“Our People Still Believe”

HERMAN YELLOW OLD WOMAN

In an interview with Alison Brown and Laura Peers at his home on 25 August 2010, Siksika elder and ceremonial leader Herman Yellow Old Woman reflected on effects of historical assimilation policies as a context for understanding why the visit of the shirts was important to Blackfoot people.

HERMAN: Oki. My Blackfoot name is Holy Smoker. My English name is Herman Yellow Old Woman.

In 1996 we started a society here, a whole new society that started bringing stuff back, repatriating sacred artifacts back into our community. Before 1996, our community was so distant, no identity about who they were. Their identity was on books, on movies, anything but themselves living it. [The] very few people who actually lived it were in their eighties and nineties. And we, as young people, got together, and brought our ways back. And today, our people can honestly say that they belong to a Blackfoot culture, a Siksika culture, that they follow and that they believe in. They are born into that way. And before this time our people understood what the church, what the churches, Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Full Gospel, all these different denominations were very strong in our community and there were very few people that carried on the ways. Today it’s different, it’s changed. All our people have some kind of identity to say “I’m Siksika,” “I’m Siksikakowan.”

And we have very, very few elders that still know of the past. Us young people seem to know more about the past than our elders, the elders today. And before 1996 we had elders that were, I say, legitimate elders, elders that actually lived it in the past. Elders that had rights to talk, to transfer, to teach, all these things. They were still around. Then after ‘96 a lot of them passed away. And today the elders that we have are hearsay elders, I call them. They actually didn’t live it. And today, that link, that was missing, we’re beyond that now. My generation, the generation after me, we’re the missing link that’s connecting that, that knowledge.
I learned from elders that were from the Blood [Tribe], from Montana, and from our elders here that were living here before ’96. I never realized what I was doing as a young child going to these elders and asking questions, learning about a dying belief. Not realising that it was going to be very, very important in the future. And some of the elders that I used, I say, as a child, to get knowledge, are people like my grandmother; the late Conner and Doris Stimpson; late Arthur and Nellie Little Light; late Margaret Bad Boy; late Julia and Russell Wright; late Albert One Runner; late Clarence and Victoria McHugh; late Albertine Low Horn. I think one of the only ones that’s still living that I used was Alice Weasel Child. Ada Breaker; late Ada Breaker; Simon Wolfleg. Those were, I guess, my mentors, as a kid. Some reason, I don’t know what it was, I used to go visit them all the time and I’d ask questions. I wanted to learn. I wanted to know because that old lady that raised me with the Bloods, I was at the Sun Dance every year. Then I come here, I come back home here and there’s nothing. That was one of the questions, “Why?”

But the people seemed to know about everything, you know. At the time they still had a connection, but I didn’t see a connection with my age group at that time. That link was gone.

So, today, I can see my generation put it back together. We have the Sun Dance; we have medicine pipe [bundles]; we have Beaver bundle; we have Prairie-Chickens; we have Brave Dogs, Maoto’kiiksi [the Buffalo Women’s Society]—we even had the Bees going for a while. They have tipi transfers, tipi flag transfers. We have Big Smoke ceremonies. And now we getting into these kinds of things—we’re talking about the weasel tail shirt transfer. Those have been going on.

A lot of things have been revived. Split-horn headdress; horn-in-the-front headdress. Medicine transfers going on. Especially in the past twelve years, there’s been so many transfers here, going on in Siksika. So many ceremonies that happen. Every month there’s a ceremony: sweatlodge; a medicine pipe; a Beaver bundle; Sun Dance; Prairie-Chickens; Brave Dogs; Big Smokes. All these ceremonies used to take place in the past, they’re all back.

But going back to the day when you guys brought these shirts back. I was excited. And when I walked up into the room I felt the power. I don’t know if anybody in the room was more excited than me, you know. I felt so happy that they came home, and I felt the power.
I felt like there should have been more done to greet them. It should’ve been special, and it just seemed like we did the introduction of each other about the shirts and that was it, you know? But to me I felt it, there needed to be more done. This is part of that connection, that missing link that our people don’t understand. Our people, things from the past, way back, these shirts come from way back; I don’t know how many years, generations back. Those are the people who had no knowledge of reading, no knowledge of what white people were, what the Bible was. No knowledge of that. They just knew how to be Blackfoot. That’s where those shirts came from. So that’s why, to me, I was so, so moved, you know? Emotional I guess, that’s the proper—there was a connection from where my people were today.

But it was an honour just to be there. And I guess it’s kind of sad to see them go, you know? But I also like to think that the people that have been taking care of them, the people who have been part of this exhibition, of bringing them here, they don’t realize what it means to our people. Me especially, I can say for myself, as a leader, as a ceremonial person, as a person who has brought back a lot of our ways back to our community.

Laura Peers: As you know, most of the pre-treaty heritage items are not in Canadian museums, North American museums, they are overseas because British people and European people were taking them back. And I don’t think it’s well understood over there what the histories of places like your community have been, and why these kinds of things are important to your people today. I wondered if you might address that a bit?

Herman: Yeah, well, I guess I did mention a little bit about it. I’m going to go back to when I was a little boy again. When I was a little boy, I guess I was one of the fortunate ones that thought about these things for the future. Not only my community; there’s other communities today, don’t have nothing in their communities. They lost everything. So they piggy-back off other communities. The Bloods were very fortunate; the Bloods were very fortunate amongst the Blackfoot people. They were fortunate that there was more elders that still tried to maintain their Sun Dance. And one of the things that really messed up our
people was the residential school. Residential school . . . we can go on and on about what residential school did. Most of all, I always use the word “rape,” raped us of our life. Not just physically, mentally, everything. And only a few survivors came and kept it going.

And these things kept going on and on. Eventually, there was no more transfers. The people that owned bundles started giving them to museums, to collectors. And alcoholism took over. Our kids are taken to the residential school; teaching them to believe that our way was no good. And then the language . . . All these things, there were, a very tough thing that they took away in our community. And so, after a while, we had church people. We had more church people on the reservation than anything else. They started teaching you, “You have to be baptized.” “You have to do this, you have to do that.” And then they scared you away from your traditional way. “If you follow that you’re gonna go to Hell.”

All those are connected, you know? They didn’t realize how powerful our way was, because our people prayed all the time. We come from a very spiritual life. Everything we did, everything we do, we pray. We give thanks for everything. Even bad things, we pray, we give thanks that we experienced something bad. Not just good, you know? We prayed for each other. We looked out for each other. And these were given to us through spirits. Those are ways, those are beliefs, but the spiritual part, that’s God, that’s the spirit comes from God. Those are very powerful. And today, there’s people that are starting to understand the connection, how we learned to get back to that day.

And so the lesson that people in your country, that they need to know: that our people still believe, that we still have that connection. We still speak the language. We still call on each other, our ancestors, where these shirts come from. We still practice the songs, we still practice everything that they did back then today. It is still going here. We might have kind of suffered some loss, but it’s coming back strong.

ALISON BROWN: One of the things that I wanted to ask you, Herman, is that most museums in Britain might be willing to lend to a museum for an exhibition. What we did here was a little bit different by allowing people to have that experience
where they were close up, and they didn’t have the barrier of the glass. Can you maybe speak to that issue in terms of how important you think that is?

HERMAN: It’s so educating to our community. Today we struggle because our people are intruded [upon] by non-Native people. Non-Native people do not understand. There are non-Natives out there that don’t care to understand, you know? And when they do get a chance, they are so moved they don’t realize the connection that we have to the past. They don’t realize how important it is.

A few years ago when the premier of Alberta was Ralph Klein, he did this big speech of giving these ceremonial objects back to the communities, as long as they circulate in the traditional way. It was so moving to our communities, to the ones that believed in our way, but the non-Native they say, “Oh, that stuff is—What are you going to do with that stuff? That stuff is museum owned by the Alberta [museums], they should leave it there.” You know, but today, today those things are what make our community strong.

And I think in the future, if there’s anything that comes back home to be visiting our museums, I think it’ll be things that we know that can help us, you know? I don’t know what the museums think over there, if they ever think of repatriating sacred artifacts back into our communities, or if they’ve done that, I don’t know, but if they really want to help out our communities, those are some of the things that they need to understand. There’s certain things need to come home, then there is some stuff, they don’t need to come home but as long as they’re, what is that word . . . duplicated? They need to help preserve our culture. Them being way over there, away from us, it doesn’t help us. It doesn’t help your people over there because they don’t know nothing about it, but if we can work together and preserve what needs to be preserved, it’s gonna help big time.