

*The Social Life of Stories:  
Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*

Julie Cruikshank

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**J**ULIE CRUIKSHANK'S *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* was a pleasure to read. It was a pleasure for me because I was reading for the first time about something I always knew but had never put into words for myself. What this book did was make me think about my own upbringing and how stories were used in my own family. The book meant a lot to me, not only because I know many of the families in the Yukon Territory in Canada, but also because I have spent time in the Sakha Republic in Russia and know many of the people there. It was a perfect book for me to read and review.

As I said, I read this book with pleasure, but it was more than that. I read it as if I were thirsty, drinking in every word or idea. I read faster and faster. I wanted to absorb as much as possible as fast as possible. Why? Because it is so rare to be able to read a book written about Indigenous peoples that is so close to where we live, so close to our own hearts. So close to our own experience.

I could actually see in my mind's eye Mrs. Angela Sidney, a Deisheetaan Tlingit and Tagish woman, whom I knew as Auntie Angela, educating the author. According to Dr. Cruikshank, she and Mrs. Sidney worked together for many years. In the beginning they

began a journey together doing what Cruikshank understood as oral history. Yet, when Cruikshank asked questions, Mrs. Sidney's answers were not what she thought she wanted nor were they necessarily what she expected. Mrs. Sidney, it seems, would insist on telling a story instead of directly answering questions.

One of the stories Mrs. Sidney told was about a coastal Tlingit man named Kaax'achgook, who may have lived near Sitka, Alaska. Kaax'achgook was a famous ancestor of the Kiks.adi clan, the clan of my grandfather, Rudolph Walton, of Sitka, Alaska. The story about Kaax'achgook is about a hunter lost at sea for many months and how he used the sun's positions as steering points to navigate his return home. The story has many meanings, but one of the important aspects of the story is that Kaax'achgook had a difficult time adjusting to the changes that occurred during his absence. Cruikshank states that Mrs. Sidney told her that story only once in 1974 but that she referred to it many times in the following years that they worked together.

Then in 1981 Mrs. Sidney told how she used the story of Kaax'achgook for the first time in public in 1945 when she was about forty-three years old. According to Cruikshank, Mrs. Sidney talked about Kaax'achgook when her son, Pete, was visiting one day so that

she could illustrate why it was so important to Pete's life. Peter Sidney had served overseas for five years during the Second World War. Mrs. Sidney explained how hard it was for her while he was gone. Pete had been gone a long time, just like Kaax'achgook, she explained. When Pete was on his way home from the war, the family discussed how they would celebrate his return. Mrs. Sidney described the feast they planned and the people they would invite. And she said she was going to sing "that Kaax'achgook song!" When Pete came home the greatest gift she could give her son was the song sung by Kaax'achgook when he returned home. And that's why it is called "Pete's song." A verse from the song is: "I gave up hope, and then I dreamed I was home" (37).

When Mrs. Sidney was eighty-six years old she decided to use the Kaax'achgook story and song again. She was then a senior elder storyteller in the Yukon Territory. She was in great demand, and in 1988 she was invited to participate in the opening of the new Yukon College in Whitehorse. She was also asked to give the college a Tagish name. Mrs. Sidney sang the Kaax'achgook song at the ceremonies "because it conveyed her feelings about what Yukon College could mean to young people in the Territory." She sang the Kaax'achgook song to a mixed audience that might not understand the meaning of the story because, as she put it, "that Yukon College is going

to be like the Sun for the students. Instead of going to Vancouver or Victoria, they're going to be able to stay here and go to school here. We're not going to lose our kids anymore. It's going to be like the Sun for them, just like for that Kaax'achgook." (40)

Cruikshank states: "If we think of oral tradition as a social activity rather than as some reified product, we come to view it as part of the equipment for living rather than a set of meanings embedded within texts and waiting to be discovered." She goes on to observe that "Angela Sidney's various tellings of the Kaax'achgook story remind us that when we approach oral tradition there is more involved than textual analysis. Her point, in her various retellings, is to show how oral narrative is part of a communicative process ... Unless we pay attention to why a particular story is selected and told, we understand very little of its meanings." (41)

What excited me so much about this book is that Julie Cruikshank learned from Mrs. Angela Sidney as well as others and understood what I always knew from my own heritage but never thought about. Dr. Cruikshank, through her research, came to understand that there is a reason a particular story is told and a point that the storyteller is making to the listener. And that the context in which a story is told is as important as the story itself.

Thank you, Julie, for asking, for listening and writing, and for understanding.