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### **The Architecture of Community: A Makah Longhouse**

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In the late '80s, I worked with environmental education students in a field studies program. We were in southern California studying ecology and cultural history, and many of us were interested in the historical and contemporary relationship between indigenous peoples and Euro-Americans, especially the interaction between Natives and Christian missionaries. At a seminar, one of the students held up a contemporary map of southern California and we all marvelled at the many tiny Native reservations that dotted the desert. What had been the relationship of these diverse cultures with the European immigrants?

We called a mission asking if we could talk to a missionary about his or her work with Native Americans, and a time was arranged for our visit later in the week. I remember the scene quite distinctly. We were shown into a large meeting room and twenty-three of us sat around an enormous wooden table. Finally, the priest arrived. He was a "Grey Robe," a Franciscan, and, somewhat whimsically, I thought he looked strikingly like friar Tuck - including the bald pate. We began asking questions, and it wasn't long before we found ourselves not very happy with his answers.

He explained to us how, yes, the missionaries had come into this area of the continent to convert the Natives to Christianity, but it was both acceptable and necessary work as the indigenous people "really didn't have much of a religion anyway."

As we had spent more than a month studying Native American beliefs and culture, this argument didn't meet a receptive audience. Pointing out all the different tribes we noticed on the map, one student said, "But, didn't the Natives have thriving, ongoing cultures at the time the Europeans arrived here?"

"Oh no," he assured us, "they didn't have much culturally, religiously, or much of anything else. In fact, they were barely surviving in their desert shanties, living under a few branches that they gathered together for shelter. They readily came to the mission for help once it was open."

In fact, Natives across North America willingly came to churches and missions, mostly for the food, jewelry, metal utensils and weapons that they offered. (This incentive is still being used today. At some churches on the Navajo reservation, participants receive food coupons for attending Sunday mass.) When they didn't come willingly, however, Natives were forced to come at gunpoint. Many mission churches in the southwest were built with the grief and blood of Native populations.

As we sat in that room, listening to the good friar, I had the distinct impression of my

students hopelessly gripping the table, digging into it with their fingers, in an effort to gain composure. They were using extreme self-control. The night before, we'd had a long discussion about being polite and decent to this man of the cloth, regardless of what he said.

The prerogative of a travelling EE program is to move, so, heading north, we found ourselves weeks later on the Makah Indian Reservation, west of Seattle, Washington. The village occupies its original location near Cape Flattery, the furthest western point in the lower states. There is a museum there that has a reconstructed longhouse on display. Hundreds of these dwellings, stretching many miles, used to be aligned along the beaches of the northwest coast. The people that lived in the numerous communities along the ocean made their livelihood through whaling, sealing and salmon fishing.

One afternoon I walked alone into the longhouse. It was dark and large (maybe 20' x 100'), you could hear the sound of the surf, and it was divvied up with waist-high dividers into family units (about 8' x 12'), each with its own fire ring.

I stood there and thought to myself how remarkable it must have been living in such a place with seven to eight families, including the old and young: cooking, singing, talking, crying, playing, fighting, screaming, lovemaking - all going on in one combined, but culturally tolerable, cacophony. I couldn't imagine the attributes of interdependence, tolerance, co-creation, and cooperation that must have existed for people to live in this way, even though it is unlikely that they had anything approaching this kind of vocabulary to describe it. Oddly, westerners have the vocabulary, but not the interpersonal know-how to live this way. For years, the image of the Makah longhouse was the metaphor that I used whenever I needed to illustrate an idealization of the complexities of community.

Why had these folks, with all the possible choices they had, designed their community, living space, and social system in this way, each one sinuously intermingled with the other? Curiously, this is also the part of the world where the potlatch (i.e., an elaborate, ritualized give-away) was developed to a high degree, with families giving away all they had to the other members of their community, even to people from other tribes. Was this style of altruism and interdependence merely an arbitrary cultural construction? What could have been their model for such an interconnected social system?

How we see ourselves is tied to the kind of picture that our culture paints for us. In contrast to most historical and indigenous peoples, many of us go through our lives isolated. We may have close family ties, and many friends, but our connection to a larger community is often abstract. We live in a particular geographic area; in a certain town; in a neighbourhood; and, on a specific street. But do we feel a part of any of those places? Do we feel supported and in contact with our most immediate neighbours? Usually not. All too often we live in a community of strangers.

This is quite different from the experience of aboriginal cultures, as well as the ancestors of Euro-Americans. Nestled in the arms of one's extended family, there is always, except in the case of roaming hunters and gathers living on the most extreme lands, a larger community that one is constantly in contact with. Twentieth-century humans are so accustomed to the immense and faceless institutions of school, television, business, and church mediating their lives that it's incomprehensible that it is possible to know *everyone* there is to know. It's possible to live so that the community which surrounds you is not made up of nameless, and mostly distant, faces, but individuals who help each other, interact with each other, and work alongside each other, but, of course, don't always get along with each other. This is not an idyllic picture, merely different from the one most of us are used to. It is an alternative to the world that Euro- Americans have created. Remarkably, society at this level of collaboration is not completely extinct, even in some non- Native cultures.

The same environmental education group that visited the friar in southern California, and the Makah Reservation in Washington, had, earlier in the year, travelled to Lancaster, Pennsylvania to work on the farm of an Old Order Mennonite farmer. The Mennonites came from Germany in the seventeenth century and have remained frozen in time to the habits and lifeways of their ancestors. In the American culture of dynamic and rapid change this is more than remarkable.

Although between the Mennonites, and a companion religion the Amish, there are many different sects that make generalizations impossible, collectively these folks shun all the wondrous accoutrements that most Americans slave away their lives to enjoy. With many variations in style: they use a horse and buggy for transportation; they do not use electricity; they do not have telephones, TVs, or radios in their homes; they heat with wood and coal; and, they use horses and mules to pull their farm equipment. Some carry pocket watches instead of wristwatches (a sign of the modern world), wear suspenders instead of belts (a new and unacceptable way to hold up your pants), use hooks instead of buttons (originally worn only by the military), and encourage their young people to court in the old-fashioned parlour. They are a glimpse at a forgotten way of being.

During our stay the farmer asked us if we wanted to visit an Amish farm where a barn had burned down and a new one was under construction. Two weeks earlier the enormous barn, full of cows, hay, a team of horses, equipment, and the family cat, had burned to the ground and everything was lost. The family didn't have a telephone, but before the embers had stopped smoking people began arriving. The women took over the kitchen, bringing large quantities of food. The men, carrying tools from home, went to the barn site and began clearing away the burned debris. In a day or two lumber started arriving.

On the day we visited the site, the frame was up and there were dozens of men, in black trousers, broad-rimmed hats, and white shirts, climbing all over the structure. I noted that while the barn's future owner showed us around, the Mennonite farmer who brought us immediately left our group and joined the workforce. Within a month of our visit the family had a new barn, equipment, hay, cows, horses - and a cat. All of this, plus the food to feed the workers and everyone's labour, was donated by community members. Once again, all of this happened without the family making a single telephone call. The Amish and Mennonites don't have insurance policies. At least, not the same kind that their "English" neighbours (as they call them) are dependent on.

Are we really the individuals that we think we are? If your community can be described as this Amish one, are you an individual or are you a community member? A robin, a mosquito, and a bear are all unquestionably a part of the ecosystem that surrounds them. They hardly exist as real entities outside of their environment, as many people experience when visiting these creatures in a zoo or seeing them in a cage. Few doubt the importance of placing wild creatures within their natural community. They have a mutually dependent relationship with their environment. Even plants have recently been found to be sharing carbon between their roots, in symbiotic exchange between different species. It may be that the social institutions and technologies that insulate and isolate us from the larger community we live in offer us an extremely limited arrangement. If only we could visualize our individuality in a different way, perhaps we would all have full barns.

Soon after our visit to the Makah village we had the opportunity of watching a salmon run on the Hoh river, which runs down from the Olympic Mountains. It's an amazing experience watching these huge fish struggle upstream against the shallows and currents. They finally make it to their original birthplace, mate, lay eggs and die. Millions of fish, thousands of tons of fish flesh, left to rot. Well, not quite. The salmon provide an untold bounty for the bears, weasels, eagles, mice, micro-organisms and other predators who dine on their sacrifice. As I watched this marvellous natural potlatch take place, I realized that I was experiencing the Makah's model of community.

All of a sudden it was so obvious. The Makah's ancient ancestors watched for centuries as these noble fish gave their lives time and again, first for their young and then for the animals of the forest, hundreds of miles inland from their lives in the ocean. What an example of communal interchange, of co-dependence between bioregions, of self-sacrifice. With intimate acquaintance, the Makahs learned to mimic their perception of the salmon's offering. As with the Amish barn raisers on the other side of the continent, nothing was more important than family, community and giving all you had for the common good. The salmon's great give-away became a profound ecological lesson built into the Makah's psyche, and the structure of the longhouse. It was a lesson as complex as any postgraduate study in ecological systems analysis - although, they could not have explained it to the good friar.

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