

themselves torn
from their roots and made prey to the surrounding evils. Just a glimpse at the
magnitude
of the problem is gained from the realisation that since 1900, 270 Indian
tribes of Brazil
have completely disappeared.

This has happened to a great many, but not to all of them. For instance, there
was
never any great suffering for the indigenous people of Papua New Guinea, and
they still
possess their lands. Others have risen up in spite of unfavourable conditions,
found good
jobs, built sound families and have become successful. Also, one must not make
the mistake
of assuming they are all of one kind. They come in variations of all degrees,
both
physically, intellectually, spiritually and morally. Some are more perfect,
some are less
perfect — as all humans are.

Just as is the case with everyone else, there are aberrations in the pasts of
indigenous peoples. In Australia for example, palaeo-botanist Mary White[1]
explains how they made vast changes to the flora and fauna of the countryside
through the practice of
burning off the bushland. Many species were lost as a result of this custom.
Chronicler of
Aboriginal lore in the early part of the century, Daisy Bates[2] describes how
she came across cannibalism and mothers who ate their own babies. Indigenous
people need not be
idolised out of all proportion, but like everyone else, they have legitimate
needs and
rights.

Now, in many parts of the world indigenous people are awakening to their
plight, their
voices are being raised, strident, as never before, asking for their own
rights, for land
or compensation, for a respected and recognised place.

For all its progress, the world is itself at this time in a state of turmoil,
its
peoples discovering their lives rocked by upheaval and anarchy, its physical
environment
under threat of damage from pollution and the mindless advance of technology.
What does
the world need, at this time?

In the welter of our new world, as we build new structures, as new marvels come

to
light, new associations come into being, and as we restore physical and
spiritual health
to the world, are these people still to be largely ignored, lost and forgotten?
Is there
nothing for them but to succumb, and join with western ways and technology in
order to
make themselves count? Or is there, perhaps, a mysterious and meaningful part
which they
can play/ Might there not be, springing from their links with the ancient past,
some
special contribution which they could make? After all, this is a time for a new
religion
to be built, a new way of life to take hold.

To fill in a background, let's look briefly then, at some things which they
have in
common, and which make them distinctive.

In the past indigenous people have all had land. To some of them it came as a
surprise
that individuals could exclusively possess land. It was their shared domain,
for all to
use and benefit from. Tribes had various rights in certain lands. In the
beginning, with
the arrival of the first settlers, the Australian Aborigines never dreamt that
they could
be dispossessed. They thought the settlers would come and go, or share the land
as they
themselves did.[3]

People living in lush jungles, even in harsh desert territories or ice covered
lands,
learned how to wisely manage the sources of their food supply. Often they were
nomadic or
semi-nomadic, so that they could adjust. They were intimately acquainted with
many species
of plant and animal life, and had garnered the knowledge of preceding
generations. So, in
spite of conditions which might have appeared taxing and strenuous, they could
live on,
relaxed and confident.

Their skills were many and over the different countries, covered a vast span of
subjects. The people of the north western Amazon, in Columbia, for example, had
a highly
intellectual appreciation of the brain and its capacity. From experience and
observation
they knew that its various parts affected various abilities, and they

distinguished between the right and left sides of the brain. Kayapo Indians, also of the Amazon knew how to cultivate wild plants of the jungle, side by side with their subsistence crops. Some species would attract certain kinds of game for them. And these gardens would be strung along their meandering paths, to be found at times of need. The Bushmen of southern Africa possessed an extraordinary knowledge of animal physiology, observed carefully in scientific detail.[4] The people of the Aleutian Islands off Alaska knew how to make kayaks of bone and skin, and of a design which would travel fast on the open ocean. Some people are now trying to resurrect and rediscover this design, to improve modern boat building.[5] The Polynesian people used amazing navigational skills to voyage over vast reaches of the Pacific. These are some examples of the knowledge of these people.

With the exploitation of forests, the confiscation of land, the pollution of rivers, and with the disappearance of tribes, their assimilation into different societies and ways of life, their attraction to cities, the disaffection of their young people, traditional knowledge is disappearing at a disturbing rate. Elders and wise men who possess that knowledge are dying out, unable to pass it on, and a vast storehouse of ancient knowledge will have vanished before the world is aware of it.

Indigenous peoples have their own languages. Many of these languages were never written down, but were handed down through song-cycles and rituals and verbal explanations. Time Magazine[6] reports that 3000 of the world's 6000 languages will not last because children no longer speak them. This also means that much cultural and traditional knowledge, explained in the vocabulary of these languages, will be lost. The knowledge of medicinal plants, for instance, is recorded in these languages.

The culture of many indigenous peoples fosters a special attitude towards food, possessions and things of this world. Amongst most of them, a system of reciprocity and

sharing exists, and many do not collect goods or store them for the future. This system of sharing is indeed one of the most endearing aspects of indigenous cultures. From babyhood they are reared to have this understanding. An Aboriginal lullaby of the Euahlayi tribe, recorded by K.L. Parker[7] reveals this:

"Give to me, Baby
Give to her, Baby
Give to him, Baby
Give to one, Baby
Give to all, Baby."

At the backbone of the indigenous peoples, as their guide and source of wisdom, lies their myth and legend, their oral tradition, handed down from generation to generation. Through myths a dialogue between the human species and the Creative Power develops, and a special relationship with the rest of creation.

In his study of Australian Aboriginal songs and myths, Strehlow[8] says that the myths are easier to understand than the songs. It is the songs, he says, "that best reveal this intimate fusion of the world that can be perceived by the senses with this other world of the spirit." The Aboriginal songs, however, are generally very difficult to translate, and require extensive commentaries if their rich imagery and compressed phraseology is to be fully appreciated.' He said that many songs were poetry in their own right, and could not be adequately translated. The function of acting and dancing then, was to follow on and portray in detail descriptions of the personages in the songs and myths.

Collector and preserver of original Australian Aboriginal myths, Roland Robinson,[9] explains further that:

"the themes of aboriginal mythology all stem from, and serve to illustrate, the eternal source and meaning of the Spirit and of Life. It is the source of a pattern of

social behaviour in harmony with the Earth-Mother that is as moral and law-giving as our own religious concepts."

From their mythical origins a wealth of beautiful art has flowed forth from indigenous peoples. This, at least is highly valued in the world today, for its originality, its earthiness and its compact blending of meaning. Whereas modern western art and the performing arts seem to have become more and more detached from their mythical origins, and hardly reflect the deep human values and spiritual conditions they once used to.

Now let us go back in history and see how thought in the civilized world has developed.

It is the world of thought which shapes the path of mankind, therefore that is where we must look for a place for the indigenous peoples.

The progress of mankind took a giant leap forward with the introduction of Christianity and Islam, and there was an efflorescence of many kinds of knowledge, culture and art.

Morals and high standards were renewed. And the glory of man and his creation became reflected in beautiful paintings like Michelangelo's, in the Sistine Chapel of St Peters in Rome.

Discoveries in the field of science came with their own perspective. Through the religions, man had understood that he occupied the centre stage, and around him all things revolved. Then came discoveries of Copernicus and much later Darwin, describing the nature of the universe and evolution, and showing that man was part of a large and complex system, and perhaps was merely a small component within it.

In 1687, Newton set the pattern of a new world view with the principles and laws of physics which he had discovered. Danah Zohar,[10] author of *The Quantum Self*, graphically explains the change that occurred in the thinking of the western world:

"Things moved because they followed rules that were fixed and determined, cold silence pervaded the once teeming heavens. Human beings and their struggles, the whole of

consciousness and life itself, were irrelevant to the workings of the vast universal machine."

The old Latin and Greek mythologies, biblical legends, were no longer of central importance. New champions of thought arose, and historian Arnold Toynbee[11] writes,

"The fields in which these champions of Modern Western achievements were victorious were physical science, technology, and philosophy."

The names of Einstein, Marx, Kant and many others come to mind, the people who brought into being powerful theories which influenced mankind and charted its course.

However many astonishing discoveries they made and marvels of nature and the universe

they unravelled, scientists are still finding that reality itself is a puzzle, and there

is no theory which seems to fit it all. Quantum mechanics made a notable advance and

includes the observer in its scheme of explanation. It also generated a paradox contradicting the theory of relativity. The Chaos Theory describes perplexing patterns in

randomness. Every discovery certainly tries to adhere to truth, and anything which does not conform to truth cannot endure the examination of science or command the respect of

mankind in this time. As the scientist Paul Davies[12] has said, however, the search for a

"Theory of Everything" has become "something of a holy grail" for physicists, but one that, like the grail, appears endlessly elusive.

Nowadays we have learned to worry about the unexpected consequences of the application

of half understood scientific developments. Science itself is looking less complete, less

reliable than it was. Some scientists have begun the process of reconciling their rigorous

ways of thought with the ancient myths and principles.

Chemist James Lovelock[13] produced an interesting hypothesis, which took mankind round

yet another bend. His theory was that the earth and its envelope of atmosphere is a living

system, all the animate and inanimate parts of it linked together in a harmonious synergy.

So he was able to give it a name, Gaia. It was like the discovery of a new beauty, a new

perfection in creation, with the stamp of scientific recognition.

Paul Davies in his recent book *The Mind of God*, [14] carries this a step further and

finds a meaningful place for the human species in creation. He writes,

"The apparent 'fine-tuning' of the laws of nature, necessary if conscious life is

to evolve in the universe then carries the clear implication that God has designed the

universe so as to permit such life and consciousness to emerge. It would mean that our own

existence in the universe formed a central part of God's plan."

This is but a fleeting glimpse at the development of science. However, it is necessary

to include it, as science plays an undeniable role in shaping the whole orientation and

thinking of mankind. Even those of us who are not involved in this field are at a deep

level influenced by these currents of thought, and our view of the cosmos and life on

earth is affected by them.

With the advance of many astonishing and powerful technologies at this time, it is

becoming clear to us as never before that our dear Gaia, our Mother Earth, is suffering

from this so-called progress. Scientists the world over are acknowledging that there are

real dangers to the environment, and marked signs of deterioration. Passionate exponent of

impending environmental dangers, American vice-president Al Gore [15], says that this present

generation may not leave a healthy earth for its children and grandchildren.

Al Gore sees the problem as not so much our effect on the environment as our relationship with the environment. It is obvious that something is wrong with the way we

are living, thinking and acting. It is not some distant volcano about to tip the balance,

it is what we are actually doing that is causing these effects. Gore [16]

writes: "...the real solution will be found in reinventing and finally healing the

relationship between civilisation and the earth." He adds, "the key changes will

involve new ways of thinking about the relationship itself." What are we actually

seeing or not seeing, and how do we relate to the world around us?

World society is not in a healthy state either. Every news bulletin confirms

its

perilous condition. Gore quotes Philosopher Ivan Illich,[17] "What has changed is that our common sense has begun searching for a language to speak about the shadow of our future shows."

To the Bahá'ís it is clear that the Bahá'í Faith supplies the direction to follow in the healing of the planet and its peoples. It also supplies the answers to scientists, and explains that science and religion are the two necessary paths to a true balance. The question we are asking is, do the indigenous people have a special role in bringing about this necessary change in mankind's relationship to reality?

The roots of indigenous people have brought them into close association with the lands where they live. They have been as careful as scientists in their observations of the paths and patterns of ecology surrounding them. Their knowledge is often detailed and sound, though adapted to perception and imagination, as anthropologist Levi-Strauss[18] states. The Desana of Colombia,[19] for instance, refer to the energy flow from the sun and its support of the organisms in nature (a network of energy pathways), as a "current" or "a circle or flow of creative and transformative feminine power".

However, instead of viewing each phenomenon as an isolated feature, or as an abstract set of patterns, or the mere operation of natural laws and rules, most indigenous people see all things, themselves included, as though arranged in a web of interconnections, and they have felt a deep attraction and relationship with all the forms of life. Not only has there been a respect for Mother Earth as a sacred entity, but also a sense of responsibility for the welfare of her creatures.

This is not merely the result of necessity and the struggle for survival, but is a deeply embedded attitude, or manner of being, passed down from generation to generation from the reservoir of wisdom contained in myths and legend and sacred instruction. In their book *The Wisdom of the Elders*,[20] Knudtson and Suzuki write, "We might at least explore the nature-wisdom of traditions that refuse to separate human knowledge

about

nature from human obligations to maintain nature's balances."

Toynbee[21] writes, "...human love needs to be extended to include all components of the biosphere, inanimate as well as animate".

It is here that we need to glance more closely at the background of myths supporting indigenous people. In his book *The Power of Myth*[22] Joseph Campbell, a world authority on myths and belief, states,

"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we can actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what it's all finally about, and that's what these clues (myths) help us to find within ourselves."

He further explains, "Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life." From these myths he says comes "information of a deep, rich, life-vivifying sort".

On the ecological plane, ethnobotanist Darryl Posey[23] writes that Native "myth has not seriously been studied as a transmitter of encoded ecological knowledge".

Through their myths and oral traditions indigenous peoples, in particular their elders, their wise men, their healers, shamans, medicine men, came to develop a view of life that was not simply confined to their own surroundings and necessities, but rather was a cosmic perspective of life as a whole. "*The Native Mind*", write Knudston and Suzuki, "yearns to envelop the totality of the world and brings a totality of mental capacities, beyond cool reason, to the task." The expression and salutation of Native American Indians "*All my relations*", conveys their reverential and all inclusive attitude towards Mother Earth and her inhabitants.

Does this conform with Gore's advice that we adopt a long-range global perspective?

That we develop a new relationship with the creation, a new language? Could

this be more,
could it be the healing balm, the missing holy grail which perhaps these
indigenous
scientists have glimpsed all along. And now it is embodied once again in the
Writings of
Bahá'u'lláh, and especially in His teaching of the oneness of mankind, and
the unity of
mankind as being the first step in the solution of mankind's problems. One of
the aspects
of the unity of mankind is that it involves bringing the indigenous peoples
into full
co-operation and participation, in restoring to them their rightful and
respected place,
amongst the rest of mankind

David Suzuki[24] exhorts us, "we must recreate for ourselves a sense of place
within
the biosphere that is steeped in humility and reverence for all other life". It
is
here, as equals and partners in the repair of this planet and its life, that
indigenous
people have the potential to make an utterly distinctive and essential
contribution. They
will assist mankind to develop an overall change of mind.

Notes

1. Mary E. White, *The Greening of Gondwana* (Reed Books, Sydney, 1986) at 45, 47; see also, Mary E. White, *The Bulletin*. (Dec. 29, 1992 - Jan. 5, 1993)
2. Daisy Bates, *The Passing of the Aborigines* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1947) at 159, 172.
- 3 Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier* (Penguin Books, Victoria, 1990) at 64-6.5.
4. Peter Knudston & David Suzuki, *Wisdom of the Elders* (Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1992).
5. *Time Magazine* (September 23, 1991) at 60.
6. *ibid.*, at 58-59.
7. Quoted in Reynolds, above, note 3.
8. T.G.H. Strehlow, *Forward to The Feathered Serpent*, Edwards & Shaw, Sydney, 1956.
9. Roland Robinson, *ibid* at XIV

10. Danah Zoharm, *The Quantum Self* (Flamingo, 1991).
11. Arnold Toynbee, *Mankind and Mother Earth* (Granada Publishing, 1978).
12. Paul Davies, *The Mind of God*, Penguin Books, Victoria, 1992 at 21, 165.
13. James Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988.
14. Paul Davies, above, note 12.
15. Senator Al Gore, *Earth in the Balance*, Plume, New York, 1993.
16. Gore, *ibid* at 35.
17. Ivan Illich, quoted in Gore, *ibid.*, at 47.
18. Claude Levi-Strauss in Knudston & Suzuki, above, note 4, at 9. See further, *The Savage Mind* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966) at 14.
19. Knudston & Suzuki, *ibid.*, at 60.
20. Knudston & Suzuki, *ibid.*, at 65.
21. Arnold Toynbee, above, note 11, at 594.
22. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (Transworld Publishers, 1989) at 4, 5.
23. Darryl A. Posey, "Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Development of the Amazon", in *The Dilemma of Amazonian Development*, edited by Emilio F. Moran, (Westview Press, 1983) at 234 - 235.
24. Knudston & Suzuki, above, note 4, at XXIV

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