
Rita Flamand

Truth about Residential Schools and Reconciling this History: A Michif View

Oppression by the Government of Canada and the Catholic Church has had a major negative influence on the Métis people. The natural evolution of a culture, a nation of people, and a society in all its aspects was thwarted by the government-sanctioned influence of the Church. Inadequate education, loss of language, and loss of culture were the results. *Culture* is defined as “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations ... the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.”¹

The effects of colonization and its mission are intergenerational and have resulted in the many social problems affecting today’s generation. In addition, many Métis people suffered

mental, physical, and emotional abuse caused by the inter-generational effects of residential school, and it still continues today through the loss of language and culture. In order for our children to know where they are going, they must know where they came from so that they can move forward in a healthy way. There is also a need for adequate and accessible healing programs and therapies that should be made available to Métis people.

My good friend and pupil, Darlene Kemash, sat down with me recently to assist in the telling of my story. You see, I speak and write in Michif, and Darlene helped to translate and organize my words.

This is my story ...

Ni Maama Ste-Anne de Lima Fagnan

My mother, the storyteller of our family, related this story to us about the residential school she attended when she was a little girl:

Kétatawé iko ni'kushopayhin (all of a sudden I came to), I was standing on top one of the corner beds in our dormitory. *Trwaa kémaa kaatr lii seur ota aanavañ kaa niipawichihk* (there were three or four nuns there standing around in front of me). As I tried to take in what happened, I focused my eyes on Sister Frances who was standing directly in front of me. The headpiece of her habit was dangling on her shoulder all askew. Forgetting everything, my eyes popped open! SHE HAD HAIR!! Us girls used to wonder if the nuns had hair,

and we sometimes wondered if they had feet the way they used to glide around in their long skirts. I was horrified when I learned that I had grabbed Sister Frances' headpiece off her head! As I looked around, the beds were all messed. I was apparently jumping from bed to bed as they tried to catch me.

Having some kind of breakdown, my mother had started fighting with the Sisters. My mother was Métis, and the reason she was in the residential school was to fill the quota while they were in the process of rounding up Treaty Indian children from the north to fill the school. In the meantime, Métis children would do. After six or seven years in the residential school, my mother could barely write her name. It always bothered her that she could not read or write. My dad would just hold that over her. After all, he went up to grade 4. She would ask him to teach her to read and write and, inevitably, their sessions would end in a fight with my mom accusing my dad of teasing and laughing at her. She wanted her children to have the education she never had. Little did she know that her children and grandchildren, second and third generation, would suffer some of the same fate with the priest and nuns, although we went to a Catholic day school.

My Parents

My mother, Ste-Anne de Lima Fagnan, was known by the name of Anne, although a lot of people still called her Ste-Anne, and she was called "*mii mii*" by her grandchildren. She did not want to be called Ste-Anne. She used to say that she was not a saint. She was born in Camperville, Manitoba, on

7 October 1905. Her parents lived on a little farm a couple of miles outside of Camperville. They used to come to town once in a while to get some supplies. My father, Peter Flamand, was born on 27 March 1886 in St. John's, North Dakota, a year after the Riel Resistance. It was not safe for my grandmother to have her baby in Canada, as the Métis people were always on the run from the RCMP. This was a very sad time for the Métis. But my dad's parents, my grandparents, still managed to run a farm in the Inglis, Manitoba area.

In the early nineteen hundreds, my grandparents, Joseph Flamand and Agathe Fleury, along with a lot of Métis people from the south, came to the Camperville area, drawn by the good fishing in Lake Winnipegosis. My Uncle Cyril was the first son to get here, as my mother recollects. She said the girls were talking about him as the "new guy in town." Not long after, she said the girls were saying "another one of Joe Flamand's sons got here and he's better-looking." My Mother said, "I saw him and I didn't think he was good-looking." With my mom this meant that she thought he *was* good-looking. She said she only saw him a few times, until one Sunday one of her sisters was shaking her awake early in the morning, "*wanishkaa, wanishkaa ki wii wiikitoon*" (get up, get up, you are getting married). She asked her sister, "What are you talking about?" Her sister told her, "Last night, Pete Flamand came to see Papa while you were sleeping and we heard them talking. He asked Papa for your hand in marriage and Papa said 'yes.'"

Where We Were Born

My older brothers were born in Saskatchewan because my parents, after they were married, went where the jobs were. My mom used to tell us that two or three families would travel together by horse and wagon across the Prairies. They would meet different Métis and Indian families also travelling by wagon and would set up their tents and visit together for a few days while they rested their horses. Later on, my parents settled back in Camperville where the rest of us were born. There were five girls and five boys in my family. I often wonder how my dad fed us all. I only remember everything tasting so good, but maybe it was because I was always hungry.

Of course we lived off the land. We ate nothing but wild meat and fish, and my dad always had a big garden. We picked berries in the summer. There were so many berries in those days, and we lived in the blueberry patch for part of every summer. I was quite young, and all we did as kids was play! It was so nice and sandy where we pitched our tents; this place was called *kaa napaksakokaatek* (where it is flat). The tents were pitched all around and we, the kids, would play in the middle where it was safe. We always played outside, not like the kids today, playing video games and becoming dangerously overweight. When I was a kid, there were no overweight kids around.

My mom would take us all to pick blueberries, and we, being the younger ones, would have a nap in the bush. My mom used to put cotton batting in our ears so the bugs would not crawl in. When we would get back to camp later, we would see fires

starting outside the tents and women making supper. What I remember is my mom cooking fried blueberries in lard with sugar right away because it was quick to prepare and it would turn into a blueberry *rubaboo*. We would eat that with *la galet* to tide us over until the meat and veggies were cooked. Those are such good memories.

School

We lived about a mile from the school. It was hard trudging to school through the high snow in the wintertime and in water in the spring. I was six when I started school. I could not speak English. I only spoke Michif. The schoolroom was overflowing with kids—there were kids standing all around the room. Our teacher was a young Ukrainian man. All I remember was us kids standing around him while he was doing a strange dance called the *Kolomeika*. His long legs were flying off the floor. We were used to jigging, but this was a new twist.

English, *Saulteaux*, and Michif were being spoken in the classroom. It was confusing. When the teacher said to someone, “Go to the cloakroom,” they would come out crying. I learned that they got the strap when they went in there. One day he looked straight at me and said, “Go to the cloakroom.” I was terrified and hung my head and started to cry. He must have forgotten about me in the chaos when he saw me crying, as he told my sister to ask me if I was sick. I understood the word “sick,” so when she asked me, I said “yes.” He sent me home and my mother kept me home for the rest of that year.

Day School

When I went back the following year, there was a change in our school. It was now called Christ the King School, and the nuns from the residential school were in charge. We were not allowed to speak our language. Everything was in English. I was learning two languages in school, English in the classroom and Saulteaux out in the schoolyard. A quarter of us kids spoke Michif and the rest spoke Saulteaux. I understood some Saulteaux words because my mom and my *kobkum* used to speak Saulteaux when they did not want us to understand something. English was totally alien, but coming from a day school, we did not lose our language completely because we spoke it at home in the evenings.

The nuns would arrive by horse and buggy every morning with their supplies and lunch for the day. They would start warming up their food at around 11:30 A.M. They would fry potatoes in butter. Oh, how that used to smell so good! By the time we went home for our lunch or ate it in the corner at school, it was hard to swallow bannock and lard or the morning's cold porridge with that smell lingering in your nose. The priests were always there having lunch with the nuns. After lunch, a priest would play with us and take us girls to the mission on the pretense of helping him in the Shomoo Hall. There, he would grab and touch us inappropriately. I did not feel right, but he was like God after all. That is how holy we thought they were.

Our family, parents, and grandparents were always in church. My grandma used to dress like a nun in long black

dresses with a big cross around her neck. We would never tell them when the priests would rub us against them, especially Father “B...” I can still hear his high-pitched, excited laughter when he would be around us. We were so innocent we thought they loved us, and that is how they got away with it. They knew we would not say anything. We were about eight to ten years old. They controlled us right from when we started going to confession—that dark confessional in the back we seemed to be always attending—which was a form of control and abuse. We had to confess everything, our bad thoughts as well as all our sins. Did we have bad thoughts about a boy? What were they? If we kissed him it was a mortal sin, at least twenty Hail Marys.

Although we went to day school, the priests controlled all the Métis people in many different ways. I remember when the second-hand clothing would arrive. The women would come to get clothes for their kids and themselves. The priest would get the women to try on the tops and blouses, touching them on the breasts and saying, “Oh, it’s too big” or “too small,” while running his hands down the breasts pretending to straighten the blouse. The women would laugh embarrassingly. My girlfriend used to have big breasts, and we used to think the nuns were jealous because they were always making mention of her “big *tootoosh*” in a derogatory way. She used to make me tie a folded *koosh* (diaper) around her chest. I would pin it in the back with safety pins so she would have a flat chest.

Pagan Babies

We used to have a big drawing of a pyramid on the wall of our classroom. Our names were written on a coloured star at the bottom. Every time we brought a penny to school, our star would move up a notch. We worked our way up that pyramid with every cent we could muster up (there were not as many pennies to be had in them days). By the time we got to the top, it was five dollars and, *voila!!* We had bought a pagan baby! I used to wonder where these pagan babies were. I always thought they were some poor babies somewhere across the ocean. Imagine my surprise when I later learned the pagans were my Indian cousins and relatives.

Praying in School

We used to pray a lot in school. We would kneel down and pray when we arrived in the morning, when we went for recess, before lunch, after lunch, and again before we went home. I kid you not, my knees used to be red, flat, and sore. One day, when the nun was going to strap my sister (we had a big, black leather strap that was used in class), I got so angry that I told the nun, “We don’t learn anything in here anyway, all we do is pray.” I went home but my dad brought me back. The nun made me stand in front of the class and apologize for being mad at her.

Residential School

The church and residential school were two or three miles from my home, and we used to walk to the “mission,” as we called it. That is where the church, residential school, Fathers’ and Sisters’

residences, and barns were clustered. It used to be so cold to walk to church, especially when you would hit the field close to the church. The wind used to be so cold off the lake, but we were promised we would go straight through to heaven if we went to Holy Communion for nine consecutive first Fridays of each month. We would be there for early Mass, and we would make several of those first Fridays. So you see, I will be going straight to heaven when I die.

On Sundays, we would go to church in the big church. Each Sunday, we would watch these two doors open on each side of the altar, and the little girls would come out of one door and the boys out of the other. The girls would be all dressed in cotton dresses, all the same kind. Their hair was cut straight across the forehead and below the ears. I used to envy their nice dresses and shoes as I did not have nice dresses like that. The boys came out of the other door, all dressed in black suits and neckties and with short hair. They too had to march to the back of the church and up to the balcony where there was a big pipe organ. They had the sweetest voices you ever wanted to hear. I remember on Christmas Eve they used to sing *Christ the Messiah*. They were every bit as good as any choir. The choir sang in Latin, and the altar boys served the priests during Mass, answering the priests in Latin.

I do not remember seeing them smile. They always looked serious. I did not know where they came from. They just seemed to always be there. I would hear “*aasha mina kii tapaashiiwak aatit*” (some of them ran away again) and “*Maaka kii*

mishkawewak” (but they caught them). Then, during Sunday Mass, they would be lined up in front of the church where the entire congregation would see them. Sometimes they would be a mixture of boys and girls, but most times they would either be all girls or all boys. Their heads would all be shaven. They would stand there with their heads down, very embarrassed. I used to wonder where they were from. I never heard anyone talk about them around the village, just in whispers, as if the people were scared the priests and nuns would hear them.

When my cousins from Tanner’s Reserve² started attending the mission school, I became more aware that the kids who appeared in church actually lived at the mission. After that, we would go with my grandparents every Sunday after Mass. We were allowed to see them in the waiting room for just one hour. Even those kids that were from the reserve were only allowed to see their parents for one hour. Sometimes, the nuns would take the “mission kids,” as we used to call them, for a walk on the highway. There would be nuns in front of them, on each side of them, and behind them, walking them like prisoners. We could not even wave at our cousins. We would run in the ditch, trying to get their attention, but the nuns would chase us away.

The Catholic Church has so many rituals, and we seemed to be always going to church. We went for catechism, Benediction, and Lent and, during the month of May, honoured the Virgin Mary. The priests were always behind the holy altar. To us they seemed so mysterious and holy, almost Christ-like. That is how the people saw them. Our parents did not teach us the Bible or catechism, the nuns and priests did. I completed grade 8. For

us, education ended at grade 8 as there was no further class for Métis children. Our school only went up to grade 8, there was no high school. After that we had to get out and find a job. We were cheated out of a high school education.

Truth and Reconciliation

The Canadian government must acknowledge the cultural genocide and abuse of the Métis people at the hands of the government and the Catholic Church. A public acknowledgement and apology by the Government of Canada and the Catholic Church is the first step towards reconciliation. With acknowledgement, the true history of Métis people must be made available in the school curriculum, not only for our Métis children, but for all Canadian children. Research, curriculum development, and implementation must happen. Human and financial resources must be allocated. Elders must be interviewed and their history documented. We were an integral part of the forming of this nation, and we remain so.

Also, the Michif language must be taught in schools where Métis children attend. Culture is conveyed through language. The government must recognize the importance of the Michif language as an integral part of health and wellness for Métis people. This should include curriculum development and implementation, with human and financial resources allocated for this. Also, Michif Elders and speakers must be consulted while they are still living. As my story shows, along with many other Métis people's stories, there were many Métis who were also

victimized by residential schools (including day schools), so we too should be a part of the truth and reconciliation process.

Notes

- 1 *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition, s.v. "culture."
- 2 Also called Gambler's Reserve at Silver Creek in Manitoba. During my childhood, the people living there were almost all from the Tanner family and were all Michif speakers. See Barkwell, Lawrence J. with Dr. Peter Lorenz Neufeld (2007). *The Famous Tanner Family and Tanner's Crossing, now Minnedosa, Manitoba*. Winnipeg, MB: Louis Riel Institute. Retrieved 5 February 2009 from: <http://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/07238>

Biography

Liza Rita Flamand is a Métis Elder born 28 August 1931 in the community of Camperville, Manitoba. She attended Christ the King School, a day school taught by nuns and priests of Pine Creek Residential School and the Roman Catholic Church. Rita and her husband raised eight children, and she is known as Kohkum to her sixteen grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. Rita completed an LPN course at St. Boniface, Manitoba, in 1948 and later nursed in several hospitals throughout Manitoba, Ontario, and British Columbia.

Rita is currently President of Mine'igo Sipi Senior Inc. and of Camperville Métis Cemetery. She was President of Home & School and Councillor on the Community Council. She also coordinated and facilitated programs such as Community-Based University Entrance, Literacy, and Métis Education School Services programs and was employed with Community Education Development Association. Rita is a member of the Dauphin Legal Aid Advisory and Restitution

committees, was certified as a Justice of the Peace Officer and Commissioner for Oaths, and worked as a Court Communicator. Rita was the first elected President of Manitoba Métis Women's Association and is a board member of both the Native Association of Community Councils and the Manitoba Métis Federation. She later became the first Coordinator of the Métis Child and Family Support program of the Manitoba Métis Federation. It was in this capacity that Rita was the first to be able to repatriate a Sixties Scoop Métis child back to her home community. Rita is endeavouring to preserve the Michif language she feels may disappear if there is no one who will take on this daunting task. Rita has put all her efforts into this since the 1980s and has since developed a Michif writing system with the assistance from two linguists: Peter Bakker, University of Aarhus, Denmark, and Robert Papen, Université du Québec à Montréal, Québec. In 2000, she began teaching and tutoring both adults and children the Michif language from lessons she developed herself.

Since 1999, Rita has translated into Michif numerous books, guides, and newsletters on Métis language, history, recipes, and stories for both adults and children. In 2006, she contributed to the book *In the Words of Our Ancestors: Métis Health and Healing*. Rita continues to translate and teach the Michif language.

Métis family at Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, 1899

Photographer unknown

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