

BLACKFOOT WAYS OF KNOWING: THE WORLDVIEW OF THE SIKSIKAITSTAPI

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I. Context

1. Introduction

As educator and scholar, I believe that the time has come to break the cycle of dependency and to assert the tribal paradigms of Indigenous cultures through affirmative inquiries based on culturally appropriate protocols. Any such inquiry must be designed to explore solutions to contemporary problems from within tribal interpretations. *Ao'isistapitakyo'p*¹ means "to be cognizant and to discern the tribal connections"; it refers to our sacred science and thus to the way to connect with our relations once again experientially through our ways of knowing. These ways of knowing are premised on seeking understanding of the complex levels of kinship relations that constitute a cosmic world of balance and harmony. Indigenous ways of knowing are the tribal processes that align *Niitsitapi* [lit. "real people," i.e., Indigenous people] with their alliances from which all knowing and knowledge is obtained. This way of knowing is of a different nature than the knowledge generated using cross-cultural or alien perspectives developed by Eurocentred sciences.

Knowledge from a cross-cultural perspective must become a caricature of the culture in order for it to be validated as science or knowledge. Borrowing from the imagery of Frantz Fanon, the study of colonized peoples must take on a "lactification" or whitening in order for the produced knowledge to be palatable to the academy. The consequences of such cross-cultural production

¹ See the glossaries at the end of the book for translations and explanations of Blackfoot terms.

of knowledge have been ongoing neo-colonialism within the discipline of psychology. (Duran & Duran 1995, 4)

The use of traditional ways of knowing among tribal cultures constitutes the initial and essential step in breaking the cycles of dependency. In this fashion, Indigenous people connect to the sacred, to their alliances, and to the knowledge that is generated for balance, free of dependency. This creates independence because it is self-sufficient and balanced, based on years of intimate observations of the web of place, community, and cycles of time passing.

The primary purpose of this book is the articulation of the ontological responsibilities of *Siksikaitsitapi* identity so that they can have impact within the current educational system. The structure and processes of *Siksikaitsitapi* epistemologies and pedagogy are constituted through the lived process of these ontological responsibilities. I believe that the current focus of Indigenous inquiry must be on healing the genocidal effects of colonialism. *Siksikaitsitapi*, among other *Niitsitapi* cultures of the world, continue to experience genocide, which begins by destroying the foundations of Indigenous science and knowledge. Reaffirming our ancient ways of knowing is essential for the generation of knowledge that is healing and unites the people with their alliances, regenerative ways of being, and an aware relationship with the natural world. This book focuses on the *Siksikaitsitapi* ways of knowing by identifying the basic responsibilities of the *Siksikaitsitapi*, i.e., the responsibilities that maintain the connection to ancestral ways of knowing. They are the essence of our distinct ways of being and have prevented the complete annihilation of *Siksikaitsitapi*.

The responsibility of seeking knowledge is fundamental to the identity of *Niitsitapi*. Knowledge is generated for the purpose of maintaining the relationships that strengthen and protect the health and well being of individuals and of the collective in a cosmic universe. In this respect, seeking knowledge is a fundamental responsibility for contributing to the collective good. *Ao'tsisstapitakyo'p* ["we have come to understand"] is the process of coming to know. *Aissksinihp* means "we know it to be like that."

Both words refer to a level of understanding and presence within the web of alliances and responsibilities that is different from merely knowing.

This book covers three major aspects of *Siksikaitsitapiipaitapiiyssin* [the Blackfoot way of life]. First, it identifies the responsibilities that make up tribal *Siksikaitsitapi* identity. Second, it identifies how these responsibilities are taught and how the people learn them. Third, it identifies how these responsibilities are maintained through ceremonies.

This affirmative inquiry is a contribution to the reconstruction of processes and structures that have been part of the educational and human development processes of *Siksikaitsitapi* in the past *for the present-day educational system*. The traditional protocol I followed provided an opportunity for *Kaaahsinnooniksi* [our grandparents] to fulfill their roles and responsibilities to pass on knowledge to the next generation. As a result, the text carries on the traditional knowledge handed down through the generations by way of oral tradition. Sacred science and tribal responsibilities are all part of the same process. If the children are to learn who they are through knowing their responsibilities, then these teachings must come from *Kaaahsinnooniksi*. The heart of knowing *Siksikaitsitapi* sacred science consists of knowing the tribal responsibilities.

The purpose of my inquiry was to gather information that would help reaffirming and reconstructing the traditional *Siksikaitsitapi* ways of knowing in an alien educational environment, i.e., the Eurocentred educational system. The reconstruction of these ways of knowing must begin with how *Siksikaitsitapi* understand the world, that is, their ontological stance. The nature of being, *Kipaitapiiyssinnooni* [our way of life] is at the heart of this reconstruction. Within *Siksikaitsipoyi* ontology, spiritual energies permeate the cosmic universe from *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa* [the Source of Life]. These energies manifest in physical form, and from them *Niitapaissao'pi* [the nature of being] is created. Based on this ontological view, we can establish how knowledge is understood and what the process of *Kakyosin* [coming to know] is. The process of knowing is based on the interrelationships of natural alliances. Knowledge is generated through these relationships. Spiritual energies are the ultimate substance

of the universe from which all life forms originate (*Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*), including knowledge. Furthermore, they are found in every aspect of a cosmic universe (a reality of interrelationship); *Siksikaitsitapi* is constituted through the spiritual connections that make up their identity. These relationships are reciprocal by nature, and thus it is possible to generate knowledge by renewing these relationships. The nature of being is conceived within and originates from these relationships.

Ontological responsibilities of *Siksikaitsitapi* are the beginning of affirming and reconstructing ways of knowing. These fundamental responsibilities must be renewed by coming to know the natural alliances. They are, so to speak, the essence of Being, and by renewing them *Siksikaitsitapi* will have access to their ways of knowing. The alliances are the conduit through which we generate knowledge. They are the way in which we participate and engage with the natural order. In partnership with our alliances, we can affirm, recover, and restore the balance that is necessary for health, prosperity, and long life.

Being these responsibilities, *Siksikaitsitapi* become aligned with the natural order of a cosmic universe. In aligning themselves with cosmic energies, they are connecting with the universal intelligence or *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa* [Source of Life]. This creates the possibility of accessing a web of kinship alliances that make up our universe. In connecting with these alliances, *Siksikaitsitapi* must first come to know how to approach these relationships. By learning how to approach them, we come to know the patterns of relationships among the natural order. They embody the knowledge and processes necessary for *Siksikaitsitapi* to live in harmony with the natural order, the basis of our knowledge, and, subsequently, for the survival of a cosmic universe, *Niipaitapiiyssin*. Ontological responsibilities constitute the relationships that create the being of *Siksikaitsitapi*. *Niipaitapiiyssin* means, in essence, renewing and maintaining balance among alliances in this universe from *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*. Alliances are kinship relationships. Kinship means that *Siksikaitsitapi* survival is dependent upon the cosmic order and that our existence is based on knowing and learning our alliances.

Reconstructing *Siksikaitsitapi* ways of knowing is a process of recreating and affirming alliances with knowledge coming from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*, *Akaitapiwa* [the ancestors and guides], and a cosmic universe of natural relations. This process of coming to know (*Kakyosin*) occurs through the spiritual connection with the alliances. My own process of connecting to the alliances of *Kipaitapiyssinnooni* [our way of life] started by connecting with *Niitsi'powahsinni* [the words that carry the breath of the ancestors] and by coming to know the ancestors through ceremony, offerings, sacrifice, and mediation. Meditation and prayer are the roots of the process of coming to know. Knowing is communicating with the natural and cosmic world of *Siksikaitsitapi* and integrating the knowledge that transpires from these relationships into one's own being. This knowledge is alive. Knowing results from being aware, observant, and reflective. *Kakyosin* creates and reveals the living knowledge of a cosmic universe. It is living because it is generated from the relationships among the knowledge from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*, *Akaitapiwa*, the cosmic universe and myself. The knowledge exists as long as the relationships with the alliances continue and changes as these relationships change.

Knowledge that is generated from these relationships can only be understood and acquired through living and communicating with the natural and cosmic alliances. As a result, the understanding of the knowledge and wisdom that *Kaaahsinnooniksi* transferred to me through *Nitaisstammatsokoyi* ["what I have been shown or instructed"] is only achieved through my experiences; the depth of my own knowledge is relative to understanding my place and responsibility among the alliances. The process of my journey in connecting with the ways of knowing and coming to know who I am can be shared with those who are searching for their identity. My story can help them to reclaim their traditional ways of knowing and reconstructing the healing knowledge that is generated and created by this process.

When individuals reconstruct the traditional ways of knowing, it means they are reclaiming the tribal alliances of *Siksikaitsitapi*. They are renewing the traditional knowledge that unites and strengthens the

natural and cosmic worlds. This will generate ways of being that balance *Niipaitapiiyssinni* [our way of life]. I began this reconstruction during my inquiry while studying the traditional manner of teaching and learning. I initiated this process with *Kaaahsinnooniksi* who had been keepers of medicine pipes and bundles. And secondly, with those ancestral guides who have protected the integrity of the ceremonies, and, finally, with the natural and cosmic alliances living in the pipes and bundles. This way I began to connect with the alliances and initiate my personal process of reconstructing and reclaiming tribal ways of knowing.

This book discusses traditional forms of learning that form the basis for the development of a *Siksikaitsitapi* studies program premised on our particular epistemology and pedagogy (as well as *Niitsitapi* epistemologies and pedagogies in general). This objective supports the desire of *Kaaahsinnooniksi* who had expressed the need to begin teaching children the language and felt the desire to see them begin thinking in the way of *Siksikaitsitapi*. The book has its origins in other projects that I had the good fortune of being a part of. It is my hope that it will contribute to our ongoing efforts to decolonize by way of cultural affirmation.

Part I provides some necessary historical context. Part II focuses on my journey of retraditionalization through my personal work and the various educational and research projects I have been involved with. Part III discusses the responsibilities that make up *Siksikaitsitapi* identity and describes how they are acquired and ceremonially maintained. Part IV contains a concluding discussion of Indigenous self-affirmation in the context of genocidal histories. At the very end of the book, the reader will find glossaries to help with Blackfoot terminology.

2. *Innahkootaitsinnika'to'pi Siksikaitsipoyi* – History of the Blackfoot-Speaking Tribes

2.1 Introductory Remarks

It is beyond the scope of this text to provide a *Siksikaitsitapi* auto-history; yet, it does seem necessary to provide the reader with some cursory historical information. My brief overview is provided with the following caveat from *Kaaahsinnooniksi* [grandparents]:

There have been many people who have written about us. These people are known for writing stories about Indians. Ewers, Schultz, Middleton, Wissler, Cobert, and others. White people wrote these books. We did not dispute them. What we are doing today is talking about how our life has been transferred. We don't have to say, let's go to that person and ask for that advice. We, collectively, we are going to discuss our way of life and give advice.

As we are sitting here listening to each other speak, our words come from our hearts, from the way we live. In other words, we didn't borrow our knowledge from anybody. What we are talking about is something we know. White people would say, we heard it from the horse's mouth.

While it may also be necessary to provide a *Siksikaitsitapi* auto-history following traditional protocols, this has not been the focus of my conversations with *Kaaahsinnooniksi*. Readers should keep their cautionary statement in mind as I give this brief overview. The subsequent sections include a critical reading of the sources, yet this reading is neither complete as critique nor is it even intended to provide the level of historico-critical discourse mandatory within a Eurocentred approach. The historical overview provides a more external or bridging perspective in preparation of documentation generated by following

traditional protocols for affirmative inquiry. The analysis of cross-cultural communication and miscommunication has not been part of the current endeavour; on the contrary, it attempts in its central parts to supercede the dichotomy of “good subjects” vs. “bad subjects” as choices for colonized people (Dion-Buffalo & Mohawk 1994) by asserting the “non-subject” option of discourse, i.e., affirming *Siksikaitsitapi* ways of knowing, while still remaining accessible to the dominant discourse.

2.2 Itotasimahpi Iimitaiks – The Era of the Dog or the Time of the Ancestors (Pre-Eighteenth Century)

The history of the *Siksikaitsitapi*, their origins, and sacred knowledge and science are the fabric from which their identity is woven. The breach from these sacred ways originated with colonialism. In consequence, the need arises to affirm and, as necessary, to reconstruct an identity from the fabric that holds the sacred ways of the ancestors. The children of the *Siksikaitsitapi* must once again learn the sacred ways of their ancestors. Learning the sacred ways is learning the traditional forms of knowing. The children must know where *Siksikaitsitapi* come from as this is the source of finding one’s place in the universe and knowing one’s relatives.

The origins of the ancestors are preserved in stories that have also been recorded by ethnographers, e.g., Ewers (1958, 3). In the beginning of the world was water. *Napi*, the Old Man, sent down four animals to find out what was beneath the surface water. First the duck, then the otter, then the badger. They didn’t come up with anything. Finally the muskrat came up with earth between his paws. Old Man took this small lump of mud and blew upon it, and it continued to grow until it became the earth. *Napi* travelled about the earth making mountains, rivers, lakes, grasses, roots, berries, timber, animals, and birds. From a lump of clay, he made himself a wife. Together, the Old Man and the Old Woman determined how they should live.

The above narration reveals the distinct relationship between the people, environment and geography, and the animal and plant worlds. The stories and legends of *Napi* address the origins and existence of *Siksikaitsipoyi* culture as well as the geographical features of their territory. This can easily be seen in many of *Napi's* adventures that are associated with specific locations in Alberta (Kehoe 1995, 9). They are legends explaining their cultural significance. As an example, the Old Man River flowing between the Peigan Reserve in Alberta is said to be the Old Man's Gambling Place (Ewers 1958, 4). Other places associated with his adventures include "Old Man's Sliding Place," "Rolling Stone Creek," and "Tongue Flag River" (Kehoe 1995, 9).

Siksikaitsitapi traditionally inhabited the Great Plains area. Early explorers estimated the population to be 30,000 to 40,000 (McClintock 1992, 5). Upon contact in 1691, *Siksikaitsitapi* occupied a vast area bordered to the north by the North Saskatchewan River; to the west by the Rocky Mountains; to the east by the Sweet Grass hills and central Saskatchewan; and to the south, the Yellow Stone River (Kehoe 1995, xiii). *Siksikaitsitapi* all speak the same language and are comprised of four tribes: The South Peigan (*Aamsskaapiikani*) located in Montana, the North Peigan (*Aapatohsiipikani* or *Skinnee Piikani*), presently in Canada, the Blood (*Kainai* or *Aapaitsitapi*), and the Blackfoot (*Siksika*).

The two Peigan tribes were originally one. Their *Niitsitapi* names (*Otsiitsitapiinihkasimmowaistsi*) refer to their locations after they split into two tribes. The *Aamsskaapiikani* located in Montana, and the *Aapatohsiipikanni* or *Skinnee Piikani* (North Peigan) are located in Canada. I am told that the name "Peigan" is the English pronunciation of the *Siksikaitsitapi* word *Piikani*, meaning "poorly dressed" or "torn robes" (Ewers 1958, 5) or "robes that are worn and thin from wear." *Skinnee* refers to the place that they occupy. It means "to live at the edge," referring to the mountains (P. Standing Alone, personal communication, October 1997). The name *Piikani* was likely the tribe's name prior to contact.

The English name "Blood Tribe" has several possible explanations. It is reported to have come from the Kutenai. Members of the tribe were

said to have massacred a small group of Kutenai and were returning home with bloodstained faces and hands (Ewers 1958, 7). Another explanation for the name *Aapaitsitapi* comes from the Cree who gave them this name because of the *Aapaitsitapi* ceremonial use of sacred red paint on faces and hands. However, according to P. Standing Alone (personal communication, April 1998), the name *Aapaitsitapi* came from the misinterpretation of the *Siksikaitsipoahsin* or Blackfoot word that describes the weasel's winter coat, *Aapaa* (*Api*, meaning "white"). The colour of the weasel coat changes from the winter to the summer season, and thus the name of the weasel changes corresponding to these seasonal changes. "Blood" is mistranslated from *Aapaitsitapi*, the white phase or pelt of the weasel or real people (the word was mistakenly connected to *Aaapan* [blood]). The *Kainai* (Many Chiefs/ *Aakainawa*) have used the weasel's coat for their clothing and other household items, thus they were referred to as the weasel people by other groups (P. Standing Alone, personal communication, April 1998). White weasel pelt shirts were a prized possession of the *Aapaitsitapi*, *Kainai*, or Blood.

"*Siksika*" literally translates to "Blackfoot people." It has been speculated that they were named by the Crees because of their black feet (maybe as a result of the many prairie fires that coated their moccasins with blackened earth, or perhaps they may have dyed their moccasins black). Some unclarity remains as to the origins of the different *Siksikaitsitapi* names (Ewers 1958, 5–6).

In the Eurocentred literature (anthropology, ethnography, mythology, etc.), *Siksikaitsitapi* are described as independent "Stone Age people" who dominated the northwestern plains with their military power (Ewers 1958, vii). Ewers (1958, 7) argues that *Siksikaitsitapi* adopted the horse, metal tools, and weapons in the early eighteenth century. It is also reported that *Siksikaitsitapi* migrated from the area around Lake Winnipeg. On the other hand, Kroeber argues that they may be regarded "as ancient occupants of the northern plains" (Potvin 1966, 5). One indication of this long-standing occupancy is that sacred places and creation stories (involving Old Man *Napi*) mark the boundaries of *Siksikaitsitapi* territory.

The basic belief system of *Siksikaitsitapi* includes belief in the spiritual nature of the sun, constellations, birds, animals, waterfowl, etc. and their ability to communicate some of their sacred knowledge to humans. While praying and fasting, the sacred powers may be received through dreams and daytime visions (see also Ewers 1958, 17 & 162). It was not only the animals and birds that gave sacred knowledge to *Siksikaitsitapi*, but also the sky beings, such as *Ksisstsi'ko'm* [Thunder] who gave *Niinaimsskaahkoy-innimaaan*, the Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle. Beaver and otter are two potent underwater beings and *Ksisststakyomopistaan* [the Beaver Bundle] is said to be the oldest among *Siksikaitsitapi* (see also Ewers 1958, 17–18). *Siksikaitsitapi* understand that with the knowledge of these sacred powers comes the ability to call upon them for protection, and the bundles and pipes are a major source of protection through their balancing power. As a result, *Siksikaitsitapi* relate to the natural forces with respect, the fundamental premise of their ethical and moral conduct. Balance is recognized as the natural law of the cosmic universe, and respect is based on this law (I use the term “cosmic universe” to reference *Siksikaitsitapi* understandings of reality emanating from *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*, the Source of Life). This law is acknowledged in the thought patterns and organizational behaviour of *Siksikaitsitapi*. The pipes and bundles form the societies that shape the organizational behaviour of the people. Balance is the mission of the *Siksikaitsitapi* culture, and through the organization of societies, balance is manifested in the values, norms, and roles of the people. Striving for balance becomes the motivation of life and the impetus for all relationships. Thus we see that relationships are connections with cosmic beings creating alliances. They constitute the foundation for what, in Eurocentred terms, would be called *Siksikaitsitapi* ontology, epistemologies, and pedagogy. We talk about it as *Kipaitapiiyssinnooni* [our way of life], the *Siksikaitsitapi* lifeworld which we seek to understand, *Paitapiiyssin* [lit. “up(right) life,” as in “up and living,” “alive and walking around as physical beings,” the processes of our way of life].

The holistic interrelationship or mutual reflection of the various aspects of *Niipaitapiiyssin* (such as ontology, epistemologies, and cosmology) are

the basis for traditional forms of knowing and are necessary for the cultural production of contemporary *Siksikaitsitapi* societies. The knowledge and the forms of teaching and learning are embedded in the ways of the ancestors that we can understand today as epistemologies and pedagogical theories and practices. Ceremonies are a way to make present, teach, and demonstrate through origin stories the life of the ancestors, the natural laws of universe and relationships, the moral and ethical conduct of the people, and the essence and respectful approach to the alliances of the bundles. The legends and stories of these bundles and ceremonies are the connection to *Siksikaitsitapi* knowledge, customs, and rituals. They constitute the pedagogical foundations for acquiring knowledge that is a way of life, just as knowing is a way of being. Both mutually reflect and are conditioned upon each other as they are embodied in the ways of relating to and participating in a world designed for balancing the cosmic world in which we live.

As a result, *Siksikaitsitapi* organize themselves according to their observations of the natural world and the understanding of their relationship with the environment. The natural world with its various resources are experienced as interrelated in a manner that respects all its beings – whether the wide-open grass plains for the buffalo, or other four-legged animals, or forested hills for shelter, or timbered river valleys for winter camps, or roots, berries, and plants. Anthropologists and ethnographers have also noted this. Kehoe (1995, xiv), for example, states that the ways of the bison were very similar to those of the *Siksikaitsitapi*. Similarly, the *Siksikaitsitapi* culture changed as the environment changed. Technological changes were incorporated into the culture just as environmental and other natural changes were incorporated within the context of creation. All was regarded as imbued with *Ihtsipaitapiiyo’pa* [Source of Life], which is inherent in all of life and also works as cause for change. *Ihtsipaitapiiyo’pa* is powerful and is always acknowledged and respected in every aspect of living. The power of *Ihtsipaitapiiyo’pa* was and is maybe most obvious to outsiders when they observe the *Siksikaitsitapi* relationship to the dog, which is their close companion and partner. (The relationship

with the horse is similar.) These relationships illustrate the context in which *Siksikaitsitapi* adapted to technological changes and their manifestation in the societal structure. The advent and welcoming of dog and horse illustrate how *Siksikaitsitapi* culture is premised on balance.

The pre-horse era among *Siksikaitsitapi* is referred to as *Iitotasimahpi Iimitaiks*, “dog days.” Eurocentred researchers report that they presumably organized themselves in small travelling hunting bands described as economic and political units (Ewers 1958; Kehoe 1995). They journeyed throughout their territory seasonally as guided by their economic activities and ceremonies. The literature also reports that *Siksikaitsitapi* gathered annually in the summer for the *Ookaan*, a ceremony sponsored by a Holy or Medicine Woman (Ewers 1958; Kehoe 1995; Taylor 1989, 19). Other gatherings for ceremonial purposes, such as *Niinaimsskaahkoyinnimaan* [Medicine Pipes] and *Ksisskstakyomopisstaani* [Beaver Bundles], are not discussed in the literature.

In the era of *Iitotasimahpi Iimitaiks*, the *Siksikaitsitapi* travelled on foot with their companion, the dog. Researchers (e.g., Ewers 1958, 7–10) believe that they marched in small groups following the buffalo over the grasslands. Each family was responsible for its own teepee and supplies. It is estimated that the dog could drag a load of seventy-five pounds on a wooden travois. Able-bodied men flanked the march, and the women and children were in the centre, some distance away from the dogs. Lodges were small due to the weight limits of what dogs could pull.

The dog was given grave respect because it was seen as the companion of humankind possessing *I'ta'kiwa* [“has a spirit”] and consciousness. The gifts that dogs give are loyalty, and even their lives, in order to protect their *Siksikaitsitapi* partners. In addition, dogs can see those ghostly beings who did not make it to *Omahkspa'tsikoi*, the Sand Hills (the place where the dead live). It will give a specific bark that will alert the *Siksikaitsitapi* to the fact that a ghost has entered their midst. Sometimes *Ma, mo'ta'k* [the spirit] may leave the body of an alive person and travel to visit favorite places or people. On these occasions, dogs will alert their companions to such a presence.

Ewers (1958) claims that *Siksikaitsitapi* did not have the *Ookaan* during *Iitotasimahpi Limitaiks*, but that they did have *Ksisskstakyomopisstaan* [Beaver Bundle]. When food was scarce, the *Siksikaitsitapi* called upon *Iksissksta'kyo mo'pisstaiksi* [the Beaver Bundle holders] to open the bundle and perform the ceremony to call the buffalo, just as *Ksisskstaki*, the Beaver, instructed them to do. *Maa*, *Iimopisstawa*, the Keeper, and his wife would sing the songs that would charm the direction of the wind and drive the buffalo toward camp. In exchange, *Ksissksta'kyo mo'pisstaiksi* would receive the choice cuts from the buffalo kill. This ceremony is one of the forms of alliances whereby *Siksikaitsitapi* engage in traditional ecological relationships to honour and renew mutual dependency. *Ksissksta'kyo mo'pisstaiksi* would acknowledge these alliances through songs, and they would sing to drive the buffalo toward camp. This invocation alludes to the complexity of the natural relationships and alliances within a holistic nature of *Niipaitapiiyssinni* [cosmic universe].

Certain *Siksikaitsitapi* have always been distinguished because of their special abilities. They may have had the power to call on *Iniwa*, the buffalo, or to heal the sick. They may have had outstanding war records and swiftness of foot as well as physical stamina. These important characteristics helped them to sustain themselves in relationship to the natural world. Ewers (1958, 17) assumes that the buffalo was hunted by extremely good runners, who could overtake buffalos (or enemies). These special gifts gave confidence and integrity to the *Siksikaitsitapi*.

2.3 *Ao'ta'sao'si Ponokaomita* – The Era of the Horse (Eighteenth Century to 1880)

Horses were probably introduced to the Plains tribes around 1630, when they were abducted from other *Niitsitapi* charged with taking care of them for the Spaniards. Through gifts, barter, and thefts the horse made its way to *Siksikaitsitapi* approximately a hundred years later (Potvin 1966, 12).

However, *Siksikaitsitapi* have stories that tell of an earlier encounter with the horse (Narcisse Blood, personal communication, September 1966).

Ewers (1958, 22 & 23) reports that *Aamsskaapipiikani* first encountered the horse when it was ridden by one of their enemies, the Shoshonis. They managed to kill the horse with an arrow in the belly. Initially, *Siksikaitsitapi* named the horse *Limitaa* [big dog] and later renamed it *Ponokaomita* [elk dog]. They now could journey much longer, and travel was less tiresome. Horses made food easier to obtain while hunting, making them much more valuable than dogs. The transfer of ceremonial bundles was facilitated as a result of these changes, and a closer relationship developed among the various medicine societies (Potvin 1966, 15). It also supported the initiation of individuals into social and military societies. For example, when Red Crane, *Kainaikowan*, acquired the Long Time Medicine Pipe, *Misommahkoiyinnimaan*, for the second time, he gave away sixty horses in the transfer (P. Standing Alone, personal communication, November 1996). In addition to easing the creation of bonds among the ceremonial societies through transfers, the horse also made it possible to travel to other *Niitsitapi* camps much more frequently. *Ponokaomita*, the horse, provided the mechanism and the opportunity to accumulate wealth. It also generated more time for social, recreational, and ceremonial activities. Young boys were well adapted to riding by the ages of six or seven, and in their teens they were expected to join the tribal hunts (Potvin 1966, 30). These changes increased the unity and the strength of the *Siksikaitsitapi* Confederation (Potvin 1966, 15).

Europeans characterized *Siksikaitsitapi* mounted on the horse as “a powerful nation.”

War is more familiar to them than other nations.... In their inroads into the enemies' country, they frequently bring off a number of horses, which is their principal inducement in going to war. (Potvin 1966, 13)

According to anthropologist Robert Lowie, horses represented wealth (Potvin 1966, 15). Such interpretations reflect European values of aggression and accumulated property. However we may interpret its meaning, it is clear that horses did have a tremendous impact on *Siksikaitsitapi* culture and society, which, according to Ewers (1955, quoted in Potvin 1966), probably happened around 1790. According to Grinnell (1962, 243 & 244), *Ponokaomita* not only changed *Siksikaitsipoyi* attitude or need for war, but it also changed their attitude towards the accumulation of property and generated the idea of warfare for territory. Such warring and capturing of horses from other tribes is estimated to have occurred over a seventy-five to eighty-year span.

The *Siksikaitsitapi* interpretation of the terms “warring” and “capturing of horses for the accumulation of property” is *Naamaahkaan* [coup]. *Naamaahkaani* is a custom that requires the physical and spiritual characteristics to which *Siksikaitsitapi* men aspired. It complements their mission of balance, integrity, and bravery. The term “coup,” which means, “blow” (Grinnell 1962, 245) and “to take a trophy from an enemy” (Frantz & Russell 1989, 347), is attributed to the French traders and trappers. A direct translation of the Blackfoot word *Naamaahkaan* is the phrase “to strike the enemy.” I am told that the actual behaviour meant touching the enemy or going inside his home where his horse was tied and taking the horse (P. Standing Alone, personal communication, May 1998). It does not mean merely attacking the body of the enemy. In practice, the coup was executed by approaching the enemy close enough to strike or to touch him with something held in hand. The characteristics required for *Naamaahkaani* included bravery, physical courage, lack of fear, and daring (Grinnell 1962, 245). For example, a man might ride over and knock down an enemy who is on foot (the horsemen could not be shot or receive a lance at close range). The taking of horses was also considered *Naamaahkaan*, as were the capture of a shield, bow, gun, war bonnet, war shirt, or medicine pipe (Grinnell 1962, 245–48). Warriors usually provided proof of their statements through possession of these items. On special occasions *Naamaahkaan* was performed in public and

during ceremonies (Grinnell 1962, 246). The practice of *Naamaahkaan* was clearly a collective agreement among the tribes. *Ponokaomita* and *Naamaahkaan* became integral parts of the *Siksikaitsitapi* culture through the annual ceremonies of the *Kanatsomitaiksi* [Brave Horse Society] and *Itskinnaiksi* [Horn Society]. In this way, *Siksikaitsitapi* continued the sacred ways of their ancestors as they responded to changes.

Horses were incorporated into the social and religious practices of *Siksikaitsitapi*. They were seen as sacred animals and became central to their dreaming (Potvin 1966, 55). P. Standing Alone (personal communication, November 1997) described dreams generally as an aspect of receiving knowledge, with some dreams having visionary significance. Dream knowledge usually takes the form of information, guidance, or warning and is frequently only meant for the dreamer (Taylor 1989, 160). Potvin (1966, 55) quotes A. M. Josephy's apt description:

The plains had always been a place for dreams, but with the horses more so. Something happens to a man when he gets on a horse.... There seems never to have been a race of plains horsemen that was neither fanatically proud or religious. The Plains Indians were both.

According to the stories told, horses were gifts from *Ksisstsi'ko'm* [Thunder], from *Sooyitapiiks* [water spirits] or from *Ipissowaasi* [Morning Star]. Horses were derived from the same sources as all *Siksikaitsitapi* sacred possessions. They were seen as having supernatural powers that allowed them to perform unusual feats and gave them exceptional endurance. Horses that recovered from seemingly mortal wounds or escaped battle unscathed were perceived to have "secret power" (Potvin 1966, 56, 57). Ethnographers saw the "horse medicine cult" as a secret society surrounded by mystery with the rituals possibly resembling the *Niinainsskaipasskaan* [Medicine Pipe Dance] (Potvin 1966, 56–57). They report that members of the society practiced a ritual designed to aid the healing of horses or humans; however, most of the time they dealt with the capture and handicapping of enemy horses.

Pre-contact culture quickly eroded under the influence of European technology and materialism, which was introduced over a relatively short period of time during the eighteenth century. By way of gun and Christianity, European materialism quickly permeated *Siksikaitsipoyi* culture. The people demonstrated their ability to adapt to these new influences as they became the most feared tribes in the colonized plains (Ewers 1958). However, in adapting to the influences of European materialism, their own system of spirituality began to deteriorate, leading to unprecedented changes in their way of life, which continue to this day.

During this period of transition, it is reported that, with the use of gun and horse, *Siksikaitsitapi* had intensified their warring with other tribes and increased their wealth through participation in the fur trade. These changes began to alter fundamental relationships in the *Siksikaitsitapi* world. The shift from harmony and the sacredness of life to materialism began the breach with the sacred. This is most obvious in the relationship with *Iiniiwa* [the bison]. Traditionally, *Iiniiwa* is seen as a gift from *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*, and it is a part of the ceremonies as well as a staple food for subsistence. The relationship with the bison shifted from a ceremonial and subsistence relationship to one of commercial use.

The demise of the *Iiniiwa* changed the overall *Siksikaitsitapi* relationships of alliances with all beings of the natural world. As these relationships were altered, the traditional responsibilities and alliances between *Siksikaitsitapi* and *Iiniiwa* were also changed. The entire *Siksikaitsitapi* universe was affected. It was a violation of the natural laws of *Niipaitapiiyisinni* [the cosmic universe] or the *Niitsitapi* lifeworld, the interdependence and interconnectedness of life. One breach affects all other alliances. In the natural world of alliances, the physical manifestations of life are derived from connections with *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*. This shift in relationship with fur-bearing animals introduced the beginnings of imbalance in the *Siksikaitsitapi* way of life. The perception and connection to the sacred had been altered, as history after the demise of the buffalo illustrates.

2.4 *Ao'maopao'si* – From when we settled in one place (1880) to today

The destruction of the buffalo was almost complete by 1880. This began a series of events that almost annihilated *Siksikaitsitapi*, with the reservation era being the last major effort by governments to control and render the people dependent. *Siksikaitsitapi*, like all other *Niitsitapi*, were placed on separate reservations with severe restrictions. Legislation and policies of this era forced the placement of children in residential schools for most of their childhood and adolescent years; it limited ceremonial practices and the use of *Niitsi'powahsinni* [Blackfoot language]; migration patterns and economic pursuits were now completely controlled by colonial forces. These restrictions, coupled with their severance from their natural alliances, such as with *Iiniiwa*, accentuated and increased the split within the sacred world of *Siksikaitsitapi*, and, in turn, accelerated their adoption of European materialism.

On the reserves, *Niitsitapi* began to live as they were taught by the Indian Agents (Department of Indian Affairs) and the missionaries. The *Treaty of 1867* formalized the boundaries of the reserves. In 1920 and 1930, the Government of Canada enacted two sections as part of the *Indian Act* that enforced the compulsory attendance at missionary-operated residential schools by *Niitsitapi* children. These practices led them further away from their alliances with the natural order. In the past, the people taught the young children their responsibilities of being *Niitsitapi*. Now children began to perceive the ways of *Niitsitapi* as obsolete and irrelevant. Most of the children no longer spoke the language, and the old people no longer told the stories of the grandparents. Repressive legislation prohibited dances and ceremonies in the 1920s and 1930s. Ceremonial bundles were confiscated or sold to museums by missionaries and police. The absence of these sacred bundles is reflected in the following observation by Clark Wissler, who, after a fourteen-year absence, returned to living with *Aamsskaapiipikani*:

I found the once noted chief and medicine man, Brings Down the Sun, in a small poor lodge on the outskirts of the camp [the Sun-lodge camp of 1917], unnoticed and seemingly unknown to the younger generation of the Blackfoot. He had come from his home in Alberta to attend ... and lead in the ceremonials of the Sun-lodge.... The young men were engaged in a baseball game by the side of Sun-lodge.

Comes Down the Sun had this to say to the younger generation:

Young men, come forth and help us! You now have homes of your own and should do your share in keeping up the worship of the Sun. You no longer are helpers, but sit idly by and seem willing to abandon all of our old religious customs. While we live we should keep up our religion. You seem to care only for whiskey, gambling and horse racing. (Quoted in McClintock 1992, 507)

Although much seems lost in translation, the above quotation captures the shift from a consciousness emanating from and connected with *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*, to the consciousness of materialism. It is the beginning of an era of imbalance and colonization. Their effects are as evident in contemporary society as they were almost a century ago.

Siksikaitsitapi experienced starvation with the disappearance of *Iiniiwa* during “the starvation winter” of 1883–84. Other fur-bearing animals depended upon for subsistence were also getting rare. Epidemics of smallpox (1869–70) and influenza devastated the populations. As an example, the 1836 diphtheria and 1837 smallpox epidemics reduced the *Siksika* by six to seven thousand people (Hildebrandt et al. 1996, 18). The harsh climates of sub-zero weather with the lack of proper shelter now proved to be insurmountable for *Siksikaitsitapi*. Finally, there was the whiskey trade. All these factors, in conjunction with isolation and segregation, contributed to the near extinction of *Siksikaitsitapi* in the nineteenth century. Their traditional knowledge had been altered with this shift toward Christianity

and materialism. This also changed the mission of *Siksikaitsitapi* society. The influence of European values and the perception of land as a commodity began to permeate and disrupt the traditional value system. Land became a valuable commodity for settlers and government. As a result, all *Niitsitapi* territory shrank to small parcels of land called “reserves.” *Siksikaitsitapi*, near starvation, had now been herded onto these reservations and were kept alive with government rations (McClintock 1992, 508).

The environment had changed drastically over time: *liniwa* was gone, the seasonal hunts were a thing of the past, and seasonal gatherings for ceremonies no longer took place. The small reserves, with the absence of game, the prohibition of ceremonies, the loss of language, and the children in residential school, left the survivors with the belief that *Niitsitapi Oopaitapiissoowaiyi*, the way of life of *Niitsitapi*, was no longer a necessity for survival.

In 1763 the *Royal Proclamation* established the procedure for obtaining land. Its rules for acquiring First Nations lands later became the basis of Aboriginal rights. The *Proclamation* recognized Aboriginal title to lands not already colonized (Brizinski 1993, 151). It also outlined an apartheid system between settlers and Indians. It was originally established to protect the First Nations from exploitation by European settlers. As a result, non-Natives had to pay penalties for trespassing. This policy was reversed in 1885 and now the Natives could not leave their reserves unless given a pass. Although this pass system was not law, York (1990) reports that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police enforced it as though it had been legislated.

During this painful process, Aboriginal peoples internalized the expropriation of their lands that had been justified by the government with “public interest,” “national interest,” and “common good” arguments (Boldt 1993; York 1990). Boldt (1993, 67) describes this as an artificial construct used to create the illusion that a natural homogeneity of interests exists and that governmental policies are designed to promote these interests.

Some of the details of the expropriation process are worth remembering. The appropriation of First Nations lands began in 1822 with the practice

of individual payments, primarily used to entice starving people to sell their land and to instill the idea of individual ownership. In 1850 the *Lands Act* was passed. It stated that lands occupied by First Nations were to be held in trust and protected from taxes (these sections continue to be a part of the present *Indian Act*). In 1857, the *Act for the Gradual Civilization of Indians* was passed by Parliament. This legislation effectively eroded much of the communal and collective consciousness of the tribes through the enfranchisement criteria and through the opportunity to own land in fee simple. In 1869 the *Act for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians* was passed. It was designed to remove traditional tribal leadership and to set up a government based on municipal laws and the Eurocentred concept of “majority rule.” Until this time traditional leadership had been based on values that produced harmony, respect, and integrity through consensus.

In 1884, the *Indian Advancement Act* outlined the training of tribal leaders for the implementation of municipal structures and processes. Government agents were now authorized to dispose of chiefs and councils resisting the government and practicing their beliefs and values. The government also introduced the “location ticket.” This was the allotment of Indian reserves, where each person would receive a piece of land if they could demonstrate that they understood the concept of private property. It was used as a standard for “being civilized” in accordance with the *Indian Advancement Act*. The government also began using the proceeds from land sales to enforce assimilationist policies. The First Nations were told that they would lose more lands if they did not begin to farm. In 1889 the government was empowered to lease and sell tribal lands not in use for farming or ranching and to use the proceeds from sales to carry out its objective of assimilation. Under this system, individual *Niitsitapi* were given forty acres to farm, whereas settlers were farming up to 160 acres at that time. The emphasis was on root crops. The objective for this type of farming was to keep the First Nations people busy with tedious work and to distract them from their ceremonies, dances, and other gatherings. Under the *Indian Advancement Act* “vagrancy” was prosecuted

by government agents. Technology was poor by the standards of the day, and First Nations farmers did not have control over their own produce (Buckley 1992, 54–62).

These policies and practices were designed “to advance and civilize the Indian people.” This meant the destruction of pre-contact conditions and traditional ways of life. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Europeans found that

the Indians in general exceed the middling stature of Europeans.... Their constitution is strong and healthy, their disorders few.... The Indians are in general free from disorders; and an instance of being subject to dropsy, gout or stone, never came within their knowledge. (York 1990, 77)

Today government officials often point to the decrease in disease rates among Canadian Aboriginals. The decline, however, has been agonizingly slow and is outweighed by deaths from accidents, violence, alcohol, drugs, fires, and suicides. For example, in 1964, 22 percent of all Aboriginal deaths were the result of accidents and violence. This figure has since increased to 35 percent and is one of the worst in the world (York 1990, 77). Aboriginal people are also four times more likely to be murdered than non-Natives. The death rate among Canadian Aboriginals from accidents and violence exceeds most rates in the Third World and almost anywhere in the industrial world. This compares to only 5 percent of deaths due to accidents and violence among non-Natives (York 1990, 77–78). The *Indian Act* with its restrictions on Native people’s autonomy, and the patchwork of tiny reserves on infertile land, has locked them into a cycle of unemployment, overcrowding, poor health, and dependence on welfare (York 1990, 79).

In spite of overwhelming genocidal forces, resistance persists to this day. *Siksikaitsitapi* still cling to the traditional beliefs and practices. As demonstrated in the following example, *Aawaaahsskataiksi* [ceremonial grandparents] who pursue their customs had to become secretive and highly pro-

tective of their traditions in order to survive as who they are – *Niitsitapi*. Despite the difficulties, they remained *Siksikaitsitapi* by annually renewing their responsibilities through the *Aako'ka'tssin* [Sundance].

Mad Wolf had this to say:

It has been our custom ... to honour the Sun God. We fast and pray that we may lead good lives and act more kindly to each other. I do not understand why the white men desire to put an end to our religious ceremonials. What harm can they do to our people? If they deprive us of our religion, we will have nothing left, for we know no other that can take its place.... We believe that the Sun God is all powerful, for every spring he makes the trees bud and the grass to grow. We see these things with our eyes, and therefore, we know that all life comes from him. (McClintock 1992, 508)

McClintock (1992, 509) comments: “Their unselfish and patriotic lives, devoted to the welfare of their tribe, rise before me in strange and painful contrast with the rich and powerful of my race.” The strength of the *Siksiakaitsitapi* ceremonialists and their ceremonies are captured in these words. It ensures the continued survival of *Niitsitapipaitapiiyssinni* (the *Niitsitapi* lifeworld). Their strength is living the circle. Understanding the natural law of the cosmos means the “circle comes around.” This is living in the consciousness that everything is connected and has consequences (Wub-e-ke-niew 1995, xiv). Government and businesses had made every effort to seduce *Niitsitapi* to forfeit this principle (Boldt 1993; York 1990). Such efforts continue to this day.

The prophecies of many tribes (such as the Hopi and Maya) speak of a new era to come (Kremer & Gomes 2000). One of the characteristics of Indigenous culture is the understanding of the cycles of time. Prophecies among grandparents, elders, and spiritual leaders speak of a time of renewal that will bring a second great flowering of the Americas. No matter how we may interpret these prophecies, it is clear that this is a time of great change. According to the Mayan people, the present timecycle



My Grandmother, *Siipinamayaki*, Josephine Plain Eagle, with brother, *Otskoi Ka'ka'tosi*, Elmer Bastien, in 1946.

will come to an end on December 21, 2011 (Gonzalez & Kremer 2000). Another prophecy speaks of the time when a new fire – the Seventh Fire – will be lit (Peat 1994, 217).

I understand my own work in the context of these prophecies. Reaffirming and reconstructing *Siksikaitsitapi* ways of knowing is renewal as well as part of our ongoing resistance to colonial and genocidal forces; making them part of government-regulated education is mandatory. Language and ceremonies are the essential foundations from which they can begin to understand and experience anew the philosophies, principles, and social and normative systems of our ancestors and the ancients. Language and prayer establish and maintain the emotive and kinship connections that are at the heart of being *Siksikaitsitapi*. They are the key ways through which to access the knowledge, wisdom, sentiments, and meaning of *Niitsitapiipaitapiyysin*. According to the teachings contained in the prophecies, the ceremonies have protected our science. This means that it is imperative to affirm our traditional knowledge and to reconstruct *Siksikaitsitapi* ways of knowing in new arenas, such as education. This will allow our children to live by them.

The prophecies also state that the time will come when the White Brother will look to the Red Brother for guidance. Now we have to teach a world community about the responsibilities of humanity in a universe of alliances as we understand it.

3. Cultural Destruction – Policies of Ordinary Genocide

Raphael Lemkin coined the term “genocide” in 1944, when he wrote in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* that

... generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the

destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the group themselves (quoted from Davis & Zannis 1973, 9).

Canadian governmental policies constituted a coordinated plan to disrupt and destroy the essential foundations of *Niitsitapiipaitapiiyssin*, and the resultant actions fit this definition of genocide. They were an attempt to destroy a holistic way of relating to the world by disrupting the process of maintaining the alliances central to the *Niitsitapi* way of life and identity through ceremony, language, and traditional instruction.

Colonization can be described as a process that disconnects tribal people from their kinship alliances. After the initial physical violence, it becomes a process that is slow, insidious, and often abstract in nature. The explicit or implicit objective is to alter the identity, the self, and the sense of humanity of the colonized. This is done by redefining identity, self, and humanness as abstractions instead of defining them through the specific lived realities of natural alliances. It is through the use of these abstractions that the experiences and minds of the colonized are altered. This process changes the consciousness of tribal peoples as it changes the world in which they live. It has created unprecedented conditions of dependency by virtue of the destruction of kinship alliances and the emergence of isolated, individualistic selves. Such dependency is found in the Third World conditions in which Aboriginal people find themselves in Canada (Clarke 1990; Bolaria 1991; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996).

J. S. Frideres describes the process and its results clearly:

Land that was eventually set aside for Indians was selected because it was away from the main routes of travel, not suitable for agricultural development, and lacking in visible natural resources such as mineral wealth. The result has been that most reserves have not had an adequate ecological basis for their existence as self-sufficient

communities.... Indians have not enhanced their economic status or relative position in the Canadian class system. (Bolaria 1991, 116)

The above conditions of dependency are a systemic part of the Canadian polity. They are accepted and legitimized within a fundamentally racist system. The politics of assimilation and integration became the justification and the intellectual arguments for designing theories, structures, and mechanisms for rendering a people dependent and inferior. Racist assumptions have been instrumental for the perpetuation and mystification of the paternalistic policies, the cloak of cultural genocide that governs Aboriginal people. They grew from the notions that Native people were heathens, primitive, and lazy. Such prejudices provided the Canadian government with the moral and civic responsibility and justification to ban and destroy essential features of tribal practices.

The following examples illustrate cultural genocide as experienced by Canadian Indians. In 1889, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police urged the Department of Indian Affairs to clearly define cultural practices so that ceremonies could be made illegal.

If you will, by the Departmental instructions, or through the Indian Commissioner, clearly define what dances, if any, the Indians are to be allowed to participate in, either on or off Reserves, the police will endeavour to enforce your legislation. (Titley 1986, 167)

In 1889, Sam Steele, Superintendent of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, after visiting *Kainawa Ot Akokatssowai* [the *Kainai* Sundance] the previous year, wrote to his superiors urging them to discourage this ceremony:

Old warriors take this occasion of relating their experiences of former days, counting their scalps and giving the number of horses they were successful in stealing. This has a pernicious effect on the

young men; it makes them unsettled and anxious to emulate the deeds of their forefathers. (Titley 1986, 165)

The Oblates were most instrumental in advancing the idea that paganism was a problem among Indians. Father J. Hugonard wrote to Commissioner Laird in 1903 stating:

I am convinced that Christianity and advancement, and paganism and indolence cannot flourish side by side; one or the other has to give away; paganism, dancing and indolence are most natural to the Indian, who has no thought for the morrow. (Titley 1986, 167)

The above policies and practices were designed to alter the consciousness of tribal people in Canada by destroying the foundation of their tribal ways.

They were forced to develop the type of personality that is seen as successful within a Christian and Eurocentred culture. The colonizers projected their own cultural fears of “primitivism” or “heathenism” upon Indigenous peoples. Average Canadians are probably not even aware of this projection, nor are they aware of the genocidal effect of the policies resulting from these fears. The majority of Canadians support these policies because of the manner in which the Eurocentred societies have defined the concept of “culture.” However, from an Indigenous perspective, it appears as an abstract system of meanings through which reality is apprehended and a social order is established (Urban 1991, 1). This set of abstractions can be manipulated and controlled in a way *Niitsitapi* knowledge cannot. An isolated, individualistic and dissociated self is easier to manipulate than a self connected with fellow humans and the natural world through ceremonial alliances. Because of an entirely different understanding of self, colonizers can convince themselves and their citizens that Indigenous peoples can be assimilated without any serious adverse consequences. It is only the Native’s reluctance or refusal to join the colonizer’s society that stands in the way. From an Indigenous perspective, this is a twofold illusion. First, *Niitsitapi* culture is not an abstraction but is

rooted in the concrete relationships of tribal people to their world. Second, the abstract culture of European conception cannot perceive Indigenous tribes as culture. Aboriginal tribes, on the other hand, can only see the Eurocentred abstractions and dissociations as illusions, imbalance, pathology, and lack of culture.

From a European perspective, tribal people need to be civilized and assimilated by developing so-called autonomous selves. This and similar understandings have categorically regarded Aboriginal people as inferior and, consequently, in need of improvement justifying assimilation policies. The need for assimilation is part of the racist conceptualization of who First Nations people are and should be. It reveals equality as illusion, and mention of equality and justice is only made in the context of assimilation or development, not in the context of settlers and Indigenous peoples. The objective is to alter tribal peoples' culture, society, and identity. The resultant policies and practices are advancing genocide while ideological statements deny and ignore their impact or blame any deficiencies on *Niitsitapi*, the victims.

It is crucial for Indigenous people experiencing the effects of these genocidal policies to articulate and express their experiences in their own voices and not through the interpretations of Eurocentred academics and historians. I will discuss this particular issue at greater length toward the end of the book. Healing from the impact of colonization and genocide means strengthening our personal and cultural voice. Thus we affirm who we are as First Nations people.

The concept of cultural genocide implies the destruction of a peoples' belief system, meaning in the case of Indigenous peoples the destruction of concrete kinship relationships that are crucial for the survival of who they are, whether *Siksikaitsitapi* or another tribe. For example, residential school policies and practices were designed for the destruction and disruption of the life-sustaining kinship relationships of tribal peoples. The destruction of these kinship relations were essentially done by targeting the following: keeping young people away from ceremonies, prohibiting the use of First Nations languages, enforcing a Christian belief system,

and treating each pupil as an individualistic monad. The intent is to destroy the purpose, meaning, and life-sustaining relationships of a people. Chrisjohn describes this in the following way:

Consequently, the phrase “cultural genocide” is an unnecessary ellipsis: cultural genocide is genocide. In any intellectually honest appraisal, Indian Residential Schools were genocide. If there are any serious arguments against this position, we are ready to hear them.

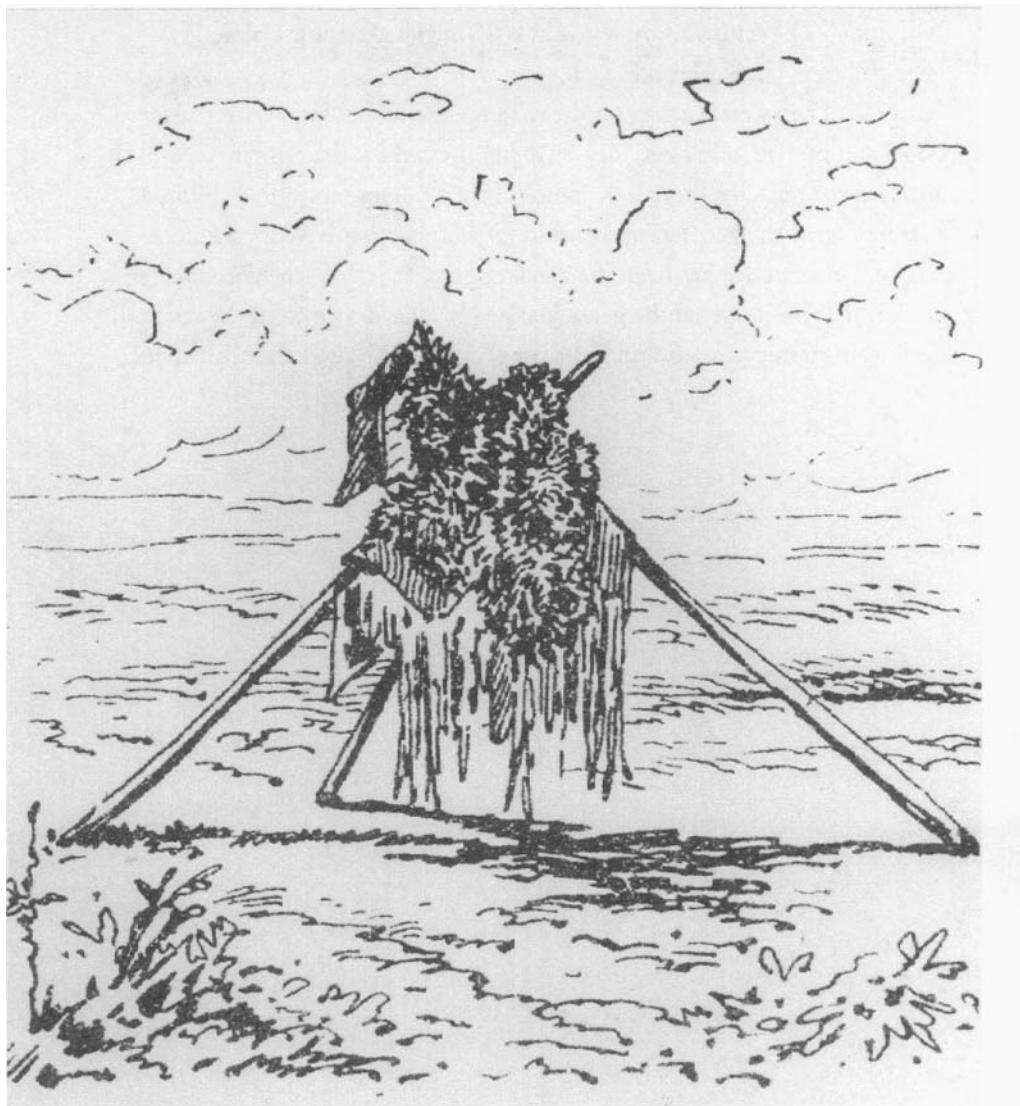
“Ordinary genocide” is rarely, if at all, aimed at the total annihilation of the group; the purpose of the violence (if the violence is purposeful and planned) is to destroy the marked category (a nation, a tribe, a religious sect) as a viable community capable of self-perpetuation and defence of its own self-identity. If this is the case, the objective of the genocide is met once (1) the volume of violence has been large enough to undermine the will and resilience of the sufferer, and to terrorize them into surrender to the superior power and into acceptance of the order it imposed; and (2) the marked group has been deprived of resources necessary for the continuation of the struggle. With these two conditions fulfilled, they are at the mercy of their tormentors. They may be forced into protracted slavery, or offered a place in the new order on terms set by the victors – but which sequel is chosen depends fully on the conquerors’ whim. Whichever option has been selected, the perpetrators of the genocide benefit. They extend and solidify their power, and eradicate the roots of the opposition. (Chrisjohn et al. 1994, 30)

The concrete relationships of *Niitsitapi* are to the land, animals, time, stars, sun, and to each other, but hundreds of years of Europeanizing history have colonized these relationships and they have become abstractions. Detachment and disassociation are evident in the dispiritualization of these concepts and relationships. They make genocide possible and allow denial afterward. Similarly, the abstracted definition of “culture” fails to perceive

the culture of concrete relationships among *Niitsitapi* and thus negates it. Abstracted definitions as used in laws, policies, schools, and social science theories legitimize the dispiritualized perception of the natural world. Enforcing their use destroyed the alliances central to *Niitsitapi* concepts of self. The colonizers who formulated racist theories and designed genocidal policies were and are detached from the conditions of Aboriginal people. Such distance is a characteristic of ordinary genocide. Davis and Zannis (1973, 32 & 180) describe such acts of genocide as polite and clinical and conclude that the systematic liquidation of Indigenous culture and society leaves First Nations people with neither the resources to build again nor even the public sympathy to perpetuate their memory.

Through the processes of racism just described, the characteristics and potentialities of First Nations children are calibrated. More often this means the expectation of failure from early on, rather than any realistic hopes of becoming *Kaaahsinnooniksi* or *Aawaahskataiksi* [elders or ceremonial grandparents]. Suicide among young people is a symptom of this situation. Among Canadian Aboriginals under the age of twenty-five, suicides occur six times the national rate compared to non-Natives. In fact, one-third of all deaths among Native teenagers are suicides (York 1990, 97). The mortality rate among the entire Canadian Aboriginal population is four times the national rate. Racist characteristics projected onto First Nations people lead to feelings of uselessness and estrangement. These factors need to be considered as underlying causes for illness and death among Natives (Bolaria 1991, 116). Children inevitably interpret their formative years, their early childhood socialization, and the educational experience within the racist context they live in. *Niitsitapi* children are denied their own interpretations of a world of cosmic alliances. Racism has produced interpretations of life that most likely result in an identity based on powerlessness and debilitation. This ensures the continuity of generation after generation of tribal children shaped into an identity that has its roots in colonialism rather than in the power and beauty of their own natural alliances.

I remember driving to work on a cold snowy morning one late November. The temperature was minus 23 degrees Celsius. I passed two little children, barely three feet tall, who were not more than seven or eight years old. They were waiting on the road for the school bus. With plastic boots and no hats or gloves, they were not dressed for the elements. As I admired the tenacity and perseverance of their parents and these children, I remembered the generations of children who have survived residential school. Perseverance has been the mark of our survival. Each *Niitsitapi* generation that has survived the genocidal policies has drawn from the strength derived from our ancestors and our connections with the natural alliances.



Blackfoot medicine pipe bundle on a tripod, ca. 1875. Original artwork by Richard Barrington Nevitt. Glenbow Archives NA-1434-34.