An anthropological analysis of *Three Day Road* and *Whale Rider*

The world is filled with a diverse group of people. Different languages, cultures, religions and political opinions interpolate wedges between societal groups. An analysis of culture and patterns of customs, traditions, and folklore, however, can reveal values that are intrinsic to humans and unify groups of people. The study of this complex human condition and the discovery of these patterns within cultures is called sociocultural anthropology. Looking at Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road* and Niki Caro’s *Whale Rider* through an anthropological lens, it is evident that both texts tell the story of cultural groups and their rich culture. *Three Day Road* offers a clear representation of Cree people and their respect for nature, death rituals, as well as their ethical stance; *Whale Rider* depicts the values of the Maori culture and their devotion to whales, and their admiration of their ancestors.

**Three Day Road**

At the forefront of Cree values is their deep-seated appreciation and care for animals. Indigenous people believe in a symbiotic relationship between nature and humans, and in an effort of preserving this relationship, they only kill when necessary and take great precautions to not over hunt or overfish. In the section “My Father” of *Three Day Road*, Niska’s tribe kills a bear for sustenance. The Cree, keen to demonstrate respect for nature, see this killing as disrespectful and an offence to their values. As they hunt, a man from the clan exclaims how they “dare to disturb a brother’s winter sleep” (36), exemplifying the value the Cree holds for the respect of an animal’s resting and the idea that it should not be taken advantage of for selfish needs. The Cree believe animals have been sent down from their divine figure, Gitchi Manitou, to provide sustenance and fur for humans, and to disrespect or misuse his gifts would go against this god-like figure and their values. Niska later elaborates that “[the tribe people] were always careful not to waste for fear of insulting the animal” (39), and that “even the smallest piece of gristle that no one wanted was collected in a bowl and...burned in the fire over prayers” (39). These two excerpts illustrate how the Cree does not waste nature’s resources as they find a use for each part of the animal and go to great measures to ensure the relationship between them and the surrounding world is maintained.

For the Cree, life does not end on Earth but instead travels into another world to be refed into the same cycle of life on Earth. Because of this, they strongly believe in traditions for the deceased to ensure a safe and successful passage into the spirit world after death. For example, when Niska’s mother dies in the chapter titled “Stealing”, she puts her mother’s body in the highest tree branch, so that her spirit may “travel up without hindrance” (214). This tradition helps the reader gain an understanding of the Cree’s belief that there is value in humans beyond mortality. Additionally, through Xavier’s experience in the trenches, it is evident that the importance of the care for the dead has been instilled within Cree culture. Even in the hardships of war, Xavier adheres to his traditional funeral practices when honouring the lifeless body of Sean Patrick as he “say[s] [his] own prayers to Gitchi Manitou”, and “burn[s]...sweetgrass and whisper[s] more prayers to drift up with it” (112). Xavier’s maintained native values further emphasize the Cree importance for the care of the dead as well as the nurturing of their spirit.

Throughout *Three Day Road*, the *windigo* figure also provides valuable insight into the morals of the Cree people. They are seen as a threat to the tribe’s livelihood. This sentiment is illustrated when Niska’s clan captures Micah’s wife and comes to the conclusion that they must kill her, as “[her] madness can surely spread” (45). The indigenous believe that the moral imbalance within these individuals can tip the ethical scale of the tribe to a dangerous point, and makes individuals weaker and more disconnected from the community. Because of the indigenous belief in respecting all forms of life, the idea of eating another for survival is seen as a “greed for life” (261). For them, selfishness is such an offence, that this “sickness” (264) must be eliminated quickly and permanently to ensure the survival of the rest of the group. Their idea of what opposes their values and their approach to the situation reveals their principles and values concerning human life.

**Whale Rider**

Similar to what is demonstrated by the Cree, *Whale Rider* displays the value the Maori people have for animals. They see whales as divine and guiding figures. The Maori people praise the whale as they are descendants of Tangaroa, the god of the ocean and, according to legend, contributed significantly to their settlement in South Island, New Zealand. They demonstrate their respect when the whales wash up on the shore and the Maori go to great lengths to ensure the creatures do not perish, many of them staying up all night. Their resilience proves their devotion and reverence for the animal. The whale tooth is another example of the prominence of the whale paradigm in Maori culture. Dubbed the “Rei Puta”, it is an object which symbolizes strength and the greatness of Maori ancestors. The one who is able to retrieve it is deemed worthy to become the next chief of the town. The community places their fate in a physical object derived from the whale demonstrating their reliance and trust they place in the whale.

*Whale Rider* also explores the integral role of ancestry. Throughout the film, Koro is often seen praying to the ancestors, asking for forgiveness and guidance in times of need. His actions reveal that in Maori culture, their ascendants are greatly respected and are believed to be knowledgeable. Additionally, many of Koro’s decisions are motivated by the need to preserve the traditions of Maori ancestry. When he scolds Paikea for engaging in a taiaha fight, he says that she has angered the ancestors by not following their customs. His fury demonstrates the need to retain the practices of the past and the importance of ancestors.

Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road* and Niki Caro’s *Whale Rider* both illustrate the dynamic culture and traditions of two indigenous groups. It is evident through the analysis of the Cree characters’ activity in *Three Day Road* that respect for the surrounding world, care for the deceased, and ethical code lie at the center of their culture. When analyzing *Whale Rider* anthropologically, significant Maori cultural elements are highlighted, such as their respect for their ancestors and their worshipping of native animals. Being able to identify certain anthropological aspects when analyzing literature is essential and ultimately allows the reader to gain a more in-depth understanding of the text and its characters.

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