Southern Coast Salish Oral Literature and Health Education

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Among the Coast Salish of western Washington State and western British Columbia, stories serve as educational tools by providing lessons regarding the traditional culture. A subset of those stories serves to provide the audience with information from the arena of human health. This instruction is the way individuals learn to prevent certain illnesses and relieve minor afflictions. These stories also present insight into cosmology and scientific thought.

In this paper, we will examine how oral literature relates to general health education among the Southern Coast Salish. We will provide examples of how stories are used to provide health training to the general population, in contrast to the specialized medical training given to four types of specialists. The Southern Coast Salish discussed here were two neighboring and similar cultures with different but related languages. The Puget Sound Salish people, who spoke the *dxʷləšucid* language (now popularly written *Lushootseed*), lived along and back from the shores surrounding Puget Sound in western Washington State. To the west were the Tuwanook (or Twana) who resided in the Hood Canal basin and spoke the *tuwaduqucid* language. Each of these groups was comprised of a number of distinct "tribes" generally occupying an individual watershed. The population of the two regions at the time of first recorded contact (1792) has been estimated at 11,800 around Puget Sound and 800 around Hood Canal (Boyd 1990:146).

The examples given below are drawn from each of the three classes of tales outlined by Elmendorf (1961:7-9). These classes can be briefly outlined as follows:

1. *Myths*. Tales referring to the prehuman period, before the world was changed to what it is now. They deal with animals and anthropomorphized elements.

2. *Semi-Mythic Tales*. The characters are mostly human and often anonymous. Occasionally animal characters interact with the humans.

3. *Semi-Historic Tales*. Animal characters are rare and anonymous. Human institutions are discussed and individuals may be named.

Period I: Stories Before the Change

Thompson (1992) identifies a genre of nursery tales among the Twana. The two examples presented are short tales that are extraordinarily rich in suggestions about both the use of literary devices and the cosmological implications of the messages conveyed. The stories of Louse and Boil, when translated into English, contain only three to four sentences:

LOUSE (*bəsčəd*)

1. Louse lives in a big house.
2. Louse sweeps her house.
3. Louse gets mixed into the dirt.

BOIL (*spús*)

1. Boil was getting bigger.
2. Her husband told her to bathe.
3. She got into the water.
4. She disappeared.

These stories for young children both make use of comic characters. Both Louse and Boil engage in self-destructive actions, something that is perhaps a universal device of humor. However, as will be demonstrated later, the specific self-destructive actions themselves almost surely have culture-specific significance. Thus, the stories are not just funny. They are funny in a culturally meaningful way.

The ironic structure of the Louse and Boil stories is a lesson in medical science. The lessons presented are not cures to be used: bathing is not a cure for boils nor cleaning the house is a cure for head lice. Rather they represent approaches of preventive medicine.

The stories go beyond a purely preventive message. They also provide a look at scientific methodology within Coast Salish cosmology. They demonstrate a principle of isolation in which a creature or phenomenon is observed outside of its usual context. This method is one that can be applied to eliminate or control the entity. Louse and Boil are abstracted from their usual contexts to show the listener how to control them. For the louse there is no head for the

louse to infest. There is also no body for boil to be on. The personification of Boil may be even more interesting in that it might be viewed as having a life because it grows.

The humor of the stories is probably better understood as sugar coating:

> *... narration of stories was also educational, entertaining and explanatory. But the fact that narration concentrated on problems must mean that the act of stating them, sometimes laughing at them, and turning them into highly interesting fictions, had still another function ---- to make life more pleasant.* (S. Snyder 1964:6)

It is the humor, however, that allows for irony. The ironic structure is also meaningful cosmologically. The louse and boil abstracted from their usual contexts lead you to the means of controlling them. If you are attentive (have the correct research design) you will observe creatures and phenomena outside their usual, normal contexts and learn the secret to their control. In other words the ironic structure is not just funny: the creature or phenomenon actually does participate in its own destruction. This treatment of phenomena implies an abstract, analytical, clinical kind of science where subjects of study are integral, just the opposite of the holism we have usually heard ascribed to Native Americans. It also implies an ultimately benign world which can be brought under the dominion of humans by means of cleverness (essentially a belief in technology). This view of science is consonant with the operative, traditional religion. It also bears a lot of resemblance to European thought.

If the above analysis is correct, we should expect to find other examples of stories that present a similar message for other types of afflictions. One would also expect that the stories would go beyond the audience age of nursery stories. Additionally, if we are correct in assuming that this is not just found among the Twana but also occurred in Puget Sound Salish stories, there should be examples from other Coast Salish communities.

In fact there are Puget Sound Salish stories which contain health care lessons.[1] An intriguing Upper Skagit episode within a much longer story, meant for more mature audiences, verifies that we are on the right track:

COUGH (st'úq"ub)

1. Cough is an old woman.
2. Coyote finds her at home alone.
3. He has murderous designs upon the old lady.
4. He threatens to kill her by burning.
5. She pretends to like the idea.
6. He tells her he will kill her through intercourse.
7. Now she is genuinely happy.
8. Instead of gratifying her, Coyote rubs nettles over her body and then flays her --- a cure used for curing colds. (S. Snyder 1964, Story #23)

It contains two of the elements that we would expect: Cough is personified and she is abstracted from human body. Distinct from the earlier Twana nursery tales, here the presentation is of a means to cure the affliction, rather than being a preventive lesson.

A portion of another Upper Skagit story contains elements in common with the Twana nursery tales and the Upper Skagit fragment:

BOIL-IN-ANUS AND HAMMER

1. Two old women live together: Boil-in-the Anus and Hammer.
2. Boil goes out to gather bark for fuel.
3. A fir needle falls.
4. It pierces her head and she dies. (S. Snyder 1964, Story #59)

Again, Boil-in-the-Anus is personified. Here the message is that a fir needle can be used to lance a boil in this delicate location.

Stories need not always contain personified afflicitions, however. In the following Twana story told by Louisa Pulsifer, the main character is Rabbit and the message is about cleanliness but there is no personification:

RABBIT AND THE WOLVES
(k"ɔ́čədi əd ti dušúyayubəš)

1. Rabbit is the slave of the wolves.
2. He is kept captive in a cage in their den.
3. The wolves are playing disk game.
4. Rabbit calls out in baby talk: "I'm pissing, I'm pooping."
5. One of the wolves yells, "Oh, let him out, the dirty thing!"
6. Rabbit escapes into the berry bushes and is free.

The health care instruction found in this short story says that if your understand your training then you can use it to your advantage. Here Rabbit uses a shared cultural notion of cleanliness to free himself from captivity.

Period II: Stories While Change was Finalizing

An example of a story about this period comes from the Suquamish and was told by Lucy Mullholland (W. Snyder 1968:89):

THE OLD MAN BECOMES YOUNG

1. An old man is always sick, was very dirty, has sores on his body, has lice on his hair and is going blind.
2. Crow tells him to make a sweat house and to use it daily.
3. He does and becomes a tall, strong, good-looking young man.

Here, as in some of the stories discussed above, the message is one of how cleanliness will defeat a number of afflictions. It also has the added benefit of longevity and giving one a better, more youthful appearance. As the story indicates, it is never too late to follow this instruction.

This story may also provide insight on the role of grandmothers as teachers among the Southern Coast Salish. Mrs. Mullholland took her tribal identity from her mother, Amelia Sneatlum (W. Snyder 1968:1). It is likely that the former learned the story from her maternal

grandmother, Lucy Allen Williams Snider (labíx"yud), whose father was a nephew of Chief Seattle's (Gross 1950; W. Snyder 1968:99).

Period III: Modern Stories

A Snoqualmie story told by Jerry Kanim (W. Snyder 1968:53-59) discusses the problem of a sick man, named Laleewa, confronted with the custom of marrying his recently dead brother's widow:

LALEEWA (lalíwa)

1. His father told him to ask her if she would accept him as a husband.
2. Laleewa responded, "... I think she wouldn't like me because I'm sick. My skin is scarred ..."
3. His father advised him to ask her if she would wait until he was well.
4. He took off her clothes while she was sleeping and woke her.
5. He asked her if she would have him when he was over his illness.
6. She said she would tell him later.
7. Another day she brought him a piece of her clothes where he had grabbed her because she did not want her "skin to become rotten."
8. He went inland toward the mountains. He washed himself until his skin was restored to normal.
9. He returned the piece of cloth to her.
10. She wiped her face with it and it became scarred.
11. She scratched her face irritation and she became sick.
12. She became scarred all over her body.
13. She died.

With this story there is no humor, just lessons (no physical contact with the sick, dispose of contaminated clothing, do not scratch the skin, bathe in mountain water).

There are signs that the lessons may be providing warnings about smallpox. Smallpox was the first disease epidemic known to have reached the Southern Coast Salish, in the late 1780s. Smallpox is an infectious viral disease that may be spread by physical contact or through contact with items that have been in close contact with the infected person. A rash appears

after about two weeks. When George Vancouver's expedition came in 1792 to Puget Sound, they saw the pockmark scars left by the disease. (Guilmet et al 1991:7-8)

Personification

It may be meaningful that in each of the four stories from Period I discussed above the personified afflictions presented (Louse, Boil, Cough and Boil-in the Anus) is portrayed as an old woman.[2] In contrast, stories from Periods II and III contain no personification of this type.

Personification of the ailments as old women may be related to the most general group of individuals telling the stories. "Usually one elderly person in a household assumed primary responsibility for the education of its children. Ideally this was a grandparent ..." (Elmendorf 1960:427) "It was the older men and women of the household who were the storytellers. And older women, that is, over forty or so, particularly are renowned as having been household recitalists." (S. Snyder 1964:24)

Humor, Period and Age Level

The Southern Coast Salish had a notion regarding developmental psychology. They geared their stories for what information should be taught at different age levels. The stories from Period I are finely crafted teaching tools that can be used for young children. Those from Periods II and III are told as history rather than as stories and, in comparison to those of Period I, lack a lot of the literary value. The stories are much drier and not as engaging. It appears from the level of the stories that the right behavior, as well as science and technology (cause and effect are still present, for example), is assumed to be known by the listerner. There is no attempt to teach. Rather, the stories have the subtlety of today's "Just Say No!" advertisements. Here the listerners are listening not because of the sugar-coating but because they known they must.

Summary

Southern Coast Salish stories present a full-array of illness prevention and cure teachings. The stories themselves range from nursery tales to what may be preserved history from over 200 years ago for an older age level. In order to more fully understand this pattern, we welcome your comments, especially regarding the presence of such health care information among other Salishan and neighboring groups.

Authors' Notes

1. Many of the story abstracts presented here have been abbreviated in order to highlight health care teaching over other messages. For a full version of the stories, please consult the originals.

2. Not all appearances of personified afflictions are accompanied by medical instruction. In a Puyallup story, Louse was the first wife of Loon's son. She was a pretty woman who had a child, went blind from weeping and had her features and vision restored by Thunder's Daughter. (Ballard 1929:101-3)

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