

9-13-2010

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Citation of this paper:

Bowers, Kisiku Sa'qawei Paq'tism Randolph, "A Mi'kmaq First Nation cosmology: investigating the practice of contemporary Aboriginal Traditional Medicine in dialogue with counselling – toward an Indigenous therapeutics" (2010). *Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi)*. 438.

<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci/438>

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On: 07 December 2012, At: 07:24

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Asia Pacific Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rapc20>

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Version of record first published: 13 Sep 2010.

To cite this article: Kisiku Sa'qawei Paq'tism Randolph Bowers (2010): A Mi'kmaq First Nation cosmology: investigating the practice of contemporary Aboriginal Traditional Medicine in dialogue with counselling - toward an Indigenous therapeutics, *Asia Pacific Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 1:2, 111-124

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21507686.2010.493205>

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A Mi'kmaq First Nation cosmology: investigating the practice of contemporary Aboriginal Traditional Medicine in dialogue with counselling – toward an Indigenous therapeutics

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This paper explores from a Mi'kmaq and Aboriginal standpoint foundational knowledge in Indigenous therapeutics. Based on an eco-social-psycho-spiritual way of working, the article proposes Indigenous cultural models that open a window to a rich cultural repository of meanings associated with Indigenous cosmology, ontology and epistemology. The three layers of meaning, theory and practice within the symbolic 'Medicine Lodge' or 'Place of The Dreaming' give rise to ways of working that are deeply integrative and wholistic. These forms of Indigenous theory and practice have much to offer the counselling and complimentary health professions.

Keywords: Mi'kmaq; aboriginal; indigenous; traditional medicine; therapy; counselling

Introduction

The Mi'kmaq First Nation is located in eastern North America, what Indigenous people call Turtle Island. Being among the first people to encounter European colonization, the history of contact between nations in this location is one of the longest when compared with the rest of Turtle Island and with other colonies such as Australia. Writing about Mi'kmaq First Nation cosmology in relation to eco-social-psycho-spiritual ways of working and, more to the point of this paper, in relation to Indigenous therapeutics as a field of practice in its own right quite independent from mainstream constructs, is a complex field of study that is, ironically, new to the literature. It is odd that, during a history of over 500 years, no one has thought to engage with this discussion in written form, except of course for early anthropological literature, which quickly enough moved on to other Indigenous people who were felt to be 'less contaminated' by such a lengthy interaction with European invader-settlers. Only recently has the field of Indigenous studies moved forward following what must surely be a sense of cultural revival as well as from the work of Aboriginal scholars putting forward their analysis within the domains of cultural and professional studies (Battiste, 2004; Duran & Duran, 1995; Orr, 2002). Quite apart from notions of cultural contamination, the scholarly efforts that underpin this paper rely on the fact that Mi'kmaq cultural revival rests on the positive and proactive notion that, in spite of over 500 years of colonial invasion, continued oppression and dynamic social interaction between cultures (Paul, 2006) the Mi'kmaq First Nation is still going strong. While not the immediate focus of this paper, reflections on how and why this

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strength is manifest in the history and contemporary life of the Mi'kmaq people are worth considering when so many Aboriginal nations continue to struggle under the weight of colonization. In these contexts, my work seeks to understand contemporary cultural ways of being, working and making meaning from Indigenous scholarly perspectives (Bowers, 2007b). This involves a study of Indigenous epistemology (ways of knowing), ontology (ways of being) and cosmology (ways of mapping complex reality) using Mi'kmaq Tradition as a starting point.

When I first began this quest for knowledge in the written-Spirits-of-text, I was already a PhD in minority studies based in counselling. My work had already made several major conscious shifts from mainstream Western cartesian, material and humanist views towards what Duran and Duran (1995) call a 'postcolonial psychology' informed by First Nation perspectives. At the time, I recall visiting the chief repository of scholarship in the area in Eastern Canada, the Mi'kmaq Resource Centre at Cape Breton University. During that first visit I remember being shown the still well-used card catalogue. The Head of Research showed me the section where my work would be placed – it was empty. She turned to me and said, 'You are the first to write in your area of culture and spirituality in therapy. As a scholar, teacher and counsellor you must know what that means.' Quite aside from the professional meaning of her words, my Mi'kmaq Spirit, mind and heart immediately were given a vision of students sitting around that very table at sometime in the future, well after my body had expired and this skin-time was over for me. Those students were speaking Mi'kmaw, and they were talking about my ideas and how these made sense to them and they had a good feeling. As an Aboriginal person, my heart sank with the responsibility of realizing that my work was for the Seventh Generation – those people I may never meet in this skin-time. My face went pale, I grabbed the table. The Research Director turned to me asked if I was OK, did I need some water? She took my arm to steady me, and sat me in a chair. Had I seen a ghost, she asked? She was quite concerned. She went to get me a can of soft drink. Then she was back with me, handing me the open can to drink. It was then that I looked into her eyes. All I remember is smiling and thinking, if only you knew sister, if only you knew.

This narrative suggests that there is a sense of culturally based responsibility, humility and mortality that are central cultural and spiritual values within an Indigenous aesthetics. These ground the work that is undertaken via scholarship in all its forms, and as such, the work of teaching, research and service requires consideration of culturally based protocols that honour Traditional practice (which can best be understood as a wide spectrum of concerns from ethics to values, to procedures in social interaction, as well as to honouring spiritual laws and practices that govern notions of respect, interconnection and relationships among animate and non-animate entities). By discussing what is considered by Indigenous people to be Sacred Medicine, my hope is to open an intercultural space of respect at a time in Western history, theorization and practice within the counselling field when people appear to be more open to authentic and culturally grounded forms of awareness and professional practice (Cortright, 1997; Duran, 2006). Before introducing my status and place within this discussion (which is certainly required in Aboriginal protocol), allow me to speak to the notion of Traditional Medicine.

Traditional Medicine is a field of practice within many Indigenous cultures worldwide (Letendre, 2002). The field tends to be defined differently within local and regional traditions (Krieger, 2002; Pereira, 2000). From place to place and over time, perceptions of Traditional Medicine change depending on the evolution of culture, group identity, norms in beliefs and values, levels of education and influence from other cultures (Knutson &

Suzuki, 1992). Traditional Medicine and the information contained within this field of practice tend to be held very sacred and dear within the Traditions of the culture, and as such, are often felt to be restricted information given or shared only among those who are felt to be mature enough and who have studied and practised within the Medicine Tradition for some time (Duran, 2006). In many respects, there are numerous examples of Indigenous culturally grounded information that originated within Traditional approaches that have filtered into mainstream models, including those of transpersonal psychology and multicultural counselling (Cortright, 1997).

However, Indigenous scholars have aptly noted that frequently these Traditional sources of knowledge are coopted by mainstream writers, decoded and detached from their original sources, which are often subject to additional layers of disqualification and deligitimization if not outright application of colonial attitudes that are based on prejudicial assumptions (Mihsuah, 1998). Thereby, Indigenous forms of theory and practice tend to become lost in their specificity while ironically also becoming 'commonplace' within mainstream philosophical approaches, a phenomenon of colonization that is evident even in the applications of Western philosophy following works like 'The elementary forms of the religious life,' by Emile Durkheim (1915), in which he used extractions from, among others, the Sacred Traditions of Pueblo Indians and Aboriginal tribes in Australia. These forms of cultural assimilation into colonial constructs rely heavily on theories of Western humanism, which by their very nature, tend to generalize human experience. Even in the seminal works of William James (1907), pragmatism and humanism were intimately linked in an approach that covertly supported efforts to subjugate cultural difference by arguing for a humanism based on 'causal unity,' 'generic unity' and a notion that 'the world is one' and, therefore, cultural difference may be whitewashed by the dominant discourse of the day. In a largely unwitting, unconscious and somewhat ignorant consent to continue in this colonial process of assimilating culturally grounded approaches, contemporary counselling and allied helping professions appear to contribute to the uprooting of cultural sources of therapeutic theory and practice that serve dominant discourses within mainstream systems (Bowers, 2008, 2005a; Duran, 2006). This being said, the importance of honouring sources and maintaining cultural specificity in a global context raises continued concerns (Mihsuah, 1998). My work moves forward trusting that these issues are attended to by those whose consciousness is being raised to the real issues inherent in culturally grounded approaches to healing that also use the contemporary frames of counselling and psychotherapy. As such, this paper moves forward and seeks to expand our notions of more respectful and generative forms of integrative and culturally infused practice in dialogue with Traditional Medicine.

My awareness of Traditional Medicine is informed by the study of Mi'kmaq First Nation histories, contexts (Paul, 2006), and contemporary practices (Bowers, 2007). Again, we are breaking new ground. From my perspective, several key ideas inform what constitutes cultural and Indigenous studies focused on Traditional Medicine practices within contemporary communities (Bowers, 2005a). Borrowing from critical social theory, this study is based on an investigation of present day culture with a focus on how people make their sense of meaning (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Around an Indigenous standpoint on sociological methods (Nakata, 2006) this work begins with an Indigenous wholistic perspective looking at eco-social-psycho-spiritual processes, both intrapersonal and interpersonal. Coming from an insider's perspective within my culture, my study engages in allowing perspective-shifts through what has been an intensive and advanced training within Western therapeutic traditions, while attending to Mi'kmaq cultural spaces through a continual practice of a discursive 'two-eyed seeing' methodology from within different

cultural and linguistic traditions (Bartlett, Hatcher, Marshall, & Marshall, 2007), an approach that is expanded to include multiple perspectives within a Mi'kmaq Six World cosmology (Bowers, 2010a). Traditional Medicine is best understood as a culturally grounded eco-social-psycho-spiritual approach rooted in Ceremonial Space (gkisedtanamoogk & Hancock, 1993). To understand this Space is to grasp a different Way of Knowing, a Way of Being. To be grasped by this Awareness one must begin to understand Aboriginal cosmology (Nebelkopf & Phillips, 2004). Entering this Space is an extremely time-consuming and life-changing quest for most mainstream people of European descent. Allow this disclaimer to ring true: only those who commit to allowing their mind and heart to change, and be moved, can enter this creative and ecological Space where the Creator's Presence is very often felt, if not simply acknowledged in humility, thereby allowing a Transformative Energy to be observed (St Pierre & Long Soldier, 1995). Even while deeply spiritual, Indigenous ways of knowing or epistemology do not tend to imagine what is not observable. Rather our epistemology is based on what we observe as part of the Creation all around us, of which spiritual phenomena is but one part. The difference is that our perceptual field was never separated or cut off, as it appears to be within cultures of European descent. This wholistic way of knowing informs our ontology. We are challenged and humbled by life events, for example, by the simple Power of observing the ecology of the forest or stream or ocean. We stand within a worldview that forms a Great Web of Existence, and our philosophy is integrative and wholistic – that is, we attend to the whole as well as the parts, and we do this all at the same time.

For those who practise this kind of Awareness, there is an ability to at once hold specific and discursive information while also suspending judgment and holding vast interconnective forms of meaning within conscious awareness (Bowers, 2005b). One might imagine being completely and fully aware of how human and natural systems work in relationship while also attending to specific interpersonal dynamics and circumstances within daily life. However, our example is based on a Western material flatland epistemology that begins with the parts and gives inadequate acknowledgement of the whole within a standard approach to systems theory (Wilber, 1995). However, if you were to undercut and dissolve the mainstream way of thinking, after going through personal mental and emotional crisis, and enduring months of existential anxiety and cultural displacement as well as probably a temporary although powerful experience of adjustment disorder (Bragdon, 1990), you would allow yourself to become open enough to expand your awareness to such a place that you would then be able to understand a Mi'kmaq First Nation experience of cosmology (Bowers, 2005b). In other words, the way we think informs the way we are and how we become who we are – within Indigenous societies these are grounded in teaching and learning contexts in everyday life, including in Initiation Ceremonies (St Pierre & Long Soldier, 1995). There is, alas, no easy way to engage these transformations in contemporary intercultural spaces, but by shifting the subconscious assumptions that support epistemology, we can allow ourselves to engage in authentic intercultural dialogue. Otherwise, if we assume we can talk interculturally without transforming our way of knowing, and thus our way of being, we are only playing games and causing more disrespect to people within another culture who are quite astute enough to see through the games that most mainstream people play. This is another way of explaining why past conceptions of multicultural theory were wholly inadequate as a field of theory and practice that relied heavily on a humanist philosophy that tended to suggest that one approach or size fits all different cultures; as long as we demonstrate the 'core skills' of respect, empathy, etc. (Atkinson, Kennedy, & Bowers, 2006). Minority critique is clear that humanism, in this sense, as it is applied within mainstream counselling and psychotherapy, is another

form of the colonization of the mind and a sustained form of racist assimilation and simultaneous destruction of Indigenous linguistic and cultural traditions, even while multicultural competencies have come a long way in addressing these concerns (Arrendondo, 1999).

A Mi'kmaq cosmology enters a unique spacial awareness where a vast cultural and philosophical Way of Being has been handed down by generations of Elders since the last Great Winter (the last ice age), and long before that time, and in this way, we acknowledge that our Elders hold thousands of years of collective memory as well as a specific knowledge of today's challenging circumstances (Bartlett et al., 2007). We begin to grasp a completely independent location of human wisdom and science that exists outside of mainstream understanding.

Therefore, when a Traditional Keeper of Medicines raises the Sacred Pipe in Ceremonial Space and in Prayerful Intent, or when the Practitioner stands toward the East at Sunrise and Invokes the Presence of Kitpu Nipsanaway – Eagle with the Medicine, the Ceremonial Action only makes sense within the local cultural Traditions of the People. That is to say, within their cosmology, ontology and epistemology as the first manifests the latter and they work together in an ever-evolving hermeneutic circle of understanding. It is felt to be inappropriate to make great generalizations about Indigenous cultural ways without an in-depth study of local ways (Mihesuah, 1998). While there are many approaches that translate across Indigenous societies, and there are many synergies between different Medicine Traditions across North America, there is also a specificity and locality that respects the immediate ecologies and traditions within the history and consciousness of a People. The universal versus the local is a continual debate, as evidenced by the political reaction against what might be considered to be a pan-American Indian approach to Native spirituality (Mihesuah, 1998; Tree, 2004). At the same time, a paradox in Indigenous studies comes forward. When an individual dives more deeply into a local tradition, as happens when a practitioner travels deeply into any world religion, they arise in places similar to other human spirits who have gone before them. This story is apparent in the experiences of Western mytics whose specific cultural contexts were diverse, one example being insights arising in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (Merton, 1973). Paradoxically, respect for local knowledge may give rise to generalizations that appear to speak to more universal expressions of Aboriginal Medicine, Dreaming Practice and Indigenous Spirituality, as overlapping fields of theory and practice. Also, there is no doubt that local traditions tend to protect their knowledge for good purpose in postcolonial spaces where Indigenous ideas are stolen and abused. Respecting that certain Traditions are given only to those initiated into their Teachings, as the wider socio-political and historic dynamic changes in a supportive paradigm of 'alternative' and 'complementary' health, the study of Traditional practice is likely to expand to include an embrace of what may have remained hidden in past but is now brought to the light of universal appreciation in research and practice (Arden, 1994).

As a person who honours Mi'kmaq First Nation descent as well as European extraction, my study of Traditional Medicine has occupied several years of study and practice. I have been honoured to sit with the Elders across my region of Eastern Canada, and to learn what is mine to know, and what is handed down to me by those who have entrusted Sacred Medicines to my care. Also as a Two Spirited being, who in this skin-time lives in a male body, my Elders have acknowledged in cultural and spiritual ways the beauty and Power of my identity within the cultural traditions of our People (Brown, 1997a, b; Callender & Kochems, 1993; Hodge, 1993; Roscoe, 1988). This experience of honour and respect stands in contrast to what the mainstream society tends to label as difference

within materialistic constructs of gender and sexuality that have no inherent cultural or spiritual meaning beyond who one has sex with, and how one behaves within limited notions of masculinity and femininity. Likewise, in Mi'kmaq culture, among the Circle of Elders with whom I am acquainted, a great deal of respect is given to allowing the Medicines of Creation to arise in our lives and our practice in diverse forms that inform our family life, and teach us when we need instruction, heal us when we need healing, and inspire us when we need inspiration. What we learn is a Way of Life. Instead of focusing on identity labels, strategies or details, we come to appreciate allowing a process to unfold and synergies to manifest. And in reality these are difficult experiential concepts to convey because to teach and learn these ways of being, one needs to sit and listen, observe, and take time over several years to continually listen. Listening then, from my cultural stance, becomes the most central theoretical and practical notion within an Indigenous method of therapeutics.

At this stage it may be helpful to introduce a model that arose from several years of listening to the patterns of identity formation within a study of Indigenous and minority societies. Perhaps we can begin with this simple and two-dimensional model, which is suggestive of a Mi'kmaq cultural stance, although the model is fairly limited in describing what I would consider to be a culturally grounded cosmology. Once we have introduced this model we can further explore a Ceremonial expression of cosmology arising from a study of Mi'kmaq cultural practices.

Observed cycles of learning

Over several years my cultural and professional practice involved listening to people's patterns in relation to identity, marginalization and trauma. While this study focused on different 'populations' such as gay and lesbian, Australian Aboriginal and Canadian Indian, my efforts were based on a quest to understand Indigenous patterns of learning and recovery from trauma. In time it came to my awareness that within traditional cultures these cycles of learning and change are often called healing experiences, where people who have endured some form of marginalization, harm or trauma, and whose identity has become marked by that trauma, then undergo some form of change or transformation over time or overnight (Duran, 2006). In one way or other, people come to grips with their hurt and change over time. In other cases, people appear to become entrenched in their trauma (Atkinson et al., 2006). While I respect people who have felt disempowered and continue to manifest their Power by focusing on their woundedness, their experience is not my focus *per se*. Over many years of practising as a counsellor I came to understand the dynamics of 'the pain body' and how people live out of their shadows. While my empathy with this way of being was boundless, staying with this energy was not my life's focus or purpose. My life quest became to understand the nature of change and transformation as expressed within the traditions of healing within Indigenous cultures. This led me to study and practise Indigenous methods.

During this transition, my observation of pain and healing cycles in identity became manifest in theoretical and practical terms. Identity came to be defined as self-awareness expressed in relationship with others. In this definition, healthy cultural identity tends to evolve toward responsiveness within relationships. Healing can be understood as a form of the consolidation of identity, allowing a person to function and contribute to their society in more generative ways (Bowers, 2007a). In Mi'kmaq culture, this is expressed in the teachings around the nature of 'Elder', which is not an age-specific quality. Rather 'Elder' describes a quality of being, and a Way of Life. This capacity allows a person to contribute

in quite balanced and often profoundly moving ways within their families and communities, and within the Mi'kmaq Nation as a whole. Certain research postulates that similar patterns and processes exist across cases of marginalization (Bowers, 2007a, b). The patterns relate to experiences of harm, trauma and subsequent experiences of healing. Of great interest is the later-life outcome or dimensions of generativity and Elder-wisdom that emerge in people's stories of change. This movement and process towards generativity, heartfelt love and contribution of self toward human society suggests that people whose past has involved great degrees of trauma can show the potential for leading even more productive lives and making significant contributions to family, community and society.

By listening to the trauma stories of many Mi'kmaq Elders who survived the residential school era of abuse and displacement, these notions of healing deepened. The observations were held in tandem with the stories of gay and lesbian older people who have lived life and walked in many ways within the margins of society. Generative outcomes are noted within these life-histories in spite of systems of education and professional training which continue to marginalize and further entrench colonial and prejudicial social and political dynamics (Bowers, 2008). Figure 1 conveys this cycle of learning or healing



Figure 1. Observed cycles of learning among minority populations.

within a traditional circle. All Aboriginal circles in my experience lead to understanding processes that are multifaceted. If we begin with 'childhood' as the first phase of life, the circle follows from there.

With intention, allow me to leave the two-dimensional model to your pondering. Moving from this cyclic expression of cultural learning and listening while observing minority people's experiences of growth and change, the next step on our vision quest is to explore a more direct multi-dimensional model of Mi'kmaq cosmology. Figure 2 shows a Mi'kmaq Sacred Medicine Wheel. This diagram arose from years of culturally grounded practice.

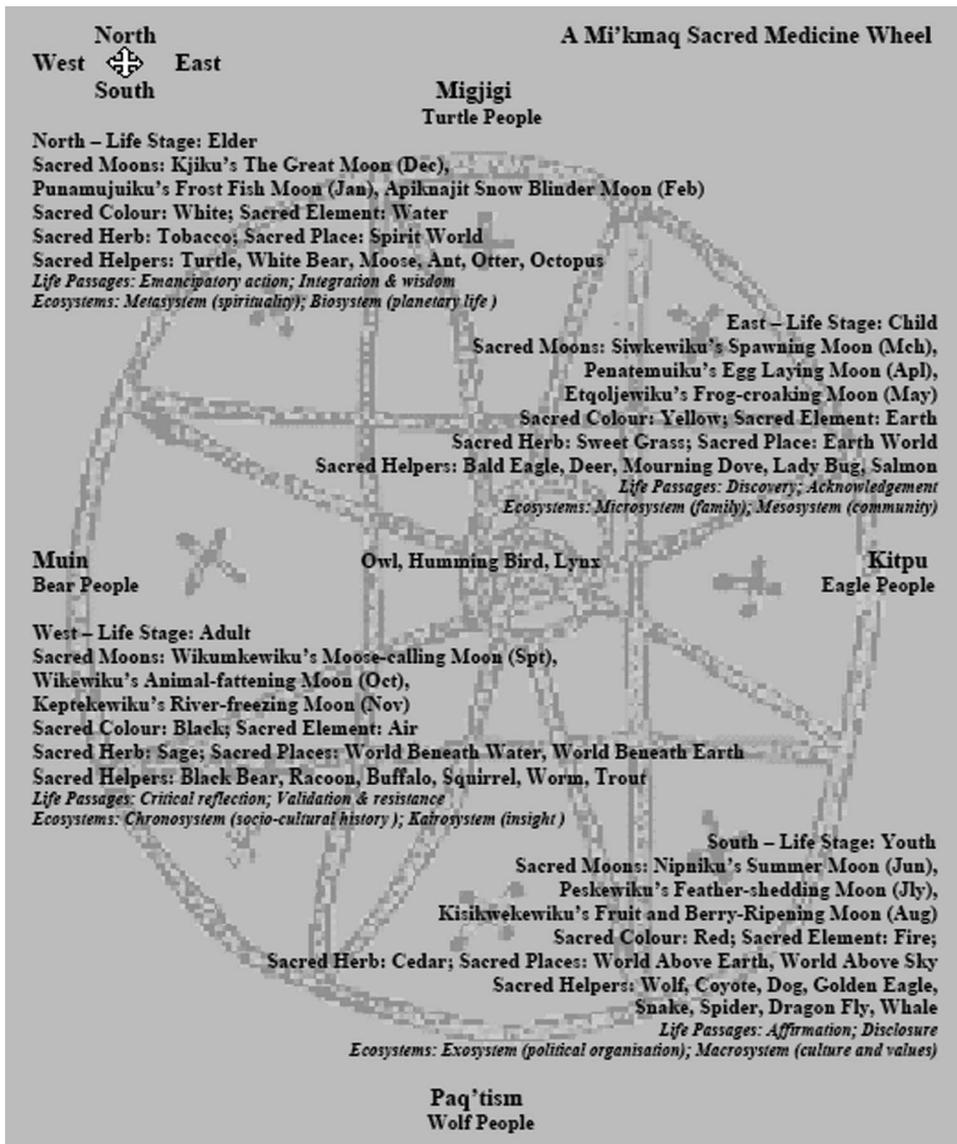


Figure 2. A Mi'kmaq Sacred Medicine Wheel.

While several books could be written in explaining the Medicine Wheel, my intention in this article is to raise the discursive possibility of an Indigenous therapeutics, while setting in place the three poles of theory and practice in this discipline. The central organization of the Sacred Circle in Figure 2 is the polar axis, representing not so much north, south, etc., rather, the emphasis is on Totemic Powers who Govern and Protect the different directions within a Ceremonial Space. In other words, all of life is relational. A community of good intention is found in Presence and Being. This is the central philosophical principle of Indigenous therapeutic methods.

In each direction within Figure 2 there is a list of symbolic and practical observations and links to meaning. In the world of the online web, we understand how links open up new pathways to understanding. Perhaps this one modern experience of surfing the web gives the easiest allegory for Aboriginal epistemology, ontology and cosmology – our three poles that support the Wigwam and Medicine Lodge of Indigenous therapeutics.

The ancient and contemporary Mi'kmaq cosmology relies on Six Worlds within the Seven Sacred Directions. These form a kind of self-evident living eco-cybernetic Being called Creation. Within this dynamically alive organism are Entities who are Present-in-Being-and-Power. The Six Worlds are observed, real and metaphorical places, where the People live, dwell, and make their being. They are the World Beneath the Earth, the Earth World, the Water World, the World Above the Earth, the Sky World, and the World Above the Sky or the Pathway of the Ancestors (Bowers, 2010b). We might imagine, for the sake of illustration, that the World Wide Web was a living entity along with all forms of human invention, which incidentally many Indigenous people believe is true, because, in a way, all human consciousness and invention arise from the Living Substance of Creation and will go back into the Circle of Life upon dissolution and decay. The Six World cosmology conveys a vast repository of experiential wisdom that gives rise to parallel notions of identity, lessons shared in narrative and ways of learning and teaching within the whole community of being. Movement between the ideas of a World Wide Web to a culturally based cosmological awareness is not indeed radical, as many of the contemporary technological advances may in certain ways point people back toward rediscovery of traditional values.

Observing and discovering the Six Worlds, our Ancestors then observed that the Worlds are all interconnected. They came to agree on a philosophy of life unfolding. Their science (observation) and their practice (Ceremony) gave rise to the ancient teachings of the Sacred Circle, the Six Worlds, and specific Teachings on Living the Right Way, Living in Peace, and Living in the Way of the Sacred Pipe. Our Ancestors were considering how best to help us live happy and resourceful lives within Creation in sustainable ways. All the Old Stories (many of which predate European contact) give rise to understanding how easy it is for human beings to mess things up. We are given Teachings to help us stay good. These Sacred Traditions form the wider rationale and basis for Indigenous therapeutic theory and practice as for science and inquiry, and for life-development, economy and work. These traditions become just as much alive today for us as they were 10,000 years ago among the Old Ones of the People.

To take only one Sacred Direction as an example, and for instructional sake, we will pick the South. In the South we observe the **Life Stage: Youth**. We see that the Circle represents life stages as well as seasons of the year. Here we acknowledge the **Sacred Moons: Nipniku's Summer Moon** (June), **Peskewiku's Feather-shedding Moon** (July) and **Kisikwekewiku's Fruit and Berry-Ripening Moon** (August). These moons convey associated meanings within the local ecology of the People and our environment, and in traditional practices conveyed specific duties and tasks such as harvesting certain plants

and animals. Engaging in cultural practices, gatherings and Ceremonies; singing certain Song Cycles; engaging in play and games – whatever the case, during the year a complete cycle was observed and reflected upon by the People. These cycles informed the cosmology and thus the way the universes fit together. Instead of seeing this as an antiquated form of primitivism, Indigenous scholarship and cultural practices today are reviving these forms of knowledge and practice because they hold tremendous wisdom for all people in today's disconnected world.

Then we have the **Sacred Colour: Red**, the **Sacred Element: Fire** and the **Sacred Herb: Cedar**. These Sacred elements of nature are also observed within the ecology as gifts of Creator to our People. All gifts come with honour. All honour relies on respect. All forms of respect must be based on a personal sense of responsibility within the life of Creation and the life of the People – these are all deeply interconnected within our traditional philosophy. These relations within an expansive, enormous universe are expressed also by the **Sacred Places: World Above Earth** and **World Above Sky**. These Places within the Six Worlds Cosmology show how intricate and diffuse is the Mi'kmaq system of scientific observational practice based on a deep spirituality expressed by attitudes of virtue that are flexible and evolve as we observe reality unfolding, and are nothing to do with any dogmatic forms of belief that become inflexible and untouched by change. I also like to note that sometimes the Old Ones among us today talk about Seven or Eight Worlds within the cosmology. The number and description depends on the particular gifts of insight from different Elders and their personal Medicine Journey. In other words, we do not presume to say there are Six Worlds unless we visit those places and learn and listen there, and come back and can share our story. Our teaching is based on observing, living and learning about these different Places within Creation.

Then there are the **Sacred Helpers: Wolf, Coyote, Dog, Golden Eagle, Snake, Spider, Dragon Fly, Whale**. These Helpers, Guides and Powers are different for each person. For those of us who take up the Medicine Walk and Carry the Sacred Pipe of the People, we may end up becoming linked in with many Helpers depending on the need and context of our work. Each relationship with the 'Totem' is very unique. We call these various totems Nations and Peoples, so if my Totem is the Wolf, I might say the Wolf People, the Wolf Nation. We are just as intimately related to our totem as we are to our blood or foster parents, our brothers and sisters, our cousins and siblings and all our kin. These relationships govern our lives in many ways on a daily basis, and inform a traditional way of experiencing and knowing and discerning our walk through life.

Then I have added layers of developmental theory (Bowers, 2001) and ecosystems theory (Paolucci, Hall and Axinn, 1977) that suggest an Aboriginal reworking of mainstream theories is of use to us in the notion of **Life Passages: Affirmation; Disclosure** and **Ecosystems: Exosystem (political organization) and Macrosystem (culture and values)**. These notions compliment and provide another layer of meaning to the Sacred Circle, showing how Indigenous theory adapts well in dialogue with mainstream conceptions.

Conclusion: Philosophy and practice

Moving from cosmology, to ontology, to epistemology is a generative circle. "These three pillars of awareness and practice are much like the three central poles used to build a wigwam in traditional Mi'kmaq culture. When we wish to manifest our awareness of the Place of Family, the Wigwam, we physically go into the bush and select the three central poles that will support the whole structure. The Elder who walks the bush listens closely, and actually waits until she or he hears or feels the voice of the Tree Spirit who willingly

submits to the transformation – giving up its life for the Wigwam of the People. Doing some task in the physical world relies intimately on respecting the forces of nature which include spiritual and cosmological realities that are observed by generations of the People. So when we are talking about cosmology, ontology and epistemology in relation to contemporary Indigenous therapeutics, we are indeed speaking about a complete system of awareness and practice. When we actually physically set the three central supporting poles of the Wigwam for a Medicine Lodge, we intentionally offer Sacred Herbs like Sweet Grass, Sage, Cedar and Tobacco to bless and purify the Ceremonial Space. Likewise, when setting the poles for Indigenous Therapeutics, my Spirit suggests it is important to understand that three poles support all 13 poles of the Wigwam. The Circle of the Wigwam represents all of family and cultural life, all as one together: Msit Nogama – All My Relations. Thus the whole enterprise rests on the stability and grounded-energy of the first three poles. So we begin by understanding that our cosmology rests on an expansive Indigenous vision and observation of reality in this cosmos, on this planet, in local ecologies and within interconnected living entities (systems). Our cosmology is our map of reality, our map of the universe. This map helps us in our journey, our living and our learning. When we are lost, we have only to sing our way home through this Indigenous Songline (Arden, 1994; Cowan, 1992, 1994; Crocker, 2005; Flood, 1995; Harris, 1990). The Dreaming practices of our Ancestors live today in our hearts, minds and bloodlines (St Pierre & Long Soldier, 1995). These ways are also accessible to people of European descent whose traditions are nonetheless available to those with the intention to seek them out and apply them to living ways (Cowan, 1993). In a sense, we can allow life to unfold around us by listening to the Traditions of our heritage, and in the process we learn to work with the energies of Creation (instead of working against ourselves, which most people seem to do in contemporary life). In an Indigenous sense, in humility our Power arises when we let go of illusions of control, and when we learn to work with the manifest energies of Creation. The Way of the Mi'kmaq Warrior is always based on humility, listening and flexibility.

I was once told a story of how our Ancestors swam across Halifax harbour and underneath the floating islands from across the great waters; they cut holes through the beams, sinking the ships of the white men. To swim across a large distance and work underwater that way must have taken great energy, skill and endurance. Those Old Warriors served the Nation well and they worked in sync with Creation, allowing their manifest wish to see the possible and to walk the path (or swim the distance) towards the manifest vision. Therefore, taking this cosmology and applying this approach means very practical methods. For example, in traditional ways a Pipe Carrier takes on responsibilities depending on their gifts and abilities. Some become teachers, others healers and others are able to discern and offer guidance. Sometimes Medicine Keepers may not carry a Sacred Pipe, and they may have gifts with herbs and plant lore. Others may be gifted with Spirits from the ocean. There are many ways that Creator manifests gifts and talents, and all good ways are welcome within Indigenous community.

However, first and foremost, the primary way that these Traditions manifest in action is in changing our identity by teaching us to listen. Core values of humility, patience, kindness, openness, respect, honour and peacemaking are taught within the culture. These apply in practice as well as in daily life.

Skills of intensive observation in natural environments translate to astute observational skills in professional practice. Learning new ways of thinking and practising are familiar to Indigenous people in many ways. The fact is that learning the Western Canon can be quite restrictive and boring, because two- and three-dimensional thinking are foreign to many

Aboriginal cultural ways. Our approaches are already multifaceted and meta-cognitive and our philosophy is already expansive and far-reaching. We learn through creative stories with many and multiple meanings, associations, allegories and metaphors. We teach ethics and morality through symbolic stories and gestures, symbolic ways of movement, dance and song. We convey our cosmology in rich and beautiful cultural traditions, Ceremonial cycles, and our ways are time honoured and esteemed. In these ways we stand in solidarity with all Indigenous Nations. These methods in Indigenous therapeutics exist in an independent realm beyond the Western canon of counselling and helping – it would seem appropriate for mainstream approaches to also become more humble, flexible and open.

It is also important to say that the Medicine Way of the First Nation is not an easy way. There are no romantic ideas here. We stand against the abuse and appropriation of Indigenous cultural ways. In my work, for example, I keep several Indigenous protocols in mind. There are very strong cultural forms of respect at play behind the scenes of this article, and in all of my work. It is my practice to seek out advice, to sit and listen, and to learn through my personal and professional practice. From this, my work is given back to my People through a formal repository created for my scholarship within an institution supported by our Chiefs and Elders. This serves several purposes, including allowing the Elders of today and tomorrow to have access to my work, to critique this work and to take ownership of this work. In many publications I have given over copyright to my People under an agreed protocol. Cultural knowledge is not mine to own, but only to take responsibility for within my limited scope. Then, give it back. Give it back. Only through listening to my Elders do I have a feeling that my work is meant to happen this way. Otherwise, I would not write these words.

There are many forms of Indigenous therapeutics which rely on a deeper and more revealing study of Aboriginal cultural experience. This paper is not the context for that discussion. In this paper I would, however, like to suggest that any study of Indigenous therapeutics will take into account the three central poles of epistemology, ontology and cosmology as the basis for all further study. As such, this paper lays the foundation for the Medicine Lodge or the Place of The Dreaming to arise and manifest from the creative energy of Mother Earth as it was meant to be. With great respect for the Mi'kmaq First Nation cultural way of humility, in Acknowledging in a symbolic Ceremonial manner, I offer my heartfelt prayers to the Powers that Be in the Four Winds, and say in my language, Wela'lia Kitpu, Wela'lia Paq'tism, Wela'lia Muin, Wela'lia Migjigi. Msit Nogama. Tahoe. That is to say, in translation, 'Thank You Eagle Nation; Thank You Wolf Nation; Thank You Bear Nation; Thank You Turtle Nation. All My Relations. It is Finished.'

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