

## **Storytelling and ecological management: understanding kinship and complexity**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores examples of the ways that indigenous and traditional stories are tools to guide humans through complex interactions with ecosystems and to remember our shared fate with the land. Traditional stories are not mere superstition or poor substitutes for scientific thinking; they are made up of extremely complex, finely coded information on human subsistence and infused with elements that ensure they continue to be told and remembered

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On the surface, sitting around listening to stories may not seem like a remedy for global ecological crisis. However, in indigenous cultures all around the world, stories help people gain complex understanding of Nature. Traditional stories also help indigenous people remember the ways that their lives are linked to even large-scale long-term ecological cycles. Similar stories were part of the daily life of all families until only a few generations ago.

Over many thousands of years, indigenous people developed subsistence strategies that resulted in health and resilience for both people and the natural systems they lived within. Indigenous ‘traditions’ exist in a dynamic state, based on thousands of years of continuous use (Berkes, 2008). Globally, indigenous people have come to identify with their lands as an extension of themselves, and as family (Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, 2012). This ancient approach to ecological values, based on empathy and communicated through narrative oral tradition, indicates a parallel between social and ecological relationships. Because humans are animals, our social systems are in fact a subset of ecological systems. In the world of traditional myths, the land is a person, an elder, and an extension of the human body (Basso, 1996; Treverrow & Terverrow, 2001; Turner, 2005). Through traditional stories we learn that the *relationships* that people maintain with themselves and others can translate in a complex way into *actions* that regenerate or degrade the natural world.

In ethnographic research, examples abound of indigenous traditions that reflect a link between storytelling and culturally based resource management. The stories and beliefs I refer to here are cultural practices recorded by others, living things frozen in time and space. They are meant to be illustrative and to instill a sense of wonder and a rethinking of the role and possibility of human culture.

Empathy has been traded for efficiency in industrial societies, especially empathy for non-human entities. I believe empathy for places, plants and animals is a necessary social adaptation that helps groups of people receive the necessary feedback from their actions. The primary way traditional stories can teach empathy for the land is by transmitting a view of plants, animals, and elements of nature as being animate and alive with unique characters and preferences. This is often referred to as animism, although that word has had negative connotations in the past. Nancy Turner (2005), an ethnoecologist in Vancouver B.C. reinforces the conservation value of animist stories in her book *Natures Blanket*. “Only in the modern era,” Turner (2005) writes, “are humans unable actually to view the humanness in other life-forms” (p. 70). Indigenous subsistence and land management strategies did not just come from human innovation, but from the plants and animals themselves, and they were carried on through stories.

A common theme in traditional stories is remembering a time when all animals, plants and celestial bodies were like humans, and humans were more powerful and wise through closeness to nature. This is the time of the Transformers of Pacific Northwest coast traditional stories, as well as the Transformers of Australian Aboriginal culture, which were both giant people/animal beings that walked the landscape, creating the world as we know it (Turner, 2005; Bell, 2001). The San people of the Kalahari tell of a time when animals, plants, and celestial bodies all lived in a village together along with the people of the “ancient race” (Bleek & Lloyd, 1911). These stories of a lost intimacy

with animals and plants offers listeners a reason to respect the lives of other beings, and to strive to understand the wisdom embedded in the landscape.

Animism conveys empathy for animals and plants, and also the greater system that ties them all together. In Mongolia, traditional herders try to prioritize “Big Life” with everything that they do, so that all the “Little Lives” can continue (Rong, 2008). Western Apache people tell stories of changing woman, who gave birth to all the plants, animals, and people (Yraceburu, 2002). The Interior Salish people of British Columbia see the plants covering the soil as the blanket of the earth that if disturbed would result in the earth weeping, or becoming angry and making bad weather (Turner, 2005, p. 20).

The Salish view animals and plants as related to one another in family groups, just as humans see ourselves, and many of the relationships are based on ecological roles; a folk version of taxonomy that conveys a more holistic understanding of the ecosystem (Turner, 2005). The Salish people, and other indigenous groups, put humans in the network of kinship between plants and animals as well. This gives human actions an ecological context (Turner, 2005).

The understanding of kinship with nature is a large part of indigenous thought all over the world. To many traditional Mayan people, stories of an unwilling marriage between a beautiful nature deity and a human make people the in-laws of the natural world. Nature takes the place of a reluctant relative, who has family responsibilities nonetheless (Mazariegos, 2010). To the Mayans, this uncomfortable peace with nature must be carefully maintained through ritual, and remembered through stories (Prechtel, 2005). Mazariegos writes that, “The Mayan relationship of man to the earth and its bounty can be viewed as an affinal relationship, or rather, as a permanent state of being a suitor” (2010 p. 49). Through this story of a part of nature as an unwilling bride, the possibility of humans toppling the balance of nature is made relevant to everyday life, giving traditional Mayans a common awareness of what they take from nature to survive.

Australian Aboriginal people have a slightly different intimate relationship with the land, that of dual paternity between one’s father and a specific place. In Aboriginal culture, equally important to the human biological father is the place where the mother was standing when she first felt the baby move inside her. That place is seen as a spiritual father, and the child inherits responsibility for that place, along with the songs, stories and decision-making associated with it (Clark, 2009).

One of the more common ways that the sentient nature of the land is communicated through traditional stories is through the personalities of animals and plants, and the lessons and gifts they offer humans. Animals and plants can be revered and emulated, like wolves are in Mongolian tradition or salmon are in Pacific Northwest cultures. In that case, young people can model the togetherness of a pack of wolves, or the perseverance of salmon to support the next generation (Rong, 2004; Turner, 2005).

Animals can also be examples of bad behavior. This is often the trickster archetype, a rich character that exists in many storytelling traditions. The trickster is usually a vulgar, foolish, or morally ambiguous character. Often the trickster is also responsible for many gifts to humans. Among the diverse cultures of the Pacific Northwest, Raven is the most mischievous and wily. The raven is often a hero, credited with giving gifts to the people, like sunlight, salmon, and traditional weaving, plus many others. Alternately, Raven is sometimes the butt of jokes, being punished by other deities

for his antics. Often, Raven illustrates to people proper behavior in a story as an example of what not to do. The raven is common to the trickster archetype as a complicated character that advocates for humans, but also punishes them and other animals in favor of the greater community of living things (Wonders, 2008; Turner, 2005).

Mathias Guenther (2006) studied among the San people of the Kalahari Desert. He recorded the San trickster deity *Gauwa*, who is the subject of derision by the people listening to a story because of his bad behavior (Guenther, 2006). *Gauwa* is also the deity who is closest to humans, believed to be lurking just outside of the ring of firelight. *Gauwa* determines the success and difficulty of hunting, plant gathering, disease and healing, rites of passage, and death (Guenther, 2006). Stemming from this, both sides of the trickster god, according to Mathias Guenther (1999), work to “maintain the equilibrium between men and nature” (P.112). In this sense, *Guawa* is nature itself embodied in a complex god that can take on many forms, and who can be both male and female (Guenther, 1999).

Trickster deities allow people to wonder, being both villain and creator simultaneously. People can identify with a trickster character’s imperfections. By being both a mischief-maker and benefactor with the same action, trickster stories increase people’s capacity for paradox. Tricksters are a reminder of the constant change people must be prepared to endure. Raven, for example, is credited with the presence of important elements of the land like the sun, fresh water, and salmon (Reddish, 2011). But Raven most often steals, exchanges, or redistributes them, as the embodiment of the cycles of nature (Bringhurst, 2000).

Stories, art, and play likely serve a similar social function and evolutionary purpose (Boyd, 2009). The fact that people experience enjoyable feelings when listening to a story, due to the release of dopamine in the brain, suggest that our bodies have evolved an incentive for storytelling because it has helped us survive (Boyd, 2009). Just as play is the repetitive practice of a finely honed skill that people might need for a task like hunting, storytelling might be a repeating of the social information needed for subsistence.

Seeing elements of the landscape as sentient and as kin are evolutionary ideas that have developed to serve human culture in understanding nature for the span of our existence. Due to the universal structure of narrative and its ubiquitousness in all human cultures, it is likely a social information-sharing tactic that originated at the dawn of human evolution (Boyd, 2009). When we listen to stories with animal characters, we are not only being entertained, but we are experiencing the world through “mirror neurons” that fire in our brains as if we were experiencing the story firsthand (Boyd, 2009). Stories of an animate landscape allowed people throughout human evolution to hunt and gather in ways that did not permanently deplete the land. The lack of those stories has probably led in part to a lack of empathy for the land, and a lack of appreciation and understanding that our fate is tied to the fate of the natural world.

Gary Snyder, originally a poet of the Beat movement, writes about rediscovering the purpose of storytelling to advocate for the places that we value, and reconnect humanity with the landscape we depend on. He proposes a “post-human humanism” a theoretical bridge between ancient indigenous lifeways and people who are seeking to create something new out of the failures of modern industrial culture (1996, p. 127-8).

His reasoning is that civilization's influence on human evolution is minor compared to the evolutionary influence by non-literate hunter-gatherer activities. In his essay "The Politics of Ethnopoetics," Snyder groups poets, singers, and storytellers together under the umbrella of oral tradition, suggesting that the true and ancient work of a poet is to "sing the voice of the corn, the voice of the Pleiades, the voice of the bison, the voice of the antelope" (1996, p.143).

Snyder emphatically points out that we must not see indigenous stories as fading remnants of people of the past, but realize their application for today, allowing them to fulfill our sometimes destructive need for human accomplishment. He writes that learning about the worldviews and stories of "primitive" cultures is a way to "enrich our sense of human accomplishment without stealing anything from anybody," but that we must express gratitude and respect for teachings of ancient cultures by struggling with subsistence societies to prevent "rape of land and culture...they are disappearing, even as we praise their songs" (1996, p.147).

People continue to receive narrative in the form of books, films, television, radio, and news media. Media fits well into the common practice of private leisure time, but "as watchers, listeners, or readers, we have no or only very little influence on what the mass media have to offer" (Wienker-Piepho & Congress, 1990, p. 21). Berkes (2008) theorizes that the loss of the feedback that comes through oral culture may be one of the reasons behind the ecological ills of today.

Though the message may have fallen by the wayside along with the activity of extended family gathering to retell old stories, the fate of humans and the fate of the natural world are still inseparable. It may be that simply by taking time to participate in the simple human activity of sharing narratives through oral tradition, people might be helping to create a much needed cultural evolutionary shift.

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