

Book Reviews

Huron-Wendat: The Heritage of the Circle

Georges E. Sioui, translated from the French by Jane Brierley
Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 1999, 288 pages

Reviewed by **Ken Schramm, University of British Columbia**

Georges Sioui, a Huron-Wendat historian, is our guide for sharing Aboriginal knowledge and ways of knowing in returning to our common home and heritage of the Circle on Turtle Island, North and South America. In his master's thesis (1992) he wrote, "Amerindian autohistory," which is "the study of correspondences between Amerindian and non-Amerindian sources" to show "that ever since the 'discovery' of America, world society has been engaged in a process of 'the Americization of the world,' whereby the essence of original American thought is being communicated to the other continents as our 'Americity'" (pp. xxii-xxiii). Reviewing differences between linear evolutionist societies and circular ones, he writes:

In the Amerindian's world of plenty, no one is required to believe in the ideology of another. Each person is a vision, a system, a world. In contrast when non-Native humans have impoverished their environments, quarrels arise to determine who will control the remaining resources, and whom this victor will be able to subjugate. (p. 103)

He argues that social evolutionist histories justify the disappearance of Aboriginal societies as inevitable progress, justifying their subjugation to superior technology, ignoring that "had it not been for the European advantage created by the diseases that the newcomers imported, the Native peoples would have had a chance to absorb the shock, which would have been far less powerful" (p. 3).

At the First Biannual Indigenous Scholars Conference (Sioui, Weber-Pilwax, & Makokis, 1995) he said,

We were there when the visitors arrived from Europe. We were not impressed because they were weak, sick, poor, and they asked for a little place to live. We refused to be impressed by a value system of people who had to leave their lands in the first place. We never had to leave. We consistently refused to be controlled and to be impressed because we know the harm that was done to our peoples. Prior to contact we had great nations, we had great confederacies of nations. Today the Iroquois Confederacy represents what remains of large confederacies of Wendats, Neutrals, Arias, Tobacco peoples, and an infinity of Algonquin nations with which the Iroquois Confederacy traded before contact. The Iroquois were able to save the remnants of all those destroyed nations and confederacies. We have suffered a severe shock for 503 years. We are taking our place again as leaders in our land and the protectors of the land. Our nation, the Wendats, just like the Iroquois had a high gift for adopting people and assimilating them into our societies. Our ancestors were able to survive because they were able, supposedly, to help the French fight the English. Their real agenda was to kidnap English children and adults to bring back to their villages and raise them as Wendat people. I believe we are in the process of reclaiming our people; those who say they are part Indian. They will come back and be First Nations. And the door is open to

non-Indians. We were always able to transform non-Indians into Indian people because we all come from the Circle, when we say our land we say we come from the land, just as I say I come from my mother and my father. I don't say my mother is mine or belongs to me, I belong to her. Non-Indians say my land and they mean the land belongs to them, we must be able to give non-Indians the feeling they belong to this land rather than this land belonging to them. (pp. 84-86)

In the book reviewed here, he portrays the life and health of his Wendat civilization, continuing the heritage of the circle of life as sacred. Opening with a prayerful dedication to the Great Spirit, to his mother, to all Amerindians, and to all Indigenous peoples of the world, he closes his preface:

At a time when the myths of progress and cultural evolutionism are being denounced with growing conviction by both popular and scientific critics, I wish to offer all of our human society this study of the history and nature of one civilization of the circle—the Wendat civilization—and the process of its swift destruction as a result of the arrival of the linear societies of Europe. I ask readers to believe that no fact or hypothesis in this book is put forward with the intention of denying anyone's right to, and need for, the respect and pride so vital for every human being. Rather, my prime motivation has been to bring about a spiritual healing, the re-circularization that we all need so desperately if we wish to prevent the loss of the Circle—that is, of life, this marvellous gift that we possess as a species belonging to the Circle. (p. xii)

Concluding his book, he writes:

Humans have only two possible choices: recognize the dignity and interdependence of all forms of life, or destroy them all except for a certain class of their own species, a class that is itself too spiritually impoverished and weak to survive. The present work will have borne fruit if it succeeds in inspiring a greater and better love in its readers for this Great island, this Earth that we all share, and shows why and how this love should be expressed. It is my profound belief that the Wendat and other Amerindians, ancient and modern, have never had a more cherished wish than to recognize a strong mutual sense of belonging—a feeling that binds the hearts, minds, and bodies of all who live in their homeland to the Earth, our Mother, not to nation-states. May we Americize ourselves, and may this exploration of the old Wendats bring us the heritage of the Circle! (p. 180)

His portrait of Wendat civilization continues Wendat oral tradition (Barbeau, 1915), archeology (Trigger, 1990), ethnohistory (Heidenreich, 1971), ethnographic documentation (Cartier, 1924; de Champlain, 1922-1936; Lafitau, 1974-1977; Thwaites 1896-1901), Mohawk oral tradition (Blanchard, 1980; Dennis, 1993), and Amazonian ethnography (Posey, 1987) to understand the catastrophic effects of European epidemic diseases on Wendat civilization. By contrasting Huron "savagery" as portrayed by contemporary explorers and missionaries with the health of Wendat civilization coping with invasions and epidemics, his autohistory allows readers to experience our intercultural ignorance of our savagery and their healthy civilization. All forms of life in the heritage of the Wendat sacred circle are so precious that when people died in epidemic diseases, women directed their male relatives to find human replacements to adopt. Georges Sioui gives us a portrait of a healthy inclusive agricul-

tural and trading Wendat civilization still alive in their descendants. Teachers who wish to use this book to encourage intercultural understanding in their classes by asking their students and themselves to share family stories will find Georges Sioui an indispensable guide to writing our autohistory. References cited below are supplements for our return home to the Circle.

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They Knew Both Sides of Medicine

Cree Tales of Curing and Cursing,

Told by Alice Ahenakew

edited and translated by H.C. Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew

University of Manitoba Press, 2000, 314 pages

Reviewed by *Rosalyn Ing, University of British Columbia*

The bear in Cree culture has always been associated with medicine or healing. This book reveals an extraordinary vision about a bear giving a curative gift to a Cree minister who later becomes a healer because of this vision. This bear vision is the focus of this book.

The collaborative team of Freda Ahenakew and H.C. Wolfart has again provided an excellent documentary on Cree life in the early settlement period of the Prairies, particularly in Saskatchewan. Following the preface, linguist Wolfart provides a scholarly analysis of the structure of the Cree text. This book is divided into 12 chapters and contains a commentary and notes, a Cree-English glossary, and an English index to the glossary. I commend the two scholars Ahenakew and Wolfart for their meticulous attention to preserving the unedited manuscript, particularly Freda Ahenakew, who audiotaped the interview. This book, unlike their other publications, does not contain Cree syllabics. However, the interview takes place in Cree and a complete English translation is provided. This book is an excellent source of history and a worthwhile contribution to the preservation of stories by Elders and a fading way of life. We are taken through rapid social and economic changes. Survival for the Cree is largely due to hunting and this helps them to cope; others, however, find it brutally challenging. Alice talks about a priest and his family existing on porridge for three meals each day.

The first part of the book details personal reminiscences of Alice Ahenakew's early childhood, courtship, and marriage to a member of a distinguished Saskatchewan Cree family. She was born in 1912 and remembers the 1918 influenza epidemic that struck her community. Some time after her marriage to Andrew Ahenakew, a priest, they traveled to England for a month. She described delightfully how they went to London to "the place where the Queen lives" (p. 53), but didn't see her, only her flag flying, and watched the changing of the guard. Elsewhere in their travels they encounter much the same sights and behavior that present-day tourists endure, except that the beggars were ragged gypsies. The Ahenakews toured cathedrals, Stonehenge, Scotland, Liverpool (where the Beatles had come from, Alice said), and were naively persuaded to try "the best apple cider in the world" in a bar, thinking it was apple juice!

Alice described how the curative gift was given through a dream. One night, after Andrew prayed fervently for a sick brother, he fell asleep. He

dreamt about an animal coming to him that said, "I have come to give you my body ... for you to use in healing people." It was a polar bear. How can Andrew deal with this when he lives in the middle of the Prairies? The bear told him what parts of the body to use, exactly how to make the medicine, and showed him what the medicine would look like when made. When Andrew awoke he forgot the dream for a week; then he remembered and told his wife about it. She convinced him about the power and she insisted he do something with this sacred thing he was given by the higher powers. But he was further discouraged when his brother died. When another brother became sick with cancer Andrew was convinced that he must make the medicine according to how he was told. He failed to make it look as it appeared in the dream; he told Alice how to make it; and so the next night she made it and it looked exactly as in the dream.

The storyteller, Alice Ahenakew, said, "They (her people) knew both sides of medicine." This meant that there was good and bad (evil) medicine. She talked about the good medicine in this way: Not long after she successfully made the medicine Andrew's other brother developed cancer. He requested that she bring the medicine to the hospital to doctor him. Fearing the doctors, she went reluctantly to him and administered it in a plastic teaspoon (as no metal is allowed to touch it). He slept that night but he was still sick the next day. He took more medicine for he had persuaded her to leave it with him. He was quite ill for two days after; and then, after two more days he got up because he was cured. He lived for many years and died from a heart attack. Now Andrew's fame spread to the States, like wildfire, she said. Because the medicine was used in a good way, people came from all over to be doctored. Alice gave two eyewitness accounts of how an old woman revengefully used medicine in a bad way when she was angered. Alice explained that, although it was rare, it did truly harm when used, as in the following story: A love-struck young man wanted a young woman. He abducted her from the grandmother who went into a store; when she came out, her granddaughter was gone from her buggy; she knew what happened and made a threat that "he will know indeed what I will do to him"; and through a curse she put on him "that old woman destroyed that man" (p. 127), said Alice.

This is how we hear the Cree tales of curing and cursing and how some healers and destroyers knew both sides of medicine. We are told many other interesting things about the old Cree way of life, including the Cree rites of worship, which is a paradox because her husband, Reverend Andrew Ahenakew, is an Anglican priest. She successfully converts him to the Cree rites of worships, and he comfortably uses both forms. What is important is that we learn some facts from oral tradition that there were other forms of worship practices used.

This book is a valuable addition for use by Cree speakers, learners, linguists, and for those who wish to maintain the tangible symbols of identity and culture. For those who wish to develop proficiency in Cree literacy it is indispensable; I am a Cree speaker and cannot read or write it, but I am able to slowly pronounce the Cree text to increase my vocabulary. I recommend this as one way to become more literate in Cree. The book is intriguing and delightful, full of wise sayings, and told in a humble and simple way. It is after all a conversation being recorded for posterity. Many Cree (and other) people have heard stories of healing and destruction, as passed down through generations, but few are recorded. Readers from all backgrounds would benefit from the material. The stories would be useful in a classroom setting using excerpts to teach text in Cree language classes, and students who want primary sources of life for Elders in the early 19th century will find this book invaluable as a research tool. I highly recommend the book to anyone interested in history from a Cree perspective. This book represents one of the ways that the linguistic heritage of the Cree language will be preserved. For this reason it should have a place on any bookshelf. I thank Mrs. Alice Ahenakew for her contribution in sharing her husband's vision and describing their life together.