

The Nez Perces' Relationship To Their Land

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CENTRAL to understanding any aspect of the way of life of the Nez Perce Indian Nation is an understanding of their integral relationship to their country. The Nez Perce culture is not a body of abstract ideas; it is a way of life, and at the center of that way of life is the earth.

The lands of the Nez Perces lay in what is presently Northeastern Oregon, and in Southeastern Washington and West Central Idaho as well, near the lands of their neighbors, the Cayuse, Walla-Walla, Yakima, Umatilla, and Palouse nations. This was the country of the Ne-mepu, the name by which the Nez Perces call themselves.⁽¹⁾ They were part of their land in a way that European and Euroamericans did not, and still generally do not, comprehend.

This lack of comprehension (where it is not a deliberate excuse for dealing arbitrarily with Indian lands) results from the basic difference in the way the European and the American Indian peoples look at the land.

First, briefly consider the European way of regarding lands, transferred to this continent through immigration and conquest. When one of European background speaks of the earth, he calls it "land," and to him land is a resource to be used as he chooses. Land equals "property," and property is assigned a value, according to the equivalent amount of goods or money it can be traded or sold for. Man is the owner of the land, and as owner he decides how the land is used, what it grows, and assumes the right to sell or trade his parcel of land to others whenever he chooses, provided he can secure the price he thinks it is worth. Although all people may become sentimentally attached to a given locale, permanent tenancy has never been consistent with the European idea of property. Whenever another place will serve a man's uses better than his present location, he is usually willing to put sentiment aside and move.

The Nez Perce way of regarding lands (like the way of most Indian peoples) differs entirely from the European way. When a Nez Perce speaks of the land, according to the traditional concepts of his people, he speaks of the earth. The earth itself has meaning. It is the earth that gives special meaning to the lives of the people.

Rather than being a resource for man's use, the earth is the source of all life and provides all man's needs. Man does not use the land to create products that fulfill his wants; he gathers what the earth freely provides.

A Nez Perce valued the earth not for what it represented in goods or money, but for its being the source of his life and providing all he needed. He did not own the land; rather he belonged to a particular part of the earth, and owed a responsibility to it. Belonging to the place of his birth, he did not feel free to exchange it for another place. He did not desire to abandon his responsibility to his country.

The earth was the mother of all life, and the mother of the people. It was as the Cayuse leader Stachas told Governor Isaac Stevens at the 1855 Treaty Council: "This is our mother this country, as if we drew our living from her."⁽²⁾ Owhi, a Yakima, said at this council, "It is the earth that is our parent. . . ." He also said, "God made our bodies from the earth. . . . Shall I give the lands that are a part of my body?"⁽³⁾ This close relationship between man and the earth was explained quite clearly by Richard Halfmoon, of Lapwai, Idaho, during an interview in August, 1970. Speaking of the way in which the Nez Perces had traditionally been associated with the earth, Mr. Halfmoon said, "Man comes from the earth, and at his death he returns to it," likening this to a literal acceptance of the expression in the Christian Bible: "Dust thou art, to dust returneth."⁽⁴⁾

The earth, like a mother, cares for the people. The Cayuse Tautau attempted to explain this relationship to the Stevens commission (clearly, an unreceptive audience). Tautau said,

"The Earth says, that God tells me to take care of the Indians on this earth: the Earth says . . . feed them right. God named the roots that he should feed the Indians on: the water speaks the same way: God says feed the Indians upon the earth: the grass says the same thing: feed the horses and cattle . . . the Earth and water and grass says God has placed me here to produce all that grows upon me, the trees, fruit, etc."⁽⁵⁾

Owhi said, "God gave us day and night, the night to rest

in, and the day to see, and that as long as the earth shall last, he gave us the morning with our breath; and so he takes care of us on this earth. . . ."⁽⁶⁾

That the earth cannot be equated to material items, or to money, was well expressed by Peopeo Moxmox, the Walla-Walla, who said, "Goods and the Earth are not equal; goods are for using on the Earth. I do not know where they have given lands for goods."⁽⁷⁾ Twenty-one years later, in a meeting with a commission from Washington D. C. sent to discuss the Wallowa country, Joseph, leader of the Walwama Band of the Nez Perces, said,

"Do not misunderstand me, but understand me fully with reference to my affection for the land. I never said that the land was mine to do with as I chose. The one who has the right to dispose of it is the one who created it. I claim a right to live on my land, and accord you the privilege to live on yours."⁽⁸⁾

Not only do Joseph's words point out that man does not have a right to sell the land; they also clearly explain that man is not the owner of the land.

A Nez Perce believed that he was placed on a particular portion of the earth—he and the others of his band—and that he belonged to that place. He felt as Owhi felt: as Owhi explained to General Palmer at the 1855 Treaty Council, "God looked one way and then the other and named our lands for us to take care of. . . . God named this land to us. . . ."⁽⁹⁾ Looking Glass, the great Nez Perce leader from the Asotin area, said also, "I am already named from above, by the Supreme Being, my heart is with the country I live upon and head. . . ."⁽¹⁰⁾

Within the Nez Perce Nation there were numerous bands, composed of villages in sheltered canyons where families made their permanent homes, where they always lived during the winter and where they returned from fishing, root harvesting, and hunting. The areas occupied in and around these canyons and on the surrounding prairies were the lands of each band, and the association of particular areas with particular bands was recognized by other Nez Perces and by all the tribes of the region. These were their homelands. As Mr. Halfmoon explained, no person "owned the earth," but people of a group had the privilege of living on a portion of the earth and there they were provided by the earth with the fish and game, roots and berries, that fed, sheltered and clothed them.⁽¹¹⁾ The Nez Perces felt very strongly about remaining where they and their forefathers were born. As Joseph once tried to explain to the Lapwai agent, John Monteith, "Our fathers were born here. Here they lived, here they died, here are their graves. We will never leave them." Of his homeland, Joseph

said, "I love that land more than all the rest of the world."⁽¹²⁾

The Nez Perce feeling for the land—of coming from and being of the earth—was not an abstract concept superimposed on their daily lives. There was no separation of concept from reality. The Nez Perce way of life conformed to the nature of the land where they lived and depended upon the seasons. Deward E. Walker, who has made a detailed study of certain social aspects of Nez Perce life, has said, ". . . aboriginal Nez Perce social organization was . . . strongly influenced by the biophysical environment."⁽¹³⁾ It is more true to say that the Nez Perce way of life—economically, socially, and spiritually—grew out of and remained part of that particular part of the earth which was their home.

Knowing the earth as their mother and accepting with gratitude the roots growing in the prairies, the trout and salmon in the streams, and the game that likewise live from the earth, the Nez Perces practised conservation, never thoughtlessly wasting what the earth generously provided. They killed only sufficient game and took only enough fish to supply fresh meat and to dry for use in the winter and spring seasons. Game was not killed during mating season, nor fish caught during spawning time.⁽¹⁴⁾ Knowing how to use all that was provided, the women made clothing from deer and other smaller animal skins, robes and lodge covers from the hides of the buffalo. From the horns of the buffalo, they carved spoons. The curled horn of the mountain sheep, whose hide made the finest dresses,⁽¹⁵⁾ might appear merely decorative; however, with great effort and patience, Nez Perce men steamed and straightened the horn, then from it formed a bow. They backed the horn bow with deer sinew, using the boiled blood of the sturgeon or the sticky material scraped from the inside of "the winter steelhead salmon" as glue. This bow was an excellent one which other tribes were anxious to trade for.⁽¹⁶⁾

Through such intimate knowledge and skilled adaptation of the materials of their environment, the Nez Perces and their ancestors lived in their country for generations—dating back perhaps 8,000 years—and did not wear out the land or break the circle of growth, death, and new growth.

That the Nez Perces knew the earth and lived according to that knowledge is apparent in the names they gave to the months of the year. The months are named after nature.⁽¹⁷⁾ Each is a season which affected the lives and activities of the people.*

The new cycle of the Nez Perce year begins in Latital, "blooming time," when the earliest blossoms appear after the hard, cold months of We loo poop, the time of "freezing, biting zero weather accompanied by

strong wind," and Alatemal, the "fire needed season" when "flint and rotten wood," which was used to make fire, became damp, and some people had to borrow these things from their neighbors. After Latital, and the first flowers, comes Ka'keh'thall, the time when the first roots, kah-keet, were dug. This month is followed by Uppa'aul' when kous was dug and made into a "brick loaf called uppah."⁽¹⁸⁾ About this time the annual Keh-eh-yuit, or "first fruits ceremony," was held.⁽¹⁹⁾ 'Islal*, the next month, signifies the time when the Nez Perce people, following the seasonal changes in their country, left their valley homes and moved to temporary camps in the upper prairies; this was the time of "later digging on higher places" when the root grounds "in lower places dried up and (became) overripe."⁽²⁰⁾

The numerous rivers and creeks in the Nez Perces' country were essential to them. They knew these waters as well as they knew the land. After the month 'Islal came Kuaigzal, the "blueback season" when "bluebacks (kho'k'h'tseh went up the creeks to the heads of the streams." The next month, Tie'yah', mid-summer, had a second name, Wa'wah ma'ikhall, which is the "time of spawning" at the "heads of rivers." This month was followed by Uauam-aikal (also: Pe'kun ma'i khall) when "fish (were travelling) the rivers for winter holes." Wa wah ma'ikhall and Uauam-aikal (or Pe'kun ma'i khall) indicated where to find fish: in the shallows as spawning season approached and after that, in deep water.⁽²¹⁾ It was important to know where the best fishing could be found because the Nez Perce people did not fish for sport, but for food.

When the fish head for winter holes, this signals an approaching change in seasons. Hope'lalh, "tamarack shedding needles," when "one can see the golden color up in the mountains," is a sign from the earth, telling the people that cold weather is coming.* Saghual is "fall season" when leaves fall, there is snow in the mountains, and rain in the valleys. This was the time for the people to return to their homes to prepare for winter. Ha'vo 'khohu (also: Eekoi or Aluzal), "the season of the growing of the little calf," is a cold time, even in the lowlands. It is also the season when elk calves are "starting to form in their mothers' wombs."⁽²²⁾ As the old life is ending, the new is beginning.

The beliefs of the Nez Perces before the abstractness of Christianity was introduced by missionaries, grew out of and expressed their closeness to the earth. Each per-

*NOTE: As Mr. Halfmoon has explained, there is no correct way of spelling Nez Perce words. Regarding the names of the months and the roots, Mr. Halfmoon and Mrs. Wilson have in some cases given different spelling. The spelling used in this paper is generally the one which seems closest to the pronunciation.

son, while a child, made the "wayakin," or "quest," for a guardian spirit, going alone to a quiet place to fast and wait. The "wayakin," or guardian, was always the spirit of some being in the person's surroundings—the grizzly bear or coyote, a mountain, lightning, or perhaps the sun or moon.⁽²³⁾ For generations the Nez Perces had carefully observed and respected all aspects of nature. They knew that each animal and bird, each mountain and lake, as well as the sun and moon, possessed special qualities. When someone received his or her wayakin, he acquired the strengths and weaknesses of his guardian. The belief in the wayakin expressed and strengthened the Nez Perces' relationship to the earth. It was an individual acceptance of the earth as mother.

The belief that the earth was the mother of all life and that man should respect the earth was central to the E-mamu-ce-lipt religion of the Nez Perces. Tuhulhulsote, a Nez Perce civil and religious leader in the 1870's, attempted to explain this to U. S. Army General O. O. Howard. Tuhulhulsote said, ". . . I belong to the land out of which I came. The earth is my mother."⁽²⁴⁾ These beliefs were a direct expression of the Nez Perces' way of life.

The relationship of the Nez Perce Nation to their lands was a realistic and respectful relationship. The basic fact that all life ultimately comes from the earth and that the continuity of life lies in the earth's regenerative power is as true today as it was when Joseph said of the land: "'As it was created it was finished with power. There is nothing that should supersede it. There is nothing which can outstrip it. It is clothed with fruitfulness.'"⁽²⁵⁾

Footnotes

- 1: Richard A. Halfmoon, Interview, August 27-29, 1970. Lapwai, Idaho.
- 2: from "a True copy of the Record of the official proceedings at the Council in the Walla Walla Valley, held jointly by Isaac I. Stevens Gov. & Supt. W. T. and Joel Palmer Supt. Indian Affairs O. T. on the part of the United States with the Tribes of Indians named in the Treaties made at that Council, June 9th and 11th, 1855." (hereafter called 1855 Treaty Journal.)
- 3: 1855 Treaty Journal.
- 4: Richard Halfmoon Interview.

*This season apparently had two different names: 'Islal also, Apaal or Apam) being one name and Tus'te ma sa' thall being the other. The difference in meaning is not clear. Some of the words from the older dictionaries, as Mr. Halfmoon has explained, are no longer in use.

*This season was also known as Pikunm-aikal, where the previous season was called Uauam-aikal.

- 5: 1855 Treaty Journal.
- 6: 1855 Treaty Journal.
- 7: 1855 Treaty Journal.
- 8: Chief Joseph, quoted in Albert Britt. *Great Indian Chiefs*. Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1969, p. 264.
- 9: 1855 Treaty Journal.
- 10: 1855 Treaty Journal.
- 11: Richard Halfmoon Interview.
- 12: Chief Joseph. "Chief Joseph's Own Story." Seattle: The Shorey Book Store, Facsimile Reproduction, 1968. (reprinted from *North American Review*, April, 1879, and "Northwestern Fights and Fighters," by Cyrus Townsend Brady, and with permission of the Great Northern Railroad.), p. 15.
- 13: Deward E. Walker. *Conflict and Schism in Nez Percé Acculturation*. Pullman, Wash.: Washington State University Press, 1968, p. 9.
- 14: Richard Halfmoon Interview.
- 15: Elizabeth P. Wilson, Interview, August 28, 1970. Kamiah, Idaho.
- 16: Theodora Picard. "Some Historical Backgrounds of the Nez Perce Nation," *These Are the Nez Perce Indian Nation*, ed. Joseph J. S. Feathers. Article ed. by Merlyn C. Deinhart. Lewiston, Idaho: Lewis-Clark Normal Press, 1970, p. 22.
- 17: Elizabeth Wilson Interview.
- 18: Elizabeth Wilson Interview.
- 19: Walker, *Conflict and Schism . . .*, p. 28.
- 20: Elizabeth P. Wilson, Letter, Kamiah, Idaho: October 5, 1970.
- 21: Elizabeth Wilson, Letter.
- 22: Elizabeth Wilson, Letter.
- 23: Walker, *Conflict and Schism . . .*, pp. 18-19.
- 24: Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, p. 500.
- 25: Chief Joseph, quoted in Britt, *Great Indian Chiefs*, p. 265.

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