“Those Ones Endured So These Ones Could Survive”: A Journey of Community Healing Within a Pacific Northwest Native American Canoe Pilgrimage

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ABSTRACT

Building on Jill Dubisch’s identification of pilgrimages as a means of expression and resolution of a community’s history of suffering (2005) this study examines Native American Canoe Journey as a venue in which Pacific Northwest Native Americans use community as a source of healing for both individuals and their communities. While reexamining the concept of pilgrimage, this study also emphasizes the role of pilgrimage in cultural revitalization. As Dubisch added the idea that pilgrimages can be healing for the individuals undertaking them, this study similarly finds that pilgrimages can add “community healing” to a revitalization movement when a community shares a great loss.

INTRODUCTION

Through the examination of narratives from members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and drawing on my experience as a participant on Journey for three years, I make a three-part argument. First, though Journey can be seen as a revitalization movement according to Anthony Wallace’s (1965) stages of revitalization movements, Journey functions as a pilgrimage of community healing, as the pilgrimage heals communal wounds through revitalization. Secondly, I demonstrate how Journey constitutes a pilgrimage, regardless of the lack of religious affiliation. Lastly, I show how Journey is a pilgrimage of healing for the individuals who participate.

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—Kerri, tribal member

BACKGROUND

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde consists of 30 bands of Native Americans from around Western Oregon, southwestern Washington, and Northern California forced to relocate to the current Grand Ronde site, 25 miles from the ocean. In 1954 President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Western Oregon Indian Termination Act, terminating Grand Ronde Tribes’ federal recognition and treaty rights and lands. 63 tribes in Oregon were terminated because of the Termination Act; more tribes were terminated in Western Oregon than any other region in the United States.

In 1986 the first Journey in the Pacific Northwest began with Washington’s Paddle to Seattle. Not until 1993 did the next Journey occur with Paddle to Bella Bella, B.C. Ever since, Canoe Journey has become an annual event, with more than 100 canoes and Canoe Families from other First Nation cultures participating, as well as Inuit, Maori, and Native Hawaiians.

ANALYSIS

Revitalization

Once a cultural system becomes unsatisfactory for the society because of cultural stress, either internal or external, the system must adapt and change to function in a way that satisfies its members. There are six stages of revitalization, according to Wallace (1965), which Journey meets. Because of the treatment Native Americans experienced at the hands of Europeans, their cultural system was greatly stressed, nearly lost. This stress called for a change in system that would satisfy its members. The solution found by Pacific Northwest Native Americans was Canoe Journey. Journey became a stage for a revitalization movement. Journey created a place for a community of people who were previously ashamed of their Native American identity and lack of cultural knowledge. It was a place where they can come together and be Native American around each other, to help relearn traditions and put them into practice. This is the first outcome of Journey.

“My mom and all of her family members went through boarding schools, so it was beaten out of them. With me it was beaten out of me to be Indian and I grew up and I said someday I want to be, feel like I’m really Indian.”—James, tribal member

Pilgrimage

Victor and Edith Turner (1978), two anthropologists focused in pilgrimage studies, identified and defined four main types of pilgrimage. What the Turners do not identify are pilgrimages of healing, especially those that are not affiliated with a religious movement. Jill Dubisch (2005), anthropologist, is one of the first to identify a modern, healing pilgrimage in the Vietnam Memorial motorcycle pilgrimage, Run for the Wall. Dubisch states, “at the heart of a pilgrimage, after all, is the idea of a journey, and at the heart of the journey is the idea that traveling to a different or special place will bring about a change in one’s life, in one’s viewpoint, in one’s state of being” (p. 144). Journey functions as a pilgrimage without a religious affiliation because it is an annual journey that aims to bring a change in Native American’s lives, following an ancestral path, which goes to special, culturally significant destinations that were before denied to them through the Termination Act.

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Healing

Because of the treatment Native Americans have experienced in the United States, the history of pain, culture loss, and animosity has created generations of trauma and the loss of identity and cultural practices. Informants talked about a void within themselves because of a lack of practicing traditional ways; they knew they were ‘Indian’ but that they did not know what that meant in practice, which created a lack of something within them. Another of my informants mentioned how he convinces addicts away from drugs and alcohol: he teaches them to ground themselves within their culture, to fill whatever is lost in themselves with the practices of dance, song, canoe, sweat lodges, and ceremonies. In my study I found that Native Americans use Journey to fill a void, to recreate a culture that was lost to them, but most importantly they use Journey as a venue to identify and process past trauma and identity loss.

“There’s this thing called shame when you think of Indian country. ‘It’s only supposed to be this way, you’re only supposed to do ceremonies that way, don’t do this during a ceremony, don’t do that during a ceremony, this will happen if that happens’. That kind of mentality—and I’ve learned this from Uncle—is shame and trauma… We are still learning how to be Indian, which is weird to say.”
—Kerri

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY