Conversion and Identity in James Sewid's "Guests Never Leave Hungry"

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ABSTRACT

Identity and representation are the key areas in postcolonialism underscoring freedom from oppression. In the Canadian postcolonial context, identity politics lies at the heart of representation of the First Nations as regards their cultural and literary identity. The mainstream research studies of the culture and literature of the First Nations applies postcolonial theories on Canadian First Nations literature and takes as its point of departure "the arrival of Europeans". Hence, the identity of the First Nations is represented through the optics of colonialism and postcolonialism. This synchronic approach either subsumes the First Nations' literature under postcolonial Canadian literature or under a literature of lamentation, thereby enshrouding the distinctness of the First Nations' literature. In order to highlight the uniqueness of their literature and the limitations of the postcolonial approach when applied to it, this paper examines (a) spirituality and religion, (b) Native missionaries and differing perspectives of conversion, and (c) First Nations Identity, in *Guests Never Leave Hungry* written by James Sewid.

KEY WORDS: POSTCOLONIALISM, RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, MISSIONARY, IDENTITY, POLITICS.

INTRODUCTION

Religion and Spirituality: The Oxford Dictionary defines religion as "the belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the worship of them, or in the teachings of a spiritual leader" and spirituality as "the quality of being connected with religion or the human spirit". According to De Plot "religion is an organized approach to the supernatural reality through human activities, which are mostly spiritual and usually encompass a set of narratives, beliefs, and practices. By giving the supernatural reality a name, we create a relationship with Him or Her and attempt to take part in this supernatural power (p 11)". De Plot further describes spirituality as "a multiform search for a transcendent meaning of life based on the reflection of our human experience on the level of being. On this level of our existence we are conscious of our connection with all beings and with the whole of creation (p 12)".

Hence, it is apparent that the two terms are fundamentally different and rooted in different socio-cultural environments: Christianity and First Nations' Spirituality. Along these same lines, Love M. Chile and Gareth Simpson also point out that religion and spirituality are not synonymous. Religion is only one of the ways through which spirituality finds expression. It is a faith-based institution, through which belief systems and practices become recognizable in particular practice traditions. Spirituality, on the other hand, is an expression of the inner self that defines who we are. It is developed and expressed in many ways outside of religion, and involves the relationship between the individual, the collective and the universe (Chile 319, Cited by Chinnathambi p 61). The Canadian Encyclopaedia states that "First Nation, Métis and Inuit religions in Canada vary widely and consist of complex social and cultural customs for addressing the sacred and the supernatural" (Smith, "Indigenous Peoples"). These complex social and cultural customs provided different perspectives as regards conversion.

Representation of Conversion: Most of the historical documents available today were created by the missionaries, historians and postcolonial scholars who studied Religion. Hence the details about the conversion of Natives presented in those documents were from a non-native perspective, presenting natives either as victims of forced conversion or passive recipients of Christianity.

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These perspectives render the conversion of Natives and their identity ambiguous. They consolidate missionaries belonging to churches of different denominations into a single group and varied Native tribal communities also into a single group. This approach fails to throw light on the differences and conflicts that existed among the missionaries themselves, and separately among the converted Natives themselves. Also, the important sub-divisions that Christianity created within the native community, such as “Natives, Native Christians, Native mission workers, and Native missionaries” (Neylan, “Heavens are Changing” 6), and the roles of each of these in conversion were not investigated in detail.

In *Guests Never Leave Hungry*, James Sewid archives intensive contact between Native society and Western society. In addition, he also describes how he came in contact with the Anglican Church and became part of the church activities. His missionary activities, schooling at an Anglican church-run-school and efforts to uplift his Kwakiutl community play a pivotal role in constructing his identity. Sewid’s focus on progress and Christianity shows that he is a by-product of the “1920s and 1930s overlap of progressive and christian paradigms or discourses” (Katerberg 8, cited by Chinnathambi). His conscious choice to borrow from Western systems to improve his community may be misconstrued to paint him as an imperialist. However, in doing so, one would be overlooking the fact that his choices were his own, and that he was not the passive recipient of choices forced upon him.

James Sewid, in his autobiography *Guests Never Leave Hungry* presents conversion, and the role of native missionaries in detail. He also delineates the subdivisions that Christianity created within Native communities/tribal groups. As a converted Christian, Sewid works hard to revive Kwakiutl tradition and tries his best to uplift his community. He adopts both the Native spiritual practices and Christian religious practices. The two different practices that he adopts in his daily life point to the fact that conversion, for Natives, does not mean giving up Native spirituality for the sake of Christian religion.

Spradley, the editor of *Guests Never Leave Hungry*, points out the bicultural adoption of practices by Sewid. He says “James Sewid was also bicultural in the area of religion and rituals. He appeared to be completely westernized in his religion, but although he had a deep commitment to his Anglican faith, and was more involved in the church than most Kwakiutl, he also held some traditional Kwakiutl religious beliefs” (p281). Spradley further points out how Kwakiutl values shaped Sewid’s understanding of Christianity. In contrast to Western individualism, Kwakiutl culture stressed submission to authority figures, and James Sewid interpreted the most important aspect of Christianity as obedience to elders (p281). It is evident that the natives understood Christianity through Native cultural values. This aspect is missed out in non-native representation of Native identity, especially in the research that employs a postcolonial

framework. Robin Fisher takes similar perspectives in his *Contact and Conflict*. He portrays the missionaries as the destroyers of native culture and civilization (qtd. in Neylan “Shamans” 45) but misses out the role of native missionaries in native conversion and their perspectives on conversion. Norman Etherington, in his book *Missions and Missionaries* published by Oxford Press, focuses on conversion from the perspectives of missionaries and not from the perspectives of converted Natives. Hence, having worked exclusively only with material sourced from missionary documents and scholarly works, his work does not present the Native perspectives of conversion and Christianity as such.

Yet another important area that deserves attention as regards conversion is the existence of conflicts within the various denominations of churches and the effects of these conflicts on the natives. These conflicts have not been focused upon in detail by Canadian historians and postcolonial scholars. James Sewid, however, addresses the topic of such conflicts in *Guests Never Leave Hungry* (GNLH) and presents a unique dimension to the function of religion in the everyday lives of Natives. He specifically records the tensions that existed between Romanism and Protestantism, and how religion divided natives into Christians and non-Christians and further divided the converted Christians into different denominations of churches. Sewid states:

When the Pentecostals first came they attracted many of our people because they liked something new. It wasn’t too good because an Indian village is just like a family. I felt that the Anglican Church was there for us, and we were all baptized and confirmed there and married there and when we die we are going to be buried there. They have done very well for us. When the Pentecostals came into Alert Bay and to the other villages also, a couple of members of the family would start going, maybe a wife and son. So the father would try to talk to his wife and son and say to them, “Now, don’t overdo it. You were out until 4 o’clock this morning. Where were you?” He might think something different was going on. I had to take a trip up to Kingcome one time because the Pentecostals had gone up there and that whole village was divided. The fathers and the sons were divided, the mothers and fathers, they were not on good terms, and the way I saw it, it was not a good thing. (GNLH, 178).

It is evident that the church denominations divided the village families along the lines of denominations and set them in opposition among themselves. The conflicts between the churches also caused conflicts between the two groups of converted Natives. These conflicts were not studied in detail by the historians and researchers. James Sewid records his dislike to the Pentecostals’ prayer meetings. He writes, “When the Pentecostals came and started to hold prayer meetings they were really bad. What I mean is that they used to have services in different homes every night and it was just like somebody died in there.” (GNLH, 178) There are also instances in his book wherein Sewid opposes the teachings of Anglican church

ministers too and is in favour of retaining Native cultural practices. He opposes the attempt by the ministers to change native traditional funeral practices. He states:

Sometimes we had the same problem with some of the ministers wanting to change funeral services and not allow people to buy an expensive casket and send lots of flowers. I felt that if a person is gone from this world and we were going to pay him our last respects, then it was up to the family to decide what kind of funeral they wanted. It really meant a lot to our people to do a lot of things for a person who died, especially for a noble and respected person like a chief's son or daughter. They used to put a lot of expensive jewels and other things with the person who has died, especially when it was someone who had come from a very well-known family. I always compared our customs to Egyptians who used to do that to the very noble people, and I thought we just sort of liked to carry on the custom of our people from the early days. That was what some of the ministers in our church wanted to change. I felt it was wrong for a person who came and stayed among us for a couple of years to want to change those kinds of things. (GNLH, 213).

Sewid consciously chose what he considered to be good for his people to retain and opposed anyone who tried to change Native traditional/cultural practices. Despite the fact that he was a lay reader in the Anglican Church, he opposed the ministers in many matters. It implies his deep affinity to his Native cultural practices. It is also evident that converted Natives' view of spirituality was significantly different from that of their European counterparts. Spradley, the editor of Sewid's book, emphasizes that James Sewid's "indoctrination into two religions was simultaneous and began early. At about six, he was baptized into the church, just shortly after he danced in his feet secret society ceremonial: his marriage was both Anglican and Kwakiutl: his confirmation in the church took place at about the same time that he went through the extended hamasta initiation" (GNLH, 281). Sewid's exposure to native tradition and the White man's lifestyle simultaneously at an early age helped him understand the cultural differences better and act in a wise way. In this same vein of thought, Donald B. Smith quotes Ralph Steinhauer to highlight how native missionaries viewed native spirituality:

They had two loyalties. Egerton, the devoted Methodist – after 1925 United Church – missionary, admitted to Ralph the amazing similarity between Christian teachings and Native beliefs. He did not dismiss Native spiritual concepts as superstition. Speaking of the Sun Dance he to his great-nephew: There was a bit of torture there, but it was no worse than training for the commandos. They also had the ceremonial dances. There was a good deal of paganism, whooping and hollering but you know, I'm still an Indian. Actually, I can't say too much against it. There were some great prayers said – heartfelt and sincere. The Sun Dance was a form of worship. (Smith, "The Steinhauers" 60). It is apparent that being a native Christian missionary did not mean that he/she had given up native spirituality. The life of James Sewid is a unique

example of this.

CONCLUSION

Historians and researchers who studied religion during the colonial and postcolonial eras represent natives from the perspectives of postcolonialism: either as resisting colonialism or becoming the victims of it. Such perspectives blur the actual reality of the function of religion in the lives of the Natives. The autobiography of James Sewid describes the complexities of the roles of Christianity and conversion within Native community from a Native viewpoint. For a European missionary, conversion means that the native gives up his traditional cultural and spiritual practices in favour of Christianity; but for the Natives (James Sewid) it does not mean abandoning their up native cultural and spiritual practices. Moreover, it is important to note that James Sewid understands Christianity through the prism of Kwakiutl cultural values. He neither passively accepts Christianity nor it is forced upon him. In contrast, the postcolonial approach represents natives either as victims of conversion or as those resisting conversion. Such a two-dimensional representation misses out the differences that existed among the Natives in their approach toward Christianity/conversion, the role of native missionaries in conversion, and conflicts that simmered within the various denominations of the churches. These important aspects lay beyond the ambit of most postcolonial research studies, thereby leaving a lacuna in describing a holistic view of native identity in the context of religion, spirituality and conversion.

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