

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Utilizing Oral Traditions: Some Concerns Raised by Recent Ojibwe Studies; a Review Essay

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1g87t3mq>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 7(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Kugel, Rebecca

Publication Date

1983-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Essay Review

Utilizing Oral Traditions: Some Concerns Raised by Recent Ojibwe Studies; a Review Essay*

Rebecca Kugel

Thomas W. Overholt and J. Baird Callicott, *Clothed-in-Fur and Other Tales: An Introduction to an Ojibwa World View* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982). 198 pp. \$23.00, Cloth. \$11.00 Paper.

Vivian J. Rohrl, *Change for Continuity: The People of a Thousand Lakes* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982). 269 pp. \$22.00 Cloth. \$11.50 Paper.

Victor Barnouw, *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales; and Their Relation to Chippewa Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977). 304 pp. \$25.00 Cloth. \$9.95 Paper.

Basil Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976). 171 pp. \$11.95 Cloth.

Basil Johnston, *Moose Meat and Wild Rice* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Ltd., 1978). 188 pp. \$16.95 Cloth.

Eighty years ago Franz Boas urged that oral traditions be collected from Native peoples. He was convinced that such traditions could shed important light on the cultures and world views of non-Western tribal peoples. To date, the information contained in Native oral traditions has not been systematically utilized by scholars as Boas suggested it could be. The work of the excep-

*The author would like to thank Professor Kenneth M. Morrison of Arizona State University for his thoughtful criticisms and encouragement of this essay.

Rebecca Kugel is a Doctoral Candidate in History at UCLA.

tional few stands in contrast and once more proves the rule. These five books on the Ojibwe people attempt in varying degrees to utilize oral traditions to gain a better understanding of how Ojibwe people thought and viewed themselves, their society and the world around them. The theoretical constructs the five authors employ vary widely, as do their interpretations. Taken as a whole, these books demonstrate the difficulties inherent in utilizing oral traditions. They point up how badly a general theoretical orientation is needed if scholars are to use oral traditions to understand a culture on its own terms.

The most recent of these publications, Thomas W. Overholt and J. Baird Callicott's *Clothed-in-Fur and Other Tales: An Introduction to an Ojibwa Worldview* seeks the modest goal of "understand[ing] these narratives in their own terms" (p. xii). The authors urge "learning by experience" (p. xvi) about the Ojibwe world view. Emersion into myth texts can provide a reader with an opportunity to identify the components of an Ojibwe world view. Such knowledge in turn "will enhance one's understanding of specific aspects of the culture" (p. xiii), such as religious activities or cosmology.

If one attributes such importance to oral materials, their accuracy and authenticity must be established as firmly as possible. Overholt and Callicott display a keen awareness of the difficulties inherent in working with oral traditions and with the special complexities of the Ojibwe historical experience. The authors thread their way carefully through the tangle of issues the past forty years of Ojibwe studies has produced. They handle the question of probable significant cultural difference between geographic divisions of the Ojibwe by stating they "wish to avoid making the claim that the assumptions which underlie these narratives represent *the Ojibwa world view*" (p. 27), hence the subtitle of their book.

They also address the problem of ascertaining the aboriginality of their narratives, which they obtained from William Jones's *Ojibwa Texts*, published in 1917 and 1919. Overholt and Callicott acknowledge the possibility that Jones's narratives—recorded, it must be remembered, after 250 years of Ojibwe contact with Europeans and their descendants—may have been influenced by non-aboriginal themes, motifs and values. To test that possibility, they compare Jones's material to Hallowell's studies of the conservative Northern Ojibwe. The authors reason that the Northern

Ojibwe, because of their geographic isolation and cultural conservatism, embody in their world view "a reasonable approximation of traditional Ojibwa thought" (p. 28). They further cite Mary B. Black's studies of Minnesota (southwestern) Ojibwe. Black's work evidently indicates these same two widely separated divisions shared a world view. Here, however, an important dilemma presents itself.

In spite of the authors' care to stress that their study can only represent *an* Ojibwe world view (that of the people from whom Jones collected his narratives), they rely on evidence from other geographic regions to prove the aboriginality of their materials. While the authors take pains to acknowledge the regional differences between Ojibwe, they themselves make trans-regional comparisons of the sort they have acknowledged may create distortions. Evidently the work of Hallowell and Black convinces them that a trans-regional application of an Ojibwe world view is possible. One wishes for a full discussion of the reasoning behind this apparent conviction. Black's trans-regional work in particular deserves more detailed treatment. Perhaps the problem of regional variation would then have been satisfactorily addressed. The issue is confused in the book, and inclines one to conclude the study of Ojibwe oral traditions is caught in an inescapable Catch-22 that makes meaningful study impracticable in fact, however tantalizing in theory.

While the authors' discussion of the problems of regionalism and the aboriginality of texts is insightful, their interpretation of an Ojibwe world view offers no real new insights beyond those contained in Hallowell's excellent "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior and World View" (1960). As a result, the book appears merely to cover old ground. Whether one gains a better appreciation of another People's reality by emerging oneself in ethnographic literature, and then by turning to the study of world view and belief system, or whether experiential knowledge of the world view ought to precede other study, as Overholt and Callicott contend, remains a matter of opinion. The authors achieve their goal of interesting the reader in another culture's unique perception of the surrounding world. However, this reader was left wanting to know much more about the Ojibwe world view, in particular its role in shaping human behavior and social institutions.

Victor Barnouw's *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales; and Their Relation to Chippewa Life* attempts this heightened level of analysis

at the same time that it takes its place in an ongoing scholarly debate on the nature of Ojibwe society. The debate focuses on whether Ojibwe society can be categorized as "atomistic" or cooperative. Supporters of the "atomistic" view argue that Ojibwe society was loosely-structured, the people individualistic and uncooperative, centering their energies and emotions around the small, patrilineal, extended family hunting bands to the exclusion of any other larger political, economic or social bodies. Other scholars have documented significant elements of cooperative organization, such as clans and political societies, indicating a less particularized society.

Barnouw, a leading proponent of the "atomistic" school, has modified his position somewhat in this work in response to the work of Harold Hickerson, which detailed cooperative activities and attitudes among the southwestern Ojibwe. He concedes that "there may have been a tendency" towards cooperative activities in this one Ojibwe division (p. 6). Oral traditions, he believes, can be of especial use in resolving the issue of the nature of Ojibwe social life and organization! Careful study of folklore can reveal both Ojibwe conceptions of the nature of reality and present information on typical social situations. Scholars can then analyze these situations for their atomistic or cooperative elements.

In conjunction with his awareness of the social implications of oral traditions, Barnouw applies a Freudian analysis to discover "prevalent personality patterns" (p. 5) among the Ojibwe. His thinking has it that certain personality types should predominate in certain types of societies, providing further proof of the nature of social organization. Barnouw shares with Overholt and Callicott a concern with understanding Ojibwe perceptions of reality. Additionally, he provides an analysis of Ojibwe social life based on a thorough familiarity with the world view, an element missing from Overholt and Callicott's work. His use of mythology most closely parallels Boas's suggestions for using oral materials. As such, his work, which not surprisingly argues the Ojibwe remain an atomistic society, raises several serious questions.

If one is to utilize oral traditions as Barnouw proposes, questions of the authenticity of narratives, of accretions and omissions of themes, and of the qualifications and representativeness of informants become paramount. Most of Barnouw's material was

gathered on one Wisconsin reservation, Lac Courte Oreilles, between 1941 and 1944, though a lengthy creation myth was obtained from Lac du Flambeau (p. vii). Since Barnouw provides no historical or economic information on these two reservations, it is difficult to assess whether they are representative of the southwestern Ojibwe experience. More importantly, Barnouw fails to consider the possible biases of his informants. Three of his five principal storytellers had extensive exposure to Euramerican society; two were raised as Catholics and had Euramerican fathers (pp. 261-2, 271-5). Barnouw provides this information in brief biographies but does not discuss its implications in regard to the accuracy or possible selectivity of the narratives he collected.

Considering the significance of his analysis of Ojibwe society based on these informants' narratives, Barnouw needs to assess their backgrounds in depth. In particular, information is needed about the informants' own life experiences, about their acquisition of oral traditions, about their exposure to Euramerican culture and its values, and of the influence of that exposure on their story-telling. That difficulties with informants could occur in just such areas as these is evidenced in a letter written by a fieldworker to Dr. Truman Michelson of the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1915. The fieldworker observed that his Christianized informants were reluctant to tell *Nanabo'zho* stories, recited the tales uncomfortably and with apologetic asides for *Nanabo'zho's* cruder antics, and turned with relief to "safe" fairy tales and Bible stories adopted from European sources (Ernest C. Oberholtzer to Truman Michelson, May 8, 1915, Bureau of American Ethnology Collections, Chippewa Manuscript #4365-A, Smithsonian Institution). Did Barnouw experience similar problems 30 years later? Did he take such reticence into account when he analyzed the narratives he obtained? If he did so, he makes no mention of it in his work, and the reader is left with important, unanswered questions regarding the accuracy of material.

Many of the stories in Barnouw's book are attenuated versions of narratives which can be found in earlier collections, including J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong's *Original Odzibwe Texts* (1913), which were also obtained from southwestern Ojibwe and to which Barnouw does not refer. It is unclear why Barnouw should choose to interpret traditional Ojibwe society solely on the basis of narratives collected in the 1940s to the exclusion of earlier recorded

material. It would seem logical to utilize all available and regionally relevant oral traditions when attempting to reconstruct a past reality. A foreshortened myth text collected in 1940 may say a great deal about the state of the oral tradition in the 1940s, but its use as the sole tool in reconstructing the past social order seems dubious simply because it is abbreviated. It does not represent the entirety of the knowledge on the Ojibwe oral materials. It is impossible, relying on just the 1940s material, to know what episodes are missing and what motifs and details have disappeared. The narratives need to be examined in historical perspective; they cannot provide that perspective by themselves.

In his attempt to document his case for the essential atomism of southwestern Ojibwe society, Barnouw overlooks a crucial distinction in his narratives. He observes that evidences of non-atomistic organization and behavior are not present in much of the mythological data. References to cooperative institutions and activities, village life and families other than that of the protagonist are few. Here there is an important temporal element in oral traditions that Barnouw fails to recognize. It is true that stories set in the mythological age when *Nanabo'zho* walked the earth (transforming the world into its present condition, and learning, through often humorous trial and error, how to act properly), contain very few references to other people, to village life or to cooperative social interaction. But these are stories set in the world before human beings exist. These stories refer to mythic times before human social realities were established. In the stories set after *Nanabo'zho's* departure from this world, one finds numerous references to the groups of families, the villages, and the group activities. For example, in five of Barnouw's seven *Windigo* stories, village life and group activities are explicitly mentioned (pp. 120-128).

Barnouw's use of Freudian analysis and symbolism to interpret the hidden meaning in Ojibwe stories is probably quite orthodox, but again, it is founded on a series of oral narratives whose authenticity has not been established. Barnouw's analysis of the Ojibwe origin myth exemplifies the difficulties of utilizing oral traditions for detailed Freudian analysis. The themes and events described in the origin myth vary widely from collection to collection. For the purposes of Freudian investigations, some of the variations appear to have considerable significance. In some versions, *Nanabo'zho* kills his father for causing his mother's death,

a situation fraught with Oedipal connotations. In other tellings, he kills his brothers; and in still others he kills no one. Given this variety, it is not clear that a definitive analysis, based on one theme to the exclusion of the others, can be made.

Barnouw's work makes clear why scholars have not taken advantage of the traditional oral materials available to them. Barnouw has attempted to integrate oral narratives into a larger, societal study, as Boas suggested, only to encounter numerous and frustrating obstacles. A range of concerns regarding one's informants, their typicality, their personal histories and feelings about their traditional culture, must be confronted. Accurate translations from one language to another must be achieved. An author must have a thorough understanding of the various categories of tales. Concerns with whether myth texts collected at relatively late dates reflect accurately an aboriginal point of view must be addressed. Barnouw's book reveals that a great deal of "background work" must figure into a discussion of a society based on analysis of oral materials. Without careful examination of such issues, the "proof" provided by oral traditions remains obscure. Barnouw's work reveals the potential of oral materials at the same time it demonstrates the difficulties involved in utilizing the source.

Vivian J. Rohrl's *Change for Continuity: The People of a Thousand Lakes* represents a shift in emphasis from the concerns of Overholt, Callicott and Barnouw. Rohrl analyzes selected important institutions and discusses their structures and functions in order to describe how changes in the Ojibwe reservation community of Mille Lacs, Minnesota continue to reflect a commitment to an Ojibwe world view and lifestyle. Rohrl attempts to isolate particular articulations of the world view, which she calls values, then assess their continued viability in the industrialized world the Ojibwe now inhabit. Recognizing that cultural patterns and values "are reflected in folklore" (p. xv), Rohrl includes references to oral traditions to demonstrate the aboriginal existence of certain values.

Rohrl utilizes the value orientation schedule devised by Florence R. Kluckhohn and Fred L. Strodtbeck (*Variations in Value Orientations*, 1960) to define specific traditional Ojibwe values. By comparing the value statements made by her informants with descriptions of traditional Ojibwe values found in the earlier works of Hallowell, Landes, Densmore and Friedl, Rohrl is able

to measure changes or persistence in attitudes. Within this framework she is successful in isolating on-going Ojibwe values, although one cannot tell from this structural-functional approach what actions the Mille Lacs people undertook to encourage the survival of their values.

Rohrl's claim to use Ojibwe oral traditions to support her argument is overstated. Her references to Ojibwe traditions are few and often unspecific. For example, in discussing the "past" time orientation, one of the values on the Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck schedule, she notes that it "is not particularly meaningful" to the Ojibwe. "Legends and narratives," she adds, "indicate this fact," but she offers no examples of any oral material to prove the contention (p. 146). Her understanding of the Ojibwe culture hero *Nanabo'zho* (alternately *Wenebo'zho*, *Manabo'zho*) seems superficial when she states he is "sometimes referred to as 'The Indian Messiah'" (p. 97), without providing further explanation of this very untraditional conception of the culture hero. The Ojibwe certainly recognized prophets, but a savior was a European idea. If *Nanabo'zho* has come to be perceived as a savior, a radical change in his personality and function has occurred and should be addressed. While Euramericans as far back as Schoolcraft have chosen to interpret *Nanabo'zho* as an Indian savior, it is not clear that Ojibwe people ever did. Rohrl's unexplained use of the term is puzzling and raises more questions than it answers.

In a more serious way, Rohrl's structural analysis limits her ability to analyze Mille Lacs society on its own terms. While she can observe changes and continuities, she cannot analyze what they meant for the Mille Lacs people. She can prove the existence of Ojibwe values but those values remain formalized results at the end of an unexamined process of culture change. While this study demonstrates the utility of purely structural analysis, it also reveals its limitations. Oral traditions can be used more effectively. It would be interesting to know, for instance, which stories are still told today at Mille Lacs and whether they continue to articulate the values Rohrl isolates on the Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck schedule. Rohrl suggests that, while institutions change, the values that underlie them remain the same and reveal themselves in newly-emerging structures. A thorough analysis of oral traditions and the values they express would have been of considerable use in proving this contention.

Basil Johnston's *Ojibway Heritage* does not utilize oral tradition

to reconstruct or analyze Ojibwe society. Instead, Johnston presents a collection of oral traditions accompanied by explanations fitting the pieces of thought into a philosophical whole. An Ojibwe himself, Johnston has recorded some of the traditions of the people in the southeastern region of Ojibwe country in southern Ontario. His is a valuable work because it offers the most recent expression of Ojibwe traditions in the books under review. One proposed method of determining change in oral traditions urges that the most recent retellings of the stories be used as a point of departure. Working backwards from the most recent material to the oldest collections, a scholar hunts for variations in themes, emphases and beliefs. Although Johnston himself does not do so, his book offers a wealth of material from which to make assessments regarding change and persistence in Ojibwe culture. A major difficulty with Johnston's book, however, is that the author does not explicitly state whether he is recording remembrances of a past way of life or documenting an ongoing and viable culture. The uses to which his material can be put are thus minimized. If this work recounts traditional culture, then the Ojibwe remember their past with an accuracy that should encourage scholars to pursue oral traditions as difficult but highly reliable sources. If it is an account of current Ojibwe culture, however, Johnston's stories suggest that an impressive amount of traditional Ojibwe culture has survived in a meaningful way. If this is the case, it is especially noteworthy that southeastern Ojibwe conceptions of the universe remain very little altered in spite of extensive exposure to European religious traditions. In Johnston's stories, *Nanabo'zho's* role as creator has been down-played in favor of *Ki'tchi Manido*, the traditional Ojibwe spiritual being who lived in the sky and who aboriginally remained distant and remotely beneficent. *Ki'tchi Manido* has assumed the role of creator, more in keeping with European conceptions of God. *Nanabo'zho*, however, still makes the world safe for human beings by destroying monsters and shaping geographic features and is still honored for giving the *Midewiwin* to the People, an act attributed to him in older traditions.

Johnston's *Moose Meat and Wild Rice* is a collection of humorous anecdotes recounting the adventures of various living and recently living members of one Canadian Ojibwe reserve. These studies, at first glance, may not appear to fit the definition of oral tradition (they are obviously of recent origin), but they perform

the usual function of oral traditions in passing on certain lessons and attitudes the People consider important and wish to perpetuate. The values they express are subtle and easily overlooked as one follows the characters through encounters with Canadian bureaucracies, technological innovations and social mores. Their very existence indicates that oral tradition flourishes among the Ojibwe, incrementing itself in a process that probably has never stopped, regardless of changing contact situations. New situations are dealt with and new insights are passed on in the form of stories. This use of oral tradition to pass on accumulated knowledge is of course traditional. The fact that oral traditions can be used to explain the non-traditional contact with Canadians points out the ways in which an aboriginal form of retaining knowledge survives and changes to cope with new situations. The values that the stories express are of particular interest in light of this.

Several stories suggest that Ojibwe ways and Canadian ways are distinct, meant to be so, and should not be indiscriminately mixed. One should not, in Canadian fashion, try to profit from one's relatives and friends ("Big Business," pp. 151-157). Nor should one adopt an exploitative Canadian attitude towards animals from the Ojibwe world whom one ought to treat with respect ("Indian Smart: Moose Smart," pp. 13-18). Respect for the traditional Ojibwe belief system is obvious in such tales as "Don't Make Fun of Old Beliefs" (pp. 65-71), in which the skeptic is properly chastized and the community at large reminded that the old beliefs continue to express reality. In other stories, traditional assumptions are more subtly presented. The story that is my personal favorite, "Don't Call Me No Name!" (pp. 120-124), involves two recently discharged World War II veterans who, when they discover the Canadian laws forbidding the sale of liquor to Indians have been reinstated at the end of the war, eventually masquerade as Chinese men in order to be served a glass of beer. The man who becomes angry, cursing the waiters and bouncers who refuse the two heroes service, is not the one to resolve the difficulty. It is his mild-mannered cousin who suggests the impersonation. A longstanding Ojibwe preference for quiet action (and a complementary respect for the deliberative and quiet man who gets things done without a lot of fuss and attention) is expressed, as opposed to loud and angry but essentially useless words. It is not surprising that many of the stories

detail quiet Ojibwe victories over White Canadians, and it is interesting to note how the stories reveal that traditional behavior still works for the People. The People get what they want by using their enemies' weaknesses and foolishness to advantage and by acting as Ojibwe are supposed to act.

These stories render yet another important service. They demonstrate a point often stated but rarely enlarged upon in the literature: the Ojibwe are possessed of a keen, wry, appreciative sense of humor. They cope with life with laughter. The majority of the stories deal with the collision of Ojibwe and Canadian values, behaviors and institutions. The fact that the Ojibwe handle this situation with laughter and an optimism that life, though hard, is good, reveals to us an important and often unrecognized source of the strength and resilience of that nebulous construct, the Ojibwe world view.

In their diversity these books afford a glimpse of the potential of oral traditions to add depth to our knowledge of Native American cultures on numerous levels. Their presence is cause for optimism: scholars from many fields are beginning to heed Boas's suggestion and are taking first steps towards utilizing this rich and long-neglected source. As these five books also demonstrate, however, the methodology for accurately utilizing oral sources is not yet present, and to this lack I would attribute the shortcomings of these works. Rigorous methodologies addressing a wide variety of concerns need to be developed. At such time as methodologies are established, the study of oral tradition can progress unhindered by the sorts of difficulties that beset Barnouw's work. The potential of oral traditions is evident. It is now necessary to develop methodologies that will enable that potential to be realized.