

Research: A Nuu-chah-nulth Perspective

By Umeek: Dr. E. Richard Atleo, Ph.D.
University of Manitoba

March, 2005

Contemporary Knowledge and Research Conditions: What is....

Knowledge explosion and information overload describe our age. Yet, in spite of the awesome and miraculous powers demonstrated by a scientific age, in medicine, communications, transportation and other technologies, there are grave concerns about the emerging new world order, that it is being driven primarily by the free enterprise system. From its inception science has been touted as the savior of humankind but now, in this new world order, science may be reduced to an economic convenience – a tool of a monetary system that no government seems able to control. Although the foregoing is an overly simplified description of a much more complex world order that is dominated by free enterprise, there seems no doubt about its prevailing emergence in all the major countries of the world, the Americas, the European subcontinent, Asia, and in particular the largest country in the world – China. In my view, while science has demonstrated great technological marvels, it has had little impact in the important areas of qualitative relationships, not only between and among humans but also between humans and other life forms such as plants and animals.

Technological advances stand in sharp contrast to massive failures in attempts by all dominant cultures to advance the quality of human relationships. There is no way to overemphasize or exaggerate the enormous irony of a world that confuses technological advances with improvements in the quality of human life as demonstrated in an ability to live in respectful relationship with one another whereby each life form is recognized as having intrinsic and sacred value. Social commentators over the past several decades

Worldview as a Historical Context: What was....

The scientific worldview is based on its origin story. It is a simple story. There was a BIG BANG! Then there was evolution! And here we are! That is the story. In the prevailing view of this story taught in all mainstream universities there is no Creator and consequently no moral values, just a random sequence of events called random selection. That is why, in 1904 in the St. Louis World Fair, 59 indigenous groups were brought together as evidence to support Darwin's theory of evolution that the human species has been steadily evolving in a randomly selective process from a state of simple, instinctive, primitivism towards the more advanced, enlightened, and consequently superior human species of European origin. Of that event Cole (1984) writes:

WJ McGee's aim in the fair's anthropology section was "to satisfy the intelligent observer that there *is* a course of progress running from lower to higher humanity, and that all the physical and cultural types of man mark stages in that course." To assist in demonstrating this evolutionary model he brought to St. Louis African pygmies, Ainu from Japan, Tehuelche from Patagonia, and, among American Indians, representatives from the Cocopa, Pawnee, Dakota, Pima, and Pomo groups.
(p. 201)

Although many academics of European origin now deny this embarrassing myth the scientific origin story together with the randomly selective process of its subsequent evolutionary process upon which it is based remains a firm belief system. As one scientist confided to me, "There's lots of evidence to support the scientific worldview." Herein may be the confusion.

In the practical affairs of everyday life technological advances are the only evidence of the authenticity of the scientific worldview. Important dimensions of human existence, of human nature, such as love, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, joy, patience, goodness, Monuments and special days are set aside in hopes of the same. Even in cases of individual outrage there is an immediate demand that something be done so that similar outrages don't happen again. Yet, human inhumanity to human continues unabated. Wars and individual outrages continue in spite of all efforts to the contrary. Is science helpless in the face of these massive human failures to end inhumanity to human? Are there no other alternatives to the hope of remedy placed in science?

Knowledge and Research: What is possible....

What may not be adequately understood by both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities is that all pre-contact Aboriginals had their own legitimate means of acquiring knowledge to ensure their continuity. This assertion implies an alternative worldview to the scientific one. For illustrative purposes I will provide a Nuu-chah-nulth worldview perspective. In the examination of my Nuu-chah-nulth cultural heritage I asked myself the question: How did my ancestors know about hahuupa or teachings; Did they create these teachings out of their own heads or did they learn these teachings from somewhere else? Over time I came to realize that my ancestors had two primary sources of information, origin stories and nature, and one primary method of investigation to acquire knowledge, oosumich, or as it is known in English, vision quest. The first source are the origin stories about how Son of Raven captured the light, thereby indicating the natural intimacy in the relationship between 'heaven and earth'; how Aulthmaquus stole children, and how Aint-tin-mit, Son of Mucus, in cooperation with a Chief's wife, a hakum, rescued the children and restored them back to community; and many more kinds of such stories, each of which help to illuminate the original design of creation and so provide an orientation for life management purposes. The second source of information, nature, is identical to the scientific source of G.Neihardt in their book: Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux:

Crazy Horse's father was my father's cousin, and there were no chiefs in our family before Crazy Horse; but there were holy men; and he became a chief because of the power he got in a vision when he was a boy. When I was a man, my father told me something about that vision. Of course he did not know all of it; but he said that Crazy Horse dreamed and went into the world where there is nothing but the spirits of all things. That is the real world that is behind this one, and everything we see here is something like a shadow from that world.
(p. 85)

If Black Elk's statement about the 'real' world were an isolated incident there would be reason to discount it. However, as I have observed elsewhere, spiritual experiences among the Nuu-chah-nulth, as I assume among all Aboriginal communities of the past, were everyday occurrences for every family. Just as the scientific community recognizes authentic methodological processes to knowledge acquisition so too did the Nuu-chah-nulth recognize an authentic methodological process to knowledge acquisition called oosumich, or vision quest. Oosumich was considered as necessary for survival and daily living as schooling and homework today are considered necessary for survival and daily living. The following is a thumbnail sketch of the Nuu-chah-nulth knowledge acquisition process, its replication process and its means of testing and validation process.

Numerous cases can be cited, and have been in various publications by ethnobotanists, ethnohistorians and anthropologists of every description, of medical knowledge and how this knowledge has been acquired by simply observing nature or through an oosumich process. In nature, sickly animals can be observed eating specific plants and this is one simple way that Aboriginals determined some kinds of medicine. However, one cannot assume that this observation of nature is like a detached scientific observation where the observer is uninvolved or where the observer assumes to be superior to the animal. In the Nuu-chah-nulth worldview each animal is like a person and therefore is eligible to be a in the context of an oosumich it nevertheless illustrates an important principle of oosumich, which is an effective means of communication and transfer of knowledge or power from the spiritual to the physical realm.

I went to bed, I don't know what time, but I think it must have been about 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock, somewhere around that time. I saw something coming from the river way, from the north. When I looked again I was sitting on the bed. I knew I was sitting on the bed but I guess I was sleeping. That motel seemed to have no walls. This creature came right towards me. He stopped about six feet from me, maybe a little closer, and he looked at me and smiled. A beautiful creature, a creature of God. And he spoke to me (p. 120).

The creature said, "I have been sent here by the higher power. I'm sent to come and instruct you to make medicine, which will be yours. If I tell you what to do and you listen." I thought to myself, how can I listen, when I'm a clergyman, to this creature?

The bear could read his thoughts and told him that even though he did not believe now, he would believe later and would do this big thing. The bear smiled, showing teeth four to five inches long, and continued: "I'm sent here to come and teach you how to make medicine. I'm willing to give my body to be killed so that you can take me and use me for medicine." (Hodgson, Janet & Kothare, Jay, 1990p. 121

It is critical to note here that this manner of acquiring knowledge is not the only form of oosumich. Here the spiritual world appears to take the initiative in the transfer of medical knowledge. Origin stories teach that the primary requirement for effective communication with the spiritual realm is humility. Andrew Ahenakew evidently met that requirement just as Son of Raven eventually met the same requirement after Wren advised that Son of Raven transform into an insignificant

leaf. Andrew Ahenakew received medical knowledge to effectively heal certain kinds of cancer and Son of Raven brought light into the world, both kinds of resources came from the same source, the spiritual realm, the Creator.

Nuu-chah-nulth knowledge, sometimes referred to as 'protected knowledge', was democratically available to each family. That is, each family had its own oosumich in the same way that illiterate people of the middle ages accepted the word of literate priests who could read.

If Nuu-chah-nulth and other Aboriginal teachings could be compiled and classified they form a body of life management knowledge whose practice in traditional times astonished the first Europeans. As Sagard, a Recollet missionary observed:

[T]hose of their Nation...offer reciprocal Hospitality, and help each other so much that they provide for the needs of all so that there is no poor beggar at all in their towns, bourgs and villages, as I said elsewhere, so that they found it very bad hearing that there were in France a great number of needy and beggars, and thought that it was due to a lack of charity, and blamed us greatly saying that if we had some intelligence we would set some order in the matter, the remedies being simple. (cited in Jaenen, 1988, p. 121)

Although the account above is about the Montagnais specifically, other historical accounts of many other Aboriginal communities corroborate Sagard's observation. It does not mean that wars and conflicts were unknown or that individual outrages did not happen in pre-contact America. What it does imply is that in spite of the continuous struggle to manage powerful forces in reality that are often contradictory, good and evil, generosity and greed, creativity and destruction, war and peace, inflated egoism and humility, strong and weak, Aboriginal societies found ways to balance and harmonize these polarized and contrary forces. For this purpose, the Nuu-chah-nulth developed the sacred Tloo-qua-nah ceremony. It is a community ceremony to remind people of the necessity to keep in remembrance the polarized nature of reality. Consequently, when strong outside forces kidnap children from a family, that family is ceremonially chastised. "You must have forgotten the teachings of our grandparents" they are told. Significantly, the children are rescued through the collective prayers and collective action of the community. often destructive forces. The children stolen from Ahaus were found by Aint-tin-mit to have gum over their eyes. Metaphorically, these children became blind to their own identity, they became blind to their own culture, blind to where they came from, and all they could see and experience were their present circumstances of imprisonment. Today this blindness can be compared to the drug culture where children are lost to parents, to culture, to language, and to community.

Sagard's observation of "reciprocal hospitality" among the Montagnais was not an isolated case of generosity. For the Nuu-chah-nulth reciprocal hospitality or generosity was such a strong cultural theme that it is to be considered a law. It is in fact associated with life. The act of giving was thought and believed to be necessary to life and consequently its absence was considered to be equivalent to death. If, after much admonishment, a person still refused to contribute and give a share to others, that person could be banished from community, a condition equivalent to death. The status of generosity as a law of life derived directly from teachings found in origin stories as well as direct experiences of the Nuu-chah-nulth people. Out of millions of stories that could be told, and for now, in the absence of contemporary formal research, these stories must be considered anecdotal, my aunt tells the story of how they gave the last of their salmon to visiting relatives. Before this salmon had been completely consumed there came a knock on the door. When the door was opened there stood a fisherman with an offer of more salmon that was gratefully received. In other cultures where generosity is not considered necessary to life nor considered to be a law then it is very unlikely that anyone would give the last of their salmon to visitors. However, generosity in the Nuu-chah-nulth culture has been successfully practiced for millennia and the law has never been known to fail. It is a law that is empirically counter intuitive. Logic demands that before the last salmon is served to guests that replacement of this salmon must first be assured. That would be sound household planning and management. Ordinarily that is what Not all incidents of giving result in such an immediate return or fulfillment of the law of generosity but many Nuu-chah-nulth continue to this day to practice that ancient law whenever they receive any visitors.

Although there are fundamental differences between the Nuu-chah-nulth knowledge system and the scientific knowledge system there are also important similarities. First, the similarities are found in the structure and process of knowledge acquisition. Science utilizes theory while the Nuu-chah-nulth utilizes stories. These are parallel in meaning because both theory and story propose (are propositions about) the nature of reality. Scientific theories are tested for veracity through scientific methodologies where variables are examined in relation to one another to establish whether a theory or proposition is true. Origin stories are tested for veracity through oosumich to see if there is a special relationship between the spiritual and physical dimensions of reality. The truths contained in origin stories have been verified by oosumich over millennia. Ceremonially, hinkeets songs, dances, regalia, names, chants, prayer songs, oral histories, and formal declarations at great feast halls were the means to report, affirm, and confirm the outcomes, the findings, of oosumich in the same way that papers, journals, books, and conferences are the means to report scientific findings.

Second, the fundamental difference between the scientific knowledge system and the Nuuchah-nulth knowledge system is worldview. To adequately describe this difference would take another book. Suffice to say for now that this difference in worldview is based upon assumptions by science that reality is primarily empirical while the Nuuchah-nulth assume that reality is both empirical and spiritual. Moreover, it is assumed that the empirical is completely dependent upon the spiritual dimension for its existence. These differing assumptions constrain a different knowledge acquisition process. The oosumich methodology employs both the mind and the spirit/soul while the scientific reality and the other discovers order, one assumes that what is not seen is more substantial than what is seen while the other assumes that the only reality is what is seen and testable by empirical means.

Conclusion

Scientific research has unquestionable power towards technological advances but has proven powerless in advancing the quality of relationships as found in the policies and practices of the major governments throughout the world. Not only are there continuous conflicts between and among nations but the policies and practices of the governments of every major power on the earth have so degraded the environment as to imperil the wellbeing of future civilizations. Yet, in spite of massive failures by the governments of major powers on the earth to advance the quality of human relationships there are no shortage of answers to human problems. The liberals are as certain as the conservatives who are as certain as the socialists who are not outdone in the area of certainty by a host of movements, environmental in its many manifestations, Oriental in its many manifestations, Native spirituality in its many manifestations, and of course, academics who may begin their response by stating: "If only...this or that were done or not done...then all problems would disappear." In my view, science cannot be the savior of humankind because its strength lies in technological development while its weakness is in its inability to advance the quality of human relationships between nations, cultures, genders and ethnic groups.

Fortunately, what appears to be a weakness in the scientific knowledge system appears to be a strength in the Nuuchah-nulth system, and by extension, to the traditional precontact Aboriginal knowledge systems of the world. Aboriginal knowledge systems focused upon quality, or respectful, relationships between life forms. When Ahous went to the death of most of the people of Ohstoos and many of the people of Ahous. This war lasted a little more than a decade and this time is negligible in the context of millennia when for most of that time these Nuuchah-nulth peoples managed to balance and harmonize the forces of reality such that there was relative peace. Successful management of reality is difficult at the best of times, as each of us may testify.

Nevertheless, in spite of the inability of science to advance the quality of human relationships it can be greatly enhanced through cooperation with Aboriginal knowledge acquisition systems. This is where an Aboriginal theory will be useful. The theory of Tsawalk can be found in my book: *Tsawalk: A Nuuchah-nulth Worldview*. In the epilogue I make these comments.

The first peoples' struggles to reorient themselves according to creation's original design, as recounted in origin stories, parallel the current struggles of indigenous peoples to orient themselves according to the contradictions of the postmodern world, which espouses pluralism but cannot find a balance and harmony between multiple, competing interests. The theory of Tsawalk offers an alternative stance from which to view contemporary problem solving because it assumes the unity of creation irrespective of any of contemporary society's contradictions. (p. 133)

First Nations cultures were founded upon origin stories that provided reliable information about the nature of reality and the place of quus (Nuuchah-nulth people) in it. For most of the past 500 years of colonization quus did not have a place in contemporary society.

At worst quus were considered an inferior human species and at best they were considered beings of a lower social cast, similar to serfs and the lowest classes of the middle ages in Europe. I will now use a personal experience to illustrate what I think is necessary to take place in the relationship between quus and the larger society, between quus and scientist/academics. In 1993 the government of BC struck a scientific panel that included three Nuuchah-nulth elders and one Nuuchah-nulth academic, myself. The Panel's mandate was to find solutions to the environmental issues in the forest practices Second, and this is the main point, in our discussion with the scientists, we, the Nuuchah-nulth said the same things from the beginning to the end. At first the scientists rejected our terminology. We talked of balance and harmony. We talked about how everything is connected and related. We talked about the health of the forests and waters. Gradually the scientists changed their views and eventually, at the end, accepted all of the words that we used from the very beginning. Our knowledge system is anchored in millennia of experience while scientific knowledge is anchored in a few hundred years of experience.

Third, the successful work of the Scientific Panel demonstrated that it is possible for scientists and Aboriginals to work together. It is a two way process. Scientists do not have all the answers. They cannot. Their methodologies forbid it. Neither do Aboriginal knowledge systems have all the answers. They have no means at present to make technological advances. Aboriginal knowledge systems however, with their strength in the quality of human relationships necessary for successful and difficult decision making processes, can make a nice complement to the scientific process.

Bibliography

Annett, Kevin D.

2001 Hidden From History: The Canadian Holocaust: The Untold Story of the Genocide of Aboriginal Peoples by Church and State in Canada. .

Kevin_annett@hotmail.com: The Truth Commission into Genocide in Canada, 2001.

Arima, E.Y.

1982 The West Coast People: The Nootka of Vancouver Island and Cape Flattery. Victoria, B.C.: British Columbia Provincial Museum.

Atleo, E. Richard

2004 Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview. Vancouver BC: UBC Press.

Barrow, John D.

1990(1991 reprint) Theories of Everything: The Quest For Ultimate Explanation. London: Vintage.

Barzun, Jacques

2000 From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Berry, Thomas

1988 The Dream of the Earth. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

Bunnell, Fred, & Atleo, Richard

1995 The Scientific Panel for Sustainable Forest Practices in Clayoquot Sound: First Nations' Perspectives Relating to Forest Practices Standards in Clayoquot Sound. Victoria, BC: Cortex Consultants Inc.

Capra, Fritjof (Third Edition)

1991 The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism. Great Britain, Glasgow: Caledonian International Book Manufacturing Ltd.

Clutesi, George

1969 Potlatch. Sidney, BC, Canada: Gray's Publishing Ltd.

Cole, Douglas

1983 Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts. Seattle:
University of Washington Press.

Denis, Claude

Hardwick, F. C. (Ed.)

1973 The Helping Hand: The Debt of Alexander Mackenzie and Simon Fraser
to Canadian Indians. Vancouver B.C.: Tautalus Research Limited.

Hodgson, Janet & Kothare, Jay

1990 Vision Quest: Native Spirituality and the Church in Canada. Toronto:
Anglican Book Centre.

Jaenen, C. J.

1987 "Amerindian views of French culture in the seventeenth century." In
Fisher, R. & Coates, K. (Eds.). Out of the Backgroun: Readings on
Canadian Native History, 102-133. Toronto: Copp Clark Pitma Ltd.

Neihardt, John G.

1972 Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala
Sioux.
London: University of Nebraska Press.

Sam, Stanley

1992 Indian Doctor Stories. Unpublished manuscript

Saul, John Ralston

1993 Voltaire's Bastards: The dictatorship of Reason in the West. Toronto:
Penguin Books.

1997 Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth
Century. Toronto: Penguin Books.

If our Elites tell us that the principal forces moving throughout the west are such things as global trade, the money-markets and competition, and that these are beyond anyone's control, well then, the citizen is left in an awkward position. With the ideological stroke of inevitability, we are deprived of the community powers which, particularly over the last two centuries, have permitted us to put an increasingly decent social structure in place. What does this do to the citizens' self-esteem, this return to a single absolute religion in which the forces which determine our future are as out of reach as those of an all-knowing deity? What powers does it leave us, except those old mediaeval crutches—emotion and superstition? (p. 435)

