

**Survival of Traditional Cultures in Canada as portrayed in
A. M. Klein's "Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga"**

X. Akshay Joseph Dylan

II MA English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli

Civilizing the Uncivilized

In the name of civilizing the natives, the colonizers have destroyed the cultural wealth of the land. The culture of the natives was considered as obstacles to the civilization process. As A. M. Klein, in his poem "Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga", traces out the way the culture of the natives in the reservation was made antique by the colonizers. The poet substantiates the transformation of the culture into western in the following lines.

*"one afterschool I'd leave the classroom chalk,
the varnish smell, the watered dust of the street,"*

Schools and varnish were things that were not part of the culture of the natives. They were new to it and the poet questions the existence of the red Indians in today's world. The culture of the natives could only be found as pictures in the calendars according to the poet. Even the very first stanza of the poem raises questions about the existence of the native people and their culture.

*"Where are the braves, the faces like autumn fruit
who stared at the child from the colored frontispiece,
and the monosyllabic chief who spoke with this throat?
Where are the tribes, the feathered bestiaries?"*

Things used by the people of a culture are considered as symbols of that culture and are left back for their future generations to know the dignity and reverence of their esteemed culture. But in this native land such articles are either sold as fashion articles or being preserved for further research. The culture of the native red Indians has lost its recognition as culture. In the poem, the poet exclaims that all those articles and practices of the natives of Canada were now found only in the museums as a thing of awe for the present generation.

*"..... The game,
losing its blood, now makes these grounds its crypt.
The animals pale, the shine of the fur is lost,
bleached are their living bones. About them watch
as through a mist, the pious prosperous ghosts."*

The native culture remains only in words and does not exist in real world. The social, political and economic interests of a group of people contribute to the culture of that group. But the colonizers have set target on these criteria to abolish the native culture. As Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of

Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932 clearly states, "I want to get rid of the Indian problem. [...] Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department". In order to civilize the uncivilized, as the native red Indians killed each other for land, the settlers who were the so called 'civilized' massacred the native people and still they call themselves as civilized. Even the ancestral ghosts of the natives couldn't take revenge upon the massacre against their children. It shows the modern weaponry used by the settlers in genocide.

Even after the formation of the reserves, the settlers have used various other means to get rid of the Indian culture. The Bagot Commission of 1844 proposed the idea of educating the children in the reserves in boarding schools far away from their parental influence in order to bring them up in a colonial culture-the separation of children from their parents was touted as the best means by which to sustain their civilizing effects. Further similar successive proposals such as the *Gradual Civilization Act* (1857), *Act for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians* (1869), and the Nicholas Flood Davin publication titled *Report on Industrial Schools for Indian and Half-Breeds* (1879), which noted that "the industrial school is the principal feature of the policy known as that of 'aggressive civilization'" were taken into consideration.

"the Indians should, as far as practicable, be consolidated on few reservations, and provided with permanent individual homes; that the tribal relation should be abolished; that lands should be allotted in severalty and not in common; that the Indian should speedily become a citizen [...] enjoy the protection of the law, and be made amenable thereto;"

[Report on Industrial Schools for
Indian and Half-Breeds, 1879]

Davin disclosed in this report the assumptions of his era-that "Indian culture" was a contradiction in terms, Indians were uncivilized, and the aim of education must be to destroy the Indian in the child. In 1879 he returned from his tour of the United States' Industrial Boarding Schools with a recommendation to Canada's Minister of the Interior, John A. Macdonald, to implement a system of industrial boarding schools in Canada.

Origin of Reserves

The origin of reserves dates back to 1637, the moment the French missionaries set foot on the land of North America. The tract of land settlements decided by the French missionaries in view of guiding the aboriginals adopt Christianity, was the rough model of the reserve systems. Gaining control from the French, the Whites, under the hood of 'civilizing' the aboriginal further specialized and drafted the design of reservations. Legally, after the "The Indian Act of 1876",

the reserves were called “Indian Reserves” with its initiative from the “Constitution Act of 1867” which did set out the notion ‘Indians and Lands Reserved for Indians’.

Intention of Reserve Formation

The ultimate intention of the early settlers, the French and the Whites was to own the land of North America. To achieve the intention, the idea followed by them was to pull down the innocently hard and rude natured native red Indians to a more passive and sedentary way of living. The nature of life of the natives, such as disputing upon the control over the land territories and hunting for their daily livelihood, were considered as the uncivilized way of living by the settlers. Thus achieved subjugating them through feeding them a calm and quiet way of living, the settlers called them civilized and named the process ‘civilizing the uncivilized’.

Having the land acquisition as the real intention, the way it was implemented vary in number. The land disputes were fed by the colonizers (Whites, French, and so on) as they financed the settlement of their respective settlers. With the increase in number, the land dwindled in size leading to further disputes between the settlers and the natives. The colonizers taking the upper hand suppressed the disputes and delivered judgments in favour of the settlers, creating number of reserves just at the stroke of a pen. The disputed land will become the land of the settlers while the natives of that land would be consigned to the created reserves. In the name of promoting agriculture too, the settlers had the natives pushed to reserves that hold lands that are not suitable for agriculture which they later took it from them under the act of “Reserve Reduction”.

“ the same government that took away most of their lands secured them in the possession of reserves, and then took away most of the reserves.”

[Cole Harris, *Making Native Space*]

Present Scenario

The reserve systems destroyed all the cultural ethics that dwelled upon the native Indians for several ages. Right from the way of accommodation the reserves provided to the people, the culture was colonized. The housing amendments of the reserves were based on the American way of living, with enough room for a nuclear family, which pulled down the joint family atmosphere of the native Indians. In terms of job too, they were forced to lose their cultural identity.

According to Statistics Canada in 2011 there are more than 600 First Nations/Indian bands in Canada and 3,100 Indian reserves across Canada. For the 2011 census, of the more than 3,100 Indian reserves across Canada, there were only 961 Indian reserves classified as census subdivisions. Reserves suffer

from poverty, substance abuse, suicide, unemployment, and mortality. Some reserves exhibit what has been controversially described as ‘Third World’ conditions, due to inadequate housing and contaminated water supplies, among other things. As Globe and Mail reporter Christie Blatchford wrote regarding the Yellow Quill First Nation in 2008, “The reserve water supply was so poor that until 2004, when a new water treatment system began operating, residents lived under a boil-water alert that lasted fully eight years.” It is widely accepted that the cultural genocide and social disruption perpetrated over generations through displacement, discriminatory legislation such as the Indian Act, and federal programs such as the residential school system created enduring hardships among Aboriginal peoples and hindered the re-establishment of social networks and the development of stable communities.

In addition to these social hardships, reserve communities often face economic and environmental challenges. Reserves are typically located in areas where economic opportunities are limited, and the reserves themselves provide few resources. Access to resources such as fish and timber are heavily regulated, and in many cases the government maintains ownership of any mineral or subsurface resources (*BC Indian Reserves Mineral Resources Act*). Because reserves are held in trust by the Crown, people living on them do not “own” the land. Property is not considered an asset, and band members generally face difficulty in obtaining mortgages, small business loans, or lines of credit. They also face more restrictions than private owners when it comes to developing their land. As well, government rights-of-way such as power transmission lines, railways and highways frequently intersect reserve lands, dividing them up and further reducing useable space.

The impacts of the reserve system also take on a gendered dimension. Aboriginal women on reserves face additional challenges with property, for example. Historically a woman has had to leave the reserve community she married into if her husband abandons her or passes away. In these cases, lack of regulation regarding on-reserve matrimonial property has forced many women to leave their homes and belongings behind as they leave the reserve causing more trouble to them as there doesn’t exist traditional practices as it did before the settlers.

Reserves fall under federal rather than provincial or municipal jurisdiction—levels of government that typically provides services, infrastructure and regulations to non-reserve communities. In the spring of 2009, Sheila Fraser, the auditor general of Canada, concluded an audit of the environmental conditions of reserves. She found that there was a significant gap between environmental conditions in reserve communities and those in other communities in Canada. Non-reserve communities are regulated by provincial and municipal governments, which have systems in place to deal with waste disposal and air and water monitoring. Reserve communities, on the other hand, fall under the jurisdiction of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), as

stipulated in the Indian Act. Fraser concluded that INAC lacks the capacity and resources and is generally unprepared to provide these services and regulations to reserve lands. In fact, the audit found that INAC has no idea how waste is disposed of in 80 reserve communities, a startling statistic that provides a glimpse into the breadth of challenges to overcome.

Reference

- <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/reserves.html>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_reserve
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._M._Klein
- <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-27.2/page-1.html>
- <http://www.slideshare.net/khendrukchoda/analyzation-of-the-element-of-power-play-in-the-poem-a-far-cry-from-africa-and-indian-reservationcaughnagawa>
- https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/User:Pooel/Theme_of_preservation_of_tradition_in_a.m.klein%27s_indian_reservation
- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_Reservation._Indian_Reservation
- [Caughnawaga_BAnQ_P48S1P01427.jpg](#)
- http://www.uwo.ca/english/Canadian_poetry/cpjrnl/vol27/davies.htm
- <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse/66/6#!/20584435/>
- <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/aboriginal-reserves/>
- <http://www.legacyofhope.ca/about-residential-schools/a-brief-history>
- <http://www.nwac-hq.org/research/matrimonial-real-property>

—————