

peoples from diverse cultures can meet and share in the spirit of generosity and cooperation. "Understanding ultimately rests in the ability to recognize how many different phenomena are really part of a coherent whole. Genuine understanding cuts through surface complexity to reveal an underlying pattern" (Morgan, 1988, p. 320). In the meantime, there are many webs to weave, webs involving the expression of Indigenous thought and experience. "After all, they elevate the act of survival. Somehow webs prevent life from ever degenerating into ugliness" (Simon, 1999, p. 303).

Notes

¹A 1999 estimate by myself and Herman Edwards, a fluent speaker, teacher, and traditional knowledge keeper.

²Transformative praxis follows a linear sequence: awareness, resistance, and action. In Indigenous societies, involvement in transformative praxis can occur in any sequence.

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Orality in Northern Cree Indigenous Worlds

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Introduction

In this article I present my thinking on a topic that has managed to capture and hold a significant place in most aspects of my work over many years. Although there were years when the daily grind of 18-hour work days did not permit me the luxury of intellectual or scholarly focus on the abstract concept of orality, nonetheless the practical effects of orality were omnipresent in my world. I worked in a public school system that served a population of a predominantly (97-98%) Aboriginal students. Most of these students lived in Cree communities, but there were also several Chipewyan communities and one German community. Like all public school systems, our system was expected to adhere to the standards of education as determined by the provincial ministry of education. This educational context did not encourage or permit the easy identification of students' learning issues that might be directly or indirectly connected with or related to their immersion in cultures of primary orality.

My situation in this context was a continual challenge. I was working not only to improve the level of basic services for students and their families and to improve the quality of work experiences for staff, but at the same time I struggled against the tendency to sink exhausted into an intellectual safe fuzziness that ignored the serious questions about orality and literacy as these were evidenced in the classrooms and communities that we served. Individual survival is instinctual, for teachers as well as for administrators.

Overview

I contextualize the topic of orality in a discussion of the practice of shared memories and their functions in personal and communal healing among the Northern Cree, in particular as this relates to orality in Indigenous worlds. I address one example directly at the end of this article, the example of the *wihkihtowin*, "dance of the ancestors" sometimes referred to as "ghost dance." The bulk of the article provides background and context in a number of areas. It begins with a short history of the Woodland Cree, moves to a much lengthier description of the importance and centrality of orality rather than literacy in the shared lives of the Cree, then to some notes on stories and collective events and their consequences for healing, and finally to the *wihkihtowin* in the context of historical trauma and healing.

Short History

The initial territories of the Cree people of Canada were located in the northern parts of what are now Ontario and Quebec. Slow movement and expansion of the

Cree people westward occurred over hundreds of years. This is as believable as the popular story that the Cree came west with the movement of the fur trade and were successful in displacing other tribal groups because they were one of the first Indigenous groups to have guns (Edge, 2002, personal communication). Whether or how far one or both theories are correct does not have a heavy impact on my work at this stage. However, inserting a short story at this point might suggest the direction of my leaning in relation to these two theories.

I grew up hearing stories about a turtle long before I could even conjure up an image of such a creature. I heard the Cree word for turtle, *miskinahk*, without knowing to what the word referred. Until my mother showed me a picture, I did not know what a turtle looked like. Even today some of my memories of the turtle are shrouded in the long filaments that followed behind my mother's good stories that I never completely understood. She was a good storyteller, and I was left with a sense of mystery and the unexplainable along with a certain amount of fear as she talked about growing up beside a lake and while swimming always being watchful for the giant turtle that lived in the deep waters.

Many years later I was living in a small, isolated northern Cree community. One weekend, after a trip to the city, I brought back a small turtle. Over the following days several respected Elders of the community came over specifically to see this little turtle. I had met all the families of the community, and I had close friends who introduced me to the intricacies and intimacies of the wider community as close friends will tend to do. But when it came to asking the right questions about the Elders' interest in that turtle, I missed the boat. At that time I didn't have enough understanding of this event even to ask the right questions. I did, however, suspect some connection between the stories I had been told by my mother and the sense of high or deep interest that was being accorded to this little turtle, so far away from his natural environment. If turtles were not a natural part of life in the northern communities of Alberta, how did the turtle get into the consciousness of the northern Cree people? It seems not too unreasonable to suggest that the Algonquian creation story of the giant turtle who carries North America on his back is simply a part of the psyche of the northern Cree people, a part that remembers some of the cosmology from the eastern parts of what is now Canada.

In the gradual expansion of the Cree people westwards, their ways of life were influenced by, and in turn influenced, the ways of the tribal groups they met. The merging of social groups and economic structures through intermarriage and trade was a logical outcome of the interface between an existing society and a peacefully encroaching one. In situations where peaceful and mutually beneficial alliances could not be established, the outbreak of war between the Cree people and the local tribal groups was inevitable.

In the Prairies region, Cree expansion forced the Blackfoot people south from their former territory into what is now southern Alberta and northern Montana. At the same time Cree settlement forced the Dene groups, in particular the Chipewyan and Slavey peoples, north from their former territories into what is now the far northern parts of Alberta and into the Northwest Territories. It was primarily here in the western and northern areas of the plains of what is now

Canada that the territorial expansion of the Cree people was accompanied by warfare and violence. Such interaction with others is still evident in the words used to name the Cree people, a good example being the Dogrib word naming them, *the Enemy*.

The stories that address the "traditional enmity" among tribal groups tend not to receive a major focus in the collection of oral history from Aboriginal peoples of northern Canada, including that from the Cree people. It is not, of course, to be denied that the stories continue to be told in families and specific clans. If your grandfather was killed by a Cree or a Blackfoot warrior, for example, you will certainly know about it. However, such stories are not likely to be included in the oral history as collected and printed, nor are such stories likely to be available for the purposes and/or uses of mainstream institutions and society.

In my personal history there have been only a few occasions when traditional enmity entered into the relationship or the dialogue. At a committee meeting a Blackfoot Elder expressed openly that he was not comfortable sitting with Cree people at the meeting. Unfortunately for all of us, the group facilitator did not recognize the auspicious nature and moment of the occasion. The statement was allowed to remain hanging in the air, a shocking and carefully stifled reality displaying a particular logic and historicity that was ignored. It was dropped carefully, with uncomfortable laughter and without any serious consideration. I considered myself too young and inexperienced to say anything, especially as I was a Cree Metis and he was a Blackfoot Elder.

It was also here on the western edge of the western plains that group distinctions between the Cree people themselves became most visible, not only to themselves, but to others. Distinctions of cultural practices and ways between two groups became significant and easily discernible to an observer. The northern Cree displayed many similarities in their cultural ways and practices to those of their northern neighbors the Chipewyan people. Some cultural characteristics were common among the northern groups simply as matters of practicality because they shared a common physical environment, the northern woodlands or boreal forest. However, it could also be observed that the southern Cree people displayed many similarities in their cultural ways and practices to those of their southern neighbors the Blackfoot peoples and the other Plains peoples further south.

These distinctions between the two Cree groups were significant enough that new designations or identifiers seemed to be needed. When the formal designations of Woodland or Bush Cree and Plains Cree began to be used in discourse as a means of distinguishing the two groups, neither Indigenous group objected. Despite these differences, however, the Cree people continue to see themselves as one people made up of many different family groups, linked by a common language, and connected within tribal affiliations, some of them formed through treaties with Britain.

In the significant realm of stories, beliefs, and spiritual practices, the distinctions between the Plains Cree and the Bush Cree were not so obvious. However, in outward expressions of culture, what might have been at one time clearly identifiable as Cree ways of being were now more closely associated with either northern bush experiences or southern plains experiences. Thus the spiritual expression and

the world view or model of consciousness of each cultural group was also taking its form from its own physical environment.

The relationship between the environment and the different lifestyles and belief systems that evolved over the centuries for the Cree people is direct. The northern Cree deem their relationship with others and the land, including all aspects of the physical environment and its inhabitants, as one of the most powerful factors affecting and even determining the quality of their daily lives. Good relationships mean good lives: nothing complex, a principle of beauty and simplicity to guide everyday living. In a general sense this principle seems to reflect a commonly shared belief or attitude among most Indigenous peoples of the planet.

Centrality of Orality

If, then, good relationships with all others mean good lives, how is this lived out on a daily basis in a northern Cree context? It is lived out through a continual focus on interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. In the world of the northern Cree, orality systems govern all communication, whether interpersonal or intrapersonal. The systems of Cree language use and Cree thinking patterns determine and guide all forms of social interaction and individual development.

Social interactions include relationships with animals, fishes, birds, plants, trees, water, other people, spirits of those who have died, spirits of all created beings, as well as the Creator spirit and the grandfather and grandmother spirits. Each interaction requires its own set of protocols and practices based on particular history, knowledge, understanding, and experience.

Individual development is directly related to an understanding of the values and beliefs of the culture, as well as to a knowledge of the structures and semantics that govern the language used for general conversation, or the language used in teaching and passing on spiritual values and beliefs. Individual development is also related to knowledge and understanding of practices governing spiritual ceremonies as the primary means of acquiring greater compassion for all others, as well as greater self-awareness and self-discipline. Such ceremonies and practices can include individual and group forms of prayer and offerings, prayer or healing sweats, pipe ceremonies, and fasting. The use of stories to teach and to provide history is common, and certain types of stories are included in the category of spiritual ceremony or practice.

The Bush Cree were strictly an oral society made up of fairly small family or clan groups. Although many Cree people, especially those who maintained strong associations with the Christian churches, did learn to read and write the syllabics system "recorded" by James Evans, the writing system was used for interpersonal communication purposes and served as an extension of speech. It overcame the barriers of distance, for example, and served the practical needs of people in everyday situations—a sister talking to a sister, a mother to her children, a sick grandparent informing his family, a death or a birth, the stuff of family conversations.

I have known many old people who have now passed on and many people who are my contemporaries or younger who are literate in syllabics. Fifty or 100 years ago they learned from the hymnals brought by the missionaries, teaching

themselves or being taught by someone else who knew the system. Today those who know that system of writing usually have learned or are learning from their grandparents. I have watched a 4-year-old child learn to read and write in syllabics from her grandfather. The controversy over which system of "literacy"—syllabics or Roman orthography—should be promoted and used in the formal (school-based) teaching of the Cree language tends to be politically generated and driven, with the support for syllabics being carried primarily by the least powerful in society. Although this may seem unrelated to this discussion, there is certainly a place where the politics of literacy are affecting the survival of cultures and societies that are based on orality.

In reference to contemporary usage of syllabics, I remain hopeful when I note that the Cree syllabics system has not yet been used as a means of conducting philosophical discourse or analysis on paper. Although literacy in the English language is a force in the consciousness of educated or schooled Cree people, it has not replaced a consciousness of orality. The limited use of syllabics holds no promise that literacy in this system either is likely to replace orality for the Cree people.

At the same time I have realized the imminent dangers to the survival of Cree orality as the numbers of Cree speakers decline. The survival of Cree epistemologies and cosmologies are totally dependent on the strength and presence of Cree orality. Without wide and popular usage of the language, the Cree consciousness of orality surely—or perhaps I should say logically—faces a weakening and, therefore, ensuing and significant transformation. Whether the people themselves can or will be able consciously to predict, direct, or to some degree control such transformation is an important question that must be seriously considered.

The reading and writing system based on Evans' syllabics was introduced in the context of evangelizing, and those Cree people who learned to read and write taught themselves these skills from the hymnals that were printed by Evans during his missionary work among the Cree people. According to Dickason (1992), a Metis historian, the introduction of the Evans syllabary significantly changed the culture of the Bush Cree. There is little doubt that the writing system led to some changes and even that the Cree may have at one time "had one of the highest literacy rates in the world" (p. 241). It is significant, however, in relation to these literacy rates that the syllabary itself and its use did not change the oral nature of the social structures and practices of the Woodland Cree. The orality that was the foundation of the Cree communication system would not easily give way to the predominantly simplistic form of messaging that characterized the early use of syllabics. Nonetheless, the syllabary was promoted and spread quickly among Cree speakers, as well as being adapted for use among other Algonkian language groups and some Inuit language speakers.

The syllabics system was never used as a means of *language storage* as described so intricately by Havelock (1986) in his analysis of classical Greek society in transition from primary orality to literacy. The societies that used the Cree language did learn to use the syllabics system of writing, but the contents of their writings in no way reflected that their traditions and teachings were being recorded or stored through the medium of the syllabics system. The system of

syllabics that Evans recorded was never used as a means of conserving the knowledge and teachings of the Cree people. Contrast this with Havelock's analysis where the initial meaningful purpose adopted for the Greek alphabet was to serve the language storage function for Greek teachings. The Greek society of primary orality was slowly being replaced by a Greek society of literacy. The new society used the alphabet and writing to replace the language storage systems of metered poetry, song, and dance that had served it as a society of primary orality. Havelock makes it clear that the transition from orality to literacy in Greece was resisted for centuries, with the significant factor in the end being the recognized "superiority" of writing as a language storage system for the conservation of Greek cultural and societal teachings. From this point in the history of literate Greek society, it was not a huge step to move from writing as a means of recording orality to writing as a means of communication and interpersonal exchange. The use of writing for the expression of individual ideas and thoughts came later. And again much later today as literate members of literate societies, we can claim that we do not always use writing for a purpose, that writing is no longer purely functional. We see that it can be creative, that it has its own life.

This discussion based on Havelock (1986) is intended to contextualize the notion that Cree society was and still is a society of primary orality immersed in a larger literate society. I use the term *primary orality* according to Havelock's basic definition: "a distinct and separate condition of society" (p. 65) and from Ong's (1977) simple definition of primary orality as "the orality of a culture which has never known writing" (p. 18). I do not necessarily subscribe to all the finer points that Havelock makes in his description of primary orality as, for example, where he says, "in primary orality, relationships between human beings are governed exclusively by acoustics [supplemented by visual perception of bodily behavior]" (p. 65). At another point in his work, Havelock suggests that the primary orality of the Indigenous world of the Americas and Africa before European entry was replaced forever by literate technologies of the colonial powers and their societies:

Their superior alphabetic technology applied to the administration of the society which they governed swiftly supplanted the oral mechanisms of government with literate practice. The original oral performance with its poetry was stripped of functional purpose and relegated to the secondary role of entertainment, one which it always had but which now became its sole purpose. (p. 86)

Havelock's (1986) comments strike me as rather generous extrapolations from his analyses of the Greek situation, and these attempts to expand the application of his theories into the context of the "newly colonized Americas" are simplistic and tend to ignore or downplay the complexity that must of necessity be inherent in a society of orality consciousness.

Nevertheless, Havelock's (1986) terms and the basic theoretical framework that he uses to describe the social transition from orality to literacy in the Greek world provides a convincing and in many ways exciting discourse. For someone not trained in classical studies, I found the whole work served as an interesting and effective foil to my own thinking about contemporary societies of primary orality. Although it is true that Havelock's denial of the existence of contemporary societies of primary orality is presented as a secondary point in his work, and such

denial is made through indirect arguments, his words leave little doubt as to his beliefs. He extends this by also stating that societies of primary orality should certainly not be confused with those contemporary societies perceived as non-literate or illiterate. This is, of course, a cogent point and one that warrants further research and study, especially in relation to the Indigenous experience of English-language literacy where whole communities can be nonliterate or illiterate while immersed in an English-language world of writing.

In relation to Havelock (1986) and his seemingly confident dismissal of the existence of contemporary societies of primary orality, it would be careless thinking on my part to ignore such misleading conclusions and misapplications simply because these were not at the center of the writer's work. Havelock was 85 years old when he wrote this work, sharing his profound knowledge and demonstrating his wisdom by the elucidation of other significant works in relation, directly or indirectly, to the development of an academic discourse on orality. This also cannot be ignored.

I found Havelock's (1986) work contributed tremendously to my own thinking of primary orality and deepened my own realization of the significance of orality as the foundation of Cree consciousness. From an Indigenous perspective of primary orality, serious consideration of Havelock's work and conclusions discloses and highlights unmistakably the necessity for concise articulation in the elaboration of an Indigenous discourse on orality consciousness. Contemporary Cree and other Indigenous societies continue to function in a consciousness of primary orality, and this reality cannot be politely set aside because Havelock (and others whom he cites) has attempted to expand the application of his work with Greek primary orality and literacy. If they are to be acceptable, Havelock's extrapolations about the "colonies" of the Americas must be as theoretically sound as the rest of his arguments.

Close examination of his statements reveals that Havelock (1986) presented no convincing evidence that he is knowledgeable to any significant degree about the people in the "colonies." Either he had no basis for his conclusions, or he feels no need to provide a basis, believing simplistically that there is an evolutionary logic to his position that the European colonizers' literate society replaced the Indigenous one of primary orality just as the literate society replaced the oral society in the Greek world.

There is one major and obvious fault with this line of reasoning. Havelock's (1986) discussion of Greece centered on the Greeks as one people and one society. North America was never one society, neither before nor after the arrival of the various European groups. Nonetheless, Havelock talked about the replacement of primary orality with a literate society in the colonies of North America as if he were talking about one group of people and one society. He seemed not to recognize that the social and political reality of Greek society could not simply be transposed into the multiple social and political realities represented by the many Indigenous societies that the Europeans encountered when they entered into the territory that became North America. Havelock's words imply that the Indigenous people and their societies simply became one with the European societies. How one people could become another people is not addressed in his reasoning. Yet his conclusions

require this to have occurred if we are to apply consistently his theories on Greek orality and literacy to the situation of the peoples in the "colonies" of North America. The Greek people moved from orality consciousness to literacy; the Indigenous peoples of North America did not; the key word here is *consciousness*.

Havelock (1986) demonstrated well the transition from orality to literacy in the Greek world. His analysis does not hold up, however, when he tries to make the leap from a specific Greek context to a general view that primary orality is dead except perhaps for those primitive societies that have remained isolated from the contamination of literate societies. Although Havelock is clear that he does not believe that primary orality is synonymous with primitive, he does seem to blur the edges of these statements in other sections of his work. The world of the Woodland Cree people as I know it does not uphold Havelock's attempts to apply his theories based on Greek classicism to the Indigenous experience of primary orality in North America.

The Northern Woodland Cree societies of the past tended to reflect a primary orality that included storytelling, dancing, and singing. But primary orality went and still goes beyond this in the sense that these would be empty activities without a full *understanding and/or participation* on the parts of all listeners and participants. By full understanding is meant a capacity, an ability, and a willingness to immerse oneself totally in the event as it is enacted or unfolds. The vitality of primary orality in a culture rests on this full understanding in each member of the society. This sense of primary orality and the full understanding of each member of the society is not historical in the sense that it used to be like this and perhaps now is no longer. Primary orality and full understanding are contemporary concepts and contemporary realities. Most members of Cree societies do not know or hear these words, but they live out the meaning in their everyday lives. Not having or using such vocabulary has not weakened the actual state of primary orality as it is known and lived in the Woodland Cree worlds.

Events, Words, and Meanings in Primary Orality

People still tell stories, *achimowina* and *atoyakwina*, each with its own protocol, preparation, and purpose. Certain persons tell particular stories at certain times of the year and during certain events or situations. Stories may be for and about teaching, entertainment, praying, personal expression, history, and power. They are to be listened to, remembered, thought about, meditated on. Stories are not frivolous or meaningless; no one tells a story without intent or purpose. A person's word is closely bound up with the story that she or he tells. A person's word belongs to that person and in some instances can be viewed as being that person, so words—in particular some words in some contexts—are not carelessly spoken. These were the old ways, and they are still practiced and observed today by many people and in many places.

The dances still happen and the planning is still conducted with great care. The dances in the north are generally referred to as tea dances by the people themselves. We do hear such terms as *pow-wow*, but only more recently and only seldom. This term more accurately describes the southern intertribal celebrations that include storytelling, dancing, singing, drumming, and individual and group spiritual ceremonies and practices. Competition between dancers and drummers,

both as individuals and groups, is a large part of contemporary pow-wows, including those that have come to be adopted and welcomed in the Woodland Cree areas in more recent years. The multi- and intertribal nature of the contemporary pow-wow has led to a form of celebration that many young Indigenous people value as concrete and meaningful in their search for personal and collective identity, as well as in their search for roots and history. The differences between the tea dance of the north and the pow-wow of the south are in fact blurring in the language use and even experience of Indigenous youth. Both words have been and are being used to describe both events even though the experiences themselves might be quite different. For the focus of this article, however, this point is meant to demonstrate that although a young Cree person may not know his or her identity or history as a Woodland Cree person, he or she is still engaged in the activities associated with Cree primary orality: that is, the ceremonies, storytelling, dancing, drumming, and spiritual practices.

The vocabulary used in these events will vary depending on the language proficiency of the individual leading. In some cases the event itself determines the terminology and the individual who can or does lead. For example, announcements and judging for the competition dancing in pow-wows are often conducted in English because most people in attendance are English-speakers. However, for spiritual ceremonies the language that is preferred and almost always used is Cree. Even those who do not speak or understand Cree usually expect and accept that the Cree language is used during spiritual ceremonies and rituals. Translations or interpretations are neither expected nor usually provided during the ceremonies themselves, although such interpretations and explanations will often follow at a different time when the context of the words spoken can be fitted into a more appropriate setting, and not inserted into an actual Cree ceremony. The continued practice of or adherence to these expectations about the use of language in particular types of ceremonies demonstrates the vitality of primary orality in contemporary Cree society.

The words spoken, the music, the drumming all contribute to the total experience of the individual in the ceremony. The words spoken or sung or drummed all belonged at one time to someone else or to a spirit of another being. The songs were handed down orally from one teacher to one learner; the learner listened and remembered and practiced under the eyes and ears of the teachers. In many ways teachers as plural is appropriately used here because the learner practiced under the eyes and ears of the whole community, or at least all who participated in the event that was associated with what was being learned. No learner ever referred to written words to teach or learn any of these songs. Today many young learners will rely on audio-technology such as cassette recorders, but even there the learning and teaching is oral and aural, not literate or based on the written word.

The Woodland Cree had and have many ceremonies that are not recognized as ceremonies by the people themselves. At least they are not referred to as ceremonies as the English-speaking world would recognize or label an event as ceremony. Each event has its own words and its own meanings, and this is the language that is used. A general category term such as *ceremony* is rarely used, simply because words in Cree conversations usually refer to the specific and the particular. A

category is not after all a “real” thing. It is like a philosopher’s word, a word used when people are talking about words. In Havelock’s (1986) words, *category* would be a *literate* term.

I have heard the Cree word for ceremony used, but only in the context of talking to an English-speaking person who has asked something that the Cree speaker can only generalize. Then the word becomes *isihcikewin(a)* or, literally, “a making” or “makings,” or if the word is *ceremonial*, then the term is *kihci isihcikewin*, which carries the association of sacredness or godliness or spirituality, literally, “great making.” I looked up both these words in an English-Cree dictionary, and the English *ceremony* and *ceremonial* that are ascribed to the Cree words are probably the best choices for interpretations available in the English language. In an English-Cree dictionary, where the Cree words are written in Roman orthography and seem to have been written primarily for the benefit of English-language speakers, meaning is simplified and reflective of the literate society. However, the meaning of the Cree word *isihcikewin* carries an emphasis on “the making” of an event; it is a verb acting as a noun, and the emphasis is not on the person who did “the making,” although the involvement of a person is implied. In standard English-language usage, the word *ceremony* carries an emphasis on “the event itself” as a completed something, like an object. There is nothing in the word to suggest involvement of a person or action or process.

I go into some detail in an attempt to exemplify that where the Cree language has been written down for whatever reason, the meanings of the Cree words as written are usually not reflective of the nature of primary orality in the culture. The tendency is to use Cree words with English translations that are “literate,” that is, they fit into a literate society. Unfortunately for both the English-speaker and for the Cree-speaker, neither is really benefiting from the richness of meaning that is actually embedded in the Cree words as would be the case if these were to be totally and accurately interpreted. This difficulty in accurate interpretation of Cree words that express a Cree reality is often why so many Cree Elders will tell us that Cree cannot or has not been translated properly, or they will caution against the interpretation of certain elements of Cree practices and teachings, often those of a spiritual nature.

Other than language, spiritual events themselves play an important role in the maintenance of both personal and collective identity. Spiritual events ensure the well-being and vitality of both the individual and the collective. One such important event is the *wihkohtowin*, sometimes translated as the “dance of the ancestors” or the “tea dance.” The exact terms arising from the translation of the Cree word, as is true for any translation, depend primarily on the degree of knowledge, understanding, and competence in the two languages and in the two cultures being interfaced through the translation process. In this case, the *dance of the ancestors* translation was proposed by a missionary priest and has since been used by some of the people he taught. The *tea dance* translation is one that I have heard used by Cree people themselves. Another Cree word, *macisimowin*, is that usually translated as tea dance. The word *macisimowin* also names a dance or a celebration of a special event such as a birthday where the inclusion of spiritual rituals may be

a part of the event, and the people who participate attend with informed awareness about the purpose and meanings of the event.

Interestingly, this term *tea dance* is also used freely by the white people who came into what was once traditional Cree territory. This English-language term describes the obvious activity of the group, and perhaps this was the English term of translation that was heard most often by the Cree-speakers. For the Cree people, then, using common English terms to translate the names of Cree events would eliminate any complexities associated with meaningful communication between two language groups. The seemingly subtle but complex differences between dancing in the *wihkohtowin* and dancing in the *macisimowin* could be dissolved into one English word: tea dance. The differences between the events themselves would have no significance to a nonparticipant, so tea dance serves the naming function. To a Cree participant, knowing and understanding the Cree words that name the events are more important than making accurate translations of the Cree words into English.

Over the years many white people came and lived beside the Cree people, sharing their physical spaces, but not necessarily their cultures or languages. It is really the more unschooled people—those white people unschooled in Cree ways and those Cree people unschooled in English ways—who comfortably and easily used the term *tea dance*. This might suggest, then, that the word *tea dance* is closer to the world of primary orality than it is to the literate world. In fact the translation *dance of the ancestors* is probably more reflective of Cree primary orality because it is a much more accurate descriptor or namer of the event.

This demonstrates that there are always at least two perspectives in the analysis of Cree-English translations, because both sets of words reflect a constant and changing interplay between the primary orality of the Cree-speaking world and the literate world of the English-speaker. The obvious forms of interplay depend on factors such as language competence; knowledge of language semantics; knowledge of language structures; as well as knowledge, understanding, and experiences of other aspects of the cultures involved. For example, there are also the many more subtle aspects of the power of words and languages such as their inherent power to reflect the philosophies and beliefs of the people. Even if language specialists could find ways to overcome the most obvious difficulties logically in any work of translation, it would still be impossible to “translate” the lived cultural effects of philosophies and beliefs that are embedded within and associated with the words and terms themselves. Yet, ironically, herein exactly lies the source of the power and meaning of those words and terms.

The debilitating effect of translating a language as if it were only a knowledge and skills exercise is not ignored in the Cree world. However, because the Cree words are not associated with people who hold significant political or economic power in Canada, the translations of Cree into English will continue according to expedience and efficiency, and in some cases according to good will on the parts of the Cree people. Cree speakers do not perceive it as a significant issue whether or not the translated English words reflect the primary orality inherent in the original Cree words. One reason may be that the true cultural meaning of the Cree word cannot be fully understood by most members of the English-speaking society. Even

if the meaning of a Cree word were to be accurately translated and expressed in the English language, most members of the mainstream society of English-speakers would not be able to make the transition from a literate way of understanding the context of the word to understanding the context of the word from a consciousness of primary orality.

The Wihkihtowin in the Context of Historical Trauma and Healing

The *wihkihtowin* or dance of the ancestors takes place in the spring and in the fall. It is a gathering of the family clan or of the community. Fires are lit inside a lodge that has been especially constructed for this event. A bundle is opened, and this signals a bringing into the present of the historical reality of the contents and/or the bundle by the present bundle holder. The family becomes a part of or is joined to that historical reality by being present and participating actively in the event. The context of prayer and sacred actions formulate an invitation to the grandfathers and grandmothers, to the ancestor spirits to come and be present and to join in the celebrations of the dancing, drumming, and ceremonial feasting. This event is a celebration by means of which the spirits of those who have gone ahead are welcomed by the living members of the community and enter into communion with all the people present. It is a bringing into consciousness for the people who are still on this side, still living, that those who are in the spirit world are present with us and are an integral part of who we are and who we will be. The event teaches us and brings to our awareness that this is a part of our identities and beings as Cree people, and it brings into reality the connections we have with the rest of the family or clan or the community, including present and ancestral beings. We experience ourselves through the talking, the dancing, the drumming, and the feasting as a physical expression of the collectivity as it exists across time and space.

The *wihkohtowin* is one of the most important events to ensure the integrity and continuance of the Cree collectivity. This assurance rests on the highly sophisticated structuring of individual experiences in conjunction with forceful renderings of oral expression through singing, dancing, and talking with an intensity that is heightened by the powerful hypnotic effect of drumming. These form the context for sharing in the dancing and the feasting that becomes the individual and personal expression of commitment to membership within and of communion with the collectivity. To participate actively in the *wihkohtowin* is effectively to become immersed in and a part of the living history of the people as collective. This is an experience where "the psyche... knows by a kind of empathetic identification of knower and known, in which the object of knowledge and the total being of the knower enter into a kind of fusion" (Ong, 1977, p. 18). It is an experience of primary orality.

Of course, it could be argued that the bundle and its contents can serve and be understood as a text, as a part of the "written" history of the people. However, I prefer to see the bundle as the repository of living power and the ceremonial sharing of the meanings connected to the bundle and its contents as a sharing of that power with all the people present. Through orality the words of the bundle holder are an expression of the power of the bundle and its contents. The people share in this expression because without a listener, a receiver, the power of the

word is empty. The power of the bundle is constant, but the people lose the strengthening effects of its presence among them without the traditional hosting of the *wihkohtowin*. They also lose the force of their identity as collectivity when they cannot or do not immerse themselves in the physical experience of this or other similar events. The *wihkohtowin* is shaped by a concept of shared memories that is given form by the dancers and all those present. At the same time, the vitality of these shared memories springs from the communion with the ancestors, and this force upholds and gives life to the dancers and all those present.

I turn now to one of the many periods of darkness and hopelessness in the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada. This was the years between the late 1880s and mid-1900s when the government operated its residential schools for "Indians." When the federal government first started to consider how they would meet their obligations under treaties with the various Indigenous groups to provide education for the children, they turned to partnerships with the already established Christian missions and contracted out to the missionaries (Dickason, 1992). This approach was economical, which pleased the government, and it was fairly unregulated, which pleased the missionaries. They could select the programs and the methods without any real interference.

Two types of schools, the industrial school and the boarding school, operated until about 1920. The industrial schools were closed down in the early 1900s, but the boarding schools and day schools on reserves continued to operate until the mid-1950s. The stories of abuse that have surfaced in the last decade have drawn a picture of human destruction of such magnitude that it has been compared to the Holocaust under Hitler. It is not my intent to elaborate on this because many of my contemporaries have written critically of this period of history and can speak from first-hand experience (Bull, 1991). However, it is necessary to understand that the abuses that were experienced by many children or that destroyed many before they could return home are not sensationalized fiction. I heard some of these stories as I was growing up, listening to adults talking, and I have since heard the same or worse from my colleagues and students. My personal experiences were different in that my family was not classified as Indian under the Indian Act. As such, I was not forced to go into a residential school or a boarding school to be educated, assimilated, civilized, or Christianized. Those who were categorized, through Treaty primarily, as Indians had few choices by the early 1900s except to submit to the rulings from the federal government and its agents. "Amerindian children could be committed to boarding schools and kept there until the age of eighteen on the authority of the Indian agent" (Dickason, 1992, p. 335).

Those adults who as children and youth lived in the boarding schools have their own stories to tell, and those stories belong to those individuals. It should be noted that some stories of residential school experiences reflect good and happy times of learning, but these are a small part of the whole. Some of the individuals who have talked favorably about their experiences in the residential schools have observed that the strength of their learning was related to the connections that they were able to maintain with their homes and families while they were in the boarding schools. Others who merely survived physically talked about years of turmoil and psychological displacement following their release or departure from

the residential school situation. Personal and social problems such as alcohol and drug addictions, physical and sexual abuse, high rates of violence, incarceration, suicide, and low rates of academic success and employment have all been attributed to the residential school experiences of thousands of Indigenous persons.

How does a country like Canada begin to address such a phenomenon? Is it not accurately described as a phenomenon? We can see it in operation every day in our communities. The approaches that have been adopted by our nation to address the almost overpowering need for individual and social healing in the Indigenous communities essentially denies the existence of such problems. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that such approaches continue to state clearly that the federal government accepts no responsibility for the personal suffering or the psychological and physical damages inflicted on the most vulnerable of the Indigenous populations during those years. Because there is no recognition of responsibility or accountability on the part of the federal government in this matter, the federal contributions of dollars to Aboriginal communities and individuals to find ways to heal themselves is intended, we are told, to address an expressed need; it is not to be interpreted in any way as compensation, redress, or retribution.

How does an Indigenous people like the Woodland Cree address the matter of individual and social healing after such traumatic disruptions of individuals' lives and disintegration of communities? One way that has made a difference and will probably continue to make a positive difference in individual and group lives is the practice of communal spiritual events and other events of both individual and collective nature. These events and celebrations are important because they build a sense of personal identity that is strengthened by the consciousness of membership in a collectivity. Such events as the *wihkohtowin* provide powerful connections with the consciousness that bring to the individual the presence of all the living persons, the ancestors, and the spirits that are a part of his or her collective family or group or community.

The *wihkohtowin* experience of orality consciousness is one of healing, a reconnecting to self and to collectivity, not in a cerebral logical way, but at the deepest level of acting and engagement with life. It is psychological healing of a most intense nature: that of knowing who you are and where you belong. The participation in the event is a sharing of memories. The presence of the ancestors, those we know and remember, is about honoring and strengthening: honoring the ancestors and strengthening the family group or community.

I submit that certain ceremonies, or events as I prefer to call them, are a tremendous source of healing power for the Cree people. One such event is the *wihkohtowin*, which I describe as the collective experience of a powerful expression of orality consciousness. From my own personal experiences, and from connections with many Woodland Cree people over the years, I have noted that the power of orality consciousness within the Woodland Cree societies of northern Alberta was in no significant way diminished even by the schooling experiences of the people. There were transformations in the expression of orality consciousness, but these cannot accurately be described as a diminishing of such consciousness. In the north some of the smaller, more isolated northern Cree communities retained the traditional vitality of their languages and their cultural practices with some

disruption only at a superficial level. The community and its families were able to maintain vital connections with the children through the strong teachings and traditional ways of life that the children came home to on a regular basis. In some areas to the south, however, with larger populations and more non-Indigenous forms of cultural impact and influence, a few of the spiritual practices that reflect powerfully the expression of orality consciousness were driven underground or hidden because of various external social and religious pressures.

In both the north and the south, the reemergence of vital spiritual ceremonies among the Cree people over the past several decades is more an indication that the views of the dominant society have changed than an indication that the practices have actually been revived. Such spirituality and practices had never died, nor had the spiritual leaders or individuals ever stopped expressing their beliefs in the traditional ways of their ancestors. The contemporary openness of spiritual expression is perhaps a strong indicator that the Indigenous people are realizing even more clearly that it is in the reconnections with their own oral histories and in the expression of these sacred reconnections that lie the healing and fulfillment of the individual and collective capacity to enter fully into the power of orality consciousness.

Afterword

Since writing this article, I have been particularly fortunate to have noted two events that presented themselves as evidence of the vitality of contemporary Cree orality consciousness. I relate these events because they constitute the reality without which the best of theories and the most powerful incantations are merely empty speculation and movements in the wind.

A friend of mine who does not speak the Cree language has been working in a northern Cree community for some time. She comes from a Metis family with Cree ancestors, and Cree grandparents. The Cree language was always a part of her social environment, although not in her immediate family. This friend called me the day after I finished the article, and I listened to her talk about her experiences in that community. She said she was facing a moment of crisis in her life and it seemed to have been precipitated by the relationships she had established with the people in that community: this was not only in reference to relationships with her co-workers, but with everyone with whom she had had contact. She struggled for words to explain accurately what she was feeling and had experienced.

As I listened to her, I heard her describing a reconnection with a different form of life: a different form of thinking and a different form of being. I said to her, "Are you maybe experiencing a different form of consciousness? Perhaps orality consciousness?" I was half-serious and half-joking, and I was a bit surprised first at her incredulity and then at her enthusiasm as she exclaimed, "Yes, that's it! I am living in a totally different world and I am feeling right at home. I am feeling so happy and so welcomed—I know who I am and what I am doing here. I feel like I have always been looking for this way of being. I know the people and I understand them, even without understanding the language they are using. Those are the best words to describe what it is I am experiencing, and I am coming back to something I am comfortable with."

The second incident occurred at a board meeting. We were discussing the use of a public address system at the annual pilgrimage at Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta. This is a Roman Catholic pilgrimage of primarily Aboriginal peoples. The p.a. system had been used for over 30 years to broadcast all shrine events to every camp at the pilgrimage site. This meant that approximately 30,000-40,000 Aboriginal people could listen to and participate in the prayers, the singing, the speeches, and the announcements as these took place at the pilgrimage shrine. For the last two years the p.a. system had been inoperative, and repairs presented a major problem (other than financial) because the source of the problem remained unidentified, raising the issue of considerable cost. Last year the hosting group decided to have the shrine events broadcast over FM radio. The pilgrims and people were given prior notice to bring FM radios if they wished to hear what was happening at the shrine during the main days of the pilgrimage events. This use of an FM radio channel was economical and permitted all camps to hear what was happening if they so chose.

The responses from the pilgrims to the use of radio indicated continued great dissatisfaction. People continued to request and insist that the p.a. system be reinstated because it was a critical element in the spiritual experiences of the pilgrims. The first time this topic was introduced, the concern was expressed as coming primarily from the older people in the camps. It was easy to believe that the unfavorable response was simply a reaction to a break in one of the traditions at Lac Ste. Anne.

At the meeting to which I refer, a board member shared a story about a young man who had always come to the pilgrimage as a child and young teenager with his family. He had criticized the use of the p.a. system as a "brainwashing" instrument, controlling the thousands of people who sat and listened and participated in various ways in the events being broadcast. The last year, after having been absent for a couple of years, again he accompanied his family on the pilgrimage, but this time as a young adult. After a few days at the site, he expressed his concern that the pilgrimage was no longer an enjoyable event; it was all very different and people were not "together" anymore. Everyone seemed to be doing "their own thing" and the meaning was gone.

This board member went on to say that the Elders who wanted the p.a. system back on and in use had said that if the people were to come together as one whole, then the p.a. system was a critical part of helping to make that happen. Otherwise, the people would not come together as they had always done in the past. The p.a. system, they said, helped to pull the people together and to hold them together. These words and the words of the young man expressed the same theory and voiced the same interest and need: the people came to experience a sense of togetherness, to experience themselves as members of a collectivity. The p.a. system enabled the people to feel or experience themselves as they knew themselves to be, conscious beings of orality. The p.a. system gave vitality to what had been empty space, and the individual consciousness of each person tuned in to participate and create a collective experience that would not have been available otherwise.

I said, "Orality consciousness, that is what this is about." The people need the p.a. system in order to be who they are in the fullest sense of their being. They need to hear and to listen and to participate through those actions in the creation of individual and collective spiritual experiences.

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