Chapter 7

Circle Peace-Making in Alaska:
A Return to Indigenous Practice
Through Intercultural Dialogue

Polly Elizabeth Hyslop
University of Alaska – Fairbanks, USA

Brian N. Jarrett
California State University – Dominguez Hills, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors explore the re-emergence of peace-making in a Tlingit community, its renaissance, and its value as a contemporary method of dispute resolution in rural Alaska. The circle peacemaking process (herein “circle peacemaking”) works in collaboration with the State of Alaska judicial system, as a local restorative practice addressing misdemeanors and juvenile offenses. Local law enforcement and families within communities can refer misdemeanor and young offenders to circle peacemaking. Local schools can also refer students who are in need of guidance and direction to address misbehaviors.

INTRODUCTION

The re-emergence of Tlingit Peace-making, and its value as a contemporary method of dispute resolution in Alaska has been a testimony to successful local community autonomy. The Circle Peace-making process, practiced by local volunteers in Kake, a Tlingit community in southeast Alaska works in collaboration with the State of Alaska judicial system, as a local restorative practice addressing misdemeanors and juvenile offenses. This process allows the court system along with local law
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enforcement and district court within the community to refer local offenders facing misdemeanor charges, to participate in a restorative Peace-Making Circle with the victim(s) and other interested members. This local process is a testament to the return of traditional Tlingit ways of working together to resolve local harm, strengthen broken relationships and restore safety to the community.

Because the residents of this community have always practiced peacemaking before the advent of colonial courts both federal and state, the Tlingit community accepts Circle Peacemaking as a legitimate method of conflict resolution and crime reduction.

Circle-Peacemaking as a Way of Life

Ironically, Circle Peace-making is not a new invention in Native communities. Instead, the community is experiencing a return to Native principles and practices as it re-emerges as a viable means of resolving contemporary problems associated with an increasingly chaotic social world. Throughout history, Circle Peace-making has always adapted to meet the new challenges of new day and it will continue to do so, as long as it remains true to its roots. Peacemaking is practiced both as a way of life and as a process by which to keep communities intact in the journey towards community safety and wellness. This is true in many other Indigenous communities as well. In fact, there is an abundance of literature on traditional law and practices successfully maintaining peaceful relations between tribal members, clans, and other tribes all over the world using Indigenous Knowledge (Kunnie & Goduka, 2006; Ross, 2006; McCaslin, 2005).

Law is embedded in our ways of thinking, living, and being. For Indigenous Peoples, law is far more than rules to be obeyed. Law is found within our language, customs, and practices. It is found within the carefully balanced relations of our clan systems and our extended families. It is also found in ceremonies and rituals. Law is a whole way of life. Through countless means, our traditions teach us how to be respectful of others and mindful of how our actions affect them (McCaslin, 2005, p. 88).

The Tlingit Circle Peace-making also referred to in this article as the “Circle” process emerged as a response by the local community to address local health, crime, and related behavioral issues, which the Alaska state government and its law enforcement institutions failed to address. Cultural differences in ideas and attitudes regarding punishment and community wellness often pitted efforts by law enforcement and the courts against the better judgment of the Tlingit community in Kake. To its credit, however, the Kake community took proactive steps to bridge the gap that this clash in cultural perspectives and priorities created. This story of local
Risk, Activism, and Empowerment: Women's Breast Cancer in Venezuela
www.igi-global.com/article/risk-activism-and-empowerment/139199?camid=4v1a