

A Cross-Cultural Comparison

Rapid Socio-Cultural Change and Student Mental Health

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PART I

The purpose of this paper is to compare the effects of rapid socio-cultural change on the role identity of two groups of adolescent students living in very different environments, but sharing certain characteristics. The two groups of students are Liberians of tribal origin (West Africa), and Cree Indians of north-central Quebec (Canada). They share the following characteristics: 1) their environments are undergoing rapid economic development with concomitant social and cultural changes; 2) they are key participants in the inter-generational conflict of values that has accompanied the diminishing importance of the extended family and traditional tribal authority structure; and 3) education has become a central focus of the inter-generational conflict, being highly valued by youth and negatively or ambivalently regarded by "traditional" adults of the tribe. Data is drawn from the author's experience as director of mental health services in Liberia (1964-66) and from his recent participation in interdisciplinary research among the Quebec Cree Indians of the Waswanipi and Mistassini bands.

*Liberia: Tribal Authority, The Challenge of Education
and The Threat of Witchcraft*

Liberia is a country of more than a million people located on the west coast of Africa. It has been an independent republic for more than a century. The population comprises some twenty major tribes in addition to the relatively small but socially and politically

dominant group of "Americo-Liberians," descendants of approximately ten thousand American slaves and free Negroes who established settlements along the coast during the mid-nineteenth century. Although elementary and secondary education have been available for many years in the capital city of Monrovia and several towns along the coast, the possibility of schooling is a very recent thing for the vast majority of the tribal population. Large-scale exploitation of the timber, rubber and mineral resources of the country during the past fifteen years has resulted in the rapid development of roads, a communications network and administrative centers. In the wake of these developments, the government has undertaken an enormous expansion of education facilities in the 'interior' of Liberia.¹

The tribal population of Liberia is inevitably experiencing profound changes. Traditional legal, political, and religious institutions (such as the Poro and Sande societies), while by no means in eclipse, are declining in authority.² The traditional economic system of subsistence farming and fishing based on the cooperative effort of the extended family is giving way to wage employment at mines and rubber plantations. The geographic mobility and increasing urbanization accompanying this occupational shift have contributed to the weakening of extended family ties.

As a consequence of this rapid process of change, with its demand for new skills and its promise of new rewards directly related to educational achievement, the desire for education among tribal youth has steadily mounted. Competition is intense and anxiety-provoking. Among Liberians there is widespread belief that success engenders jealousy and resentment, and that the highest academic achievers may be subject to retaliation by their less successful peers through the agency of witchcraft. The belief prevails that the jealous student or his family may obtain the help of a secret society such as the Lightning or the Snake society, or of a "country Zo" (an individual regarded as particularly knowledgeable in the preparation and use of medicines for healing or for witchcraft) to bring illness, misfortune and even death to the resented individual. Successful students are especially fearful of retaliation in the form of mental illness induced by witchcraft. Because of the pervading belief that any individual has the potential to invoke malevolent spirits, interpersonal relations are characterized by a high level of suspicion and guardedness. Students soon suspect that

they are being "poisoned" (bewitched) when they develop a low-grade but persistent fever or intestinal disturbance. This belief is internalized early in life and reinforced when parents explain children's minor illnesses as attempts by malevolent individuals to bewitch them.

Hypochondriacal preoccupations are very common among students, and are almost invariably associated with complaints of weakness, fatigue, headache, numbness in the head, nightmares and insomnia.³ A further group of symptoms relates more specifically to feelings of inadequacy and fears of failure in academic performance: inability to concentrate, blurred vision, feelings of loneliness or hopelessness, and depression over falling grades.

During the early stages of acculturative influence, authority figures within the extended family and the tribe are hostile to education. They see "Western" education as a threat to the stability and continuity of traditional tribal institutions, which are safeguarded primarily through the power of the Poro and Sande secret societies. Gibbs has stressed the inherent conservatism of these societies and pointed to d'Azevedo's contention that one of their major functions is to preserve the status quo; to maintain adherence to traditional norms, even in situations of acculturation or social flux.⁴ The central role of the Poro and Sande secret societies demands that pre-adolescents spend several years at initiation "bush school." A bush school is organized by the Poro or Sande society at intervals of approximately seven years, and all uninitiated younger members of the tribe must participate. Beliefs and values essential to the traditional cultural organization are inculcated during this period of strict seclusion from the outside world, and among the most fundamental values is that of unquestioning submission to authority.⁵ Gay and Cole assert that, in terms of the traditional culture (in this case of the Kpelle tribe), "knowledge is primarily a possession of the elders. Education is concrete and non-verbal, concerned with practical activity, not abstract generalization. The primary goals of education are maintenance of the past, conformity, and provision of the necessities of life, in descending order."⁶

The system of values implicit in Western education runs strongly counter to traditional institutions, threatens the tribal authority structure, and consequently gives rise to strong opposition within

the family and tribe. During the early stages of acculturation, the farther the student progresses in his education, the more he revises his educational goals, and the more committed he becomes to the social and occupational aspirations associated with those goals. As this process continues, the inter-generational conflict progressively intensifies. By the time the student reaches high school and beyond, the intrafamilial strain may reach the point of rupture. The student comes to Monrovia to advance his education, but cannot count on any support, either financial or psychological, from his family. Parents' hostility toward their children's educational aspirations is most frequently expressed in their conviction that once they have gone to school, their children "will get puffed up and have no more time to bother with us country people again."

This family estrangement has two major concomitants for the student. First, it generates further culture-specific anxiety that witchcraft procedures will be directed against him by members of his family or tribe who are envious of his achievements and angered by his flouting of tribal authority. In Liberia, the most intense anxiety about "being witched" typically relates to one's immediate family members.⁷ Many of these students become so convinced that they will be "poisoned," "witched," "humbugged by geni" or "troubled by bad medicine," and ultimately "turned crazy" by these methods, that they will not risk returning to their villages to visit.

Second, an identity conflict develops and assumes a major role in the student's psychic functioning as his aspirations increasingly veer toward the "acculturated" identity model represented by his teachers and other individuals in the urban setting with whom he has progressively greater contact.⁸ In keeping with this identification with the Western urban model, the student conceives of his education as the *sine qua non* for achievement and status in urban society. He becomes increasingly anxious about the implications of failure in school that would require him to relinquish his goals and return to his village. Fears of retaliation by authority figures of kin group and tribe exacerbate fears of failure and in some cases generate such intense anxiety that the student's ego defences collapse.

However, the attitude of strong opposition to education on the part of the authority-wielding generation becomes modified as further socio-cultural change occurs. Direct opposition to education decreases and an attitude of highly charged ambivalence develops.

This stage is reached when parents tolerate or even encourage one or more of their children to attend schools in their village or region. The parents will want these children to stop school when it is time for them to attend the initiation "bush school" or when they have had sufficient formal education to enable them to communicate with the regional representatives of government and commerce. If these students want to continue their education and are able to neutralize opposition within the family toward this end, they will be expected to begin contributing materially to the support of the kin group. In addition to the kinds of anxiety described earlier, these individuals often feel that the demands and expectations of their families are too much for them to cope with; for instance, that they should act as guardian and provider for younger siblings and other kin sent to them "to learn book." Role conflict creates great anxiety in many of these students, since they are expected to assume the full burden of traditional adult responsibilities long before they have completed their studies or are in a position to shoulder adult obligations realistically. Even before these students have completed their education they are expected to repay the family which had permitted them to "become the educated one," by contributing to the material support and aggrandizement of the entire kin group.

The Cree: Education, Identity Conflict, and Psychopathology

The approximately fifteen hundred Cree Indians of the Waswanipi and Mistassini bands inhabit an extensive sub-arctic region south and east of James Bay and more than 400 miles north of Montreal. The Waswanipi and Mistassini Cree were selected for study because their traditional way of life based on hunting, trapping, and fishing, is undergoing important changes as a result of recent large-scale forestry and mining operations in the region, the introduction of roads and communications, and the decline in fur prices.⁹ While adult roles are affected primarily by economic changes in the region, traditional patterns of enculturation are undergoing important modification as a result of changes in the educational experiences of Cree youth.

In the past, a small number of Cree children were exposed to formal education organized by missionaries during the summer when individual hunting-trapping groups came together to rest,

secure provisions, socialize, and celebrate marriages after nine months of isolated bush life. However, as a result of the government's decision to work toward the integration of Indians within the economic mainstream of Canadian life, there has been an increasing tendency during the past ten years for all school-age children to attend government-sponsored residential schools in distant "white" urban communities.¹⁰

During the pre-school years, traditional models for identification are provided by parents, grandparents, and adults of the extended kin group.¹¹ Children are expected to learn adult role behaviour through imitation and experimentation; there is little emphasis on direct instruction. Children are given responsibility in accordance with their performance of tasks with a clearly defined usefulness to the family and hunting group.¹² Expected adult behaviour modalities are reflected in boys' play activity, such as chopping wood, hunting birds, and setting snares for rabbits and other small game. Girls help with household tasks such as collecting firewood, gathering spruce boughs for the tent floor, and washing clothes. Discipline is mild and indirect, taking the form of teasing or ridicule, occasionally reinforced by threats of retribution by spirits or by fearful figures of the white world. Appropriate behaviour involves self-reliance, inventiveness, and inhibition of emotional expression. Cooperation with peers is stressed while competition is discouraged. The cultural emphasis on generosity and on effort directed toward the benefit of the kin and hunting group is reinforced by religious values. It is fundamental to the Cree belief system that spiritual power (*Miteo*) is shared by all objects, animate and inanimate, and that the "soul spirit" (*Mistabeo*) guiding a man's behaviour "is pleased with generosity, kindness and help to others."¹³ The Cree believe that satisfaction of an individual's *Mistabeo* through generosity will be rewarded by success in hunting.

Throughout this early period of enculturation the child's contacts with non-Indians are limited to the personnel of the Hudson Bay Company store, the Anglican minister, the Indian Affairs agent, and tourists who come to the region to fish and hunt. Perhaps the most meaningful figures of the "white" world conceptualized by the pre-school child are the nurse and the *Wabinkiyu*, an evil spirit somewhat akin to a bogeyman. When gentle discipline does not succeed in controlling a child's misbehaviour, parents may

threaten him with being carried off by a *Wabinkiyu*, or being taken to the nurse for an injection.

With the shift from traditional milieu to the setting of the "white" urban residential school, the child is removed from the family at the time he or she is becoming competent to assume responsibilities within the hunting group or for the care of the household and younger siblings. The child is required to learn a new language, eat "store food" rather than "bush food," abide by a wide range of rules and a time structure completely at odds with his previous experience. His teachers and dormitory counselors know relatively little of his Indian social and cultural background and conceive of their role as preparing him for life in a modern industrial society.¹⁴ Traditional Cree values, beliefs and behaviour patterns tend to be covertly and sometimes overtly devalued by whites with whom the students come in contact. Compliance with rules of the school and dormitory limits exploratory, self-reliant behaviour. Emotional expression is encouraged and so is competitiveness in scholastic performance, in athletics, and in other extra-curricular activities. Through contact with "white kids" at school and in town, and through his exposure to television, the young Cree student learns that overt expression of aggression is condoned. As the child continues his schooling over a number of years, marked differences develop between his behaviour and attitudinal patterns and those expected of him by his parents. Prolonged separation from the traditional life of family and tribe, extended over the six, eight, ten, or even twelve years of his school career, makes it practically impossible for a boy to learn the age-appropriate hunting and trapping skills. Girls are unable to learn the techniques required for helping a man on the trap line, for preparing furs for sale or moose hides for moccasins, for making snowshoes or repairing fishing nets. Students have little opportunity and decreasing motivation to develop traditionally approved social and occupational role behaviour.

Furthermore, as they continue their education, these Cree youths acquire a growing knowledge of and familiarity with the life-style of white urban society. Their understanding of the white world is greatly enhanced by the fact that at the high school level all Cree students live with white foster families and attend schools in the community where they are living. As time goes on, the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour patterns of the townspeople, especial-

ly those of their teachers, counselors, and foster families, come to serve as models for identification. And these models contrast sharply with the traditional models of the students' pre-school experience.

Conflicting role expectations between home and school engender role anxiety in the children involved. The intensity of the anxiety experienced by individual students is a function of the degree to which the individual equates his repeated separations from family with feelings of rejection, and the degree to which supportive relationships are established with those teachers, dormitory counselors and foster families who come to fill the role of surrogate parents.

As the student continues his educational career, the discontinuities between school and reserve become sufficiently wide-ranging and intense that they may create marked anxiety. Intergenerational conflict reaches a peak during adolescence as parents become painfully aware of the student's resistance to the traditional life and of his very close association with his student group. Accordingly, the parents exert increasing pressure on their children to stop school and return to the reserve to assume traditional adult roles and responsibilities, to contribute to the support and well-being of the family, "to learn the Indian ways."

The inter-generational conflict unfolds on a conscious level. But at the same time, an identity conflict assumes an increasingly important part in these students' emotional lives as they attempt to resolve the largely unconscious conflict over models for identification that they feel are incompatible: the traditional Cree and the "white" Euro-Canadian.¹⁵ For those students who move toward the "white" identity model, feelings of inadequacy and fears of failure to achieve their occupational and social aspirations, combined with a growing awareness of white condescension and prejudice, generate intense anxiety. Symptoms of emotional turmoil become clinically discernible when such students' determination to continue their education brings them into open confrontation with their families.



Part II — "A Comparison of Findings" will appear in our next issue.

Notes and References

1. The sharp contrast with the past is apparent even from the titles of the best known descriptive accounts of Liberia prior to World War II: Graham Greene's fascinating *Journey Without Maps* (1936) and Schwab and Harley's *Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland* (1947). In contrast to these works are recent accounts by Fraenkel, *Tribes and Class in Monrovia*, London: Oxford University Press, 1964 and Martinelli, *The New Liberia: A Historical and Political Survey*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964.
2. See accounts by: J. L. Gibbs, Jr., "Marital Instability among the Kpelle: Toward a Theory of Epainogamy," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 65 (1963), pp. 552-573; G. W. Harley, *Notes on the Poro in Liberia*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941; and J. Nolan, "The Poro Secret Society Complex, Social Control and Psychosis among the Loma of Liberia," unpublished ms., 1966.
3. Clinical psychiatric facilities were introduced in Liberia in 1961 with the construction of the 40-bed Catherine Mills Rehabilitation Center, followed in 1965 by the establishment of a mental health clinic. An unexpectedly high percentage of patients at the mental health clinic were students. During the first 18 months of its operation, students accounted for 38% of the mental health clinic's patients and during that same period comprised 13% of in-patients at the Catherine Mills Rehabilitation Center.
4. W. L. D'Azevedo, "Common Principles of Variant Kinship Structures Among the Gola," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 64 (1962), pp. 504-520; J. L. Gibbs, Jr., "Poro Values and Courtroom Procedures in a Kpelle Chiefdom," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 18 (1962), pp. 341-350.
5. G. W. Harley, "Masks as Agents of Control in Northeast Liberia," *Peabody Museum Papers*, Cambridge, 22 2 (1950).
6. J. Gay, & M. Cole, *The New Mathematics and an Old Culture: A Study of Learning among the Kpelle of Liberia*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967.
7. R. M. Wintrob, & E. D. Wittkower, "Witchcraft in Liberia, Its Psychiatric Implications," in S. Lesse (ed.), *An Evaluation of the Results of the Psychotherapies*, Charles C. Thomas, 1968.
8. For tribal Liberians there are, in fact, two models for identification contrasting with the traditional one (of their pre-school experience). In addition to the "white" middle class model represented by foreign school teachers, missionaries, plantation and industrial personnel, there is another model for identification represented by the socially, economically, and politically dominant Americo-Liberians. Sharp distinctions between tribal and Americo-Liberians were long maintained by law and practice, reinforced in consequence of repeated tribal revolt against Americo-Liberian authority and control (Fraenkel, *op. cit.*; Martinelli, *op. cit.*). Since it has long been necessary to have the support of the Americo-Liberian power bloc in order to

- advance one's education and ultimately one's career beyond the limits of the village and the tribe, it can readily be understood that the Americo-Liberian identity model internalized by the tribal Liberian gives rise to intensely ambivalent feelings (R. M. Wintrob, "A Study of Disillusionment: Depressive Reactions of Liberian Students Returning From Advanced Training Abroad," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 123 (1967), pp. 1593-8).
9. N. A. Chance, "Implications of Environmental Stress for Strategies of Developmental Change in the North," *Archives of Environmental Health*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1968), p. 571. Rising economic aspirations are reflected in the fact that in 1964 the entire population of the Waswanipi band moved off their "reserve" in search of jobs in lumber camps or with mining prospectors.
 10. The generalized term "whites" as used by the Cree involves a wide range of associations. For the present purpose, the term "white" identity model refers to both working class and middle class Euro-Canadians, the former applying more particularly for Cree boys and the latter for Cree girls. A further division of working class and middle class identity models along the lines of French versus English Canadian would also be relevant, but is beyond the scope of this paper.
 11. The following description of the traditional enculturation process and the impact of experiences during the child's early years at school is drawn in large measure from the work of my colleague, Peter S. Sindell. For further details, reference should be made to his paper, "Some Discontinuities in the Enculturation of Mistassini Cree Children," in Norman A. Chance (ed.), *Conflict in Culture: Problems of Developmental Change Among the Cree*, Ottawa: Canadian Research Centre for Anthropology, Saint-Paul University, 1968.
 12. E. S. Rogers & J. H. Rogers, "The Individual in Mistassini Society From Birth to Death," *Contributions to Anthropology 1960*, National Museum of Canada Bulletin 190, Part 2 (1963), pp. 14-36; and Sindell, *op. cit.*
 13. F. S. Speck, *The Savage Hunters of the Labrador Peninsula*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935.
 14. Sindell, *op. cit.*; Chance, *op. cit.*
 15. R. M. Wintrob, "Acculturation, Identification and Psychopathology among Cree Indian Youth," in Chance *Conflict in Culture* —.