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Reviving Native Culture and Tradition with the Help of Elders – A Study of Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*

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Elders should be role models for everyone. Elders should be teachers of the grandchildren and all young people because of their wisdom. Elders should be advisors, law-givers, dispensers of justice. Elders should be knowledgeable in all aspects of Innu Culture. Elders should be teachers for everyone of the past history of Innu people. Elders should be teachers of values to be passed from generation to generation... We place great importance in our elders. Their directions for us will guide our lives. (Statement by the Innu delegation from Sheshatshiu Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, April 27, 1989)

The role of Elders has become increasingly meaningful in First Nation Communities, especially urban communities. Elders are important for their symbolic connection to the past and for their knowledge of traditional ways, teachings, stories and ceremonies. A number of community organizations in Toronto, such as the Native Canadian Centre, Anishnawbe Health of Toronto, Aboriginal Legal Services to Toronto, First Nations House of the University of Toronto and many more have introduced either a resident "Elder", "a visiting Elder programme, or an Elders' Advisory committee to provide guidance and information to the organization and its community. Such a strategy provides the community with contact with tradition, traditional beliefs, ceremonies and experiences and a philosophy unique to First Nation Cultures. If the knowledge of tradition is lost, the Native identity will be lost. They are symbols of Aboriginal culture not only in their words and actions but in their very being. This paper is an attempt in analyzing the revival of Native culture and tradition in Maria Campbell's autobiography *Halfbreed*.

Intimate familiarity with Native culture is a key to the survival of the Metis. It can help them to take pride in being Metis and to retain their Metis identity. Without it, they are most likely to become nothing and fail in a pluralistic society. Maria Campbell, born in 1940 in Northern Saskatchewan, produced her book, 'Half-breed', in 1973. This is a story of her own life up to the time she became a writer. Campbell never dreamed of becoming a writer. It was growing frustration and anger with her powerlessness that spurred her to write about herself. Since then, she has been active in publishing short illustrated histories for children, which include *'The People of Buffalo'* (1976), *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit* (1977), *Riel's People* (1978) and *Achimoona* (1985). These books are designed to provide young Native people with Native stories, which help to instill in them a pride in their heritage and a positive self-image.

Campbell is raised by her Metis parents and extended family in Native community. Her familiarity with Native traditional practices is represented through eating Native traditional food, observing Native spiritual customs, using a dialect of her Native language, and maintaining close contacts with Native relatives. Her daily experience of Native ways creates a priceless accumulation of knowledge of her culture. This Native experience enables

Campbell to hold a positive outlook towards her people and to see the Metis as distinct from either Indians or whites.

Campbell is also fortunate to have Cheechum during her childhood. She introduces Cheechum as “my best friend and confidante, (who) tried to teach me all she knew about living” (16). The teachings of Cheechum, based upon traditional Native wisdom, makes Campbell strong enough to get through her difficulties. The close contact between the Campbells and their extended family and Indian relatives is instrumental in developing a positive outlook towards the Metis.

The Indian relatives of the Campbells provide Maria with priceless opportunities for learning the difference between the Metis and the Indians, and for enhancing her sense of cultural distinctness. Cultural awareness is important for the Metis to survive in non-Native society. Intimate familiarity with Native culture brings to the Metis a sense of identity and confidence in themselves. Those who lack a strong cultural background are confronted with the problem of identity “loss”. The solution for them is the recovery of Native culture. One of the goals of Native organizations is to save and rebuild pride and to develop a sense of identity, by providing the Metis with many opportunities to expose themselves to their ancestral culture and customs.

While analyzing “The Quest for Cultural Roots”, S.Armstrong sums up the story of **Halfbreed** thus:

Campbell’s retelling of Native history in a revolutionary vein is a rereading of the hegemonic writing of the Metis history. In the first chapter of her autobiography, Campbell records very brief Metis historical events and struggles and family history in an encapsulated form. (45)

Maria Campbell illustrates the nature of Halfbreed people and their origin. She firmly believes that close familiarity with Native culture is a key to the survival of the Metis and she takes pride in retaining her Metis identity. Despite the images of poverty and economic destitutions faced by Maria Campbell’s family, the first part of **Halfbreed** is permeated by laughter, music and a sense of joy in the community. Maria’s early life gives us a picture of happy childhood days

... Daddy taught me to set traps, shoot a rifle, and fight like a boy. Mom did her best to turn me into a lady, showing me how to cook, sew and knit, while Cheechum my best friend and confidante, tried to teach me all she knew about living. (16)

Maria Campbell spent most of her time with her great grandmother Cheechum. She could smell something special that comforted her. She was taught to dance and make music on the guitars and fiddles. Her parents and other elders in the settlement took the children on long walks and taught them how to use the different herbs, roots and barks. While the children were engaged in weaving baskets from the red willow, the elders told them stories of their people.

Many were legends handed down from father to son. Many of them had a lesson but mostly they were fun stories about funny people (18)

Their relationship with the Indians continued despite their quarrels and they visited each other. ‘Mushooms’ (grand father) and ‘Kokums’ (grandmother) took them to pow-wows,

sundances and Treaty Days. Maria acknowledges that through them she has learned the meanings of those special days.

Halfbreeds are very superstitious people. They believe in ghosts, spirits and any other kind of spook and they have many terrifying stories of ghosts. It is during the annual Trappers convention, near Montreal lake, Maria experiences the power of Native medicine. Power of the word and the ways of the Native medicine are closely related to oral tradition. **Halfbreed** describes the various medicinal ways practiced by the Natives along with hunting and trapping.

Many Native people practiced medicine but Montreal Lake was renowned for its bad medicine. The men used it on their traplines so they would have good hauls... They could cast spells and even kill with it. (44).

The power of the word may refer to the advice given to the younger Natives by the grandparents and elders. In this context McGrath and Petrone point out:

Central to the oral tradition was the power of the word, whether spoken, chanted or sung. It carried the power to make things happen: medicine to heal, plants to grow, animals to be caught and humanbeings to enter the spiritual realms. Through this scared power, the Indians and Inuit sought to shape and control the cosmic forces that governed their lives (309)

Native people's knowledge of medicinal ways and the related herbs to cure diseases are closely associated with the oral tradition. Maria refers to a cree medicine man 'Ha-shoo' meaning crow. He loved to chant and play the drum.

Story telling is a well-knit factor closely connected with the ancestral tradition of orature. **Halfbreed** is full of incidents where reference to storytelling is made. Many elders and grandparents are good storytellers. Campbell refers to the storytelling power of her Granny Dubuque:

Grannie was a combination of a very strict Catholic and a superstitious Indian, which made her the greatest story teller in the world. Every evening, after work was done, she made each of us a cup of cocoa and some popcorn, and then gathered us around her and told stories of the northern lights (ghost dancers), of Almighty voice, Poundmaker and other famous Indians. We heard many spine-chilling tales, but we asked for one story in particular, over and over again. (91).

Maria Campbell elaborately describes the Native's respect and reverence for the elders, their joint living and their faith in superstition. Maria Campbell's acquaintance with Native culture, beliefs and oral traditions is developed through many opportunities to participate in various traditional customs and to hear the Metis history and their oral stories. She is raised by her Metis parents and extended family in a Native community. Her familiarity with Native traditional practices is best expressed in her vivid presentation of eating Native traditional food, observing Native spiritual customs, using the names and a dialect of her Native language and maintaining close contacts with Native relatives. Maria Campbell realizes the difference in their food habits only at school:

They had white or brown bread, boiled eggs, apples, cakes,

cookies and jars of milk. We were lucky to have these even at Christmas. We took bannock for lunch, spread with lard and filled with wild meat, and if there was not meat we had cold potatoes and salt and pepper, or else whole roasted gophers with sage dressing. No apple or fruit, but if they were lucky there was a jam sandwich for dessert (50)

As a child, there is a longing in this description. But later after the death of her mother, Maria Campbell talks about a Christmas celebration

Christmas was a sad time, even if Daddy was home. He tried to make us happy, but in spite of all our efforts, we were a lonely family. Our people were too far away to visit and we missed the excitement and love we shared at home with them. We sat down

and tried to eat Christmas dinner, but the roast beef and new toys couldn't replace what we had known. We had never eaten beef before and we found it flat and flavourless. (90)

They miss their people. The basic Native trait is to live together and share everything. Maria Campbell's early life is filled with the memory of their life in the Native Community with the relatives. Christmas, Marriages and funerals are occasions which bring them together. It is this feeling of togetherness that is more important to the Natives.

Next to the Christmas festivities, our people looked forward to weddings. Weddings were something special, and were gay and gala affairs, in which everyone in our area and other communities participated... For two days there would be feasting and dancing and laughter (57-58)

The Natives assemble for the funeral of their relatives. Everyone has to share the work. The men build the coffin and dig the grave. Women wash and dress the dead body. They cook lots of food and even the children have to help. They sit around the body all day and night saying rosaries every hour. Maria Campbell recollects:

Funerals were like weddings as far as seeing old friends and relatives was concerned. People would come from miles and miles to visit (67)

In spite of their poverty, they are closely knitted in sharing their joys and sorrows. These occasions provide them with opportunities to meet their elders and learn more about their culture and tradition through their oral stories.

Campbell is fortunate to have the knowledgeable guidance of her great grandmother Cheechum. The teachings of Cheechum begins in the early life of Maria Campbell. She spends most of her time with Cheechum and listens to her stories. Maria Campbell's understanding of the basic problem of the Natives comes from the teachings of Cheechum. Maria Campbell gets frustrated when the white children tease them at school saying the Road Allowance People eat gophers. She comes home, cries and shouts at her parents. Cheechum takes her outside for a long walk and then explains how the Natives left their homes and lost their dream:

They fought each other just as you are fighting your mother and father today. The white men saw that that was a more powerful weapon than anything else with which to beat the Halfbreeds, and he used it and still does today. Already they are using it on you. They try to make you hate your people... I will beat you each time I hear you talk as you did. If you don't like what you have, then stop fighting your parents and do something about it yourself. (51)

Maria Campbell accepts that she has learnt her first real lesson. Cheechum tries to make Maria Campbell understand that self dignity and pride in one's own culture is more important.

The Natives have a very close relation with nature. They see God in everything. It is through Cheechum that Maria learns to see beauty in all things. She understands that there is a spirit in each thing whether it is a leaf or just a blade of grass. She learns that by recognizing its life and beauty, she is accepting God

She (Cheechum) said that each time I did something it was a prayer, regardless of whether it was good or bad; that heaven and hell were man-made and here on earth... She said God lives in you and looks like you (82)

Cheechum finds a kindred soul in Maria Campbell. When Maria Campbell expresses her wish to finish school and her longing to be different from the other women of her community 'who had nothing but kids, black eyes and never enough of anything' (98), Cheechum just smiles at Maria Campbell and says:

Now I know that you belong to me. Don't let anyone tell you
That anything is impossible, because if you believe honestly in
Your heart that there's something better for you, then it will all
come true. Go out there and find what you want and take it,
but always remember who you are and why you want it. (98)

Cheechum is an optimist. She has worldly knowledge and interprets the matter in the right way. She is not discouraged easily. She is full of optimistic spirit. She is not only concerned about the family but also about the political and Native organizations and their activities. She soothes Maria Campbell who is frustrated and cursed the Native men for being weak

Wait my girl. It will come. I've waited for ninety years and
listened to many men. I have seen men quit and have felt as you
do, but we have to keep waiting and as each man stands unafraid we have to believe he is the
one and encourage him. You'll feel discouraged like this many times in your life but, like me,
you'll wait (76-77)

From the time of North West Rebellion in 1885 to the day of her death, Cheechum has come across many important leaders. After their failure, each time she comes back again with the hope that the right man will come and encourages her grandson and even Maria Campbell to take part actively in the activities of Native organizations. This shows the resilience of the Natives.

Withdrawing from alcohol and drugs is very difficult. Maria Campbell's life in town after she leaves her family resembles that of the stereotypical image of a Native woman a drunkard, alcoholic, and a good-for-nothing Halfbreed. The words of Cheechum, "You can have anything you want, if you want it bad enough", brings a turning point in Maria Campbell's life. With a lot of difficulty she tries to withdraw from drugs for the second time.

Although it was worse than the first time in a way it was easier,
because this time my Cheechum was with me the whole time. I
could feel her presense in the room with me and I wasn't afraid
(144)

Cheechum has advised Maria Campbell:

When the government gives you something, they take all that you have in return—your pride, your dignity, all the things that make you a living soul. When they are sure they have everything, they give you a blanket to cover your shame. (159) Maria Campbell understands being afraid of facing reality, she also wears the blanket. When a man loses his pride and dignity, he loses his identity and self confidence. When she comes under her sponsor Don and his wife Edith who run the Alcoholic Anonymous Office, Maria Campbell understands the true value of what Cheechum has been trying to tell her and how she has misinterpreted the teaching of Cheechum.

She (Cheechum) had never meant that I should go out into the world in search of fortune, but rather that I go out and discover for myself the need for leadership and change: if our way of life were to improve, I would have to find other people like myself, and together try to find an alternative... Because of her (Edith), I eventually attended meetings at the Native Friendship Centre. She said that if I was ever going to become strong inside, I would have to face reality. (166-167) This takes her in the path of communicating with kindred souls. Her communication with AA inmates at Prince Albert Penitentiary brings a great change in Maria Campbell. It makes her come out of her despair and gives her the courage to meet Cheechum. When she meets Cheechum after a long time,

The tidy cabin, and the familiar smell of herbs and roots and wood-smoke, and the rabbit soup simmering on the stove, all made me feel like I had come home again. We didn't have to talk—Cheechum understood my feelings. (174)

The lesson she has learnt in a very hard way becomes the foundation for her life in which she tries help the girls on the street. She is not going to solve anyone's personal problems but "if I could give them a home and friendship, then they would in turn find their own answers... Each of us had to find himself his own way and no one can do it for us". (175). She realizes that her years of searching, loneliness and pain are over. As her Cheechum has predicted, she has found brothers and sisters all over the country. Like the optimistic great grandmother, Maria Campbell hopes that "one day, very soon people will set aside their differences and come together as one. May be not because we love one another, but because we will fight our common enemies". (184)

According to Maria Campbell the feelings of inferiority and shame in being Metis are the root cause of the Metis contemporary identity crisis. She strongly believes that exposure to Native culture and customs and the experience of mingling with other Native people will have a significant effect on developing the Metis consciousness. In turn it will create an awareness among them. The metamorphosis of the character of Maria Campbell in her support of Metis political organizations represents possible solutions to the Metis identity crisis. Enhancement of cultural awareness with the help and guidance of the Elders has positive consequences for Campbell throughout her life.

She realizes the need for unity among the Metis in order to prove their existence to the dominant society and to work for their own improvement. She firmly believes that cultural awareness is important for Metis identity and it will give strength and enable a person to survive as a Metis in a pluralistic society. Those who lack a strong cultural background are

confronted with the problem of loss of identity. Only Native organizations and Elders can assist the Metis to understand and retain their own cultural traditions. Like Cheechum, the Elders try to rebuild pride and develop a sense of identity by exposing the Metis to ancestral culture and customs.

The Native Centre's United Way Report of 1986 presented a definition of what an Elder is:

Elders are the people who are the corner stones of our culture as they are the keepers and teachers of traditional teachings. They are the link with our past, our present and our future. They are spiritual leaders and teachers but also have the wisdom and the experience to provide very pragmatic guidance and advice on how best to improve and ensure the physical, mental and spiritual health of our community. (Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1986)

In **Halfbreed**, the teachings of Cheechum based upon traditional Native wisdom, makes Maria Campbell strong enough to get through her difficulties. Elders like Cheechum still have vivid memories of past victories and defeats and of their unique ninetieth century lifestyle. These cultural and historical factors encourage the Metis to retain and develop a strong sense of identity. The Metis believe that keeping culture and traditions alive requires passing the teachings and wisdom, to those, who are prepared to take on the tasks from the elders. Through relationship established with Elders like Cheechum, people like Maria Campbell are beginning to take up the tasks of the Elders through their own learning. Through this relationship, the cycle of life is continued. The teachings of Cheechum, her close relationship with her family and the Native tradition and culture create an awareness in Maria Campbell and this awakening is the key factor to Maria Campbell's regeneration. With her personal experience Maria Campbell has tried to revive traditional cultural traits and to establish a sense of their historical traditions. The Metis organizations have been influencing the growth of ethnic consciousness and group identity among the Metis. By reviving the Native culture and customs by mingling with her own people, Maria Campbell tries to bring up a positive effect on Metis consciousness. Maria Campbell's views reflect the realities of the Native organizations and their Elders as the unifying forces.

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