On Transcribing the Metcalf Tapes

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A number of years ago, Leon Metcalf, then of Seattle, became concerned about the rapid extinction of American Indian languages in western Washington. In the early 1950's he travelled about the state making tape recordings of stories, conversations, histories, and songs from the Indian elders in their own languages. A very large portion of this collection was spoken by Puget Salish people who were friends, relatives, and acquaintances of mine. Recently, these tapes were presented to the University of Washington Burke Memorial Museum where I learned about them. This spring, through a small grant from the Melville and Elizabeth Jacobs Research Fund (administered by the Whatcom Museum of History and Art), I began the exciting task of transcribing and translating this material.

The tapes total about sixty-one hours of Puget Salish from four dialects, Duwamish, Skagit, Snohomish, and Suquamish. Many of the old stories are told in the wonderful style typical of the best raconteurs. The recorded songs include examples of all categories sung by our people. There are segments related by respected tribal historians which are of great value for presenting the Indian perspective - and for recent times, the Indian side of encounters with the white man. Some of these accounts also include statements about kin relationships which are of great interest to the younger generation.

Mr. Metcalf also recorded many messages which he carried from one homebound elder to another. These messages express appreciation and joy at hearing from a relative or friend speaking in the language; and they capture the respectful style typical of our elders in former times - a style sorely missed by the contemporary Skagit speaking generation.

Indeed, our people long for the beautiful Indian orations that used to be spoken at meetings and gatherings of all kinds. These were especially comforting at funerals. English words simply cannot express the Indian feelings at such times. Recently, I attended two funerals for our elders. To the first, I took along a tape from the collection and played it later to the bereaved daughter and other relatives who were so happily comforted to hear our language. At the second, I read part of an old story to a large group as we gathered in the dining room for our noon meal. There was much laughter as the listeners anticipated what was coming. Again our language brought happiness to lighten a sad occasion.

As I work, I introduce my people to the Metcalf collection and my transcriptions so they will be aware of what is taking place. I also encourage their participation by helping with the translations. We hope to leave our young people adequate material with which to study and learn our language in the future, for I feel confident they will want to. I check the accuracy of my translations by reading them from my working notebooks to the elders. (The first couple I read to were incredulous at the start and then so pleased that I could actually write this and that they could understand what I was reading to them.)

The task is not always easy. Although some of the tapes are very clear, others are not as well recorded as one might wish. This lack of clarity plus the dialect differences often render the work very time consuming and a little difficult. However, with enough time and support I believe eventually they can all be transcribed and translated.

By way of a small sample of the collection, I include here an excerpt from one of the tapes recounting an amusing incident among the Suquamish. This occurred in the very early days of European contact when ships from the Hudson Bay Company were trading for beaver pelts and giving Indians such food as sugar, molasses, and hardtack.

(1) tułčil kʷi ship dxʷʔal kʷi tuʔitəkʷbixʷ. (2) bəłiligʷəd ʔə tiʔəʔ ʔəsʔistə. (3) ləpəskʷi tiʔəʔ ʔəsʔistə ʔə tiʔił ʔusłilds tiʔił dxʷsʔalb. (4) hikʷ kʷi šuʔ. (5) huy, ʔəʔquci(d)tʼbəxʷ. (6) huy, kʷədatʼbəxʷ ʔə tiʔəʔ wiʔwsu tiʔəʔ ləpəskʷi. (7) huy, huyudəxʷ (h)əlgʷəʔ sbəbiʔ ʔal tiʔəʔ šuʔ sgʷistalb. (8) huy, təǰʼdaxʷ (h)əlgʷəʔ gʷəl təǰʼdaxʷ. (9) huy, łəqʷaxʷ tiʔəʔ ləpəskʷi gʷəl gʷəbiʔad. (10) "ʔuʼ ʔəsʔistə haʔwəʔ kʷi səshuys. (11) xʷiʔ haʔwəʔ kʷi gʷəsułəqʷs."

(12) xʷiʔ kʷi gʷat ʔuləkʷʼd ʔal tiʔəʔ ʔitəłʼbixʷ. (13) huy ʔəsxəcbitʼb. (14) dił tiʔəʔ səslulʔuʔs. (15) gʷəl ʔəxʷcutʼb sʔuləč, sʔuləč kʷi ʔuləkʷʼd. (16) dił tugʷəł ʔitəłʼbixʷ tiʔəʔ tushuys.

(1) A ship arrived at the Suquamish. (2) They (the crew) gave them food as they had done before. (3) Hardtack and things as they had given to the Clallam. (4) The tide was way out. (5) Then they opened it. (I.e., they began a game.) (6) The children took the hardtack. (7) And they used it as a hoop on the tide flats. (8) They rolled it and rolled it. (9) Then the hardtack got wet and disintegrated. (10) "Oh, so that is how it is. (11) (You) can't get it wet."

(12) No one ate it at Suquamish. (13) They were afraid of it. (14) It had holes in it. (15) And they thought that worms, worms had been eating it. (16) That is what took place among the Suquamish.

(The holes in the hardtack, by the way, created quite a stir everywhere. While the Suquamish feared worms had caused them, the Clallam exclaimed at how clever the strangers were to be able to put the little holes in it.)

Our people owe a debt of gratitude to the dedication of this body of scholars. I personally thank each of you as you share your expertise so unselfishly with us. As most of you realize, there are volumes yet that need to be done. Our future generations gratefully will thank you for preserving so much for them.

jijəlaƛič

pədgʷədbixʷ

gʷəlapu ʔəsq̓ʷu(ʔ) ʔal tiʔəʔ gʷəɬ ləliʔakʷbixʷ swatixʷtəd:

ʔəsʔistə ʔə tiʔə(ʔ) səsq̓ʷuʔləp ʔal tiʔəʔ čələp ugʷagʷəd dxʷəladəd tiʔəʔ sgʷədgʷatədčəɬ ʔi tiʔəʔ gʷəɬ dəčakʷbixʷ. čəda ʔuhilitᵊb ʔə tiʔə(ʔ) dsyayaʔ dxʷʔal kʷi gʷədsƛ̓ub ʔuyəcᵊbtubuɬəd ʔə tiʔə(ʔ) dsx̌al. ƛ̓ubiʔbəlč čəd. tux̌ʷ, xʷiʔəxʷ kʷi ɬudsɬaʔ dxʷʔal tiʔiɬ swatixʷtəd ɬ(u)asq̓ʷuʔləp. yəx̌i diʔaʔ tiʔəʔ siʔiʔab dᵊʔibʔibac ʔəsjəx̌əx̌bic tuƛ̓ʔal tiʔiɬ ʔiɬjixʷ lil swatixʷtəd. x̌ʷəƛ̓əxʷ čəd ɬutalusbitubuɬ liɬʔal tiʔə(ʔ) dsyayaʔ, gʷəl ɬutulud tiʔə(ʔ) ʔəsx̌altxʷ čəd. ɬ(u)aspətidgʷəsbitubuɬəd čəd. ƛ̓ub x̌ʷuƛ̓ haʔɬ kʷi ɬ(u)astix̌ᵊdxʷ ɬi tiʔə(ʔ) syayus.

gʷəl dxʷəladəd tiʔə(ʔ) dsyayus: ləculəqᵊd čəd tiʔiʔiɬ tusiʔiʔab tudʔiišəd ʔal tiʔiɬ tusugʷagʷəds (h)əlgʷə(ʔ) ʔal tiʔəʔ gʷəɬ pastəd səxʷgʷagʷəd. tuʔilid həlgʷəʔ kʷi bək̓ʷ stab haʔɬ syəcᵊb, čəda ləcup̓aacut, ləcux̌alad. ƛ̓al čəd ləcutulud liɬʔal tiʔəʔ gʷəɬ pastəd sgʷədgʷatəd.

cick̓ʷ čəd ƛ̓(u)ashiiɬ ʔal tiʔiɬ ƛ̓udsləqᵊdxʷ tiʔiɬ ƛ̓usʔux̌ʷtxʷs (h)əlgʷəʔ tiʔiɬ haʔɬ dxʷᵊl(ə)šucid. tiʔiɬ tudʔiišəd gʷəl [hə]laʔb t(u)as(h)aydxʷ tiʔəʔ dxʷᵊl(ə)šucid. təɬ čəɬ ɬučəwatil ɬuhaydxʷəɬi tiʔə(ʔ) syəcᵊb ʔəsqiq̓ ʔal tiʔəʔ stab (h)aẃə(ʔ) kʷi gʷədsdaʔad ʔal tiʔiɬ x̌əɬ ti ʔəsqaluqʷ sil ʔal gʷədalʔtxʷ ʔə ti hikʷ ʔalʔal dəxʷ(ʔ)a ʔə kʷi qa stabigʷs ʔə ʔaciɬtalbixʷ ʔal jijəlaƛ̓ič.

ƛ̓ut̓igʷitubuɬəd čəɬ ʔal tiʔəʔ ƛ̓əsukʷaxʷatubuɬləp dxʷəladəd tiʔəʔ gʷəswəliʔalusbid čəɬ tiʔiɬ tusəshuy ʔə tiʔiɬ tuyəƛ̓yəƛ̓abčəɬ. šač̓əxʷ tiʔə(ʔ) dsgʷagʷəd.

taqʷšəɬalu