

Symbols of Culture: Traditional Concepts

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The Circle

What is the circle but a concept of anti-linear thinking, Can we profess to understand the concepts that have occurred over centuries of thought and spiritual awareness?

“The symbol of the circle holds a place of special importance in Native beliefs. For the North American Indian, whose culture is traditional rather than literate, the significance of the circle has always been expressed in ritual practice and in art”¹

Art has always been a tradition of First Nation culture that allows the concept of the mysticism to flow from the minds of those who are intending to re-create an expression of self identification and tribal affiliation. Ritual practice allows for the act itself to add to the action of the expression of an artistic form that transcends into the spiritual realm.

“The lives of men and women, as individual expressions of the Power of the World move in and are nourished by an uninterrupted circular/spiral motion.”²

The circle is a symbol of continual commitment to the betterment of the community but also as a personal journey of self determination. When the theory of social cohesion within the multi cultural dynamics of what we can conceive as a progressive society, re-structuralizing the fragile components of the communities that we

¹ http://www.grc-rcmp.gc.ca/ccaps/spirit_e.htm

² ibid

reside in and are attached to, are fundamentally important to their long term survival. Men and women are inclusive and retain their own identity during the process, and the circular motion winds in interweaving fashion that allows for further solidification of gender and race.

“This circle is often referred to as the Medicine Wheel. Human beings live, breathe and move, giving additional impetus to the circular movement, provided they live harmoniously, according to the circle's vibratory movement.”³

Originally, the medicine wheel, conceived by European culture, is the integration of other cultural symbols allowing First Nation Peoples to adopt new ideas into the healing process. When societal discourse is constantly imposed within a culture by force and socialization, we see the disintegration of the society in entirety. As society begins to adopt the basic symbolism, if in its originality, intention is purely for the benefit for the community.

“You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days, when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished.”⁴

Strength of this structure that was conceived thousands of years ago can be contributed to the symbolic nature of the community that this symbol represented. As only one piece of a culturally significant greater whole the circle represents a holistic approach to dealing with criminality and social problems. As more symbols within First Nation culture emerge, the symbiotic nature of all the components begins to become relevant to the totality of each concept. Strength comes from the knowledge that all wisdom is fluid and changes with the context of time and place. As we believe to

³ http://www.grc-rcmp.gc.ca/ccaps/spirit_e.htm

⁴ (Black Elk Speaks, pp. 198-200) Spiritual Advisor to the Oglala Sioux in 1930.

become more knowledgeable in academic study, we find ourselves search for any concept of truth that we can understand as relevant and significant. This is when we must seek the wisdom from those who have come before us.

Elder Wisdom

Growing up within a First Nation Culture I was aware of the importance of elders and hung on every word that they spoke. I did not understand the concepts that they had tried to explain to me and, as other did, I dismissed them as simple and lacked the complexity that was needed to incorporate them into everyday life. As a got older, Ideas and concepts that we originally we so foreign to me began to play out in situations in my own life. What I had dismissed a euphemistic chattering, transformed into more complex theoretical frameworks.

“Elders may be either men or women. Their most distinguishing characteristic is wisdom which relates directly to experience and age. There are exceptions. Elders need not be "old". Sometimes the spirit of the Great Creator chooses to imbue a young native.”⁵

Intersection of traditional knowledge and symbolic interpretation is similar in circular concepts and gender relations when talking about elders being inclusive of age and gender differences. This allows all to be treated in the ways of an original egalitarian society.

“Elders' spiritual gifts differ. Some may interpret dreams. Others may be skilful in herbal remedies or be healers during a sweat lodge ceremony, and so on.”⁶

⁵ http://www.grc-rcmp.gc.ca/ccaps/spirit_e.htm

⁶ ibid

Diversity of the elders allows for new ideas and concepts to emerge out of traditional teachings. Each elder attributes their own knowledge to experience and spiritual guidance for the Creator and the teachings of a polytheistic environmental sybioticism. Each of us follows the beat that leads them to where they need to be.

Drums

Drums are also an important aspect of First Nation Culture and have significant importance to Traditional healing and cultural understanding. The process in which the drum is implemented can be as significant as the drum itself. The songs are seen as prayers and the sounds then are transmitted to the Creator.

“Different sizes are used depending on "doctoring" or ceremonial purposes. Drums are sacred objects.”⁷

The ceremonies themselves are a spiritual process of meditation and communication to the Creator, thus reinforcing the need for guidance and reflection. The interaction is very holistic as it includes the circular concept within the shape of the drum and the presence of elder participation within the ceremonies involving the drum.

Each drum has keeper to ensure no-one approaches it under the influence of alcohol or drugs. During ceremonies, no one may reach across it or place extraneous objects on it.”⁸

In incorporating the traditional value of the drum we attempt to understand our own spirit and attachment to the identity that defines us as humanity.

⁷ http://www.grc-rcmp.gc.ca/ccaps/spirit_e.htm

⁸ *ibid*

“Drums represent the heartbeat of the nation, the pulse of the universe.”⁹

In hearing the drum we react to our own bodily reaction as it mimics the order within us and the order than is around us. The function and boundaries of the internal and external can be approached in 3 ways, in a micro, macro and mezzo. (Figure 1.1)

Figure 1.1

Drumming	External	Internal
Macro	How the earth and its systems have a rythum that the drum replicates	The rythum that each individual can collectively relate to and understand is a path that they can choose to follow
Micro	How the sound of the drum mimics the sound of our own beating heart and the beat moves each of us individually.	How the drum causes us to feel the path the we as individuals must follow and the path the Creator has chosen for me.
Mezzo	How the community comes together to work towards progressive action that is traditionally expressed through the drum beat.	How each community follow the path. that the drum sets forth to contribute to the greater whole.

⁹ ibid

Conclusion

The traditional value of each of these “symbols” in First Nation Culture is mystic and understood in many different ways. As the discourse of the dominant culture continues to suppress new understandings of “old” traditional values, the reintegration of important concepts are disregarded and trivialized.