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Origin Stories

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 embraces an inclusive ethnohistorical approach to understanding the historical and archaeological record of Indigenous ecology and origins. This approach incorporates the voice of Indigenous Peoples through an examination of four origin stories from each of the four cardinal directions: east, south, west and north. Concepts of Indigenous ecology are rooted in place and expressed through stories. These stories reflect the voices of the people themselves and offer new insights about the ways in which different nations place their beginnings. In some instances, the people are born of the immediate environment and function of plant or animal beings, while in other stories the people come about through a migration or a celestial event. While the epistemological significance of the oral tradition is made evident through these stories, they demonstrate more than just ontological perspectives; there are also lessons about the ways in which that knowledge is transmitted to future generations.

The four origin stories in this chapter illustrate four particular aspects of meaning, therefore helping to demonstrate the richness and diversity of Indigenous cultures in Canada. In the Glooscap origin story from the east, there are reminders about the importance of natural resources as well as the importance of teaching. The Inuit story featuring Sedna, while focusing on natural resources as well, also highlights the vagaries of nature, the Inuit sense of time, and the importance of history studied over long periods of time. The story from the south features what might be thought of as a lowly white sucker fish; however, the oral tradition of the Ojibwa reveals the important role the white sucker plays in the renewal process of the Great Lakes. Therefore, this story provides a lesson about how an origin story can help a listener from today to understand something that was not explained in the documentary record. In the Haida story from the west, the trickster-transformer role of Raven represents an imperfect creator with human qualities; this story provides lessons about the difficulties of an uncertain world, which is also one of the more universal themes from Indigenous stories overall. This theme is prevalent in the more common Turtle Island stories, and often features a flood. Another more universal theme is that of the western movement of people as they settled on the land.

Various aspects of these stories also complement current ethnohistorical accounts, and emerging evidence continues to build on what we know. The current record does not contradict the main explanations for Indigenous origins exemplified in this chapter. These include an American genesis, and the arrival of peoples from elsewhere, including by water and a land bridge that connected Asia and North America during the late Pleistocene age. Thus, this first chapter asks readers to be open to reconsidering dominant historical narratives regarding First Peoples in the Americas. Readers can

subsequently approach academic inquiry with a critical mind that makes history open to further study through various academic approaches.

Learning Objectives

- To understand the significance of the oral tradition in learning about the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada
- To understand the benefits of an inclusive ethnohistorical approach versus an exclusive documents-based approach
- To recognize the diversity of societies and cultures present in the Americas at the time of contact
- To recognize the manner by which ethnohistorical evidence corroborates the origin stories of Indigenous Peoples in terms of explaining their existence in the Americas.

Key Terms, Figures or Sites

Beringia: The name scientists have given to the land bridge that spanned the Bering Strait between what are now Asia and North America during the Wisconsin glaciation (last Ice Age). (p. 17)

Ethnohistory: The cross-disciplinary study of history that incorporates the findings and methodologies of disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, folklore and oral history, and linguistics. (p. 2)

Johnston, Basil (1929-2015): Recognized for his significant contributions to the preservation of Indigenous Peoples' past, he published several books that preserved Anishinaabek stories that might have otherwise been lost. Some of his most important works include *Ojibway Ceremonies; Ojibway Heritage; By Canoe and Moccasin: Some Native Place Names of the Great Lakes;* and *The Manitous: The Spirit World of the Ojibway*. (p. 6)

Trickster-transformer: A common character in the tales of many Indigenous cultures, such as Old Man Coyote in Siksika tradition, who tricks others into doing his bidding for his benefit and to the detriment of the one who has been tricked. The character is also, as with Raven in the Haida tradition, sometimes responsible for the transformation/creation of the natural world. Often, by breaking social norms or upsetting the balance of the natural world, the trickster tale reaffirms the values of the group and the need for community. (p. 12)

Study Questions

1. What is ethnohistory?
2. What is the significance of the four cardinal directions?
3. What is the ontological significance of origin stories?
4. Why does the expression “*traduttore, traditore*” apply to the translation of these stories into English?

5. Name two key elements of Mi'kmaq worldview that can be gleaned through the Glooscap story.
6. Why is Basil Johnston's work considered so important to the preservation of Indigenous Peoples' past?
7. What important aspect of Odaawa worldview does the story of the white sucker reveal?
8. Why might the raven have been a popular symbol in several cultural stories or mythology?
9. What is the lesson to be understood by the existence of an 'imperfect creator' as exemplified by the raven?
10. What two more universal ideas from the origin stories transcend the general differences among them overall?
11. How does the ethnohistorical record now better support some of the explanations in Indigenous origin stories which explain their existence in the Americas?

Essay Questions

1. How is the importance of the oral tradition, as it applies to the history of Indigenous Peoples, demonstrated through the origin stories shared in this chapter?

One of the best ways to understand a culture is through its stories (p. 3). By examining both the unique and more universal aspects of these stories, we can learn about how Indigenous Peoples understood the world around them, how they built relationship with the land and resources, and the ways in which they identified the necessities of life (p. 3). We are also able to gain some understanding of how their worldview was passed on from one generation to the next.

As corroborated by the ethnohistorical record, these stories also help to document the physical history and origins of Indigenous Peoples (p. 16).

2. Describe the roles and functions of these stories in Indigenous societies.

Origin stories help cultures to make sense of the world around them and relationship with it (p. 3). These stories teach lessons about the world and its necessities (p. 3). In addition to hearing lessons within the stories, listeners also learn about how that knowledge is transmitted. They also served the purpose of entertaining and amusing their listeners (p. 4).

Additional Resources

Further Readings

Augustine, Stephen, *Mi'kmaq Teaching Elder*. "Four Directions Teachings."
<http://www.fourdirectionsteachings.com/transcripts/mikmaq.html>

Crowshoe, Dr Reg, and Geoff Crow Eagle, *Piikani Blackfoot Teaching Elders*. "Four Directions Teachings."
<http://www.fourdirectionsteachings.com/transcripts/blackfoot.html>

Deloria, Vine Jr. *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1997.

Ellis, C. Douglas, ed. *Cree Legends and Narratives from the West Coast of James Bay*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1995.

Fiedel, Stuart. "The Peopling of the New World: Present Evidence, New Theories, and Future Directions." *Journal of Archeological Research* 8, no.1 (2000): 39-103.

Heyerdahl, Thor. *Early Man and the Ocean: A Search for the Beginnings of Navigation and Seaborne Civilizations*. New York: Vintage Books, 1980.

McClellan, Catharine. *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of the Yukon Indians*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1987.

McGhee, Robert. *Canadian Arctic Prehistory*. Toronto: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1978.

Sassaman, Kenneth E., and Donald H. Holly, eds. *Hunter-Gatherer Archaeology as Historical Process*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2013.

Shutler, Richard, ed. *Early Man in the New World*. Beverly Hills, CA.: Sage, 1983.

Websites

Canadian Museum of History – Creation Stories: First Peoples>An Aboriginal Presence>Our Origins> Wealth of Stories

- <http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/aborig/fp/fpz2f02e.shtml>

Hillary Mayell, National Geographic News – Did First Americans Arrive by Land and Sea?

- http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/11/1106_031106_firstamericans.html

Ondondaga Historical Association – "The Creation Story."

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSzDM7Jmg94>

Stan Wesley, stanwesley.ca – "The Creation Story" as told by Norman Wesley

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qn0zJ1QH2Zc>