ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY: 
SYMBOLIC HEALING IN CANADIAN PRISONS

ABSTRACT. Symbolic healing is a complex phenomenon that is still relatively poorly understood. This paper documents a process of symbolic healing which is occurring in Canadian penitentiaries, and which involves Aboriginal offenders in cultural awareness and educational programs. The situation is compounded, however, by the existence of offenders from diverse Aboriginal cultural backgrounds with differing degrees of orientation to Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian cultures. Participants must first receive the necessary education to allow them to identify with the healing symbols so that healing may ensue, and both the healers and the patients must engage in a process of redefining their cultures in search of a common cultural base.

INTRODUCTION

A considerable body of literature has emerged in recent years on the topic of symbolic healing, with Dow’s (1986) synthesis standing as a landmark contribution to our understanding of this area. The purpose of this paper is to describe the manner in which current Aboriginal spirituality programs in Canadian prisons constitute a variant of symbolic healing. In particular, this paper will emphasize the cultural variability that exists among Aboriginal offenders and healers, and therefore the need for an extensive process of cultural education and interactive dialogue between patient and healer to establish a common cultural base in order for symbolic healing to ensue.

THE NATURE OF SYMBOLIC HEALING

Csordas (1983) has suggested that the global prevalence of “religious healing” argues persuasively for an examination of the “holy” as fundamental to our understanding of health. In his examination of the discourse involved in Catholic Pentecostal healing, he has argued that “the locus of therapeutic efficacy is in the particular forms and meanings, i.e., the discourse” that are reified in the healing encounter. “The notion of rhetoric,” he continues, “as against the notions of suggestion, support and nurturance, or placebo effect, contributes a recognition that healing is contingent upon a meaningful and convincing discourse that brings about a transformation of the phenomenological conditions under which the patient exists and experiences suffering or distress” (1983:346). Such a conception presupposes that the rhetoric is meaningful for both the healer and
the patient, and in this fact the religious community plays the crucial role. Both the definitions of the problem and the cure "conform to the agenda of the religious community," and "healing is understood to occur in terms of integration of the healed person into the religious community" (1983:347). Dealing with religious groups such as the Catholic Pentecostals, it is not surprising that the healing is viewed not as a fixed phenomenon, but rather as a continuing process that requires on-going support from, and in effect integration into, the religious group.

Csordas (1983) suggests that what he calls the "rhetoric of healing" must, in the first instance, convince the patient that healing is possible; the patient must be "predisposed" to being healed. By participating in the social and religious setting of the church, Catholic Pentecostals are exposed to the relevant symbols that will ultimately allow healing to ensue. However, Csordas (1983:349) notes that individuals do not primarily become involved in the movement to seek healing; rather healing often ensues after a period of involvement. The implication is that some form of education as to the basic elements, principles, symbols and rhetoric is required first. Ultimately, the patient undergoes a transformation when he/she "is persuaded to change cognitive, affective, and behavioral patterns ... in order to achieve the construction of a self that is healthy, whole and holy" (1983:356).

Csordas (1983) refers to this form of healing as "religious," but it is clearly also a form of symbolic healing. Building upon the earlier work of Moerman (1979), Dow (1986) has outlined what he believes to be the "universal aspects" of symbolic healing. According to Dow, symbolic healing revolves around the generalizing of social and cultural experiences through the use of culture-specific symbols embedded in cultural "myth," defined as a "model of experiential reality" containing "cultural experiential truths" (Dow 1986:59). Symbolic healing involves the healer convincing the patient that his problems can be defined in terms of this myth and treated through the manipulation of transactional symbols particularized to the individual but derived from this myth. The techniques of symbolic healing involve suggestion, catharsis, and social restructuring in which the patient's problem is redefined in terms of family or social problems. Dow also suggests that psychochemical action, such as the release of endorphins through induced stress, may also contribute to the healing.

 Paramount in Dow's discussion is the fact that symbolic healing is culturally-based and, in effect, healer-centered. According to Dow, "the experiences of healers and healed are generalized with culture-specific symbols" (1986:56), and "the first requirement for symbolic healing is that the culture establish a general model of the mythic world believed in by healers and potential patients" (1986:60). Such a model presupposes that both patients and healers share more or less the same culture in order for there to be a successful therapeutic outcome, a principle accepted by other authors as well. For instance, Finkler's (1985:9)
study of spiritualist healers in Mexico questioned whether "all members of a
given culture respond equally to symbolic healing and whether all members in a
given culture respond equally to the same therapeutic symbols." The existence
of intra-cultural variability, as Finkler suggests, poses a new question, "whether
all persons within a given sociocultural segment share the same healing
healing movements, likewise stressed that "the degree to which a participant
shares these myths and internalizes healing symbols may determine their
therapeutic impacts." "Symbolic systems of healing are most effective," she
writes, "if culturally relevant for adherents" (1988:1204). Indeed, while not
wishing to belabor the point, it would be contradictory to suggest that symbolic
healing could exist in situations where the cultures, and more specifically the
symbols, metaphors, "mythic world" and so on are not shared between the
healer and the patient.

Dow's (1986) analysis also places the onus on the healer to convince the
patient that they share sufficient elements of culture and mythic reality to allow
for the symbolic healing to occur. Borrowing from Ehrenwald (1966), Dow
suggests that the patient must undergo an "existential shift," which is to say that,
"As the patient believes in the therapist's power to help, he is able to change and
find new opportunities for adaptation" (1986:60). The patient must respond to
the therapist's myth in a positive way. Missing from this conceptualization is the
possibility that the patient may need to adopt a more active role in helping the
healer to construct this mythic reality.

THE RESEARCH SETTING

In 1990 and 1991, I undertook research at a forensic correctional facility
operated by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). This centre receives
offenders primarily from other federal prisons, and offers a variety of psychiatric
and psychological treatment programs. The centre can house approximately 106
offenders, or "patients" as they are referred to at the centre; at any given time, Aboriginal offenders may constitute approximately one-third.

The research called for the extensive interviewing of thirty Aboriginal
offenders to begin to develop a better understanding of the consequences of their
differing cultural backgrounds for treatment. All had alcohol and/or drug abuse
problems and were selected from the treatment units which dealt with per-
sonality disordered individuals and sex offenders. None were medicated.

Using an ethnographic interview format, the offenders were tape-recorded as
we discussed a range of life experiences, including cultural background and
prison experiences. Involvement with prison spirituality programs was one area
in which data was solicited, and which is reported upon in this paper.
Among other things, the overall research documented that there was not only a great variability among Aboriginal offenders in terms of their traditional cultures (with representatives from all culture areas in Canada), but also that the individuals had varying degrees of familiarity with Euro-Canadian culture, ranging from little (i.e. very traditional) to more or less complete assimilation with no knowledge of the ancestral Aboriginal culture. Cultural orientation is, of course, a relative concept. The "traditional" individuals can be defined as those who spoke an Aboriginal language as a first language, continued to speak that language today, had relatively less proficiency in the English language, and relatively little experience in predominantly non-Aboriginal, Euro-Canadian environments. At the other end of the cultural orientation scale are those individuals who are oriented almost exclusively to Euro-Canadian culture, having been raised in foster or adoptive homes. In between are the "bicultural" individuals, who speak an Aboriginal language, but who also are comfortable using English and who express little difficulty operating in both worlds. All three groups are empirically demonstrable products of colonialism and geography as they pertain to Canada.

SPIRITUALITY IN PRISON

In general, Aboriginal "spirituality and awareness" programs have been available in Canadian prisons since the early 1980s, and operate essentially as educational and religious programs. Attendance at these programs is characteristically open to offenders of all cultural backgrounds, and not just Aboriginal offenders. Not surprisingly, Aboriginal offenders predominate.

There are two basic streams to the spirituality and awareness programs, the product of the method of contract tendering used by the correctional system. One stream concentrates on spirituality, seen by prison staff as "religious" in nature, involving spiritual services similar to those offered by the prison chaplains. Correctional officials do not readily acknowledge that there is anything therapeutic about the spirituality programs. The other stream focusses on cultural and academic education, such as "Native Studies." However, there is a significant degree of overlap between the two, and the offenders themselves are often hard put to separate the spiritual from the educational. This is due, in part, to the fact that many Aboriginal offenders actually have little or limited knowledge of their ancestral cultures and history, the result of having been raised in non-Aboriginal cultural environments.

Cross-cultural educational workshops are often made available, usually led by an Elder, and may run from one day to four or five days. Certain elements of Aboriginal spirituality, including the sacred pipe, use of tobacco and sweetgrass, the sweat lodge and the medicine wheel are explained. All of these symbols are
related back to the Creator, whose assistance is required in order for healing to ensue. Stories of creation, reserve experiences, and other historical information may be shared. Cultural education is also a part of the weekly meetings of the Native Brotherhood, a voluntary association for Aboriginal inmates.

For many Aboriginal offenders, the first deliberate exposure to Aboriginal spirituality is in prison. In the case of traditional and bicultural patients, these individuals may have had some exposure to components of spirituality within their families and home communities, but four points need to be made. First, where such exposure has occurred, it has tended to be in the form of the traditional educational system, through observing and listening, and not through direct instruction. Second, very few have ever had recourse to consult with an Elder in their home communities, in part because cultural changes have made this less and less the culturally appropriate thing to do. This is true even of the most traditional individuals. Third, some Aboriginal offenders come from communities where practices such as the use of sweetgrass and sweat lodges have long been absent, or else where such practices were in fact foreign to their traditional cultures. Finally, Aboriginal spirituality in the centre, as well as in other institutions, has a strong pan-Indian orientation, and hence is likely foreign to some extent to most Aboriginal offenders. Each of these issues will be revisited again in subsequent sections of the paper.

ELDERS

The central focus of Aboriginal awareness and spirituality programming at the centre, as well as the parent institutions, is the work of Elders. Elders are individual Aboriginal spiritual leaders who may be male or female (although most working with male prisoners are male). There seems to be no set age at which one can become an Elder, and there is no self-ascription. Respected individuals are simply referred to as “Elders.” They may or may not also be shamans or “medicine men,” but it is suggested here that all are “therapists” within the context of symbolic healing; indeed, in Euro-Canadian terms, they can be seen to act as psychologists, social workers, physicians, educators and priests.

Elders are usually hired on a contract basis by the Correctional Service of Canada, often through intermediary Native agencies. It is not surprising, then, that these individuals tend to be functionally bicultural, since they need to be able to successfully bid for contracts and negotiate the rather complex bureaucracy involved in prison management and patient care, yet still have facility in an Aboriginal language and spirituality. In some ways, prison Elders are different from those one might find on the reserves, the older “traditional” Elders who rarely leave their homes and do not offer their services to institutions
(although they will work with their own people in the traditional manner). These traditional Elders are often the teachers of the prison Elders, and the latter will frequently return home to continue their own spiritual education. A common characteristic of prison Elders, whom I would term “neo-traditional,” is that many of them have experienced alcohol and drug abuse problems in the past, and have come to be spiritual people rather late in life. In this sense, they have been “healed,” a precondition to them becoming healers both in terms of symbolic healing theory (Dow 1986:57) and in the eyes of many Aboriginal offenders (as we shall see).

In prisons, the work of Elders is concentrated mostly in three areas: offering sweats; individual counseling; and providing cultural and spiritual knowledge. Most Aboriginal offenders viewed the Elders with great respect and reverence. Some suggested that any notion of playing “games” with Elders, such as by lying to them (as they might with regular prison staff) was simply out of the question. Indeed, the contrast between offenders’ views of the Elders, on one hand, and other centre staff, on the other, was quite striking. The data clearly suggest that the services provided by the Elders are important aspects of the centre’s experience.

One-on-one, private counselling was greatly valued by the patients. They were able to talk about their culture, their personal backgrounds, and obtain advice and spiritual/cultural knowledge from the Elder, as explained by the following two offenders:

I talk about myself and the problems I have, and they give me advice, you know, how to have a better life out there. That’s something that I’ve learned so much from these Elders ... Like I go up there for a one-on-one when I am depressed, then I ask him why I feel like this? Why am I having so much guilt? What can I do to get rid of these feelings, and that’s where they come in. And they make sense when they say something to me, because I can relate to these guys. They’ve been through what I’m going through, and how they’ve changed their life is something that I want so bad for myself. And I admire these people turning their lives around and becoming somebody. [Traditional – Northern Cree]

I basically want to know more about my culture. If I was feeling down and out, I would tell him why I was feeling down and out. I asked for a couple of Elders to pray for me when social services tried to take my daughter away. I fasted so it wouldn’t happen to my daughter and my daughter ended up with her grandmother, so I believed that what I did worked. Just like now, I just come to them for counseling, sort of if I am having problems ... When you are in jail, you kind of have an image that you kind of want to maintain. So if you are hurting inside, unless you have a real close friend that you can talk to, you don’t want to talk ... So I used to go to the Elder and talk to him ... I know what I told him wouldn’t go no further. [Bicultural – Saulteaux]

The confidentiality of which the above patient spoke was mentioned by others as well. Many like the fact that the Elders do not share information with the treatment team. The ability to talk to the Elder about spiritual matters was also important. One patient noted that, “I would talk about my [medicine] bundle that
I had in my cell, and when I would need sweet grass, I would ask him.”
[Bicultural – Northern Ojibwa]

Many Aboriginal offenders, especially the more traditional ones, believe strongly in the power of dreams, but dreams usually require interpretation. Elders are sought out for this purpose:

But sometime I don’t like having those dreams, having bad dreams like that. Like, see, when I have a dream, I like to tell the Elder about it, because the Elder knows what to do … [after one dream] I told him about my dream and I told him I believe in my dreams, right. I respect them and then I’m scared, I told him. And he told me [what to do].
[Traditional – Northern Ojibwa]

Some also expressed a belief in “bad medicine,” the ability of individuals to cause harm, illness or misfortune to befall another individual through supernatural means (cf. Young et al. 1989). While only one respondent intimated that “bad medicine” was implicated in his string of problems, many others expressed a belief in it. Instances, and fears, of “bad medicine” can only be handled in a culturally appropriate manner, and the Elders and medicine people are the ones capable of dealing with these problems.

Through workshops, sweat and individual counselling, the Elders are able to make certain cultural knowledge available to the offenders:

It’s just to learn, learn about it, to educate myself. To know what this part of my blood is. To understand my relatives. I have one uncle who is a medicine man. He’s got the medicine bag and all that, eh. But he never talked to me about it. [Bicultural – Plains Cree/Metis]

The single most important characteristic of the Elders that was detailed by the patients interviewed was their ability to be empathetic, to understand the patients. This is an element of symbolic healing remarked upon by Dow (1986), who has noted that healers themselves have often gone through the healing process. In many cases, the empathy of the Elders was contrasted with the perceived lack of this ability among the treatment staff. The fact that the Elders had frequently led troubled lives, often involving alcohol and drug abuse, and even periods of incarceration, were characteristics appreciated by most patients. Stated two offenders:

I feel that I can relate to this person. He has been through what I have been through. He was an alcoholic one time in his life. He was on skid row. He did things that I am doing now, and I ask him for advice, what changed him around. How did he do it? What path he took … Like I have one-on-one’s with the staff, eh, but it’s not the same as talking to somebody you can relate to. Somebody that’s your own kind. [Traditional – Northern Cree]

Like, talking to an Elder is very easy for me, because a lot of the Elders experienced that same type of thing I have gone through, and I could relate to them in that respect, and they could understand me more than a person that has got a degree could understand me in my point of view, because they haven’t experienced that lifestyle that I have experienced. [Bicultural – Chipewyan]
For many, the Elders provided a blueprint for how one could live a life, especially after having experienced prison and a subsequent spiritual revival:

An Elder who has been in prison and has gone straight would know more and understand more than an Elder who has never been in jail or has never been an alcoholic. ... I can approach an Elder who hadn't been in prison or been a drunk ... but pretty hard to talk to.
[Traditional – Northern Ojibwa]

The patients, in general, recognized the value of the treatment staff, and in many ways viewed the Elder’s services as an adjunct to the centre’s therapy. The two are not directly in competition; rather, the patients seem to feel that the Elders offer a different, but equally essential, service. This individual has clearly accepted the role of the Elder as a healer, and therefore the mythic world that underlies it:

When you talk to an Elder, he talks in a spiritual way and that makes you feel happy ... and he tells you a little bit about the culture. And I guess that is the most important thing is when you talk to an Elder. And when you talk to ... a staff, staff members, they just want to help you get started, you know, to look at your life, and it’s hard and there’s a lot of hurting in it too. And that’s what the difference is. Mostly I guess it is the same thing almost, but it is a little different. They [staff] want to teach you skills ... anyways I feel comfortable when I’m with an Elder because I believe that some Elders they have powers that were given to them, power, some kind of power to do that from the Creator.
[Traditional – Northern Ojibwa]

While most Aboriginal patients had nothing but respect for the Elders who worked in prisons, a few were very critical. Some suggested that individuals who had led past lives of alcohol and crime could not be “real” Elders, regardless of their spiritual transformation. Others were disturbed with the fact that prison Elders were paid for their services, which they felt was a contravention of the traditional method of remunerating Elders for their services. These critical individuals were simply not prepared to accept such Elders as healers; there was no sharing of the mythic world that forms the context for the Elder’s role.

THE SWEAT LODGE

The sweat lodge involves cultural as well as spiritual education, and provides the most direct link between the individual offender and the “grandfathers” or “Creator.” It is a religious undertaking involving prayer, an educational undertaking involving the sharing of cultural information, and a therapeutic undertaking involving, among other things, confession and peer support. It has been described as having both placebo effects and as entailing an altered state of consciousness (Wilbush 1988; Swartz 1988), both of which are components of symbolic healing. It has also been suggested that the sweat lodge can have physiotherapeutic benefits (Adair et al. 1988) and contribute to bodily cleansing (Kunitz 1989). The psycho-social benefits of the sweat lodge in the treatment of
alcoholism has been discussed as well (Hall 1986). Indeed, sweats have become commonplace in Aboriginally controlled alcohol and drug abuse programs in Canada and the United States (e.g., Hall 1986; Grobsmith and Dam 1990).

For many offenders, prison affords them their first opportunity to undertake a “sweat.” The reasons for becoming involved tend to vary, and there certainly exists some peer pressure to participate as a sign of solidarity with the other Aboriginal “brothers.” But the therapeutic effects, as perceived by the offenders, are important in the decision-making process that leads to the sweat. As one offender described his introduction:

Well, I seen a lot of people going to the sweats and it seemed like it was changing them, that they were becoming different because of it. I watched their attitudes, whether they were in prison, or whatever they are, and I didn’t at first just jump right into it. But I watched how, because I was always skeptical. I watched the change … They weren’t as bitter, they weren’t full of bitter and ..., hate. They seemed to have more compassion, more caring after practicing it for awhile … It’s been like a cleansing. It has given me a chance to cleanse my insides, my thoughts, and spiritual learning process. [Euro-Canadian – Metis]

Some offenders attend the sweats faithfully as they are offered. Others attend only for a specific purpose. Still others never attend at all. Some reasons for having a sweat included the following:

I don’t get into sweats unless I know something is really hurt, somebody is really sick and not getting any better. Then I get into that. If I know my mom and my dad is really sick and they aren’t getting any better and I know I can use that. I can use that prayer and that sweat. That is something I have to do for me to get them better. A sacrifice. Something for me to do to get them better. [Traditional – Slavey]

I wanted to change. I wanted to get a better life. I didn’t like the life I was leading. I wanted to make amends to people ... [Bicultural – Cree/Metis]

Offenders identified the direct benefits of sweats as including spiritual renewal and an enhanced ability to cope with prison life:

It takes my anger away. Sometimes I feel real happy. [Traditional – Northern Ojibwa]

The sweats is like keeping up with your culture. Like you go to church, it’s the same thing. You keep up with it and you feel for it, and it helps you to have a clean mind and not to think of bad things. [Traditional – Northern Ojibwa]

It brings up my spirit, especially when I come out of a sweat. Eh. When you come out of that sweat, there’s nothing that can disturb you today. [Bicultural – Northern Ojibwa]

I think a sweat will give me a chance to pray for all the other people. It makes me humble myself. Like I have to get on my hands and knees to walk inside that sweat, so I am really humiliating myself; and then when I go in there, I am asking to pray for other people that have a hard time understanding me, one’s that I can’t get along with ... I pray for guidance and I pray for understanding ... I think I get really cleansed. I sweat all the bad stuff out ... [Bicultural – Cree/Metis]

You have to go through suffering and pain, and you have to experience it, you have to
sweat it, you have to learn how to pray, and in that way you come out refreshed like a new person. And I guess in a way you look at creation in a different light. All of creation ... And in a sense it did provide that relief of pressure of everyday living, participating in sweats ... because ... you have to sweat and you have to be exposed to the rocks which are hot, and you have to suffer a little pain, humility. But I guess that is a process that is needed and required for a person to start praying ... and you don’t just pray for yourself as an individual. You pray for all of creation, and you pray for your brothers and sisters. In that respect it was more or less known that you were suffering for the overall good health of everything else around you. [Bicultural – Chipewyan]

It is evident from the above comments that the sweats also serve an important institutional function, by reducing stress and illegal activity within the prison.

Sweats are taken very seriously by most offenders. Some refuse to participate despite their belief in them. To sweat within the prison environment would be sacrreligious, and hence these individuals do not completely share in the mythic world which the prison Elders are trying to construct. This mythic world is one which allows for spiritual activities within the prison. Sweats also reinforce the need to remain sober and drug free while in prison, but this is not always easy to do. There are tremendous psychological and peer pressures to use drugs in prison, and Aboriginal offenders may experience conflict between the demands of the spiritual healing and its attendant mythic world, and the alternative mythic world of prison culture:

For me, like I didn’t go into sweat because I was smoking dope all the time. I wasn’t being honest, you know ... I respected it. Like I only stood outside. If I went into the sweat and I would come back out and I would be clean, but a couple of days later I would have done what I was doing before, smoking up and all that. That’s still disrespectful. [Bicultural – Northern Cree]

Me personally, I believe that in Indian culture there is no room for drugs and alcohol. And it kind of bothers me that I see people get high and then they go to a sweat, and after they come from the sweat they get high again. I mean, that’s hypocritical, phony, you know what I mean? And when I went to my first sweat I straighten out for about three years, and then when I started getting high and stuff like that again ... and that is when I quit going to sweats. [Bicultural – Saulteaux]

They are really sincere in trying to change their life, and you have to be sincere because you can’t smoke that pipe if you have been smoking drugs and that and so to respect going into the sweat, you don’t want to smoke any drugs or do any bad things. So you try to do good all the time. [Bicultural – Cree/Metis]

For some patients, the simple fact that they were in prison was reason enough not to attend sweats. The negative environment was not compatible with the traditional mode of sweating. But a few others simply did not believe in sweats, or else were fearful of them. These individuals tended to be bicultural or Anglo-Canadian in their cultural orientations, and they too rejected the mythic base and transactional symbols of Aboriginal spirituality. In some instances these individuals were active followers of fundamentalist Christian churches. The following individuals clearly failed to comprehend or accept the symbolism
inherent in the sweat:

I know that you get really hot in there, eh, and that is why I get chicken. Don't know whether I can stand the heat. Like I say to myself I can, right. I got a low self-esteem of myself, and that is what stops me from going, right. [Bicultural – Cree/Metis]

But I don't like doing his sweats, they are too intense. It seems stupid in a way ... You get burnt really badly, and I don't care how much you pray or anything, it's not going to stop you from getting burnt ... I think it is kind of, well to put it bluntly, retarded. To go and sit in a sweat house. I would rather go and sit some place comfortable in a sauna and sweat just as much rather than going in a small place with a bunch of Indians singing songs and praying, you know, "Oh great-grandfather." Just sounds kind of phony, and getting my ass burnt off and my lungs burnt. It just kind of seems silly, so I just quit. [Euro-Canadian – Gitksan]

**PAN-INDIANISM AND CULTURAL COMPATIBILITY IN SPIRITUALITY PROGRAMS**

The centre, like many prisons, employs only one Elder (at a time) on contract. The particular Aboriginal culture of the Elder presents one area in which, at least potentially, an incompatibility might exist. If the Elder comes from one cultural tradition, will his ways not be alien to Aboriginal offenders from other cultural traditions, and therefore rejected? Can symbolic healing ensue in such situations?

In general, most Aboriginal offenders in this study were unperturbed by the cultural traditions that underlay the spiritual programs they received. Both of the Elders in this study were from Plains groups, and their traditions therefore tended to express a Plains cultural framework. Grobsmith (1989) has noted that, in Nebraska, prison spirituality programs tend to be modeled on Lakota beliefs. This is true to some extent in western Canada as well, since a number of the prison Elders have immersed themselves in Lakota traditions as part of their own rehabilitative efforts. Of course many of the Elders were from Plains groups anyway, and so it is easy to see how generic Plains beliefs have come to dominate in prison programs.

Perhaps surprisingly, those offenders with the firmest roots in an Aboriginal culture were largely unconcerned with the nature of the spirituality being offered; indeed, they too suggested that a sort of “pan-Indianism” exists, in which all Aboriginal spiritual traditions are fundamentally the same, with only minor differences in procedures. But it was also clear that the offenders have come to believe in such a pan-Indianism as a result of their interaction with prison Elders, who have been forced to enhance the common themes, and discredit the significance of differences, as a means of establishing the common mythic base for healing to occur. The interaction between healer and patient seems to be, in part, a search for the lowest common denominators linking their
cultures and experiences, so that the therapeutic encounter has some hope of success. And both the healer and the patient take on the responsibility of redefining the essential elements of their own cultures to arrive at a common base. According to one traditional patient:

I know we don’t understand each other [in Aboriginal languages] but we sort of see that we have something in common, that we’ve been through what I’m going through. He’s an Elder. He shows me how to pray. He teaches me about Native spirituality ... We talked about that [cultural differences between Sioux and Cree] and it’s [spirituality] about the same thing. A little different, but, Siouxs are Siouxs and Crees are Crees, and they do things a little different so ... but it’s not something that I should be aware of because I like what I am doing with this Elder here. [Traditional – Northern Cree]

Another traditional patient stated the following:

Elders, I guess I respect them because the Native people, they almost do the same thing. A little different, but almost the same everything ... It doesn’t matter, I guess, who the Elder is. [Traditional – Northern Ojibwa]

Some bilingual offenders also suggested that the cultural differences were unimportant:

But to me our religion is all the same anyway. It doesn’t really matter, you know, what tribe you’re from. We still all believe in the same thing, that we’re from different tribes but we’re all the same. [Bicultural – Northern Ojibwa]

No, that doesn’t bother me because to me the original people of the northern continent was ... the Aboriginal people, and spiritual beliefs or lifestyle was interrelated or similar in one way or another. So I have to learn from them, and I also have to learn from my own people. [Our] Elders that have known this type of spirituality have long passed, so the Elders from the brothers south of us, they tell us they could teach us, so we have to learn from them. [Bicultural – Chipewyan]

A patient who had been adopted as an infant by a Euro-Canadian family, echoing the above views, suggested that as a ‘blank slate’ in terms of Aboriginal culture, it was easy for him to accept varying cultural traditions:

If you are Mic Mac you got different ways to do it. If you are Blackfoot, you got another way to do it, but I think they come down to one principle. But maybe for me it was more easy because I don’t know how my people do it. [Euro-Canadian – Mohawk]

Indeed, offenders like the one above, with the least knowledge of their Aboriginal traditions were least likely to be concerned about the cultural background of the Elders. These individuals are searching for their Aboriginal cultural roots and identity, and are willing to allow the Elders to define the mythic base for them. They absorb everything they are taught, and question little:

Like, sometime in my life I’m going to go back to that Reserve, eh, and I’ll start learning the ways of the Blackfoot people, eh... you know the Crees, the Chipewyans, the Blackfoot. I look at them all as one race anyhow, and open religion ... I think all our beliefs are the same, it’s just that we do things a little differently, eh. [Euro-Canadian – Blackfoot]
Even Elders speaking in an alien Aboriginal tongue while praying were not generally a problem (English was always the language of instruction in group settings; an Aboriginal language might be used when Elders were involved in individual counselling):

He used to pray in his language. He used to pray in Cree. I couldn’t understand him but he used to tell me later on ... I told him I couldn’t understand Cree. I used to ask him how he was praying and he told me. [Bicultural – Chipewyan]

There were a few instances in which the fact that the Elder came from a different cultural background was of concern. This was particularly true for one traditional patient who clearly articulated the discordance between his and the Elder’s cultures that prohibits symbolic healing:

I want to talk to an Elder, but ... I need an Elder that has been where I’m from, and knows something, so he wouldn’t misunderstand what I am saying. I need an Elder from where I am from ... I need an Elder that’s from there, that understands the drinking, the behaviour, the negative, like why I am thinking negative ... Cause we’re [the Elder and him] from different grounds. He could say something and it could be from his, and not relate to mine. There’s a negative in between. [Traditional – Chipewyan]

Inuit patients represent a very different case, and it was evident that the pan-Indianism which characterized the spirituality programs in prison is as foreign to them as are the Euro-Canadian customs. In a sense, their “mythic world” is centred on a region hundreds of miles, and a cultural world, away. Anecdotal information provided by prison officials suggests that, across the correctional system, the Inuit do not become involved in Native awareness programs. Indeed, one Inuk was told by an Indian patient that he could not go to an Aboriginal cultural awareness workshop because he was not “Native.”

One interesting by-product of the cultural education process which forms the foundation for symbolic healing is that some Aboriginal offenders, including very traditional ones, come to view their own cultures as somehow deficient because they lacked certain key elements of the spirituality they were being taught in prison. As noted earlier, some offenders came from communities in which sweat ceremonies were no longer practiced, sweet grass or sage no longer burned, and where the concept of the medicine wheel simply did not exist. They may have nevertheless lived a fairly traditional lifestyle, being raised on the reserve or in the bush, speaking an Aboriginal language, and involved in activities such as hunting and trapping. As such, they would no doubt have obtained a form of spiritual knowledge and culture related to land and reserve activities, but this process of education was informal, in contrast to the more formal instruction they experience in prison. As an example of this process, consider the words of one offender, a traditional man from a northern Ojibwa reserve:

When I was brought up ... I didn’t even know what Native culture was ... I didn’t understand it ... Nobody even told me about it, you know. Maybe if I was brought up in a culture way, if I understand what life is all about ... maybe I would have understand the
meaning of Indian religion. Because kids that are brought up in their culture, Native culture, they follow it. [Traditional – Northern Ojibwa]

There is no question that this individual only began to view himself as a-cultural once in prison, and the paradox of his actual life and his perceptions is striking. The following offender, a traditional Cree man from northern Alberta, had spent most of his life in the bush or on his reserve. Yet, his belief that his upbringing was culturally inadequate is clear:

I never really learned about nothing deep down Native, just that we were staying in the bush and surviving, and staying in the reserve and how it is. But I never really learned about nothing like the Elders and stuff like that ... I never even heard of sweat lodges before I came to [prison]. Never seen one. I never seen pipe ceremonies. There was no pow wows where I came from. So I have seen all this stuff since I came to prison. [Traditional – Northern Cree]

Another offender, a traditional Slavey from the Northwest Territories with very little experience in a Euro-Canadian setting, described his a-cultural existence in even more dramatic terms:

In that prison I got involved with my Native spirituality, got involved with sacred circles, Native sweat lodges and pipe ceremonies ... There was something that was missing, knowing that I was a Native person and ... there was no culture in me. No cultural background grown up with ... Where I come from in the Territories I never heard them do stuff like that. [Traditional – Slavey]

These traditional individuals actually appeared to be undergoing an identity crisis as a result of their exposure to the Aboriginal spirituality programs in prison. Furthermore, this crisis seems to have been an essential component of their own personal healing process, as they came to embrace the spirituality and symbols of the Elders with whom they came into contact. Ness (1980:167–168) has argued that participation in religious healing rituals can have both positive and negative emotional effects, and that “for some individuals, participation in non-medical healing activities may be emotionally and behaviourally disorganizing.” The data presented here reinforces this view. The outcome was not always negative, however, and there were cases where individuals transcended cultural boundaries to become, in effect, respected members of new cultural traditions.

CONCLUSION

Most Aboriginal offenders found great value in the spirituality programs they received in prison. The cultural knowledge that they received was greatly appreciated, and for many (particularly those with little or no knowledge of an Aboriginal culture) this was the first such knowledge they had obtained and it clearly played a role in helping them resolve their identity conflicts. More importantly, the spirituality programs provide a new meaning to shattered lives,
ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY IN CANADIAN PRISONS

and a way to cope with incarceration. They have given a “religion” of sorts to some offenders. Finally, the spirituality programs also provided for the sharing of cultural knowledge that allowed the process of symbolic healing.

Given the cultural heterogeneity of the Aboriginal offenders, symbolic healing is predicated on the ability of the Elders and patients to establish a common cultural ground and mythic world, including the transactional symbols of tobacco, the pipe, sweet grass, and sweat lodge, as well as the rhetoric. The Elders develop this world through education, both formal and informal, and through dialogue. Indeed, this process parallels that described by Csordas (1983), in that recruitment into the Aboriginal awareness and spirituality programs precedes healing, and is a precondition for healing to occur, but healing per se is not normally the reason a patient initially becomes involved. They are most likely to be interested in sorting out identity conflicts and learning more about Aboriginal cultures and histories. There is also some peer pressure to become involved as a sign of Aboriginal solidarity. The fact that the patients are actively involved in this kind of cultural construction suggests a new dimension to our understanding of symbolic healing which extends beyond Dow’s (1986) implicit assumption that it is the healers who are primarily involved in this. It is not surprising, therefore, that a pan-Indian, heavily Plains-influenced culture is being promoted: it provides highly visible symbols that many offenders (like non-Aboriginal peoples in general) have come to view as being quintessentially “Indian.” This is all the more significant for Aboriginal offenders with no knowledge of their own cultural heritages: they are considerably more free to adopt a culture of their choice. Those with more knowledge of their traditional cultures, including very traditional people, strive to find the common cultural ground between themselves and the Elders so that they may then establish the therapeutic relationship. This process involves redefining procedural aspects of spiritual ceremonialism, and other cognitive manipulations regarding the meaning of various elements of spirituality, in a search for a more common cultural base.

The healing is not simply the product of the encounter between a healer and a patient. The group process as a whole becomes significant, as the “brothers” work together to redefine their cultures and support each other within the restrictive confines of prison. Effective healing entails abstinence from alcohol and drugs, and a decrease in tension and stress; these are important cognitive, affective and behavioral changes (Csordas 1983:356). The healing itself is viewed as an on-going process, one which will continue to require disciplined adherence when the offenders are ultimately released from prison.

Of course, these data also demonstrate that the symbolic healing in Canadian prisons is not without implications. Not all Aboriginal offenders are willing to engage the Elders in the cultural construction or restructuring of a mythic world. Some reject this process because they are too traditional, and cannot accept that
spirituality and healing belong in prison, or because they are unable to objectively assess their own cultures in comparison to that of the Elders, and agree to certain common principles. Still others reject the healing because they are ideologically opposed, as in the case of fundamentalist Christians, or are simply fearful. And, as I have shown, there exists the possibility that an individual becoming involved with the Elders may suffer negative psycho-social consequences. The dimensions and seriousness of this are not clear at this time, though they are likely minor relative to some other problems these offenders characteristically exhibit.

Whether the symbolic healing which Aboriginal offenders have undergone has been therapeutically “effective” is another question. From the perspective of the many offenders quoted in this paper, that is from the emic or subjective view, there have been some definite benefits. So, to quote Skultans (1976:191), “to ask whether spirit [or symbolic] healing works in terms of removing the pathology is to alter the focus of attention. Spirit healing works insofar as Spiritualists [and Aboriginal offenders] have pain and insofar as they do not present themselves for treatment” (comments in brackets are mine). Finkler (1985:5) too has emphasized the subjective nature of evaluating therapeutic effectiveness. But this is not to belittle the concerns of Wiebel-Orlando (1989) and Anderson (1991), as well as Finkler, who more cautiously offer that indigenous healings systems have not really been adequately assessed in terms of efficacy from a scientific point of view. But, as Skultans (1976) suggests, this is a somewhat different issue, certainly worthy of investigation, but one which should not detract from the other aspects of our understanding of symbolic healing.

As this paper demonstrates, it is essential for some common cultural territory to be established before symbolic healing can ensue. In our rapidly changing, multi-ethnic world, the ability to provide the necessary cultural education becomes paramount in the maintenance and continuation of these healing traditions. This paper has demonstrated the process in which a symbolic healing system is developing and adapting to situations of increasing cultural plurality as well as the unusual context of prison. It is essential that the therapeutic nature of prison spirituality programs be recognized so that full bureaucratic support (including financial support) can be made available on behalf of those Aboriginal patients interested in this form of healing.

Department of Native Studies
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK, Canada S7N 0W0
NOTES

1 The research upon which this paper was based was funded by the Correctional Service of Canada, contract No. 1990/91–PRA–306. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the staff at the Regional Psychiatric Centre (Prairie region) in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, especially Drs. Art Gordon and Steve Wong. A special thank you must be extended to the Elders, Native Liaisons and patients who participated in the research, but who must remain anonymous.

The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the views of the Correctional Service of Canada, its staff, or the Elders and patients. The author alone is responsible for the content.

2 In this paper I use the term “Aboriginal” to describe all individuals recognized as “Indian,” “Inuit” and “Metis” in Canada. Specific cultural affiliations are noted where appropriate. The term “reserve” is used in Canada to refer to communities established for government-recognized Indians; the term is analogous to “reservation” in the United States.

3 There are obvious treatment implications in the fact that the Elders are not expected to share their knowledge of the patients with the treatment staff. It means that the Elders are not considered part of the treatment “team,” and that any work they do with the patients is not well integrated into the overall treatment plan.

REFERENCES

Adair, J., K. Deuschle and C. Barnett

Anderson, R.

Csordas, T. J.

Dow, J.

Ehrenwald, J.

Finkel, K.

Giil, D.

Grobsmith, E.

Grobsmith, E., and J. Dam

Hall, R.
1986 Alcohol Treatment in American Indian Populations: An Indigenous Treatment

Kunitz, S. J.

Moerman, D. E.

Ness, R. C.

Skultans, V.

Swartz, L.

Weibel-Orlando, J.

Wilbush, J.

Young, D., G. Ingram and L. Swartz