

Culture



Kinêhiyâwiwininaw NÊHIYAWÊWIN, *The Cree Language is Our Identity: The La Ronge Lectures of Sarah Whitecalf*, edited, translated and with a glossary by H.C. Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew. Publications of the Algonquian Text Society, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1993; xiv + 160 pages

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présence narrative de l'auteur. D'un côté, Perrin décrit avec détails des situations et des contextes d'actes chamaniques ainsi que des exégèses de chamanes guajiros. Une partie importante du texte est composée de traductions d'extraits d'entrevues dont le style et le format sont très agréables à lire. D'un autre côté, l'auteur introduit les diverses parties du livre à l'aide de témoignages personnels et de narration d'expérience de terrain. L'ouvrage utilise avec pondération les nouvelles formes d'écritures ethnographiques et semble viser un public varié - professeurs, étudiants ou lecteurs cultivés - qui y trouvera son compte.

Référence

PERRIN, M.

1986 Interprétation morphogénétique de l'initiation chamanique, *L'Homme*, numéro spécial 97-98, L'État des lieux : 107-123.

Kinêhiyâwiwininaw NÊHIYAWÊWIN, *The Cree Language is Our Identity: The La Ronge Lectures of Sarah Whitecalf*, edited, translated and with a glossary by H.C. Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew. Publications of the Algonquian Text Society, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1993; xiv + 160 pages.

By Regna Darnell

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This volume — one in a series of texts from Plains Cree elders facilitated by the collaboration of linguist H.C. Wolfart and linguist/Native Studies professor/Cree elder Freda Ahenakew — presents a series of canonical teachings from a fully viable oral tradition, recorded in a setting which is traditional for the transmission of knowledge. The lectures are presented in Cree syllabics as continuous text and in Cree (Roman script) with alternate pages in English translation. The English translation is close to the English spoken by Cree people in the Prairies. The glossary which follows allows the non-speaker of Cree to work through the original language. A wide range of readers, both Native and non-Native, are accommodated.

The teacher, the late Sarah Whitecalf (1919-1991), was a monolingual speaker of Cree raised in the traditional manner by her maternal grandparents.

She was kept at home because a sister had died at residential school. During her lifetime, she moved between Moosomin and Sweet Grass, Saskatchewan, and functioned as an elder in Saskatoon, at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. Her language was the Plains Cree of the River People.

In January 1990, she spoke in response to questions by teachers in Freda Ahenakew's class in La Ronge, Saskatchewan. For the participant, this was a rare opportunity to draw on the accumulated experience of a woman already well known for her "discourses, mainly on Cree culture" (p.vii). Topics covered include: speaking Cree and speaking English, dyes for porcupine quills and horse-hair, dream spirits, evil medicine, teaching [Cree language and culture] to whites, tobacco, love medicine, alcohol and drug abuse, and lecturing the young.

Sarah Whitecalf was a traditionalist who believed in communicating the wisdom of the world in which she grew up to a new generation of Native people (and any non-Natives who wished to learn). Although she spoke incidentally of her personal experiences, her intention was "not to tell stories but to explicate Cree practices and beliefs" (p.ix) which applied beyond the events of her own life. She recognized that young Native people today face a complex and troubled world. She urged them to live in the future, using the past as a guide.

Freda Ahenakew explained to the students that she had invited Sarah Whitecalf to "tag along," to travel with her and speak with the students (p.23); she emphasized that a gift of tobacco was appropriate in asking a question. This is the traditional way.

The word translated "lecture" in the title correctly represents the respect given to Sarah Whitecalf's expertise as a teacher and ability to convey her life experience in formal speakings. Ka-kêskim-/kak-êskimâwaso- means to counsel or to lecture, primarily to one's children, to address or speak to others. It is a genre of traditional Cree pedagogy. Content and style range from description of traditional practices to harangue for younger people to follow the spirit of those practices.

Sarah Whitecalf refers to Freda Ahenakew and H.C. Wolfart as her "partners" (p.53, p.59) in teaching. They know much already, respect traditional Cree knowledge and "try to know it" (p.55). Only the traditional sundance lodge is to be reserved for Crees exclusively, because it was given to them as their traditional religion (p.55).

Sarah Whitecalf firmly but unpretentiously states her own credentials. In Saskatoon, she is "part of the group" when the elders sit together in the board room (p.25). Although she never went to school, she was "chosen for the work" because she was monolingual; "I am truly a Cree" (p.27). For her, and for her listeners, the language is inseparable from the culture. She expresses regret that she needs interpreters to speak to many Native people, and to whites, "in order for them to be lectured" (p.27), i.e., in order that they might have access to her knowledge.

Some of the reported knowledge was gained by experience, for example, by watching her mother do quill-work. Other things came from the words of her own elders: "Yes, I used to hear about it" or "I did not ever hear her speak about that" (p.31) or "I have lived long enough to have seen . . ." (p.61). Passing on of traditional knowledge is not a place for speculation.

Sarah Whitecalf mourns for today's young people who are "on their own" because many do not have old people to "lecture" them (p.77). It is no wonder that the young no longer know how to listen. Her own words summarize the need to teach (p.75):

These are the things that greatly hurt us and break us; and with these things rampant, we who are old have a great deal of grief, you know, these things break us, they trouble us greatly. We cannot even sleep when we hear of all the things which happen to our relatives, or of all the trouble our children get into; that is what is causing things to break down, you know, that is why our minds are greatly troubled.

These texts are a beautiful memorial to a remarkable woman and to the continuing power of traditional Cree knowledge to shape the lives of contemporary individuals.

Michèle DACHER with Suzanne LALLEMAND, *Prix des épouses, valeur des soeurs, suivi de Les représentations de la maladie : deux études sur la société Goin (Burkina Faso)*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992; 203 pages.

By Myron Echenberg,

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Michèle Dacher, an ethnographer at EHESS, has been doing fieldwork among the Goin of southwestern Burkina Faso since 1969, and is well placed to

offer these two essays on an interesting but little-known matrilineal society. The first, written with Suzanne Lallemand (who has published research on Voltaic cultures before), deals with the status of women, while the second examines representations of illness. Together, the two subjects offer useful insights into the functional and dysfunctional aspects of Goin society.

The introduction offers the necessary background to an acephalous, matrilineal, patrilocal, farming community which today numbers some 60,000 people densely occupying the small but well watered land which runs from the foot of the Banfora escarpment to the border with Ivory Coast. As is the case elsewhere in West Africa, the Goin matrilineal system is slowly giving way to patrilineage. The colonial regime, the impact of Islam, and the post-colonial administration all favored this trend. Nevertheless, especially in rural areas, many Goin cling tenaciously to their unique culture.

What is rare about Goin society is its system of two obligatory unions for children, which results in the highest bride price payments of any people in Burkina Faso. Males are obliged to pay for two successive licit unions with two different partners, as well as the obligation to cover the costs of marriage feasts. Bride price for a single union in the 1980s was 15,000 CFA (\$60), but gifts and marriage expenses could reach as high as 500,000 CFA (\$2000). The authors estimate that it would take at least ten years for the average Goin farmer to accumulate these funds from the sale of his agricultural surplus, and at least twenty years to be free of the debt for both formal unions. Such a system, the authors argue reasonably, is a device for strong control of juniors, both male and female, and cannot be interpreted simply in feminist terms.

Goin women, Dacher and Lallemand contend, are permanently disadvantaged but not super-exploited, as Meillassoux has argued. They depend on their husbands for rights to land use. When granted, these are limited and always revocable. Nor can a wife ever acquire formal authority in her adopted lineage. Yet women are far from helpless. Since husbands must invest so much money to enter into marriage, they rarely chase away wives. On the contrary, they take care to persuade them not to flee. A woman thus always has the threat of being able to go home to her parents if her husband is demonstrably abusive or miserly. Divorce is rare, then, and Goin marriages very stable. Another protection for