Personal Reflections on the Dakhódiapi Wahóȟpi and Children's Identity Development as it Pertains to Culture and Language for Early Risers podcast

By Nicole Cavender
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And all the others in my family & greater community who have helped me to better understand this topic for myself, including people in my global circle like Ali Mac Forever on Instagram.

Háŋ Mitákuye Owás'iŋ!
Čhaŋtéwasteye nápe čhiyuzapi ye!
Nicole Cavender emákiyapiye.
Bdé Óta Othúŋwe, éd wathí.
Damakóta k'a Scottish, k'a Norwegian.
Sisíthuŋwaŋ-Waȟpéthuŋwaŋ emátaŋhaŋ.

In the language of the first people here, the Dakota people of Miní Sóta Makhóčhe I just said:

Hello my relatives! With a good heart I greet all of you with a handshake.
My name is Nicole Cavender.
I'm from Minneapolis.
I'm of Dakota, Scottish, and Norwegian descent.
I come from the Sisíthuŋwaŋ-Waȟpéthuŋwaŋ (Sisseton-Wapeton) Dakota communities.

As a parent at the Dakhódiapi Wahóȟpi (which is Dakota for Dakota Language Nest) I'm honored to be invited by Woókiyewiŋ and the Early Risers team to discuss children's identity development as it pertains to Native culture and language. It is important to me that I emphasize, what is obvious to most, that I can only speak for myself and my own unique perspective, and I by no means speak for other Dakota people, much less Dakota people as a whole. I look forward to seeing this conversation continue and expand include many diverse Native people.

I present as a middle aged, able-bodied white woman. I'm from Minnesota born and raised, though I have lived in other places around the world. I come from Scottish & Scots-Irish family on my father's side, and from my mother's side I am Sisíthuŋwaŋ-Waȟpéthuŋwaŋ, Dakota, (but unlike my mother, and siblings the same blood quantum as me, I am not enrolled because the rule about blood quantum in my community was changed a year before I was born). I'm a mother, and I'm married.

As a Mother:
Right now, I mostly identify as a mother with young children. Much of my identity revolves around my responsibilities first to raise them to be healthy, kind, caring, responsible, self-aware and self-regulating people, and then to do what I can to make the community and environment around us a place that is safe and nurturing to grow up in (and modeling these actions for them is part of raising them in a good way). Then the hope is when these become their responsibilities and their world to care for, hopefully we as caregivers can leave it for them better than we found it.

I've healed so much through simply being a loving mom to my children. So many generational traumas that may have been unrecognizable early in life or laid dormant come up to the surface when a child is brought into our lives. I was once told by a healthcare provider that "when a baby is brought into your life you get the baby and you get your past." There's nothing quite like the way a child holds up a figurative mirror showing us where we can improve, grow, and heal.

Identity development generally:
I talked about this podcast topic with a Tuŋwíŋ (which is Dakota for Aunty), and she said identity, when you break it down to the basics, it's not where you were raised or even who raised you, as much as it's rooted in who loves you. I had to sit with that for a while. It's beautiful, and I also know that part of my identity is tied to people who were never loving to me. But I do see how most of my identity more often moves toward the people and communities where I experience reciprocal love.

I think it's important to have a shared definition before I continue. As I understand it, identity development is a lifelong process, so it's forever growing and changing for each individual based on countless factors of our unique lives that impact our sense of self & belonging. It's both how we see ourselves and how others see us, based on our actions. If I say I'm an environmentalist, but I don't do anything to help the environment, am I really an environmentalist?

One of my siblings is enrolled in our Dakota community, but has nothing to do with Dakota culture, but enrolled or not she is descended, so she is Dakota, but may not choose to identify as Dakota.

The topic of the identity development of children in Native communities is a broad topic, and as I said requires multiple voices, and ongoing conversations. So I want to repeat that I can only speak for myself from my own specific experience. And after speaking with many family and community members about this podcast topic, I've also been permitted to share what others have shared with me as a small portion of that conversation.

Before we can talk about Cultural Identity we need to talk about Colonialism:
We can't talk about identity inside of a colonist society without discussing colonialism. This applies to all people living in such a society, around the globe, Native or not.

I've always known I'm Dakota and have always been taught to be proud of that, and I've also always known I'm Scottish, too, and I honestly didn't get enough exposure to those two cultures to feel I could relate to either. That's what colonization does to cultures. I notice a lot of white U.S. people around me seeking knowledge about our European descended family trees as a hobby. Not learning our European culture, much less practicing the cultures we're descended from. To embrace our cultural roots means stepping outside of the colonized, racist values that have plagued us, and continue to plague us even today. Embracing our roots is returning to the language and cultural life ways of our ancestors. Basically, if you have been assimilated as my immediate family has been, it's learning a completely different way of living on the land, in a reciprocal relationship with the natural world and one another. For Dakota people we have always been here. We are still here, even though the US government tried to extinguish us in so many different ways.

A more recent method of attempting our physical and cultural extinction has been assimilation. By removing children from their Dakota families and life ways and forcing them into boarding schools where they were abused for speaking their language or practicing their culture, the government and missions beat white, Christian, English language into young children. This was extremely effective. Every Native person in this country has a grandparent, a parent, or they themselves were stolen from their loved ones and forced into boarding schools. This is the era and the trauma that we are in the process of healing. The unhealed effects passed down from that trauma is what I don't want to carry into my children's generation.

As a young adult in my early 20s I was exposed to the same marketing and media as everyone else which attracted me to things that are in fact harmful to Dakota culture, and not just Dakota culture. Everyone is negatively impacted long-term by environmental damage from consuming more than we need, and seeking luxury experiences and items. But I turned away from Dakota culture and language which I knew in my heart and my gut is a part of my being, and at the same time the culture felt foreign to me. It was a strange feeling being split like that. Genuinely wanting to immerse myself in a culture that I come from, but was a total mystery to me, so I felt immensely uncomfortable. It's a very unsettling feeling I still have to this day even after years of returning to community and culture.

But I am noticing that identifying as an American, specifically a U.S. citizen, is uncomfortable for many people these days, too. Based on what I was taught in school and mainstream media, I understand “American” identity means focusing on individualism, and we're supposed to be proud of vague concepts, like freedom, economic power, military strength, and justice. But then I read books like “Indigenous Peoples History of the United States,” and “The Relentless Business of Treaties,” or "Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of our National Identity,” and I learn that the National identity we're taught through school and media is not something I feel proud of because, I now know it is, at best, rooted in lies. At the root of those lies is the land.

My Dakota elders teach that the major mechanisms of our culture & spiritual identity …
It's about the land.
Our spiritual connection is land based.

My Tuŋwíŋ (Dakota for Aunty) told me about a quote by Harriet Nahanee, a Native woman from part of the Nuu-chah-nulth (pronounced noo-CHAH-nool) people, and she then married into the Squamish Nation in what is now British Columbia. Harriet was taken and put in a residential school as a 5-year-old child, and she's quoted in a 2012 article by Dianne Meili speaking about the colonizing society. Harriet said:
“Their idea (in schooling us) was to civilize us and make us Christians and, actually, it was a process to take us away from the land,” noting her pristine childhood home had been clearcut-logged, mined and over-fished since she grew up there.

Colonization is about taking the land, and the reason it’s so challenging and violent to do that is because our Native cultures around the globe are so deeply rooted to the land.

For thousands of years before colonization in what we now call the USA, this land only experienced many hundreds of Native languages, many of which are still spoken here. Many of

these languages have been lost. But there is a strong concerted effort to strengthen the languages that remain.
A quote that sticks with me from Ali Mac, an Irish Celtic descended woman on Instagram, is:

“Colonialism doesn't just take your land, it takes your mind.”

What she has said about colonialism in Ireland is the same here, and across the globe. She said:
“Colonialism forced and enforced English using hard powers like rules, laws, punishments, and brutality. Colonialism also uses soft powers like psychological manipulation and propaganda which creates a lot of internalized shame.”

My Deksí (which means Uncle in Dakota), who grew up in a Dakota speaking household, told me a story about going to the cowboys and Indians movies when he was a boy. His parents taught him to be fiercely proud to be Dakota and so he is also fiercely proud. He told me about how he felt angry at the kids who would root for the white cowboys. The white people represented the “good guys” in all of those movies, and what kid doesn't want to identify as a “good guy.”

More and more over generations of boarding schools and other cruelties, caregivers taught family members to speak English because they felt the need to equip their children with English so they could be successful in the colonizing society. Caregivers wanted to protect children from the harms faced by previous generations.

I've had a younger adult family member tell me that when she started to learn the language some people asked her, “Why? Dakota is a dead language why would you waste your time learning it?” but it's not a dead language. It tells us everything about where we’re living. If we all understood Dakota we would better understand all the natural environment, and the reciprocal relationship we share.

At the same time, the Dakota language *is* at risk right now because there are so few first speakers left. And the language is in the hands of our second speakers, and even more so in the hands of the children of our second speakers. We keep it alive.

“It's the ultimate success of colonialism when you can get the people to police their own self from their internal colonial mind.” -Ali Mac

No culture (or person) is a Monolith:

There are hundreds of federally recognized Native Nations in what we now call the United States, and many more fighting for recognition. To lump us all together, which still happens so frequently, is the same as considering Scottish folks the same as Italian or Turkish people.

Indigeneity is different for everybody. Blood quantum & enrollment impacts identity. Where you grow up does, too. Not just which Nation (Tribe), but which community in that Nation, and then which family in a community, and which skin color in that family, what age, gender identity, etcetera. Maybe you grew up in community, or maybe, like me, you're starting the journey to return to community and culture.

I've explained that I'm white and Iná (Dakota for my mother) is white passing, and I have always stuck out like a sore thumb at family gatherings back on the reservation. I've been hyper aware since I was little that I look like the perpetrators of my mother's Dakota culture. My skin color has always been enmeshed with my identity as a Dakota person.

On different occasions, a couple of Aunties have told me, "no Nation bases citizenship on the color of their skin." And another said, "You need to stop making it about skin color. Being Native is not about skin color it's about what's in your heart. If you embrace the culture then you are Dakota."

But because of the dominant colonized, racist society, the color of your skin is going to strongly impact your identity. Native people have the full range of skin tones, some for beautiful reasons, some because of reasons stemming from generational trauma.

No individual is monolithic either. We're all multiplicitous. We all have multiple truths, even conflicting ones, existing in us simultaneously.

So, each person is going to have a different story of how their identity formed to where it is today. And it will continue to change in some ways, like someday soon I'll be the old, silly, introverted artist, and I was once the extroverted theater teen. But I've always been and will continue to be Dakota, and Scottish, and I've recently, but not proudly because of generational trauma reasons, discovered I'm also Norwegian. And those last two answer why I'm always going to be light skinned. I identify with aspects of my Dakota heritage more than the others I come from because I share those values, … mostly, though, because this is the land I'm living on. Dakota land.

Dakota Identity in my personal experience:

Iná (Dakota for my mother) made it clear my whole life that I am Dakota, and to be proud of that. But because of colonialism and forced assimilation the answers to all of the questions I had about what it means to be Dakota were not all passed down through her, and I still have so many questions. And as an adult I awkwardly stumble learning, and re-learning protocols and songs in community even after years of learning. I still struggle and make basic mistakes, like daily. And I can imagine there are many people like me who might wrestle with undeserved shame for simply not having the knowledge that was stolen from the generations before us.

And the forced assimilation that caused all this was not long ago! My Iná was 10 when the Pipestone boarding school was closed, … Flandreau boarding school in SD is still open. Great grandmothers in my family were in the forced women and children's march. I was born less than a year and a half after Native spirituality was finally no longer illegal to practice in 1978.

In a country that's supposed to value freedom of religion, all Native peoples in the United States of America were punished for practicing our spirituality. Dakota spirituality is engrained in what it means to be Dakota. Many of us grew up with assimilated Christian family members raising us, we didn't have ceremonies, even on the reservation because most of our ceremonies had been eradicated from being illegal for over a century. So most of my family did not grow up fully understanding our own culture. There's a lot of undeserved shame that comes with not knowing all of what was taken. But it's not shameful because caregivers were forced to make impossible choices rooted in survival, and they should never be shamed for that. And the children they raised to be assimilated, to succeed the best that they could in the abusive dominant culture should not be shamed. It's intentional that we don't know our own history, that all Minnesotans are not taught this history in schools, at least not until just recently, and there's a lot of misinformation to undo and heal from. So, now that we know, it becomes our responsibility to learn and to share the truth we learn.

When people are removed from culture, returning can be very hard. Our culture, our language is our inheritance, we shouldn't be made to feel uncomfortable learning or re-learning it, nor should we feel like it doesn't belong to us, but that's what can happen. It can feel debilitating, to return. The immense shame of not knowing, can trigger in many people a freeze response.

Let me quick define shame as I understand it in comparison to guilt. My understanding is that:
Guilt is the belief that I did something bad.
Shame is believing I am bad.

Shame causes people to shut down or blindly comply. It's a tool of colonial society. It can be a regular hurdle on the journey of reconnecting. There's a lot of undeserved shame. Shame of not returning sooner, the shame of not knowing what we don't know but we're expected to know. For example, I've had waśíču people (non-Native, mostly referring to white people) hear that I'm Native and just expect that I know my culture, and history. It's painful to have to explain that I don't actually know very much (even after years on this journey of returning). Worse is when people who might know more than me, don't have the skills to be gentle about it or they act proud about knowing more than I do. Between separated Dakota communities or even within a community there are different ways certain things can be done or said. So a different example I've experienced feeling ashamed is if I learn from a community, heck sometimes even a family that's not my own, it can cause others in my own family to feel strongly that I'm not learning properly. Thankfully most of the elders understand and give a lot of grace, but not all the time, because they're human, too and it can be painful to see younger generations from their own Dakota community learning language or teachings that are not their own.

But think about all of the pain we all come from … I didn't know until sometime in the last five years that many of our recent Dakota ancestors, and even elders alive today sacrificed so much for us (their future generations) to reclaim these stolen parts of ourselves, our inheritance, our identity. I didn't know until recently about traumatizing experiences like the 150-mile forced march of women, children and elders in freezing November temperatures, to Fort Snelling where they were imprisoned in a concentration camp during the winter of 1862-1863. The women, children, and elders in our families survived and endured terrorizing things. I didn't know any of this until I was an adult because I was never taught in school. The horrors of boarding schools are finally being talked about openly. I didn't learn until I was an adult what it fully meant that Dakota people sacrificed and suffered to save and protect the language, ceremonies, and culture for me to still be ABLE to seek them out.

It makes sense with the weight of all of that history (generationally so close to us) that we're all very sensitive because we carry that generational trauma and responsibility. So when I ask people in order to know more about where I come from and how I can better belong it triggers a lot of anxiety in me, and in the past, and sometimes still this discomfort causes me to miss out on moments of learning … and I'm not alone. Try though we might, shame is hard to heal, and sometimes hard to recognize, and hard to not repeat. So it's still very uncomfortable, sometimes painful to struggle and navigate the layers of challenges while learning. But despite how we are taught to feel, this struggle is not shameful. We are not wrong or bad. It's a skill to practice sitting in the discomfort of two conflicting truths existing at the same time and trusting we'll be

ok. Then doing things differently with our children, and future generations. I don't want my children to go through the same struggles I have.

My kiddo was made fun of recently by a young friend (as naturally young kiddos will do) but they made fun of him for not knowing his own Dakota language because he wasn't learning as fast, and despite the adults making gentle corrections and repair attempts encouraging my kiddo that he's doing great at learning …I still noticed around that time and since, he's less encouraged to speak Dakota, and sometimes even negative about it when I use the language. And each moment like that takes more and more courage to break the cycles by being gentle with myself, gentle with him, and making the time to have a 5-year-old level conversation about how colonial powers win when we let them continue to steal our language, and culture from us from within our own thoughts.

There was a time I decided to ask a question despite my anxiety of sticking my neck out. ... A panel of four highly respected Native women were discussing a book about Indigenous history. It was hosted by Hennepin County Library. During the Q & A I asked what advice they have for how people like me can heal the conflicting identities of my Native and colonizer heritages? One said to seek out and have conversations with my family. One said to show up for the community, and my role as a white person is to put myself in the front line at protests because I'm less likely to be attacked by police. Another said I need to look within and be gentle with myself as I have conversations with different internal parts of myself. The last one saw my last name and told me that a Kúŋši of mine (Kúŋši means grandmother) Kúŋši Naomi had taken her under her wing when decades ago she was returning to community and culture. Then this Tuŋwíŋ (which means Aunty) sent a message to me in the chat with her email address and said to reach out to her any time with any questions. I gained family that day.

That same Tuŋwíŋ (Aunty) told me, because this was the start of my journey returning to community and culture as an adult, she said, "Learn the language. It IS the culture. When you learn the language you learn how we see the world and everything in it." And she also said, "Learn the history of this land, our connection to it, and what happened to our relatives on it." Then she recommended I read books by another Tuŋwíŋ (Aunty) of mine: "In the Footsteps of our Ancestors" and "What Does Justice Look Like, the Struggle for Liberation on Dakota Homeland." by Wazíyatawiŋ PhD. Every Minnesotan should read "What Does Justice Look Like." It's such a good explanation of what happened on this land, and where do we go from here. Every person who learns the history of the land where they live, will benefit, and better understand their own identity.

I only just learned a few years ago that the Dakota creation story takes place 4 miles (a 25 minute bike ride) from where I live, at Bdóte the confluence of the Miní Sóta Wákpa and Ȟaȟá Wákpa (Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers) where Fort Snelling was built. And that's also the location of the concentration camp of 1862-1863 I mentioned earlier. All of the crucial history that I didn't know most of my life, when I learned it, it changed how I see myself. It changed how I parent, and show up in the world.

If we don't have our Native language, our cultural identity connected to this land, why would we be worried about what's happening to and on the land?
But … If we grow that connection, as we learn our history, reach out to family, when we learn and speak the language, and sing our cultural songs, when we gather in community and in ceremony, we're going to notice and be upset about the things that have been, and continue to be, harmed and taken away and we will want to do something about it!

The gift we have now, as caregivers of our children, is the opportunity to heal the generational trauma and be cycle breakers. It seems universal to want our kids to have it better than we did. But we can only do that when we're conscious of it. We can learn what was taken from those of us who grew up assimilated. I'm trying to be gentle with myself as I reclaim my maternal culture, and I'm proud of what our relatives protected and still pass on. I'm honored to be part of the ones who get to pass this knowledge on and fill in the gaps for our kids and future generations.

Because my kiddos are now being raised learning Dakota language and songs … unlike me at their age … every ceremony, every wačhipi (which is Dakota for powwow) when my kids go there and hear the songs they'll feel familiar with them and know them, they'll understand them and feel they belong in that space, and maybe they'll even sing along (like my youngest sometimes does waking us up singing a gratitude song full volume drumming on the coffee table) and that's a beautiful gift for them to feel belonging. It's a gift for me for us to experience that together.

It's so important to start speaking the language to the children as young as possible. Speaking to them in the language as babies, or even while pregnant. The language will be so much more ingrained into what they know about the world and who they are. This Dakota Language Nest my youngest just graduated from is for 3-5 year olds, and it's now only in its 3rd year, so sadly my 9 year old child did not get the same exposure to the language as my youngest and wishes he could have attended here. There are other preschools teaching Dakota Language, but this is the one I know of which is nature-based, and our family really values kids being outdoors a majority of the day in all kinds of safe weather conditions. So, the Dakhódiapi Wahóȟpi is ideal

for our family, but all of the preschools teaching the language are doing some of the most important work, in my humble opinion.

Someday, I hope the school incorporates infant and toddler classrooms in the Dakota language, and I hope I can learn the language well enough by then, and acquire the qualifications to be a Kúŋši caring for the babies in the language.

I'll end with another quote from Harriet Nahanee that applies to all peoples around the world in colonized societies … She says:
"I'd like to ask all the people out there to reclaim their culture − practice it, teach the children, and let's reclaim our backbone, our culture and put some pride in our children."