

Indigenous Nations & Modern States

Introduction

By Rudolph C. Ryser, PhD

The conduct of international relations is one of the oldest of social arts. It demands of individuals who will practice the disciplines of tact, discretion, poise, and finesse a special commitment and understanding of one's own culture and the cultures of other peoples. Other than holding a doctorate in international relations, my true foundation for this work is in my family heritage. I am a descendent of a long chain of Fourth World diplomats—a chain that extends to the 17th century when the kingdoms of France and the United Kingdom first set out to claim trade routes and wealth in the three rivers region of where the Algonquin, Abenaki, Five Nations Confederacy of Haudenosaunee and the Missasaqua nations had long lived. Important branches of my ancestors became cross-cultural diplomats mediating the often differing economic, social, cultural and political interests of the Kingdoms, their business colonies and the interests of nations who at first believed the small numbers of merchants, fur traders, slaves, and indentured servants to be a benefit to them.

My father's family of farmers follows a single strand to one location in Bergdorf, Switzerland, extending well before the Swiss Confederation of the 13th century. My mother's family is rooted in North America, and the Orkadian Islands off the northern coast of Scotland. This family branch contains more than 350 years of diplomatic history, helping to define the relationship between nations in North America, France, England, and eventually Canada and the United States. This history begins with my 17th century grandmother, Isabell Montour.

Isabell Montour (1667-1752) had a French father from Cognac named Pierre Couc and a mother from Weskirini or Montagnais (Algonquin people), the first of the extraordinary diplomats in my family. She and her family were involved in fur trading during the early 1700s to Fort Mackinac and Detroit (then a trading post) and Albany (also a trading post). Her brother Louis Montour (the source of their last name remains a mystery) served as a trade interpreter and negotiator between the French and various Indian nations. When the French Governor discovered that Louis Montour had been negotiating agreements beneficial to the English (in Albany), he directed that a gunman assassinate Louis. Like her brother Louis, Isabell was employed first by the Governor of New France to negotiate trade treaties with the nations in and around the three rivers (Trois-Rivières, as the French referred to the rivers) area. When she learned that the Governor had her brother killed in 1711, she shifted her talents from the French to the English colony of New York, where Governor Robert Hunter was

only too happy to have her extensive knowledge of the Indian nations and multiple languages (she spoke English, German, Algonquin dialects, Haudenosaunee and French) serve his government. She advised preparing speeches and messages to be delivered to sachems representing the various nations. Kenneth Steele and Nancy Lee Rhoden describe my 18th century grandmother in their book *The Human Tradition in Colonial America* as “a complex and multi-faceted individual who moved easily between native and settler communities, facilitating informed communication between different cultures.” She was instrumental as a cross-cultural diplomat in mediating trade arrangements and preventing violent conflicts between the nations and the English. So important were her abilities and successes that the New France Governor tried mightily to acquire her services, but she held a bitter taste in her mouth for the French as the killers of her brother. She was fully committed to working with the nations and the English.

My grandmother Isabell had been married three times. The last was Carondawana (meaning Big Tree) (1670-1729) a warrior for the Oneida who at the age of 59 was killed during a battle with the Catawba during the War that grew out of a treaty between the Five Nations and the Tuscarora between Haudenosaunee considered a threat by the Catawba. She moved to the Susquehanna River Valley and became the most influential resident of Otstuguay after the death of her Oneida husband. Carondawan

and Isabell (while living in Albany) bore a son named Sattilehu. He became known to the British and historians by his English name, Andrew Montour (1710-1774), and as he grew to manhood, he took up his mother’s profession as a cross-cultural diplomat. He learned several languages from his mother (French, English, dialects of Algonquin, Lenape, Shawnee, Oneida, and other languages of the Haudenosaunee). He also traveled with her on numerous diplomatic trips to Philadelphia, Albany, and Detroit.

Sattellihu was my 18th-century grandfather who served as interpreter, negotiator, and mediator for the Six Nations Confederacy, the Delaware Nation. On behalf of the Pennsylvania Colony, he worked with Conrad Weiser, Croghan, and Trent to negotiate trade and peace treaties. He sided with the English during the French and British War (1754-1763), working for the colonial governments of Pennsylvania and Virginia. George Washington, a young volunteer officer for the British, gave him the rank of Captain during the losing battle against the French at Fort Necessity (1754). He was one of the few Indians to travel with General Edward Braddock, the British commander in chief for North America, during the beginning of the French and British War. The Indian nations of the Ohio River Valley placed such trust in Sattellihu as a mediator and interpreter that they made him a sachem in the council. This new role caused the French Governor of New France to consider this a hostile act and subsequently put a bounty on Sattellihu’s head.

Sattellihu's children followed him into diplomacy, with his son John becoming an interpreter and negotiator for Virginia Colony, and his son Nicholas moved to Quebec when the United States was declared. Nicholas Montour helped found the Northwest Company, which eventually merged with the Hudson Bay Company. Nicholas Montour's daughter, Elisabeth Montour, became an interpreter and mediator in negotiating fur trade agreements with the Cree and Misisagwa. Her daughter Charlotte Bird followed in her footsteps to become an interpreter and mediator. She married John Flett, son of an Orkadian father and a Cree mother. John Flett and Charlotte both spoke several native languages as well as English. In 1841, while in their mid-20s and with four children in tow, they were chosen to join the Sinclair Wagon Train traveling the 1700-mile wilderness from the Hudson Bay Company Red River Colony (now Winnipeg, Manitoba) to the Nisqually in the Oregon Territory. John Flett served the Hudson Bay Company and eventually the United States government as an interpreter and mediator, negotiating treaties with nations along the Pacific Coast from 1844 to 1850.

I grew up in southwest Washington State in the Taidnapum-Cowlitz culture, only having a slight inkling of my Cree, Orkadian, Oneida, and Algonquin heritage, and certainly little of my family's historic role in the diplomatic history of North America. I was and am fully Taidnapum in my identity since that is the culture in which I grew to adulthood. My interest in cross-cultural diplomacy came to

me naturally as I entered Indian Affairs as a matter of lifestyle and eventually as a profession working for the Quileute Nation, Quinault Nation, Colville Confederated Tribes, Yakama Nation, and numerous other nations. When asked to explain my profession, I would say, "I translate English into English." By this, I meant I interpreted the ideas and views of native leaders and communicated them to US representatives through written policy papers, proposed legislation, and historical analysis. Indian governments sought my help in negotiations with the United States and later talks with the United Nations and a wide range of governments, including Canada, Germany, Australia, Denmark, China, and Bolivia.

My interest in the political development of indigenous nations grew from my work with the American Indian Policy Review Commission in the mid-1970s. The Commission addressed a wide range of topics, but one very specific topic was handed to me. Commissioners wanted to know what might be the "alternative elective bodies" that Indian nations might form to facilitate their participation in the formulation of US government policies toward those nations. I consulted with Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons, Quinault President Joe DeLaCruz, and many other Indian leaders, as well as historians around the United States. I was puzzled by the tendency of all those with whom I sought advice to describe Indian nations in legal or anthropological terms. Since the question I was handed actually had to do with the political capacity of Indian nations, I was surprised to discover that none of my

informants could offer useful advice except to say that there would be an answer “sometime in the future.” Essentially, that is the report I gave the Commission after months of inquiries.

As I came to the end of my research and while writing my report to the Commission, I had the sudden realization that the question remaining unanswered was the question unasked: What is the present and future political status of Indian nations in relation to each other and in relation to the modern state? It was impossible to determine how Indian nations might form various political structures without knowing the political identity of Indian nations, generally and specifically. At the time, no one knew the answer to this question. Until that point in my thinking, the only definition of Indians was that they “are unique tribes and communities” protected by the United States government under a legally defined Trust Relationship confirmed by the US Supreme Court. I wondered if other peoples in the world had similar relationships to a government, and I could find none. I guessed, “Indian tribes are truly unique.” I was wrong.

It seemed to me that the question about “alternative elective bodies” raised by the American Indian Policy Review Commission was left unanswered as a result of my report. It proved to be only a “starter question.” “What is the political relationship between Indian nations and the United States,” I began to ask as the added question. I probed the question historically and legally and found that nowhere in the literature (either original documents or published works) did anything say that Indian nations had become

part of the US federal structure—they were, indeed, part of the United States of America. All I could find, other than writers who assumed Indian nations were part of the US, was that Indian nations had treaties that placed many (but not all) Indian nations under “the protection” of the US government, but not one treaty ever directly or indirectly suggested Indian nations would be part of the United States. My conclusion was that “Indian nations and their territories remain politically outside the political structure of the United States of America.”

I examined relations between Indian peoples and Canada and found the same political condition: Indian nations remained outside Canada’s political structure. In Australia, Mexico, and countries worldwide, I found indigenous peoples remaining outside the political structures of federated and unitary countries. However, they were “assumed to be under the control of the state.” There emerged in my mind a pattern suggesting that American Indians, Indians in Canada and in Mexico, and indigenous peoples in most countries in the world had fallen into a kind of political stasis resulting from colonial globalization begun in the early 15th century. Indigenous peoples were not defined as political communities able to engage in economic, social, and political intercourse on the same level as other peoples. Indigenous peoples were in the 1970s still defined by 19th-century social sciences as “backward” human groupings that would disappear into the dustbin of history. Indigenous peoples, so the prevailing thought supposed, had been replaced by advanced societies, and they were, from that viewpoint, irrelevant.

Throughout the 1970s, I persisted in my drive to understand indigenous nations' political or future political identities even though I lacked the vocabulary to discuss the topic thoroughly. Two things began to change how I was to approach the problem I had defined: 1.) The designation of a social scientist, Martinez Cobo, by the UN Human Rights Counsel to "inquire into the situation of the rights of indigenous populations," and 2.) my discovery of and friendship with Bernard (Barney) Q. Nietschmann, a remarkable geographer at the University of California in Berkeley, California. The UN inquiry into the situation of indigenous populations opened the door for the International Indian Treaty Council in the United States, the National Indian Brotherhood in Canada, and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples to step into the international arena as developing participants in a dialogue that would begin to create a new vocabulary around the subject of "who and what" are indigenous peoples. I joined in the process.

My friendship with Barney was the beginning of a personal dialogue where two men searched for a common language to explain events in the world (the War between the Miskito, Sumo, and Rama and the Nicaraguan government for Barney, and the political identity question for me). Barney and I conducted weekly "telephone seminars" from our homes (he in Berkeley, California, and me in Lynnwood, Washington). We talked at length about specific political and strategic problems faced by indigenous peoples in Nicaragua and in the United States. Soon our discussions widened to include the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, Papua peoples in Indonesia's

West Papua, Chakma in southeastern Bangladesh, Sami in Sweden and Norway, Catalans in Spain, Igbo in Nigeria, and Maya in Belize. We both wrote papers to each other and wondered if there weren't more people we could draw into the dialogue. For over three years, there were but a few men and women in the world we searched for who would or could engage in our discussions.

Barney and I resolved, after several years of meetings, discussions and traveling to different nations in the world together that we should co-write a book that would spell out what we had learned about indigenous nations' political and cultural identities and how indigenous nations remained vital and dynamic relations between peoples. Barney and I concluded that political identity is a product of having a map that describes where your nation is located and results from the conduct of relations with other nations (and in the modern era, with states). In other words, political identity for indigenous peoples is a consequence of understanding indigenous nations' geopolitical positions and activities. A nation assumes a political identity recognized by other nations and states and becomes a political status in relation to other nations and states. I decided that our studies and revelations about the geopolitical character of indigenous nations were a system of thought worthy of a name: Fourth World Geopolitics.

Though Barney wrote copiously, as did I in the 1980s, neither of us could settle on how to write a book about what we called a "moving target." The more we learned about more indigenous nations, the more things seemed to change. No

sooner had we written about one nation and its political decisions and actions, then new choices and actions would present themselves. We continued to observe and write about events as they unfolded in short essays and articles. After more than twenty years of working together and moving toward writing a book, Barney fell ill with esophageal cancer, and within a short time, he died in 2000. His passing was a tremendous personal loss to me, and that loss was compounded when, within months, his wife, Anje, also fell ill and died.

I began this inquiry alone with my thoughts, and now, more than thirty-five years later, many thousands of miles traveling and many thousands of hours closely observing indigenous nations worldwide, I believe I understand what is occurring with the political identity and development of indigenous nations. I now see that indigenous nations are evolving new political forms and many forms of political status, and they are elevating their political importance through interactions with other nations and states' governments. The best way to discuss my conclusions is in this book, a work that heavily depends on Barney Nietschmann's thoughtful, creative, and concise thinking.

It is the duty of an individual engaged in international relations to appreciate and advocate his or her people's global view and be sensitive to the global view of one's neighbor.

In a world of thousands of nations, peoples occupy eco-niches on virtually every continent except Antarctica. Distinct human communities

participate in a global symphony of cultural differences. They are isolated and separate yet interrelated and unified. When separate and isolated human communities encounter one another and begin to carry on relations, structured international relations become an obvious need to a community. At the very beginning of human societies and collectivities, the art of international relations became a human institution- when distinct nations came into contact.

Ancient art as it is, the practice of international relations is a recent vocation arising in the 13th century with the emergence of the Roman Catholic Church as the dominant political reality in Europe (Thompson, 1994 pp. 55-57). The Romans, the Greeks, the Catalans, Friesians, Saxons, the Flemish, and many others had earlier practiced international relations in Europe. The Phoenicians, Israelites, Palestinians, Assyrians, and Persians were, of course, nations engaged in relations with their neighbors, too. In Asia, the Han of China, Mongols, Manchurians, Tibetans, Pathan, Japanese, Koreans, Hmong, Shan, and numerous other nations have engaged in the practice of international relations for thousands of years.

In Africa, the Nubians, Egyptians, Maasai, Zulu, Gambians, Zimbabweans, Ghanaians, and Berber- among the hundreds of nations- engaged in complex relations between themselves and neighboring nations for thousands of years before the 13th century. In other parts of the world, unknown to the Europeans before the sixteenth century, systematic relations between

nations had become well-developed over several thousand years. In the Americas, the Mixtec, Haida, Cree, Hopi, Mapuché, Wampanoag, Maya, Haudenosaunee, Quechua, and other nations conducted economic, social, political, and cultural relations with their neighbors. Between the hundreds of nations in Melanesia and island nations in the oceans, vast distances were no obstacle to international relations. The point I believe I am making is that rules of conduct have been evolving due to contact between nations for millennia, and virtually all nations share in experience and responsibility for the art of international relations. Despite this global character of international practices, in the modern era, we have become wholly dependent on one very limited conception of international relations (big power hegemonic control), and those ideas were born from the experience of nations in Europe largely in the 17th century.

I do not wish to cast European domination of international relations as good or bad because I do not want to discuss the moral question in the following pages. However, I wish to point out the limitations of Eurocentric conceptions of international relations and emphasize the discussion of international relations, its theory, and its application within a broader conceptual context. By including Eurocentric conceptions of international relations in a global context, I describe the broad outlines of a new general theory of international relations and *new modalities and institutions for international collaboration to resolve disputes between nations*

and between nations and states—to affirm the political identity and status of indigenous nations.

Where we are standing decides our point of view.

In the following chapters, I offer a discussion about international relations from the Fourth World perspective, which may seem unfamiliar. What I mean by this suggestion is that the conventional wisdom in politics is that one can achieve more by going with the tide of opinion than going against it. Mine is not the conventional wisdom. I bring to the discussion of international relations a viewpoint that comes from my heritage, the vocation of my ancestors as cross-cultural diplomats and many years of working in the Fourth World.

Throughout the text, I draw on a generation of personal experience in Indian Affairs in the United States and a lifetime of experiences. Overlapping these experiences is thirty years of experience in international relations, representing nations in the growing debate over the position of Fourth World nations in international affairs. My analysis of what is a “nation” and how nations interact with each other and with states is informed by my direct participation in political activities and extensive research in connection with many Fourth World nations throughout the world. The most fundamental perspective is informed by knowledge given to me through the teachings of many throughout Indian Country in North America.

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