

Written History vs. the Oral Tradition

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Recently I had the pleasure to watch an interesting debate on an Internet message board devoted to discussion on Mohawk history. The debate pitted written history against oral tradition. After reading it I had to really think about it and the way we try to decipher truth and authenticity in historical accounts.

In order to find truth and authenticity in traditional knowledge and history, one must gather extensive information from various resources. These resources can come from a variety of locations, including discussions with the learned, personal experience, and yes; even the written word. While the task of gathering information maybe at times difficult and time consuming, the most trying aspect in the pursuit of knowledge is deciphering its truth and authenticity. In order to accomplish this, the following formula can help this journey.

Using the elements of a proverbial jigsaw puzzle, knowledge is a large undecipherable mosaic of enlightenment whose truth and authenticity can only be recognized when the wide array of puzzle pieces are properly fitted together. These puzzle pieces (which is metaphoric of researched information) come in all shapes and sizes, some accurate and authentic, while others may only contain the smallest bit of true information. But in time, using both deductive reasoning and common arithmetic, similarities and consistencies will highlight a pattern that will guide a proper fitting of these historical elements; thus revealing the puzzle's mystery. Using this formula, one can certainly appreciate the merit of all information, be it the written word or the oral tradition. All that is needed is an open mind when acquiring resources and vigilance when analyzing it.

The written word is a valuable tool and is no threat to tradition, provided both responsibility and caution is employed when using it. Surely, if people like Seth Newhouse or John Norton did not transcribe their accounts, our people would have certainly lost much of the knowledge that died with those of their generation. Moreover, if it were not for ethnologists like Horatio Hale who wrote *the Iroquois Book of Rites*, the Condoling Council in 1964 may not have been able to complete the installation of Mohawk chiefs in Kanehsatake. That was just one instance where a book actually saved a ceremony, but was the only example needed to illustrate the usefulness of the written word. In a sense, the written word is an extension of the ancient pictograms that appears on the Roll Call or Condolence canes used to aid a speaker's recitation. Books allow us to look into a frozen moment in history and analyze its contents from a different perspective.

There must be some caution, however, when dealing with the written word that requires some intelligence on the part of the reader. Historical writings in particular can be inaccurate, subjective, and fabricated. Sometimes, the social conditions of the author can unconsciously affect the truth and authenticity of his or her words, leaving perhaps a corrupt or misleading account.

For example, the Jesuit Relations of Father Lafitau can provide an extremely insightful account into 17th century Iroquoia, but when reading it, one must recognize the archaic and sometimes derogatory terminology that is used combined with religious undertones that greatly upset the text's truth and authenticity. Indeed, the terminology and social beliefs of non-native writers warrant caution in this matter, as their observational accounts can never reflect a relation of domestic experience.

Another example of conditional influence can be found in the manuscript of Seth Newhouse, whereby the social and political conditions of Grand River greatly influenced the way in which he transcribed his information. Later on, Parker's "abridged" edition of the Newhouse Manuscript became the most prevalent and preserving version of the Haudenosaunee Constitution. The consequence of which has unfortunately reinforced a singular faith behind one document that is replete with inaccuracy and corruption. What happened with the Newhouse Manuscript provides another negative aspect of the potential difficulties with written information, which is the tendency to become overly dependent and reverent of "sacred" texts. Similar to the way the Holy Bible is to Christians, we ultimately dwell and squabble about semantics and rendition as opposed to the true nature of the message.

The oral tradition is by far the oldest form of communicating, and is vital to the pursuit of knowledge. In a sense it is a *living* and ongoing account of history. Like life, history will grow and continue, so what better way to reside historical information than within the oral tradition. This way, accounts will derive from those who have experienced the matter first hand, and relate their stories with a human emotion and compassion that cannot be felt reading books.

The primary problem with the oral tradition is the possibility of intended manipulation and unconscious corruption of the account. Indeed, one must be mindful of the speaker, taking into account the general conditions of his or her own life that could potentially affect the account. Sometimes, one can be motivated by external factors to manipulate the account in order to accommodate his or her agenda. For example, when the late Chief Jake Thomas had often related his knowledge on sub-chiefs and war-chiefs in the context of the Kaianere'kó:wa, Jake would usually include a subjective opinion of the modern Warrior Society that seemed to emphasize and interpret historical elements that justified his political position on the matter.

More than likely though, most individuals have no malicious intent in corrupting the truth and authenticity of the account, and are usually the result of innocent forgetfulness or false understanding. These factors do make the oral tradition at times unreliable, but nonetheless integral in the pursuit of knowledge.

It is therefore important to accept the worth of both the written word and the oral tradition as both equal forums for acquiring information. One should not favor one over the other, as both are symbiotic tools to achieve truth and authenticity in historical and cultural

enlightenment. The student simply needs to access for himself or herself its place in grand puzzle of knowledge.

Ever onward towards the good tidings of peace and power!