

# 15 Elder Brother as theoretical framework

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Recently Indigenous Studies scholars have employed traditional stories as a means to assist them in gaining a better understanding of Indigenous people's perspectives of their historic and contemporary realities (e.g., Martin 2012; Doerfler et al. 2013). These authors demonstrate the central importance of Indigenous stories and therefore Indigenous knowledge to Indigenous Studies. What becomes apparent is that in order to better understand Indigenous people, it is crucial to become familiar with certain central Indigenous cultural concepts. Indigenous cultural knowledge can be employed as a theoretical framework as a means to explain Indigenous peoples' views, thoughts, and motivations.

This chapter explores how I utilized traditional stories of Elder Brother to explain the connection between Indigenous cultural knowledge and the interactions of contemporary members of Cowessess First Nation. The basis of this chapter is the notion that historically, traditional stories governed peoples' interactions. In my work, I applied traditional stories from Cowessess First Nation, a community located in the southeastern portion of the province of Saskatchewan, comprised primarily of Plains Cree, *Saulteaux* (Plains Ojibwe), Assiniboine, and Métis, as a way to explain the way in which contemporary kinship practices continue to guide interactions of Cowessess people. American anthropologist Alanson Skinner collected the Elder Brother stories I used as the basis for my study when he visited Cowessess in 1913; they were published in *American Folklore* in 1914. The contention here is that the Elder Brother stories are the basis for the kinship practices of contemporary people from Cowessess First Nation. Working toward that understanding begins with an examination of how stories worked in traditional societies.

Spiritually/supernaturally based stories such as the *Wisahkécâhk* or Elder Brother stories express certain values central to the culture.<sup>1</sup> In Cree, the two main categories of stories are *âtayôhkêwina* and *âcimowina*. *Âtayôhkêwina* refer to the ancient stories, while *âcimowina* are the stories of more recent times. The stories have been understood by some scholars to progress in a somewhat linear fashion from the very old stories to the more recent. As Brightman states in talking about the Rock Cree of Northern Manitoba, "events in *âcaohkiwina* are understood as temporally antecedent to those in *âcimowina* and comprise most of what is conventionally labeled as 'myth'" (Brightman 1989: 6). Eva Mary Linklater explains for the Nelson House Cree, also from northern Manitoba, the stories

within *âtayôhkêwina* are further divided into four subcategories – the beginning of time (*Mimoci Kiyahs*), ancient time (*Mawac Kiyahs*), long ago (*Kiyahs*) and more recent time (*Anohciki*). She states that the

Cree notion of *kayahs*, a long time ago, is without calendrical years; it is a single time beyond living memory. It is a mythic time in which the creation story and subsequent history were acted on the landscape of north central Manitoba ... These stories are validated by our elders and they are witnessed on the land.

(Linklater 1994: 32)

Linklater explains:

It is said that in *Kiyahs*, that there were many beings that are different from today. The *Mimikwisihwahk* were the water people who could go through rock. Their house and canoe was located at *Wahskahihkahn awka Cimahn* and here they continue to reside. There was *Mihsihpihsew*, the water lynx and *Wasahkacahk*, the transformer. A conflict between these two beings resulted in a great flood over the land. Muskrat then brought *Wasahkacahk* a dab of dirt on his paw, and from this he recreated the earth and made it livable for Cree people. In gratitude, *Wasahkacahk* gave muskrat a special place to live, a river (*Wahcasko-sipih*) and a lake (*Wahcasko-sahkahikahn*). Muskrat's relatives continued to be found here in great numbers until inundation by Churchill River diversion. *Wasacahkacahk* then began his travels, changing the animals and the land into what they are today. In his journey, he was always hungry and continually trick other animals into becoming his meal ... Most importantly, however, as *Wasacahkacahk* continued his travels through the land, he left behind marks of his passing so future people would know of his presence ... at *Otitiskiwihnihk* he left his footprints in the cliff, giving rise to *Otitiskihwin-sahkahihkahnihk*, the Lake of the Footprints. It is on Footprint Lake that the Nelson House people have now chosen to reside.

(Linklater 1994: 67–68)

She adds, “That many of these sites continue to be remembered at all, in spite of their current situation beneath several feet of water, emphasized their importance to sense of place and sense of identity for the Nelson House people” (1994: 63).

Though there is a temporal distinction between the two sets of stories, there was, however, overlap between the two. Brightman, for example, states that *âcimowina* “focus on human characters, but this is not their defining feature since humans figure also in *âcaohkiwina*” (Brightman 1989: 7). That is *âtayôhkêwina* and *âcimowina* are not completely distinct from each other as they “are temporally situated in a kind of ‘historical’ time possessing continuity with the situation and narration.” As Winona Wheeler points out, echoing Linklater, “*âtayôhkêwina* are sacred stories of the mystical past when the earth was shaped, animal peoples conversed, and Wisakejac transformed the world” (Wheeler 2005: 202). However, *âcimowina* also includes mythical elements (Brightman 1989: 7). Wheeler explains that:

*âcimowina* are stories of events that have come to pass since *Wisakejac*'s corporeal beingness transformed into spirit presence, that there are many different kinds of overlapping and related *kayâs âcimowina*, stories about long ago, that are often infused with the sacred.

(Wheeler 2005: 202)

Brightman says that *âcimowina* stories can relate true events that can be old or contemporary, funny or serious, but also notes that they may not all be factual and could contain supernatural characters. According to him *kayâs âcimowina* "refers to stories which are temporally remote from the situation of narration" (Brightman 1989: 7). Therefore, *âtayôhkêwina* has influenced the way in which *âcimowina* can be told because it allows for the inclusion of spiritual components into stories of relative recent times.

*Âtayôhkêwina* contain many characters known as *âtahôhkanak*, the mythical beings that helped shaped the earth and its people. Neal McLeod explains that "*âtayôhkanak*, which means 'spiritual helpers,' spiritual grandfathers and grandmothers. [*Âtayôhkêwina*] are essential because they give insight into the way in which Cree people related to their ecology and the environment, and with other beings" (McLeod 2007: 17). These characters include Pine Root and Beaded Head, *mêmêkwêsiwak*, or the little people, Thunderbird, the Great Serpent/Lynx, that caused the great flood, the *Pâhahk*, the skeleton, and the *Wihtikôw*, the cannibal that preys on human flesh, and of course *Wisahkêcâhk*, Elder Brother (Cuthand 1988: 197; Carlson 2009: 359). According to Nathan Carlson's oral historical research of Cree and Métis in Northern Alberta, *Wihtikôw* is one character that has crossed the boundary from *âtayôhkêwina* to *kiyâs âcimowina* (Carlson 2009: 386). This opens the possibility of thinking about other *âtahôhkanak*, such as Elder Brother, who may have also made that journey. For example, McLeod notes that,

The narratives of *wisahkêcâhk* should be seen as part of the *genre* of sacred stories, *âtayôhkêwina*. The term *âtayôhkêwina* denotes stories of *wisahkêcâhk* (and, indeed, other beings). When we shift the paradigm to think of *âtayôhkêwina* as "spiritual narratives," we can see them as core to Cree culture and beliefs. They are key to the construction of what is meant by Cree narrative memory, and also Cree narrative imagination, which is essentially the process of expanding our narrative memory in light of new experiences. These narratives re-imagine the landscape of Cree territory, noting the place names of *wisahkêcâhk*'s travels. The narratives also point to relationships between humans and other beings, and to the possibility of radically re-imagining constructed social spaces.

(McLeod 2007: 97–98)

McLeod's notion of Cree narrative memory can be of assistance in applying concepts found within *âtayôhkêwina*, and indeed *âcimowina*, to a contemporary context.

These stories apply to Cowessess even though it is a culturally mixed community with many Plains Cree and Saulteaux people. Though some Cree and Saulteaux/Ojibwe traditional stories have some significant differences, they are very similar in structure, form and purpose. For example, Cree and Ojibwe share many of the same mythical beings. The Ojibwe mythical beings are known as *atiso'kanak* (variously spelled) as opposed to the Cree *âtahôhkanak*. According to A. Irving Hallowell *atiso'kanak* “refers to what we would call the characters in these stories; to the Ojibwa they are living persons of an other-than-human class ... A synonym for this class of persons is ‘our grandfathers’” (Hallowell 1975: 150). Many of the *âtahôhkanak* found in Cree stories, such as the Thunderbird, the great Lynx and others are also Ojibwe *atiso'kanak*. The stories of the spirit beings have a direct relationship with how Ojibwe and Cree society operate as they served to reinforce socially beneficial behavior. Theresa S. Smith provides examples from a series of Thunderbird stories to illustrate the importance *atiso'kanak* played in Ojibwe society. In these stories we learn among other things that the Thunderbirds live in communal group with a heavy emphasis on sharing, that the young Thunderbirds, due to their immaturity and their inexperience with lightning strikes, cause havoc to the environment and to humans.

According to Brightman, *wisahkêcâhk* was the Cree cultural hero from Ontario westward, while *Nanabush* was the Ojibwe cultural hero. He notes that although these two characters have differences they share similarities. For example, Smith notes that like the Cree, some Ojibwe refer to *Nanabush* by the kinship term of Elder Brother (Smith 1995: 175). More interesting is the fact that “many attributes of the characters are similar and many stories are common to both” (Brightman 1989: 61). In fact, Brightman found the first reference to *Wisahkêcâhk* in the historical records attributed to Ojibwe/Odawa of the Mackinac region in 1669, where a fur trader recorded the word “Ouisaketchak” referring to the great hare. Many commonly refer to *Nanabush* as the Great Hare.<sup>2</sup> According to Brightman numerous fur traders and anthropologists have noted some Ojibwe used the term *Wisahkêcâhk* instead of *Nanabush* and that some Cree and Ojibwe used the term interchangeably. Edward Ahenakew from Ahtakakooop reserve in Saskatchewan related a Plains Cree story of “Wesakaychak and the ‘Startlers’” that seems to correspond to these observations:

As he went along he came upon a nest of young prairie chickens. “Little prairie chickens,” asked he, “pray, what is your name?” “That is our name you call us by,” they replied. “Everything that breathes has two names,” said Wesakaychak. “I myself have three: Wesakaychak, Nanaposo, and Mutchekewis. Do not tell me you have only one name.” “Well, then,” replied the little birds, “we are sometimes called startlers.”

(Ahenakew 1929: 333)

In the end, Brightman asserts that the level of similarity between the Cree and Ojibwe cultural heroes relates to the proximity of the two groups prior to European contact. Ojibwe/Saulteaux who resided in northern regions prior to contact have no cultural influence with the Cree, while those Ojibwe/Saulteaux who moved into the region after the contact period were impacted by Cree cultural influences (Brightman 1989: 64).

My research was to ascertain the basis for contemporary kinship practices among Cowessess First Nation. Even though the process of colonization had changed kinship practices enacted by Cowessess from the pre-reserve period, yet it was still different from non-Indigenous Canadians. Looking for a way to explain contemporary Cowessess kinship patterns meant recognizing that these practices did not appear out of thin air, but were grounded in historical practices guided by the culturally normative expectations that were conveyed through traditional stories. Cree and Saulteaux traditional stories, such as Elder Brother stories, though viewed simply as entertainment, or even children's stories, expressed these cultural expectations. Whether Ojibwe *atiso'kanak* or Cree *âtahôhkanak*, the spirit beings stories were central to their societies. As Wheeler states, "*Atayôhkewina* are the foundations of Cree spirituality/religion, philosophy, and world view, and contain the laws given to the people to live by" (Wheeler 2005: 202).

The legal systems of pre-contact Indigenous peoples, as James Zion points out, "were based upon the idea of maintaining harmony in the family, the camp, and the community" (Zion 1984: 265). The failure to follow prescribed regulations could, according to what happens to Elder Brother in the stories, result in severe negative consequences. Conversely, adhering to the positive Elder Brother behavior was seen as the ideal that all should attain. The stories also provide insight into contemporary peoples' ability to maintain certain aspects of their kinship roles and responsibilities.

Traditionally, stories acted to impart the philosophical ideals upon which Indigenous societies should function. As Robert Williams Jr. notes, "The stories socialized children and reminded adults of their roles and place within the universe ... Indians have long practiced the belief that stories have the power to sustain the many important connections of tribal life" (Williams 1990: 84). The telling of stories, such as those of Elder Brother, conveyed Indigenous philosophical meanings to the people. The stories show Elder Brother as generous and kind, yet he can also be selfish and cruel. In a story, if he was kind, he usually met with success; if he was cruel, he often met a disastrous and sometimes humorous end. His adventures and misadventures guided the peoples' social interactions, and therefore he is highly regarded. As Basil Johnston states about the esteem the Ojibwe have for Nanabush:

For his attributes, strong and weak, the Anishnabeg came to love and understand Nanabush. They saw in him themselves. In his conduct was reflected the characters of men and women, young and old. From Nanabush, although he was a paradox, physical and spirit being, doing good and unable to attain it, the Anishnabeg learned.

(Johnston 1976: 20)

As Sinclair states:

Now, as before, stories reflect the experiences, thoughts, and knowledge important to Anishnabeg, and collectively map the creative and critical relationships, and philosophies and histories of kin. Among other reasons,

stories create, define, and maintain our relations with each other and the world around us, and when shared cause us to reflect, to learn, to grow, as families, communities, and a People. Stories also indicate where we are in the universe, how we got here/there, and often indicate where we need to go ... Anishinaabeg storytelling, therefore, is not a simple one-dimensional act but a complex historical, social, and political process embedded in the continuance of our collective presence, knowledge, and peoplehood.

(Sinclair 2010: 23)

Elder Brother stories conveyed Cowessess traditional law to its people. These stories functioned as a legal institution. Though this institution was unlike European institutions, it functioned in the same way. As Zion and Robert Yazzie explain, “When a legal institution articulates a norm or validates a custom, that is ‘law’” (Zion and Yazzie 1997: 74). The Elder Brother stories explained the rules for expected normative behavior. These ideals were enshrined in the peoples’ notion of themselves, with each retelling of Elder Brother stories and with each act that could be attributed to these stories.

A number of legal scholars have linked traditional narratives, whether stories, songs, or prayers, of Indigenous peoples to their traditional legal system (Auger 2001; Cruz 2001; Williams 1990; Yazzie 1994). For example, Williams points out that:

stories are told in tribal life to educate and direct young ones, to maintain the cohesiveness of the group, and to pass on traditional knowledge about the Creator, the seasons, the earth, plants, life, death, and every other subject that is important to the perpetuation of the tribe.

(Williams 1990: 84)

John Borrows states that the traditional tribal customary principles “are enunciated in the rich stories, ceremonies, and traditions within First Nations. Stories express the law in Aboriginal communities, since they represent the accumulated wisdom and experience of First Nations conflict resolution” (Borrows 2002: 14). Donald Auger asserts that “the knowledge gained by individuals from story-telling was that of relationships and the importance of maintaining balance and harmony” (Auger 2001: 124). Stories act to connect our “normative system to our social constructions of reality and to our vision of what the world might be” (Cover 1983: 10). Robert Cover explains the connection between narratives and law:

No set of legal institutions or prescriptions exists apart from the narratives that locate it and give it meaning. For every constitution there is an epic, for each Decalogue a scripture. Once understood in the context of the narratives that give it meaning, law becomes not merely a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live ... in this normative world, law and narrative are inseparably related ... every narrative is insistent in its demand for its prescriptive point, its moral.

(Cover 1983: 3–4)

The Elder Brother stories reflect the moral normative behavior that Cowessess people were expected to follow. Through these stories, as Johnston notes, “their sense of justice and fairness” were prompted (Johnston 2005: 103).

Elder Brother stories help to explain traditional kinship practices of the pre-reserve and early reserve periods, when Cowessess people easily incorporated others into their band, including the adoption of white children. However, the assimilation policies of the Canadian government sought to undermine the law of the people, including regulations guiding kinship practices. Though these attempts were in many respects successful, for many Cowessess people the notions of kinship as epitomized in Elder Brother’s behavior continue to exist, demonstrating that the ideals of the traditional law of the people are still implicitly central principles guiding band members’ social interactions. The extent to which current Cowessess band members tell Elder Brother stories or even know about them is not certain. However, what is apparent is that the values encoded in these stories have persisted to the present, and that the stories can be used to explain current kinship practices.

The *âtayôhkêwina* and *acimowina* stories not only give us insight on how Cree and Saulteaux societies operated, but can also provide a theoretical framework that can assist scholars. This is exactly what Neal McLeod advocates, as he states:

the use of *âtayôhkêwina* – sacred stories or spiritual history, as one elder has described it – is one source of conceiving of a Cree critical theory; a narrative embodiment that creatively reflects on the situation and the world in which we find ourselves.

(McLeod 2007: 97)

Applying traditional values and principles embedded in the ancient stories to assist in explaining contemporary peoples should be appealing to Indigenous Studies scholars.

## Notes

- 1 *Wisahkêcâhk*, variously spelled, is commonly referred to by his kinship term of Elder Brother. For some Cree people the term *Wisahkêcâhk* was used only in the winter, the time when his stories were told, and the only term that could be used for him from spring to fall was Elder Brother. Though many Cree refer to him using the male designator of brother, others believe that this was a result of colonization and that traditionally *Wisahkêcâhk* was neither male nor female. He falls in the category of trickster, though he is more like a cultural hero rather than a trickster.
- 2 For example, in the index of Smith’s book it says: “Great Rabbit. *see* Nanabush” (1995: 228).

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