

Seeking Wisdom in the Kingdom of Established Labels and Digital Spirits

An interview with Hwiemtun, Fred Roland, a Sweat lodge Keeper, intercultural teacher and global traveler

During my stay in Canada, I noticed that people here use the terms “Indian”, “Indigenous”, “Aboriginal”, “Native Canadian” or “First-Nation” to refer to a diverse group of peoples native to Canada. Referring to the Constitution the term “Indian” is defined as “a person who is registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as an Indian.” There is no federal definition for either Metis or Inuit under federal legislation. Everyone is simply labelled as an “Indian”.

What do you think of this and how do you refer it to yourself ?

In our history, we have had to adjust to many different labels since the time of the settler’s arrival. The so called Indians in the Indian Act refer to all of the First Nation People in Canada. The Indian Act however represents a limitation for all First Nation Peoples and it has allowed a structure to be retained, which forces not only a labeling but a very restrictive life style on us. So the terminology used in the Indian Act is just a simple governmental labeling procedure, in order to create generalizations for indigenous people and to reduce our freedoms since its enactment. We were actually doing fine where we were and in how we were living before any settler came through.

Everyone who attended your lecture at Open Space Art Centre in Victoria was very grateful for what you said. During the lecture, you introduced us to the sound of Lakota drums. In my researching, I read that the drum is defined as the heartbeat of Mother Earth and I came to understand that drums are used in First Nation culture for communication with the world of spirits in regard to nature and supernatural powers.

Can you tell us a little more about the role of drums and sounds in general in your rituals and traditions?

Drums are very important in our traditions where a lot of our traditional songs and ceremonies come from the environment itself. The sound of the drum is therefore a unique vibration that we can relate to in accordance with the environment in which we live in -a rhythm that we are comfortable with. Through the drumming in the ceremonies, we form a relationship to Mother Earth. Also, the tradition of drumming has been in our culture for many years and this has even gone forward and brought expansiveness to our ceremonies.

So then, how are the drumming ceremonies actually being performed today?

For each ceremony there is a different drum beat and within First Nation tribes there are different hides that are used to perform these drum beats on. For example, compared with the past, there are many more hides that are used today in drumming ceremonies and, of course, the choice of the drum depends on the ceremony itself and on the person who has been invited to drum. In the case of birth and death ceremonies, the drumming rituals are not as much performed today as they used to be in the past. This is because First Nation families have started to practice different kinds of ceremonies due to the outside cultural and religious influences mentioned before.



Hwiemtun during the presentation at the Arts Open Space in Victoria, BC

During part of your lecture, drumming was accompanied by recordings of Lakota songs together with the projected images of First Nation and other peoples who are on a spiritual journey. Do you think the digital technologies can be used to build “bridges”, or connect individuals to the spiritual world, to alternate realities, or even to see reality in different ways in order to nurture new consciousness and what is gained and what is lost when cultural traditions are communicated in new ways?

It is evident to me that new technologies are going to change our ceremonies and traditions in a very tangible way. For example, conferences via Skype where we can see people virtually and talk to them without being close to them has already changed the way First Nation people communicate and keep relationships going today. Like everyone today, we do less and less personal visits due to the Internet . We now visit people via Skype or conferences calls, we send music via email, and even all the invitations for the family ceremonies is being done electronically now. However, such technologies are also something that are useful to us too. When I look at the numbers of Elders that have passed away and all of the stories and the history that has gone with them, I think that digitalisation could give us a chance to preserve the knowledge for generation to come. So, thanks to new technologies we are able to record First Nation's stories, traditional songs and ceremonies and store them for the future.

Do you think it is inappropriate to use digital recording device because it might disturb established spiritual practice?

It is a personal choice of the families to make such recordings and sometimes members of the First Nation families want to record the ceremonies, but also these methods of recording have their limitation within our traditional environment. Moreover there are of course certain ceremonies and songs that cannot be recorded. Therefore, I think that in certain situations there will always be some struggle between Elders about getting permission to use the new technologies during the ceremonies. But I think that slowly the Elders are realizing that if our traditions are not preserved by recording, they will not get through to younger generations.



Graduation Ceremony held in the Gathering House of the University of Victoria BC

One of the greatest experiences for me in Canada was attending the First Nations graduation ceremony at the University of Victoria in your new and wondrous First Nation building. Following the ceremony closely, I came to believe that the young First Nation graduates are already transforming the marginality of their communities that was caused by injustices in the past into a more self defined, self regulated, and new First Nation identity.

You are deeply involved at the University. From your perspective, can you tell me how education is making a difference for you personally and also for the First Nations community in general?

I think that education is one of the systems that we can use to advance and proceed with some of First Nation teachings. Traditionally, our teachings weren't really recognized and accepted by Academia.

However, within the Departments of Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology, the aspect of spirituality is considered and therefore our teaching do find acceptance by the University. In this way, I think that it is possible that education can build a sort of channel for information exchange between both academic based and our community teaching. More and more Universities are opening their doors to ways of learning about and understanding some of our traditional knowledge. Therefore the Western education system has finally realized some of their own deficiencies and because of this I think that the University could become an option for sharing knowledge about culture and traditions to create understanding.

So, do you think then that young First Nations people could consider the established Western education system as a chance to learn something about their own ways?

Well, many of the younger generation of the First Nation's peoples are moving now into the modern, hi-tech world and at the same time leaving some of the traditional teaching and ceremonies behind them. On account of the University, traditional teachings can be mediated and preserved through literature or recordings, and the history of the First Nations can take on a more solid platform and continue on into the future. But at the same time, sitting in the class room and not learning about the environment directly from the environment is something that is very unusual for all First Nation communities. Personally, I feel that education at the University is important, however reading books and listening to recordings should only motivate younger people to stay closer to nature and to learn with all of their senses. Traditional teaching has to be taught on traditional land or in the forest. When you try to teach about ceremonies in the classroom, you use limited faculties of the human system and when you are actually in the environment you get the feel, the smell, the touch, and it is these things that make a big difference in everyone's education.

And do you think that the today's education lacks, let's say, a method for practical learning to think and for using your imagination in learning?

I think that there are two different ways of learning: The Western way of learning is based on theoretical research and on the other hand First Nations people learn through actual physical experience. To give an example, the students at the University are sitting in the class room where a Western "PhD Holder" teaches them about our ceremonies and traditional practices without even having ever attended a ceremony or having the experience of living on traditional lands. Many teachers holding such a degree have not had the opportunity to really experience traditional lifestyle and the knowledge connected with such. So, you can imagine that this is indeed very limited and very shallow for us. When I think about it if I had to go to the forest, I would probably trust our kids that have no academic education than I would trust some Professor who has only published papers in some academic journals.

Considering the academic community and research publications appearing on First Nations history, I think that many are slowly becoming more aware of forced assimilation, the emotional pain, and the community despair that has confronted many generations of First Nations people in the past.

How do you think having a First Nations building such as the one at the University of Victoria and having a First Nations curriculum could bring further acceptance and recognition of the First Nation culture and aid in establishing a new foundation of strength for all First Nation people within the larger Canadian community?

If you start to look at the majority of the Universities – even just in British Columbia- you realize that many of them are actually built on First Nations territory. You realize that it would be very beneficial for such Universities to acknowledge and to recognize some of the past, not only that of Western history, but also our history too and have this as a part of their curriculum. Actually, I think every University in Canada should have at least a Gathering House, in order to see some of the relationships, sustainability and

reciprocity that was shared within the First Nations communities. Honestly, just speaking about Western content or European content without providing any information on First Nation people, who have been here for thousands of years, is really disappointing.

The Off Label festival introduced a new aesthetic of combining not only diverse cultures but also diverse approaches to the arts. Further, there was a deep effort to focus on Spirituality, which acted as a bridge between both virtual and real artworks. It seems that in the arts today, we are more exposed to half truths, ambiguities, and culture based on consumerism.

Do you think that virtual artworks such as those in second life, or those using geo-tagged media, or for that matter even the use of things like iPhone applications and iTunes files can bring about new knowledge, alternate ways of thinking, or even bring about more of a connection to the universe?

It's natural within the society that we all are learning and experimenting with different things. Traditional knowledge is shifting and changing as the new generations appear. Sharing experiences about how we connect with the Universe, meaning the knowledge that we call "All my Relations", or all of the things that come from the four directions etc. is often reduced to electronically mediated knowledge that is represented by the digitally compressed version of it on our iPhone. Traditionally, we learn from the environment by observing the earth and the sky... Now we look in the internet for it and accept the information that is continuously brought to us. But how much of this information is really the truth? So I think that there are basically two different ways of acquiring new knowledge: Sitting with an Elder and learning from that Elder, or by using an electronic device such as the iPhone and searching for truths. Of course, virtual reality facilitates the understanding about other cultures, but if you try to understand the traditional ceremony, and traditional teachings through the internet instead of sitting in the forest, again, it is a different level of spirituality. A ceremony that hasn't been held in the forest doesn't really have the proper "essence". These days, our traditional teachings are often reduced to the level of standard academic teaching practices, because new generations simply don't find the time to get out into the forest and they don't have the time to be in there long enough to learn about the physical changes that are taking place there. So, they learn the songs from recordings and they learn about ceremonies through digital recordings. This is for them, the way to connect to the Universe.



Artist's Blood donation campaign, Off Label festival

The Lakota people believe that we are confronted in life with two choices; the "Red Road" and the "Black Road". As you know, The Black Road is the wrong way and the so called Red Road represents "the good way", the good side, or the right choice. The Red Road also refers to the color of blood which is the same for humans as for all animals. It is therefore culturally sacred, because it carries the treasure of all genetic code that reaches back to the beginning of life. One of the highlights of the Off label festival was an initiative called "K(no)w Picnic" – a long picnic table that was used for the dissemination of knowledge and handwork. Part of this project was an Artist's Blood donation campaign that motivated artists and non artists to visit the Open Space art

venue and donate blood for the Victoria, BC Blood Bank.

Do you think that such “art projects” as this one can improve the quality of life within the community and cultivate more faith and respect for each other?

Yes definitely, it's was brilliant idea. We all suffer from the lack of resources and blood is one of these resources. Questions like, where do we come from? or what is our blood type? are very important for the society today. Understanding the blood type is a way help people recognize this. Everyone needs a specific type of blood to live. Therefore, the Artist's Blood donation campaign reminded us about the importance of blood quantum, blood relationships, as well as understanding and reciprocal support. In regard to “Relationship”, such a blood campaign could be explained in the same way that First Nations and other indigenous people around the world would explain it. What is your blood type means actually: How many lines are behind you?

Do you think that acknowledging the importance of donation could teach us to have more respect for not only humans, but also for nature in general?

Yes, definitely. In my teachings, I try to share knowledge about the blood line with many people. Knowing your blood type could bring knowledge to other people that not only don't understand their relationship to other human beings, but also to the environment they are living in. You know many projects that have been made are just a waste of time, where they could be a little more beneficial, inclusive and sometimes look closer at the needs of general public.

You have been traveling for years now, teaching, sharing and learning from other cultures. You often talk about your experiences with Shamans and spiritual leaders. Today capitalism, for example the tourism industry, threatens and often destroys indigenous cultures and traditions by changing them into profitable businesses, entertainment parks and forces an over abundance of souvenirs.

Do you think there are any alternative ways of traveling and learning through it that could be used to disseminate, preserve traditions, knowledge, and even safeguard fundamental freedoms and right of indigenous cultures?

Traveling and sharing indigenous culture helps other to realized how beneficial it is for us to really link our cultures. Today, globalization is again another colonizer, which is pushing indigenous cultures into a sort of corporate greed. Everybody is becoming a blind consumer and it is destroying the environment. Those few who are nature orientated are threatened. Preserving indigenous knowledge under such circumstances is very difficult. For example, a lot of what is learned today is about extracting resources for consuming without even letting others know where these resources have come from and what harm is in the way they are being used. This shows us again the deficiency in the education system. Instead of teaching through experience, learning is very limited and experience is made in a too passive way. There are to many Western researchers in traditional territories traveling and trying to preserve indigenous identity and when I think about, I think that it would be more beneficial if we have more First Nation visiting other First Nations People, because, it is more important to have traditional aware people traveling around and visiting other indigenous cultures, in order to share knowledge and practice.

Perhaps exchange within an education system could be beneficial as well.

Indeed, If you want to retain someone's cultural knowledge and avoid some of the established reinterpretation society forces upon us, we have to start at the very beginning, at the grade school and not first at the PhD level. Simply put, if people want to understand and learn some of the traditional teaching, they need to visit residential schools, live in the reserve, or stay with elders and learn from them directly. Today, a lot of people grow up with preformed opinions and of others. You might have heard the old standard stereotype of the “drunken indian with a blanket” or others. These are false projection from

people who have minimal understanding about what is actually happening around them. As a First Nations person, I would say: If you don't know who your grandmother is and what teachings she has to give, then what kind of knowledge do you think of preserving? On the other hand, there are also some great academics that really make efforts to understand some of the history of the indigenous people. However, I still think that it would be more beneficial to have First Nations people traveling around. The opportunity to travel and visit indigenous people around the world, will definitely contribute to being accepted and to the dissemination and preservation of indigenous cultures.

What do you think the role for cultural venues might be, which are interested in promoting indigenous artists and preserving their art?

Well, I think it is very important to have artistic component within each community. There are a few venues and art spaces that are beneficial to and are interested in helping indigenous people to promote their culture and exhibit their artworks. I have also noticed that some "cultural venues" are actually very detrimental to indigenous people, because they look at such spaces not as an art space for promoting art, but solely as financial space. Let me give an example; If an indigenous artist sold a carving for 20 dollars and the carving was then resold for 200 dollars this is actually detrimental to the indigenous cultural practice. Keeping the carving and trying to sell it for a profit, would be more of an equal exchange and promotional for indigenous cultural practices.



Peter Morin performance, Off Label Festival

This is a two part question. Reading about Black Elk and his teachings, it was mentioned in a recent publication that he believed that one's visions can replace traditions. He also believed that many rituals practiced by the 1st Nations peoples were related in some way to those Christian traditions. Red Feather, like Black Elk believed that many rituals paralleled the sacraments of the Catholic Church. For example the Sun Dance to be representative of the suffering of Christ; the Making of Relatives is similar to baptism; The Sun Dance to communion; the Sweat lodge participation to penance.

Getting back to the First Nations graduation ceremony that we attended. One of the elders said a beautiful prayer. At one moment I noticed that she gesticulated the sign of the Cross. Is this a valid integration of a religious practice lying outside of indigenous traditions and can you tell us about how such adaption historically took place?

It is true that many First Nation ceremonies and spiritual practices stand in parallel to those practiced in Christianity. However, the ceremonies of the indigenous people are actually all inspired by the environment and our rituals and spiritual practices were celebrated before the Christians arrived in our lands. Many First Nation ceremonies use water for example and water is a key element in the majority of indigenous tribes. In the Christianity, the use of water symbolizes the baptism. Water is therefore sacred for all First Nation people and for Christians. During the colonization in Canada many First Nation People were forced into religious conversion. They started to practice Christian rituals but at the same time preserved their own rituals through chanting practices. Of course, the amount of integration of Christian

practices varies from tribe to tribe. On the Lakota territory in Cowichan Valley for example, Christianity has been accepted and combined with their traditional teachings. Another example is the how the traditional First Nation chanting is combined in the Cherokee Church. Now there is almost no difference between traditional First Nations chanting and the Cherokee Church.



The hearth of the Duncan Sweat Lodge ornamented with gifts from other cultures

During my stay on Victoria Island, we all went to your home in Duncan and had the opportunity to take part in a Sweat Lodge ceremony with you. You introduced us to the traditions of the Sweat Lodge and at the same time made us aware of the fact that each e is unique. For example, you have Buddhists statues at the points of the hearth and Tibetan prayer flags are hanging across the way. How did the integration of these diverse practices come about for you?

The Sweat Lodge Ceremony is about sharing. Several important teachers of mine told that the Sweat Lodge Keeper leaves something to share with other people and sharing means that the Spirits world is working. Basically, the Keeper has to take care of the Sweat Lodge, has to mediate knowledge, and teach the things that need to be learned. Originally, the Lakota Sweat Lodge Keepers were traveling most of the year to help people. Today, the Sweat Lodge Ceremony is a continuation of their practice to help others and not only First Nations People, but people from all around the world with their different religions and cultures. Monika, as you saw for yourself when you were here, the people who visited the Sweat Lodge in Duncan left me different things as a sign of gratefulness and sharing. The Buddhists statues and Tibetan prayer flags are some of these things and, for me, these are signs of respect for other cultures. Taken as a place of gathering, the Sweat Lodge is therefore representative of the global community. When I think about all the people who have visited me, and about the knowledge and the experiences that were shared, I like to see this phenomenon as a kind of global viral movement. Sweat Lodge is not a religion, it is just a practice of life. It's an ability to take care of the teachings and sharing in the good way. The Dalai Lama has said that we should not practice Buddhism to become a Buddhist, but just practice it to become a better human being. I believe that we all have to learn and try to understand the relationship to others.

I remembered that after the Sweat Lodge ceremony we were all very grateful for this unique chance to share something in the good way . This knowledge will continue to grow as time passes and I share it then with others.

Hwiemtun, Thank you very very much for the interview.

I am really happy to continue to share our thoughts.

Fred Roland, Hwiemtun was Born and raised in Khowutzun, so called 'Warm Land' by a Coast Salish mother and Hawaiian lineage father. Through spending many years with elders of his territory, Hwiemtun learned the cultural and spiritual traditions of his Salish Culture. During the last 15 years, he has journeyed around the world to explore and share ways of being with elders and healers of many indigenous tribes. Visiting tribes such as the Makushi, Wapashani, Shipibo, and Yanamamo of South America; the

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Kajikhastani and Hungarian tribes of eastern Europe; and the Humung, Tai Muang, Ainu just to name a few, Hwiemtun share spiritual teachings with the elder monks of India, Nepal and Lhasa, Tibet. His journeys were also spent traveling within North America connecting with the Lakota, Cree, Blackfoot, and many tribes within British Columbia. As a Sweat Lodge Keeper, Hwiemtun has been building sweat lodges in Germany, Hungary, South America, West Indies, Caribbean, Asia, and through out Canada. Hwiemtun has devoted his life to creating partnerships internationally, nationally and locally with organizations, youth programs, treatment centers, spiritual groups Universities and tribes. He conducts presentations, workshops and ceremonies on a regular basis to promote understanding of indigenous ways of knowing.

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