

TELLING SECRETS: STORIES OF THE VISION QUEST

ROBIN RIDINGTON

Department of Anthropology and Sociology,
University of British Columbia,
Vancouver, British Columbia,
Canada, V6T 2B2.

ABSTRACT/RESUME

The Dunne-za, an Athapaskan hunting people of northern Alberta and British Columbia, follow a vision quest in childhood. As the individual grows with worldly knowledge, such as techniques of hunting and the ways of animals, so too he acquires the knowledge of medicine power, with the mythic tales and responsibilities of an adult within the culture. The personal knowledge/power of each individual also becomes, through stories and the gradual awareness of others, that of the group over time. Thus the individual hunter both learns, and becomes part of, the lore of the community in the course of his journey from child to elder.

Parmi les Dunne-za, peuple chasseur déné du nord de l'Alberta et de la Colombie britannique, on poursuit dès l'enfance une recherche visionnaire. A mesure que l'individu grandit au rythme des connaissances universelles, telles que les techniques de chasse et le mode de vie des animaux, il acquiert aussi des connaissances relatives au pouvoir médicinal, au moyen de son contact prolongé avec les récits mythiques de son peuple, et de son apprentissage des responsabilités de l'adulte au sein de la société. La connaissance et la puissance (qui vont de pair) ainsi accumulées par chaque individu, deviennent dans un sens plus large la possession du groupe entier. De la sorte, le chasseur s'instruit et, à la fois, prend part au savoir de son peuple au cours de sa progression de l'enfance à l'âge avancé, à la sagesse.

We humans have lived in small scale band level societies for most of the time since our emergence as a self-reflective species. The channels of communication we now think of as intrinsically human must have evolved to meet the needs of a social order where people living together were well known to one another. In band level societies today, stories of individual lives are an important part of every person's cultural competence. This intimacy and interdependency of band life is often represented by the language of kinship but there are other exchanges that connect people to one another even more deeply. These are the lifelong exchanges through which a person's life becomes a story that is part of the cultural competence shared by others.

As in any human society each person lives both within his or her own subjectivity and within the intersubjective embrace of common understandings, but in bands there are special channels to facilitate a flow of information between subjective experience and intersubjective understanding. Band traditions are sustained orally and through personal contact. Story telling is more than entertainment. It is a way of communicating important information from one person to another and from one generation to another. Stories are culturally coded interpretations of personal and collective experience. When something important happens to a person it becomes a story shared with others. Each story that is shared contributes to the knowledge others have of an individual. Each individual is a character in the story of a group's life together. Stories are interpretations of experience through which subjective information is organized and communicated intersubjectively. They are a medium particularly adapted to the conditions of life in band level societies.

Typically, in band level societies known to us ethnographically, the story of an individual's life comes to be associated in one way or another with traditional mythic stories. In these societies, mythic events are often viewed as being like dreams in their relation to the events of everyday experience. They are recognized as real, authentic and immediate but meaningful primarily as interpretations of everyday events. Individual stories, myths and dreams are all abstractions of ordinary experience. They are all coded media of communication. Story telling may be used both to communicate one's own personal experience, and to recount the archetypal experience of beings from mythic times. These times are often associated with dreaming, and the dream experience may serve as a point of contact between individual experience and cultural archetype. The dreamer comes into contact with mythic tradition, bringing this form of cultural intelligence to bear upon his or her own personal experience. Through dreaming, the collective representations of myth may be related to the events of a person's own life. The use of dreams to mediate between personal and mythic narrative must go back to the time when humans first began to communicate on an interpretive level with one another. As the capacity for reflective thought emerged, dreams must have been recognized as subjective reflections of common understandings.

Among the Australian aborigines, associations of mythic dreamtime and individual identity have come down to us as totemism. There, the story of a

person's life is instructed by his or her identification with a totemic ancestor from the mythic dreamtime. Among many North American band level hunting societies associations between personal experience and mythic archetype are established through the vision quest. Dreaming in these societies is an essential link between the events of a person's life and the events of mythic time. Individual visionary experience and dreaming bring a person into relationship to the interpretive symbols of mythic thought. This paper is about how one North American hunting society, the Athapaskan Dunne-za of the Peace River area, tell the stories of their vision quest experiences.

In traditional Dunne-za life, every person experienced a series of childhood vision quests to which he or she referred in later life as a source of power and identity. By the time a person had become an established elder of the band, his or her "medicines," as these powers are called in English, were known to everyone within a circle of related bands. During the course of a lifetime, what had once been intensely personal became a focal point of public information. The circle of a person's life among the Dunne-za was a trail of telling secrets.

The childhood vision quest experience is private and secret. If a child reveals the story that came to life during the dream space alone in the bush, the power may turn against him or her. Only the old people know, through their dreaming, what story may have possessed a child away from camp. Only people whose dreams visualize the trails of animals in the bush can articulate the vision of children when they are away from camp. Only by dreaming back to their own encounters with the medicine animals of mythic times can they see themselves in the visions of children. When the children return to camp from their time alone, they sense a balance has been realized between themselves and the old people. Growing up in camp, they had come to know the medicine stories active in the lives of the old people, but had not yet discovered their own connection to the medicines. They knew the taste of every kind of meat, the warmth of fur against their skin, but not the animals themselves, alive and autonomous. They knew the medicines within the old people but not these same medicines within themselves.

When the children return to camp from the bush they can look to the old people within themselves. They can look ahead to the circle of their lives, telling secrets of the vision quest. In the span of life between child and old person, the medicine stories of a child's experience alone in the bush become an old person's stories known by everyone in camp. The stories become real in the theatre of their telling. They always remain secrets but during the course of a lifetime become known to a widening circle of people. By the manner of their telling secrets, Dunne-za children establish themselves as people of knowledge. Thus, the story of an individual's life becomes part of the stories known to all. This diffusion of information balances the vision quest during which a story known to all becomes part of the child's experience.

In any small scale society where every life is known to others as a story, transformation of personal experience into culturally recognized knowledge is a powerful medium for bonding people to one another with meaning. The art of telling secrets is an important medium of communication where people know

one another from living together interdependently. My own knowledge of Dunne-za medicine stories comes from participating for a time in this interdependence. As I came to know the old people, the stories of their lives became part of my own cultural competence. I learned in much the way a child learns before his or her own vision quest experience. During the course of daily life in camp I observed that the space around these old people was treated differently from other spaces. Each old person's space was distinctive just as the life story of each one was distinctive. I learned, as a child would learn, the facts of life about what could or could not be done in the presence of each old person. I learned that one person does not eat red berries and that it is incorrect to throw egg shells into his fire or take flash pictures in his presence. In another person's camp, the sound of a stretched string may not be heard. Another did not play the drum.

I was told these facts about the lives of old people because it was necessary for me to know how to act properly within their spaces. Direct inquiries about the meaning of these personal taboos were not answered. Receiving replies like, "Old person don't like that kind," I quickly learned that in this culture you must figure things out for yourself in order to claim the knowledge as your own. In responding to me as a child, the Dunne-za showed me how they expect children to learn. Thus, I learned that they come into possession of knowledge only by putting together pieces of information into a meaningful pattern for themselves. Children and anthropologists learn to learn by interpreting the special attributes of old people. Later, as old people, they apply themselves to the more difficult task of interpreting the special attributes of children.

The key to the child's (and my own) learning to interpret the special actions of old people, is coded into traditional Dunne-za stories. For each medicine power, a story describes how a giant person-eating animal of old was overcome by the culture hero-transformer. His childhood name was Swan, high voyager between seasons. After his own vision quest, he became Saya, sun and moon in the sky, another form of high seasonal voyager (Ridington, 1978). The distinctive identity of each giant animal as recounted in traditional stories is a link to the qualities that distinguish the space occupied by old people. Their personal identities and actions bring stories from the realm of long ago and Far-away into the centre of camp life. Red berries, eggshells and camera flash link to stories about the power of thunderbird, whose red eyes flash lightning and whose eggs are laid in nests high in the mountains. The sound made by stretched string was used by giant spider man to lure his human game to a giant web. Frogs, living like people beneath the lakes, used drums in the gambling games they played with one another. Even a child is able to see the medicine stories in the lives of old people.

Every old person lives both in camp with other people and at the centre of the medicine stories revealed to him or her as a child. A person's growth is measured by the pace of his or her revelation of these secrets to the people at large. They must be revealed in such a way that they are discovered by people rather than imposed upon them. A child, fresh from the direct experience of medicine powers in the vision quest, must guard the secrets closely, perhaps

even direct them to some quiescent place below everyday consciousness. Later, with maturity, a person may dream back to that visionary moment, recalling it back into everyday life. In these dreams, the child's experience becomes an active point of reference in the life of the adult. Through dreaming, the adult learns that the time has come to construct a medicine bundle containing objects symbolic of the medicine story. The bundle is an outward sign of inner growth. It can only be put together on the authority of a dream that goes back to the child's vision. The bundle is hung above and to the east of a person's sleeping place. The act of producing a medicine bundle indicates a person has begun to dream back to this visionary moment. The bundle is a physical representation of a story becoming active in a person's life, but it does not give any clues to the identity of the story or its power. Outwardly, it is a plainly wrapped bundle, the contents of which are never revealed directly. The secret must be revealed slowly, if it is to be accepted as true to the person's deepest identity.

A person's relatives must figure out the slowly emerging pattern of his or her medicines in the same way that a child figures out the medicines of old people. The secrets must be told bit by bit, so that they are discovered by others rather than claimed directly. Medicine powers are shown gradually as people become teachers within their bands. The powers are real only as people discover them for themselves. Children first discover the powers of old people from the special quality of the space around them. In the vision quest they apprehend power through overwhelmingly direct transformative experience. Later they dream back to that time and begin to release information for the people living closest to them. When a person begins to dream back, the child's vision gradually emerges from his or her subjectivity to touch an inner circle of closest relatives, and then outward to more distantly connected people. As a person's household grows, more people have an opportunity to observe the medicine bundle. In times of crisis, it may be used ritually in an attempt to restore well-being. The bundle and the dreaming of its owner become important to the household's sense of self sufficiency. Success in the food quest attests to an ability to see connections between the trails of people and animals. Dreaming back to the child's vision is associated with dreaming ahead to the point of contact between hunter and game. The present moment is seen to be framed by visions of past and future encounters with medicine power. Knowledge of the future must be balanced by knowledge of the past.

At every stage of the life cycle, medicine powers are secrets that must be discovered in order to be valid. The ability to discover meaningful patterns is as important to the mastery of bush skills as it is to the learning of medicine stories. Mastery of one is taken as indicative of having mastered the other. The ability to figure out meaning in the pattern of animal movements in the bush is the same ability through which the meaning of medicine stories is learned. Only when a person has begun to demonstrate an understanding of subsistence skills, will the external tokens of medicine power be accepted. The secrets of a person's deepest subjective experience become part of his or her public identity only when they also contribute to an intelligent identification with the powers of nature through which all of Dunne-za life descends. Both medicine powers

and bush skills are learned through a combination of intelligent observation and intense transformative experience. Stories of Saya, the culture hero, and stories of individual medicines are learned as part of the interpretive process through which Dunne-za children become competent and contributing members of their society.

The Dunne-za refer to medicine power as "knowing something." To know something is to have both experienced and interpreted it. The vision quest is an intensely personal transformative experience of which all Dunne-za children are possessed. The medicine powers that grow out of this experience are socially validated personal interpretations of traditional stories. This powerful union of personal experience and cultural programme is demonstrated most dramatically on the rare but significant occasions when a person's medicine space is wilfully and knowingly violated. Because the giant medicine animals were people-eating monsters, a person whose story is deliberately challenged within his or her personal space is said to become "too strong." This person is then compelled by the logic of the medicine story and the authority of having truly experienced the story in a vision quest, to begin a transformation into the person-eating mythic monster. The resulting anthropophagous being is called Wechuge, and the performance leading up to the completed transformation is highly stylized. In it, the person whose medicine power has been violated, re-enacts within camp the events of the empowering medicine story. A person whose frog power was violated, for instance, began to jump up and down like a frog. (For other examples and a more thorough description of the wechuge performance see Ridington, 1976). Usually, the community supports the person whose power has been violated. Others, whose medicines are well recognized, use their own powers to bring the wechuge under control before the transformation has become irrevocable.

The wechuge performance is dramatic in that, energized by the fire of interpersonal conflict, it makes manifest secrets that otherwise are left to inference. Wechuge is a stylized cultural performance. It can only be understood by people within the culture. The child who sees someone he knows performing a medicine story as Wechuge learns both the story's content and its extraordinary power. The clues that ordinarily reveal a person's medicines suffused within the background of camp life emerge to dominate the entire camp during a wechuge performance. I only know of older people actually having carried off such a performance. It seems that when a younger person's more covert medicines are challenged the result is more likely to be a private medicine fight (Ridington, 1968). Because a younger person's medicines are still largely secret and not an established fact of social identity, defense of a challenge is less likely to result in a public drama.

CONCLUSION

Dunne-za stories of personal vision quest experiences and traditional Dunne-za myths are private and public versions of the same information. To a young person, the myths are public information while stories of the vision quest are

personal secrets. During the course of a person's life, his or her identity becomes more myth-like until, as an old person, the events of the medicine story encountered as a child become public information. Story telling is a form of communication of great antiquity. In small scale band level societies stories are an important channel for interpreting and communicating personal experience. They are a bridge between subjectivity and the intersubjective realm of culture. The anthropologist's distinction between myth and narrative obscures the interpenetration of these two levels of symbolic communication in band level societies. In communicating a personal experience to others, the story teller uses the same system of meaning found in traditional myths. At least among the Dunne-za, personal and cultural communications are systematically related to one another.

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