

Building Intercultural Community: Insights from Indigenous Bahá'í History

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews with Indigenous Bahá'ís from diverse backgrounds in Canada and the United States, this article explores efforts and experiences of intercultural Bahá'í community building dating from the 1960s through the early 1990s. At a time when colonial policies and attitudes remained ripe in North America at large, the Bahá'í Faith was a site of intercultural learning and exchange through which Indigenous and non-Indigenous adherents forged striking relationships of mutual respect. Building Bahá'í community in the decades considered here, however, was neither easy nor automatic and was especially fraught for Indigenous adherents, who also confronted tensions of intercultural communication and understanding and sometimes outright racism. Implementing unity in diversity is a gradual process that continues to be worked out in particular contexts over time. This process itself reveals the Bahá'í religion's role as a rich space of intercultural contact and community building.

Resumé

À partir d'entrevues menées avec des bahá'ís s autochtones de divers milieux

au Canada et aux États Unis, l'auteur se penche sur les efforts déployés et l'expérience acquise en matière de développement communautaire interculturel bahá'í dans les années 1960 jusqu'au début des années 1990. À une époque où les politiques et les attitudes coloniales demeuraient très présentes dans l'ensemble de l'Amérique du Nord, la foi bahá'íe était un lieu d'apprentissage et d'échanges interculturels où les bahá'ís autochtones et non autochtones ont forgé des relations remarquables de respect mutuel. Cependant, bâtir une communauté bahá'íe au cours des décennies examinées n'a pas été un processus aisé ni automatique, en particulier pour les bahá'ís autochtones qui ont aussi dû faire face à des tensions sur le plan des communications et de la compréhension interculturelles, parfois même à du racisme. Établir l'unité dans la diversité est un processus graduel qui continue d'être mis au point au fil du temps dans des contextes particuliers. Le processus lui même met en lumière le rôle de la religion bahá'íe en tant que lieu propice aux relations et au développement communautaire interculturels.

Resumen

Recurriendo a entrevistas con bahá'ís indígenas de diversos trasfondos en Canadá y los Estados Unidos, este artículo explora los esfuerzos y las experiencias de la construcción de comunidad bahá'í intercultural datando desde los 1960s hasta los años tempranos de los 1990s. En un tiempo cuando las políticas y actitudes coloniales permanecían fuertes en Norteamérica en general, la Fe Bahá'í era un sitio de aprendizaje e intercambio intercultural a través de la cual adherentes indígenas y no-indígenas forjaban relaciones impresionantes de respeto mutuo. Construyen-

do comunidad bahá'í en las décadas aquí consideradas, sin embargo, no fue fácil ni automático y estuvo especialmente lleno de tensión para los adherentes indígenas quienes también confrontaron tensiones interculturales de comunicación y comprensión y a veces de racismo flagrante. Implementando la unidad en diversidad es un proceso gradual que se continúa trabajado en contextos específicos a través del tiempo. Este proceso en sí revela el rol de la religión bahá'í como un espacio rico de contacto intercultural y de construcción de comunidad.

“That was my big eye opener,” Tlingit Bahá'í Joyce Shales recalled, describing the international Bahá'í conference she attended with her father in Palermo, Sicily, in the summer of 1968. “I met people from Africa,” she continued, “from everywhere in the world. So it was like this was the epitome of everything that I thought I believed, and now there it was, right at your feet. And it was the real beginning of the Bahá'í Faith as a global religion for me.”

As a Bahá'í, Shales developed a global spiritual geography that, to paraphrase Bahá'u'lláh, viewed the earth as one country and humanity its citizens. Like other adherents, Shales activated this vision, as well as an attendant sense of world citizenship, through travel and attendance at transnational Bahá'í gatherings. And as sociological studies of the contemporary Bahá'í community have signaled, she and other Bahá'ís further forged “situated universalist” identities by working to build Bahá'u'lláh's promised “New

World Order” at home (McMullen 12; Echevarria; Warburg).

Bahá'ís are charged, as a core matter of the Faith, to build community with other adherents. Where existing literature on Bahá'í community building has stressed the role of Bahá'í institutions and considered their operation in specific contexts, I focus in this article on interactions between adherents themselves and the Bahá'í community as a broader space of intercultural interaction. More specifically, I draw on interviews with Indigenous Bahá'ís to examine efforts and experiences of intercultural Bahá'í community building dating from the 1960s through the early 1990s.

This article is derived from a wider study that considers how and why Indigenous people from diverse backgrounds in Canada and the United States joined the Bahá'í religion and practiced their faith during the second half of the twentieth century (Horton). This larger study, like this article, is based on interviews with Indigenous Bahá'ís from both urban and reserve/reservation environments stretching from Alaska to Alberta to Arizona and locations beyond and in between. Most of those whom I interviewed became Bahá'ís between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s. A number were raised with a strong sense of Indigenous identity, while they were also racialized as Indians. Others grew up disconnected from their Indigenous heritage and a few first came to openly identify as Indigenous by way of Bahá'í observance itself. I come to this

study as a scholar of settler heritage who is not a member of the Bahá'í Faith. I offer the analysis that follows in a spirit of respect and dialogue.

The core Bahá'í teaching of unity in diversity was a strong motivational factor for Indigenous people who joined the religion in the decades examined here and their subsequent "deepening" in the Faith. Bahá'ís, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, came and continue to come together for regular worship and celebration and for administrative functions, teaching, and service projects. Encouraged to "live the Bahá'í life" in the everyday, many also cultivated relationships that extended beyond explicitly Bahá'í spaces or activities (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Compilation* 1–28).

At a time when colonial policies and attitudes remained prevalent in North America at large, the Bahá'í Faith was a site of intercultural learning and exchange through which Indigenous and non-Indigenous adherents forged profound relationships of mutual respect. Building the Bahá'í community between the 1960s and the early 1990s, however, was neither easy nor automatic, and it was especially fraught for Indigenous adherents, who also confronted tensions of intercultural communication and understanding—and sometimes even outright racism. As articulated in the Bahá'í Writings and borne out in ongoing community practice, implementing unity in diversity is a gradual process. Other articles in this collection reflect on more recent efforts to build Indigenous-Bahá'í

relationships, informed by currents and experiences like those considered here.

Participation in the Bahá'í community frequently brought Indigenous adherents into a form of close intercultural interaction many had not experienced before. While Shales, for example, stressed how her global travels opened up what the religious studies scholars Manuel Vásquez and Marie Marquardt have called an expanded "cartography of belonging," she likewise emphasized how engagement in the Bahá'í community back home in Alaska involved a new form of "mixing" altogether (53). As she recalled of her entry into the Bahá'í community in the mid-1960s:

when I became Bahá'í, I can tell you that from the background I came from, I came from a small Alaskan town [Sitka] that I had never left, except maybe I traveled to Seattle once or twice with my family. Coming to the States was like coming to a foreign country. So I went away to the University of Alaska [in Fairbanks, in the Alaskan interior], got married, had one son, and then became Bahá'í. Okay. Never been around White people socially to speak of. That was a shock. Most of the people I've been around are my family, except for at school or having to do with some administrative organization of some sort. I worked in a hospital after high school and I really enjoyed

my work. It was there that I had my first real interaction with the non-Native community in my hometown.

Coming into the Bahá'í community further extended such "real" interaction. Drawing on the metaphor of mixing, Shales explained that "when I became Bahá'í I got mixed in with a bunch of people that I had never been mixed in with before. A whole new different kind of a group." She contrasted this experience with her upbringing in the Presbyterian Church: "Even when I had gone to church," she continued, "you don't mix in with people like you do in the Bahá'í community; it's a whole different thing. When you go to church, you go there on Sunday, you visit a little, and you go home." The Bahá'í Faith, by contrast, brought Shales quite literally into the homes (the gathering places for events such as Bahá'í firesides and Feasts) of her coreligionists.

The novelty of Bahá'í intercultural interaction was not limited to those in remote environments like Alaska. Joining the Bahá'í community, even the act of enrollment itself, presented new dynamics for adherents in urban areas as well. Mary Gubatayao-Hagen, for example, described the acute pain she confronted when she entered an unfamiliar White middle-class suburb in San Jose, California, in order to sign her Bahá'í declaration card in 1981. Gubatayao-Hagen is of Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Filipino heritage and was raised in Washington State. She was

first introduced to the Bahá'í Faith by her mother, Ruby Gubatayao, who encouraged her daughter to formally enroll as a Bahá'í in the local community of San Jose, where she was then living.¹ Gubatayao-Hagen had come of age in a context of urban Indigenous activism in Seattle, a factor, she stressed, that firmly informed her declaration experience. She recalled:

I was pretty radical and revolutionary. I wasn't exactly American Indian Movement—they were very militant—but I think that our family, and especially my mom, was a notch below that. And so for me with all this Indian activism, to have to go to this middle-class White neighbourhood, and I was just praying to Bahá'u'lláh, I said, you know, "Are You testing how much I love You? Are You testing that I believe in You?" Because I knew that Bahá'u'lláh was going to be the healing medicine for our people; I knew that already. And so I'm going, but oh my God, it took all this strength. I mean, I was crying, and I just, every step across the street and up the walk and up on the porch and knocking on the door and going into the house—the whole thing was extremely painful. But I said, you know, I would do this, but as I was crossing that street, I said,

1 For context on Ruby Gubatayao see "Ruby Gubatayao Served the Cause Among Native Peoples."

“Bahá’u’lláh, I’m going to do this.” And I said, “But I am going to work my whole life to make sure that other Native people don’t have to go to this extreme, and overcome these kind of hurdles to have access to You.”

Gubatayao-Hagen’s reflections reveal a charged conversion process from Red Power² to intercultural Bahá’í community and identify the sorts of structural barriers—social, cultural, and racial—that Indigenous people sometimes confronted as they made such a move. At the same time, her experience illustrates the lasting kinship that such contact could promote. Speaking to a sense of shared genealogy that Bahá’ís often cultivated with their religious teachers and those Bahá’ís in whose company they signed their declaration cards, Gubatayao-Hagen explained that she remains

2 “Red Power” refers to a visible, sometimes militant (to use Gubatayao-Hagen’s term) Indigenous activist movement that came into public view in the late 1960s (Johnson, Nagel, and Champagne). On earlier strands of such activism see Cobb and Fowler. Andrea Smith has employed the language of conversion “from Red Power to Christianity” (99). Lorintha Umtuch, who became a Bahá’í on the Yakama Reservation in Washington in 1966, likewise notes the class dimension of her declaration experience, in her case connecting with “poor Indian people from the coast” who had traveled to her reservation to teach the religion.

connected with the non-Indigenous (and, it turned out, prominent Bahá’í) family at whose home she enrolled and feels “really lucky to have them as these very close spiritual mentors in my life.”

Other interviewees likewise recalled formative mentorship they received as early Bahá’ís. Deloria Bighorn, for example, who is of Yankton Sioux and Chickasaw heritage and who is the current chair of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Canada, spoke with great warmth about two elderly sisters, Dorothy Hayes and Emmalu McCandless, who served as key supports after she declared in Walla Walla, Washington, in the late 1960s. Bahá’í demographics, Bighorn noted, were shifting by generation as well as by race at this time, and youth often met with McCandless for intense spiritual discussion and study. As Bighorn explained, “Her home was always open and the youth were there hanging out and she was just delighted. She treated us all as absolute equals.” Bighorn remained in contact with these women after she moved away from Walla Walla. She recalled being particularly moved when she first introduced McCandless to her husband, Jacob, who was Lakota from Montana:

I remember she said to Jacob—when we first met and married, I wanted Jacob to meet her—and the minute she took his hands in her hands she said, “This boy has been hurt.” And that really touched Jacob’s heart, because

that's really all he wanted anybody to recognize, is that he had been hurt. "This boy has been hurt." She brought him in and she was such an amazing woman.

Bighorn did not specify whether or to what degree Hayes and McCandless were aware of the colonial history that had caused this hurt. But her reflections imply that the heart connections they cultivated worked on an intimate, interpersonal scale to help heal it.

Interviewees pointed to "pioneers,"³ in particular, as adherents with whom they forged meaningful and lasting bonds. They invariably spoke with great affection about non-Indigenous Bahá'ís who committed themselves to pioneering over the long term. Interviewees recognized that these pioneers voluntarily undertook intercultural teaching and acknowledged the steps these Bahá'ís took to extend themselves beyond their own cultural comfort zones (Umtuch; Locke; Tyler; Healy). Peigan Bahá'í Beverley Knowlton, for example, whose parents joined the religion when she was a young girl, stressed that the pioneers who made regular visits to her reserve in southern Alberta during the 1960s and 70s "came and they didn't take us different. They accepted us." She added that

3 "Any believer who arises and leaves his [or her] home to journey to another country [or area] for the purpose of teaching the Cause is a pioneer" (The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 30 March 1971).

"through the years, we had all kinds of Bahá'ís come into our home. And Dale and Joyce [two non-Indigenous Bahá'í women], well I just practically grew up with them."⁴ The indelible impact of these relationships was made clear when Knowlton recalled her hesitancy, as a teenager, to join in the Indigenous activism brewing in Edmonton, where she attended high school. Youth in the city, she explained, were "being really racist with White people. And having these protests and all this and I was right in with them. But the thing that always got me is I can never fully join them because I was raised as a Bahá'í. And if I start calling White people down, then that would be just like calling Dale Lillico down and Joyce McGuffie, who were a very big part of my growing up." An unwillingness to partake in what anthropologist James Clifford has described as "exclusivist nativism" did not mean that Knowlton, or other Indigenous Bahá'ís, were apathetic (200). Rather, as her expression of intercultural solidarity signals, Bahá'ís were working to realize their own vision of unity in diversity.

Some Indigenous Bahá'ís—in the Yukon and on the Navajo Reservation, for example—lived in areas with a certain geographic concentration of Indigenous adherents. In the everyday lives of many Indigenous Bahá'ís, however, engagement in the Bahá'í community necessarily meant

4 For background on Dale Lillico and Joyce McGuffie see Verge 70–71, 82, 83, 177, 266, 310, 311.

engagement in intercultural community. The relative scarcity and geographical isolation of Indigenous adherents meant that in order to partake in the community, they had to reach out and build intercultural bridges in a way not required of the majority of Bahá'ís.

This process sometimes produced strong relationships. But it also generated strains. Most Bahá'ís did not participate in teaching or pioneering among Indigenous people. When they encountered Indigenous people and practices at Bahá'í gatherings, then, it was likely the first time that they found themselves in any kind of close interaction with Indigenous people. Such interaction, of course, was precisely the sort of thing that the principle of unity in diversity promoted. Yet despite sincere commitment to this teaching, the power that attended—indeed, constituted—difference did not simply evaporate at Bahá'í functions. The result was frequent intercultural miscommunication and misunderstanding and sometimes outright racism. Such difficulties caused a number of Indigenous Bahá'ís to pull back from active community practice, a pattern that in turn exacerbated demographic imbalance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís.⁵

5 Interviewee Lee Brown noted that many of these people continued to identify as Bahá'ís but became “inactive.” Another interviewee, Phil Lane Jr., described these as “estranged” adherents.

Lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of non-Indigenous Bahá'ís proved to be a particular point of tension for some Indigenous adherents. Many of those whom I interviewed were first drawn to the Faith by the space that they saw within it for Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The teachings of progressive revelation and cultural preservation that the Bahá'í Faith promoted were profoundly refreshing and inspiring for many Indigenous Bahá'ís, both those who had preexisting ties to Indigenous cultures and others who made these connections by way of their Bahá'í practice (Horton). At the same time, a number of interviewees hinted at having encountered suspicion, fear, and dismissal from non-Indigenous adherents.

Cherokee Bahá'í Lee Brown, for example, spoke pointedly about the profound surprise and disappointment he felt following the first Nineteen Day Feast that he attended after becoming a Bahá'í in Seattle in the 1970s. He described being approached by an elderly White woman, who told him, “Now that you're a Bahá'í, I hope you quit that Indian singing nonsense. It's time to let that go and just be a Bahá'í now.” Brown further detailed his reaction: “I thought, ‘What?’ I thought the whole thing about the Bahá'í Faith was unity in diversity and that our diversity was good. And I'd sang at Bahá'í gatherings and people had said, ‘Oh, that's cool.’ And now it was controversial.” As other scholars have observed, and other interviewees also noted, there

was a particular moment of pushback against such diversity in this period, as significantly more youth and people of colour came into the North American Bahá'í community (Garlington 137–39; Deloria Bighorn; Lane). Tensions were not isolated to this time, however. Anthropologist Carolyn Sawin, for example, has reported conflicts in the Yukon, where non-Indigenous Bahá'ís regularly dismissed Indigenous cultural practice as entertainment, not worship (82–83, 117–20, 169–70, 179). Similarly, writings from the Universal House of Justice that spoke of the incorporation of “colourful characteristics of particular peoples and tribes” and that distinguished “festive and cultural events” from “religious ceremonies and rituals” may have caused Bahá'ís to overlook the spiritual orientation of Indigenous cultures that do not strictly parse the sacred and the secular (Letter dated 26 March 1982).

The same community context and composition that produced pushback against Indigenous cultural practices like drumming and singing also contributed to a normative baseline of Bahá'í practice that some interviewees described as alienating. Bahá'í writings on ritual caution against just this sort of baseline. Not unlike Bahá'í writings that deal with superstition—which enjoin Bahá'ís to eschew empty, fear-based, repetitious form—writings regarding ritual urge Bahá'ís to avoid establishing “rigid rituals” so that local Bahá'í expression may flourish (Hornby 477–78; McMullen 7–8, 76–77). As scholar and former Bahá'í Linda

Walbridge observed in 1995, however, Bahá'ís have historically exhibited anxiety about ritual in a way that has often curbed flexibility in Bahá'í observance. At the same time, Bahá'ís have sometimes failed to recognize how practices that have hardened into established form are themselves a kind of ritual, and a rigid one at that.

The format of the Nineteen Day Feast, for example, has changed over time, but since Shoghi Effendi's ministry, it has been mandated that the Feast, however cultural varied, consist of three components: devotions, administration, and socialization (McMullen 85–87; the Universal House of Justice, qtd. in *Compilation* 420). Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice after him, encouraged flexibility within this broad structure. And yet rigidity still persisted in practice. A 1976 editorial in *Bahá'í Canada*, for example, critiqued what was then an established pattern: “A Feast can only be a Feast if five or six prayers are followed by a ‘consultation’ which is followed by tea and cookies. In spite of the warnings which Shoghi Effendi wrote to us, we keep falling into the groove of conformity” (“The Wide Path of Service: An Editorial” 2).

Such conformity is something that Lee Brown and other Bahá'ís on the Okanagan Indian Reserve strove to address in the 1980s when they held a pipe ceremony as the devotional component of their Feast. As Brown recalled:

for a while we were having Feast on the Vernon reserve, because we had enough Bahá'ís to have a Feast. And the Feast would often be at our house. And what we would do, and we decided to do, was a pipe ceremony. We'd do a pipe ceremony as our prayer section. We'd have the social section and then we'd have the business section [...] And sometimes Bahá'ís from in town would come and participate. And they would say, "Well, this is a pipe ceremony, it's not a Feast."

Articulating a sense of intertribal Bahá'í affiliation, Brown continued:

And I would say, "Well, I heard that on the Navajo Reservation, the Feast is all day long." And here in Vernon, we go into Feast in town, it's an hour long, that's it, bam, you go home. But we sat down as a community and said, "How do we want to do Feast? This is how we want to do it." And it's very clear in the Writings that different people around the world, different places, will do the Feast differently. You know, we wanted to do it that way.

In 1989, the Universal House of Justice explicitly called for the Nineteen Day Feast to incorporate "a salutary diversity, representative of the unique characteristics of the various societies in which it is held and

therefore conducive to the upliftment and enjoyment of its participants" (qtd. in *Compilation* 420). Brown recalled that Bahá'ís in Vernon, however, simply "couldn't get their minds around the fact that it was a Feast."

The place of the pipe ceremony within the Bahá'í Faith became a point of reflection and dialogue within a number of local Bahá'í communities and national administrations in North America. It also drew the attention of international Bahá'í figure Rúhíyyih Khánum. Speaking about a gathering on the Peigan Indian Reserve in southern Alberta in 1986, Brown shared:

I was at a pipe ceremony on the Peigan Reserve in Alberta, at the Bahá'í Centre on the Peigan Reserve, many years ago, and Phil Lane was doing the pipe ceremony during a gathering and there was quite a few Persian Bahá'ís there and others, non-Native Bahá'ís, who were not being respectful, who were talking during the ceremony. And that night Rúhíyyih Khánum, the wife of Shoghi Effendi, was there and she was upset by the disrespect. And she stood up and gave a little talk. And she told the non-Natives there, she pointed at the pipe and she said, "In North America, that's it. You guys have to respect that here. This is an important thing in North America." She actually sent a letter to all the Persian Bahá'ís in the world—every Persian

Bahá'í in the world—saying, “Respect the pipe. When you’re present with the pipe, respect it.”⁶

Rúhíyyih *Khánúm*, who had visited the same area and had been given a Blackfoot name nearly twenty-five years earlier and who is remembered by many Bahá'ís, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as both an ally and a relative, followed this up in October with a letter to the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly.⁷ In this meditation on her journey to Canada earlier that year and the ongoing imperative, in view of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prophecy concerning Indigenous peoples, of outreach to Indigenous communities, Rúhíyyih *Khánúm* again chastised Iranian Bahá'ís for the disrespect they

6 What Brown was likely remembering here is a letter Rúhíyyih *Khánúm* sent to Canadian Bahá'ís on the subject (Rabbani, letter dated 28 October 1986). An article about this gathering, the opening of the Naat Owa ‘Pii (Sacred Things) Bahá'í Centre in Brocket, was published in an area newspaper: “Peigans Open Welcome Baha’i Centre.” Suggesting a shared sense of Indigenous Bahá'í memory and identification, another interviewee, Donald Addison, who was not in attendance at this gathering, also mentioned it in his interview with me (though he put it among the Blackfeet in Montana, not the Blackfoot in Alberta).

7 Rúhíyyih *Khánúm* was given the Blackfoot name “Natu-Okcist,” or “Blessed Mother,” during a visit to the Peigan Reserve in 1960 (Rabbani, Message).

demonstrated toward the pipe ceremony at the Peigan Reserve. Invoking her late husband, she also wrote in this letter, “I remember Shoghi Effendi telling the American pilgrims at the dinner table in the Western Pilgrim House that the American Bahá'ís were tainted with race prejudice; he said ‘they do not think they are, but they are’” (Rabbani, letter dated 28 October 1986). “I think this holds true,” she continued, “also of the whole situation vis-à-vis the Indians in North America” (Rabbani, letter dated 28 October 1986).

While it was White Bahá'ís who set the dominant cultural tone of the Bahá'í community in Canada and the United States, this exchange at the Peigan Reserve underscores how Bahá'í intercultural relations were not a straightforward Indigenous-White issue. There was an Iranian presence in the North American Bahá'í community from the start, something that was significantly amplified with the arrival of relatively large numbers of Bahá'í emigrants in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This demographic shift sometimes produced new intercultural tensions (Brown; Greenaway; Shales). At the same time, several interviewees also stressed a strong sense of connection that they shared with Iranian Bahá'ís on the basis of common histories of oppression.⁸ Further, it is quite possible that

8 Lucas; Umtuch; Greenaway. A similar connection was drawn in the 1980 Indigenous Bahá'í teaching pamphlet, Circle

at least some of the Iranian Bahá'ís in attendance at the gathering at the Peigan Reserve were new to Canada and would thus have had little, if any, prior exposure to Indigenous cultural practices such as the pipe ceremony. Their very presence at a gathering on a reserve signals a first step, however shaky, toward intercultural exchange.

Such learning was a two-way process. Joyce Shales, for her part, recalled her surprise when, after an initial honeymoon period during which she felt a strong acceptance and contentedness in the Bahá'í community, “slowly these cross-cultural issues started cropping up.” Though Shales subsequently dedicated much of her personal and professional life to intercultural education, she noted that “I didn’t know anything about cross-cultural issues at that time, I didn’t know what they were. So they were kind of hard for me to understand.” These issues had much to do with communication, with the subtle unspoken cues that structured interaction. Shales, for example, recalled having difficulty understanding why Bahá'ís “wouldn’t wait for me to speak,” as Tlingit precepts of courtesy prescribed. As she elaborated elsewhere, with a characteristic touch of humor:

of Unity. Diné Bahá'ís likewise draw a parallel between the Navajo “Long Walk” and Bahá'u'lláh's series of forced migrations across the Middle East (Covey 54). Graeme Were further notes a sense of solidarity shared by Nalik Bahá'ís in New Ireland and Iranian adherents (666).

I used to tell Clint [her husband] it took me ten years before I could look a White person in the eye. Ten years of work. It's just that we never looked people in the eye. That was a teaching. You don't look somebody in the eye, because when you look somebody in the eye, it meant you were angry. So, to then have White people constantly looking you in the eye, and they're walking right up to your face and then staring you in the eye—because some people really do that—was just unnerving. So you have to tell yourself, “They don't mean anything by it, they don't mean anything by it. Even if they back you into the refrigerator, they don't mean anything by it.” So they have no clue, but you're always on the defensive, because you're trying to cope. Any Indian will tell you that. Or any minority, be it Mexican, Black, or whatever. I believe. Because the cultures are different. And it's not just that, it's eye contact and touching and space. And asking questions. And how close you get to somebody when you're talking to them. Like one guy used to back me into the corner all the time, because he'd get so close to me and I'd be backing up. But he'd keep walking forward until I was backed into the fridge, and all the time he'd be asking questions. Never failed. I'd still be backing up, he'd still be yakking away. And asking what would be to us

inappropriate questions. Nothing harmful, just questions we would never ask somebody. Or questions we normally wouldn't ask people. That was cultural. If somebody wanted to tell you something, they'd tell you. That was it.

Speaking to her increased conversance in White communication styles (like the ability to “look a White person in the eye”), Shales added, “So the way I am today is not the way I was. I would say I'm a completely different person now than I was at that time.” She and her family did not sacrifice their sense of being Tlingit upon becoming Bahá'í. And building unity in diversity, as several interviewees stressed, demanded flexibility on all sides (Shales; Gubatayao-Hagen; Greenaway; Covey). Yet in practice, the process demanded something different—indeed, something more—from Indigenous adherents. Non-Indigenous ignorance of Indigenous teachings like the Tlingit interactional patterns Shales described produced a normative baseline of non-Indigenous Bahá'í practice. This meant that it was Indigenous adherents, rather than non-Indigenous ones, who were, more often than not, required to negotiate and cross the cultural color line.

This process proved intensely painful for some Indigenous adherents. Jacob Bighorn, for example, spoke about the early enthusiasm that he brought to his employment at Maxwell International School, a Bahá'í institution in Shawnigan Lake, British Columbia,

where he and his wife, Deloria, began working in 1991.⁹ Bighorn was inspired by intersections that he saw between Indigenous spiritual principles and Maxwell's pedagogic philosophy. Still, everyday interactions at the school proved a challenge. As he shared:

I would say something at a staff meeting, I remember one time distinctly, offering something in my style, I wasn't conscious that it was a style at the time, but I said what I said, and there was no response. I thought I was making a contribution. Well, I heard somebody else say something, say what I meant, the person said what I meant, the way I said it, so I thought we were speaking together, but when this person said it, everybody said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah! That's a good idea!” And I reached around and I said, “I just said that!” And the person turned to me [and said], “Jacob, you speak in metaphors!” And I got confused: Is that a downer? Is that an upper? Or this person, is she frustrated? Is it her problem? Is it my problem? [...] And, I think that was the challenge then.

9 Maxwell International School, named for early Canadian Bahá'ís May and William Sutherland Maxwell, the parents of Rúhíyyih Khánúm, was a co-ed school for students in grades seven through twelve; it opened in 1988 and closed in 2008.

That's an aspect of being Bahá'í, that's the diversity . . . in the end, I think that's part of why I worked my way out [from teaching at the school]. It was too frustrating, it took its toll on my heart, my health, I think, which is symbolic of suicides, the high rate of suicides amongst Natives, all the other emotional, psychological troubles, and health troubles—that this degree of low self-esteem and not caring, not being in charge of one's own destiny, the sense of destiny is in someone else's hands and so forth. So it's diminishing, diminishes the spiritual strength.

Bighorn further addressed such tensions in relation to dreams and visions. Speaking in a contemporary context, he explained how persistent patterns of cultural dominance lead people to keep their dreams and visions private:

because for the most part, non-Native communities are left-brain thinkers, who dominate social scenes or processes, even in the Bahá'í Faith, they tend to diminish or belittle, unconsciously, belittle the existence of such experiences held by Native people who have these dreams. So sometimes these unique experiences, experiences unique to the Native way of thinking, are discounted as meaningless, because nobody else, especially the people in authority, the legitimizers, if they

don't have these dreams, if they don't think they're important, then apparently, in my experience, my unique experience, [it's] not significant, it's not valuable. So it could be sometimes a daily battle, a daily process against energy to maintain a sense of value, of what one sees in your mind, or imagination, or a spiritual definition, is worth something. When all around, the social standards, the cultural values surrounding you do not acknowledge your existence. Or the existence of your unique way of seeing things.

As members of settler society, non-Indigenous Bahá'ís not only reaped the material benefits of a long history of Indigenous land dispossession, but they were also inheritors of a less tangible form of self-assurance and privilege that derived from having one's worldview and modes of interaction consistently validated and reinforced by overarching social and cultural cues.¹⁰ As Hesquiaht Bahá'í J. C. Lucas, also from Vancouver Island, observed of his own experience:

the culture, the mainstream culture, in some parts of the Bahá'í community, people don't realize how strong it is. When Native people come in and there's a pressure, without really being

10 On settler society and the privilege that accrues to its members see, for example, Regan.

pressurized. A lot of the stuff comes in. And it triggered me quite seriously some years ago and I just began to withdraw. And my old residential school things came to the fore. So I just kind of withdrew. I still teach, I still pray early in the morning, every day since 1980, actually.

Lucas took care to note that he's "not mad at the Bahá'ís" and that he still "love[s] and honor[s] the Bahá'í Faith." His decision to pull back from active community participation seemingly stemmed not from specific actions on the part of particular Bahá'ís, but from the broader social context that he, as an Indigenous person, found particularly painful to navigate. Simply operating in the environment of the dominant culture, where non-Indigenous Bahá'ís and attendant social patterns predominated, invoked the living legacies of such damaging experiences as residential schools and ultimately led to his retreat from Bahá'í community life. Experiences like these underline just how deep colonial wounds continue to cut and suggest the significant obstacles that exist to building unity, even in a community explicitly committed to this cause.

Racism and paternalism further undermined the prospect of unity in diversity in practice and often took crass forms as well as more subtle iterations. Mohawk Bahá'í Linda Loft, for example, recalled the pain she felt when, not long after moving to Victoria, British Columbia, in the early 1970s, she

offered to assist with the preparation for an upcoming Bahá'í gathering and a detailed discussion over décor ensued. Her experience reveals a pattern of normative practice and prejudice: "the next thing was, well, 'We have to sit down and really discuss this, because this is such an important occasion, we don't want daffodils. We need to know here that roses are going to be needed.'" Loft recalled thinking:

"Well, what am I?" But I didn't say anything. Being the way I am. But I was extremely hurt by that statement. But I saved face, I just put that behind me. But that just isn't meant to happen. Of course I know it's going to be roses. Of course I'm going to try and get the best of what we'll have at the season, at this time, in this different place. And of course I'm going to have tablecloths on our tables.

She continued, elaborating on the pejorative implications of this exchange:

Take, for instance, maybe I live on reserve.¹¹ Maybe I've never ever seen a rose. Maybe I've never ever seen a daffodil, you know? Maybe I'm so remote there's no flowers growing around where I live [...]. Now, I've got to set this here place up. Now I'm picturing myself,

11 Loft herself grew up on the Tyendinaga Reserve in southern Ontario (Watts and Verge).

take myself out of that situation, put myself in a different situation such as the one I just explained, and, “Yeah sure, I’ll do that [volunteer to help set up].” A stick might be the most precious thing to me, that I would put in my most expensive container, and put it on the table. Maybe a cedar bough, maybe a circle of rocks might be the best thing, you know? Maybe to me that is really offering everything I could, from the heart, for my Creator. And I know that the people that are coming, that are going to be attending, are going to feel my joy of being able to do these things. Being able to put this event on to the best of my ability. Not judge me for what their standard is, being better than mine, or mine being better than theirs either.

Echoing an emphasis on process also articulated by other interviewees, Loft stressed the relative youth of the Bahá’í religion and framed moments like this as significant learning opportunities. She and other interviewees stressed that tension was inevitable as what Shoghi Effendi called the “embryonic” Bahá’í community took new intercultural form (Loft; Covey; Shales; Kahn; Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration* 90). As Nedra Greenaway, a Bahá’í of Metis and Chinese heritage, stated in a clear expression of Bahá’í historical consciousness, “Comfort isn’t on the agenda in the next one hundred or so years.” Yet comfort is relative.

The exchange that Loft experienced as painful paternalism, for example, likely went unregistered by those insisting on roses.

How Indigenous Bahá’ís themselves participated in intercultural community had much to do with their own personal and family histories. What were painful incidents to some because of previous experiences of colonial violence or trauma, for example, may not have been taken this way by others from different backgrounds. Where some interviewees were accustomed to, if not entirely comfortable, interacting in non-Indigenous society when they became Bahá’ís, for others, partaking in this religious community required a more radical step. Lee Brown, for his part, shared that he takes some responsibility for the difficulties that he has had interacting in Bahá’í communities, noting, “I know because of the trauma of my youth I overreact to things.” Despite painful memories that continue to affect his life and that led to periodic retreat from the Bahá’í community, Brown also stressed that he is pleased to be part of a community that is grappling with these issues: “I think that’s very important. You know, it’s difficult and it’s hard, but we’re doing something that’s very hard—we’re trying to bring human beings together, and that’s not an easy thing. But I’m glad to be part of a community that’s attempting to do that.”

One of the key tools that Bahá’ís employed, and continue to use, in this process of community building

is consultation. Bahá'ís are instructed in their discussion and decision-making processes to apply this method, which counsels “the ‘subjugation of all egotism and unruly passions, the cultivation of frankness and freedom of thought as well as courtesy, openness of mind, and wholehearted acquiescence in a majority decision” (The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 10 June 1966). Several interviewees noted similarities between Indigenous and Bahá'í methods of consultation and suggested that more flexible and responsive modes of communication have developed within the Bahá'í community over time owing, in part, to Indigenous representation on Bahá'í institutions like Local and National Spiritual Assemblies (Jacob Bighorn; Gubatayao-Hagen). In the decades examined for this research, however, the focus and tone of consultation seem to have been frequently set by majority adherents, who found their own cultural cues and assumptions silently confirmed in and by the Bahá'í community at large. During this period, strong emphasis on Bahá'í expansion, as opposed to building internal community understanding, further exacerbated such tensions (Brown; Lane).

Despite a sincere desire for Indigenous difference within the Bahá'í community, an overwhelming emphasis by some on unity often functioned to shut down necessary discussion of diversity. This was, and in some instances remains, a source of tension within the Bahá'í community. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directed adherents to:

take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. (*Selections* 44:1)

Shoghi Effendi further called for consultation that is “frank and unfettered” (qtd. in Hornby 579). In practice, though, the tendency to avoid any hint of tension or disunity at times kept Bahá'ís of diverse stripes from openly confronting such controversial subjects as racism within the Bahá'í community.¹²

Deloria Bighorn observed of her own personal pattern of activity and retreat within the Bahá'í community:

I remember the last time I left the [Nineteen Day] Feast and I thought, that's it, I'm not going back. It was when I was at Maxwell [International School] in '90, I'm going to say '95, '96, maybe

12 Bahá'í teachings on backbiting likewise contributed to reticence on the part of many interviewees to speak directly to the subject of intercultural tension within the Bahá'í community in their interviews with me.

sometime in there. I remember feeling so frustrated that I just got up out of the Feast and left. And that was the magic day. Because I went home and I prayed about it, I talked to my parents about it and I thought, why am I leaving? How is anything going to be different if I don't stay? How is anything ever going to change if I just keep leaving? Every time I leave, then that's one less voice to say something different. And it was a big "aha" moment, but that's what happened for me. I can see that it's different for different people, but I guess the only way I reconciled it is how I deal with it. How I deal with it is that, the basic teaching is the teaching of unity, right? And the basic law under that is contention and conflict are forbidden in the *Aqdas* [the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*], it says. They're forbidden. So, I got to do something about that. I cannot be in conflict with somebody else, to be right with my God. So I can certainly feel it, but I got to work on it, I got to do something about it. I can ask nobody else to be accountable for that but me. So that's when I quit leaving the table.

For Bighorn, aspiring to achieve unity proved a prompt for addressing internal Bahá'í tension. She noted that since she joined the religion in the late 1960s, there has been significant improvement in intercultural communication and understanding within the

Bahá'í community. At the same time, her reflections imply that the onus for raising issues of intercultural tension continues to fall on Indigenous adherents like her, as it generally did during the intervening period, when many non-Indigenous Bahá'ís (White ones especially) were unaware of the scale of their own privilege and, reluctant to engage in "frank and full" consultation, proved ill-prepared to fully plumb its implications.¹³

Tensions like these stimulated a sense of solidarity among Indigenous adherents and sometimes encouraged interactions between them. As Deloria Bighorn reflected: "the Native people, the Native Bahá'ís, always helped each other, always tried to help each other. Always tried to reach out to each other. Always recognized that there was a desire to have more of us and that it was a hard go. That there were other people who were trying." Mutual support efforts included gatherings such as "Native Councils" in Alaska (discussed

13 Deloria Bighorn employed the phrase "frank and full consultation" in our interview together. Consultation has proved a challenging process outside of the Indigenous context as well. Writing about the Atlanta Bahá'í community, for example, Michael McMullen shared a joke he encountered several times in the course of his research: "although Shoghi Effendi counsels 'the spirit of frank and loving consultation,' (1974, [*Bahá'í Administration*] 63) 'frank is often left out in the car' when [a Local Spiritual Assembly] meeting begins" (45).

also by Joyce Baldwin in this volume). Marilyn Patterson reported in a 1978 *Bahá'í News* article that these gatherings were organized “in response to the need to find an effective way for native Indian and Eskimo believers to express their concerns.” “Basically,” she explains, “the Native Council is a teaching [and deepening] conference conducted for natives within a native setting. The Native Council allows the native believers to participate fully and easily in their own unique way.” Alluding to intercultural tension within the Bahá'í community, Patterson added that while non-Indigenous adherents were welcomed as observers and dignitaries were to be “acknowledged and given the freedom of the floor,” the intention of the Councils “is to encourage the participation of native peoples and avoid domination by non-natives” (11). While heartening for Indigenous participants, however, separate gatherings like these were contested by some non-Indigenous Bahá'ís, who disputed the need for distinct Indigenous spaces within the community and objected to what they saw as sectarian events undermining the principle of unity.¹⁴

This was not a new charge, nor one limited to internal Bahá'í affairs

14 Such tensions were addressed by Bastow, Loft, and Sargent in their interviews, and also by the non-Indigenous Bahá'í Fletcher Bennett, who was active in Indigenous teaching on the Northwest Coast and who was also involved in bringing Native Councils to British Columbia (Bennett). See also Sawin, 108, 114.

(Garlington 137–38). White Bahá'í Dorothy Baker, for example, recalled the mixed reaction that met a call from Shoghi Effendi in the mid-twentieth century for two new teaching committees, one to reach “the Negro minority of America” and the other “the Indian tribes of this continent.” As Baker describes in a 1953 address:

some of us, to draw out further light on the subject, even questioned a great deal about the kind of psychology that might ensue if you had a committee just to reach the Negro, but he [Shoghi Effendi] rather scoffed at it in a precious kind of way, and firmly reiterated that without special attention we simply had not done it, and that the important thing is to do it. (2)

Dubbed by Shoghi Effendi “the most challenging issue,” Black-White relations have been a longstanding area of concern for American Bahá'ís (Garlington 115–21; Venters; Etter-Lewis and Thomas). And Indigenous and Black Bahá'ís themselves sometimes made common cause, no doubt through a sense of racialized solidarity (Deloria Bighorn).

Indigenous peoples are the subject of what has been described as the sole “racial” prophecy in the sacred Bahá'í texts (Pemberton-Piggot 34). (See discussion of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prophecy concerning Indigenous peoples in the introduction to this volume.) While the prospect of forging community

within the Bahá'í community was contested, Indigenous adherents thus had a unique impulse and justification for doing so. None of the Indigenous Bahá'ís whom I interviewed pointed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophecy (or, as some alternately described it, "mandate," "credo," "promise," "gift," or "destiny") as an initial motivation for becoming Bahá'í.¹⁵ But they all identified it as an important, if ambiguous, subsequent mandate. A number struggled with the loaded language of savagery that the passage contains but were simultaneously buoyed by what they read as a recognition of the particular spiritual capacity of Indigenous people.¹⁶ Some interviewees described the prophecy as specific to North America, while most saw it extending throughout the Americas or to the Indigenous world at large. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement was, and remains, an active subject of personal meditation and shared deliberation among Indigenous Bahá'ís.¹⁷

15 Though none pointed to the prophecy as specific explanation for declaration, it did motivate Indigenous enrollment to the degree that it inspired Bahá'í outreach to Indigenous peoples. Various characterizations of the prophecy include those from Healy, McDermott, Gubatayao-Hagen, and Greenaway.

16 See Horton (51-61) for discussion of different translations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement concerning Indigenous peoples.

17 In 2008, for example, Indigenous Bahá'ís from diverse backgrounds came together in a series of regional gatherings on the West Coast to consult on the

As Deloria Bighorn related, "We're always pondering this. What did 'Abdu'l-Bahá mean? What are we supposed to do about it?"

Queries like this motivated and enabled Indigenous Bahá'ís to come together in a community of their own. Workshops at a Continental Indigenous Council held on the Blood (Kainai) Reserve in August 1982, for example, were guided by the questions, "Who are we, as native Bahá'ís?," "Where are we heading?" and "What is our responsibility?" ("Excitement Builds as Native Council Approaches" 37). A *Bahá'í Canada* report on the gathering elaborated:

A frequent topic of frank consultation during the workshops, according to one observer, was the issue of dealing with a predominantly white society including non-Native Bahá'ís. During the consultation the indigenous friends spoke of their need to overcome fears and prejudices and to become one not only with other Native believers but with all of the friends. Participants offered one another strong encouragement to accomplish this. ("Third North American Native Council" 8)

subject with Violette and Ali Nakhjavani, the first a close travel companion and confidant of Rúhíyyih Khánúm and the second a former member of the Universal House of Justice.

Organized by an Indigenous Bahá'í committee of the same name, with members appointed by the National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'ís of Canada, the United States, and Alaska, Continental Indigenous Councils were held in locations across North America beginning in 1978 on the Yakama Reservation in Washington.¹⁸

At these gatherings, which drew the participation of hundreds of Indigenous Bahá'ís from across the Americas, participants pondered their specific roles in the religion, consulted on living legacies of colonialism in and outside the Bahá'í community, and celebrated and enacted intertribal cultural exchange.¹⁹ Though geared specifically toward Indigenous Bahá'ís, the Councils were also open to non-Indigenous adherents; the Second Council, held in July 1980 on the grounds of the National Bahá'í Center

in Wilmette, Illinois, in fact included separate sessions for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís. This gathering closed with a large powwow attended by upwards of one thousand people, including non-Indigenous Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'í Indigenous people from nearby Chicago ("Native Council"). Lee Brown described this Council as "one of the biggest events I ever went to, as far as Native Bahá'ís go, and one of the real highlights of my entire life." Relationships forged at periodic events like these in turn informed local Bahá'í community life as well. It was, for example, after consulting with Diné Bahá'ís at the Council in Wilmette, where they shared that their Nineteen Day Feast could last an entire day, with many hours of prayer, that Brown and other Bahá'ís on the Okanagan Reserve in British Columbia made the decision to hold a pipe ceremony as the devotional component of their Feast (Brown).

Indigenous Bahá'ís built a community of their own when they came together at such gatherings to celebrate and share cultural knowledge, to consult on persistent colonial currents in North America, and to discuss their own prophesied place in the Bahá'í religion. Through participation in the broader Bahá'í community, they also built strong relationships of mutual respect with non-Indigenous Bahá'ís. Indeed, the teaching of unity in diversity established an imperative for intercultural relationship building that many Indigenous Bahá'ís described as refreshing and profoundly healing. At

18 The first Council was held in 1978 in White Swan, on the Yakama Reservation in Washington; the second in 1980 on the grounds of the National Bahá'í Centre in Wilmette, Illinois; the third in 1982 on the Blood (Kainai) Reserve in Alberta; the fourth in 1985 in Fairbanks, Alaska; the fifth in 1988 on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South Dakota; and the sixth in 1991 at Maxwell International School in Shawnigan Lake, British Columbia.

19 The third Council on the Blood Reserve, for example, drew the participation of over four hundred Indigenous Bahá'ís from ten countries and sixty different tribes ("Third North American Native Council" 8).

the same time, experiences of building intercultural Bahá'í community between the 1960s and the early 1990s could be fraught with pain and anxiety for Indigenous adherents. Indigenous Bahá'ís frequently encountered tensions of intercultural communication and understanding and sometimes outright racism, experiences that led

some to pull back from active community practice. Implementing unity in diversity is a gradual process that continues to be worked out in particular contexts over time. This process itself reveals the Bahá'í religion's role as a rich space of intercultural contact and community building, learning, and exchange.

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