

Indigenous / Indigeneity

Webster defines indigenous as 1: having originated in and being produced, growing or living naturally in a particular environment 2: INNATE, INBORN. However, colonized thinkers, when considering the concepts of indigenous and indigeneity at all, generally think of these as synonymous with terms such as “native” or “aboriginal” or, and especially for those living in what are now commonly called “The Americas,” they are synonymous with the word “Indian”. Ideas about Indians held by colonized peoples in “The Americas” today (including colonized American Indian people) originate primarily from projected stereotypes: Indians are thought to look a certain way, most usually like spray-painted actors of southern European descent wearing horsehair wigs. Indians are thought to be uncivilized, lazy and probably alcoholic. It is thought that all Indians get money from casinos and a free ride from the government. Indian religion or spirituality is thought to be idolatrous and superstitious, certainly inferior to “monotheistic” Abrahamic religions, or conversely, all Indians are thought to be super-spiritual mystics. Indians are thought to treat women as property (a patently false stereotype, especially when one considers that at a time when women were considered legal chattel of their fathers or husbands by European and European-American governments, American Indian women had an equal voice in the governance of their own indigenous communities. Indians are also thought of as a people of the past or as a “vanishing race”. I have personally encountered or have been confronted by each of these stereotypical notions, and the list of such stereotypes goes on and on.

Another projected stereotype commonly held by colonized thinkers is that American Indians had very little material culture before the arrival of European colonizers and continue to be basically unimaginative and uninventive. Colonized thinking includes “a tendency to judge the material culture of Indians [and other indigenous peoples] based on observations of living conditions after 100, 200 or more years of continued European genocidal activity along with the effects of European introduced pandemics. This is as unfair as it would be to judge Jewish culture based on the observation of European Jewish survivors immediately after the fall of the Third Reich” (“120 Questions” p. 108). Indeed, the American Indian holocaust has yet to end. To summarize, colonized thinking sees indigenous peoples as inferior, backward, superstitious, not responsible enough or intelligent enough to govern ourselves or determine our own destinies as peoples. We are, at best, quaintly interesting anachronisms wearing turquoise jewelry and organizing pan-Indian powwows and, at worst, an annoying or possibly dangerous hindrance to civilized progress clinging to unreasonable bitterness and desiring a return to what the colonized mind sees as an imagined pre-Columbian utopia.

Grandfathers whispering
In the wind
Rejoice in the life
You are a part of
Natural energy
Bound to natural laws
You will survive this

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Temporary madness imposed upon you

- John Trudell from “Grandfathers Whispering”
in *Lines from a Mined Mind*

There are many indigenous definitions for the word indigenous. My working definition of indigenous is – connected in healthy or whole relationship or unity with Creator/Creation in the now or present place and time.

Our own Tsalagi (Jahlahgee) word for “indigenous people” is Aniyvwiya (Ahneeyuhweeyah). Aniyvwiya is a very old word of self-designation used by Cherokee or Tsalagi people. It was and continues to be the favored term of self-designation used by Chickamauga Cherokees, those Cherokees who chose a path of resistance to European-American expansionism and colonization, splitting from the accommodationist faction in 1775 and forming the nucleus of the Chickamauga Confederacy. Chickamauga Cherokees used the term Aniyvwiya not just in reference to Cherokees but to all members of the Chickamauga Confederacy: allied American Indian tribes and factions of tribes as well as those of African and European descent who joined in the cause. In more recent times, the word has come to be translated in a very general way as “Indian”. However, this translation in no way gets to the heart of the meaning of this ancient word. While yvwi means a human person and aniyvwi means a human people group, yvwiya may be translated as “a real person” and aniyvwiya may be translated as “the real people”. For a comparative use of the “ya” suffix, in the Tsalagi language, we may look at the word “tsisqua” (bird) and the word “tsisquaya” (sparrow). We could say the sparrow is designated in Tsalagi as a “real bird”, but in what sense is the the sparrow a real bird? Observation would lead us to the conclusion that the sparrow is a plain bird, a common bird, real in the sense of being unpretentious. This may be a good way to look at the word Aniyvwiya: the unpretentious people, people who do not attempt to set themselves above or apart from the rest of the Earth or the rest of Creation. I may add here, that to the best of my knowledge, within all American Indian languages, and I suspect, within all indigenous languages in the Earth, there are words of self-designation bearing similar meanings to that found in the word Aniyvwiya.

In contrast to the noun-based English language of which we are all so familiar due to centuries of colonization, indigenous languages are action centered. In order to understand the deep meaning of Aniyvwiya, one must understand the word as a verb. Aniyvwiya is not a noun; it is not something that may be owned or possessed as colonizers, with their noun-based languages seek to name and claim and possess and own everything: land, plants, animals, human beings. Aniyvwiya identity does not belong to one by virtue of ancestry or “blood quantum” or expert DNA analysis. As Taiaiake Alfred puts it, in his book *Wasa’sé*, being indigenous, being a Real Person, being Aniyvwiya “...is living heritage, being part of a tradition - shared stories, beliefs, ways of thinking, ways of moving about in the world, lived experiences - that generates identities which, while ever-changing and diverse, are deeply rooted in the common ground of our heritage as original peoples....” (Alfred p. 139). He goes on to say, “I am drawn to the idea of indigeneity as practice, a dynamic of reflection and

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dialogue....” (Ibid). Being Aniyvwiya is in what we do, how we interact within or with ourselves, as part of an indigenous community and as part of the Earth and Universe. As explained in “120 Questions”

An indigenous people is connected with Land, Creator and together as a People through the essential cultural aspects of Language, Oral Tradition, Ceremonies and Agriculture. These four: Language, Oral Tradition, Ceremonies and Agriculture are aspects of indigenous culture. They are not parts, they are aspects, each integrated so completely within all the others that if one is damaged or taken away, everything goes out of balance and spins crazily toward destruction. Without our Language we cannot maintain our Oral Traditions with anything close to accuracy. Without our Oral Traditions we cannot understand and maintain our Ceremonies. Without our Ceremonies we cannot maintain our Agriculture in the way it was intended. Without our Agriculture, we cannot fully comprehend our Language.

In all of these, we relate to both Land and Creator. It is important to note that an indigenous people is of and connected with the land, where the people are at, not with some other land. All of these aspects make us who we are as an indigenous People. (pp. 10-11)

It is in these ways, in continuing to practice or regaining the practice of these essential aspects of indigenous culture that we continue as indigenous people and can truthfully and without pretension say that we are Real People or Aniyvwiya.

And as far as material culture is concerned....

The material cultures of American Indians prior to European contact while different, were every bit as well developed, in many ways probably better developed, than European material cultures of the same period. To cite just a few examples: American Indian agriculture was far in advance of European agriculture as was American Indian medicine. The average house or dwelling in the Americas prior to European contact was larger and more comfortable than the average European home of the same period.... (“120 Questions” p. 108).

I add to this, as reported by many early colonizers and seen by them, ironically, as a sign of weakness, that there were no rich and no poor in Aniyvwiya or indigenous societies of what are now commonly called “The Americas” at the time of first contact with Europeans. Everyone had enough, and life expectancies were much higher for Aniyvwiya or indigenous peoples in “The Americas” than they were for Europeans in Europe before European colonizers arrived. You see, it was a *real*, not an *imagined* pre-Colombian utopia.

The indigenous struggle is not to fulfill the projected stereotypes imposed upon

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us by the colonizers, it is not to fulfill the role of quaint anachronism or tourist attraction. Rather, the indigenous struggle is the “struggle for existence and the right of self-determination as peoples or nations in our own lands, the lands of our ancestors (Ibid p.99). Re-indigenation or indigenous resurgence is not a longing to return to the past nor a rejection of all innovation as colonized thinking would suppose it to be. Mindful of the past, re-indigenation or indigenous resurgence involves changing our attitudes and actions in the present, so that we may have a future. As Leanne Simpson puts it, in *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, it means, re-creating the cultural and political flourishing of the past to support the well-being of our contemporary citizens. It means reclaiming the fluidity around our traditions, not the rigidity of colonialism... encouraging the self-determination of individuals within our national and community-based contexts” (p. 51).

As for innovation, throughout history, much real innovation or invention has come by way of indigenous peoples, empire-builders being more inclined toward co-optation and misapplication than invention. There is, of course, a major difference in the way indigenous peoples and imperialistic colonizers conceive of innovation. Indigenous innovation is made in dialogue with the Earth, mindful of the effects on and well-being of the Earth in all her aspects for the next seven generations and thereafter. Imperialistic innovation considers immediate gain or acquisition with little thought for the distant future, and so, today, in the midst of what scientists call “The Sixth Great Extinction,” a mass extinction caused by human activity, any future is questionable (Drake).

Even so, being indigenous or being involved in the indigenous struggle or resurgence does not necessarily preclude working in or otherwise being connected with imperialistic or colonizing systems, institutions or organizations, at least not in this present generation. Five hundred years of colonization in what are now called the Americas or 5,000 years of colonization in Eurasia and North Africa cannot be overcome in one generation. Pertinent questions to ask oneself from the midst of a colonizing system are, “Why am I here? Am I here only to make money or to effect change?” and “What am I doing with this experience?” Something may be said for indigenous people inserting themselves within colonizing organizations and institutions as change agents. I will have more to say about this later, but in short, these very courageous Aniyvwiya act as a medicine injected directly into malignant tumors of Earth’s cancer. Alternately, or at the same time, an indigenous person working within a colonizing system or organization may bring back from their experience something to help their own indigenous people. However, doing good within or bringing good from work within an imperialistic or colonizing system or organization takes a very high level of awareness. There are dangers, the greatest danger being the further colonization or cultural death of the indigenous person within the colonizing organization, institution or system, in which case that person is likely to bring back only malignancy to the people. But while indigenous thinking and action may not preclude working in or being connected with imperialistic or colonizing systems, institutions or organizations, It is my considered opinion that indigenous thinking and being indigenous does preclude living life for personal acquisition or personal gain with no regard for

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ones own people, with no regard for all peoples, with no regard for the Earth in all her aspects, with no regard for the next seven generations.

But, now we see that the most important and most difficult aspect of the indigenous struggle has to do with decolonizing as peoples who have ourselves become colonized, to wake up and begin developing the awareness it takes to return to ourselves, to become who we really are, to re-indigenize or enter the process of indigenous resurgence, to be Aniyvwiya. This is no easy task. In order to make room for the truth that will free us, we are obliged to unpack a boatload of lies.

Thing is
It has to do with heart
We have to understand
What hearts are for
Before we can get back
To heaven or paradise

Or the power of our mind

- John Trudell from "Thing Is"
in *Lines from a Mined Mind*

In the April 2016 edition of the "Missouri Conservationist" magazine, there is a picture of a white otter or a mostly white otter that was trapped on the Maries River. We Cherokees have an ancient story about the Morning Star descending to Earth at a time of great need in the form of a human being named White Otter. Furthermore, it is said that White Otter returns to Earth as needed. So, what of this white otter trapped on the Maries River in central Missouri? Perhaps it's a good sign. Perhaps it would have been a better sign had the white otter been seen alive rather than photographed dead in the hands of a trapper. But, when will White Otter return to help the Aniyvwiya?

There is a baby blessing kept by our Chickamauga Cherokee people in which the spiritual helper, speaking for the baby, says, "I am the Morning Star." Is there someone you are looking for or waiting for, expecting to come to bring healing in the Earth? Kneel and look upon the calm surface of a slow-moving stream, and you will see that one gazing back at you. Many in this generation are saying this, and it is true; you need to listen. You are the one you are waiting for. We must understand the truth of this in this generation, at this time of great crisis: We are that one we are looking for. The thought that we are somehow less than those who have gone before is only in our minds. We are not less. Through the ages, we, you have been prepared for this. It is now time to act. It is time to be Aniyvwiya.