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An Indigenous History Site

'their brains were like paper': Narrative Strategies in Indigenous Oral Histories

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By Winona Wheeler

"...our ancestors had no other way to keep the sacred promises [Treaties] given to them, only by memory. They said then their brains were like paper." [1]

Chief Abel McLeod, c.1946

Archival repositories are becoming home to increasing numbers of Indigenous oral history collections being made public for researchers. We have often heard Elders speak of their memories as "books" but it is important to recognize that this is metaphoric. Oral histories are not the same as books and, therefore, should not be treated as written records. A brief overview of some of the narrative strategies employed by Indigenous knowledge keepers demonstrates the need to treat and interpret these records according to and within their own cultural contexts. Treating oral histories like written documents has the potential to distort and misinterpret the original messages. I have spoken and written about this many times before but it is a subject close to my heart so I am sharing it again to remind us all that Indigenous approaches to the past require far more effort and skill than is taught in conventional history departments. And that the work we do, as Indigenous historians, comes under much deeper scrutiny from our communities and families than the work of most others.

Lacking the tools to work with and interpret previously recorded interviews, historians tend to treat them like written documents. Oral historian William Moss speaks for many when he explains that once captured on tape, oral history becomes a document: "In a sense," he writes, "it is no longer alive but rather like a slice of tissue on a slide under a microscope of history. Like other documents, it is but a representation of a moment in time, an abstraction from the continuum of human experience..." [2] Such a perception does not work in Indian country. Treating oral narratives as if they were written docu-

ments is totally inappropriate for all sorts of reasons I will summarize in a moment. But the biggest lesson I learned about this came from an old audio taped interview of the late Alex Bonais from Little Pine. I've told this story before, but will tell it again because it is so instructive.

Back in the late 1960s and into the 1970s the old people who were still with us realized that much knowledge would be lost if it was not recorded on audio tapes and paper. For many it was a difficult admission, for some it was heartbreaking, because there were not enough young people around equipped or interested in taking the time required to learn from them in the old manner as they had learned. The late Alex Bonais allowed some of his stories, teachings and songs to be recorded by my late husband's late father Wilfred Tootoosis, in the mid-70s because he feared all would be lost. These were his words:

Nobody wants to carry on to replace me, to carry on with these responsibilities across this land. All will stop. Spiritual ceremonies, Sundance, the lodge for smoking the pipe...they will be no more. And at that time where will the people take their children?...Only the white man's world will remain.[3]

As my late husband and I listened to this old man's soft and quiet voice, there was a lull, then a sudden surge of urgency. He moved closer, more directly into the microphone, then raising his voice he called out, "in the future you youth try to educate each other with this information." [4] That was over 40 years ago.

We both knew that old man. We knew his mannerisms, his facial expressions, his expressive eyes. So as we listened to the recording we had vivid images of him speaking into the microphone. We felt his hope and faith in future generations, we felt his urgent plea and we were humbled to tears by his compassion and love. His voice and message reached deep, listening was a somatic experience that reached our hearts. That voice on the tape was not dead to us, it was *épiṃatciw akitémaka*, something that has a spirit, something that can give life. It was left for us to build on, draw strength from, to empower ourselves with, so our people would live on, so his teachings could live on and not die. Something so powerful is not lifeless.

Written transcripts of Elders' oral accounts are vulnerable in unknowing and insensitive hands. Most of us already understand the reasons why but it's worth restating: Linguistic translation across cultures is a complex process. Words seldom translate literally; regional and local idioms and concepts are unique; the contexts of the orations influence the quality, depth, and emphasis of each story; and, not all translators possess a high enough level of cultural/linguistic knowledge in both languages to translate Indigenous concepts accurately into English or French. Much is lost at all levels of translation—the cultural and linguistic contexts, the context of the telling, the shared cultural repertoire that assumes common understanding, and the non-verbal communicative strategies that often "say" more than transcriptions are capable of revealing, are lost when oral histories are translated and transcribed. Without the philosophical and cultural contexts of words, concepts, and metaphors, for example, translations are incomplete at least, distorted at worst. Transcripts are often mere skeletons of the original telling.

Scholars actively engaged in oral history fieldwork agree that a thorough understanding cannot be adequately achieved, nor can these sources be adequately judged and evaluated, by methods and standards established outside their own intellectual and cultural contexts.[5] Oral histories are heard stories and their fullest meanings can only be acquired when

one is equipped to understand what it is one is hearing (from a recording) or reading (from a transcription), from within the intellectual and cultural contexts of the orators.

Another example that demonstrates how important shared cultural repertoire is to gaining deeper understanding comes from a book written in 1923 by Edward Ahenakew, a Plains Cree from Atahkakohep (Sandy Lake, Treaty 6 territory).[6] Ahenakew was an Anglican clergyman for many years before he wrote *Voices of the Plains Cree*. While he dedicated his life to the ministry and teaching, he was not totally supportive of the federal government's assimilation program because it did not adequately prepare Cree youth for productive lives in their own, or in mainstream, society. Through the fictive character named Old Keyam, Ahenakew historicized his peoples' contemporary condition and proffered his advice for their survivance. Old Keyam not only criticizes the numerous injustices faced by Cree people, he was also highly critical of Cree apathy. The term "Keyam" in Cree means in various contexts *what does it matter? so be it!* or, *never mind*. Old Keyam gave voice to Ahenakew's observations and interpretations at a time when his own voice was silenced by church and Indian Agents.

Ahenakew brilliantly used his fictive character Old Keyam. His implied readers were non-Indigenous since they were the ones in power, had the means to address ineffective and harmful federal Indian policies, had access to published literature, and could publish (or not) his work. So Ahenakew had to write in a manner that appealed to their sensitivities. However, the narrative strategy Ahenakew used also consisted of a subtext that can only be decoded by those who shared Ahenakew's experience, knowledge and cultural repertoire. This subtext can be recognized by identifying the narratees that emerge in the text.[7]

The primary narratees emerging from Ahenakew's "Old Keyam" are Cree people who have at least some of their traditional language and teachings intact and who know well the demoralizing effects of colonization. While many instances can be cited, Old Keyam's outward lament about the persistence of superstition among his people speaks directly to these narratees. Immediately following Old Keyam's expressed regret over the persistence of superstition he immediately launches into a 'superstitious' story:

"Let me tell you my grandmother's story of Mâ-mâ-kwâ-sesuk. She said they were U-pes-chi-yi-ne-sâk (*little people or pygmies*). Now my grandmother was not a foolish woman, she was No-tô-kwâ-wi-ku-mik (*Old Woman's lodge*), the sister of Chief Poundmaker..."[8]

On the surface Ahenakew denounces superstition, which I believe is an intentional contradiction to highlight the persistence of superstition to his expectant non-Indigenous readers. However, it also speaks at a much deeper level to those who know the teachings associated with Mâ-mâ-kwâ-sesuk and No-tô-kwâ-wi-ku-mik. His use of these specific story characters actually serves to validate sacred stories in Cree terms. Maria Campbell explains that the story must be true because everyone knows that kôhkomnowak, *grandmothers*, are teachers and do not tell lies.[9] The name of the old woman in this story "*Old Woman's lodge*" named in reference to nôhtako-âhtoyokana, *the first Grandmother/Keeper of Sacred Stories* who's Lodge still exists among us today. To validate her credibility even more, he reminds us that she was the sister of the late Chief Poundmaker, a renown Cree Chief who was vilified and jailed by the Canadian state as a traitor after 1885 but who was better known among his people as a Peace Chief who did his best to avoid war.[10]

Ahenakew goes further: "Mâ-mâ-kwâ-sesuk," and "No-tô-kwâ-wi-ku-mik" come from high Cree, the old language used in the telling of sacred stories, and each contains sets of significant teachings or traditional laws. No one but Cree speakers

familiar with the old stories could read Old Keyam's reverence for this old woman and the knowledge she passed down through oral traditions.[11] Ahenakew inscribed his text with codes that speak directly to his own people.

Throughout the text Old Keyam concerns himself with the diminishing role and power of Cree men and the condition of young Cree men. Having returned from residential schools they are caught between two worlds, neither of which they are adequately prepared for. They are confused and lethargy is setting in. *Voices of the Plains Cree* was written in part to future generations of young men, future leaders. The stories of Chief Thunderchild and Old Keyam, are napewatsowin (teachings about the ways of men). Encoded for future generations are instructions on how to be warriors, providers, and protectors in an ever changing world.[12] What comes through loud and clear to Cree ears is that the strength and knowledge, located in the oral traditions, are as necessary for Indigenous survivance, as is the adoption of new tools and strategies. Ahenakew's implied readers—the non-Indigenous audience—would totally miss Keyam's teachings neither would they understand the significance of the Chief Thunderchild teachings. Ahenakew was well versed in English and Cree and his brilliant narrative strategy spoke different messages to two disparate audiences. The point here is that without a shared cultural repertoire the reader would miss the primary intention and lessons in Ahenakew's writing.

Scholars need to be willing to learn how to treat and understand recorded oral narratives in their own contexts to get the insights and intended meanings. When oral records make their way into the public domain there is no way to protect their original integrity. When the recordings are in Indigenous languages, researchers often rely on the translated and transcribed versions rather than going to the originals and translating themselves or with an interpreter. The transcriptions are a mere shadow of the original recordings and can be over-interpreted, misinterpreted, and basically mangled beyond their original meanings. The language barrier is usually the biggest challenge but it is not insurmountable.

My family is blessed to have inherited my late father-in-law's oral history collection. It consists of 100s of hours of taped interviews of Elders conducted during the late 60s and 70s and it includes many interviews done with the late Alex Bonais. My late husband and I worked as a team when translating and transcribing and the system seems to work pretty good. I am sure others use it as well. Basically, Tyrone did simultaneous translation and I transcribed. It is a slow process though because we strove to go deeper than the conventional literal or analogous translation by staying as true as we can to the descriptive nature of the language. We deconstruct the terms in their given contexts to locate deeper philosophical meanings. I can give many examples but my favorite are the Cree terms kéhte-ayak and kiséyiniw, which are often used interchangeably and are translated as "elder." "Elder" is a catch all term these days, often applied simply to grey-haired people in general. But a truer meaning of the term can be had through Indigenous linguistic analysis, what we simply called 'deep digging'.

The most learned of teachers among us is kiséyiniw, an *elder*. Kiseyiniwak are differentiated from kéhté-ayak, *old people*, by their standing in the community as people who have demonstrated throughout their lives their generosity, skills and wisdom. The term 'Kiséyiniw' comes from the word kiséwew which roughly translates to mean *protector*. These teachings also come from the late Alex Bonais in recorded interview from the 1970s. In defining kiséyiniw Alex Bonais gave the analogy of a duck beating the ground with its wing to distract danger thereby giving its little ones time to run and hide. He explained that when the Cree people see this, they say "that bird or animal kiséwew, that one is protecting its young. That's what Kiséyiniw means—to encircle oneself around or over your young. That's what a true Elder does, they encircle themselves around, or hover around, their children or grandchildren." [13] Kiséyiniw and kiséwew are closely related to kisêwatisiwin which means *kindness, compassion, empathy*. These are the major characteristics that set Elders apart from others, and these are displayed in the way they teach as well as how they behave and treat people.

Often times elders refer to their pipes as kiséyiniw which can cause all sorts of confusion in the translation process unless you are familiar with the cultural context. During the Samson trial I was being cross examined on evidence I provided from the late Jim Ká-nipitéwéw from Onion Lake who held the Treaty 6 pipe and official oral account of the treaty negotiations. We used a translated transcription in which Jim described his apprenticeship with the elder who passed the knowledge and pipe on to him. Jim stated that the old man was already very old when he started studying with him, then in the next sentence said that he worked with that elder for over 70 years. The judge and the crown attorneys looked at me with skepticism and asked me to repeat it. I said again, “he said he worked with that elder for over 70s years.” I was then asked something to the effect of “and you believe that?” to which I responded, “yes” and while they were shaking their heads I realized they thought Jim was referring to the old man elder when he was actually referring to his pipe as the elder.

The deepest understandings can best be had when the researcher learns and shares the cultural repertoire of the source, and when we make the effort to protect the integrity of the knowledge keeper and his/her teachings. We take on the responsibility to establish respectful relations with our sources—live or recorded—and continue learning. Most importantly, Cree historians don't simply shelve their work and move on to something more interesting because we are expected to not just learn, but actually practice, the teachings that are handed down to us. That is one of the many ways we differ from the mainstream.

[1] No. 21, James Smith Band Submission, 7 March 1947,” in Canada, *Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons Appointed to Continue and Complete the Examination and Consideration of the Indian Act: Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence* (Ottawa: Kings Printer, 1947): p, 1123.

[2] William Moss, “Oral History: What Is It and Where Did It Come From?” in *The Past Meets the Present*, ed. David Strickland and Rebecca Sharpless (New York: University Press of American, 1988), p. 10.

[3] Alex Bonais, Plains Cree, Little Pine First Nation. Interviewed by Wilfred Tootoosis, Poundmaker First Nation, ca. 1974. Translated by Tyrone W. Tootoosis. Audiotape and transcript in possession of the author.

[4] Ibid..

[5] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 102; Julie Cruikshank, “Legend and Landscape: The Convergence of Oral and Scientific Traditions in the Yukon Territory,” *Arctic Anthropology* 18, 2 (1981): p. 86; Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 200; David Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for Chimera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 9; William C. Sturtevant, “Anthropology, History, and Ethnohistory,” *Ethnohistory* 13-14 (1966-67), p. 26.

[6] Edward Ahenakew, *Voices of the Plains Cree* 1973 (reprint Regina: University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1995).

[7] Narratees are creations of the text, the readers or listeners produced by the narrative itself, the person(s) who are addresses either explicitly or implicitly by the narrator (Old Keyam). Their characteristics and identities are discovered by the narrative strategies and codes in the text which are most evidently identified by his assumption of their extra-textual, or personal knowledge. Textual analysis demonstrates that a number of narratees emerge from the text

[8] Ahenakew, *Voices*, p. 67.

[9] Maria Campbell, "Kiasyno Akuâ Nehiawatsowin: Old Man and Cree Life Ways," (unpublished paper in possession of the author, 1999), pp. 18, 19.

[10] After decades of political lobbying the federal government has agreed to exonerate Chief Poundmaker. Thia James, "Fed's confirm they're moving forward with community's request to exonerate Chief Poundmaker," *Saskatoon Star Phoenix* (January 11, 2018) <http://thestarphoenix.com/news/local-news/feds-confirm-theyre-moving-forward-with-communitys-request-to-exonerate-chief-poundmaker> (accessed 20 June 2018).

[11] Campbell, "Kiasyno," pp. 18, 19.

[12] Campbell, "Kiasyno," p. 19.

[13] Alex Bonais, Interview c.1974.

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