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IMPORTANCE OF FOLKLORE IN THE PENOBSCOT CULTURE

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**Introduction**

Before having contact with the Europeans, Native Americans have formed their own way of educating their people and the succeeding generations. In particular, this system is called the Aboriginal education; wherein folklore plays such a great role. Aboriginal education includes the transfer or transmission of knowledge and values, morals and dispositions, as well as norms and dispositions to the latter generations through stories about real world settings such as the farm, the hunting ground, and the home.

**Culture Before Contact With Europeans**

Native Americans, in general, believed that Aboriginal education, including folklore, needed to be passed so that cultural traditions and norms can be preserved. The purpose of this informal education was to immediately induct and prepare the next generation to adulthood, having the values and morals of a functional individual. Native American informal education is designed to delineate social responsibility, skill orientation, political participation, as well as values that are spiritual and moral in nature. The informal type of education was designed to develop Native Americans’ individual latent physical skills and character, teach and instill respect for the elderly and those who have authority, as well as help the individuals attain certain vocational skills.

Informal education was also overall designed to help in fostering healthy attitudes and perceptions toward honest labor. Native Americans, even before they got introduced into the formal type of education, learned about the value of community activities and experienced a sense of belonging. In this type of education where the sharing of folklore is one of the main tools, boys and girls can similarly access education. Boys were instructed by the other male members of their families, from their fathers to their uncles and grandfather. Other male elders can also teach them. On the other hand, girls learn from the other females in their families and tribe. Girls acquire knowledge and values to aid them in their lives through their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. Other female elders can also teach them about the ways of life. There were occasions that either male or female elders can also instruct boys and girls.

For Native American youth education, storytelling and the passing down of folklore were sacred and vital, as this enables knowledge that cannot be learned from other tribes or communities, as well as unique cultural practices to be passed down orally. Characteristics such as knowledge, values, culture, were all passed down through stories that serve to instruct, inspire, and provoke. The stories are equally entertaining and challenging so everyone can read and integrate the stories into their lives. Some of the stories can raise questions and make the individuals listening to them think, much like most of the folklore.

One prime example of folklore is “Why We Need Wind” by Jason Brown[[1]](#footnote-1). The story revolved around Klouskap and his Grandmother Woodchuck, living simply in their small lodge located by the ocean. Klouskap one day met trouble when out hunting some ducks because of the wind. The wind blew so hard that he fell to the shore. He got so frustrated that he asked his grandmother what caused the wind. The grandmother explained that the wind was created by a bird called Wuchowsen atop a mountain. Klouskap wanted the wind to be gone that he hiked up and tricked the bird. He first praised the bird, causing it to feel very complacent with Klouskap. The bird believed it when Klouskap claimed that it was so good that it should transfer to another peak. The bird allowed Klouskap to carry it to another peak but ended up being thrown to a large crevice. However, this act did not go unpunished for Klouskap[[2]](#footnote-2). Instead of enjoying his life without the wind, he found out the next day how important the wind is. He was not able to successfully hunt for ducks because the air was dry and the water became dirty. When he learned from his grandmother that the lack of wind is responsible for these, he went to the bird again. He rescued the bird that created the wind but told it that there are days when wind is good as there are days when it is not. The bird seems to understand and even showed the indication that it knew what Klouskap did but was not angry.

The story may seem simple, but it has valuable lessons for the tribe[[3]](#footnote-3). It showed the value of all creatures and elements on Earth, the value of being kind, and the value of forgiveness. The folklore, like others in the Native American tribe, serves to educate people of one's place in the natural order of things. Educators or the tribe members are the knowledgeable members when it comes to the physical and social world. Like the grandmother in the folklore, the elderly in the tribe are the ones most knowledgeable about the physical and social world. They are also the most knowledgeable about the relationships among things, animals, and humans.

In Native American education, learning abstract ideas is not considered as valuable and necessary as comprehending the relationships among ideas and about the nature of physical reality. For Native Americans, folklore aid in helping them learn these relationships and the understanding physical reality.

It can be said that because of the holistic education that Native American youth were given a chance to experience before their contract with Europeans, Native Americans were educated properly of the knowledge and values they need to know. Even though they came into contact with the Europeans, it can be said that the Native Americans have already developed a strong informal/aboriginal educational system.

**Culture After Contact With Europeans**

As Europeans misunderstood the system and exerted efforts to impose the formal education system on them, the natives faced the problem of upholding their culture and knowledge. Good thing, with the help of folklore, cultural revitalization was carried out in time. For example, Abby Alger’s recordings of narratives, stories, and folklores from Maine entitled “In Indian Tents - Stories Told by Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Micmac Indians”, are often consulted by the Native communities, usually re-appropriated, to achieve both cultural and linguistic revitalization when formal education already made the Native American identity blurry for some[[4]](#footnote-4). Unfortunately, formal education of Native Americans as forced by the Europeans led to forced acculturation as well as assimilation.

The broadcasted goals of the Europeans were to civilize and Christianize the Native Americans, but in reality, the natives already have their own value system and knowledge that only ended up being eroded. The effects of asking the Native American children to dress like the Europeans, become Christians, and have European names cannot be exaggerated—the results were staggering as most became confused about their cultural identity, and forget their own culture, history, norms, languages, values, and even philosophy. Folklore helped in revitalizing their culture and reminds the new generations of Native Americans of their history and culture.

One great example is  "Giants of the Dawnland: Ancient Wabanaki Tales,” as written by Alice Mead and Arnold Neptune. The tales or stories included in this thick text were from 1870 to 1884[[5]](#footnote-5). The stories talked about the early days of the Micmac, the Penobscot, and of the Passamaquoddy people. It can be considered similar to the text by Abby Alger. The stories revolved around these tribes’ survival through hunting and fishing. The stories of Gluskape, Glooskap, and how the world was created (according to the ancient Native Americans) were also included[[6]](#footnote-6). Modern Native Americans and other readers who will come by this text will understand how rivers, lakes, and hills came to be for these tribes. How the country became free of monsters and serpents can also be known from this text. They seemed to be just like ordinary folktales, but they serve as great lessons to understanding Native American culture[[7]](#footnote-7).

According to MacDougall, even though historians had already widely predicted the demise of the Penobscot Indians back in the 19th Century, the tribe started to thrive at the start of the twenty-first century[[8]](#footnote-8). Even though in the early 1800s, the Penobscots were rendered invisible by the dominant culture, the tribe was able to win back their land and visibility through folklore and other cultural resistance strategies. The author wrote that it was underestimated how vital cultural resistance was as a form of survival mechanism. Her work entitled, Dance of Resistance, showed how the rigorous analysis and examination of the history of one Indian nation could lead to the opening of a window with regard how complex and complicated cultural systems in America. How these systems interact with each other are dynamic and complicated as well. Folklore or the entire gamut of work with regard Penobscot legend, linguistics, dance (like in the YouTube video of Penobscot Indian Girls Dance**)**, and oral tradition passed through generations came to serve as a strong foundation of resistance against complete assimilation into the dominant culture that can make revival impossible. Because of folklore, complete assimilation was prevente[[9]](#footnote-9)d. MacDougall in her work showed through published works, archives, and some relevant oral sources how the Penobscots triumphed.

The Dance of Resistance was a powerful movement largely shaped by spiritual power, homeland reverence and respect, and commitment to self-determination goals, from the colonial period up to the modern times. According to MacDougall, the preservation and passing of traditions led to a decade of political activities that ended satisfactorily for the Penobscots in the 1980 Maine Indian Land Claims settlement. In this modern period, the Penobscots have their small industries they run, using and managing their own natural resources, and have access to health services, education, and social services. The poor and elderly of their community are all given proper care, all of which would have been impossible if cultural assimilation has taken place, alienating the elders and those who held on to tradition[[10]](#footnote-10).

It was apparent that folklore rescued the Native Americans, including the Penobscots from the harrowing effects of Eurocentric education, which is miseducation. It cannot be denied that being exposed to the Europeans and the Eurocentric education they forced on Native Americans led to several political, social, and economic effects. Some of these effects have permeated Native American cultures and persisted up until today. European American teachers however attributed to the gap in academic achievement between the Native Americans with the Europeans to cultural differences. They claimed that there are deficits between the cultures that non-European students cannot naturally perform at par. However, it was apparent that the teachers were merely focusing on the dominant culture and expecting all the students, including the Native Americans, to operate as if they are part of the dominant culture. With this kind of mindset, the students from the dominant group were given an advantage while putting those in the minority groups, particularly the Native Americans at a disadvantage.

Native American students were expected just to reject their own identities and cultural patters while adapting to the European American cultural patterns to achieve academically at-par with kids from the dominant culture and be successful beyond school. The teachers believed that Native American students needed to be educated away from what they knew and what their cultural patterns were and at the same time, imposed the Anglo-European culture on them regardless of what their communities think.

While the schools and the textbooks used have some information about Native Americans and their experiences as well as notable contributions to society, there was nothing substantial in the texts to aid the Native American youth in truly understanding their identities and cultures. However, with folklore and the persistent hearts of elderly Native Americans, there were rallies to change the system. There were fights to have Native Americans be educated in both the Native and English languages. There were protests staged for improved government support and involvement in providing primary, adult, and vocational educational opportunities. Later, there were also Native American advisory boards created and established in mainstream public schools to achieve greater inclusion.

Native American art, dances, and languages are now largely integrated into the school curriculum. There were concrete efforts to reverse the indoctrination done to Native Americans in the past through folklore, teaching Native American children their culture and identities from the early years of their education. Texts such as **“**Many Hands: A Penobscot Indian Story” by Angeli Perror on these early years of education made substantial contributions. The story centers around a child Lily. Lily was inspired by her grandmother to weave a traditional Penobscot basket through a dream, which she indeed, carried out[[11]](#footnote-11). After she did it, she proudly showed it to several family members and was astonished when each echoed her grandma’s words that many hands made that basket.

After feeling she was not being given the right credit to her hard work, she, later on, realized that this made sense because the basket was an embodiment of her culture and everyone in the family and community certainly played a part in creating it[[12]](#footnote-12). The book talked of a personal awakening, and most of the story occurred internally of Lily. The illustrations in the book were more on Lily and the basket, which can certainly draw Native American children in, in relating to the character, to the story, and recognize their own culture, if not be reintroduced to it. The work came with an appended note that recounted the setting of Maine setting briefly. Children who used the text were exposed to some Penobscot words, which can jumpstart their interest in Penobscot language and cultural patterns. The text is considered a worthy title for Native American studies, particularly for younger children enrolled in New England classrooms. "Many Hands" teach children of varying ages the more important concepts of community and caring, while the children get exposed to the Penobscot language and culture[[13]](#footnote-13).

Throughout the years, new forms of formal education included elements of folklore, which represents an integration of the Native American system that was in place before they made contact with the Europeans and their system of education. However, despite all these improvements, continuous improvements needed to be made. Continued commitment to the Native American community is also necessary. Nicholas Bear, a spoken word artist from Indian Island, talked about how infuriating it was that the Native American culture was still being stereotyped. He relayed the many nonsensical but stereotypical questions he and other tribe members received. He cannot help but laugh at how ignorant the questions were but claimed that precisely because of this, Native Americans have to be steadfast in keeping the public informed about the Penobscot tribe. He added that Penobscot people might be unique, but they are just like every other people: some good, some bad, some loving, and some not. Stereotyping them to be one way is hurtful as it was harmful. His oral allegations highlighted how important it is for Penobscot culture, just like other cultures, to be preserved.

Joseph Nicolar’s “*The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*" revolves around his people, the Penobscots. He detailed their first moments of creation to the earliest arrivals and eventual contact with the Europeans. The book was self-published in 1893 and is currently one of the limited numbers of narratives in English composed by an Eastern Algonquian-speaking community member back in the nineteenth century. The book was written during the time when the Native Americans seem to be at risk of ceasing to exist according to the cultural ways and identities. It was seen by the author as urgent to write the book for folklore to be transformed into something more concrete than oral tradition, so that the Penobscot cultural heritage can be passed on to the subsequent generations of the tribe. It was also believed as one way for Native Americans to reclaim their right to self-representation and determination. Included in the work were stories of Penobscot history, the material culture in place before contact with the Europeans, shamanism practices, and feats, and even ancient prophecies on the effects of the coming of the white man[[14]](#footnote-14).

Nicolar was one of the elders of the Penobscot Nation located in Maine and was also the grandchild of the tribe’s most popular shaman-leader, Old John Neptune. This gave him the credibility on writing about Penobscot folklore and culture. The author, however, passed away just a few months after the book was published. In addition, the limited copies that were published were lost in fire[[15]](#footnote-15). With the help of the Nicolar’s descendants, a new edition composed of more Penobscot information was made. The new edition, with the input of more Penobscot people, contains a extraordinary account of Native American culture, their literature, and their spirituality[[16]](#footnote-16).

**Conclusion**

It can be said that folklore is important to Native Americans and the revitalization of their culture because the mainstream educational system failed to meet the needs of the Native American students. Folklore made up for the absence of a Native American perspective in the curricula. When Native American languages and spiritual values were eroding, and the racist and discriminatory activities of majority people from the dominating culture were prevailing, folklore transferred to written works served as the mechanism for revitalization.

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