

MINIWAUKAN NEWS



A Discord of Two Cultures: My Life as an Ojibwe Indian and Michif (Mixed Blood of Ojibwe, French and Cree)

By Willie Davis



My life has been a contrast between two cultures. To refute one or any part of one of those cultures would not be to provide an accurate picture of my family, environment, and the cultural influences that have formed me into the person that I am today.

This is not a situation unique to myself, but one to which I am sure many people – both Indian and non-Indian – can relate in some way!

On one hand, I am Ojibwe Indian (also known as Ojibwa or Chippewa). I credit this part of my cultural upbringing for instilling nurturing and leadership qualities into my being. Qualities, I feel, are aligned with traditional values such as honor and reverence that are reflected in how I live my life, and in what I try to pass on to others. This side of my personality allows me to be interactive and

reflective of other peoples' concerns and to be sensitive to troublesome issues affecting their daily lives.

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However, to say that I am simply Ojibwe Indian would be to discount the other half of me. I am also Michif or Half Breed (also referred to as Métis). This part of my blood line has descended from Ojibwe, Cree, and French ancestry. From this cultural exposure, I've gained a diverse thinking style that has helped shape my ability to work with others and to resolve dilemmas in a manner that takes into account these two distinct and contrasting cultures. This side also allows me to live a modern life style and gives me the ability to share myself, my lifestyle, with others.

At times, the contrast between traditional values from my Ojibwe side and modern values from my

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Michif side makes it difficult to manage personal issues and dilemmas! It is during these times that I reflect upon my spiritual upbringing. On one side, there is the Catholic religion that brings with it certain traditions and rituals that include:

baptizing, confirming, and the sacrament of communion. On the other hand, I have grown to understand and appreciate the spirituality of my Ojibwe teachings – to honor Mother Earth, the Great Spirit, and to care and respect others.

While today, my tribal identity is now such a strong part of me, I grew up not knowing much about it. All that I was sure of was that I was an enrolled member of a tribe. There was little reference to my Ojibwe bloodline. While my family used the term Ojibwe, most other references to the tribe

used the French term Chippewa.

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However, one term I heard frequently was Michif!

One example of how Michif culture diverges from traditional Ojibwe culture was evident when it came to dealing with tribal enrollment.

I remember, around the age of 16, having to go to the Bureau of Indian Affairs office to take a picture for enrollment identification.

Most tribes monitor their own enrollment. Our tribe (the Turtle Mountain Chippewa) is one of the few, if not only one, that allows the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to verify this process. I can only attribute this fact to the diversity of our culture.

COMPARING CULTURAL VALUES – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Ojibwe / Chippewa

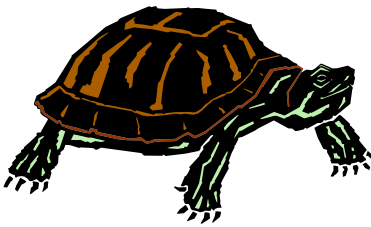
More Traditional in Thinking / Share
 Generous in Giving / Make Do With
 Cooperation, Sharing, Humility
 Group Harmony
 Sense of Time Being Relative/Flexible
 Philosophical Deep Sense of Humor About Life
 Work for Survival, Work Has its Place
 All Extended Family is Important
 Sobriety

European & Métis (Michif)

More Contemporary and Personal Thinking
 Rational Approach to What's Available,
 What You Have
 Competition, Possession, Self-Accomplishment
 Individual Achievement or Advancement
 World is Built Around the Clock, Time is Money
 Surface Humor and Jokes
 Work for the Sake of Working
 More Focus on the Immediate Family, Nucleus Family
 Use of Chemicals (Alcohol and Other Drugs)

NOTE: This is simply a personal reflection from my familial upbringing and working and living among the people.

The more traditional Ojibwe culture would want to keep this process and information screened by the tribe, so that close monitoring and accurate records could be kept on enrolled members. However, Michif culture is more accustomed to government involvement with regard to recordkeeping, and does not have an issue with the BIA taking a leading role in this process.



In the past, knowing that I belonged to two distinct and different cultures did not help me feel or have any sense of belonging. In my youth, I was not sure how to preserve my Ojibwe identity – or even that it was extremely important to do so.

When I was 15 or 16, I went on a field trip to Sioux Valley, Canada. It was there I began to understand why cultural identity is so important, and I began to value mine. I realized it wasn't that cultural identity was something I didn't care about, it was simply that I was not given the knowledge and/or skills to learn my tribal heritage at an early age. My experience in Sioux Valley gave me the opportunity to explore a part of my bloodline that opened my eyes. I had the chance to witness and partake in

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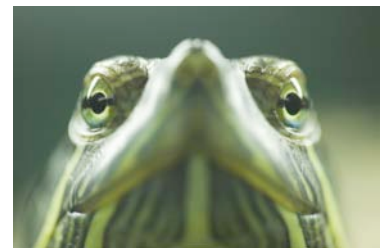
cultural events, like hearing the drum, and seeing the dancers express themselves in various styles, including different types of clothes they wore, also known as regalia. I also was able to gain an understanding of the Ojibwe people's general

mood and observe how they functioned and interacted on a daily basis. There are vast differences between the Ojibwe and Michif cultures!

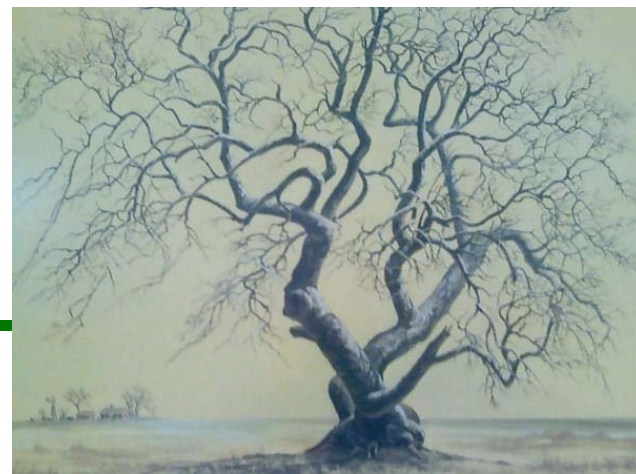


The history that I am a part of as an Ojibwa Indian is rooted in a singular culture with its own traditions. In contrast, the Michif culture (French, Chippewa, and Cree blood lines) has emerged from a blend of several cultures. The Michif culture has its own distinct culture, too, but it comes from two distinct parts of the world.

I have struggled to identify with one or both cultures, but instead of causing me to feel stress or to feel a lack of identity, my struggle has helped me come to find peace of mind and a greater understanding of the world around me and the cultures and people living among me. This, I believe, comes from my familial upbringing, including teachings and traditions.



Reflecting on my life, I can think of one example of embracing multiculturalism that really stands out,



particularly with regard to my Ojibwe identity. It was my uncle's wedding on my mother's side. The couple married in a dual ceremony, where a Catholic wedding was performed by a priest, but a traditional Ojibwe ceremony with a traditional spiritual leader was held as well. This showed me that it was possible to embrace both the more traditional (Ojibwe) values with more modern values, and incorporate traditional values into modern society without having to sacrifice one for the other. It also showed me that it was possible to maintain the idea of traditional Ojibwe culture in this modern world.



When I think of my Michif heritage, I think of my grandparents. On a very obvious level, they spoke this language, and they used it often as a way of talking about something that they did not want the children to hear. When asked what they said, they would respond by saying, "It's not important" or "It's nothing you need to be concerned about." When asked about our language or culture in my late teenage years, my grandparents often talked about their experiences while attending boarding schools. This included the suppression of using

their languages when talking to each other. These experiences in boarding schools and other similar ways the American government chose to try and assimilate Native children had a major bearing on my grandparents' decision to avoid passing their Michif language onto the grandchildren. However, there are some of my peers who can speak both languages. So, I guess some families have had the opportunity to pass it down. And with the continued support of the local community college and other avenues of learning within the community, future generations have opportunities and tools to preserve these cultures, to ensure the survival of these cultures and languages.

Another less evident example of Michif culture – but one that speaks just as loudly – was the fact that throughout my childhood, I was influenced by fiddle music. My great-grandfather was a well known fiddle player in the community, and my grandparents regularly listened to the local program, "Noon Time Fiddler Hour." The fiddle and the music it played entailed a style of art that allowed us to do jigging – a combination of dancing and moving of feet. It was also an embodiment of



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a mixture of cultures that the Ojibwe people adopted and passed onto their family members.

While the focus of this piece has been on Ojibwe and Michif culture, it is impossible ignore a third culture that is prevalent in our society, and that is the White/European/American influence. It is



present throughout the reservation, on buildings and documents, schools and churches. It is true this is a part of our life and history, but it should not be at the expense of our more traditional cultures, both Ojibwe and Michif.

It seems little if any focus is emphasized by community members and tribal leaders when it comes to performing Ojibwe sacred rituals. True, there are two annual pow wow ceremonies, various sweat lodge ceremonies, and various other cultural awareness activities taking place regularly in the community; however, the tribe and its people need to make a more concerted effort to organize these networks of activities – Including, getting more of the younger generations to part-take in the ceremonies and traditions, so that traditional culture will be preserved for generations to come.

Most tribal members are left to practice and carry on Ojibwe traditions on their own. There is no centralized importance keeping this part of our culture alive. Is this a result of our mixture of

cultures? If it were not for certain community members, the local community college, and some teachers implementing a language curriculum



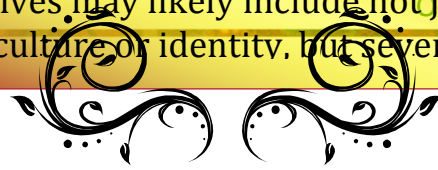
within their coursework, there would be no representation or preservation of our Ojibwe traditions in our community.

To me, this demonstrates that the Michif culture is more dominant than the Ojibwe culture – and with that dominance comes an ascendancy by the European aspect – both on an individual basis by each tribal member, and as a whole by our tribal

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government and its leadership. There is also the argument that the missionaries, BIA, and federal government schools have succeeded exceedingly well in assimilating us, changing us from a proud Indian (Ojibwe) nation into a community of half-breeds, and to some extent, less-breeds (1/4 or less Ojibwe Blood line).

It is up to us to carry on our culture and identity as well as accept that our lives may likely include not just one culture or identity, but several. October 2009



My hope for the people of the band, my community, and future generations is they continue: to educate themselves; to honor their Ojibwe and Michif culture, each other, and their ancestors; and they continue to pay homage to those Ojibwe and Michif leaders and families that have created our tribal identity in union with the Great Spirit. They have passed down the hope for tribal harmony – among both the Ojibwe Indians and Michif people. It is up to us to carry on our culture and identity as well as accept that our lives may likely include not just one culture or identity, but several. Δ



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