

B.C. Indian Myth and Education: A Review Article

ELLI KÖNGÄS MARANDA

Introduction

This discussion arises from a concern with the fates and functions of myth in a culture, in the contact between cultures, and in education. Although myth has always been my main research interest, this article is triggered by a reading of Chief Kenneth B. Harris's book *Visitors Who Never Left: The Origin of the People of Damelahamid*. (Translated and arranged by Chief Kenneth B. Harris in collaboration with Frances M. B. Robinson, University of British Columbia Press, c. 1974). Several months earlier, I had read Marius Barbeau's novel *The Downfall of Temlaham* (first published 1928, first Hurtig edition 1973, Edmonton); I had delayed the review of that book for reasons that will become clear in the discussion.

Damelahamid is the same word as Temlaham; but the similarity of the topics is not the point of my discussion. It only helps to make clear two opposite ways of using myths, one by an outsider, one by an insider, and for contrasting purposes, one for entertainment and self-expression, the other for history and the preservation of culture.

There is a great urgency to realize that the problems touched on in this paper are with us in many ways: myths are rewritten for children to read; curricula are built for all schools to use myths; various native and ethnic groups are trying to develop their own culture-specific teaching materials; the role of anthropology is under scrutiny and criticism from within and without; and most importantly, where not already dead, native cultures are struggling for survival.

I will restrict this article to the examination of the two books at hand, but the problems found here are equally present for all identifiable native and ethnic groups, and not only in B.C., not only in Canada, but all around the world. Intellectual and religious colonization wreaked havoc in every regional and traditional culture, just as technology without control threatens land, air, and water and, ultimately, life. The efforts of

conservationists are known. It is not as well-known that UNESCO has started a long-term salvage project to study and support regional cultures facing urbanization and modernization.

The Sources and Their Use

Marius Barbeau was without doubt the greatest collector and promoter of Canadian folklore to date. His bibliography runs to over a thousand titles, and some of the collections are the best yet produced in Canada, especially those concerning his native Quebec (e.g., Barbeau 1962). His scholarly interest in Tsimshian and Haida was faithful, as exemplified by his *Tsimshyan Myths* (1961), and *Haida Myths Illustrated in Argillite Carvings* (1953). Indeed, Ken Harris's (paternal) grandfather Solomon Harris was one of the persons who contributed materials used in *Downfall* (1973:247), just as he was the source of one of Harris's own texts (1974:71-74).

Kenneth B. Harris was born the year Barbeau's book was published, 1928. When he was twenty, he persuaded his (maternal) uncle Arthur McDames to tell myths for tape recording. In another twenty or so years he met Mrs. Frances M. B. Robinson, a university teacher who became his diligent collaborator. Mrs. Irene Harris interpreted the texts for her son, and he translated them on tape into English and provided interpretations and explanations to Mrs. Robinson, who researched the themes for parallels in published collections, built the scholarly apparatus, and wrote an introduction; for the theoretical discussion of myth, she acknowledges the help of her son Michael, then an anthropology student at the University of British Columbia. The aim of the book is, in Harris's words, to translate the history of Damelahamid, and to preserve the texts, "as I am the last source of such information." This must be read to mean: the last source for the clan myths whose rightful owner was Arthur McDames and whose owner now is his sister's son and successor Ken Harris. The Solomon Harris text is owned by the present Laelt of the Raven clan, the nephew of Solomon Harris, Ken Harris's cross-cousin. He may be "the last source of such information" for his group. Harris and Robinson make a proper acknowledgement of the oral copyright (p. 71).

Despite all explanations, slight obscurity remains about how the ownership is viewed by Harris and Robinson. This puzzle pertains to their presentation of the exact form of the translation. Robinson asserts in the Introduction: "The present collection of myths is the work of Ken Harris . . . They have not been tampered with in any way and are given exactly as translated by Ken Harris, using his own divisions and order. These are

his stories, presented exactly as he understands them" (p. xvii). But we are also told that these are Arthur McDames' stories fixed on tape by him in 1948. The process of fixing a text demands determining which text is the point of reference, taken as "the text." In this case is the fixed text the original told by the uncle in 1948, or is it the translation by the nephew made in 1971? If the original is the text of reference, there is no reason to revere the translation. Respect for the original text cannot mean that the translation cannot be checked, that the outside collaborator cannot ask for clarifications and more exact expressions. If Robinson's view of "not tampering" were acceptable, the fieldworker could never ask a question. But in reality, in the interest of the best translation (be it made by a bilingual native speaker of the original language, or be it made by a bilingual fieldworker, as is often the case with anthropologists), the fieldworker must ask as many questions as etiquette and ingenuity permit. Such discussion cannot damage the text that already has been fixed on tape or on paper, but it may advance its understanding and its best presentation. In other words, we must not tamper with native texts, but we must work as hard as we can to achieve their clearest translation, if they are to be translated, as is the case here.

Robinson accepted Harris's orthography for names and other native words, and they ended up written with an approximate English transliteration. She did not question Harris's translations either. This is a pity, because Harris tends at times to use what could be called committee English. It is hard to imagine that phrases like the following are the closest equivalents of any native expressions: "Each village had a chief, but there is *no reference made to any evidence* that the civilization is after the pattern of our known civilization" (p. 3); "Part of the preparation procedure was a strict code of ethics." (p. 3); "... build your home *according to these specifications*" (p. 15); "it was the *policy* that the chief had to get up early" (p. 120) (emphases added). It is to be noted that Harris introduced many more such expressions in the beginning of his translation and that later, when the artificial activity of translating for the tape recorder became routine, his language is a far more natural, spoken English. Of course Robinson had no right to change the texts, but in cases like those above she might have asked if another translation, less paper-dry, would not perhaps have been closer to the original expression in tone if not in meaning. It is understandable why Harris uses such expressions: the notes reveal (p. 52) that he is an experienced member of national (and presumably also local) boards and committees; there, *Officialese* is the *lingua franca*.

If Robinson's respect and awe for Harris drives her to the brink of the left ditch, Barbeau stumbles into the right. He set himself to write an historical novel, to chronicle a series of events which had taken place some three decades before he began his fieldwork in the Skeena area (1920-24). Barbeau lists his own field collections including myth versions, published collections, and museum materials very carefully, but immediately admits that he used them freely and in the interest of poetic inspiration: "The story of Kamalmuk is true to life. It came to us orally from his friends, his relatives, old people all, whose memory still fondly delves in the past . . . Yet, the narrative itself is couched in the author's own style and composition." (p. vii). This is about the historical narrative, and since no "Kamalmuk Epic" existed, Barbeau had to give form to the chronicle. But he also inserted myths, and this is how he did it: "The myths of Temlaham, given as a corollary as it were, are traditional recollections in set form. . . . Their *records* in our keeping are *freely interpreted and paraphrased*. A rich vein for *poetic inspiration* lies within native themes and surroundings. The *writer*, the painter, and the musician *may discover treasures in this virgin field* of human endeavour, *so far untrodden . . . The door is wide open for all to enter . . .*" (p. vii) (emphases added). The statement is romantic, it is 1928 and much before; but it is also dangerously colonial, it is Columbus discovering America. The riches of the new found land are free for all exploiters! Native tradition is raw material for real literature, but it is not literature by definition, just as native religion is not "real" religion. Compare the words of Amerigo Vespucci: "While among these people we did not learn that they had any religion. They can be termed neither Moors nor Jews; and they are worse than heathen . . ." (Washburn, ed., 1964:7-8).

The assumptions implicit in the books contrast. Harris and Robinson take myth to be almost literal truth, not symbolic truth, "backward looking prophesy," or interpretation of history. In contrast, Barbeau wants to interpret — one is tempted to say, create — Indian history, especially as concerns the internal tension and external conflict created in contact time, the advent of the white man, especially white religion and white law: "In the conflict between aboriginal races and the white conquerors, thinkers and moralists will find wide vistas on every side" (p. vii). Again, Indian facts are viewed as raw materials, but they must, in Barbeau's view, be given form and "beauty" before they can be apprehended by white audiences. This aspect of giving a form reaches as far as the myths; and giving beauty to the texts means, in Barbeau's practice, sprinkling

the text with English archaisms in word forms, in vocabulary, and even in syntax, especially word order.

Stylistically, the difference between the texts is radical. I will give an example, an excerpt of what looks like the widespread Star Husband Tale (cf. Thompson 1953):

“The mother would declare, ‘Son-in-law,’ out of respect and add, ‘you may depart when it is your pleasure. What I want is not a son-in-law who will make our foes blind, who will hurt them, or simply outrun them in the chase. No, it is an avenger who will bring retaliation into the very heart of Kunradal, an avenger fearless and mighty.’” (Barbeau 973:182).

“So she told him, also: ‘Go. You are not fit to protect me and my granddaughter.’” (Harris 1974:10).

As to the structure of the myths used, Robinson remarks in her introduction (p. xv) that the myth related by Ken Harris “contained far less detail than the earlier ones.” This is certainly true. She then argues that “less detail is needed today in the current cultural context to convey these same logical truths” (p. xvi). It is not that less detail is needed; it is that less detail could be handled and understood by the audience. Harris hints at this, perhaps, when he says: “There is no longer the time to tell the myths as we used to in the old days” (p. xxii).

The reader will observe that Harris’s myths are far shorter than the corresponding texts collected by Henry W. Tate in 1904-1916 and published in Boas’ *Tsimshian Mythology* (1916). There has been real cultural loss, and that reflects in a substantive loss of myth content. Remarkably, it does not reflect any loss of structure: Harris’s texts are coherent and balanced. They can, in fact, be used as illustrative of what Lévi-Strauss wrote in 1955: “Myth is the part of language where the formula *traduttore traditore* (a translator is a traitor) reaches its lowest truth-value. . . . Mythical value of the myth remains preserved even through the worst translation . . . its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells.” (1968: 85-86). When the flesh is wasted the skeleton remains.

Myth as Materials for Creative Writing

Pauline Johnson (1911) and Marius Barbeau used B.C. Indian myths as raw materials for creative writing, in good faith, of course. They were eminent, they were advocates of Indian causes, and their books have become classics in Canadian literature. Moreover, they had at least some partial justification for their work: Johnson was half-Indian by birth and full, as it were, by vocation: “There are those who think they pay me a

compliment in saying I am just like a white woman. I am Indian, and my aim, my joy, my pride, is to sing the glories of my people" (Johnson 1973:ix). Barbeau had spent years and years in the salvation of Indian materials. Both Barbeau and Johnson also had the full co-operation of the people whose materials they were using.

It is entirely different when the modern writer of children's books takes sacred narratives of various Indian groups and turns them to something enjoyable for kids to consume. Recently two education students at the University of British Columbia, Brian Burrill and Malcolm Haslam, in my Anthropology course, Analysis of Myth, did a study of adaptations of myths into children's literature. They found that the rewriters made statements like, "there is too much violence in the stories," referring to the killing of animals in myths concerning hunting. They found that the myths had to be restructured, because "our children are used to a certain kind of Aristotelian story pattern, with a beginning, a middle, and an end"; and they also found that the writers did not hesitate to *invent* episodes when they felt that some event was hard to understand. Such liberties were taken even in cases where existing ethnographic literature would have provided materials for explanation. In the story of Raven, the statement "the chief's daughter became pregnant" was omitted as too explicit a reference to sex.

Of course schools must teach ethics and morality. But what ethics, what morality? It is a sad comment on the ethics of our society if educators feel that you cannot tell children that a hunter must kill an animal for food. When listening to the two students reporting their findings, it occurred to me that the television programs our children view seldom depict the killing of an animal, but freely, every day, routinely, let people be killed on sight. Pregnancy also is practically taboo on television, but quite explicit sex is not. This is one area where our society has a lot to learn from most traditional societies: surely it is phony and warped to mystify hunting but to tolerate murder, to mystify pregnancy but allow aimless sexual provocation and play. Also, there is no way of preventing children from observing public advertising of sports hunters' weapons and activities. So the ethics we teach seem to be: it is unethical to hunt for livelihood, but all right to hunt for pleasure; all births are virgin births, but it is all right that people indulge in pleasure sex.

Should Myths be used in Education?

Is it necessary that Indian (or other native) myths be made known to outsiders, children or adults? I think yes. I think yes because today's

Indians, children and adults, need their identity, and one's identity consists partly in others recognizing it.

I will try to make my case by telling how I was given my ethnic and national identity (which does not depend on my citizenship): born in Finland, I was brought up with Finnish mythology and folklore as a central part of the school curriculum. By the time we were 15, we had had obligatory learning of Finnish oral literature, including most importantly the national epos, *Kalevala*. Its compiler, Elias Lönnrot, a quiet country doctor, a poor tailor's son, was presented in the history books as one of the four truly great men of the country (the others were a linguist, a philosopher, and a poet, all dealing with national identity). We had to learn other things, among which the other official language of the country, Swedish; foreign languages; and the rest. But *Kalevala* was studied as literature.

It has been documented what the publication of *Kalevala* meant for the country, which actually at the time of the publication of the two first editions, in 1835 and 1849, was not even an independent state. I quote from a modern Finnish folklorist: "The impact of *Kalevala* was immense. It has been said that a large part of (later) Finnish history . . . derives from the publication of the national epic directly or indirectly. It cannot be denied that its impact on the (Finnish) political history was great, not to mention how strong its influence was on nearly all scholarly fields, that it gave impetus for establishing new fields of inquiry, that it enriched the Finnish language, that it became the foundation of Finnish literature, and, lastly, that it placed the name of Finland on the map of the world." (Honko 1961:209, cf. also Hautala 1968) There was some unnecessary romanticism there, for sure, but I think the most decisive thing was that children were given awareness of their own roots, and that the whole nation had the opportunity to realize that they too had a history.

It must be made clear that nationalism and ethnicism are not synonyms of chauvinism, as they are often presented in the contemporary discussion of Canadian nationalism. If a group feels that its identity means superiority and must result in some missionary type expansion of the "supreme" culture, then we have chauvinism. Not so when a minority, even a minority nation, simply asks that its identity be recognized as worthy of having and maintaining.

The myths of Canadian Indians and Eskimos are part of Canadian identity. They are contributions to the Canadian heritage. Even more: they are contributions to world literature. They belong to mankind, but only if sharing them does not deprive the original, rightful owners. They

cannot be wrenched from their native owners and handled as public property. Shakespeare is not confined to the British Isles; Edda is not locked up in Iceland; *Kalevala* has been translated into dozens of languages. But Shakespeare would not be rewritten and popularized by all comers. We understand that without question; yet, Indian myths are handled without care; as Barbeau wrote, "the door is open for all to enter."

In the summer of 1974, a rewrite myth was offered by an English professor to the Salish Conference to consider. The writer explained that he felt the rewriting was necessary, because the text lacked refinement and was colourless. He proceeded to add witticisms, to play with style, to decorate the text as he best could. This in 1974, by a scholar, and for a scholarly conference! Yet, scholarship has shown that when the original text is translated with the greatest care, a beauty emerges that is far more enduring than passing western notions of good style. Repetitions, which have been most persistently persecuted by western translators, become essential pointers to the most important structural elements. A myth will not improve if it is "written better"; it will improve from reading it better. As Northrop Frye says of our appreciation of art, "art does not evolve or improve: it produces the classic or model. What does improve in the arts is the comprehension of them, and the refining of society which results from it." (1973:344)

Summary

In this discussion I have made one point at the cost of other points. My aim was not to belittle Barbeau's work; I am quite aware of his immense contributions to Canadian ethnography and folklore. I am here making a statement about how he handled native myth in his novel. He made a fundamental mistake: he viewed myth as ownerless, as free for all. Some readers may accuse me of harshness; they may say that never mind how built, the *Downfall* is a great book. Even if my criticism is too severe, the principle is valid: where there is ownership of myth, it must be respected. If it is not, writers are building private houses with blocks stolen from cathedrals.

Wanting to focus on the principle of proper publishing, I have also omitted detailed discussion of *Visitors Who Never Left*. Further criticisms could have been made, for example, that conventional technical terms in myth analysts are used inexactly. I decided again to suppress some issues in order to leave room for the main argument.

I have been considering here two opposite ways of publishing myth.

One, exemplified by the Harris-Robinson book, is the simple and most accurate possible production of oral telling in exact translation, with minimal annotation and explanations where necessary. With minor errors, the basic principles are followed in *The Visitors*.

The other one, of which I made Barbeau's book the prototype, but which is currently practiced by diverse writers, considers oral literature as raw material for some "higher" literature to be written by an outsider, an "author." This kind of activity is unacceptable.

The reasons for condemning the rewriting of myths are the following:

First, *myths are art*. They must be understood in their own terms, as all art must, not in the terms that we wish to impose on them. To reiterate, myth is not made better by writing it better, but by learning to read it better. Here, education in the basic skills of myth analysis is needed by writers, teachers, parents, and children alike.

Secondly, in the realm of myth, finders are not keepers. Myths are not free for all like air. If the owners feel that their property may not even be seen by outsiders, that is their right. However, if the owners, like Ken Harris, feel that the publication of myths is an act of preservation, which it is, then they should be the holders of the copyright on paper just as they are morally the rightful owners of the spoken myth. But the work of preservation and best presentation may demand technical and professional skills. Here, I believe, the anthropologist and the linguist can aid the storyteller, for the best possible result.

As in the case of the Tsimshian, myths are often property of a specific group even within the home culture. Among the Tlingit in Alaska, professor Richard Dauenhauer (1974) and his wife Nora Dauenhauer, herself a Tlingit, are working to publish clan myths for educational use within the clans. They have already produced a series of publications. Collecting is still possible, and it is of course more pressing than ever before.

Specialists can provide technical aid. Archival skills and techniques must be developed, requirements of accurate transcription and translation must be met. It cannot be denied that European and North American universities, archives, and museums have struggled with such problems for a long time. Their technical experience should be put into use.

Private or strictly local tape or manuscript collections are under severe fire hazard. Very recently, one B.C. Indian collector lost his single-copy tape collection of his own group's music in a fire. The collection is irreplaceable. A copy should be made of a tape collection for safety: a museum or an archive should be a place to keep the backup copy, and the collector or the copyright owner should be able to determine if the

copy is to be kept under seven seals. If it were possible to deny or to postpone any access to the collection (or if it were made known to the public at large that such regulation is possible), or if the owner could dictate the conditions under which access can be given, people might feel confident to deposit their collections in safer places than their own bedroom shelf.

Northwest Coast art has become the court art of British Columbia. It goes to national, international, and world exhibitions; it goes toward provincial and sometimes national symbol making. It enjoys prestige.

B.C. myth is just as excellent as B.C. art. It should be treated with respect and care, studied with skill and diligence, and cherished as the great contribution of this area to the total civilization of mankind.

WORKS CITED

- Barbeau, Marius, 1953. *Haida Myths Illustrated in Argillite Carvings*. National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 127, Anthropological Series No. 32, Ottawa.
- Barbeau, Marius, 1961. *Tsimshyan Myths*. National Museums of Canada Bulletin No. 174. Ottawa.
- Barbeau, Marius, 1962. *Le Rossignol y chante*. Musée National du Canada Bulletin No. 175, No. 52 de la série anthropologique. Ottawa.
- Barbeau, Marius, 1973. *The Downfall of Temlaham*. Edmonton.
- Boas, Franz, *Tsimshian Mythology Based on Texts Recorded by Henry W. Tate*. Washington, 1916.
- Dauenhauer, Richard, 1974. "A Cry for Shaadax': Style and Personality in Tlingit Prose Narrative," Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, Portland, Oregon, November 1.
- Frye, Northrop, 1973. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton.
- Harris, Kenneth B., 1974. *Visitors Who Never Left: The Origin of the People of Damelahamid*. Translated and Arranged by Chief Kenneth B. Harris in Collaboration with Frances M. P. Robinson. Vancouver.
- Hautala, Jouko, 1968. *Finnish Folklore Research 1828-1918*. Helsinki.
- Honko, Lauri, 1961. "Suomalainen kansalliseepos," (The Finnish National Epic), in Terho Itkonen and Simo Konsala, eds., *Seulottua sanaa kirjoituksia sanataiteen, kielen ja kansanperinteen alalta*. SKS:n toimituksia No. 269, pp. 202-209.
- Johnson, E. Pauline, 1911, *Legends of Vancouver*, n.p.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude, "The Structural Study of Myth," in Thomas A. Sedgwick, ed., *Myth: Symposium* (Bloomington, 1965) 81-106.
- Thompson, Stith, 1953. The Star Husband Tale. *Studia Septentrionalia* 4, 93-163.
- Washburn, Wilcomb E., 1964. *The Indian and the White Man*. Documents in American Civilization Series. Garden City, N.Y.