# TOWARDS CULTURAL WELL-BEING: IMPLICATIONS OF REVITALISING TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL RELIGION

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

After reviewing conflicting numbers from different surveys regarding the extent to which traditional Aboriginal 'Spirituality' is practiced on-reserve, this paper makes an argument for the potential well-being effects of revitalizing traditional Aboriginal religious practices by making an analogy to observed well-being impacts of revitalizing traditional languages. The conclusion is that language and religious practices are not only closely interrelated but also that their revitalization has demonstrable impacts on individual and community well-being.

Après avoir examiné des chiffres contradictoires résultant de différentes enquêtes sur la mesure dans laquelle la « spiritualité » autochtone est pratiquée dans les réserves, les auteurs de cet article soutiennent, par analogie avec les répercussions observées sur le bien-être de la revitalisation des langues ancestrales, que la revitalisation des pratiques religieuses autochtones traditionnelles peut avoir des effets sur le bien-être. Les auteurs en viennent à la conclusion que non seulement les langues et les pratiques religieuses sont étroitement liées, mais que la revitalisation des unes et des autres a des répercussions démontrables sur le bien-être individuel et communautaire.

"Why is it important to revitalize traditional Aboriginal religions?" some might ask. This is an important question, which merits a serious response. A great deal of research effort has been dedicated in recent years to better understanding the potential impact on well-being of revitalizing traditional Aboriginal languages and/or governance institutions, or of culturally relevant programming in fields such as justice or education. As well, at least in non-Aboriginal settings, there is some evidence that strong religious institutions can correlate positively with some measures of well-being. However, there is not a great deal of research on the specific question of the potential benefit in terms of well-being to be derived from revitalizing traditional Aboriginal religions. This paper seeks to chart a path towards an evidence-based response to that question, by developing an argument by analogy regarding the impacts of revitalizing traditional Aboriginal languages.

First, we look at the available data regarding the religions in which Canada's Aboriginal people claim to participate. We then compare numbers of Aboriginal persons claiming to participate in traditional Aboriginal religious traditions as found in the 2001 Census of Canada, the 2002-03 First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS), and the 2001 *Tenuous Connections* report. What we find is that these three sources provide conflicting numbers.

The 2001 Census was the last occasion on which the religion question was asked; the next instance will be in 2011. Of the 1,359,010 respondents self-identifying as Aboriginal in 2001, 27,745 (or 2%) claimed "'Aboriginal spirituality". In contrast, 577,975 (42.5%) Aboriginal persons claimed to be Catholic; 384,185 (22.1%) claimed a version of Protestantism; and, 299,685 (28.2%) said they participate in no religion.[1] When we consider the numbers of persons on-reserve, we find a similar picture: of the 321,855 Aboriginal persons living on-reserve, 14,455 (4.5%) claimed "Aboriginal spirituality". By far the vast majority of respondents on-reserve claimed Catholicism (142,785 – 44.2%); the bulk of the remaining selected a form of Protestantism (102,130 – 31.7%); or, no religion (51,730 – 16.1%).

The 2002-03 RHS surveyed 22,602 Aboriginal Individuals living in 238 First Nations communities across Canada, with the exclusion of Nunavut.[2] With regard to questions regarding religions, we find that 76.4% of the respondents consider traditional "spirituality" and 70.3% "religion", such as Christianity, important. This suggests that many Aboriginal persons value both Christian and traditional Aboriginal religions (RHS 2005: 35).[3] They may also practice both – but RHS does not ask this question and Census does not provide space for multiple responses.

The *Tenuous Connections* report was prepared by the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC). It queried 340 participants in Ontario: 255 of them were youth interviews, 33 focus group participants and 52 additional interviews with parents, front-line workers and Elders. (OFIFC 2002:11-17) This survey was explicitly about Aboriginal youth sexual practices and their outcomes but some questions have relevance to traditional religions.[4] Participants were queried whether they followed "Native," Christian or other spiritual traditions: 43% identified with "Native" spiritual traditions, 28% with no tradition, "13% identified exclusively as Christian, and 11% said they followed both "Native" and Christian Spiritual ways." (OFIFC 2002:48)

The table below provides a summary of the percentage of individuals valuing or claiming they participate in traditional Aboriginal religions in each source:

Obviously, there are issues regarding the comparability of sample size and scope. Nonetheless, we find significant differences in terms of the percentages of people claiming to participate in, or who value, traditional Aboriginal religions. The discrepancies range from an order of 10 (Census vs. *Tenuous Connections*) to 17 (Census vs. RHS). However, it is not methodologically sound to assume that "valuing" traditional Aboriginal religions can be taken directly as the number of respondents actively engaging in these practices. Let us assume, therefore, that at least half of the 17,268 RHS respondents "valuing" traditional religions practice them regularly. This leaves us with 42.1% of the respondents or 8,634 persons. This represents a factor just under ten when compared to the percentage of Census respondents noted above.

| SOURCE / # RESPONDENTS | CENSUS/1.36M OR 322K ON-RESERVE | RHS/22K | TENUOUS CONNECTIONS/340 |
|---|---|---|---|
| % Traditional religions | 2% total<br>4.5% on-reserve | 90% | 43% |

Next, I explore the positive well-being impacts that revitalizing traditional Aboriginal languages can bring. I use language revitalization as a proxy for revitalizing traditional religions. There are several good reasons to look to the case of language revitalization for insight into the potential impacts of revitalizing traditional Aboriginal religions. First, it is worth noting that the body of research available on the impacts of language revitalization is much more extensive than is the case for religious revitalization (RHS 2005:33). More importantly for this discussion however, religion, like language, constitutes one of the main cultural drivers of a society; it is deeply implicated in establishing and maintaining a culture's worldview, identity and continuity. One might add that language and religion are not separated in the Aboriginal world view[5]: it could be said, for example, that involvement in traditional ceremonies is antecedent to learning one's traditional language.[6]

In terms of conclusive findings regarding the impact on well-being of language revitalization, the research is split between economic and non-economic aspects of well-being. Research with respect to economic benefits to be gained from language revitalization can be fairly described as inconclusive. From the viewpoint of human capital theory, languages are a resource people can draw upon to increase their relative productivity, and to promote local cohesion and workforce self-confidence (Crystal 2000: 27-31). Further, as a form of human capital (as versus physical capital such as transportation infrastructure, for which laws of scarcity inform calculations of value), a language increases in value as the number of people using it increases. Nonetheless, Muhlhauser and Samania (2004:21-23) note that existing economic studies of minority languages lack sophistication, adding that while language preservation and economic development are not mutually exclusive, computing the benefits of language revitalization is a challenging, imprecise task. (Muhlhauser & Samania 2004:34-36)

Research regarding the impacts of Aboriginal language vitality on non-economic aspects of well-being is more promising. UBC psychologist Michael Chandler's 20 years of research on the relationship between well-being and "cultural continuity" in First Nations communities in British Columbia has been extensively reported. Chandler's




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working hypothesis is that the suicide rates should vary as a function of the degree to which Indigenous communities have strategies in place that help preserve a measure of cultural continuity in face of all the dramatic changes resulting from colonization. (Chandler & Proulx 2006a:16) As his work has shown, high suicide rates among First Nations in B.C. are an "actuarial fiction": 90% of all Aboriginal youth suicides take place in 15% of the bands while more than half of the province's bands did not experience a suicide during the fourteen years Chandler's research on suicide was active. (Chandler & Proulx 2006a:16) Community-level analysis shows that those First Nations that were successful in preserving ties to their past and achieving a measure of local control over their present and future are characterized by significantly lower youth suicide rates, while bands that did not achieve similar means to maintain cultural continuity "typically suffer youth suicide rates many hundreds of times higher than the national average." (Chandler & Proulx 2006a:16)

Chandler argues that that the risk of suicide "rises, in important part, as a consequence of disruptions for those key individual and cultural identity-preserving practices that are required to sustain responsible ownership of a past and a hopeful commitment to the future. (Chandler & Proulx 2006b:8; cf., Chandler & Proulx 2006a:16ff) Early studies (Chandler & Lalonde 1998, 2004) analyzed community-level suicide rates according to degree of local control over key institutions, including health, education and – notably – "programs or facilities to maintain or transmit cultural resources" as well as presence of women in government and local control of child protection programs.

In 2007, vitality of traditional languages was added as an indicator. They found that those bands with greater than 50% of language knowledge had fewer suicides than those

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with language knowledge lower than 50%. Those bands with higher levels of language knowledge averaged 13 suicides per 100,000, well below the national average for youth in general. Those bands with lower language knowledge had suicide rates six times the national average (i.e., 96.5 per 100,000). When combined with the eight aforementioned indicators, it was found that language combined with any one indicator reduced the suicide rate close to zero in all instances, except when there were four indicators present. Even then the suicide rate was less than half the corresponding rate for those bands without the language factor (37.12 vs. 77.68 per 100,000). (Chandler & Lalonde 2007:6-7)

Chandler *et al.,* are not alone in finding positive impacts emanating from language revitalization. Tulloch (2008), writing on the impacts among Inuit youth of (re)learning their traditional language, notes: "…language brings and binds community members together. Without it, some Inuit feel disconnected; they miss acceptance and the opportunity to participate fully in their community." (Tulloch 2008:73) For Inuit youth Inuktitut is a tool for self-expression and for bonding with family and community; it aids co-operation and advancement. Moreover, "[b]reakdowns in language competence are linked to interruptions in the social network" and that the reverse is also true – increased language competence can result in increased opportunities for community engagement. (Tulloch 2008:74) Learning their language is not a luxury for Inuit youth, "any more than communicating with one's parents and grandparents, knowing where one comes from, and being able to gain the kind of education one values" (Tulloch 2008:75); it is an essential contributor to social capital and cohesion.

We have seen that revitalizing traditional languages has impacts on community continuity and well-being. And, when language is tied to other proxies, indicators such as youth suicide and education outcomes improve. We might also find better mental and physical health outcomes over time. If we accept that language and religion are intertwined, we can hypothesize that revitalizing both can help improve community and cultural well-being. As Crystal puts it:

> …it [language] is the chief mechanism of their [a people's or a culture's] rituals; it is the means of conveying ancient myths and legends, and their beliefs about the spirit world, to new generations; it is away of expressing their network of social relationships… (Crystal 2000:48f)

The RHS (2005:35) provides some supporting evidence to this supposition: respondents that viewed traditional cultural events as important were also more likely to perceive community progress in such areas as:

- The renewal of First Nations "spirituality", traditional ceremonies and approaches to healing;
- Renewed relationships with the land; and,
- An increase in the use of First Nations languages.

All are related to traditional Aboriginal religions and can provide net benefits to Aboriginal well-being. As RHS (2005:39) points out "The apparent strength of culture… suggests resilience and offers hope."

We know that in Canada, as elsewhere, Indigenous people's languages are at risk. For instance, the RHS tells us that 41% of First Nations communities in Canada had local languages that were either endangered or critical. (RHS 2005:34) According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) a language is found to be endangered when less than 30% of children in a community learn that languages as a mother tongue. The 2001 Census showed that only 15% of Aboriginal children in Canada under the age of five learned an indigenous mother tongue. (Norris 2006:199) This loss of language knowledge undermines community and cultural continuity; given the close intertwining of traditional language and traditional religion, coupled with evidence pertaining to the impact of cultural continuity on well-being, policies to support the revitalization of both traditional languages and traditional spiritual institutions and practices would seem eminently justifiable.

While it has been argued that there are no authentic traditional languages (or religions) per se – they changed as a result of contact and changes in social and natural ecologies (Muhlhauser & Samania 2004:21) – there are benefits in revitalizing traditional languages, that also apply to religion traditions: providing motivation for integration into traditional societies and social healing. Revitalizing traditional Aboriginal religions could be another means by which individuals and cultures can locate themselves in time, which can improve personal and cultural continuity

and increase well-being. The RHS (2005:39) recommends language protection in the form of "urgent remedial action" using "multiple mutually reinforcing strategies." Policies supporting the revitalization of traditional Aboriginal religions and ceremonial activities fit this bill.

By way of discussion, I note that there is no way of knowing now what the impacts of traditional or Christian religions have on First Nations' well-being. We need empirical investigation specific to this question. However, we can speculate that since Chandler's indicators are all about measures leading to greater self-reliance and determination in Indigenous communities, activities designed to help revitalize traditional Aboriginal religions should also help improve community well-being.

Previously, I mentioned the possibility of developing cultural well-being measures based on traditional languages and religions. We know that both are deeply interrelated. We have seen the positive impacts on youth suicide that language knowledge can bring to First Nations communities. What these things suggest is an opportunity to develop a series of cultural well-being measures that can complement the Community Well-being Index (White, Beavon & Spence 2008) developed by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada researchers. The issue is, of course, developing measurable indicators and proxies as well as ensuring comparability. This entails a lot of work but some of it is already done: the Census asks the religion and language question, RHS does the same and asks questions related to cultural activities and health outcomes – both mental and physical.

Finally, I would remind us of an observation made above: in terms of languages and religions, value is related to use. If they are not used, their value is of limited impact and they will be lost.

## NOTES

[1] A note of caution is necessary here. Many Aboriginal communities do not participate in the Canadian Census, resulting in less than reliable numbers regarding Aboriginal individuals in Canada in its Census. In fact, in 2001 DIAND's Indian Registry reported some 610,101 First Nations individuals in Canada, as per definitions instituted by the Indian Act. And some 57.5% (or 396,685) were reported as living in FN communities or on crown land. The remainder were living outside of First Nations lands, generally in rural or urban settings. Not only does the Indian Registry report greater numbers of Aboriginal persons living on-reserve, it also reports a lower number of persons identified as Aboriginal than does the Canadian census. Explanations for this latter discrepancy can be found in differences owing to institutionalized, governmental definitions of Aboriginality (and the rights pertaining to) as per the Indian Act and persons who self-identify as Aboriginal on the Census (Clatworthy & Norris, 2007; Clatworthy, Norris & Guimond, 2007).

[2] The RHS nonetheless included some Inuit communities, whereas in the Census the numbers of persons living on-reserve does not include Inuit communities – but the total Aboriginal population numbers will include Inuit respondents as well as other persons self-identifying as Aboriginal.

[3] There are many Aboriginal Christians in Manitoba, at least, who dance powwow because they believe that it is not religious but cultural. This is a distinction based on their Christian teaching that is not made by Traditionalists). Personal communication with Mark F. Ruml, October 21, 2008.

[4] For instance, one of the guiding questions of the survey is as follows: "Are the youth influenced by Native traditional knowledge and ethics, or are there other spiritual ethics that influence their approach to sex and parenting?" (OFIFC, 2002:13, 48)

[5] In an email discussion on this topic with Dr. Mark F. Ruml, Assistant Professor of Aboriginal religions at the University of Winnipeg, I was told: "Another thing that I notice with language revitalization is that people who attend ceremonies get stimulated to learn their language, especially in order to understand the songs. I "shamed" several buddies of mine to learn their language as I was regularly called upon by the Elder to translate the meaning of the songs. I have seen many students and community members get interested in learning their language after becoming involved in ceremonies. In Manitoba, it seems that involvement in ceremonies is an antecedent to learning ones language." (Personal communication with Dr. Mark F. Ruml, September 2008) In a second personal communication (October 21,2008), Ruml says "I was also at a Midewiwin ceremony where the head Mide priest honoured one of the youths for becoming fluent in his language in such a short period of time. He was honoured for his dedication, commitment, and hard work."

[6] Personal communication with Dr. Mark F. Ruml, October 21, 2008.

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