

CLAIMING LEGITIMACY: ORAL TRADITION AND ORAL HISTORY

I Introduction: What are we talking about when we use the term
Oral tradition?

II Approaches to Analysis of oral Tradition: Historical Overview
(Basic question was: 'what do oral traditions mean'

- (a) Oral tradition as 'object'
- (b) Oral tradition in context
- (c) Oral tradition as statement about the human 'mind'
- (d) Oral traditions in political movements (Europe/Asia)

III Contemporary Approaches to Analysis of Oral Tradition:

How is Oral tradition used

- (a) oral tradition, science, history - how are they similar?
- (b) comparative perspectives:
 - (i) Africa
 - (ii) Philippines
 - (iii) New Zealand
 - (iv) Northwestern Canada
 - (v) Europe

IV Where do we go from here?

- (i) questions about definitions
- (ii) questions about 'place'
- (iii) questions about 'event'
- (iv) dilemma of relativism
- (v) problems of codifying oral tradition
- (vi) claiming legitimacy

CLAIMING LEGITIMACY: ORAL TRADITION AND ORAL HISTORY

DRAFT DISCUSSION PAPER

prepared for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

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I

Introduction

During 1992, compelling questions were raised - in the mass media, in museum exhibits, and in both popular and academic writings - about the construction of history. The Columbus Quincentenary framed these issues on an international level. In British Columbia, we heard a great deal about the bicentenary of Captain George Vancouver's visit to the west coast of North America. In the Yukon Territory, the 50th anniversary of the Alaska Highway construction was celebrated despite condemnation of the festivities by some Aboriginal people. "1992" has become a metaphor for the transition from a neo-colonial world system to a post-colonial world order (Hill 1992).

All of these anniversaries have highlighted concerns about voice in human history - whose voices are included and whose voices left out. Contesting the legitimacy of the dominant discourse is not new, of course, and one of the objectives of this draft discussion paper is to examine how this issue has been addressed in other periods of history and in other parts of the world. As feminist historians have pointed out, the problem of enlarging discourse involves much more than 'adding and stirring' additional voices; there are fundamental methodological problems involved in rethinking familiar genres of historical narrative.

A concern that many voices are systematically erased from written history has been recognized for a long time now in northern aboriginal communities. It is fundamental to the collaborative work that has preoccupied me in the Yukon where I lived for many years and where I continue to work. This paper is based on questions that I have heard raised repeatedly since I first went to northern Canada in the late 1960s. But it also draws on scholarship from other parts of the world where similar questions are being asked. I will try to use examples with which I am familiar to formulate broader propositions for discussion at our meeting.

The central question as I understand it is this: In areas of the world where written documents are relatively recent, how can oral tradition contribute to documentation of varieties of historical understanding? This issue is being raised in many cultural contexts, and the way in which it is formulated sometimes seems to give oral history rather

elastic promise - particularly when so much scholarship seems to rest exclusively on the examination of written documents. Additional problems arise once the state takes an interest in indigenous interpretation: codification of customary understandings can easily slip into control of knowledge and representation (Merry 1992:365; Messick 1986).

The term oral tradition is often used to refer to two different things. Sometimes it refers to a body of material retained from the past and known to elders. Other times we use it to talk about a process by which information has been handed down to the present. Both of these are important, but definitions like this may make oral tradition seem more rigid than it really is. Oral tradition is more than a body of stories to be recorded and stored away. It is not always passed on in the form of complete narratives. In communities where I have worked, oral tradition is discussed and debated as part of a lively process, a way of understanding the present as well as the past. More important than the search for a body of reliable orally narrated texts, then, is the question of how oral tradition is used to discuss the past. The same question must be asked of written records and this is a point I want to return to later.

My framework for this discussion paper comes from a project I have been involved with in the Yukon during the last three years. It originated with questions about how to incorporate Aboriginal peoples' voices into high school social studies curriculum. The project was directed by a team which included Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators and an advisory group of six Athapaskan elders, selected by their communities because of their long-term interest in passing on oral tradition. Two themes were stated and restated by elders. First, they stressed the continuing importance of words. Oral tradition does not simply tell us about the past, they said; it continues to provide guidelines for the present and it lays a foundation for thinking about the future. Second, they stressed the continuing importance of things: the visible material heritage that is steadily disappearing over time. They spoke of the traps and snares which can be used to demonstrate hunting strategies and principles, and of the ceremonial clothing, the decorated tools, the concrete examples they need to teach what they know. Both words and things, they would say, have an ongoing role in reproducing an understanding of the past. It seems to me that the concerns they raise have less to do with positivistic concerns about 'truth value' and 'facts' than with an understanding of how 'truth' gets constructed in the first place.

In the remaining pages, I am trying to identify some topics for discussion by doing four things. The paper will:

1. provide a summary/overview of how oral traditions have been analyzed in other times and places. Since this is a history workshop, I will restrict my summary to analyses of oral tradition that look at construction of history, setting aside for now the rich literature on narrative performance.
2. provide some cross-cultural perspective on how oral traditions are used by the people who see them as vital to their own heritage, drawing on examples from Africa, the Philippines, New Zealand, northwestern British Columbia, and contemporary western Europe.
3. outline for the workshop the dilemma I see for analysis and the ethnographic instruction that emerges from all this: what do these ongoing debates have to say that might be of value to our discussions here and ultimately to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples?

II

Approaches to Analysis of Oral Tradition: A brief historical overview

The reason for presenting this very brief historical overview is not just an academic convention: it's to show that even though many of these questions are old, they keep reappearing and the same kinds of answers keep being reinvented.

It seems fair to say that storytelling is probably one of the oldest of the arts. We know that every culture on earth has passed essential ideas from one generation to another by word of mouth. Because oral tradition has been so central to human history, the scholarly literature on the subject is vast and spans more than a century. While it is impossible to summarize that literature in a few pages, it is worth identifying some key ideas from different historical periods because similar arguments are resurfacing now, sometimes a century later.

(a) In the nineteenth century, European folklorists saw oral traditions very much as 'things' to be collected - rather like objects of material culture. They viewed oral narratives as cultural artifacts which had survived from earlier periods of human history - as a kind of "freeze-dried" history - and hoped that these traditions might provide a key to the past. Embedded in an ideology of social evolution, this perspective had serious flaws. At best, nineteenth century folklorists like E.B. Tylor and Sir James Frazer recognized the intellectual character of oral narrative, albeit treating it as kind of proto-science or

proto-religion. At worst, they embodied a crypto-racist analysis of so-called 'primitive thought'.

It is worth drawing attention to these since both the 'intellectualist' position and the 'spiritualist' position are resurfacing so starkly in contemporary debates where the state becomes involved in evaluating oral tradition. For example, a variation on the 'intellectualist' position recently surfaced in a B.C. Supreme Court decision which evaluated oral traditions in terms of how well they answer questions posed by the courts (McEachern 1991; see also B.C. Studies 1992). The latter more often occurs where non-indigenous interest groups with 'politically correct' intentions appropriate indigenous traditions, claiming to find in them evidence of primitive spirituality or primitive ecology (see Fienup Riordan 1990 for a critique of this and Wenzel for a discussion of how these images, once established, may ultimately be used against Aboriginal people). In both 'intellectualist' and 'spiritualist' formulations, indigenous traditions are seen to provide answers to problems created by modern states in romantic terms convenient for modern states.

(b) If the nineteenth analyses ignored the social character of narrative, a subsequent generation of scholars showed much more concern for the social context in which oral tradition occurs. They were more interested in what oral narrative said about the present than in what it said about the past. Durkheim, for example, saw narrative as the glue that (with ritual) helped to hold communities together. Malinowski, immersed in Trobriand society, pointed out that one can only speculate about what oral tradition means, and that the more legitimate question was to observe how it is used. To legitimate social institutions, he argued, people need a charter. The rules that govern everyday life are always in doubt. Daily life is fraught with inconsistencies, differences of opinion, and conflicting claims. Oral tradition provides one way to resolve those claims. People reflect on their oral traditions to make sense of the social order that currently exists. Again, these perspectives continue to be part of contemporary discussion. They are rephrased in the current anthropological formulation that meaning is not fixed - that it must be studied in practice.

(c) More recently, structuralists have countered that oral narratives are not necessarily related either to past or to present, that they are statements about the human mind. Levi-Strauss and others take the position that far from being simple positivistic explanations, oral traditions show the capacity of humans to use think symbolically about complex problems. Real life is full of contradictions. Narrative gives us ways to cope with a world riddled with contradiction. What you see on the surface of myth is not the 'real thing'. Reality lies at a deeper level of

understanding. Rather than being clear-cut reflections of society, oral narratives may very well invert actual social behavior, because the purpose of narrative is to resolve symbolically those issues that cannot necessarily be worked out in the sphere of human activity.

Oral narrative, then, has been analyzed both as evidence about the past and as evidence about the social construction of the present. Despite their individual shortcomings, the cumulative strength of these analyses is the evolving recognition that oral tradition anchors the present in the past, and that this is especially important in societies where rules governing family and descent play an important role in social relations, social organization and social history.

(d) Another relevant framework for analysis links oral tradition with political movements. Comparing the development of folklore studies in Germany, Great Britain and China, Linke (1990) suggests that reification of oral traditions can be historically linked with two distinct political movements, illustrating two basic principles by which knowledge of local peoples has been appropriated to become an integral part of the political sphere. On one hand, interest in oral tradition emerges from romantic nationalism - attempts to reconstruct or reconstitute a lost or vanishing cultural heritage in order to unify a population. On the other - the flip side - this interest can be appropriated as a tool of the state to foster administrative governance, and to extend political control.

In Germany, for example, romantic nationalism began as a revolutionary force aimed at forging unity among disparate German states. Nineteenth century folklorists identified 'relics' of ancient tradition and posited these as a common, lost, poetic repository of heritage. As an administrative network was set in place during the following century, the goals of folklore research shifted to emphasize the importance of local knowledge in social administration. Gradually, attention to oral tradition was converted into a technique of population management and political control, enacted through the Prussian state and culminating in the rise of German fascism (pp. 119-35).

In Scotland, similarly, a romantic quest for folk traditions was inspired by nationalist sentiments, the desire for regional self-government, and the threat of foreign (English) domination, but it never developed in the direction of population management or social reconstruction. It began and remained located in attempts to transform rural imagery from that of "superstitious backward peasantry" to that of law-abiding, industrious citizens, "attuned to civil life and glowing with natural morality" (Linke 138). In this instance, then, folklore became an ideological tool for

obtaining political autonomy from England (ibid 136-39; see also Chapman 1978).

A third example comes from China where folklore as a field of study was introduced in 1918. It began, during a period of political instability and change, as an ideological tool for legitimating popular rebellion and destroying the imperial state. In other words, it combined a romantic idealization of peasant life (like the Scots) with political pragmatism aimed at reordering society (like the Germans). In China, though, the romantic and pragmatic trends competed, with romantic idealists selectively retrieving traditions thought worthy of emulation and political pragmatists investigating those traditions they thought should be swept away (Linke 141). Ultimately, both forms of political discourse were suppressed by the state: romantic folklorists were seen as encouraging 'irrational beliefs of the past'; pragmatic folklorists were seen as emphasizing local differences in Chinese culture. Both were viewed as a threat to national unity (Linke 139-42).

Examples from Germany, Scotland and China are relevant because they suggest links between oral tradition and nation-building, and underscore the slippery divide between nationalist ideology and bureaucratic pragmatism.

III

Contemporary Approaches to Analysis of Oral Tradition: How is Oral Tradition Used?

(a) Oral Tradition, Science and History as Narrative Constructions:

Each of us involved in this workshop constructs our understanding of Canada's past by drawing on different sets of narratives - probably some told by scientists, some by historians, some in literature, some by First Nations whose oral traditions address similar questions. Oral tradition, science and history share certain similarities, but they are also characterized by certain differences. Historically, in scholarly writing, western systems of knowledge have claimed a privileged position and oral traditions have been evaluated against that backdrop. For our purposes here, it is critical to draw the distinction without putting these traditions on different planes, because as soon as we do that we inevitably bias the discussion in favour of positivistic 'truth'. This is particularly likely when oral tradition becomes of interest to the state, as seems likely in the 1990s.

Oral tradition, science and history are all organized systems of knowledge based on close observation of 'evidence'. These systems of knowledge all take many years

to learn and they are all perpetually open-ended and incomplete. Narratives told by elders and those told by scientists, historians, and in literature have developed differently and depend on different sources, but they all attempt to interpret how things came to be the way they are. Different interpretations of the past give us a sense of the richness of human history, but the explanations cannot be compared easily, nor can they necessarily be evaluated in positivistic terms for evidence of 'accuracy' or 'truth value.' Any narrative representation of the past presenting itself to us as 'history' invokes a social system.

Oral tradition has particular goals, methods and questions, but they differ from those of European science and history. Beginning with different questions, oral tradition, science and history provide us with different but equally valuable ways of understanding relationships among environment, animals and humans. Because translation is such an imperfect process, it may be that cultural outsiders can best begin by trying to understand the questions raised by oral tradition rather than trying to extract easy answers or 'facts' from it. eg. how do we know what we know? what kinds of 'evidence' do we use? What is 'evidence' anyway?

Oral and scientific traditions develop in different cultural contexts. But they are also passed on in different ways. Oral traditions survive by repeated retellings; each narrative contains more than one message. The listener is part of the event too, and is expected to think about and interpret messages in the story. Knowledge is passed on in a social relationship. A good listener brings life experience to the story each time she or he hears it and learns different things each time. Oral tradition is like a prism that grows richer as we improve our ability to view it from a variety of angles. It does not spell out everything a listener needs to know, but rather makes the listener think about ordinary experiences in new ways.

Scientific information is usually circulated in written form - in journals and books. Once accounts are written down, they can be stored unchanged. Unless they are physically destroyed, they can be reread, inspected by anyone who goes to a library to read them. Scientific accounts are always open to further tests and different interpretations by other scientists who may carry research in new directions. But in fact, when a complex experiment is checked and published, it is not often duplicated. The results alone are retained.

While those of us here may all be committed to rethinking First Nations history, it is the case that Native American's views of their own history rarely appear in mainstream literature. Again, this may be a function of the questions being asked: The question for historical research

often remains, "what really happened?" The question raised by First Nations is more likely to be "how do Aboriginal people legitimate their voices in these debates?" [1] The few studies that do investigate indigenous concepts of history (cf. Turner 1988, Fogelson 1989, Kan 1991) demonstrate that the past can be used to make sense of the present, to justify and explain the current predicaments of indigenous people in North America; that this discourse has developed in the context of a dialogue with Euro-American ideologies, like Christianity and may incorporate and internalize such concepts (Friedman 1992); and that these are attempts by indigenous peoples to defend their past against efforts of Europeans to impose their own discourses (Kan 1991). The formulations worked out in this process, in turn, are passed on to subsequent generations as agreed-upon history. In other words, just as Malinowski stated 60 years ago, people rethink and reinterpret their historical experience with reference to familiar narratives, and those narratives in turn provide a framework for rethinking that experience. The issue is less one of lining up 'oral' and documentary evidence from the past than of paying close attention to indigenous versions in order to reach a more complete understanding of past and present experiences of Aboriginal Canadians.

(b) Comparative Perspectives:

Currently, indigenous communities throughout the world are demanding that their oral traditions be taken seriously as legitimate perspectives on history. The issue for many indigenous people centres on who controls the images, the representations of their lives portrayed both to themselves and to the larger world. If one of our objectives in this workshop is to come up with generally valid themes about how oral history is currently being used, we should look as broadly as possible, not just within North America. Introducing selected examples from a variety of cross-cultural perspectives - Africa, New Zealand, Philippines northwestern Canada and contemporary Europe - may illustrate how oral tradition is entering into formulations about cultural identity.

(i) Writing from Africa, David Cohen notes that since the period of decolonization in the 1920s, there has been an energetic production of written oral histories in Busoga, Uganda. The process of actually recording those histories took place at a critical point in time, coinciding with a

1. For example, at a workshop on the History of Aboriginal History in Canada sponsored by Parks Canada in Ottawa January 21-22 1993, Aboriginal people spent two days essentially reformulating the questions posed at the outset by historians.

period of shifting power and political ferment during which colonial powers were leaving and certain clans were anxious to elevate their own position vis a vis other clans. Consequently, clans with the resources to record their own genealogies and related histories did so, and the opportunities created for young people to work with elders created a revolution in historical consciousness. As written clan histories were accorded considerable status, they gradually assumed the character of 'official history' even though they marginalized other less powerful clans (Cohen 1989).

More interesting than these 'official histories', though, are the reactions of the people whose histories were marginalized by this process. They never accepted that the recorded accounts represented their interests, nor did the written versions assume any particular authority in their eyes. For less powerful clans, oral tradition remains viable, active, debated, discussed, and revised in daily activities, gesture and speech, "not simply given or handed down but...continuously and actively gathered and dissected" (p. 10). We must be careful not to invent a reified definition of oral tradition, Cohen says, because it will inevitably favour particular classes or clans whose traditions most closely approximate the definition (see also Sahllins 1985). The more examples of oral tradition one encounters, the harder it is to formulate a useful definition.

If we look at how oral tradition is used in practice, we come to see that for the majority of people it is not a set of formal texts: it's a living, vital part of life. "Knowledge of the past is not the dead and dying survivals of a past oral culture handed down through narrow conduits from generation to generation..." (p. 12)...it is related to the critical intelligence and active deployment of knowledge. Furthermore, it includes everyone. People will always acknowledge that some elders know or remember more than others, just as they will acknowledge that written versions of oral accounts are valuable. But neither knowledgeable elders nor written texts close off the circulation of historical knowledge in the communities.

(ii) Renato Rosaldo, working in a very different part of the world - the Philippines - has come to similar conclusions. In his work with Ilongot people, he set out to reconstruct their history from the mid 1880s to the present using oral sources. Juxtaposing Ilongot oral narrative with western academic narrative, he shows how our expectations about what oral tradition 'is' actually hamper our ability to hear it. For example, when he asked people to talk about the Japanese invasion during World War II, expecting to hear personal narrative, they people responded with long lists of place

names, and as they spoke, they wept. Transcribing these names in uncomprehending discomfort he had no idea what they were talking about at the time and only later began to understand how these names anchored tremendously important personal experiences to place.

The problem with reified definitions of oral tradition', he says, is that it mistakenly equates spoken testimonies with written records. If oral traditions are compared with written documents we stumble into the standard trap of evaluating their "accuracy" in positivistic terms, and missing the real issue of how they are used in practice. The metaphor underlying the document paradigm is that of the "undistorted narrative transmitted through a conduit" (Rosaldo 89) and leads to the same error as that made by early folklorists - a search for 'original' or 'more authentic' accounts. This, he says is to entirely miss the point of what oral tradition actually does.

Rosaldo, like Cohen, looks at how people use oral tradition. Oral traditions, he says, are texts to be heard as they are told in a particular context, not documents to be stored for later retrieval. They are cultural forms that organize perception, not 'containers of brute facts' because all facts are culturally mediated. In his own work with Ilongot people, he came to see that oral tradition is mapped on landscape much as westerners might use a calendar. Events are anchored to place. People use locations in space to talk about events in time.

Rosaldo's ethnographic advice is straightforward: study the text. Don't look through or around or behind it. What people say is intimately involved with how they say it. To plunder other peoples' narratives for 'veracity' risks seriously misunderstanding their meanings (Rosaldo 1980:92). Furthermore, meanings are not fixed. They need to be studied in practice. Oral traditions can't be stored with the idea that their meanings can be determined retrospectively.

(iii) Historian Judith Binney suggests that in New Zealand the classic divide between colonizer/colonized history is clearly articulated in historical reconstruction. Written and oral narratives all share certain characteristics: all are structured, interpretive, combative, and subjective as well as objective. "History," she says, "is the shaping of the past by those who live in the present. All histories derive from a particular time, a particular place and a particular cultural heritage" (Binney 1987:16).

Frequently, historians question the 'reliability' of oral histories suggesting that because they may change over time, they pose problems for historians trying to assess their 'factual' content. Binney reverses this formula: a

good western Eurohistory, she says, has a lifespan of about 10 - 15 years and then it gets reinterpreted; in contrast, the life of an oral history is considerably longer. While the details, participants and symbols in an oral account may change, its purpose, like that of written history, is to allow people to see the past and present in new ways.

Maori oral histories and Pakeha written texts are passed on in different ways and they have different purposes. Maori history is conveyed by narrative, song and proverb to listeners. It's concerns are with family and genealogy. It's purpose is to establish meaning for events and to validate family claims to power and knowledge. Pakeha history is conveyed in writing to readers. It is inscribed as a political narrative whose purpose is to erase other interpretations. It's notions of causality and consequence are every bit as cultural as are Maori concerns; they are just different. The challenge for the western historian is to understand that Maori oral history is not merely another source of information or even of perception (p 27). It has its own purposes and the primary responsibility of the historian is to ascertain those purposes and to be responsible to them. Writing in 1987, her conclusion is that the contradictions in what constitutes history - oral and written - cannot be resolved. The narratives can be juxtaposed, she says, but not necessarily reconciled into any seamless whole (p. 27-28).

(iv) Northwestern British Columbia

An example from northern British Columbia, familiar to most of you here, gives a hint of what happens when the state attempts to codify oral tradition. In the late 1980s, the hereditary chiefs of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en made the decision to present their land claims case before the British Columbia Supreme Court. In this instance, the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en took the enormous risk of trying to state their relationship to land on their own terms, from their own perspective, using longstanding traditions as a medium for presenting their case to the court. They publicly enacted narratives that have usually been performed only within a community context. The chiefs treated this public forum as an opportunity to present their case, but also to control the representations of their culture both to the outside world and to their own communities. They presented their oral traditions as complex symbolic statements linking narrative, song and dance. The court evaluated them in terms of 'literal truth'. And their challenge (though still under appeal) was unsuccessful (McEachern 1991).

Because the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en were making their arguments in a court of law which has institutionalized procedures for resolving conflicts, the thrust of their legal argument was necessarily framed to match the

requirements of the court. Their assertions were (a) that they, the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, lived in organized societies in this region before contact with Europeans; (b) that they continue to live in organized societies, with specific reference to House and Clan; and (c) that the linkage between past and present social organization can be demonstrated through oral traditions (see McEachern:45). They further contended that oral tradition was a Declaration of Title to the land and went on to specify how their oral traditions demonstrate that title (ibid.).

They illustrated this with reference to two particular kinds of oral history - the Gitksan *adaawk* (sacred reminiscences about ancestors, histories and territories central to the social organization of Gitksan Houses) and the Wet'suwet'en *kungax* (songs about trails between territories central to Wet'suwet'en Houses).

The Statement of Claim made to the court asserts that the expressions of ownership of land come through the *adaawk*, *kungax*, songs and ceremonial regalia; that the confirmation of ownership comes through the totem poles erected to give those expressions a material base; and that the assertion of ownership of specific territories is made to the court through specific claims. In other words, there exists a complex relationship linking history, the performance of *adaawk* and *kungax*, and the land.

They also tried to impress on the court their understanding of the symbolic important of oral tradition. Minimally, they said, oral traditions provide evidence for scholars like archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists and historians who are studying the past. But, they continued, oral traditions are far more than literal history and the case before the Supreme Court did not depend merely upon the literal accuracy of these histories to establish connections between social organization and land tenure (McEachern: 45).

For a variety of reasons discussed elsewhere (see B.C. Studies, 1992) the judge rejected the assertions of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en about the concepts embodied in oral tradition. Despite the cautionary note of the appellants that the court should not evaluate the oral traditions against a positivistic definition of 'truth', it was precisely for this reason that the judge rejected them as evidence.[2] Here we have a powerful example of an attempt to legitimate 'voice'. Yet the inescapable lesson seems to be that removing oral tradition from a context where it has self-evident power and performing it in a context where it

2. In his Reasons for Judgment, Judge McEachern noted: "I am unable to accept *adaawk*, *kungax* and oral traditions as reliable bases for detailed history but they could confirm findings based on other admissible evidence" (McEachern 75).

is opened to evaluation by the state poses enormous problems for serious treatment of the historical value of oral tradition.

(e) A final example from a very different cultural context takes us back to Linke's comparison of German, Scottish and Chinese folklore studies. Paradoxically, nationalist aspirations based on ethnicity are reemerging as a powerful force in contemporary world politics (Badone 1992; Hobsbawm 1990). These movements tend to be phrased in terms of 'authentic identity' and that identity is often reformulated in terms of ethnic roots and connection with the past. Oral tradition and material culture play a significant part in such movements; folklore, in particular, has long been regarded as a privileged domain for discovery of the collective spirit of a people. As noted earlier in this paper, throughout the 18th and 19th century, folklorists and others collected and published texts that enabled literate classes to see themselves rooted in the past and to see languages as personal property of specific groups. This was - and once again continues to be - the case particularly in Finland, Scandinavia, Greece, Turkey and Eastern Europe (see Herzfeld etc.).

European examples are important to keep in view for comparative purposes to remind us that scholarship in oral tradition/folklore studies has always been linked to political struggles.

IV

Ethnographic Instruction: Where does this lead us?

The issue for Aboriginal people in Canada is clearly one of how to claim a legitimate voice in debates about historical representation. Oral tradition plays a critical role in this debate when it is invoked by Aboriginal people (both as process and a product) to underscore the position that what people say about their lives has to be taken seriously rather than as an illustration of some other process. If we accept that oral tradition refers to the ways in which people use the traditional dimension of culture to talk about the past and present, we can see that its contribution comes not through alternative "facts" or even alternative interpretation of those "facts" but through contesting some of the conventional premises of mainstream historical writing. For instance, who identifies the 'events' threaded together in historical writing? How is the meaning of 'place' constituted?

The point of outlining examples from different parts of the world and different periods of history is to see whether individually or collectively they provide some ethnographic

instruction for our discussions in Canada. To summarize some of the central points emerging from the comparison, I would suggest the following:

1. Definitions of oral tradition have methodological implications. Once definitions are formalized, reified, tied down, they have real consequences. Examples from Africa, the Philippines and elsewhere remind us that defining oral tradition too narrowly restricts our discussion. Oral tradition cannot be reified and "collected" like so many butterflies. Oral tradition has its own purposes which may differ strikingly from the purposes of western history. Oral traditions are not like archival documents: they are more like fully developed narrative constructions of the past. Their purpose is to give meaning to events. We have to listen to what people are actually saying with clear questions in mind, not simply record oral tradition as an end in itself.

Living oral tradition emerges around contentious issues - around contradictions. It cannot be encapsulated or "fixed" in an archival document for later reference because one role of oral tradition is to challenge conventional thought. Oral traditions can't be plundered for 'facts', because 'facts' are all culturally mediated in the first place. Furthermore, meanings are not fixed and must be studied in practice. Oral traditions are texts to be heard. They can't be objectified and stored with the idea that their meanings can be determined retrospectively.

2. Oral tradition anchors history to place. But it also challenges our notion of what 'place' is. We are willing enough to see 'time' as a problematic category, but too often the meaning of 'place' is taken to be self-evident. Place is often viewed simply as a location. It is where people do things, a setting for action, a stage on which things happen (Rodman 1992:643). It is "just space." Yukon elders give a very different picture of landscape. They tell how a particular place came to be, the events that happened there in the distant past when animals and humans could still talk with one another, the unique experiences they have had there in their own lifetimes. They locate a place by means of a narrative or story, and that story may flow into other stories like a trail or a stream (Cruikshank 1990a). Rosaldo's discussion of the way in which Ilongot people in the Philippines use named places to map historical events reminds us of the importance of place in oral tradition. So does the Wet'suwet'en definition of *kungax*, the 'songs about trails between territories'. Perhaps some of these questions can be addressed in our discussion of mapping.

3. If oral tradition challenges conventional ideas about place, it also challenges historical notions of event.

Often, the term 'event' is used to refer to a discrete bounded, incident and oral tradition is viewed as a way of learning an alternative interpretation of some event defined by the historian (see Fogelson 1989). Yet oral tradition frequently provides a sense that words are primary and events secondary, that events give meaning to words rather than acting as points of reference for words.

Oral tradition has its own purposes which may differ from those of western history. As the examples from Africa and New Zealand illustrate (and as I can discuss with reference to oral traditions surrounding the Klondike goldrush [Cruikshank 1989, 1992]), intersections between narratives looking for linear causality and narratives attempting to legitimate and validate family's claims to knowledge do not necessarily intersect. If oral tradition has any place outside the community context in which it originates, it is surely to require us to re-examine the culturally specific concepts like the meaning of 'event', and the relationship of events to the words in which they are conveyed.

4. A fundamental dilemma emerges from all these examples.

Increasingly, social historians understand that histories are interpretations that change in relation to changing circumstances. However, this ideology coexists with a competing notion of history as "just the facts." It seems ironic that just at the time when indigenous people are mastering the grammar of mainstream history, social historians and others appear to be embracing relativism. Significantly, historical relativism gets invoked more frequently for Aboriginal history/ Afro-American history/ women's history, than for mainstream history, so that the formulation all too often becomes something like, Aboriginal/Maori/women's history is a narrative; Euro-Canadian mainstream history is presented as "just the facts".

When the oppositions are formulated in this way, relativism actually reinforces the legitimacy of mainstream history by making it appear the 'more real' or 'more truthful' of the narratives. (see Gable, Handler and Lawson 1992 for a discussion of this). Furthermore, it allows us to continue to interpret unfamiliar narratives in terms of familiar theoretical frameworks. This kind of discourse can become a further form of disempowerment by reducing some (but not all) cultural representations to artificial "reinventions".

If there are lessons here, they are surely about power and domination rather than about the cultural relativity of texts. While many scholars have abandoned the search for

privileged versions of the past, the implication of examining alternative versions leads to conclusions quite the opposite of relativism. Any narrative representation of reality presenting itself to us as history invokes a social system. Historical narratives are fundamentally combative: western narratives are about expansion of the state; from oral tradition we more often get stories of resilience and the maintenance or reassertion of cultural autonomy.

For our purposes, a critical issue is to look at how understanding of 'event', 'fact', 'experience' is mediated by social and historical circumstances. The narrative structures shaping academic discourse should also be kept clearly in mind. Perhaps our most useful contribution to discussion of oral tradition would be to turn critical attention to the symbolic and structural nature of scholarly accounts and a closer investigation of social processes in which all narrative accounts - including science and history - are embedded.

5. We should be cautious about attempts to codify oral tradition - to conceptually articulate within a western framework that which is conceptually embedded in non-western systems. Examples of codification arising from nationalist movements in Europe or Asia, or from the experience of Aboriginal people in the North American courts show how complicated this is. Different though the outcomes are, they show that codification of one system in terms of another leads to systematic hegemony of the encompassing narrative (Merry 1992).

Nevertheless, oral tradition is more resilient than codified law. Once efforts are made to codify 'customary law' - oral tradition will pose challenges to that codification. Current controversy surrounding the South Island Justice Institute on Vancouver Island shows that codification of indigenous concepts is not simple. Oral tradition is more like an intellectual tool than like a set of fixed texts (cf. Messick, Cohen).

6. The major difficulty for Aboriginal people claiming a right to be heard in history, in the courts, in government institutions lies in presenting their arguments in a manner that convincingly demonstrates alternative ways of viewing a complex problem. Oral tradition seems particularly capable of contributing to this debate through its formulation of a counterdiscourse.

Scholarly analyses of oral tradition are framed with reference to a longstanding western tradition based on a century of comparative study - anthropology, folklore, literary studies, history. In these formulations, the boundaries between written and oral traditions used to seem

clearly drawn. The models were neat, and oral narratives were usually presented as illustrations of some 'other' process.

Aboriginal peoples' insistence - internationally - that their traditions must be granted legitimacy has made such scholarly distinctions more problematic. It is now much clearer that any precise distinction between science and history, on one hand, and oral tradition/mythology on the other is problematic. Even though they derive from distinct intellectual traditions, both are systems of cultural production involving the exchange of ideas and both may be equally ideological. As long as we put the two models on different planes, we inevitably privilege one over the other.

An alternative model (which is certainly not new, but is less often used) would have us stop trying to fit 'data' into pre-existing models and instead look at oral traditions as fully developed narrative constructions rather than as 'evidence' for other theories. The ethnographic instruction here would be 'pay attention to the words: don't look behind them or around them or through them.' In this formulation, oral narratives are not illustrations of some other process, they provide us with alternative theories about how their tellers construct, formulate and constitute meaning. They provide us with alternative ways of formulating connections between past ideas and present understandings.

It seems to me that there is an important role for critical analysis, though, particularly as discussion of oral tradition moves into the sphere of popular debate. As soon as discussion moves in the direction of 'usefulness of oral tradition', it can become subject to a variety of agendas, as we have seen repeatedly in the history of nationalism. The fact that government sponsored workshops on indigenous knowledge are presently occurring all across Canada raises cautionary notes about where this is all heading.

In conclusion, this paper raises, but does not resolve, issues we may wish to continue in our discussions here. I anticipate that these issues will overlap with others raised in our discussion on mapping and film.

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