

Confronting cultural genocide, Maine leads the nation

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Recently, I asked a Wabanaki dad about his talented daughter's education. He said, "Atuk might be admitted with a scholarship to a distant elite college."

I thought, "What great news!"

Her dad continued, "I don't think I want her to go."

I thought, "Why hold her back? Atuk will be set for life."

Later, I recalled glimpses of Atuk's vibrant relationship with her tribal community. Realizing my initial reactions were naive, I began to imagine her dad's concerns: How will she adapt to further study of a culture so unlike her own? Can she ever understand a culture that emphasizes dualism — good-bad, beautiful-ugly — over diversity — beauty and purpose in each unique creation?

What if Atuk embraces a culture that has yet to embrace fully roles that Wabanaki women have traditionally played in deciding key issues and holding communities together? Will more education grounded in Western civilization compromise Atuk's present values, beliefs, customs and perspectives?

Atuk's dad may worry how her professors would respond to the wisdom of the Wabanaki elder who said, "Nature is the university" — a source of cures, postdoctoral lessons in diversity and ultimate judge of what works. He may fear the outcome if they confront her beliefs in trees as brothers, soil as mother and rocks as ancient ones — beliefs that deepen her commitment to conserving resources and thus protecting the environment.

Experiences at this college could burden Atuk with aspects of what Carol Locust (Cherokee) calls "split feather syndrome." A feather split down its shaft and a child forcibly adopted into a foreign culture suffers a similar fate — the whole loses form and function; neither side can soar.

For Wabanaki, their culture is their identity. Wabanaki thinkers estimate their pre-contact population in what we now call Maine at 50,000-100,000. Today, Wabanaki number 10,000, six-tenths of one percent of Maine's population. The survival of Wabanaki culture depends on each new Wabanaki youth. Atuk's education must contribute to her people, not deny her roots. Education at a distant elite college may be a gentle threat to tribal values and beliefs, but it is not the first.

Wabanaki view governmental policies that remove children from their community as "cultural genocide." Some Wabanaki grandparents remember boarding schools such as Shubenacadie (Nova Scotia, 1922-1968) where they were severely punished for any sign of Indian language or

religion. Some Wabanaki parents live with cultural and emotional scars of forced adoption into non-Indian homes. During the 1950s and 1960s, our nation's Indian Adoption Project uprooted Wabanaki children at per-capita rates significantly higher than those for non-native children.

In the late 20th century, Maine's Department of Health and Human Services was a primary tool of assimilation as it frequently placed possibly-at-risk children in non-native foster homes. Since 1999, collaboration between state and tribal welfare workers has reduced per-capita rates of placement outside tribal communities.

While acknowledging this improvement, we must realize one outcome never varies: placed outside their tribe, Wabanaki children lose their cultural identity — their sense of who they are — regardless of whether foster parents are abusive or loving.

Maine is the first and only state to focus on the impact of child welfare policies on Indian communities and their children — policies historically designed to “kill the Indian, and save the man.”

On May 24, 2011, Gov. LePage and Wabanaki tribal chiefs of the Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy and Penobscots signed a Declaration of Intent to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. If Maine transforms its Declaration of Intent into a mandate, the TRC would determine past and present mistreatments and establish steps still needed to assure that DHHS gives culturally sensitive consideration to all placement options within tribal communities. Maine would become a process model for other states.

All Mainers have a stake in this healing process. If we open our hearts and minds to understanding Wabanaki culture, its natural wisdom can build our capacity to address flaws in our dualistic, consumption-driven culture. One day Atuk may provide perspectives for our children.

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