

The Tobique connection: a story of renewal

by Melanie Bell

It was the fall of 2006.

We were two students from the Renaissance College classes who were slumped over in our bus seats, and some of us were snoring as our vehicle drove on through the early morning air. We were on our way to visit the Tobique First Nation community, and our attitude was a mixture of anticipation and exhaustion.

At the Tobique Community Centre, we were greeted by the community elder Imelda Perley in full regalia. We gathered in a circle and were invited to have coffee, serving our elders first. That tradition, such a contrast to the youth-oriented culture that prevails in our society, marked our visit from the beginning. I had a sense of being drawn into something unfamiliar and sacred.

Diamond, another elder, addressed us on the evolution of the Maliseet people's history. He spoke of a long period of independence, followed by an age of destruction brought by the Europeans. Few things belong to the Maliseet today, not even their name – "Maliseet" is the Mi'kmaq word for "slow speakers." The Maliseet's original name, Welustug, means "people of the river." The river is their source of life; although it is now polluted, they continue to offer it thanks and prayer.

According to Diamond, the European settlers saw First Nations people as having no religion, no educational system, and no value – therefore they imposed their own. In spite of all that has been taken from the Maliseet, Diamond is optimistic.

He believes his people are entering an age of renewal. This statement finds support in people such as Imelda, a passionate woman taking many steps to preserve her culture. During our meal of traditional corn soup, moose chili, and fry bread, again serving the elders first, I listened as she described her educational initiatives. The former Maliseet language teacher has designed

educational programs based on stories told by the elders. They are currently being taught in the local school, and Imelda hopes for them to become provincial. She is also spearheading a program to teach parents how to raise children in the traditional way.

The community itself is incongruent with its culture's traditional values. The houses, granted by the government, are virtually identical. They are not made of wood, as the community members wanted. Aside from the colourful hand-made election signs, Tobique resembled a typical low-income suburb. Imelda, however, proudly pointed out how

They cleanse themselves every morning with a sweat lodge ceremony, providing the only water they are allowed to have. Wild animals and wilder weather visit, but they do no harm. Imelda told of one fasting woman who was approached by a snake. She asked it to leave and, astonishingly to me, it did. The lack of fear, the oneness, the empathy that Imelda mentioned as results of the fasting are beyond my comprehension.

Gathered in a circle around the mound as the elders chanted to the beat of drum and rattle, we were asked to close our eyes and think of our

Our journey ended at the Perleys' house. In our final circle, we shared what we had gained from our visit. For the first time, one resident spoke to us in tears. His nephew had just disappeared, leaving a suicide note behind; he was not sure if the boy was alive or dead.

Some of my classmates were struck deeply by this. Remembering the poverty and despair, they left Tobique in sadness. I have visited another First Nations community, attended school with several Mi'kmaq students, and am familiar with the despair. What I was most struck by was the hope. Imelda told us that many young people in the community, after a generation or so of distance, are returning to tradition, taking part in the community's daily and weekly ceremonies. These ceremonies are important, Imelda stressed, so those who practice them can remember who they are.

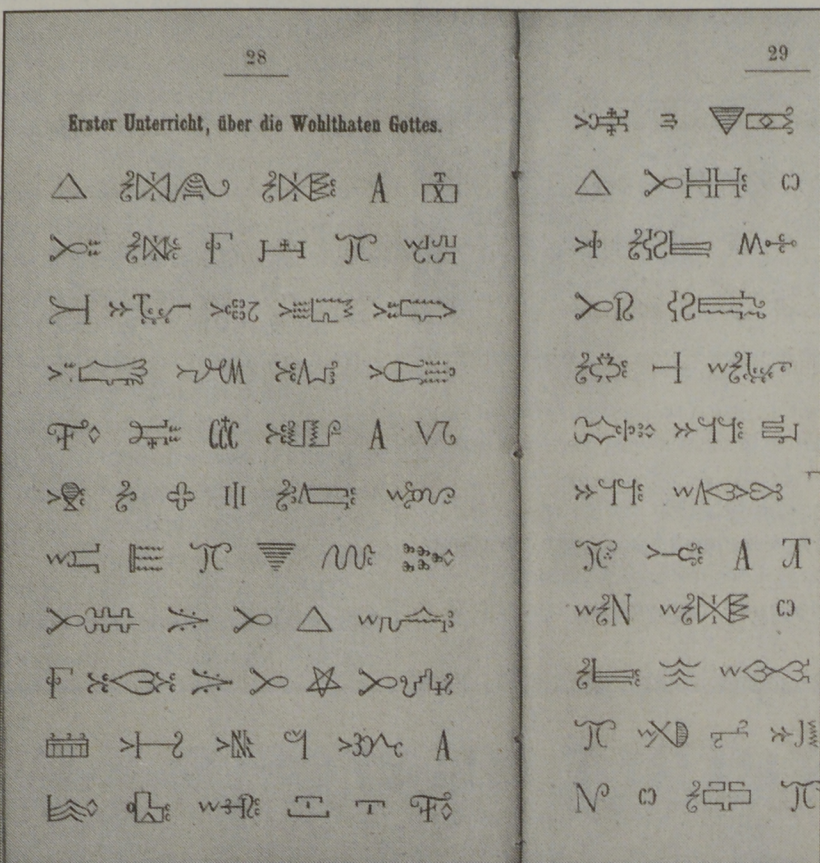
My visit to Tobique led me to realize the lack of such ceremonies in my own life. I know little about my own ancestors; I only see my extended family once or twice a year. In my youthful search for an identity, I have neglected one important element: The foundation of family heritage, the generations that progressed and merged to give me life. I am coming to realize the need for a sense of group identity that is lacking, for me and many others, in everyday life.

Our bus ride home was punctuated with discussions, sing-alongs and the sharing of food. That one day had helped in drawing us together. It made me wonder if my trip to Tobique would be a new tradition within my faculty? I hoped so.

In retrospect, the visit was only one patch in the quilt of tradition. Renaissance College classes have been visiting First Nations communities since the faculty's inception in 2000; this fall, we ventured to the Passamaquoddy Nation in Maine. Yet this kind of tradition has lent richness to the faculty, much as Harrison House's annual Great Pumpkin Sacrifice and Neville/Jones Bed Push draw their respective houses together – and much like the ceremonies practiced at Tobique unify the culture.

The ancient Babylonians, and later the Romans, made New Year's resolutions. The ancient Greeks initiated the idea of a New Year baby by using infants to symbolize the rebirth of their god Dionysus. A respect for cycles is inherent in the very idea of honouring a new year. Rituals have changed, but we still celebrate.

Perhaps a sense of group identity isn't as absent as I had first imagined. Perhaps, like the ceremonies whose renewal Imelda takes pride in, it simply needs to be practiced every day.



Internet

A writer experiences the life of the Maliseet culture first hand as she travels to the Tobique First Nation community.

much the community has grown.

Our bus ride continued through forests and steep hills. Thanks to our stalwart driver, with the occasional evacuation that allowed him to wind the bus through the narrow trail, we arrived at a burial mound in the forest. A pile of stones, each a gift placed there by a community member, marked the site where many Maliseet were buried together. This is where yearly fasting takes place. After prayers and thanks, the fasting community members each stand at a spot to which they are drawn.

ancestors. The gentle music and the inward focus of my energy dissolved the remains of my exhaustion. At first, I was puzzled. What did I know about my ancestors? So, I began to think of my mother. My thoughts flowed back to my aunts, grandparents, and the stories I have heard of generations past. I remembered instances of courage, selflessness, resourcefulness, drive, intelligence, and a strong vein of creativity. I wondered about the many strengths they held that I have never known. As I prayed to take these traits into myself and be strengthened by them, I felt as if my body was flooded with light. When I opened my eyes, I couldn't stop smiling.

As a group, we gathered branches and built a new sweat lodge with our own hands. The rickety frame of branches was transformed into a shelter, a miniature haven. When it was finished, I followed some friends inside. Embraced in silence, closeness and warmth, we made a pact to return.

Students want gay blood ban lifted

by Katie Hyslop
The Muse (Memorial University of Newfoundland)

ST. JOHN'S (CUP) -- The Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) has spoken out against Canadian Blood Services' (CBS) Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) policy, which bans men who have engaged in sexual intercourse with other men since 1977 from donating blood.

"This is a very discriminatory policy, and we are obviously not in favor of it," said Stella Magalios, Director of Campaigns for Memorial University of Newfoundland's Students' Union, a CFS member union.

"The fact is it's unfair to discriminate based on someone's personal life choice when it doesn't necessarily indicate whether they have AIDS or not," she said, noting that while homosexuality is not a choice, the act of having sex is.

CBS, however, maintains that their MSM policy is not meant to be discriminatory, but is an extra precaution to ensure clean blood.

"The basic premise for the deferral criteria that [CBS] has for men who have had sex with other men is that the prevalence and the incidence of HIV is much higher in males who have had sex with other males than in individuals who are having exclusively heterosexual sex," said Paul McGrath, the Newfoundland and Labrador media representative for CBS.

McGrath references a study released by the Public Health Agency in December 2006 that found 39.6% of positive HIV tests fall under the MSM category, the highest percentage of any group, with intravenous drug users following at 19.3% of HIV infections.

Even though all donated blood is tested for HIV/AIDS, McGrath said that it is dangerous to rely on those tests alone.

"The existing test that we have for HIV, while it is world class... No test can be 100% guaranteed," he said.

But according to Michelle Boucher, Executive Director of the AIDS Committee of Newfoundland and Labrador, while anal sex is considered a high-risk activity, men who have anal sex with men are not at a higher risk of contracting HIV from anal sex than women who have anal sex with men.

"Straight couples still engage in anal sex, still engage in oral sex, still use sex toys, and infections can be transmitted any of those ways because that would be what they consider high-risk behaviour," said Bethany Barrett, Director

of Internal Issues for Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgendered Students at the university.

"And unfortunately that behaviour is typically associated with gay men and lesbian women."

Canada is not the only country with a lifetime ban MSM policy: The US, UK, France, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, and Hong Kong also have a lifetime ban.

Some countries, however, like Hungary, New Zealand, and Argentina have shortened their ban lengths to five or 10 years.

Italy is the only known country whose MSM policy is based on the riskier behaviour, such as promiscuity and unprotected sex. It is this kind of policy that St. John's Pride Committee Chair Mark Hanlon would like implemented in Canada.

"Not every gay man who's had sex with a man or every man who's had sex with a man is necessarily at high risk for obtaining HIV or AIDS," he said, adding that HIV infection rates are also higher than average in Aboriginals and heterosexual women.

"I think [a policy] that's actually more universal ... would ask any individual what is their sexual behaviour. Whether they've had unprotected sexual intercourse with anybody, whether it's a man or a woman, then that individual should be flagged as a high-risk individual," said Hanlon.

Blood drives have been banned from the student centre at McGill University and Barrett hasn't ruled out such an action from LBGT-MUN.

"As of this point I don't know if we have any plans to protest it, and I'm not sure if we will because I have to talk to my volunteers first and just see what they feel about the subject," she said. She also added that she doesn't donate blood herself, partly for medical reasons and partly out of protest.

But Magalios doesn't think that's the best course of action for students to follow.

"Obviously donating blood is a very good thing to do, and in fact, the largest group of people that are donating right now are students," she said.

CBS's policies are controlled by Health Canada, who also recently announced the banning of organ donation from men who have had sex with men in the past five years.

McGrath says that though Health Canada is in talks with both the CFS and Egale Canada, an activist group for lesbians, gays, and transgendered Canadians, to review the policy, change will not be swift.

"This is something that is not going away today, it's not going away tomorrow, it's something that's going to be on our radar screen for quite a long time," he said.

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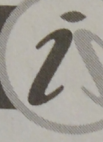
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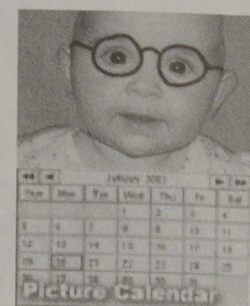
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