

Nomad Two Worlds Foundation

Our Mission — White Paper

<http://www.ntwfoundation.org/>

Chloe Olewitz
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I. INTRODUCTION

Around the world, indigenous peoples have suffered exclusion, discrimination, displacement, and exploitation. They have been relegated to geographically isolated and existentially marginalized communities, left without a voice or autonomous influence over their own affairs and the common interests of their communities.

Historically, thanks to practices, values, and traditions that often far predate contemporary societies, indigenous peoples have lived for generations in stable and sustainable communities. The institutionalized degradation of the perceived value of the world's indigenous communities does severe injustice to the culture, knowledge, language, and tradition that these communities have upheld for, quite often, centuries.

In indigenous and marginalized communities, rich cultural traditions give rise to a wide and expressive range of artistic practices. These artistic expressions have included visual arts like drawing and painting, performance arts like song and dance, basket weaving, storytelling, and more. These arts have historically been a vehicle for all aspects of indigenous life, including law and government, education and cultural continuity, family relations, entertainment, and important celebrations and commemorations of milestone events.

The cultural wisdom and inherent strengths maintained by indigenous and marginalized individuals and communities have extraordinary relevance to contemporary society. Celebration and understanding of the irreplaceable contribution these indigenous and marginalized peoples make to the modern day world creates a powerful context for communities in peaceful coexistence – a context of value, honor, and partnership between indigenous and dominant, ancient and modern, traditional and contemporary.

II. COMMUNITY

Who are indigenous peoples?

Today, there are approximately 370 million indigenous peoples spread throughout as many as 90 countries around the world (UN-DESA, 2015). And yet, surprisingly, great contention surrounds the question of developing one single definition to distinguish the world's indigenous peoples. General consensus among international

and non-governmental organizations supports self-identification as the key to understanding indigenous peoples, instead of an external institutionalized definition.

Self-identification for indigenous peoples became an official and widely approved policy in the spheres of law and policymaking in 1977. The World Council of Indigenous Peoples passed the definitive resolution in its second General Assembly by stating that “only indigenous peoples could define indigenous peoples” (Corntassel 2003). Self-identification has since been accepted as a fundamental right of indigenous peoples and a verifiable criterion for indigenous peoples’ acceptance as such. Outside those self-identified communities, elemental frameworks for understanding the common qualities of indigenous peoples do exist.

In most cases, these “rudimentary definitions” identify the following qualities of indigenous peoples (Cobo, 1983): tribal association or some account of ancestral descent from populations inhabiting a land prior to conquest or colonialist arrival; social, cultural, legal, and religious traditions distinct from practices considered to be mainstream by dominant society; language often inherited or tied to ancestry of native lands, and separate from official languages of dominant, mainstream society; status as non-dominant representatives of society in the country demonstrating sovereignty or otherwise considered to be the dominant governing force (UNHRC, 1986; Corntassel, 2003; PFII; UN-DESA, 2004; Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012).

International bodies like the United Nations and its many agencies have worked in their official capacity for decades to improve the rights and basic quality of life of indigenous peoples worldwide. Since then, the UN has overseen the creation of initiatives like United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples (UN-DESA, 2015).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also created a series of initiatives designed to represent and preserve the cultural heritage of indigenous communities. “After decades of indigenous heritage practice and scholarship... so much still remains to be accomplished” (Meskell, 2013).

What are marginalized communities?

Marginalized communities are born of an existential partnership with dominant forces, since as one group dominates another, the second becomes, in effect and by definition, marginalized (UN-DESA, 2009). Marginalization can become manifest across all aspects of life, limiting access to resources and fundamental human rights, and influencing cultural sustainability, economic status, physical and mental health, and more (UNESCO, 2006; UN-DESA, 2009; UN-DESA, 2015).

It is widely understood that indigenous communities are marginalized, but not all marginalized communities are necessarily composed of indigenous peoples.

Marginalized communities also self-identify, and often experience many of the same lived disadvantages as indigenous communities. Individuals, groups, and communities can be marginalized for any number of reasons, ranging from race to age to gender to sexual orientation, from geographical location to migration status to religious belief, from language or dialect to social class and, of course, any combination therein.

In 2015, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs released the second volume of its State of the World's Indigenous Peoples report. After two decades of dedicated departmental work on improving the rights and status of indigenous peoples, the document still reported that indigenous peoples "are among the world's most marginalized peoples" (UN-DESA, 2015).

The overlap between indigenous and marginalized communities is both common and apparent. "The concept of indigenous peoples emerged from the colonial experience, whereby the aboriginal peoples of a given land were marginalized after being invaded by colonial powers, whose peoples are now dominant over the earlier occupants" (UN-DESA, 2015). It is in this way that indigenous communities are so often also marginalized, and in most cases, have been marginalized since colonial conquest of their native lands.

What problems do indigenous peoples and marginalized communities face?

Despite the considerable efforts of globally important organizations like the UN, indigenous and marginalized peoples remain disadvantaged, oppressed, and displaced. In many cases, indigenous peoples are still denied representation in local government (UN-DESA, 2009; UN-DESA, 2015). This eliminates any opportunity for individuals and communities to influence their own affairs and play a role in the decision-making crucial to their quality of life. In the meantime, indigenous and marginalized communities experience the systematic degradation of their ancestral traditions, cultural heritage, overall health and wellbeing, and general quality of life.

A considerable portion of indigenous identity is rooted in traditions, values, and practices that are separate from those of dominant, non-indigenous communities. For this reason, the subjugation of these uniquely indigenous practices has been considered an "assault on Aboriginal peoples' identity and what has, by some, been referred to as 'cultural genocide'" (Muirhead & de Leeuw, 2012). Indigenous artistic traditions, spiritual and religious beliefs, knowledge and storytelling practices, systems of law and government, family structure, and other uniquely indigenous sociocultural traditions have all been subject to subjugation (Muirhead & de Leeuw, 2012; Ginsburg & Myers, 2006).

Furthermore, popular references to an Indigenous or aboriginal cultural genocide most often include what has become known in Australia as the Stolen Generation. As indigenous communities were pressured – forced – to assimilate into dominant society, indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and their

homes. Governmental practice asserted that these forced “adoptions” would benefit children by placing them from an early age within dominant, non-indigenous frameworks of society, but frequently amounted to childhood slavery in adoptive families. The impact on the “stolen” children and their fractured families became ever more clear as Australian governmental programs sought to scrub the younger generation of their indigenous identity, cultural traditions, and inherited understanding of the world around them (Ginsburg & Myers, 2006). This illustration from Australia is mirrored in countries like the United States and Canada, where dominant non-indigenous governments also forcibly separated indigenous children from their families, often with similar results.

Indigenous peoples “are often among the poorest peoples, and the poverty gap between indigenous and non-indigenous groups is increasing in many countries around the world” (UN-DESA 2015). The impact of the abject poverty in which many indigenous and marginalized individuals live is manifold, but it has a clear and direct correlation with experienced quality of life. Although it has not proven easy to measure or report, mental wellbeing suffers as a direct result of externally dominant forces enforcing limitations on economic status and basic quality of life in indigenous and marginalized communities.

The systematic limitation of economic resources radically decreases the basic quality of life in indigenous and marginalized communities, but it simultaneously creates an undeniable relationship of dependency. (Corntassel, 2003; Ginsburg & Myers, 2006). Indigenous peoples internalize this necessary diminishment of their autonomy and independence, either consciously or unconsciously. For this reason among others, shame is a recurring theme in both academic works and international, non-governmental inquiries into the lives of indigenous and marginalized individuals.

Diminished self-esteem, decreased autonomy, and this overwhelming sense of shame have been widely identified as the root cause of many internal community issues among indigenous and marginalized peoples. The prevalence of crime, violence, and substance abuse issues, for example, have all been tied to this symptomatic, internalized sense of shame and despair that indigenous and marginalized individuals so often experience (Barraket, 2005; Corntassel, 2003; Ginsburg & Myers, 2006). Without access to resources that promote physical and mental health and wellbeing, at-risk individuals are left with no support or outlet for their suffering.

Without physical access to geographically external resources, without positive valuation and promotion of their cultural heritage, indigenous and marginalized communities experience drastically diminished self-esteem. “Marginalized neighborhoods struggle with a sense of shame in perceiving themselves as vulnerable, overly dependent, defective or deficient, and generally judged negatively by the larger, ‘central’ society” (Russell & Arefi, 2003).

Access to education is one of the many resources that are either limited or unavailable for people in indigenous and marginalized communities. According to the United Nations, “arts education is a universal human right, for all learners, including those who are often excluded from education” (UNESCO, 2006). But schools are often impractical or entirely unreachable for those in geographically isolated communities. On the rare occasions that education programs are available to members of indigenous and marginalized communities, they are usually irrelevant to indigenous knowledge and local learning processes styled after community traditions. Lack of access to quality, relevant education contributes to the internalized sense of shame experienced by indigenous and marginalized individuals (UNESCO, 2006; Ware, 2014).

Similar limited access to resources presents a considerable obstacle for indigenous and marginalized communities who have specific healthcare needs. “Indigenous peoples’ health status is severely affected by their living conditions, income levels, employment rates, access to safe water, sanitation, health services and food availability” (UN-DESA, 2015). These barriers to access are often formed by economic limitations combined with “geographic limitations”. Without access to either public or personal modes of transportation, for example, indigenous and marginalized individuals are prevented from making the often arduous journey to non-indigenous, contemporary geographical areas where healthcare services and hospital facilities are usually located (UN-DESA, 2015).

Poverty and economic limitations also have a measurable direct impact on the decreased quality of health within indigenous and marginalized communities. Meanwhile, the stark inequality between levels of health in indigenous and non-indigenous communities residing in the same geographic regions feeds into the cycle of shame that indigenous peoples experience. Indigenous peoples across the board experience lower overall rates of physical health. The prevalence of illness and disease has all but guaranteed a “dramatically” shorter life expectancy for indigenous peoples than for non-indigenous community members in the same geographic regions (UN-DESA, 2015).

III. ARTS

What role do the arts play in indigenous and marginalized communities?

Many of the most prominent sociocultural practices unique to indigenous communities and the expression of indigenous life fall into the broadest understanding of “the arts” in general. Visual arts, musical traditions, storytelling practices and performances in dance and ceremony are all crucial to the expression of indigenous identity and cultural heritage. Historically, these artistic media have been integral elements of the governance and structure of functional indigenous societies. (UN-DESA, 2009; Jackson, 2012; Russell & Arefi, 2003; Barraket, 2005).

In this way, it becomes immediately clear that the arts already play a highly valued role in indigenous and marginalized communities. The direct connection indigenous communities maintain to their social and cultural heritage organically promotes artistic expression as the maintenance and continuity of ancestral values. “Cultural heritage and its maintenance is a common thread that weaves its way through the literature on Indigenous arts, with these activities and cultural heritage being interrelated yet distinct” (Ware, 2014).

The intricate relationship between culture and the arts in indigenous and marginalized communities carves a clear pathway for the arts to become a medium of transformation. Artistic expression has historically been prized and valued in indigenous communities, with a distinct sense of pride built around the cultural richness engrained in these arts practices. In this way, artistic spaces and the creative works they encourage bloom directly from rich, tended cultural roots. “Art is the favored daughter, but culture is the big mama,” said Carol Bebel of Ashé Cultural Art Center in New Orleans (Ware, 2014).

In what ways have the arts been proven as a transformative medium?

UNESCO’s 2006 Arts Education Roadmap calls upon the fundamental human rights of every individual to emphasize the crucial nature of arts engagement for the development of functional, healthy citizens and members of society at large. “Humans all have creative potential,” the document declares, in a lengthy examination of the proven benefits of arts and arts education in all walks of life (UNESCO, 2006).

Arts education has also been declared a universal human right (UNESCO, 2006), and UNESCO, along with a series of other prominent international organizations, identifies the ways in which indigenous communities, cultural minority groups, and marginalized peoples are both entitled to that right, and systematically excluded from it in practice (Jackson, 2012; Meskell, 2013; Ware, 2014).

At every level, access to and immersion in the arts have demonstrated positive results for individuals, communities, and the often-contentious relationships between multiple communities, either of indigenous or non-indigenous nature. Involvement in the arts benefits individual health and wellbeing, community cohesion, cultural continuity, economic status, and more. Some proven results of arts exposure have included: “increased self-esteem, dignity and confidence; a reduced sense of shame; empowerment and an increased sense of control or agency; pride in one’s personal or community achievements, which is crucially important in marginalized communities; [and] increased resilience” (Ware, 2014).

Each of these transformations as caused by involvement in the arts demonstrates a direct benefit for the individuals who experience them. Other individual benefits of involvement in the arts promote social inclusion, which boasts a series of indirect benefits to indigenous and marginalized individuals and their communities. Arts

projects and broader artistic programs keep individuals engaged in creative activities tied to their own cultural heritage and community activities (Ware, 2014). In turn, these activities keep otherwise at-risk individuals “off the streets”, and focus their efforts and their contribution on creativity and beauty, on culture, heritage and belonging in their valued community (Barraket, 2005).

Feeling included in a positive, creative community, instead of excluded from “normal”, dominant society, encourages the self-esteem and overall happiness of indigenous and marginalized individuals. Furthermore, the emotional experience of pleasure often found in artistic ventures has a profound and direct impact on the mental wellbeing of individuals in marginalized communities (Ware, 2014).

The individual benefits of arts engagement clearly influence the positive results of those arts practices in communities more broadly. “Spaces in which arts and cultural activity happen are often the pulse points of communities... These places can also help create a community’s identity and promote stewardship among residents” (Jackson, 2012). Spaces dedicated to the arts and to creative exploration also influence a community’s economic status, both directly and indirectly. Celebration of the value of cultural heritage in indigenous and marginalized communities can even create avenues for financial capital that can in turn be used to rejuvenate economic status within those communities (Jackson, 2012; Ware, 2014; Barraket, 2005).

Honoring the cultural heritage of indigenous and marginalized communities through the arts also bridges the difficult and ever-widening gap between indigenous and non-indigenous communities. The arts play a critical role in transmitting indigenous cultural heritage between generations, but arts practices can also create links between indigenous communities and the dominant societies with which they co-exist. Arts practices foster this interconnectedness, bridging an understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous communities through creative expression. “One study summed this up as follows: ‘If Descartes were a western desert man he would not have said ‘Cogito ergo sum’ (‘I think therefore I am’), rather he would have said ‘canto ergo sum’ (‘I sing therefore I am’)” (Ware, 2014).

Conclusion

Promotion of the arts supports the necessary dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous communities, and between marginalized groups and dominant societies. We must seek to build new bridges of understanding between community groups that, in so many ways, stand at odds. What better way to celebrate and support these valued individuals than through promotion of the arts? If the arts are an internationally recognized vehicle to the realization of universal human rights, and creativity is a fundamental element of the human identity, then perhaps arts expression is the skeleton key to common ground.

IV. NOMAD TWO WORLDS FOUNDATION

Founded in 2011 by internationally renowned photographer, Russell James, the story of Nomad Two Worlds harkens back to James' upbringing in Western Australia. After developing a successful and celebrated career in commercial photography, James felt called to explore the fraught nature of his Australian roots.

In a country where indigenous communities are most certainly marginalized, James struggled with the lack of communication and understanding between non-indigenous, white Australians and the native aboriginal communities who so treasure their ancestral land. The Nomad Two Worlds Foundation was sparked by James' personal commitment to employing the arts as a medium for cross-cultural dialogue that would promote understanding between the varied overlapping practices of aboriginal and non-indigenous Australians.

The Nomad Two Worlds Foundation empowers and celebrates indigenous and marginalized communities through artistic collaborations that facilitate reconciliation and increased self-esteem. The foundation provides individuals and communities with significant economic and educational opportunities through the arts. Nomad Two Worlds is committed to the development of increased self-esteem and self-efficacy of individual indigenous and marginalized artists, the development of indigenous and marginalized communities, and the development of cross-cultural and cross-community understanding.

The foundation achieves these goals through sponsorship programs, participation in local, national, and international performance and promotional opportunities, creation of artistic collaborations between indigenous and non-indigenous artists, and the development of presentations, exhibitions, and workshops on arts unique to indigenous or marginalized peoples. Nomad Two Worlds also employs promotion of individual artists as positive role models both within and outside indigenous and marginalized communities, and through promotion, funding, improvement, and expanded delivery of arts education and programming at the community level.

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