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Culture Survivance and Religion Healing: On Ojibwe Spirituality in Healing Trauma in *LaRose*[*]

WAN Mei

College of Foreign Languages, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 211106, Jiangsu, China

As of French, German and Ojibwe mixed-blood origin, Louise Erdrich, a well-known and prolific American writer, has always been dealing with the theme of the relationship between Catholicism and Ojibwe spirituality in her fictional world. Her attitude towards Catholicism and Ojibwe spirituality has sparked a heated discussion among scholars and researchers in recent years. Under such academic atmosphere, therefore, *LaRose* is discussed in this paper. It is shown in *LaRose* that when white and tribal history come together, where Catholic and traditional spirit worlds intersect, and when Western legal justice cannot solve an ethical problem, Ojibwe spirituality can be used for healing trauma, which is represented through the tradition of adoption as a spiritual reparation, the acquisition of power through naming and biological inheritance and the practice of rituals and ceremonies, from all of which the healing power is derived. Rather than being a syncretism with Catholic, Ojibwe spirituality should preserve its own traditions and cultures to survive generational as well as individual trauma and maintain a culture survivance.

Keywords: LaRose, culture survivance, religion healing, Catholicism, Ojibwe spirituality

I. Introduction

Survivance is, of course, related to the word survival, and it has many layers of meanings in different languages. This word has been used more frequently in the past few years since the publication of *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. Survivance is survival but more of the meaning of succession, it connotes not toward loss but renewal and continuity. Vizenor asserts that "survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuation of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name" (Vizenor, 1999). For Ojibwe, culture survivance is more achieved through their spiritual practice, which indicates the affirmation of native spirituality. As of French, German and mixed-blood origin, Louise Erdrich, a well-known and prolific American writer, has always been dealing with the theme of the relationship between Catholicism and Ojibwe spirituality in her fictional world. The popularity and critical success of Erdrich's works has invited analytical attention within the currents of contemporary trends. Scholars and researchers have been increasingly interested in her religion writing, in which the discussion of the relationship between Catholicism and Ojibwe spirituality is the most heatedly discussed. Among those scholars, Catherine Rainwater argues that there exists a complex

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WAN Mei, M.A. In English Literature, Lecturer in College of Foreign Languages, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics.

relationship between Catholicism and Native American culture and after she analyzes four pairs of conflicting modes in her semination paper, *Reading between Worlds* (Rainwater, 1990), Rainwater concludes that there are lots of "conflicting codes" in Erdrich's works. Yet, scholars like H. Wendell Howard, on the other hand, insist that Catholicism and Ojibwe spirituality are syncretic and Ojibwe spirituality can have more possibilities to survive during the process of syncretism and he also believes that there are a lot of "dual trails" in Erdrich's works (Howard, 2000). Moreover, critics such as Friedman believe that as an expression of religious syncretism, a parallel between Ojibwe spirituality and Catholic mysticism can be also drawn from one of her works, *Tracks* (Friedman, 1994). Actually, it is arguable that Catholicism can be syncretic with Ojibwe spirituality. Brian D. Ingraffia expresses his doubt that conversions may be deadly and affirms that Erdrich indeed indicts Catholicism in her works (Ingraffia, 2015). Erdrich's most recently work, *LaRose*, is discussed therefore in this paper to illustrate that Erdrich indeed advocates for Ojibwe spirituality, indicts Catholicism and expresses the disastrous outcomes of internalization of and conversion to Catholicism while she expresses her opinion that Ojibwe spirituality, its structure, power, practice and value, is superior to Catholicism.

Like many other Erdrich's novels, *LaRose* is a story about culture and religion conflict between the Natives and the whites. As typical in Erdrich's novels, it is also a nonlinear, yet seamless tapestry of interconnected tales spun from family stories, lore and Ojibwe legends, a powerful evocation of two families struggle to overcome misfortune. As an Ojibwe family who killed their neighbor's five-year-old son, Dusty, in an accident, the Irons's helped their neighboring family and themselves to survive this traumatic family disaster by practicing Ojibwe spirituality rather than their Catholic beliefs. By practicing Ojibwe traditions and cultures, the two families finally recovered and came back on good terms again. In order to prove that how trauma can be healed, and culture survives, this paper will analyze Ojibwe spirituality from the following three aspects: the tradition of adoption as spiritual reparation, the acquisition of power through naming and biological inheritance and spiritual rituals and ceremonies. Therefore, Ojibwe spirituality's healing power and accordingly Erdrich's support for Ojibwe spirituality can be concluded and more importantly, the survivance of a Native culture when in conflict with Catholicism in a postmodern white mainstream society is thus established.

II. Adoption: Tradition of Reparation

Like many other Native American cultures, Ojibwe spirituality is secular and emphasizes on tribes, tribal relations and interrelatedness between everything and universal connectedness. When individual benefit is in conflict with tribal benefit, individual benefit should yield to the tribal one. For Ojibwe, religious life is represented as involving responsibilities and challenges and hence as inappropriate to anyone seeking simply to escape from the cares and obligations of the world (McClure, 2007, p. 136). When problems arise, religion is used to help to solve that problem rather than to escape.

However, non-indigenous cultures tend to make a dichotomy between everything (either in literary form, relations between species or in human relations) which results in the misunderstanding of the western world on the indigenous people. Adoption as a way to compensate seems problematic for Westerners, but it involves Ojibwe ethics of family completeness. Erdrich has been thinking about this typical Ojibwe tradition when she creates *LaRose*. As a compensation to make up for the unintentional crime being committed, it is a justified way to hand over one's child to the victim's family. Nothing is more traumatic than being separate from one's own

children; therefore, adoption is a hopeless way without dignity. Yet, in order to maintain the tribal integrity and intertribal interconnectedness, adoption is the best ethical way to solve a problem that western legal justice cannot solve. Ojibwe spirituality means not only genetic relations but also tribal integrity; this kind of practice has long been used as a social and economic coalition. And to take outsiders as family members is to say that the tribal family structure is fluid and changeable. Family relations and the importance of their tribes are as significant as water and food for life, which has always been a method to strengthen intertribal relations.

In *LaRose*, the Native family Landreaux Iron and Emmaline Iron who live on a reservation in rural North Dakota have been on good terms with Peter Ravich and Nola Ravich who live in the blue-collar town adjacent to the reservation in spite of their different religions and different life styles. When harvest season comes, the two families will exchange goods to make a living. While working as a physical-therapy assistant therapist, Landreaux devotes to his clients and is guided by Ojibwe beliefs and Catholic Church, and he practices both of the two religions. He goes to hunt sometimes. Yet, peace is broken after Landreaux accidentally shoots Peter's five- year-old son, Dusty, and then the two families fall into a family trauma immediately and western nuclear family structure is consequently shattered. "As Erdrich explores the inevitable anguish and complications inherent in this act of sacrifice and attempt of justice, she takes soundings of the wellsprings of trauma and strength shaping these grieving households" (Seaman, 2016, p. 19).

This shooting accident obviously has shattered the two families. Even though Nola is slender and soft, she desires to have a blood everlasting to settle the issue and she wishes that her husband can "bludgeon Landreaux to death" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 4) to sooth her sorrow, but what surprises the reservation and the town is the Irons's subsequent devastating decision to give their son, LaRose, to the Raviches's as a compensation, which is unbelievable for the Catholic family. Facing such unexpected reality, Landreaux and Emmaline are also put into an embarrassing and traumatic situation. They went to the Catholic priest to seek for suggestion, yet it's fruitless. What saved them is Sweat Lodge. In the ritual of Sweat Lodge practice, the Landreaux finally made a decision: they would hand over their youngest son, LaRose, to their innocent neighbor to be adopted as reparation, saying, "our son will be yours" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 16). In the following development of the novel, LaRose becomes a bridge to connect the two families.

In Ojibwe tradition, adoption doesn't mean abandonment by one family and a complete take over by another family, but it implies being raised by two families together. Even though the Irons's have decided to give their son to the Raviches's, they wish to visit their son frequently regarding the traditions, cultures and the right to raise children, which makes the two families suffer a lot psychologically. However, as time goes by, Nola's revenge subsides and begins to feel LaRose's cuteness when holding him, she realizes "how could she or Peter harm the father of the son they'd been given?" and "she closed her eyes and felt the heavy warmth of LaRose as she rocked him to sleep, legs dangling over her legs, breath steaming a passage to the crater of her heart" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 112). From hatred, revenge to reunification and harmony, adoption as an Ojibwe tradition has played a vital and superior role in solving a problem that western Catholicism and legal justice can't do.

Adoption is not an individual behavior but communal and it creates a sense of presence and survivance. It is a continuation of Ojibwe spirituality, a relocation of the world, a recognition of the interconnectedness of the world and a responsibility to the world. "Individual had to be responsible to increase, intensify, spread, recognize and experience this relationship. And ideally, everyone is responsible for all members of the band, eventually for

all people, all things" (Vizenor, 2008, p. 18). Adoption is a common Ojibwe culture as is depicted in *LaRose:* when Romeo (a petty thief and mean man in the story) is unable to feed his son Hollis, he gives his son to the Irons's; Romeo himself is adopted by his aunt when he is young. Erdrich once said in an interview that "informal adoption is common in Native American cultures and being temporary parents can be very painful" (Nowick, 1994, p. 73). This kind of mixed family structure is a continued effort to preserve tribal benefit and for the survival of the tribe and a responsible presence of natural reason and resistance to absence and victimry. In this sense, *LaRose* does not only describe justice, revenge, desire and trauma, it touches on a very old tribal action of adoption and its consequent benefit for the tribe, for the family and even for siblings.

III. Naming and Bloodline: Acquisition of Power

"Naming provides a more important heritage than blood" (Schultz, 1991, p. 85), it is more possessive of cultural identity. "Names are essential to a distinctive personal nature and bear the memories and solace of heard stories" (Vizenor, 1999). Names denote identity and status in Trial Settlement and giving a newly-born child a spirit name is thus a sacred action for the child and the tribe as well. That's why when the Irons's fourth child was born, the parents hesitated to name their child "LaRose" for fear of its power. After careful consideration, Landreaux and Emmaline finally decided to give their son such a name as LaRose in the hope that the name can "protect him from the unknown, from what had been let loose with the accident" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 105), so, it is easy to understand why junior LaRose is given for adoption to the Raviches's as a compensation for their misdoing in the expectation that he will heal their family trauma.

Erdrich discusses on the importance and inherited meanings of naming in many of her works. In *Four Souls*, she commented:

> There are names that go on through the generations with calm persistence. Names that heal a person just for taking them, and names that destroy. Names can travel; names can bring you home, names you only mutter in the deep water of your sleep. Names that bring memory of painful attachments and names lost to time and the reckonings of chance. Names are throwaway treasures. Names hold the sweetness of youth; bring back faces and unsettling resemblances. Names acquire their own life and drag the person on their own path for their own reasons, which we can't know. There are names that gutter out and die and then spring back, distinguished. Names that go on through time and trouble, names to hold on your tongue for luck. Names to fear. (Erdrich, 2004, p. 47)

History and the past have laid a solid foundation for spirituality and the connectivity of Ojibwe spirituality is realized in the recognition of their own cultural history and the past. In each of the generation in Emmaline's family, there is a female LaRose over a century, which is significant since females are regarded as "powerful, socially, physically, and meta-physically" (Allen, 1986). Since the first-generation origin LaRose was born, each LaRose from each generation seems mysterious, powerful and that kind of virtue is inherited continuously by the fifth generation LaRose, who is also as powerful as his female ancestors and possesses a preternaturally soulful healing power himself. Therefore, LaRose is powerful both in name and in origins and can survive traumas and preserve Ojibwe traditions.

Ojibwe spirituality is basically mysterious and spiritual, which is characterized by its fluidity, magic and changeability and it's manifested in vision quest, guardian spirit and dream work. Ojibwe people live in a world of symbols and signs, which regards spirituality and materiality as a whole. When the first generation LaRose was sold by her mother to a white businessman and maltreated, she decided to escape. With Wolfred's help, she

poisoned the white businessman to death and married Wolfred after years of learning experiences in boarding school, finally survived. Whenever she was in pain and suffering, she asked for vision quest, through which she learned how to survive in this ruthless world. And it seems whenever she is in difficulty, there is always a vision guiding her, "Call upon me when this happens, and you shall live" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 63). Even before her death, she passed her survival skills to her daughter, the second LaRose, and

> taught her how to find guardian spirits in each pale they walked, how to heal people with songs, with plants, what lichens to eat in an extremity of hunger, how to set snares, jig fish……she taught her how to dream, how to dream, how to return from a dream, change the dream, or stay in the dream I order to save her life. (Erdrich, 2016, p. 199).

The second generation LaRose likewise passed this family power to her daughter, and generation after generation hence. During this detailed description of that inherited and magic power, the history of boarding school was mentioned and criticized, which is an inevitable consequence of the preach of Catholic church. Yet, like many other Natives, the LaRose family survived and became even powerful.

Power travels through bloodlines, the junior LaRose was naturally having a power to heal trauma. LaRose knows the importance of his name and knows how to help the two families recover from their trauma. He knows how to travel between visible world and invisible world, how to commune with guardian spirit. There was a time when junior LaRose came to a forest he dreamed of some Natives when he was in a trance because of lack of water. He dreamed of the dead Dusty; he dreamed of some old Natives who could speak Ojibwe language and he heard that they told him that he could fly like them and he saw Dusty floating in the air as well. He knows how to interpret that since he is the LaRose who has inherited his ancestors' power. At a party to celebrate Hollis graduation, it seems to junior LaRose that he saw Dusty again, who is sitting together with him. There is a word coming from the air, "Sorrow eats time. Time eats sorrow" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 371). It's just like the historical trauma of the Natives' that "getting blown up happened in an instant; getting put together took the rest of your life" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 11). Unlike Catholicism, Ojibwe spirituality undoubtedly heals the wounds of "loss, dislocation, disease, addition, and just feeling like the tattered remnants of a people with a complex history" (Seaman, 2016, p. 19).

IV. Rituals and Ceremonies: Practice of Spirituality

Ritual is a cultural form and non-institutionalized spirituality in Native American culture. Ojibwe define themselves or the tribes through ceremonies or spiritual disciplines, which can be achieved through songs, prayers, dances with drumming and dramatic languages and the wholeness of the universe is defined by the wholeness of Native ritual structures. There is no such a binary dichotomy as natural/supernatural or material/spiritual in their spirituality belief, so it's not surprising to find such supernatural and bizarre phenomena or beings as a story character in native writing traditions. To seek help or get vision through those supernatural beings is the purpose of a ritual or ceremony. As a secular religion, Native spirituality runs through their daily life and is not a religion about ethics, doctrines or mythology, it is a practice of their tribal spirituality, and it is a specific manifestation of their traditions.

In Ojibwe ritual, medicine men perform the role to help to heal trauma. They are the leader of a ritual and they "lead" the traumatized to the spiritual world and help to heal trauma. They can speak to birds, animals and plants and they can talk to the spirit, the supernatural. Through music, herbal plant, dream, their insight and ritual

dance, the medicine men can find balance between powers. All in all, medicine man serves his tribe and helps to heal spiritually. After that shooting accident, Landreaux tried to seek help from a local Catholic priest Travis, but failed. Then with his wife he turned back to their traditional Ojibwe Sweat Lodge ceremony once led by the medicine man Randall, who helped Landreaux to communicate with the spirit and made the final decision in a Sweat Lodge to send his son to his victimized neighbor. “The goal of many ancient spiritual traditions was to heal individuals by helping them to transform themselves and relearn to see the world” (McClure, 2007, p. 143). In that baking-hot lodge, Emmaline crooned an ancient song, invited the soul and Landreaux invited the wind and the animals. In such kind of trance, they recalled their ancestors called LaRose, recalled this powerful though pure name, recalled their traditions and their son, junior LaRose. Sweat Lodge connects the traumatic people to the soul and spirit and helps to heal.

Besides Sweat Lodge, the role of pipe ceremony cannot be denied as for its healing power. After junior LaRose was given to the Raviches’s for one year, Landreaux called the other four children to gather in the living room to have a pipe ceremony. Every child was given a pipe, which was made by Landreaux himself during his spare time. The process of making a pipe is like that of praying. During the pipe ceremony, all the people sit around, and everyone is supposed to hand the pipe to the next one while expressing their own ideas and wishes. When each one is holding the pipe, he should turn the pipe to the four directions, asking for bless from the spirit. All the children believe that their youngest brother LaRose is the savior of the two families and is the healer.

Ritual does not only help to heal the trauma caused by the accidental shooting, but also the survival of the first generation LaRose with her husband. After running away from the cruel white businessman in the trading post, LaRose’s husband, Wolfred became sick. He begged her to leave him alone and find a way out for herself, but she refused. She used her mother’s drum to sing, to dance and to pray for him, hoping that the supernatural spirit could cure him and help them to survive. Amazingly, Wolfred survived. Through different stages of ritual practices, the novel finally provides readers a scene of a ceremonial graduation party, a party for Hollis, the natural son of Romeo and the adopted son of the Irons’s. All the characters in the novel are invited to the party. Peter was invited even though he felt a high level of strain. He wondered if it was kind of ritual of traditional Landreaux thing it meant that should go on; Romeo was invited, who used to nurse a grudge against Landreaux. He offered a checkbook to Hollis and wished the best to him. And of course, the medicine man Randall was invited; he brought a hand drum with him and sang a song with Landreaux to Hollis. With warmth, love and good wishes, this successful ceremonial graduation party means a lot to Hollis and to our readers.

The goal of rituals and ceremonies is to unite: unite individuals and his surroundings, unite his own tribe with others, and unite the human beings with the universe. Any ritual or ceremony is to create, to support a sense of community on which tribal culture is founded. Preserving traditions and carrying on rituals and ceremonies is to heal the injured and to find direction for the lost soul.

V. Conclusion

Religion is inseparable from other social forces due to its innate cultural, social and political connotations. Erdrich proves in *LaRose* that it is not beneficial to cast away Ojibwe spirituality and internalize Catholicism. Only by sticking to their own spirituality and traditions can Ojibwe spirituality survive in the dominating mainstream white culture because “folk religion can be seen as an act of exercising native resistance to the

imposition of the religious institution of Catholicism on native American society, thereby maintaining native culture and identity" (Chen, 2007, p. 59). With the development of Western science and technology civilization, Catholicism is increasingly showing its weaknesses in explaining modern people's emptiness and vanity, let alone healing spiritual trauma. In *LaRose*, Louise indicts Catholicism's limitedness in solving ethical problems while at the same time she is praising Ojibwe spirituality's superiority in healing spiritual problems. It's not difficult to understand that as a mixed blood of while Catholic and Ojibwe origin, as a "survivor of a holocaust, her anger is buried in her fiction, occasionally breaking through to the surface" (Mckinney, 1999, p. 159), she is eager to express her support for her Ojibwe part. Erdrich's works may show a partial reversion, but that those oppressed and marginalized resorting to traditions and supernatural rituals can be healed provides chances to resist, recovery and survival (McClure, 2007), thus establishing a new society based on the rebirth of traditional cultures and values. Therefore, survivance goes beyond its narrow meaning of survival and acquires its more dynamic and creative meaning through the practice of Ojibwe spirituality.

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