

Introduction

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This book is about the cultural diversity of the peoples of the North, and how this can be maintained and enhanced in the future. Not coincidentally, therefore, a wide variety of views—expressed here by authors with different backgrounds and dealing with different regions—reflects this general theme and how it is to be approached.

To discuss these issues from various angles, a symposium was held at the *Franckesche Stiftungen zu Halle* (Germany) from December 13–15, 1997. It brought together not only scholars—mainly anthropologists and ethnolinguists—but also educators and those involved in politics from native communities of the North. The productive dialogue that arose from the symposium can be seen in the contributions to this book. Let us hope that it gives us clues and insights into both theory building and the implementation of relevant community-based activities—that help us seek appropriate means for the transmission of endangered cultural diversities to future generations.

At the outset E. Kasten emphasizes the fact that indigenous needs and global responsibilities make the maintaining of cultural diversity a matter for all of us. This, consequently, entails corresponding international and intercultural collaboration if it is to be dealt with effectively. J. Bobaljik calls attention to the need to work for adequate social, political, and economic environments, so that cultural and linguistic diversities can continue to thrive in the future. In the following paper, D. Koester directs our view to the educational process itself. These are the main themes that are taken up and further elaborated in the following case studies. From these, as discussion at the symposium also showed, some key issues have evolved which reflect the current state of the debate.

Several of these papers, based on recent field studies in various places in the Russian North, suggest another—and probably more appropriate—understanding of the specific cultural dynamics within predominantly multi-ethnic native communities in that region, especially after the resettlements of the 1950s and the 1960s (A. Bloch, E. Kasten, N. Vakhtin). According to them, earlier approaches, which often looked for “primordial” markers of

identity, may divert us from noticing the actual transformations into new complex cultural diversities—as an outcome of specific sociocultural interactions within these communities and based on ongoing reinterpretations of a people's historic past. Accordingly, native language maintenance, for example, is seen in more relative terms, as one's language is obviously an important, but not the sole, indispensable, “marker of identity”. However, the endangered state of a language can become a kind of a “barometer” for the endangerment of that particular culture as a whole (J. Bobaljik).

In this regard, subsequent papers emphasize the role of local museums in maintaining traditional ecological knowledge (A. Efimenko) and Native arts in a bicultural education curriculum (N. Nelson) to provide young people with further incentives to carry on their particular cultural heritage. In addition to this, A. Nelson shows how external innovations such as soccer, which is occasionally associated in western Europe with hooliganism, can assume different meanings when they are incorporated into another culture. In this case, soccer—interpreted in the potlatch-like context of competing and hosting—serves to stabilize social networks in First Nations' communities of the Pacific Northwest (cf Kasten 1995). Thus, particular cultural concepts may survive and thrive even in new and more complex forms, and should be acknowledged as such in education.

The changing social, political, and economic environments with regard to maintaining cultural diversities—addressed by J. Bobaljik at the beginning of the book—are dealt with, in a number of various regional contexts, by U. Aikio-Puoskari, Z. Pikunova, and V. Robbek. Maintaining one's cultural heritage with reference to native populations who live in urban settings is discussed by N. Nelson, A. Ventsel and S. Dudeck. Questions are raised about the reasons for the loss of local languages and cultures, and how these processes can be forestalled or halted. This particular theme is more explicitly dealt with by R. Iutzi-Mitchell. Following and expanding on Bourdieu's thoughts, he argues that “symbolic domination” often leads to language shift because local linguiculture is considered to be of little value. Consequently, he sees the need to give local languages and cultures greater value, for example through more widespread institutional use. The question is, however, whether local knowledge should be (or could be) perceived by youth as having *greater* value, or whether it is better promoted in bicultural education as being of necessary *complementary* value. This latter position is indicated implicitly in the article by O. Habeck, who describes the obvious advantages and necessities

for local communities of being enabled to participate actively in “globalized” knowledge at the same time. In fact, it appears that finding and defining the right balance between the transmission of local and globalized knowledge is—and is increasingly becoming—a key task in education, and not only in small-scale communities in the North.

It may be worth turning, once again, to Bourdieu’s *Théorie de la pratique* (Bourdieu 1979). Accordingly, the objective value of a given cultural tradition in itself is not as relevant as it becomes in the social discourse, wherein it is constantly re-interpreted, manipulated and eventually transformed into “political” and “economic capital” (cf Kasten 1996). This reflects its close link to changing power relations between the different groups in society—nowadays increasingly defined by ethnicity. It may even reveal the limited impact of academic debates like this one, as the actual rules of the game are established in a different way.

Iutzi-Mitchell, in his paper, even calls for giving children first-hand experiences that inculcate the values of one’s language (and one’s cultural heritage). This leads us to another important question, raised by D. Koester, which has obviously not been sufficiently addressed before. This concerns how perceived values, attached to cultural phenomena encountered by the developing child, affect the internalization or learning process, and whether these values affect the future manner in which the concepts are treated in adulthood.

Concrete examples of how endangered cultural heritage may be transmitted through appropriate teaching materials and a community-based curriculum are given by P. Jääsalmi-Krüger, K. Khaloimova, A. Kim, N. Nelson, Z. Pikunova, V. Robbek, and M. Tarasova. Beyond these, more alternative types of schooling are discussed by P. Fryer, A. Ventsel and S. Dudeck. Educators from the Russian North elucidate how the beginnings of present-day activities arose already in the 1970s at the community level, before they were later incorporated into official new state programs. The same is shown for First Nations in the Pacific Northwest of Canada, which sheds light on how effective community initiatives can be in reversing the trends of existing educational policies. The authors from Russia have witnessed most of these changes themselves as scholars or educators, and some of them have been actively involved in these processes politically as well. Thus, they are well prepared to give a critical, but nonetheless more balanced, view of these developments in the former Soviet Union, than is now and again echoed in the West.

Besides the shorter retrospectives, which help to put current trends in context, two articles broaden the view to include possible future developments. They demonstrate how a well-thought-out use of new technologies may contribute effectively to the transmission of local culture. M. Dürr explains how computer technology and the use of teaching materials on CD-ROM can have distinct advantages in this regard. O. Habeck shows how the Internet may enable isolated populations of the North to communicate—in a more self-determined way than before—about their respective cultures, both among themselves and with the rest of the world.

To present a well-rounded coverage of the issue, which has been discussed with reference to the peoples of the North, comparative views are given from corresponding case studies by P. Jaenecke, B. Zeisler, and G. Whittaker with regard to such other places as Germany, Ladakh/India, and Oklahoma/USA.

To summarize, in their reviews and discussion of changing social, political, and economic environments, and the corresponding educational practices themselves, most of the authors of this book come to conclusions that encourage us to look with “cautious optimism” to the future, much as N. Vakhtin expressed it. Although not always in their “pristine” forms—as outsiders, especially, would often prefer to see them—the concepts of northern peoples will survive embodied in the form of distinct cultures, as will the peoples themselves.

References

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