EXAMINING THE USE OF ORAL TRADITION IN THE WRITING OF OJIBWA HISTORY

BY

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A thesis submitted to
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the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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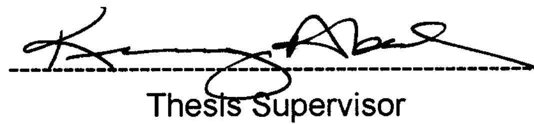

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to determine whether oral tradition is effective in the study of Native history, using a specific case study of Ojibwa traditions. It is argued that oral tradition is useful in corroborating documentary evidence, providing supplementary information, and providing information that is unavailable in traditional sources. This study begins with an examination of scholarly works that discuss the use of oral tradition as historical evidence. The structure and purpose of these traditions are discussed in the second chapter. The history of the Ojibwa in the post-contact period based on traditional documentary sources is presented to demonstrate the limitations of these documents. In the final chapters, specific oral traditions of the Ojibwa are examined to demonstrate how oral tradition can be used in reconstructing Ojibwa history in the pre- and post-contact periods.

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Introduction

In a general sense, history is the study of people and events that occurred in the past. But history is also much more than merely a list of dates, names and events. History is an integral part of who we are as individuals, as families, as communities, and as a nation. Our history provides us with a sense of identity, as well as communicating our cultural values to successive generations. What we remember about our past influences how we interpret the world in which we live, and the decisions we make every day.

Within the discipline of history, historians have always had different ideas about what constitutes history, and how it should be written. At times, history has been used as a tool to encourage nationalism, to justify imperialism, and to explain why certain events took place or certain decisions were made. History has also been written to help us understand the experiences of others in a different time or place. Furthermore, depending on how history is written, we can gain different interpretations about the same events. For example, the history of British colonialism is usually presented in very different ways when considered from point of view of colonizers than from the point of view of the colonized, or indigenous peoples.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the writing of history became increasingly structured. Influenced by the scientific method, historians moved towards what they called *objective* history, and away from what they considered *stories*. They believed that history should be based on empirical, verifiable evidence that came from tangible sources, such as written documents. It became generally accepted that "if

something was not written, preferably in an official document, it was not historical."[1] This growing dependence on written sources effectively silenced any groups in society that were illiterate as well as those societies which were non-literate. Those who did not produce written documents did not seem to possess a history at all.

In the past, oral sources were used either on their own or to corroborate written documents and to provide further details when written sources were lacking or non-existent. Since the late nineteenth century, however, historians have relied increasingly on written or paper documents, almost to the exclusion of oral sources. In fact, it was not until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as European society grew increasingly literate, that Europeans began recording events of historical importance in written form, and it was upon these documents that the histories written in later centuries relied. Such "primary" documents were accorded a certain prestige, and it grew increasingly rare for an historian to consult oral evidence.[2] The influence of Leopold Von Ranke and the German school of scientific history further concentrated research on tangible written documents to the exclusion of other "intangible" sources. Oral evidence was eventually deemed too subjective to be used as a credible source and, as a result, fell into disfavour among historians by the twentieth century.

In the study of Canadian history, this shift in focus has resulted in the marginalization of Native peoples. They were overlooked or ignored in favour of the

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[1]Olive Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 11.

[2]David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (New York: Longman House, 1982), 13.

history of the colonizing nations, or those individuals who were considered nation-builders: individuals who influenced the political and economic growth of Canada during the last few centuries. It was not often that Native peoples were recognized as influential individuals and, in fact, Native contributions to Canadian history seemed minimal or non-existent. Part of the reason historians tended to overlook Native peoples was that they constituted a very small percentage of the population and were expected to eventually disappear or be assimilated into the "general" population. Another reason historians have tended to ignore First Nations history lay in the sources upon which this professional history relied. Aboriginal peoples simply did not produce the type of document that historians were looking for, and so did not seem particularly important in Canadian history.

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in Native history and the history of North America from an Aboriginal point of view. Aware of the biases and limitations inherent in early European written documents, historians, as well as anthropologists and ethnologists, began to search for documents that could more accurately portray the Aboriginal perspective of events. This trend in historical research has fostered greater interest in the use of oral traditions of Native people to reconstruct both pre-contact and post-contact history.

As has been noted, the use of oral tradition is certainly not a new concept in the study of history. Historians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries tend to forget that all history was at one point an oral exercise. Until the early modern period, written and oral sources co-existed, and the use of oral evidence was of central importance. Consider

the epic poems of Homer, and the *Iliad* in particular, whose description and historical detail led researchers and archaeologists to the lost city of Troy — once considered no more than fiction or fantasy. Even today our judicial systems function on the basis of a form of oral tradition. Our spoken words and testimonies given in a legal or courtroom setting are accepted, if not always as fact or truth, then at least as essential and integral to the judicial process.

To date most of the scholarly literature concerning oral tradition has come from disciplines other than history. Oral tradition has been a topic for anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists and linguists. Nevertheless, historians are turning increasingly to oral traditions for information and historical data. Historians, ethnologists and anthropologists are attempting to use oral tradition more frequently in composing the history of Aboriginal peoples with varying degrees of success. Those wishing to pursue the history of nonliterate societies have had to develop alternate methods to do so. Ethnohistory is one such method used in the study of Native history which combines historical research with anthropological methods of interpreting oral sources and traditions within an understanding of cultural systems. This approach allows researchers to establish the credibility of oral traditions by comparing specific traditions to written historical documents, and anthropological and archaeological research.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether, and in what ways, oral traditions can contribute to our understanding of Native history. The ancestors of the Ojibwa[3]

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[3]There are a variety of spellings used for *Ojibwa*, including Ojibway, Ojibwe and Chippewa. I have elected to use Ojibwa simply because it is used most frequently by

people of the eastern woodlands of North America came into direct contact with Europeans over three hundred and fifty years ago. During the early part of this period, the Ojibwa became one of the most powerful military forces and influential Native groups involved in the European fur trade. Their economic and military strength continued throughout the eighteenth century, and the Ojibwa remain today one of the largest groups of Native people in North America. In spite of this, very little is known about the culture and history of the Ojibwa people either in the distant past or immediately prior to European contact in the early seventeenth century. According to early European traders and explorers, the Ojibwa did not produce written documents of their history and culture and, thus, there was no available record of the time before Europeans first arrived on the continent. While the Ojibwa may, in fact, have preserved their history and lore with birch bark scrolls and wampum belts, early Europeans were ill-equipped to understand or translate these records.[4] The Europeans failed to recognize the nature and significance of these documents, and dismissed them as irrelevant or unimportant.

As an oral rather than literate society, the Ojibwa preserved the history of their people, as well as their culture, tradition and beliefs, through stories, legends, ceremonies and songs. This oral tradition is quite unlike the European sources to which historians and scholars are accustomed. Furthermore, oral sources do not always provide the kind of

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Ojibwa authors and scholars. Similarly, I have selected the spelling of *Anishinabe* from among many because it is more frequently used, and shorter than other versions.

[4]Wub-e-ke-niew, *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought – the First Book Ever Published from an Ahnishinahbæó'jibway Perspective.* (New York: Black Thistle Press, 1995), 4.

historical information scholars are seeking, particularly in terms of empirical data such as specific dates. Does this mean that the aboriginal history of the Ojibwa is inaccessible to historians? Since oral tradition does not seem to meet the standards of objective evidence, should historians reject the basic concept of historical evidence as defined by the European intellectual tradition? Or can methods of European historiography be adapted to permit the study of oral tradition? What sort of information does this tradition preserve and how might historians interpret this information?

Through a case study of the Ojibwa, I will begin by summarizing the different theoretical approaches to the study and use of oral tradition in the writing of Aboriginal history. I will then consider the nature and purpose of oral tradition and will examine the structure of an oral narrative, including paralinguistic elements, and the role of the storyteller and audience. In Chapter Three I will present an overview of Ojibwa history based on traditional documentary sources, and consider what type of information we can gain from, and the limitations of, these sources. In subsequent chapters, I will attempt to apply the methods for using oral sources to some of the traditions of the Ojibwa people.

Among the traditions I will consider are the *origin myths* of the Ojibwa, and those that describe the *Midewiwin* or *Midé.* Origin stories, in particular, have been problematic for historians because of their mythical structure. These traditions are most unlike the traditional documents upon which historians usually rely, and equally unlike those traditions which seem to contain an explicit message or information. I will attempt to discover the type of information that can be learned from origin myths, and how that information can contribute to our understanding of Ojibwa history.

The Midewiwin and its origins have also been controversial in the study of Ojibwa history. The Midé is a complex society that teaches and performs healing techniques and ceremonies, and conveys religious instructions and guidelines for the Ojibwa people. Membership in the Midé is exclusive, and medicine men and women undergo rigorous training before they are initiated. Scholars such as Charles Bishop and Selwyn Dewdney have maintained that, based on information provided by traditional documents, the Midé developed during the post-contact era as a nativistic response to the pressures of European expansion and Christianity. Many Ojibwa, however, argue that the Midé is an aboriginal institution and has formed the basis of Ojibwa religion since ancient times. I will consider the debate in greater detail later in this paper, and examine both traditional documents and oral traditions that relate to the Midé to determine whether the Midé should be considered an aboriginal religion, or a post-contact development.

For the purpose of this study, I have focussed my research on those groups which may be narrowly defined as Ojibwa, and I have elected to omit closely related groups such as the Ottawa and Potawatomi. The groups considered within this study, then, are the Western Ojibwa, also called the Bungi or Plains Ojibwa; the Southeastern Ojibwa; the Southwestern Ojibwa, also known as the Chippewa; and the Northern Ojibwa. Although I will argue that it is important to experience oral traditions in their original context, that is, orally in Ojibwa, in order to preserve the context, I have limited my research to those oral traditions that have been published in English. Unfortunately, I do not speak the Ojibwa language, and do not have the resources to record and collect Ojibwa tradition from Ojibwa storytellers themselves. I have examined a variety of oral traditions, both

those published by non-Natives and Ojibwa authors, from different periods throughout the last three centuries.

Chapter 1
Historiography: The Debate about Oral Tradition

Interest in Third World and Aboriginal history in the late twentieth century has led to a renewed interest in and concern about the use of oral sources. Ironically, just at the point when questions were being raised about these histories, many academic historians were continuing to express a disdain for and distrust of oral sources. But other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and ethnography were more open to the use of these sources in their studies of indigenous and non-literate peoples. Thus, much of the literature in which these issues are discussed is from disciplines other than history. The multi-disciplinary nature of the study of oral traditions has resulted in varying approaches to and interpretations of the subject.

Yet there are concerns that are common to these studies, regardless of discipline. Limitations of oral tradition, such as inherent subjectivity and flexibility, are frequently discussed, as are problems of memory and translation. In the early part of the twentieth century, anthropologists and ethnologists were concerned with the validity of oral tradition as a source of historical evidence, and this debate has continued more recently among historians. In the meantime, anthropologists and ethnologists have shifted their focus increasingly to the specific role of oral tradition in the study of indigenous peoples, rather than its validity. During the latter half of the twentieth century, historians began to recognize that where little or no written history existed, oral sources could be valuable in filling in the gaps.

This chapter is by no means an exhaustive examination of all works currently available on this topic, but is intended to provide an overview of some of those sources, and to consider how the debate has developed and shifted focus. The body of literature which exists concerning oral tradition can be classified into three major groups: those works that are concerned with the validity or reliability of oral tradition; those that accept oral tradition as a valuable supplement to written sources; and those that argue the inherent value of oral tradition independent of traditional, written sources. In addition, scholars within each group have attempted to establish acceptable frameworks for the study of oral tradition. In general, it is earlier works that share a common concern about the validity and reliability of oral tradition as historical evidence, while there is a marked shift in the latter half of the century to a focus on methodology, particularly how oral tradition may best be used.

It was following this shift in focus that a further debate emerged. Scholars who accept the validity of oral tradition in historical research tend to subscribe to one of two general viewpoints: that oral tradition, as a window through which to view past cultural and social structures, should act as a supplement to existing written documents; or that oral tradition is an essential source in the study of indigenous peoples, regardless of corroborating written sources. An increasing number of researchers believe that oral tradition is a valuable commentary on the past culture which produced the tradition *and* the present one which repeats it. Although general studies of oral tradition are still being produced, more and more the emphasis is on studies of specific peoples and language

groups. Recent studies of oral sources and non-literate peoples draw on general works concerning methodology in an attempt to apply them to focused research.

Some of the earliest discussions of oral tradition were by American anthropologists. In 1915, Drs. Swanton and Dixon produced a paper which drew upon oral sources in reconstructing the history of various North American Native tribes. Robert Lowie then published a critique of that paper, stating that he could not "attach to oral traditions any historical value whatsoever under any conditions whatsoever."[1] Lowie objected to the paper because he did not believe that any of the information contained in oral traditions was historically accurate. In response, D.B. Dixon defended their use of oral traditions, arguing that although oral tradition "is sometimes grotesquely inaccurate...[the fact that] it is sometimes extraordinarily accurate and generally correct is equally a matter of record."[2] Dixon contended that when cross-checked with archaeological and ethnographic data, oral traditions had proven to be remarkably accurate. Although neither essay explored in any detail how oral sources could be used as historical evidence, this exchange is representative of the controversy and debate that has continued to the present.

In 1916, Lowie published a second article entitled "Oral Tradition and History" in which he elaborated and revised his previous claim. Although he still protested the use of

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[1]Robert Lowie. "Oral Tradition and History" *American Anthropologist* 17, no. 3 (1915) 598.

[2]D.B. Dixon. "Oral Tradition and History" *American Anthropologist* 17, no. 3 (1915) 600.

oral traditions as historical records, Lowie admitted the psychological importance of those traditions to the group that produced them.[3] He acknowledged that oral traditions contained religious and social information that was important to the people to which the tradition belonged, but continued to insist they were of no value to the study of history. In making this claim, he was denying oral traditions any historical value, but not all value "whatsoever". Lowie objected to oral traditions on the basis that they *could not* accurately depict events in history, given that he believed Native Americans had no historical sense.[4] While he acknowledged the social and religious importance of the traditions, Lowie believed that Native Americans did not preserve in their oral traditions any events that were of historical significance, and were thus incapable of remembering *history*. At least, they did not remember events that Lowie considered of value.

Further, Lowie argued, the very human tendency to embellish and alter traditions in hindsight meant that historical inquiries "can be solved only by the objective methods of comparative ethnology, archaeology, linguistics and physical anthropology."[5] Oral tradition remained too subjective and culture-specific to contribute valuable historical data. Lowie condemned oral tradition for the very reason which Dixon and Swanton valued it — it was a subjective view of a culture in both the past and the present. Indeed, future scholars would abandon the search for historical fact in oral tradition and study

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[3]Robert Lowie. "Oral Tradition and History" *Lowie's Selected Papers* Cora Du Bois, ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1960) 203.

[4]Lowie, *Selected Papers*, 207.

[5]Lowie, *Selected Papers*, 210.

instead *why* non-literate peoples remembered the events they did; few were willing to struggle with the question of these traditions as historical evidence. It was not until 1961, with the publication of Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* that the question was again addressed in detail.

Based on many years' field work in Africa, Vansina's study explored the possibility of reconstructing the history of non-literate peoples from their oral traditions. Unlike Lowie, Vansina believed that oral traditions occupied a special place in historical research. Vansina admitted that history produced from oral tradition may be less reliable, in particular when no independent written documents exist to corroborate the information provided by the traditions. This is no reason, however, to disregard oral tradition. Through his study of twentieth century non-literate peoples in the Rwanda, Burundi, and what was then the Congo, Vansina concluded that oral tradition "merits a certain amount of credence within certain limits."[6] The value of oral tradition lay in supplementing written records. Vansina recognized oral tradition as a valid historical source capable of providing reliable information if its accuracy could be verified using information obtained through other disciplinary methods such as etymology and archaeology.[7]

An example of the use of oral tradition to supplement traditional sources can be found in the work of historian Kerry Abel, who combines oral tradition and

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[6]Jan Vansina. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. H.M. Wright, trans. (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1965) 1.

[7]Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 200.

archaeological evidence in her discussion of the migration of the Dene people to the Mackenzie drainage system. The Northern Dene are close relatives of the Navajo and Apache nations and, based on an etymological study, the split between these groups most likely occurred between 500 AD. and 800 AD. One hypothesis concerning this split suggests a massive volcanic explosion around this time period in the St. Elias Range, and recent archaeological evidence has indeed placed the most recent eruptions of the White River volcano between 310 AD. and 525 AD.[8] Over a metre of ashfall accumulated in the regions south of the White River Valley, and as much as thirty centimetres of ash fell in the nearby Yukon River Valley. Such a massive explosion would produce noxious gases, mudslides, and sustained periods of acid rain, making the region quite unliveable.

Hare, Mountain and Slavey tradition, among others recorded in the twentieth century, make unmistakable reference to the "exploding mountain", and it is hardly surprising that an event of such magnitude and devastation would be commemorated in a people's history and tradition.[9] This is particularly significant to the study of oral tradition when one realises that these traditions and the event they depict have been preserved for almost 1400 years. A Hare tradition also exists which connects the exploding mountain to the proliferation of languages and the scattering of people. This corroboration between oral tradition, and archaeological and linguistic evidence strongly suggests that the eruption of the White River volcano was directly responsible for the Dene migration out

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[8]Kerry Abel. *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1993), 8.

[9]Abel, 10.

of the White River region, resulting in the ancient separation from their Apache and Navajo relatives.

Another example of the use of oral tradition in conjunction with traditional, in this case geological, sources can be found in the article "When the Mountain Dwarfs Danced", by Alan D. McMillan and Ian Hutchinson. McMillan and Hutchinson consider geological evidence and oral tradition of great earthquakes that occurred off the West Coast of North America in the Holocene period. They argue that major geological phenomena such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and mud and rockslides would have dramatically affected populations living along Canada's Western coast. They examined the oral tradition of current Native groups living on Vancouver Island and the nearby mainland to determine if these events were preserved in myth and legend. They discovered that earthquakes are a prominent feature in Nuu-chah-nulth and Bella Coola valley tradition and ceremony. Furthermore, oral tradition specifically mentions a major earthquake followed by a tsunami which seems to correspond with records on earthquake activity kept in Japan thousands of years ago.[10]

In spite of this accuracy, McMillan and Hutchinson insist that oral tradition cannot be read in the same way as historical records. They argue that oral tradition provides "important independent sources of information on past geological events that

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[10]Alan D. McMillan and Ian Hutchinson, "When the Mountain Dwarfs Danced: Aboriginal Traditions of Paleoseismic Events along the Cascadia Subduction Zone of Western North America" (in *Ethnohistory* v. 49, Winter 2002), 53.

affected human societies."[11] Oral narratives provide far more than simple historical facts. These narratives provide a frame of reference through which Native people can rationalize and interpret these events and the world around them.

Although Vansina saw value in oral tradition, he also remained somewhat conservative in his acceptance of it, maintaining, like Lowie, that cultural bias and selective preservation limited the credibility of traditions. According to Vansina, a researcher using oral tradition to reconstruct the past should not expect to produce as detailed or precise an account as one based on written sources.[12] Furthermore, he believed it was essential that researchers apply the same rigorous standards to the traditions that they applied to all other kinds of historical sources, which also frequently contained biases and limitations. In addition, Vansina maintained that a thorough knowledge of the culture and language under study was essential in the evaluation of oral tradition. Vansina's work was extremely influential in the study of oral tradition, and remains one of the most useful references for historians interested in oral sources.

Other general studies of the use of oral sources in historical writing have followed. Reiterating many of the themes found in Vansina's work, David Henige's *Oral Historiography* is a survey of oral historical literature, including both oral history and tradition. While oral sources are important to the study of non-literate societies, Henige argues that they are also inherently unstable, and are most valuable when used to

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[11]McMillan and Hutchinson, 62.

[12]Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*. (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 199.

supplement and corroborate existing written documents. In a similar vein, Richard Dorson produced a more general study of folklore and oral history, but includes some valuable insights in his chapter "The Debate over the Trustworthiness of Oral Tradition".[13] Predominantly a history of the debate, Dorson advocates the use of corroborating testimony from other genres to establish the accuracy of oral tradition.

Henige and Dorson are equally skeptical of the use of oral tradition, and note the problem of imperceptible changes in those traditions over time. Henige argues that many contemporary versions of oral traditions are the "debris of an obliterated past, the result of its mental landscape being repeatedly exposed to weathering, its shapes deposited in secondary patterns and shifting with the wind."[14] The constant adaptation of oral traditions to present circumstances obviously results in less accuracy and credibility as historical evidence. Despite his own hesitancy to lend too much credence to oral tradition, Dorson concludes that such traditions may to a certain extent be historically accurate: it was, after all, oral tradition that led archaeologists to discover the city of Troy.[15]

More recently, in *The Pursuit of History*, John Tosh discusses the use of oral sources in some detail. Yet even he persists in focussing on the difficulties in using oral sources and the inherent problems therein. Like Vansina, Tosh refers to African

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[13]Robert Dorson. "The Debate over the Trustworthiness of Oral Tradition" *Folklore: Selected Essays* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972), 221.

[14]Henige, *Oral Historiography* (New York: Longman Inc., 1992), 5.

[15]Dorson, 221.

examples, arguing that the social function and content of a tradition would be substantially modified after a number of generations; certain details considered irrelevant by one generation would be suppressed, thereby threatening the continuity of the tradition.[16] Furthermore, traditions tend to validate the current social order and rarely acknowledge that changes have ever occurred. Reminiscent of Lowie's argument, Tosh argues that "unlike primary sources, oral tradition does not convey the original words and images from which the historian may be able to recreate the mental world of the past," and oral tradition should be treated as a secondary source "with the added twist that it has erased all the earlier versions."[17] Tosh contends that traditions collected today are in all likelihood very different from those of a generation ago.

Tosh maintains that oral tradition is indeed a valuable method of obtaining the voice of those whose histories have been neglected in the past. Ideally, Tosh argues, oral traditions should be collected time and again from the same cultures over many generations. The value of oral tradition lies in analyzing the changes in these traditions to shed light on changes that have occurred in the culture. As groups grow increasingly literate, however, this process becomes increasingly difficult. If the culture itself consciously records its tradition in written form, this record may prevent such changes from naturally occurring. According to Tosh, recording oral tradition in written form essentially freezes it in time, locks the tradition in to a static, unchanging account that

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[16]John Tosh. *The Pursuit of History* (New York: Longman House, 1991) 221.

[17]Tosh, 223.

can no longer adapt to suit the culture as it evolves. Furthermore, as people become more literate, there may be less dependence or emphasis on oral tradition.

Similar arguments are found in Kenneth Wylie's essay "The Uses and Misuses of Ethnohistory". Although Wylie's focus is the growth during the late 1960s and early 1970s within the field of Ethnohistory, he discusses the use of oral tradition as an integral part of the ethnohistorical method. Wylie argues that oral traditions should be given emphasis equal to that of written sources, and that neither source should be used in isolation from the other.[18] Wylie stresses the importance of studying the traditions in context, but includes written documents of the period in that context. According to Wylie, oral traditions do not yet merit study in isolation from written "primary" documents, but their value remains as a supplement to written documents. Ethnohistorians, Wylie asserts, must have a good knowledge of the culture under study, and also develop a sensitivity to the culture to avoid gross misinterpretations of tradition. Although he advocates a "two-pronged approach using traditional written sources and carefully collected oral traditions", Wylie does not address the question of how to write a history where no written documents exist for comparison.[19]

Over the last decade, studies of oral tradition have become increasingly specialized. In addition, the debate over oral tradition has shifted focus: rather than continue the debate on the validity of oral sources, scholars are instead examining the

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[18]Kenneth C. Wylie. "The Uses and Misuses of Ethnohistory," in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3, no. 4 (Spring 1973) 711.

[19]Wylie, 717.

specific function or role these traditions might play in historical research. In addition to a new focus, new approaches to the interpretation of these sources have developed. Twenty years after his first work was published, Vansina recognized the shift in focus and chose to revise and reorganize his work, producing a second volume entitled *Oral Tradition as History*.

The goal of this work remains the same as the earlier one: to discover how oral tradition may be used as historical data. Vansina draws on more recent literature and studies and has, in fact, revised his earlier position. In comparing oral and written sources, Vansina argues that oral tradition can actually provide *more* information about the "author" than can static written documents.[20] Historians are trained to account for bias and interpretation when examining documents of any kind, and generally agree that written documents can be interpreted on two levels: the original author's and the historian's. An historian must be aware of the biases which may influence an individual's recording of past events, such as cultural or language differences, time period and personal interpretation. The same historian must also recognize that he or she brings to each document his or her own interpretations and potential biases. Oral traditions, on the other hand, develop many levels of interpretation as they are passed from generation to generation. Rather than view this as a limitation of oral traditions, Vansina suggested this is an inherent strength of oral information; oral traditions are not only a source of history, but a commentary on how the past has been interpreted by successive generations.

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[20]Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 196.

Vansina's second volume documents a shift from the narrow view that oral tradition is merely a supplement to written documents. What had been considered a limitation in the past was now viewed as a strength, allowing greater insight into a changing culture.

This theme is addressed and expanded by historian Elizabeth Tonkin. In *Narrating Our Pasts*, Tonkin does not view subjectivity or bias in oral tradition as a weakness or limitation. Instead, she considers bias "an essential part of any communication, and not a flaw to which oral tellers are particularly prone."[21] Tonkin argues that the inherent bias can give more information about the tradition and history of the culture, than can external "objective" written sources. A similar argument can be found in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli* by Alessandro Portelli. In his study of oral history, Portelli suggests that omissions are just as important in oral sources as what is included in an account; he also argues that errors in memory can be equally informative.[22]

Tonkin argues that context is of utmost importance in the study and interpretation of oral tradition. A researcher cannot merely scan oral traditions for pieces of information or historical fact; rather the entire context must be maintained. Equally important is the relationship between the teller and the audience. Since the audience will interpret the tradition in many different ways, this context too must be preserved.

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[21]Elizabeth Tonkin. *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992) 7.

[22]Alessandro Portelli. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1992) 2.

In Canada, a few scholars have addressed the issue of oral tradition in its broader sense. Anthropologist Bruce Trigger makes brief mention of oral sources in his oft-cited article "The Historian's Indian"; however he does not engage in the debate to any extent. Trigger recognizes the need to seek additional sources for the study of Native history and acknowledges that "oral traditions constitute one such source, although the tendency for this lore to be refashioned as circumstances change tends to make it unreliable."[23] This conservative point of view is much like that of Henige and Vansina in their early work. However Trigger does maintain that when oral traditions can be verified with other written sources, they constitute a valuable historical source indeed. Like Wylie, Trigger does not discuss how these traditions may be used in the absence of written documents.

Another proponent of the conservative and cautious use of oral traditions is Denys Delâge, a sociology professor at Laval University. Delâge's article "Les premiers contacts" is primarily a brief collection of Delaware, Huron, Mi'kmac, Assiniboine and Chippewa (Ojibwa) traditions. He selects only those which mention "first contact" between Natives and Europeans in an attempt to display their *in*accuracies as historical sources. Delâge argues that Native accounts of surprise at the arrival of the Europeans are not credible, because tribes had been trading for European goods long before the traders themselves ventured into the interior. The Natives must, therefore, have at least *known* about the Europeans some time before meeting them. Yet, Delâge points out, the oral accounts of

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[23]Bruce Trigger. "The Historian's Indian: Native Americans in Canadian Historical Writing from Charlevoix to the Present," *Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (1986) 333.

first contact imply utter ignorance of the European race. Based on this discrepancy, Delâge argues that oral tradition cannot be used to discover historical fact. As others have argued, he proposes that "ces récits ne sont pas sans avoir subi des modifications, à travers les siècles ...[et que] la mémoire, en effet transforme, intègre le présent...", resulting in unreliability as historical source.[24] For Delâge, oral tradition is still important in understanding the cultural and religious beliefs of a people, but should not be used to discover historical "fact".

Although a related idea is not fully developed in Delâge's article, implicit is the belief that oral traditions must be understood in their own context, and that expectations of written documents cannot be applied to oral sources. He argues that written documents contain historical facts, such as dates and locations, which cannot be obtained from oral "documents". As a result, oral traditions should not be approached as written documents, not searched for narrowly-defined *facts*, but examined as an opportunity to better understand the culture and people that produced them.

Renate Eigenbrod has made explicit much of Delâge's implicit argument. In her article "The Oral in the Written: A Literature between two Cultures", Eigenbrod focusses on the difficulty of recording oral traditions as written documents. Eigenbrod views the "instability" of oral tradition as a strength, and proposes that recording an oral story freezes it in time, preventing it from continuing to change and evolve as it has done for

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[24]Denys Delâge. "Les premiers contacts: selon un choix de récits publiés au 19e at 20e siècles," *Recherches amerindiennes au Québec* 22, no. 2-3 (1992) 111.

hundreds of generations.[25] The tradition is reduced to a static written document. Furthermore, she argues that writing these traditions down inevitably changes them in another sense because much of the context of the telling is lost. In particular, gestures and inflection used for emphasis in oral tradition are lost when the tradition is recorded in written form. Hence, for Eigenbrod, the performance itself is an integral part of the oral tradition.

Even when recorded in written form, according to Eigenbrod, the style of an oral tradition remains oral — sentence structure, repetitions and interjections — and the traditions must be read aloud to be fully understood. Eigenbrod sees an inherent contradiction in preserving in writing a tradition that "by its nature is in constant flux and thus defies preservation."[26] Transcripts or published versions of a tradition reduce the subjective experience of performance which is an integral part of oral tradition. Eigenbrod argues that, studied within their proper context and experienced as performance, oral traditions are a valuable and essential source in historical research. The continuing adaptation of a tradition can provide researchers with valuable insights into both the culture of the past and of the present.

Arnold Krupat has also tackled the issue of context in a study of Native American autobiographies entitled *For Those Who Come After*. While his primary focus is not specifically the study of oral traditions, Krupat offers valuable insights into the study of

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[25]Renate Eigenbrod. "The Oral in the Written: A Literature between two Cultures," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 15, no. 1 (1995) 93.

[26]Eigenbrod, 93.

Native texts, both written and oral. He acknowledges that autobiographies are not "a traditional form among Native peoples, but the consequence of contact with the white invader-settlers", and that consideration of these works requires an understanding of the culture and history of the authors.[27] Like Eigenbrod, he argues that oral narratives must be experienced, since verbal intonation and inflection cannot be effectively conveyed through the printed word. Context and individual expression is lost, and "no matter how scrupulous a transcription may be, it is inevitably a declension from the narrative as act."[28]

According to Krupat, the understanding of Native oral and written texts by a non-Native is a complex process. In addition to difficulties of language and cross-cultural experience, Krupat points out that, unlike Western-style documents, oral traditions lack a single author or creator. The term *author* implies an original process of creation, which does not apply to traditions which have been transmitted orally for generations.[29] Just as we cannot assume that Western concepts of private property applied to aboriginal Native culture, so also this concept of authorship cannot be assumed for oral traditions. In effect, these traditions have no single author, but are attributed to the culture as a whole rather than an individual.

Because these texts tend not to be the work of a single individual, but rather a collaboration of many authors, it is important to discover as much as possible about the

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[27]Arnold Krupat. *For Those Who Come After: A Study of Native American Autobiography*. (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1985), xi.

[28]Krupat, 3.

[29]Krupat, 11.

actual creation of the text. How many individuals were involved in its creation? What were the contributions of each of these authors, and do variants of the same text exist? Equally important is the knowledge of how and when the text was transcribed, and how well the transcriber understood both the culture and the language of the contributor. What were the motivations of both the transcriber and the narrator, and for what reason was this transcription embarked upon? These issues, Krupat argues, must be addressed when studying transcriptions of oral traditions and narratives by Native people.

The question of context is pursued further by Lisa Phillips Valentine and the Reverend F.W. Peacock in their separate works on Canadian Native oral tradition. What distinguishes these two from other sources is their emphasis on the importance of the language used in the traditions. In his article entitled "The Preservation of History and Culture among the Inuit of Labrador through Their Own and Contact Languages", Peacock explores the idea that language is more than just the vehicle used to communicate a specific tradition. Rather it is the language and words themselves that can reveal the history and traditions of a people; a single word contains history within itself.[30] Peacock explores the origin of Inuit terms as they reveal Inuit culture and beliefs.[31] Not

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[30]Rev. F.W. Peacock. "The Preservation of History and Culture among the Inuit of Labrador through Their Own and Contact Languages," in *Folklore and Oral History* Neil V. Rosenberg, ed. (St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Nfld., 1978) 92.

[31]Rev. Peacock uses the example of the word for "root" or "stem of life" as a root of the word for "mother" and "mother's milk" to illustrate his thesis. It has been a commonly held belief that women were considered inferior to men in Native cultures, but Peacock's example indicates that woman were viewed not as inferior but as the root of the culture and the people.

only does Peacock advocate the study and preservation of oral tradition, but also of all the dialects of all nations and groups across Canada in order to preserve their history. He further suggests that subtle changes in language over time operate much the same way as subtle changes in tradition, providing an implicit commentary on both past and present cultures.

In *Making it Their Own: Severn Ojibway Communicative Practices*, Valentine also addresses the issue of language, examining the role of discourse as a "universe through which socio-cultural relationships are most actively created, reinforced, negotiated, changed and disseminated."[32] Valentine makes thorough use of Ojibwa tradition and sources in an attempt, she claims, to allow the Severn Ojibwa to speak for themselves. Much like Peacock, Valentine recognizes not only the historical value of oral tradition, but also of the language used to communicate and ultimately transmit those traditions. Valentine does not recognize a need to use written sources to validate oral tradition, but rather argues tradition is a valuable source in and of itself. She argues that oral tradition and the specific language used provide a commentary on the social and cultural structures of the Ojibwa.

Catherine Rainwater is an English professor at St. Edward's University who has also considered the question of Native oral narratives. Her book, *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformation of Native American Fiction*, is actually an exploration of Native written narrative, and examines a few of the growing number of Native authors who are

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[32]Lisa Phillips Valentine. *Making it Their Own: Severn Ojibway Communicative Practices* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1995) 4.

producing written literature. She argues that the very act of writing their narratives presents a break from their traditional oral culture, but still maintains elements of oral storytelling. Native authors, according to Rainwater, "draw heavily on oral storytelling traditions", and she proposes that understanding Native literature requires an understanding of the role that oral tradition plays in Native culture and society.[33] Members of oral cultures believe that stories can change the world we inhabit by changing cultural values and, as a result, what its members' cultural identity is. Rainwater emphasizes that the context of oral tradition is essential, and that the role of the audience is one of active participation, rather than passive entertainment as is the case with most Western literature. She advises her reader that oral tradition does not comply with western expectations of chronology or that a consensus be reached by the end of the story. Instead, Rainwater argues that Native oral storytelling must be experienced as a whole, and interpreted freely by each member of the audience.

Paul Zolbrod has also considered the difficulty of reducing oral narratives to the written word in his study of Navajo culture and traditions. Published in 1984, Zolbrod's work began essentially as an attempt to rewrite the Navajo creation myth published in Washington Matthews' 1897 volume *Navajo Legends* in order to better preserve the poetry and performance he felt was absent from the earlier version. During his research, Zolbrod discovered that reducing oral literature to the printed word was extremely difficult; especially if one hoped to preserve the context, kinesthetic and poetic qualities

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[33]Catherine Rainwater. *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformation of Native American Fiction*. (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), xii.

of the oral narrative. Zolbrod counselled that anyone who undertook to record such oral tradition must be aware of the "kinesthetic dimension in oral delivery not evident in print, which might include a heavy gesture at one point and motionless at another, the deliberate use of eye contact and grinning, mimicking and mime, a hushed whisper or an unexpected shout."[34]

To eliminate these elements would be to subvert the tradition itself. This realization led Zolbrod to a discussion of oral tradition in general. He argues that oral tradition is far more effective a means of preserving culture and history than Western scholars can appreciate. Zolbrod suggests that the Navajo Creation Story is also much more than most scholars recognize: that it shapes the identity, values and perspective of the Navajo themselves. The Navajo people interpret much of their daily lives and interactions through the filter of their origin myth and the beliefs it embodies.[35] The narrative provides the Navajo people with their Navajo identity, and by studying the story within its proper context, Zolbrod argues that historians and scholars of other disciplines can learn a great deal about Navajo culture today and in the past.

The scholar who has produced the most comprehensive study of oral tradition to date in Canada is anthropologist Julie Cruikshank. She has devoted her career to the study of the oral tradition and history of the Athapaskan people of the Yukon, and produced a number of works on the topic. *The Stolen Women*, published in 1983, was an

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[34]Paul G. Zolbrod, *Diné bahane: The Navajo Creation Story* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1984), 16.

[35]Zolbrod, 23.

attempt to establish a framework for analyzing the narratives of Tagish and Tutchone women in central and southern Yukon. Cruikshank examines various themes in the narratives and suggests there is a common thread that connects myth and the present social reality of the Yukon women. Frequently, for example, the myths were used to reinforce the value of established social institutions and cultural norms. Cruikshank asserts that "fundamental to any ... investigation of narrative is the question of what myth can contribute to our understanding of society or people's ideas about society."[36] While others before Cruikshank have argued the necessity of oral tradition as a supplement to written sources, it is Cruikshank who argues most strongly that oral tradition is important in and of itself, independent of written sources. She believes that there is essential information to be found in oral tradition that is absent from traditional sources. Oral tradition is a window on society which can help clarify aspects of behaviour and social organization that cannot be found in written documents.

This early study raised a number of questions and issues which led Cruikshank to other studies in the same area. In 1991, in collaboration with three elderly Tagish and Tutchone women, she published *Life Lived Like a Story*, a collection of oral histories and oral traditions. In her introductory commentary, Cruikshank addresses the issue of how to represent in words the experience of one culture to members of another, and returns to the debate over the extent to which oral tradition can expand our understanding of the past, in particular where written sources are biased or distorted by the conditions under

[36]Julie Cruikshank. *The Stolen Women: Female Journeys in Tagish and Tutchone* (Ottawa: National Museum of Man (Canada), 1983), 5.

which they were produced.[37] Many of the written documents that exist for Yukon history were produced by short-term visitors during the Gold Rush or building of the Alaska Highway and, Cruikshank argues, lack a true understanding of the land and its people; the extensive use of oral tradition can redress this imbalance. Cruikshank believes that the study of how oral tradition is *used* merits greater attention than the search for its factual contribution. In addition, she suggests that the enduring tradition of storytelling in the Yukon demonstrates that the narratives continue to address important issues and concerns in the lives of the Tagish, Tlingit and Tutchone peoples.[38] Oral traditions are not only important in understanding the past, but also the present and, indeed, the future.

In two other works, Cruikshank addresses many of the same issues in greater detail. *Reading Voices: Dan Dha Ts'edenintth'é* is a further examination of the endurance of oral tradition and its relationship to the present.[39] Cruikshank also devotes considerable space to the comparison of written and oral documents collected in Yukon, including scientific accounts of geology, ecology and climate studies. New to her discussion here is the inherent opposition of Western ideas of science and history to the study of oral tradition. Just as Delâge and Eigenbrod contended that oral traditions should not be

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[37]Julie Cruikshank. *Life Lived Like a Story*. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1990) 3.

[38]Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story*, 399.

[39]Julie Cruikshank. *Reading Voices: Dan Dha Ts'edenintth'e, Oral and Written Interpretations of the Yukon's Past* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991).

approached in the same way as written primary documents, so Cruikshank believes researchers are mistaken in seeking historical facts or chronology in Native traditions. She argues that oral tradition has goals, methods and questions that frequently differ from goals and methods applied to written documents, so that oral tradition must be evaluated on different terms.

Cruikshank also discussed this question in her article "Oral Tradition and Oral History: Reviewing Some Issues," published in 1994. This piece is a more general study of the debate about oral tradition in which she highlights issues of subjective experience and context. She recommends that researchers embrace the subjective nature of oral tradition since "facts enmeshed in the stories of a lifetime provide a number of insights about how an understanding of the past is constructed, processed, and integrated into one's life."[40] While some viewed subjectivity as a limitation, Cruikshank believes the inherent subjectivity of oral tradition is one of its primary strengths. Not only does this subjectivity allow clearer insight into cultural and religious beliefs of Native people, but also provides a commentary on past and present societies that cannot be obtained from "objective" written documents.

Unlike her previous works, in this article Cruikshank does not dwell solely on the people of the Yukon, but provides examples from around the globe, including China, Britain and Germany. For the first time there is a discussion of Native participation in the debate, as greater numbers of Aboriginal people begin to write the history of their cultures

[40]Julie Cruikshank. "Oral Tradition and Oral History: Reviewing Some Issues," *Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (1994) 408.

themselves.[41] Further, Cruikshank indicates that indigenous people are demanding more often that oral tradition be taken seriously as containing legitimate perspectives on history.

In a more recent work, Cruikshank recognizes some concerns that are being expressed within the growing body of work on oral tradition. She points out that the oral histories from North American indigenous people are often examined in isolation of other available sources. She argues that this trend tends to isolate the study of Native oral tradition from international circles and debates. Cruikshank considers the work in the early part of this century by Harold Innis, Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin in describing how the study of oral tradition contributes to the study of history outside of Native cultures. Innis, Bakhtin and Benjamin each examined the act of storytelling in very different cultures and locations which, until now, have been overlooked. Cruikshank goes on to consider her work with Angela Sidney and Kitty Smith as demonstrating how oral narratives "can maintain human connections across clan, gender, and generation in face of enormous external pressures" and help people to understand contemporary issues.[42] In her conclusion, Cruikshank returns to the cross-disciplinary debates about the use of oral tradition in history. She maintains that oral tradition cannot be compared to

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[41]Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Oral History", 404.

[42]Julie Cruikshank, "Oral History, Native Strategies, and Native American Historiography: Perspective from the Yukon Territory, Canada" in *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies* Nancy Shoemaker, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 19.

traditional historical evidence but must be evaluated on its own terms with its own rules and its own methods of interpretation.

The call from Aboriginal peoples for oral tradition to be considered an authentic historical source is certainly not new. During the nineteenth century, a small number of Native authors expressed their dissatisfaction with European accounts of their history. According to Andrew J. Blackbird, a member of the Ottawa nation, by the 1880's, there had been "...a number of writings by different men who attempted to give an account of the Indians...but I see no very correct account of the Ottawa and Chippewa tribes of Indians, according to our knowledge of ourselves, past and present."[43] As a result, Blackbird decided to fill this void, and published his *History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians* in 1887. Blackbird was the son of an Ottawa chief, raised in the region of Michilimackinac, who, at the age of thirty-five decided to attend school in Ohio. Another Ojibwa author, the Reverend George Copway, also known as Kah-Ge-Ga-Gah-Bowh, was born in 1818 among the Mississauga, and produced his *Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation* in 1850. Copway became a Methodist minister, and later a popular author and lecturer. Another individual who contributed to the history of the Ojibwa people was the Reverend Peter Jones, or Kahkewaquonaby. Jones was the son of a Mississauga mother and European father, and published his volume, *History of the Ojebwa Indians* in 1861. A similar work, *History of the Ojibway*, was produced by William Whipple Warren, the son of a European father and a mother of

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[43]Andrew J. Blackbird. *History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians*. (Ypsilanti: Ypsilanti Job Printing House, 1887), 7.

mixed Ojibwa-French descent.[44] Throughout his life, Warren remained close to his Ojibwa relatives and gained considerable experience of their customs. Each of these authors was born and raised among the Ojibwa, and later received Western schooling.[45]

Each of these works was based to a large extent on oral tradition, although Copway consulted European documents to fill in any gaps left by the traditions. Blackbird wrote his work based on merely what he called "our traditions", without offering specific sources other than his memory.[46] Jones, Copway and Warren were more thorough, seeking out elders in their communities to provide the oral traditions which preserved their history and culture.

Despite their Native upbringing, each of these men produced his work in English in the hopes of transmitting his cultural and political history to the dominant Euro-Canadian culture. They were considered "acculturated" Natives, able to speak, read and write in English, and therefore able to bridge the gap which separated Native and non-Native cultures. At this time, Native peoples in North America remained largely non-literate, and so a published Ojibwa history in a language other than English was certainly unlikely, and would not have attracted much of an audience.

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[44]William Whipple Warren. *History of the Ojibway Nation*. (Minneapolis: Ross, 1957).

[45]The Ottawa and Mississauga are often among those tribes loosely defined as Ojibwa.

[46]Blackbird, 6.

Historian Peter MacLeod provides a summary of the works of these early Native historians in his essay "The Anishinabeg Point of View: The History of the Great Lakes Region to 1800 in Nineteenth Century Mississauga, Odawa and Ojibwa Historiography". Although his focus is written documents produced by Native individuals such as the Reverends George Copway and Peter Jones, MacLeod provides an interesting discussion of the oral sources upon which Jones, Copway and other Native historians during the nineteenth century based their histories. He asserts that Native oral tradition forms "an independent history of the Great Lakes area that both complements and balances history based on contemporary documents, and ... cannot be ignored by anyone wanting to produce a comprehensive account of the North American past."[47] This tradition, however, was largely ignored by historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. MacLeod also argues that these histories must be carefully examined for bias and the motivations of the author: essentially, that oral traditions must be approached with the same critical eye as are all documentary sources.

In his article, MacLeod examines the potential biases and motivations of these early Native authors. He argues that although these individuals were clearly educated, and not just "typical" Anishinabeg, they were in fact "representative of individuals that were able to function in both white and Amerindian cultures, and could therefore provide

[47]Peter MacLeod. "The Anishinabeg Point of View: The History of the Great Lakes Region to 1800 in Nineteenth-Century Mississauga, Odawa, and Ojibwa Historiography," in *Canadian Historical Review* v. 73, no. 2 (1992), 195.

extremely valuable insights into both cultures."[48] It is particularly important to note that MacLeod concluded that few of the events described in these works differed significantly from contemporary Western accounts. Instead, even though they were based on oral traditions collected at different times and in different locations, these histories demonstrated a "stability" among the traditions.[49] Traditions, therefore, provided an essential alternate perspective and interpretation of the history of North America. MacLeod warns against dismissing oral traditions and these versions of history as "parochial", arguing that since the history of North America is one of culture clash, it is essential to consider all available perspectives of the conflict, and not limit one's understanding to one point of view.

A more recent Aboriginal historian, Dane Morrison, considers how the history of Native peoples has been presented by non-Native historians, in his article "In Whose Hands Is the Telling of the Tale?". He points out that the writing of Native history by members of the dominant society often results in negative stereotypes of Native peoples or no mention of them at all. Morrison argues that these histories, rather than oral tradition, should in fact be called myths.[50] In order to produce a balanced account of Native history, scholars must use an interdisciplinary approach, consulting a variety of

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[48]MacLeod, 198.

[49]MacLeod, 206.

[50]Dane Morrison, "In Whose Hands Is the Telling of the Tale?" in *American Indian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Contemporary Issues* Dane Morrison ed., (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 6.

sources. Most often, histories based on only documentary evidence "were dictated by missionaries, influenced by government agencies, couched by politicians, shaped by Publishers' marketers, and happily unchallenged by audiences of farmers and ranchers, laborers and corporations."[51] These histories have not included Native sources or perspectives and therefore are dangerously imbalanced. Native communities, Morrison maintains, provide an alternative to traditional documentary evidence. He insists that historians rely too much on traditional documents to the exclusion of oral tradition. Morrison also argues that all evidence must be collected and analyzed carefully whether it is from written or oral sources.

An interesting work was recently published in the tradition of such Native authors as Copway, Jones and Warren, entitled *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought.* Although the author Wub-e-ke-niew does not discuss the use of oral traditions in recreating the history of Native peoples, his work is a more recent example of a history based almost exclusively on oral tradition. Wub-e-ke-niew asserts that his people, the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*, have inhabited the continent of North American continent for more than 800,000 years.[52] Written in what may be considered an inflammatory tone, Wub-e-ke-niew credits the oral traditions of his grandfather, and the sacred scrolls of the Midewiwin, the secret Medicine Society of the Ojibwa, for his

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[51]Dane Morrison, 7.

[52]Wub-e-ke-niew. *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought – the First Book Ever Published from an Ahnishinahbæó'jibway Perspective.* (New York: Black Thistle Press, 1995), 4.

knowledge of *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* history. Unfortunately, there is almost no discussion of how these oral traditions might be used to recreate aboriginal history and culture. It remains, however, one of the few recently-published attempts to recreate an aboriginal culture through the use of oral traditions, and is a valuable, if somewhat unbalanced, addition to the study of aboriginal Ojibwa history.

Angela Cavender Wilson is another scholar of Native heritage who is speaking up about the use of oral tradition in reconstructing the history of Native peoples. In her article "Grandmother to Granddaughter: Generations of Oral History in a Dakota Family," Wilson describes her experience of growing up hearing her grandmother recite stories, legends and traditions of the Dakota. Wilson argues that instead of repeating unverifiable myths, her grandmother's stories were deeply rooted in historical events, particularly in the United States - Dakota Conflict of 1862. Her many times great-grandmother's experience as one of the Dakota forcibly removed from Minnesota to South Dakota has been preserved for almost 150 years. Because these stories are not part of traditional histories, Wilson argues that Natives are responsible for repeating them and preserving them in oral tradition. She asserts that oral tradition is not merely a collection of interesting but historically irrelevant stories, but transmit the Dakota culture "upon which our survival as a people depends."[53] Wilson argues that historians should appreciate oral tradition for both providing "illumination"' to historical evidence and as

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[53]Angela Cavender Wilson, "Grandmother to Granddaughter: Generations of Oral History in a Dakota Family," in *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians* Devon A. Mihesuah ed. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1998), 35.

the critical feature of oral societies that is responsible for the survival and perpetuation of the culture.

In her brief article, Wilson also considers the role that memory plays in oral tradition, describing it as an acquired skill that must be developed and maintained. As a member of the Dakota, Wilson is also able to provide a perspective that is unique: the impact oral tradition had on her as a woman, mother and Dakota. Wilson explains that she learned valuable lessons about responsibilities, dignity, self-sacrifice and identity while listening to her grandmother's stories.[54] Finally, Wilson suggests that the role of the historian is not to judge oral tradition but to present it as one perspective among many others.

Not only Aboriginal scholars have been promoting a knowledge of oral tradition. Roger Spielmann is a non-Native scholar who has recently tried to explore and explain the Ojibwa perspective in his book *'You're so Fat!': Exploring Ojibwa Discourse*. A professor in the Native Studies department at the University of Sudbury, Spielmann lived among the Ojibwa at Pikogan in northwestern Quebec for eleven years, learning the language and gathering a wealth of stories, legends and traditions from the elders he knew. Spielmann's work is an attempt to present that perspective through the techniques of conversation analysis and linguistic discourse analysis. Spielmann argues that the Native perspective is often absent from studies of Native cultures, and that perspective can be obtained by studying the conversations, stories, songs and traditional teachings of

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[54]Wilson, 34.

the Ojibwa people.[55] Although Spielmann's focus is primarily the language used in conversation and traditions, he considers in-depth the role and importance of oral tradition in Ojibwa culture. Spielmann's argument is similar to Catherine Rainwater's, as he explores how oral tradition transfers cultural knowledge and cosmology to each generation, even within modern Ojibwa communities. Spielmann also discusses how non-Native scholars should approach this tradition in order to avoid imposing a Euro-Canadian framework or perspective. Scholars must develop a cross-cultural perspective in order to fully appreciate the complexities of Ojibwa culture and cosmology. It is impossible, Spielmann argues, to study any Native group without carefully considering their oral tradition. It is oral tradition that most clearly gives outsiders access to another culture and beliefs.

In June 1999, an important project began in the study of oral history. An interdisciplinary team from the University of Winnipeg collaborated to write the history of the Cree inhabiting the region southwest of Hudson and James bays. This study was particularly important since it is among the first attempts to work with both a storyteller and a team of scholars in recreating the history of the Swampy Cree or Omushkego. In this project, the storyteller and elder Louis Bird was given editorial control during all stages of the project. In the report produced by the project, the observations of Louis Bird are published in tandem with those of scholar George Fulford. This study marks the increasing recognition of researchers and historians of the valuable contributions of

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[55]Roger Spielmann, *'You're so Fat!': Exploring Ojibwa Discourse*. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1998), 5.

Native perspectives in the reconstruction of their history. Bird suggests that "in order to understand the legends...one has to understand what makes the story interesting [from an Omushkego point of view]."[56] It is not enough merely to collect these legends in isolation; historians must also investigate how the oral culture perceives its own legends and the context in which they are told.

In addition to the study of Native history, an interesting body of literature in other disciplines is appearing which contributes to the oral tradition debate. One area of particular interest is the use of oral tradition in women's studies. The majority of Cruikshank's works are focused on Native women, as are the works of Barbara Godard and Jane B. Katz. Godard's *Talking About Ourselves: The Literary Productions of Native Women of Canada* calls for a redefinition of "literary productions" to include oral narratives. Throughout history, Godard asserts, women have created oral texts such as tradition, song and poetry that have essentially been ignored in the study and writing of history.[57] In particular, Godard views Native women as "culture brokers", teachers and leaders, and as a result, their traditions and contributions are invaluable to historical and cultural studies. She does not view these traditions as merely a supplement to existing documents, but as providing a clearer sense of culture which may not be included in past written sources produced predominantly by men.

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[56]Louis Bird and George Fulford. "The Omushkego Oral History Project," in *Pushing the Margins: Native and Northern Studies*. Jill Oakes, Rick Riewe, Marlyn Bennett and Brenda Chisholm, eds. (Winnipeg: Native Studies Press, 2001), 276.

[57]Barbara Thompson Godard. *Talking About Ourselves: The Literary Productions of Native Women of Canada.* (Ottawa: CRIAW Publications, 1985), 5.

Katz, in her work *I Am the Fire of Time*, considers many of the same issues as Godard, although in an American context. She contends that oral tradition is the reservoir of Native people's knowledge and heritage, and that women are the traditional keepers of that reservoir. Women were essential to the life and stability of the tribe. When Native people were moved to reserves, tribes were decimated and families scattered, and yet the oral tradition survived.[58] Katz argues that not only did the oral tradition provide a sense of continuity in a time of confusion and dislocation, but the women themselves were the facilitators of that continuity.

Issues about oral traditions are also being debated in the courts. In *Delgamuukw v. B.C.*, a recent lands claims case in British Columbia, oral traditions were offered as evidence to demonstrate the historical depth of Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en occupancy in the territory in question. Although the original trial judge was instructed before the testimony was given not to search the oral tradition for specific dates or facts that may be expected of written sources, Judge MacEachern refused to accept the oral tradition offered as evidence on its own terms, contrasting it instead with "good evidence" which, in his opinion, came from the written record. The result was a complete disregard for the value of oral tradition and, by implication, of the Native rights in the dispute. In "Invention of Anthropology in B.C.'s Supreme Court: Oral Tradition as Evidence in *Delgamuukw v. B.C.*", Julie Cruikshank discusses the court's use and in fact *misuse* of oral tradition in this case. In Cruikshank's opinion, the case is a disastrous example of the

[58]Jane B. Katz, ed. *I Am the Fire of Time: The Voices of Native American Women.* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), xvii.

dangers of taking oral tradition out of the context in which it belongs, and trying to find in it specific historical "fact".[59] Eigenbrod and Delâge established that oral traditions should not be searched for specific historical *facts*, but rather studied for the understanding of culture and world-view more generally that they provide.

The early debate over oral tradition centered on its validity as an historical source. As scholars began to accept the value of oral tradition in reconstructing history, they began to consider oral tradition as a supplement to existing written documents, as a "window" to culture and social organization, or as a commentary on both the past and the present. Historians, anthropologists and ethnographers first treated oral traditions as objects to be collected and studied, but soon recognized the importance of the context in which the tradition was performed. More recently, there has been a shift to a greater effort to understand oral tradition on its own terms and merits, rather than imposing Western or literary standards.

What, then, are the merits of oral tradition? Is there something lacking in documentary sources that may be found in alternative sources such as indigenous oral tradition? How should historians approach this tradition? If an approach can be established, how can it be used to apply to specific Aboriginal history such as Ojibwa origins or the development of their Midewiwin? These questions may be answered more easily by first examining the nature and purpose of oral tradition. It will also be necessary to establish what sort of information traditional documentary evidence can provide, and

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[59]Julie Cruikshank. "Invention of Anthropology in B.C.'s Supreme Court: Oral Tradition as Evidence in Delgamuukw v. B.C.", *BC Studies* no. 95 (Autumn 1992) 33.

what may, or may not, be missing from such documents. The following chapters will consider some of these questions, and concerns, about oral and traditional documentary sources.

Chapter 2
The Structure of Oral Tradition

In the previous chapter, I outlined the continuing debate about the use of oral tradition in the study of Native peoples among historians, anthropologists and ethnologists. I demonstrated that in the early part of this century, most scholars did not believe oral tradition could contribute in any significant way to the study of Native history. By the later part of the twentieth century, this opinion had changed, as scholars began to accept oral traditions as inherently valuable and attempted to incorporate traditions into their research. This use has been challenging, since oral tradition remains very different from the types of traditional sources many scholars are accustomed to using. While basic methods of historical enquiry can be applied to oral tradition, it is essential that scholars be aware of the differences if they hope to use oral tradition effectively. In the following chapter, I will discuss the nature and purpose of oral tradition itself, to gain a better understanding of how it differs from more traditional historical sources. I will then suggest a framework that will consider some of the difficulties in studying oral tradition, and that may be applied to the study of oral tradition.

It is important at this point to distinguish between *oral history* and *oral tradition*. Oral history usually refers to the study of the recent past through the collection of personal reminiscences, rumours or eyewitness accounts of events experienced within the lifetime of the informant; the term oral tradition has been used to refer both to those traditions — myths, legends and histories — transmitted from generation to generation within a culture, as well as the process of that transmission. According to historian-

anthropologist Jan Vansina, oral tradition differs from oral history in that oral tradition is no longer contemporary, and the original informant or informants are no longer living.[1] Furthermore, early scholars argued that the tradition must be widely known and understood by the society in which it originated, although variations often may occur and are even expected.[2] Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank agrees that oral tradition can be used to refer both to the material that is remembered from the past, and the process of transmitting the material. She adds that the term *oral history* describes the actual method of recording information, and is usually a "sound recording...made of an interview about first hand experiences occurring during the lifetime of an eyewitness."[3]

Dakota author and scholar Angela Cavender Wilson, among others, disagrees with these definitions of oral tradition and history. She suggests that oral history and oral tradition are not separate entities, but that oral history is found within oral tradition. Wilson argues that an application of such limited definitions does not allow for the addition of any new material or experiences. Instead, she contends that oral tradition is the process of transmitting culture and has little to do with how long a story has been told. She argues that "personal experiences, pieces of information, events, incidents, etc., can become part of the oral tradition at the moment it happens or the moment it is told,

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[1]Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 12.

[2]David Henige. *Oral Historiography*. (New York: Longman Inc., 1992), 2.

[3]Julie Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Oral History: Reviewing Some Issues," *Canadian Historical Review* 75, no. 3 (1994), 404.

as long as the person adopting the memory is part of an oral tradition."[4] If these additions are not permitted within oral tradition then the culture, like the stories, cannot adapt to present circumstances.

I would argue that oral tradition does contain oral history, but that oral history also exists outside of oral tradition. An historian gathering eyewitness accounts of a current or past event is not creating oral tradition. Certainly, if the accounts are preserved orally among the teller and his or her family or culture and repeated, they may become an oral tradition in a general sense. The culture of the teller, however, plays a significant role in determining whether the account is classified as oral history or tradition. All cultures have some measure of oral tradition, and people share stories and reminiscences about the past, but these are much more ingrained in the character of an oral culture than in a predominantly literate one. Oral societies take greater care in preserving their histories and tradition in the oral form, than non-oral societies. Indeed, members of cultures with a strong oral tradition generally believe that humanity creates its own world through stories that are told.[5] For the purpose of this paper, I have used oral tradition to refer to the collection of oral stories preserved from the past, as well as the process of transmission, without limiting the time frame in which the traditions

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[4]Angela Cavender Wilson, "Grandmother to Granddaughter: Generations of Oral History in a Dakota Family," in *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, Devon A. Mihesuah ed. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1998), 29.

[5]Catherine Rainwater. *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformations of Native American Fiction*. (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), xiii.

originate or are recorded. I have considered traditions recorded in the past, as well as their contemporary versions.

Oral tradition functions on a number of different levels: to preserve the history of the people; to instruct community members in acceptable behaviour and accepted values; and to entertain. Oral societies believe that "one of the most important of the oral traditions is storytelling and the preservation of the origin histories...we are told where we come from...it is through these stories too that we are given the basic tools and ways of knowledge with which to survive in the world."[6] Oral tradition contains critical information about significant events, genealogy and geographical knowledge, kinship ties and political arrangements, and instruct future generations in practical issues such as subsistence activities of hunting and trapping. Their legends and myths contain stories of the creation of their people and also provide them with an understanding of the world around them. Without oral tradition, members of oral cultures would have no sense of the land in which they lived, or where their people had come from. Oral tradition lays the foundations for cultural behaviour and religious belief. Younger generations, and even outsiders, are instructed how to behave and how to view the world through their culture's oral tradition. Linguist Roger Spielmann, as a non-Native living among the Ojibwa, describes how oral tradition and storytelling was used to gently instruct him in

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[6]Peggy Beck, Anna Walters, and Nia Francisco. *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*. (Tsaile: Navajo Community College Press, 1993), 57 -8.

the customs and expectations of Ojibwa culture.[7] Rather than call attention to his "mis-behaviour", elders would recount a legend or story in which were embedded the finer points of Ojibwa etiquette.

The influence that myths, legends and stories exert on behaviour and ways of thinking is not to be overlooked. There is a strong belief among oral societies in the power of storytelling. Their oral tradition emphasizes tribal identity and roles, and helps to maintain solidarity within their communities. From birth we are taught what our culture deems acceptable behaviour, and we share a similar knowledge about our past as a people. This similar view has an enormous impact on how we, as individuals, think. It influences our decisions, how we perceive situations, and how we evaluate others in our society. An individual who chooses to conform to the expectations of the culture in which he or she lives creates for him or herself a sense of community, while one who does not conform often feels he or she does not belong, and lacks a sense of identity within the dominant culture. Essentially, oral tradition provides a people with this sense of identity.

Because these histories and legends create a sense of identity, and of solidarity within a community, they have the power to shape the world in which members of the culture live. Since successive generations are instructed how to behave, or what to think, those who control the representation of that culture through oral tradition even control how a culture perceives or reacts to different events, such as the arrival of Europeans in

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[7]Spielmann, Roger. *'You're so Fat!': Exploring Ojibwa Discourse.* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1998), 110.

North America.[8] Which stories are remembered and repeated, which legends are considered important, and which details are emphasized or omitted plays an integral role in defining their history. Clearly, oral tradition contains far more than stories intended for entertainment. It has the power to forge the identity and collective will of a society by determining what is remembered as well as what the fundamental beliefs of the culture are.

Told over and over again, the myths and legends of oral peoples are given new life with each telling. Voices are imitated, dramatic gestures added, and each narrator varies the tradition slightly to reflect his or her own character. The prominent characters are alive and immortal, and not the result of an active imagination. It was through these characters that cultural beliefs and behavioural norms are expressed. Common patterns, including information about social organization and belief systems remain. Storytellers adapt traditions to appeal to the current generation without changing the central teaching or message.

Both Natives and non-Natives are continually updating their frames of reference as the world around them changes, and we should expect no less of oral tradition. As cultures constantly change and adapt to external circumstances, the adaptation within oral tradition merely reflects the ongoing adaptation within the oral culture. Even history is not absolute.[9] Our past is constantly revised and reinvented with each generation —

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[8]Rainwater, 19.

[9]Rainwater, 46.

what we accept as fact and truth about our history is subject to continuous reinterpretation. This adaptation provides a commentary not only on the past generation, but also on the present one which has reexamined and altered it.[10] In the study of oral tradition, these changes and modifications may offer an invaluable insight into the changes and growth the society has undergone over many generations.

A fundamental difference between North Americans and Native people is the way in which both cultures view "authorship" and the purpose of story-telling. According to Foucault, western narratives generally emphasize power.[11] Furthermore, the power of the author lies in creating the stories and the characters, in controlling their developments and their behaviour, as well as the final outcome. In western narrative and literature, there is an assumption about the superiority of the author. The author is a creator, and the originality of his or her work is the basis upon which he or she is judged.[12] The more a story is unlike other stories, the more it is recognized. The story becomes intellectual property that belongs, essentially, to its creator but can be shared with others at the discretion of the author.

In oral cultures, it is the story that carries authority, not the teller. Where western authors are celebrated for their originality and individuality, Native oral tradition is not

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[10]Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Oral History," 408.

[11]Michel Foucault, "What is an author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* Donald F. Bouchard, ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 125.

[12]Rainwater, 7.

the intellectual property of a single person. Moreover, individual storytellers are not the creators of traditions.[13] The Native storyteller is distinguished by how well he or she recites a familiar story, not for creating a new one. The traditional storyteller did not emphasize his or her own identity when presenting the story. The tradition belongs to the culture or group as a whole, and is always acknowledged as common within the community or culture. Legends and histories are often punctuated with statements such as "it is said" or "I was told" which demonstrate that the history or legend being shared is not the invention of the teller. Instead, it is a tradition that has been passed down that contains "truth" for the people to whom it belongs.[14] The story has authority by being widely repeated and acknowledged within its culture. In short, the storyteller is not creating fiction. While he or she may have borrowed or adopted the traditions from another culture, or modified minor details, this is a function of repetition rather than invention.

Furthermore, western narrative is expected to maintain coherence. Characters, events and details in the story are brought to some type of closure by the end. The message is clear to the audience, and the audience or readers are expected to arrive at essentially the same conclusions as the author intended.[15] This is very unlike oral

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[13]Irving A. Hallowell. *The Ojibwa of Berens River, Manitoba.* (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1992), 81.

[14]Victor Barnuow. *Chippewa Myths and Tales and their Relation to Chippewa Life.* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 4.

[15]Rainwater, 7

tradition where the audience is not expected to reach a consensus when the narrative ends. The storyteller is not responsible for making the events and details "add up" or result in a single interpretation. Instead, the audience is expected to draw their own conclusions based on their own character and intellectual capacity. According to Ojibwa scholar and author, Basil Johnston, it is the responsibility of the audience to interpret the oral tradition "freely, yet rationally according to Ojibwa views of life."[16] Readers and listeners of these traditions are expected to draw their own conclusions. It is the responsibility of the audience to consider the story in a cultural context, and integrate the message into their every day lives. It is even assumed that the same individual may discover a different message or meaning with subsequent tellings of the same story.

If the audience has certain responsibilities, so too does the storyteller. The elder is trusted to choose the appropriate story to be shared, that the audience might be able to appreciate its message. Part of the storyteller's responsibility is to consider the present audience and adapt the story as necessary.[17] A legend shared with a predominantly non-Native society for example might have certain elements emphasized or certain details included for clarity that are not emphasized among a Native audience already familiar with the story. The storyteller is also expected to make the tradition interesting through humour, dramatic gestures or facial expressions. Most importantly, the storyteller has to

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[16]Basil Johnston. *Ojibway Heritage: The Ceremonies, Rituals, Songs, Dances, Prayers and Legends of the Ojibway*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 8.

[17]Rainwater, 160.

allow the audience to form its own conclusions and interpretations, and not impose one's own understandings or expectations.

This raises the question as to how the elders or storytellers remembered the countless stories, legends and histories of their people. What is often overlooked in the study of Native peoples is that many did have a system of record-keeping prior to the arrival of Europeans. For example, the Ojibwa used wampum beads and belts, as well as birch bark scrolls, to maintain their histories and traditions.[18] Different coloured wampum beads were woven into pictures or symbols as memory aids for the carrier of the belt. Similar pictographs were carved into the soft underside of birch bark. These symbols and patterns served as reminders to the Ojibwa of events, or dreams, or ideas that were important to the group.[19] An individual trained in their use and interpretation could reliably reproduce the history preserved in these records for future generations.

While mnemonic devices are employed to repeat some tales exactly, oral traditions have also tended to allow some individuality. A storyteller might embellish some points, but there is still a repetitive emphasis on important elements that are not changed.[20] While Euro-Canadians have been brought up to believe that our memories are often faulty and unreliable, this is not necessarily true in Native society. Among oral cultures,

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[18]Gerald Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 26.

[19]I will discuss the significance of birch bark scrolls in greater detail when I examine the oral tradition of the Midewiwin.

[20]Barnouw, 12.

"...the human memory is a great storehouse ordinarily filled to only a fraction of its capacity. The elders knew this and tested and trained the memory ... so that the history and traditions of The People could be preserved and passed on."[21] Native peoples consciously train themselves to remember their legends and history, and do so with impressive accuracy.

Repetition is also used in oral tradition to assist in memory. Within a story, those details which are most critical are often repeated numerous times. This practice not only reinforces the memory of the storyteller, but also draws the listener's attention to which details are particularly important. Moreover, "the importance of specific stories...was expressed by the frequency with which those were told."[22] Those stories which were central to culture and history are told most often. If an elder does not feel that a particular lesson has been understood, the tradition would be repeated at different times, or with slight variations, until the message is appreciated.

There are still many concerns about the use of oral tradition as historical evidence. Part of the tradition of distrust of oral tradition has been based in part on the "...profound cultural differences [that] frequently interfere with mainstream ... understanding of 'marginal' art [including oral tradition]."[23] Quite simply, oral tradition reflects a culture and language very different from that of European explorers and many historians today. It

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[21]Beck, Walters and Francisco, 57.

[22]Wilson, 30.

[23]Rainwater, xi.

has been difficult for Euro-Canadian researchers to access Native Canadian oral tradition because the cultures in which we have been raised are based on fundamentally different precepts. In particular, Euro-Canadians have tended to underestimate the importance of oral tradition among the Ojibwa.[24] We are immersed in a culture that traditionally puts more emphasis on the written word: newspapers, books and theories. We are far more occupied with television and radio (while themselves oral media) than with listening to and sharing the collective experiences of our culture. This cultural preoccupation often makes it difficult for non-Native researchers to appreciate the influence of oral tradition in Native society and history. These cultural differences, however, do not mean that non-Natives cannot or should not study or attempt to interpret the history of Native peoples. Just as newcomers to a country or culture must develop strategies for functioning in that society, so too must researchers and historians develop strategies that allow them to explore Native oral tradition.

One of the more obvious problems researchers face in the study of oral tradition is the difficulty of crossing linguistic boundaries. Obviously, language is of central importance to oral tradition. It is often the language itself that is essential to preserve culture and context and historical roots in this tradition.[25] It is the original medium for sharing history and knowledge. Language allows us to preserve and retell the history of

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[24]Spielmann, 90.

[25]Spielmann, 184.

those who came before us. Without language, we would be unable to transmit our culture or history to subsequent generations.

Much has been lost in the translation of oral tradition into English. Many argue that in order to recapture the true meaning within oral tradition, it must be recorded in the original language.[26] Studying Native oral tradition in its Aboriginal language may offer greater insights into the tradition than is possible if they are studied in English. It is language, the choice of words and of metaphors, that represents the full meaning and intention of the story. Without a close study of language, a study of oral tradition may remain incomplete.

Here we are faced with limiting the accessibility of oral tradition, in this case to only those individuals who are fluent in Native languages. Although, ideally, oral traditions should be studied in their original language, the growing number of Native authors and scholars, such as Basil Johnston, who are bilingual (and essentially bicultural) have helped to address this problem.[27] Better than any non-Native researcher, these authors can interpret and translate their traditions into English without fundamentally distorting the language or imagery, so that outsiders to their culture can access and experience them. The intimate knowledge and experience of these individuals with their

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[26]Basil Johnston. *Tales the Elders Told.* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1981), 8.

[27]John Boatman. *My Elders Taught Me: Aspects of Western Great Lakes American Indian Philosophy*. (New York: University of America Press, 1992), viii.

culture and heritage lends their translations an authority that is often lacking in those by non-Natives.

Translating foreign concepts is equally difficult. Many abstract concepts were difficult to express, and early Europeans tended to apply their own standards and expectations to aboriginal culture.[28] It is difficult to translate metaphors and idiomatic expressions from one language to another, without subverting the original substance and meaning of the tradition itself. According to Ojibwa scholar and historian Basil Johnston, the Ojibwa language makes "...liberal and imaginative use of images, metaphors and figures of speech to express in the concrete abstract ideas and concepts."[29] It would be very easy to misinterpret a symbol or metaphor when moving from one culture and language to another. Without a strong understanding of Native cultures and value systems, including language, early Europeans and Euro-Canadians today would have difficulty accurately translating oral tradition. Even those equipped with historical and anthropological information about the culture being studied may experience difficulties in interpreting oral tradition.

The actual recording of oral traditions in written form is in itself problematic. Linguistic studies of discourse have revealed that written transcriptions of oral sources may indeed detract from the power of the tradition. In particular, "oral performances made use of the melodic and rhythmic aspects of language...storytellers rely heavily on

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[28]Wub-e-ke-niew. *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought*. (New York: Black Thistle Press, 1995), 6.

[29]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage,* 8.

pitch and cadence. When they repeat sequences their voices are often more markedly measured than print can always allow."[30] Certain gestures or inflection and intonation of the voice of the teller which add emphasis may not be recorded, and the transcription may distort or eliminate the context surrounding and the paralinguistic aspects of the story. Since written versions of oral tradition rarely convey paralinguistic qualities such as tone of voice or facial expression, it may be that writing these traditions down eliminates important aspects that cannot be easily rendered in the written word. It is frequently this context in which the tradition is told that is of utmost importance to its understanding, and this may be lost if the traditions are recorded and merely read.

Furthermore, some argue that the recorded stories are no longer part of Aboriginal oral tradition because they can no longer change and adapt as external circumstances change. Instead,

> the stories that have been recorded, translated, and printed... have altered tribal religious experiences. Published stories have become the standardized versions, the secular work of methodological academics; the artistic imagination has been polarized in print, and the relationships between the tellers of the stories and listeners, the visual references to the natural world, are lost in translation.[31]

Versions of oral traditions that are recorded in print are essentially frozen in time. They come to be accepted as the only acceptable version by the dominant culture, and even among some Native groups. There is no room left for free interpretation, or adaptation,

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[30]Paul G. Zolbrod, *Diné bahane: The Navajo Creation Story* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1984), 16.

[31]Vizenor,139 - 140.

or the individual touches of different storytellers. Proponents of this argument believe that oral tradition should remain predominantly oral, and not be subjected to the conventions of the written word.

The question, then, is whether historians should avoid studying written versions of oral tradition entirely. Certainly, there are inherent problems in examining written transcripts of oral tradition. It has also been argued, however, that these written transcriptions, while lacking in some areas, do carry a certain power of their own by making traditions available to non-Native individuals who are interested in closer study of Native culture and beliefs.[32] While it is best to examine oral tradition in its original language and context (that is, experienced rather than read), I believe it would be far worse to overlook oral tradition altogether.

When these traditions are recorded in written form, the utmost care must be taken not to alter or distort the narrative. The written form must be manipulated in such a way that it remains an oral source, preserved in its most accurate form.[33] Greater exposure to oral narrative and tradition within the dominant society has created an atmosphere of greater cultural sensitivity, which may assist researchers in recording oral tradition more carefully. The use of the tape recorder and, more recently, the video camera has also allowed researchers to better preserve oral tradition in its original format. Linguistic and translation difficulties, as well as the perpetual adaptation within the

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[32]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 7.

[33]Rainwater, 7.

traditions themselves, have led to a continuing resistance to rely too much on oral tradition within the discipline of history. Does this mean the cultural perspective and historical information in oral tradition is inaccessible? Should historians despair of ever being able to reliably use oral tradition as historical evidence? As discussed earlier in this chapter, Euro-Canadians who are not accustomed to living within oral tradition are often unable to appreciate its scope and value. This does not mean, however, that we cannot learn to use oral tradition effectively.

Non-Natives attempting to study oral tradition must keep certain things in mind. First of all, we must remain cognizant of the epistemological differences between Native and Euro-Canadians. The cosmologies of Native and newcomers are not always the same, and researchers must be aware of and sensitive to the differences between cultures. Just as certain rules and methodologies govern the study of western literature and history, so too Native oral tradition has rules and principles that are important and valid. Individuals who seek to explore these traditions must be prepared to apply and respect these principles. Oral tradition cannot be approached or evaluated by the same standards or expectations of written documents. Research based on oral tradition requires some measure of historical and cultural knowledge, as well as cultural sensitivity so that personal cultural expectations or prejudices are not imposed on the tradition.

Researchers like Julie Cruikshank, who have collected and analyzed oral traditions extensively, have often found that their expectations of what the traditions

could provide were unrealistic or misdirected.[34] Since historians often approach oral traditions using methods better suited to the study of written sources, they are searching for historical fact and a chronology which may not exist in oral tradition. Furthermore, the western-based view of the metaphysical is rooted in the scientific method: if it can be proved concretely, it is truth. Oral tradition is not intended to provide absolute truth, and these traditions do not contain historical fact in the same manner as written documents.[35] Native historical materials contain symbolic interpretations and representative images rather than specific dates or concrete data. Oral tradition is illustrative, and researchers cannot approach these documents expecting to find the same type of information as in written documents.

In spite of these important differences, scholars seeking to use oral tradition must approach it with many of the same methods expected in the use of documentary evidence. Historians must consider to whom the tradition is being told, and under what circumstances. If the tradition is being recited at home among friends and family, it is likely to carry different meaning than if it is shared with a large non-Native audience in a lecture hall. We must also consider who is telling the story and why. The source of the tradition is important since oral storytellers are subject to personal motivations and opinion in the same way authors of written documents are. Just because an individual is Ojibwa does not mean his interpretation is infallible.

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[34]Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Oral History," 409.

[35]Spielmann, 91.

Consider the writings of Peter Jones and George Copway. Both men were of Ojibwa heritage, and provided a much-needed perspective on their history. But in many ways, their perspective was more European than Ojibwa. Both were also Christians, and well-educated in the European tradition, and their commentary on the traditions of their people reflected the attitudes of the dominant society more than Ojibwa culture. For his part, Peter Jones refers to oral tradition as "silly stories", and laments the unenlightened state of the "poor Indians" and "their imaginary gods."[36] Although Copway lends greater credence to Ojibwa oral tradition, he too comments that Christianity "has dethroned error, and has enthroned truth."[37] The histories written by these early Ojibwa authors demonstrate that the source of the tradition, potential bias, and motivation must be carefully considered.

How, then, should historians approach the study of oral tradition? Considering the difficulties with language, cross-cultural prejudice and the nature of oral tradition, I would suggest the following method. Scholars must be aware of their own cultural expectations or foundations before beginning. They must have a good understanding of the rudiments of the oral culture they wish to study, and approach the traditions with a great deal of cultural sensitivity, recognizing that the cosmology and spiritual world of the Native culture is very different from that of the dominant one. Essentially, we must try to "see" or "hear" the traditions as an Ojibwa might. Moreover, scholars cannot try to find

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[36]Peter Jones. *History of the Ojebway Indians*. (London: Bennett, 1861), 93.

[37]George Copway. *Indian Life and Indian History* (Boston: Albert Colby & Co., 1860), ix.

the same type of information contained in traditional documentary evidence, but instead look for underlying information about the culture itself. It is equally important that the source of the traditions be verified, and that we consider who is sharing the tradition, and why. As much as possible, the original context of the tradition must be preserved, ideally including the language and paralinguistic qualities such as gesture and tone of voice. Scholars should avoid relying on traditions that have been edited or altered extensively by individuals outside the culture.

As demonstrated by the research of scholars such as Kerry Abel, Alan McMillan and Ian Hutchinson, oral tradition can provide valuable insights into and information about Native societies, both in the past and the present. In comparison with geological and archaeological evidence, oral tradition has been shown to be quite accurate in preserving accounts of major disasters such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Perhaps more importantly, oral traditions of indigenous people explain and preserve elements of religion, culture and language, as well as provide a context in which to understand their environment.[38] In studying oral tradition we may find historical evidence by examining clues to past routes, territorial boundaries, migration, contact with other peoples, and past events. Moreover, oral tradition can contribute to understanding of past culture and conditions of their social life. Understanding culture helps us understand how people think and why they may have acted the way they did at a certain

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[38]James R. Stevens. *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), 11.

time. This is essential to understanding not just what happened in history, but why it happened.

In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to apply this approach to specific stories within Ojibwa oral tradition. It is an inherent contradiction in my thesis that I do not speak or read Ojibwa, nor have I had the opportunity to experience Ojibwa oral tradition as it is meant to be experienced. Instead, due to constraints of time, location and the scope of this thesis, I have relied on written versions of oral traditions. For the most part, I relied primarily on those traditions recorded by Ojibwa individuals, but have also considered collections recorded by non-Native authors and researchers. Before examining these traditions in depth, I will first present a general history of the Ojibwa based on documentary record. As I will demonstrate, there are limitations in documentary sources that prevent historians from obtaining a complete and accurate picture of the history of the Ojibwa.

Chapter 3
Documentary Record of the Ojibwa

What follows in this chapter is an attempt to reconstruct the history of the Ojibwa people using traditional documentary sources. Since the focus of this paper is to demonstrate that different kinds of things can be discovered about history through different kinds of sources, this chapter is a demonstration of what can be learned about Ojibwa history from a fairly traditional, conservative historical method. The subsequent chapters will discuss what may be learned from non-documentary sources, particularly oral tradition.

The information I present concerning the early contact and fur trade eras (beginning in the sixteenth century) to the present is based on primary sources and works that have made extensive use of recorded contemporary accounts, available archaeological sources, and histories produced in more recent years. I have limited my research to these types of sources and avoided others such as oral tradition in order to establish what sort of information can be gained from documentary, recorded sources. Some of the secondary sources I have considered in this chapter have themselves drawn to an extent on oral traditions. In using these sources, I have tried to avoid using information gained from oral tradition. These sources were recorded at various times over the past four centuries, and may contain conflicting viewpoints. In writing this chapter, I have attempted to balance conflicting opinions and historical interpretations.

There is some confusion as to whom the term *Ojibwa* refers. When French traders first encountered an Ojibwa group gathered at the rapids of what would become the Ste.

Marie River, they named the Natives *Saulteaux*, or *People of the Rapids*. In addition to the term *Saulteaux*, the French called other Ojibwa they encountered the *Achipoue*. Today, "Saulteaux" refers to those Ojibwa who migrated from the Great Lakes region, and now live as far west as eastern Saskatchewan, and no longer have an immediate connection with the rapids at Sault Sainte Marie.

The French were only one of several ethnic groups in contact with the Ojibwa, and each of these groups attributed a different name to the people they encountered. The English called them the *Chepawa*, and the Dutch the *Schipuwe*. Many other variations of this name also exist, including *Otchipwe* and *Jepoy*. In this early period, French traders made the identification more difficult by referring to more than thirty different nations, including the Ojibwa and the Potawatomi, as the *Ottawa*. Eventually, the name Ojibwa became a blanket term which was applied to a variety of nations including the Potawatomi, Ottawa, Saugeen, Menomonee and Mississauga. While these groups shared similar cultural characteristics and history, they are today considered separate peoples.

Europeans were not the only ones to refer to the Ojibwa by many different names. The neighbouring Ottawa called the Ojibwa the *Ojibbewaig*, while the Huron called them the *Eskiaeronnon*, and the Assiniboine used *Wahkahtow*. This profusion of conflicting terms makes early documents confusing and often difficult to interpret. It is not always clear whether different individuals were referring to the same people.

The European sense of the term *nation* caused further confusion in distinguishing among Native groups. The Ojibwa and other related groups were frequently mistaken for members of the same *nation* when, in fact, they considered themselves distinct peoples.

While larger groups did exist that brought together a number of bands, such as the Iroquois Confederacy, these were less common, and often precipitated by an external threat such as war with the American or British colonizers. The arrival of the Europeans fostered new economic and social relationships among many of the Algonkian-speaking groups, often changing historical alliances. The Ojibwa were particularly close to their Ottawa and Potawatomi relatives, and this may in fact have contributed to the confusion about who the Ojibwa were. Despite this rapprochement of Ojibwa and other Algonkian-speaking nations, Ojibwa clans retained their identity and autonomy.[1] In fact, it was not uncommon for treaties that had been concluded between two Native groups such as the Dakota and Ojibwa in the Southwest to be disregarded by clan-groups not present at the negotiations, or who felt their wishes had not been properly addressed.[2]

When European explorers began to expand into the interior of the North American continent in the early seventeenth century, the Ojibwa resided in the mixed deciduous-coniferous forests of the Central Great Lakes region. The Ojibwa are members of the Algonkian-speaking language group, which includes, among others, the Cree, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Montagnais, Algonquin, Menominee and Shawnee tribes. The Ojibwa language itself is most similar to the Ottawa and Algonquin languages, although the Ojibwa were able to communicate with many of their other neighbours. To the

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[1]Charles A. Bishop. *The Northern Ojibwa and the Fur Trade: An Historical and Ecological Study*. (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974), 344.

[2]Laura Peers. *The Ojibwa of Western Canada*. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994), 24.

immediate east of Ojibwa territory lived the Ottawa, the Nipissing and the Algonquin, while the Cree inhabited the regions to the north and north-west. South of Ojibwa territory lived the Potawatomi and Menominee tribes. The Central Great Lakes region contained other language groups, including the Iroquoian-speaking Huron to the south-east, and the Siouan-speaking Dakota and Assiniboine living south and west of Lake Superior. (Figs. 1 and 2)

The territory inhabited by the Ojibwa at the time of European contact in the seventeenth century was significantly smaller than the area they inhabited by the eighteenth century. One interpretation of the material evidence suggests that the limits of Ojibwa territory at the time of contact were marked by the waters of Lakes Huron and Michigan and Superior, stretching no further north or west than Michipicoten Bay on the north-east side of Lake Superior.[3] Scattered throughout this territory were many different bands and villages, sharing a similar language, culture and history.

Early Europeans in the area, including Jesuit missionary Father Marquette, recorded that the Central Great Lakes region was rich in plant, fish and game resources. The Ojibwa relied for the most part on hunting, fishing and gathering of vegetable foods for survival, and produced implements, tools and weapons from birch bark, stone and animal horn. Their spears and arrows were tipped with flint or bone, and knives and scrapers were made of the same material. The inner bark of many trees was used for weaving mats and baskets, making twine, and fishing nets. Clothing was made from

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[3]Vivian J. Rohrl. *Change for Continuity; the People of a Thousand Lakes.* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981), 1.

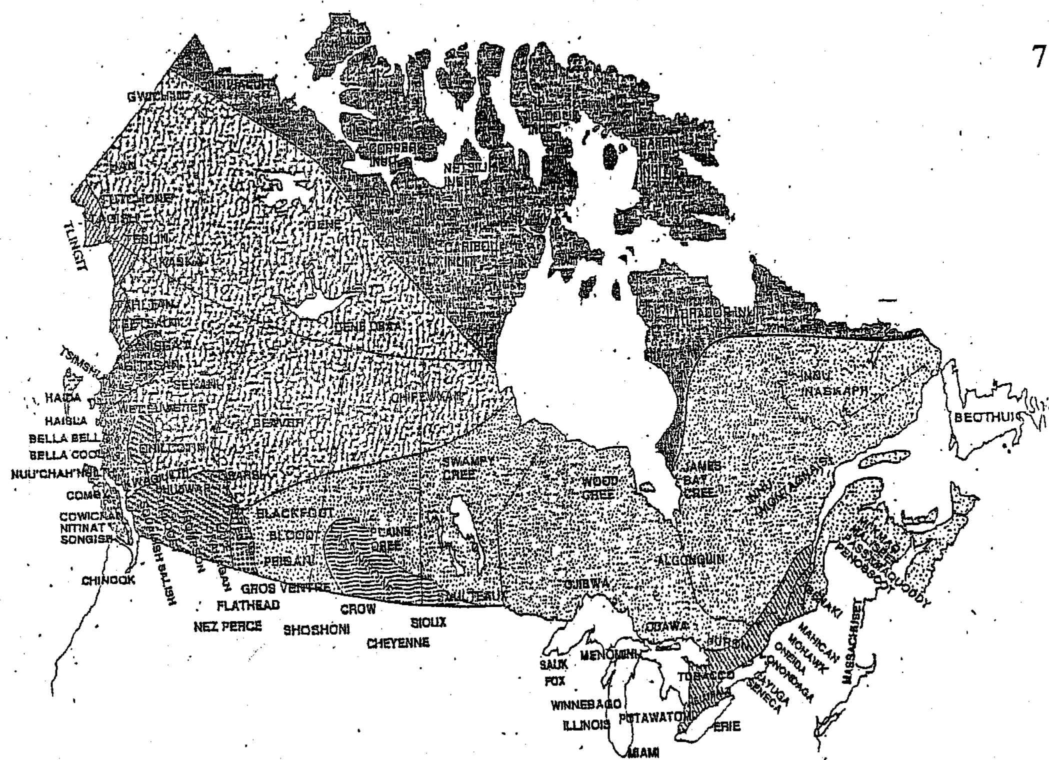

Fig. 1: Map showing tribal distributions in and near Canada at time of contact.

Source: Olive Patricia Dickason. *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times.* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 65.

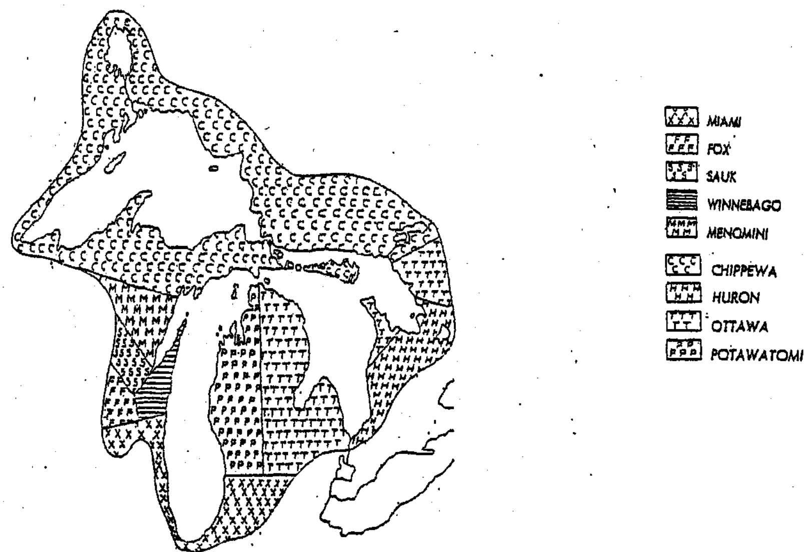

Fig. 2: Map showing approximate distribution of Native groups in the Central Great Lakes region circa 1600.

Source: George Quimby. *Indian Life in The Upper Great Lakes: 1100 BC to AD 1800.* (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1960), 109.

caribou and moose hides, as well as beaver and otter pelts, while fishing nets were made of woven plant fibres. Their homes were constructed from sticks and small poles which were bent to form a dome, then covered with matted grass or birch bark. These dwellings were often quite large, and likely housed several families together.

Hunting and snaring were carried out by the Ojibwa men, and were year-long activities. Alexander Henry, among others, observed that during the winter, the Ojibwa groups moved away from their summer settlements and into their hunting territory in the northern forests.[4] They hunted large game animals such as deer, elk, moose, caribou and bear, and also smaller game animals including rabbit, marten, beaver, muskrat and lynx. In addition to hunting, summer survival depended on the catching of fish, and the gathering of fruit, berries and some wild crops, such as maize and rice.[5] These activities were considered primarily women's work, and they gathered nuts, fruit and berries, and maple sap to make sugar. In addition, their knowledge of the forest and its resources also resulted in the use of various roots, stems and leaves as poultices, medicines and potions.[6]

Although there were people of importance and eminence among them, the society did not appear highly structured. Individuals of prestige acquired their positions as a

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[4]Alexander Henry. *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between the Years 1760 and 1776.* James Bain, ed. (Toronto: George Morang & Company Ltd., 1901), 62.

[5]Edward S. Rogers. "Southeastern Ojibwa," in Bruce Trigger *The Handbook of North American Indians* vol.15 (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1978), 762.

[6]Robert E. Ritzenthaler. "Southwestern Chippewa," in Bruce Trigger *The Handbook of North American Indians* vol. 15 (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1978), 746.

result of outstanding abilities or accomplishments as warriors, hunters, leaders or shamans.[7] Individual leaders or chiefs did exist; they were generally eldest sons who inherited their positions from their fathers and were installed through an elaborate induction ceremony.

John Tanner, who lived among the Ojibwa for thirty years, described the Ojibwa as organized in layers of social units.[8] The smallest of these consisted of the nuclear family: parents and their unmarried offspring. Extended families, which included close relatives such as brothers or married children and their offspring, often lived together in a single dwelling. The extended family acted as a social unit as well as an economic one, forming the basis of trading relations, military alliances and personal relationships. The number and composition of these groups varied as a result of marriage, death, birth and personal conflict. There were approximately six to twelve individuals in a given family, and all but the smallest children participated in everyday chores and tasks upon which the survival of the family depended.

The extended family units were autonomous within the larger Ojibwa nation, and this local group was an important focus of an individual's life and identity.[9] Two or three of these families might live together as a hunting group, and when these hunting groups

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[7]Ritzenthaler, 753.

[8]John Tanner. *Captivity of John Tanner, US Interpreter at the Saut [sic] de Ste. Marie during Thirty Years Residence among the Indians in the Interior of North America.* Edwin James, ed. (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines Inc., 1830), 314.

[9]Peers, 22.

congregated at communal sugar bushes or fishing runs, a temporary village was formed. The merging of these extended families and villages was brief, however, and each family unit maintained its autonomy within the larger Ojibwa nation. These individual groups and villages viewed one another as potential allies, rather than as segments of a larger political entity. While they shared a common language, store of beliefs and code of interaction with others, individual villages and hunting groups made or broke their own alliances and peace treaties with other Aboriginal groups or nations.[10] These layers of affiliation and community resulted in a scattering of smaller autonomous bands, rather than a cohesive political entity which could be considered an Ojibwa nation in the sense of a European nation-state.

Ojibwa children were treated well and often indulged and, according to eighteenth-century observer John Long, "...Indian women love[d] their children with as much affection as parents in the most civilized states."[11] Infants were carried for most of their first year on a cradle board, consisting of a cedar board about two feet in length. They were wrapped in sphagnum moss and buckskin or cloth. Children were not often weaned until the age of two or older, and were named at special ceremonies that involved friends and relatives, and to which a namer would be invited. During the ceremony,

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[10]Harold Hickerson. *The Chippewa and Their Neighbours: A Study in Ethnohistory.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970), 77.

[11]John Long. *John Long's Voyages and Travels in the Years 1768 - 1788.* Milo Milton Quaife, ed. (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1922), 78.

tobacco and food was offered to the spirits, and the namer would call on the protection of his own guardian spirit.[12]

The world of the Ojibwa was not merely physical; it contained a strong spiritual element as well that encompassed and permeated every aspect of daily life. The supernatural world of the Ojibwa contained the spirits of animals, plants, inanimate objects and cosmic phenomena. The sun, moon, winds, thunder and lightening were of paramount importance. The forests and streams and lakes were filled with supernatural beings and powers, called manitous, that demanded the attention and respect of the Ojibwa people. It was believed these spirits could protect or punish the Ojibwa people, and *manitous* were called upon for guidance and protection. Some of these spirits were benevolent and protective, others were malevolent, causing illness and injury.[13] This belief system was based on the maintenance of friendly relationships with the animal, plant and cosmic spirits which inhabited the Ojibwa world. Neglect of ceremony or proper respect could result in accident, illness or scarcity of game.[14] Images of these spirits, of birds, animals and trees, were carved into knife handles, cradle boards and other tools and implements as wards against danger or malignant spirits.

Although each individual maintained a personal relationship with the spirits around him or her, there were those who were gifted with special abilities to communicate

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[12]Ritzenthaler, 750.

[13]Rogers,"Southeastern Ojibwa", 763.

[14]Calvin Martin. *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 73.

with the spirits. Both men and women could be shamans, the religious leaders of the Ojibwa. Shamans were believed to possess special powers and medicines which allowed them to predict the weather or an enemy attack, prevent and cure illness and injury, and procure a successful hunt.[15] Because the manitous played such an important role in the lives of the Ojibwa, these shamans were the most revered and the most feared individuals within Ojibwa society.

An integral part of the relationship between an Ojibwa and the spirit world was the vision quest. According to Tanner, "dreams are particularly attended to by the Indians."[16] Upon reaching puberty, all Ojibwa boys would fast for several days, hoping to receive a dream or vision from a guardian spirit. The spirit that revealed itself became the individual's protective guardian and could be called upon to provide guidance and prosperity in the future. While fathers instructed their sons, mothers taught their daughters women's duties and skills. When girls reached puberty, they were isolated in a small dwelling to fast for four days and nights.

European contact with the Ojibwa began in the early seventeenth century. Samuel de Champlain established a settlement at Quebec in 1608, and when he first encountered the Iroquois people in 1609 at Ticonderoga, he found among them a number of Huron, Algonquin and Montagnais. It seems likely, due to their close relationship with

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[15]Henry, 115. *Shaman is a European term. The Ojibwa more often used medicine man or woman.

[16]Long, 112.

the Huron, that this group included Ojibwa.[17] The effects of the European fur trade, and later missionary activity were soon felt by the Ojibwa through their trading partners such as the Huron and the Ottawa. Champlain was probably the first European to describe Ojibwa located near the mouth of the French River on the eastern shores of Georgian Bay around 1615.[18] A Jesuit Mission was established at Sault Ste. Marie in 1669 in the heart of Ojibwa territory by Father Marquette.

Following initial contact with the Ojibwa people, the French traders and explorers were at first more interested in trade with the Huron people, who were sedentary and centrally located, unlike the scattered, semi-horticultural Ojibwa hunters and fishers.[19] The Ojibwa however quickly became active participants in the fur trade, serving as intermediaries for groups living farther west and north of Ojibwa territory. By the 1620s, the Ojibwa were trading with the Europeans without intermediaries, and by 1634 were themselves travelling to Quebec to trade in furs.[20]

During the early contact period, according to French records, the Ojibwa lived in a series of semi-permanent villages along or near the north shore of Lake Huron, and near the east periphery of Lake Superior. Documents of the early contact period and modern archaeological research suggest that at the time of contact, the Ojibwa organized

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[17]Peter Schmalz. *The Ojibwa of Southern Ontario.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 14.

[18]Rogers, "Southeastern Ojibwa", 760.

[19]Schmalz, 15.

[20]Bishop, 8.

themselves in small groups numbering two or three hundred people. Early each spring, Ojibwa groups would travel from their winter hunting grounds in the forests surrounding the Great Lakes region to the sugar bush to harvest maple sap, where they would join other groups. These spring gatherings might see more than a thousand individuals and could last up to a month, acting as a regional social gathering. Families traded information as well as material goods, formed alliances, made decisions about war and peace and where to winter, renewed old social ties and formed new ones.[21]

At the end of the sap run, these groups would then move to the nearby sturgeon fisheries around Lake Superior, meeting with members from other sugar camps. During this three to four week spawning run, thousands of sturgeon were taken at weirs that lined the mouths of rivers flowing into Lake Superior. One of the major centres for these gatherings was at Sault Sainte Marie, and it was here that the French eventually encountered the Ojibwa by the mid-seventeenth century.

During this season, the Ojibwa made trips to the trading posts to prepare for the season ahead. After the spring gathering, the Ojibwa dispersed for the summer. They continues to fish, collect berries and hunt until the end of the summer when they gathered again to harvest wild crops and hunt migrating wildfowl. The Ojibwa made another trip to the trading post in early fall to obtain goods for the winter and to trade their summer furs.

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[21]Schmalz, 5.

The European fur trade affected the Ojibwa in many different ways, some subtle and some more dramatic. Through interactions and relationships with individual traders, and later with company posts, a number of modifications were apparent in both the economic and political culture of the people. It is essential to recognize, however, that the Ojibwa, and all other Native groups, were not merely pawns manipulated by the European traders. Native people were attracted by many items of European manufacture, but they were not indiscriminate in their trading. The Ojibwa were selective in their bargaining, incorporating those material goods which suited their existing culture, without substantially altering it, and discarding those which were unsuitable.[22] Copper kettles, needles and thread, for example, were more efficient than Native versions, while other items such as European shoes were impractical. In turn, the Europeans adopted many Native practices and articles such as the snowshoe and the canoe, which were far more practical than their own European technology.

Traders and Natives developed and maintained strong personal ties. It was quite common for a hunting group or band to remain loyal to one trader for many years. Alexander Henry described the practice of traders bestowing gifts of tobacco, ammunition and alcohol as an attempt to secure or maintain the loyalty of a particularly productive hunting group.[23] Marriages between European traders and Native women were also quite common, and served both parties equally. Aside from personal relationships, these

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[22]Bishop, 8.

[23]Henry, 71.

marriages were often political in nature. These women played an important role in maintaining good relations between their families and their European husbands. They explained Aboriginal customs, mediated disputes and cross-cultural misunderstandings, translated conventions, as well as provided their husbands with the skills and materials necessary to survive in the bush.[24]

Many scholars, including historian Peter Schmalz and ethnohistorian Charles Bishop, believe it was during the early fur trade period that the Ojibwa began expanding their boundaries. They base this conclusion on evidence derived from French and English sources. During his extended travels in "Indian territory", Alexander Henry produced a map in 1776 which showed an Ojibwa expansion to the west.[25] Researchers James Morrison and Adolph Greenberg have read these documents differently and argue that the Ojibwa already occupied a very large region prior to contact. Rather, as traders encountered them deeper in the interior of the continent, it was assumed that the Ojibwa were migrating when it was the fur trade itself that was expanding. Certainly, modern archaeological evidence seems to indicate that, early in the fur trade era, the Native inhabitants of the region west of Lake Superior were Cree, Assiniboine and Monsoni.[26] The Ojibwa are not mentioned in the records of fur traders or explorers in this region

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[24]Sylvia Van Kirk. *Many Tender Ties; Women in Fur Trade Society*. (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishers Ltd., 1980), 29.

[25]Arthur J. Ray. *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their role as Trappers, Hunters and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay 1660 - 1870*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 101.

[26]Peers, 4.

until the mid-eighteenth century. The journals of fur traders and early European visitors do indicate more clearly that there was an Ojibwa expansion east into what was once Huron territory in central and southern Ontario in the period after contact. There do seem to be four distinct groups of Ojibwa in North America, a situation that could have resulted from an extended migration. If we accept the fact that the Ojibwa did expand to their boundaries during the contact period, it is likely that this expansion was at times peaceful, and at other times resulted in conflict as other Native groups were encountered, and new alliances and animosities developed.[27] By the end of the eighteenth century, Ojibwa groups were found as far as the eastern end of Lake Ontario, west to Lake Winnipeg and Turtle Mountain on the border of Manitoba and North Dakota, north almost to the swampy lands south of James Bay, and south into Minnesota and Wisconsin.[28]

The expansion of the Ojibwa people to new lands and often different climates resulted in the development of a certain extent of cultural and economic diversity among the different branches. Those who remained in the boreal forests were primarily hunters and trappers, while the Ojibwa migrating to the coniferous-deciduous forests along the south and west shores of Lake Superior grew more dependent on fishing activities. As Ojibwa groups migrated farther into the continent, the cultivation and harvesting of wild

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[27]Lauren Walker Ritterbush. *Culture Change and Continuity.* (Ann Arbor: Bell & Howell, 1993), 21.

[28]Schmalz, 4.

rice became increasingly important to the subsistence economy.[29] By the early nineteenth century, four main divisions among the Ojibwa were apparent: the Southeastern Ojibwa, Southwestern Chippewa, the Western Ojibwa, and the Northern Ojibwa.

Southeastern Ojibwa

Information for this section on the Southeastern Ojibwa is based on archival records, such as the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, as well as personal accounts found in the letters and journals of traders and missionaries, including John Long and Jesuit Father Louis André. It was this region where the influence of European culture was most strongly felt, since it was settled at a much earlier date than more remote regions of the continent. As a result, there is a wealth of documentary evidence concerning the Southeastern Ojibwa. In the early nineteenth century, Ojibwa authors such as George Copway, Peter Jones and William Whipple Warren began to record information about their people as well.

There are today approximately 20,000 Ojibwa living on almost forty reserves throughout southern Ontario. Until the mid-seventeenth century however, the southern and eastern regions of the province were dominated by the Huron and Iroquois confederacies. It was not until much later that the Ojibwa came to occupy this territory. The Southeastern Ojibwa began to move eastward into southern Ontario during the early fur trade period, but were forced to flee the Iroquois during the Huron dispersal in 1649.[30]

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[29]Thomas Vennum. *Wild Rice and the Ojibwa People*. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 2.

[30]Rogers, "Southeastern Ojibwa", 760.

Following the Iroquois victory, the Ojibwa retreated west into their original territory, taking with them many of their dispossessed Huron, Neutral and Petun neighbours.

At first, an uneasy peace existed between the Ojibwa and the Iroquois Confederacy, punctuated alternately by raids and peace negotiations. In the fifty-year period between 1651 and 1701, southern Ontario experienced three phases of population shift. Immediately following the dispersal of the Huron and their allies, the territory was used exclusively by the Iroquois as hunting grounds. During the 1670s and 1680s, Iroquoian settlements were established along the northern shore of Lake Ontario, at the same time as the Ojibwa were beginning to settle just north of the evacuated Huron territory. The Ojibwa maintained a defensive position against the encroaching Iroquois for a short period, before moving to the offensive during the 1680s. The uncertain peace between the Ojibwa and the Iroquois came to an end as war broke out in the last decades of the seventeenth century, resulting in the defeat and withdrawal of the Iroquois from former Huron territory by 1701.

According to historian Peter Schmalz, the Ojibwa of southern Ontario experienced a golden age following their victory over the Iroquois that lasted until the defeat of the French in 1763. Their military and numeric strength made them masters of the Great Lakes region, and they became the major intermediaries for groups farther north and west of their territory. European powers recognized the importance of the Ojibwa to the trade, and competed with one another to gain the trust and alliance of the Ojibwa nation. Hudson's Bay Company Manager R.C. Wilson commented that this fierce competition between traders allowed the Ojibwa to demand the best quality goods

at the lowest prices, and to alter trade routes to better suit Ojibwa trappers.[31] This preferred status could be sustained only as long as the French and British were at odds, and came to an end with British Conquest of North America and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763.

While their French allies had been conquered, the Ojibwa did not consider themselves defeated, and expected to receive the same level of treatment and respect from the British as they had from the French. Following the Conquest, however, the situation changed rapidly. British traders and settlers quickly filled French forts and settlements south of the Great Lakes, exhibiting an entirely different attitude towards their Ojibwa neighbours.[32] The new settlers began to forbid the Natives to fish in British waters, and their settlements began to encroach on open Ojibwa territory.

General discontent among the Native groups, including the Ojibwa, with the actions and behaviour of the British soon led to the participation of many Ojibwa in the Pontiac Uprising in 1763. The Ojibwa believed, as did Pontiac, that the British had violated an unwritten contract which allowed the traders and settlers the use of Ojibwa territory, but not the annexation of it.[33] In retaliation many of the Ojibwa chiefs, Pontiac among them, united to wage war against the British and demand fair treatment in the tradition of the French traders and government. Early in 1763 the Ojibwa attacked and

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[31]Bishop, 83.

[32]Schmalz, 69.

[33]Schmalz, 70.

laid siege to Fort Detroit, but were soon defeated by the British. In June of the same year, the Ojibwa amassed 400 warriors at Michilimackinac, leading a surprise attack on the fort under the guise of a lacrosse game.[34] It was, perhaps, one of the most dramatic Native victories, and certainly the most sensational.

In the summer of 1764, a Grand Indian Council gathered at Niagara to consider peace negotiations.[35] In addition to over two dozen nations and 2,000 individuals, William Johnson attended the Council as the British delegate. The treaties concluded at the Council brought to an end warfare between the Ojibwa and the British, and a time of peaceful trade ensued. Because these diplomatic negotiations and treaties were so important to British interests in North America, they were well documented and those documents have been preserved.

Shortly after the Pontiac Uprising, settlers began to move into the Ohio Valley, attempting to drive out the Native bands living there. The Ojibwa retaliated, becoming involved in two major conflicts on the side of the British: the American Revolution and the War of 1812. These conflicts had many negative effects on the Ojibwa of southern Ontario. The American victory in 1783 forced British patriots, the United Empire Loyalists, and their Iroquois allies to flee north in search of safety. The Ojibwa welcomed the British and Iroquois refugees, allowing them to settle in their territory. This arrangement, however, would prove problematic. The Ojibwa of southern Ontario began

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[34]Edmund J. Danziger. *The Chippewa of Lake Superior.* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 54.

[35]Danziger, 55.

to lose what was left of their independence as the settlers restricted Ojibwa movement and hunting, absorbing ever more territory from the Ojibwa nation. While the Loyalists perceived the Natives as wicked and thieving, claiming that "they are a lazy race...[and] are too stupid and too idle", the settlers themselves continued to seize land and resources from the Ojibwa, despoiling fishing and hunting grounds.[36] As a result of this encroachment, many Ojibwa bands took the initiative to establish more sedentary villages, turning to agriculture to supplement the dwindling supply of game.[37]

During the revolutionary war, the American frontier continued to move west into what had been Native territory. In 1783, eighteen different nations, including the Ojibwa and their former Iroquois enemies, joined together in a defensive alliance to forestall further encroachment by European settlers. The movement of settlers to the west increased in speed and intensity, and by 1786 the Six Nations were forced to retreat; many resettled in southern Ontario. When Americans attempted to cross the Ohio River in 1791, the alliance provided one thousand warriors to drive them back. Unfortunately, because the British were unwilling to come to the aid of their Native allies, the Ojibwa and their allies could not stand against the Americans indefinitely.

In the early nineteenth century, the threat of an American attack on Upper Canada again served to unite the Ojibwa and their allies, British soldiers and the Loyalist

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[36]J.G. Kohl. "A German Visits the Canadian Backwoods," in *Early Travelers in the Canadas 1791 - 1867*. Gerald M. Craig, ed. (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1955), 200 - 201.

[37]Rogers, "Southeastern Ojibwa", 765.

settlers in the defence of their shared territory. The Iroquois Six Nations took a different tactic than the Ojibwa in defence of their interests, and remained neutral during the first six months of the conflict. The Ojibwa contribution to the War of 1812 was indeed significant, although it is often overlooked in historical accounts, overshadowed by the exploits of the Shawnee leader, Tecumseh. While popular history and sentiment credit Tecumseh and the Six Nations for major victories in the war, it was in fact the participation of the Ojibwa that resulted in the capture of Fort Michilimackinac on July 17, 1812, successful engagements at Brownstown in early August, and the subsequent capture of Detroit in August, 1812.[38]

The War of 1812 was a major turning point in the history of the Southeastern Ojibwa. While the war ended in a stalemate between Britain and the United States, it was a great loss for the Native groups who participated. When the Treaty of Ghent was negotiated in 1814, no Native chiefs or bands were included or consulted. The Ojibwa and Six Nations were forced to relinquish more land, and surrender more of their autonomy to the British authorities.

Treaties, of course, feature prominently in the documentary record. One of the earliest treaties between the Southeastern Ojibwa and the British government was arranged in 1764 when the Seneca surrendered Ojibwa territory along the Niagara River to William Johnson. During the American Revolution, this parcel of land was re-

[38]Danziger, 53.

surrendered by four Ojibwa chiefs to their British allies.[39] Between 1781 and 1806, the British acquired the waterfront territory along the St. Lawrence River to Lake Erie, and along the Detroit and St. Clair Rivers. After 1815, the Ojibwa of southern Ontario relinquished the line of territory immediately behind the first surrender and, after 1830, were resettled on the Bruce Peninsula, Manitoulin Island and the north shores of Lakes Huron and Superior. Beginning in 1836, the Ojibwa began signing a series of ten treaties that would eventually surrender the majority of land in the Saugeen Peninsula and Watershed, including land along the shores of Lake Huron. One hundred years after the first surrender of land, the Southeastern Ojibwa had relinquished almost all of their land, and, by the 1880s, were living on reserves scattered throughout the south and central parts of the province.

Another feature of Ojibwa history that was well-documented was the work of Christian missionaries. Of all the Ojibwa groups, the Southeastern Ojibwa were the most profoundly affected by missionary activity. This may be a result of a longer period of contact with Europeans in southern Ontario, but also because among the Southeastern Ojibwa, Methodist missionaries, in particular, took advantage of the natural leadership among the Ojibwa. Raised as a Methodist, Ojibwa leader Peter Jones is credited for bringing Christianity to the Ojibwa nation.[40] As a minister, Jones convinced his Credit River band to accept the Methodist faith and eventually to settle in a number of houses

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[39]Schmalz, 123.

[40]Schmalz, 159.

provided by the government. Methodists, using Ojibwa leaders, were able to spread their influence throughout the province, and by 1830 they had established eleven schools for over 400 students. Concerned about the growing Methodist influence, the Anglican church attempted to build schools and chapels of their own but, ultimately, failed since they lacked Ojibwa leadership among their missions.[41] Mission records, publications and the personal correspondence of missionaries all provide detailed accounts of their work among the Ojibwa.

Southwestern Ojibwa (Chippewa)

According to written record, it appears that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, another group of Ojibwa expanded to the west and south, following the shores of Lake Superior. They established themselves in territory that is now northern Minnesota and western Wisconsin, and eventually became widely known as the Chippewa, an English corruption of the name Ojibwa.[42] Today, the Chippewa occupy reserves throughout Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and Montana, while several thousands of non-reserve Chippewa live in the state of Michigan.

Prior to the expansion of the Ojibwa, the land to the south and west of Lake Superior was occupied by the Siouan-speaking Dakota nation. Under the pressure of Chippewa expansion, the Dakota relinquished their territory in the northern wooded areas and began to establish permanent settlements along the west bank of the

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[41]Schmalz, 164.

[42]Danziger, 33.

Mississippi, almost to the present Iowa border, and along the length of the Minnesota River.[43] The Chippewa established their own villages along the lakes and streams, under the cover of the northern wooded area, away from the Dakota villages situated in the more open prairies in the major river valleys of Southern Minnesota.

As they moved west and south, the Chippewa encountered a physical environment that was very similar to the one to which they were accustomed. The northern regions were heavily forested with mixed coniferous-deciduous species and contained extensive marshes and lakes, and the Chippewa quickly adapted to the local resources available.[44] To the south were primarily deciduous forests, dissolving into prairies farther to the west. For the most part, the Chippewa economy and subsistence patterns changed very little. They continued to exploit the sturgeon fisheries of Lake Superior and trapped beaver, muskrat and other game animals. As before, the most important food in the Chippewa diet was large game supplemented by berries, maple sugar and wild crops.

One significant change did occur in the subsistence patterns among the Chippewa. As they moved south from the Central Great Lakes region, the Chippewa began to rely more heavily than other Ojibwa groups on the harvesting of wild rice stands.[45] Wild rice was less reliable in the colder climate north of Lake Superior, and the

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[43]Hickerson, 111.

[44]Vennum, 1-2.

[45]Ritzenthaler, 746.

harvesting of wild rice became of greater importance as a subsistence activity to the Southwestern Ojibwa. Since wild rice yielded a successful crop in only one out of three years, the Chippewa were often unable to store enough to last through the winter. Historians have concluded that this reliance on wild rice led to competition and later conflict between the Chippewa and the Dakota.[46]

Contemporary observations claim the Dakota and Chippewa populations were relatively equal in size, reaching between three and four thousand individuals in each group. The Chippewa resided in approximately ten major villages of up to 800 individuals per village, and in a number of smaller "satellite" villages of about 100. While they were essentially equal in numbers, the Chippewa population appeared to be increasing more rapidly than the Dakota, who became fearful that the increasing Chippewa population would soon outnumber their own people, resulting in a conquest by sheer numbers. Although prolonged warfare and diseases such as smallpox served to balance the natural population increase, the Chippewa slowly began to edge the Dakota out of their traditional territory.

Between 1680 and 1736, the Chippewa entered Dakota territory peacefully, both to trade and hunt with neighbouring tribes, acting as middlemen between the Dakota and the French traders. By 1736, however, peaceful relations between the Dakota and the Chippewa were becoming strained. Using traders' accounts, historians have proposed that the continued expansion of European exploration and the fur trade in the first half of

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[46]Vennum, 39.

the eighteenth century north to Lake Winnipeg, south to the Missouri River, and west to the Mississippi River opened direct trade with the Dakota, making the Chippewa intermediaries obsolete. No longer dependent on their Chippewa trading partners to obtain European goods, Dakota warriors began to harass the Chippewa hunters in Dakota territory. Where once the Ojibwa and Dakota had hunted and co-existed peacefully, the area became one of contest between the two nations.[47] Both sides grew hesitant to enter this contested zone for fear of attack and frequent raids.

Ethnologist Harold Hickerson suggests the Chippewa were unable to survive in the over-hunted regions of the boreal forests once they were denied regular access to the resource-rich contested territory. As a result, they began to invade Dakota territory more frequently, pressing the Dakota to migrate farther south and west. When the Dakota massacred a number of French traders in 1736, the Chippewa seized the opportunity to break their alliance and peace treaty with the Dakota.[48] Forming a new alliance with the Cree, Assiniboine and Western Ojibwa, the Chippewa and their allies began raiding the Dakota territory. This competition and animosity between the Chippewa and the Dakota lasted for almost a century, and eventually resulted in a Chippewa victory and subsequent conquest of former Dakota territory.

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[47]Melissa Meyer. *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity and Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation, 1880 - 1920.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 18.

[48]Danziger, 36.

The hostility between the Chippewa and Dakota frequently interrupted trade in the region, and in 1774-5, European traders arranged a meeting between the Dakota and the Chippewa at Mackinac, hoping to encourage peace between the warring tribes. Their efforts were unsuccessful, but the documentary record of the period does not explain why. By this time, the Chippewa were strengthening their position in northern Minnesota, and had moved as far west as Lake of the Woods. By the 1780s, the Chippewa had established settlements at many of the lake and river sites throughout northern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin, and by 1783, had established permanent villages at Sandy and Leech lakes. Throughout this time, the hostilities between the Dakota and the Chippewa continued; raids and skirmishes are recalled by John Tanner in his account of his life with the Ojibwa.[49] Finally in 1825, peace was achieved with the Treaty of Prairie du Chien. The treaty was an attempt by the early American government to establish boundaries between the warring nations, and reduce incidents of raids and attacks.[50] Between 1825 and 1838 an uneasy peace reigned between the Dakota and Chippewa, apparently maintained to a large extent by the traders and post agents in the area, but hostilities between the two nations soon redeveloped. In 1839, following a long series of raids and attacks, the Dakota attacked Chippewa villages at the St. Croix River and Mille Lacs regions, killing over 100 Chippewa and all but destroying the villages in the attack.

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[49]Tanner, 105.

[50]Meyer, 18.

As in the case of the Southeastern Ojibwa, treaties were well-documented because they were important to the American newcomers. In August of 1815, representatives of the Chippewa, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Wyandot, Seneca, Delaware, Shawnee and Miami tribes congregated at Spring Wells near Detroit to discuss the terms of a treaty with American Commissioners William H. Harrison, Duncan McArthur and John Graham. The treaty, signed on September 8, 1815, established peaceful relations between the American government and the attending tribes.[51] It returned to the Native groups their rights and possessions as had existed prior to the War of 1812, and established a protocol for later treaties.

Land surrenders began as early as 1837, when the Chippewa agreed to cede a large tract of land in north-central Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota in exchange for a one-time cash settlement amounting to approximately $170,000, plus $35,000 to be paid each year for twenty years.[52] In addition, the Chippewa retained their right to hunt, fish and gather wild rice on the ceded lands. By October of 1842, the Chippewa ceded their remaining hunting grounds in northern Wisconsin and the upper peninsula of the territory of Michigan on similar terms. A final treaty was negotiated in 1854, ceding the rich mineral lands on the south shore of Lake Superior. By this time, the reserves were too small to support the traditional economy of the Chippewa, and they found their independence and autonomy increasingly curtailed by the American Bureau of Indian

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[51]Danziger, 68.

[52]Danziger, 87.

Affairs. Once foraging far afield for game and resources, the Chippewa found themselves confined to a number of small reserves, including those at Nett Lake, Fond du Lac and Grand Portage.[53]

The records produced by missionaries provide a glimpse into another aspect of Chippewa history. According to the missionaries, they met with some success among the Chippewa during the nineteenth century. The Reverend Leonard H. Wheeler and Bishop Frederick Baraga, in particular, spent much time among the Chippewa. Beginning in 1835, Baraga lived among the Chippewa for three decades, travelling between La Pointe, Grande Portage and Fond du Lac. While among the Chippewa, Baraga performed hundreds of baptisms, and established a missionary church at Grand Portage. And yet, when Wheeler arrived in 1841, little change had occurred among the Chippewa as a result of missionary efforts.[54] Establishing themselves at Bad River, Wheeler and his wife studied the Chippewa language, wrote a Chippewa spelling book, translated parts of the New Testament into Chippewa and started a school for Chippewa children. In spite of their efforts, and the efforts of others, the majority of the Chippewa did not seem interested in adopting the Christian religion as their own.[55] The missionaries had more success convincing the Chippewa to live in houses and do some farming, although more remote villages received little attention and continued with their traditional way of life.

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[53]Gerald Vizenor. *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 31.

[54]Danziger, 83.

[55]Danziger, 86.

Western Ojibwa (Bungi)

While the Chippewa moved west of Lake Superior towards the end of the seventeenth century, it was not until much later that some of these groups began to push farther west and north into what is now Manitoba, at least according to French observers. Since the conflict between the Chippewa and the Dakota had created the contested zone, many Ojibwa-Chippewa were prevented from exploiting the region east of the Red River and north of the Upper Mississippi River. Historians have deduced that, rather than risk a Dakota attack, some Ojibwa groups chose an easier route, moving west and north around the contested zone, expanding into the lower Red River basin and as far as the Assiniboine River.[56] It was primarily from these groups that the Ojibwa who would become known as the Plains or Western Ojibwa originated.

Ethnohistorian Laura Peers has proposed a somewhat different dynamic. She believes that the Ojibwa expansion to the west began as a process of extended visits to relatives and family living in the more western regions. Indeed, these relatives travelled back and forth between the west and eastern forests quite frequently. A sort of seasonal commuting occurred as voyages of exploration were made in addition to familial visits. These groups of Ojibwa spent their springs and summers in the east, and moved west to hunt bison near the Red River in the fall and winter. They returned east in the spring for the maple sap rush and to attend the annual gatherings.[57]

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[56]Ritterbush, 25.

[57]Peers, 28.

After approximately a decade and a half of this seasonal migration and exploration, the Ojibwa began to occupy more permanent settlements in the West. This was promoted by an increasingly familiar association with the plains people already living in the region.[58] Over time, the west became an integral part of their identity as Western Ojibwa. Unlike the Chippewa, the Western Ojibwa began to regularly hunt bison, and to adopt a more plains-oriented economy and culture. Wild rice became increasingly important to their survival, but could not be found west of the Red River, so many Ojibwa continued to travel east to gather or barter for the rice.[59]

As the Western Ojibwa moved west into the Boundary Waters of the upper Minnesota and upper Red drainage basins they again came into contact with the Dakota. While early relations between the Chippewa and the Dakota had been relatively peaceful, the continued western expansion of the Western Ojibwa incited conflict and competition for land and resources. Following the Dakota massacre of French traders in 1736, the Chippewa joined the Western Ojibwa, the Cree and the Assiniboine in a campaign against the Dakota.

The Ojibwa migration farther west to the parklands and prairies of Manitoba continued through the last three decades of the eighteenth century. Traders operating out of Montreal reported that the Western Ojibwa were spread out along the Red River through the Interlake district, the Assiniboine and north Saskatchewan rivers and other

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[58]Irving Hallowell. *The Ojibwa of Berens River, Manitoba.* (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1992), 118.

[59]Peers, 29.

major water routes as far west as Edmonton House, Lesser Slave Lake and the Columbia River. The contested zone that existed between the Dakota and the Chippewa limited to a large extent the expansion of the Ojibwa into the parkland and prairie regions east of the Upper Red River and the mouth of the upper Mississippi. Instead, many travelled north and west around the disputed area to the lower Red River area and beyond to the Assiniboine River.

Records produced by the trading companies such as Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company show increasing numbers of Ojibwa began trading at various posts throughout the Northwest late in the eighteenth century. Beginning at Fort Alexander at the mouth of the Winnipeg River, the Western Ojibwa proceeded to other posts along Lake Winnipeg and up the Red River past Pembina, and west as far as Turtle Mountain and the Hair Hills. They moved throughout the Interlake district along the Assiniboine River past Brandon House, Shell, Dauphin and Red Deer rivers, along the Qu'Appelle River north and immediately west of Lake Winnipegosis and along the North Saskatchewan River as far as Edmonton House and Lac La Biche.[60]

Extensive fur trade records, particularly those kept by the Hudson's Bay Company, show that for a time in the west, the Ojibwa hunters consistently trapped a plentiful supply of beaver for trade purposes, leading to a general affluence among the Western Ojibwa. The continuing competition between traders and companies in the western interior was advantageous for the Ojibwa in the west as in the east. In return for their

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[60]Hallowell, 118.

pelts, they demanded better quality knives, kettles, guns and ammunition as well as decorative articles such as bone and glass beads, red cloth, silver jewellery and wampum beads. Even when beaver began to diminish after 1797, at least in part as the result of an epidemic which swept through the beaver population, the negative effects were offset by the increase in fur trade competition. The Ojibwa were able to profit from the intense competition between the Hudson's Bay Company, the Northwest Company and the newly-formed XY Company. This competition ensured that the quality and number of goods to which the Ojibwa were accustomed remained available. Fur traders' reports have enabled historians to propose that the Ojibwa were quick to press their advantage, playing traders off one another, and travelling to other posts for better prices.[61]

This movement westward led to some significant changes in Ojibwa culture. As the Ojibwa moved from the eastern forests and lakes to the prairies and parklands of the west, they encountered an ecological and human environment very different from the one they had left.[62] Travel was not a concern; as a canoe-oriented people, the Ojibwa had no difficulty navigating the lakes and rivers of present Manitoba. Subtle changes did occur, such as a shift to an economy based increasingly on bison hunting and a plains existence. By the time the Ojibwa were moving into the parklands and prairies of Manitoba, they had begun to manufacture clothing from European cloth using their traditional patterns. They rejected European shoes in favour of the more practical moccasin, although

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[61]Ritterbush, 24.

[62]Ritterbush, 3.

leggings, breechcloths, shirts and dresses were increasingly made from wool or cotton and adorned with ribbon or beadwork trims.

As they moved into the West, it seems that the Western Ojibwa grew closer to the Cree than to the Assiniboine groups. While the documentary record is not clear about what may have been the cause, the uneasiness between the Assiniboine and the Western Ojibwa became open hostility in the summer of 1801, provoked perhaps by the increasing competition for bison.[63] These tensions however did not prevent the Assiniboine from joining Cree, Western Ojibwa and Chippewa war parties in raids and attacks on the Dakota to the south. Nor did this uneasiness impede the relations between the Western Ojibwa and the Cree. Ultimately, the Western Ojibwa encountered little resistance during their migration into the parklands and prairies of the west.

Missionary records again provide a glimpse into another aspect of this history. The first missionaries to contact the Red River Ojibwa arrived in 1818, but were more concerned with the white settlers and the Métis living in the area.[64] Their influence on the Western Ojibwa was minimal. Roman Catholic missionary Sévère Dumoulin and Anglican missionary John West established separate missions among the Western Ojibwa, but both met with limited success and were removed by 1823. More than anything,

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[63]Peers, 44.

[64]Ritterbush, 136.

missionization among the Western Ojibwa sparked a struggle for power between the missionaries and the traditional Ojibwa leaders.[65]

As settlers moved farther west during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, they came increasingly into contact with the Western Ojibwa living in the region. The earliest treaty was negotiated in 1817 between the Western Ojibwa and Lord Selkirk, giving much of the land bordering the lower Red River to Selkirk for his agricultural settlement. This early agreement with Selkirk made little difference to the patterns of Ojibwa life as they continued to use the ceded land.[66] The Stone Fort Treaty (Treaty Number One) of 1871 marked the beginning of an era of increased government control. The Western Ojibwa began signing treaties in quick succession. Treaty Numbers Two and Four were signed in 1871 and 1874, and by 1877 the Western Ojibwa had surrendered most of the area between Lake of the Woods and the Rockies.[67]

Northern Ojibwa

As has been noted, there is some disagreement among historians as to whether the Ojibwa migrated north during the contact period, or were established in the northern boreal forest well before the arrival of Europeans. The documentary record is not clear and part of the uncertainty may be a result of the use of the name Ojibwa as a blanket term. It may be that northern groups were Ojibwa-speaking, but more closely related to

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[65]Peers, 167.

[66]Ritterbush, 136.

[67]Peers, 205.

the Cree who were also present in the region.[68] Researchers James Morrison and Adolph Greenberg argue that European explorers mistakenly classified these Ojibwa-speaking groups as belonging to Ojibwa tribes in the south, and assumed a northern migration where none existed. Others, such as anthropologists Charles Bishop and Irving Hallowell, argue that the people known today as the Northern Ojibwa did indeed move north and west from the Central Great Lakes region, displacing the Cree and Assiniboine who in turn moved farther west into what is now Manitoba. Anthropologist E.S. Rogers contends that the earliest documentary reference to the Ojibwa in northern Ontario places them at Port Severn in 1764, and at Gloucester House in 1784, when traders mention the arrival of the "Jepoy" natives.[69]

If we accept that some Ojibwa groups probably did migrate from the Central Great Lakes region around the time of contact, it is important to note that this movement was gradual. The early period of expansion into the region north and west of Lake Superior appears to have occurred between 1660 and 1780, and the Ojibwa eventually established themselves in the southern regions of northern Ontario, and in northeastern Manitoba east of Lake Winnipeg. Migration deeper into the boreal forests did not present a radical

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[68]Adolph M. Greenberg and James Morrison, "Group identities in the Boreal Forest: The Origin of the Northern Ojibwa," *Ethnohistory* v. 29 no. 2, (1982), 82.

[69]Edward S. Rogers, "Cultural Adaptations: the Northern Ojibwa," in *Boreal Forest Adaptations: the Northern Algonkians*. A. Theodore Steegmann, ed. (New York: Plenum Press, 1983), 86. * The term *jepoy* was one of the alternate terms for the Ojibwa in the fur trade period.

change in the physical environment to which the Ojibwa were accustomed.[70] There were fewer deciduous trees in the northern boreal region, but game and resources remained similar. One significant change that did occur was the shift from a diet based on sturgeon and whitefish at the time of contact, to large game animals in the late eighteenth century.

Much like the Western Ojibwa, groups in the northern regions moved into the boreal forest first on a seasonal basis, hunting and acting as intermediaries between northern tribes, such as the Cree and Assiniboine, and the European fur traders.[71] This arrangement lasted for many decades, and over time, the Ojibwa groups began increasingly to exploit the fur and game resources that lay beyond the Central Great Lakes region. As the Ojibwa moved consistently north, they coexisted peacefully with the Cree and Assiniboine already established there. The Cree themselves appeared to be moving west with the expansion of the fur trade, and there was no real objection to the Ojibwa expansion into the region. This expansion did not prevent involvement in the summer gatherings at the Sault, rather the Ojibwa returned south every spring to gather maple sap and take advantage of the sturgeon runs.[72]

The Ojibwa maintained their lucrative positions as middlemen in the northern trade until the 1670s, when the fur trade itself expanded north and west into the interior of the continent. Trading posts were established in the interior of northern Ontario and

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[70]Hallowell, 22.

[71]R.W. Dunning, *Social and Economic Change mong the Northern Ojibwa.* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1959), 3.

[72]Bishop, 310.

eastern Manitoba, and Europeans began trading directly with the Cree and Assiniboine, effectively eliminating the Ojibwa intermediaries.[73] No longer essential to the fur trade in their former capacity, the Ojibwa were forced to compete with the other Native groups in the growing northern trade. Although the Ojibwa were quick to take advantage of the rivalry between posts, and between the French and British traders, demanding better quality and greater variety of goods in exchange for their furs, they no longer enjoyed a preferred status in the trade.

In 1730, the Hudson's Bay Company began to establish trading posts farther into the interior above Lake Superior in an attempt to compete with other posts already located there. These posts attracted greater numbers of Ojibwa to the north, and they began to settle in semi-permanent villages along the major waterways of the interior. They journeyed south to the summer gatherings less frequently, and began to establish closer relations with the Cree and Assiniboine.

The North West Company was founded in 1782 and became the primary competition for the Hudson's Bay Company in northern Ontario. The Ojibwa seized upon the fierce competition between the rival companies to acquire large quantities of high quality, inexpensive material goods in return for fewer and lesser quality furs. According to Hudson's Bay Company manager R.C. Wilson, the Northern Ojibwa

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[73]Eleanor M. Blain, "Dependency: Charles Bishop and the Northern Ojibwa," in *Aboriginal Resource Use*. Kerry Abel and Jean Friesen, eds. (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 1991), 95.

exerted pressure on the trading company to alter supply routes to make it easier for the Ojibwa to participate in the trade.[74]

After 1805, beaver began to grow scarce in northern Ontario and large game animals such as deer and caribou were virtually eliminated in the southern parts of northern Ontario. The Ojibwa were forced to rely on smaller game, fish and agricultural crops for subsistence.[75] In 1821, the North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company amalgamated, bringing to an end more than forty years of competition in northern Ontario. Non-profitable posts in the north were closed, credit was no longer extended as freely as before, and the prices of European goods rose dramatically. The Hudson's Bay Company introduced new conservation practices to protect the remaining marten and beaver populations, further curtailing the profits to be found in the fur trade.[76]

The culmination of these crises had a devastating impact on the Northern Ojibwa economy. Until 1821, the Ojibwa merely relied on trading posts for specific necessities, such as metal kettles, firearms and ammunition. Without moose or caribou hide for clothing and moccasins, the Ojibwa were forced to rely more heavily on European goods such as wool and cloth. Game scarcity meant the Northern Ojibwa were unable to find

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[74]Blain, 102.

[75]Leo G. Wainsberg and Tim E. Holzkamm, "A Tendency to Discourage them from Cultivating: Ojibwa Agriculture and Indian Affairs Administration in Northwestern Ontario," *Ethnohistory* v. 40 no. 2, (Spring 1993), 177.

[76]Blain, 95.

enough food to support their families and hunting groups and they had to rely increasingly on store foods and small game for survival.[77]

Between 1810 and 1820, changes were also occurring in the social organization of the Northern Ojibwa. Anthropologists have used Hudson's Bay Company records to determine that during the early period of expansion, the Northern Ojibwa continued to hunt in clan-based groups of about twenty-five to thirty individuals, exploiting communally-held territory. With the establishment of semi-permanent trading posts in the interior, Ojibwa hunting groups grew more stabilized and attached to specific territories. While no formal boundaries existed, customary use of a certain territory year after year constituted what the Ojibwa viewed as ownership.[78] Game and resources shortages meant that large, clan-based hunting groups could no longer be maintained, forcing these extended family hunting groups to disintegrate. As hunting groups dispersed, so did many clan members, and Northern Ojibwa loyalty shifted from their clan group to the hunting groups and villages.[79]

Unlike the Southeastern Ojibwa, the Northern Ojibwa were particularly isolated from European influences during the early contact period. While it is likely they encountered traders and missionaries before they began to move north, European contact was limited to individual traders located sporadically at posts in the interior of the region.

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[77]Bishop, 255.

[78]Edward S. Rogers. *The Round Lake Ojibwa.* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum Art & Archaeology Division Paper no. 5, 1962), A23.

[79]Bishop, 346.

Ojibwa groups residing farther west, in northeastern Manitoba, were isolated most of all. According to some anthropologists, this general isolation from European influence resulted in a more conservative Ojibwa culture among the northern groups than Ojibwa living farther south and interacting with Europeans on a more frequent basis.[80]

Missionary contact was difficult and sporadic, and their religious influence over the next 100 years was negligible. It was not until late in the nineteenth century that a concerted effort to reach the Northern Ojibwa was undertaken. Although missionaries had entered the northern regions of Ontario and southern Manitoba early in the nineteenth century, the first mission was not established in northern Manitoba until E.R. Young arrived among the Ojibwa at the Berens River in 1873. Young, like many of the missionaries in the region, found the Northern Ojibwa quite resistant to conversion, and the process of christianization proceeded slowly. Indeed, the most visible evidence of missionary influence was witnessed not in religious spheres, but in their success at persuading the Ojibwa to cultivate summer potato gardens and limited corn crops, to abandon the practice of polygamy, and later to write in syllabics.[81]

With Confederation and the subsequent creation of the province of Manitoba in 1870, the Northern Ojibwa began to feel the effects of a distant national government. The first rail lines were established just south of Northern Ojibwa territory in the 1880s,

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[80]Hallowell, 26.

[81]Wainsberg and Holzkamm, 194.

and a second line farther north was operating by 1920.[82] The Northern Ojibwa began signing treaties with the Dominion government relinquishing their aboriginal lands in return for annuity payments and reserved land. Since the documentary record focusses on the activities of government representatives, it is not clear whether the Ojibwa immediately recognized the full significance of these land cessions. In signing Treaty 3, the Ojibwa ceded the land from Pigeon River west to Lake Nipigon, and northwest to the land between the Albany and Winnipeg Rivers. Treaty 5, negotiated in 1875, directly affected the Ojibwa living east of Lake Winnipeg, ceding approximately 100,000 square miles of land. Treaty 9, signed in 1905, created reserves in northern Ontario. An elected band council pre-empted the chief's traditional leadership position, and the Northern Ojibwa were placed increasingly under the paternal policies of the Canadian government. Additional reserves were granted throughout northern Ontario and eastern Manitoba over the next several years, reducing Ojibwa autonomy and independence throughout the region. Today, the Northern Ojibwa live in a number of semi-permanent villages scattered on reserves throughout the southern portion of northern Ontario, and northeastern Manitoba. (Fig. 3)

Summary and Twentieth Century Developments

Early Euro-American documentary records indicate that by the 1770's, the Ojibwa had expanded to their present boundaries. Throughout this tumultuous period of migration and European contact, changes occurred in Ojibwa economy, culture and

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[82]Rogers, "Cultural Adaptations", 118.

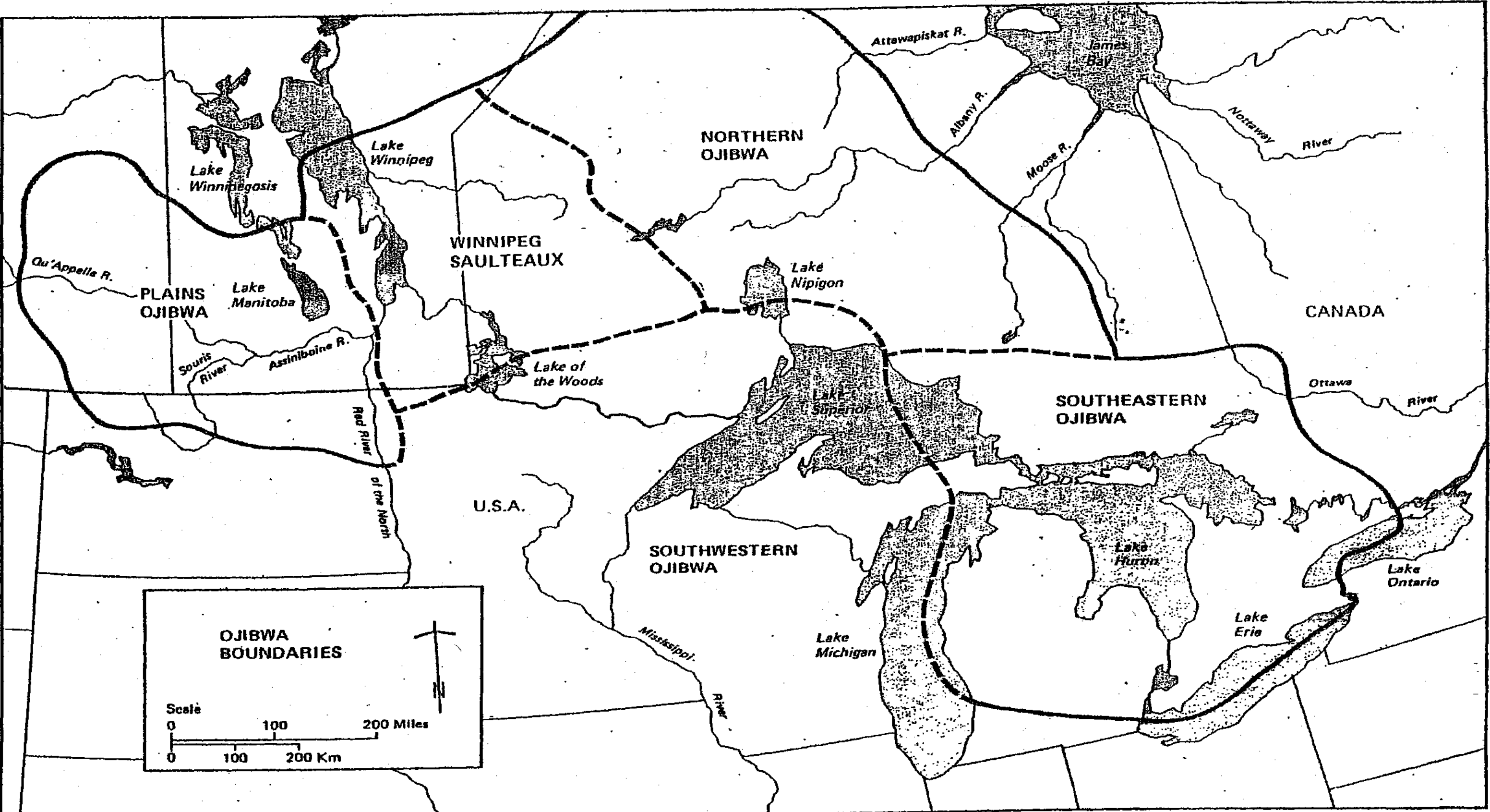

Fig. 3: Map showing distribution of the Ojibwa in the twentieth century.

Source: Basil Johnston. *Ojibway Heritage: The Ceremonies, Rituals, Songs, Dances, Prayers and Legends of the Ojibway*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994), 10.

religious beliefs. These changes were sometimes subtle, sometimes profound, and varied from region to region.[83] Modifications that did occur were cumulative and, for the most part, a result of Ojibwa participation in the fur trade. Trade and European contact gradually modified the aboriginal Ojibwa subsistence economy to one that increasingly mirrored a Western economy based on the individual pursuit of material wealth. An increasing reliance on European material goods eventually resulted in the loss of knowledge of many aboriginal skills and practices. Although this reliance was more pronounced in southern regions than among the Ojibwa in more isolated northern forests, all branches of the Ojibwa adopted various European trade goods into their everyday life.

One item obtained in the European fur trade that had a particularly deleterious effect on the Ojibwa people, and Native populations in general, was alcohol. Prior to European contract, Native people had no experience with alcohol, and were unprepared for the disastrous influence it would have on their lives. Liquor was readily and easily incorporated into Ojibwa culture, but was not merely a substance used to achieve inebriation. It was incorporated into their celebrations and religious observances, and the Ojibwa participated in drinking parties in the spring and fall when they gathered in large numbers at the trading posts.[84] The ability to obtain alcohol soon became a sign of prestige and wealth, and alcohol was an accepted offering, as was tobacco, during religious ceremonies. Ultimately addictive, the spread of liquor was damaging to Native groups.

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[83]Ritzenthaler, 746.

[84]Peers, 42.

The semi-annual drinking parties frequently dissolved into fights, causing injury and, on occasion, even death. The free distribution of alcohol among the Native population was substantially reduced after 1821.

The Indian Act of 1876 "consolidated the piecemeal legislation of the British," and after this date the Canadian government made a more concerted effort to assimilate the Native groups.[85] The school system was expanded under the guidance of various missionary groups, and it was here, acting of the belief that Native youths were more malleable than their parents and grandparents, that the Canadian government concentrated their efforts. Native children in day and residential schools were forbidden to speak their Native language, and were discouraged from communicating with their parents. It was expected that separation from their traditional culture and immersion in Christian culture would civilize Native children. In spite of government attempts at assimilation, Native communities remained separate from mainstream society. Native peoples were isolated from that society, while assimilation policies worked to erode and destroy their traditional cultures.

The social and economic institutions of the Ojibwa today are very different from those of the early contact period, but they are not duplicates of European-Canadian institutions either. Instead, they are the "result of an ongoing, adaptive response to external pressures and the desire to maintain a sense of social and cultural identity," and

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[85]Schmalz, xiii.

are a composite of traditional cultural elements and European-Canadian influences.[86] The Ojibwa were certainly not oblivious to the changes that were occurring within their culture. Indeed, between 1760 and 1860, in reaction to increasing European influence, a number of nativistic and prophetic movements spread across Ojibwa territory. Some of these movements were initiated by other Native tribes, such as the Shawnee Prophet and his warrior-brother Tecumseh. In 1801, the Ojibwa leader Tabashaw reported a dream visitor who bestowed upon him the special gift of being able to produce anything he wanted, including firearms, liquor and iron arrows. Tabashaw interpreted his dream as a sign of independence from all others, including European traders. His interpretation reveals the Native desire for material goods, and an equally strong desire to remain an independent people from the Europeans.[87] Harold Hickerson, among others, argues in fact that among these nativistic responses were attempts to protect Ojibwa culture and religion from further encroachment of Western culture, is the Grand Medicine Society of the Ojibwa, the *Midewiwin*. Many Ojibwa, however, maintain that the Midewiwin was indeed an aboriginal institution that is, it pre-dated contact. This debate will be explored further in a later chapter.

Further changes occurred in to the twentieth century. Reserves had been established throughout Ojibwa territory, and the Ojibwa were coming increasingly under governmental control. Traditional chiefs had been replaced in many respects by Indian

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[86]Bishop, 1.

[87]Peers, 43.

agents, and only nominal leadership was vested in an elected band chief and his council.[88] These bodies had limited autonomy and served more as liaison officers between the community and the Canadian government. The reserves were no longer indicative of the autonomous communities which had existed in the past, and encouraged independence of individual households at the expense of reserve or group cohesion.[89] By 1959, regular medical service was being provided on many of the Canadian reserves, as were government pensions, treaty payments and family allowance. As a result, Native populations grew increasingly stabilized on reserves.

During the twentieth century, interaction with Euro-Canadians increased dramatically and after the Second World War Native people began to play a more significant role in the development of national policy. Despite relegation to small plots of land within their traditional territory, and mistreatment of many at the hands of missionaries and the government, no other ethnic group in Canada contributed as great a proportion of men to the war effort of the two World Wars than the Native population. The Ojibwa who returned from the wars exhibited more militancy than others in their political organizations, and were instrumental in the demand for greater Native control of national policy, and greater self-determination in the social, economic and political realms of their people.[90] They demanded broader rights and restitution for their mistreatment,

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[88]Bishop, 15.

[89]Hickerson, 17.

[90]Schmalz, xv.

worked to create alliances with other Native groups in Canada, and to abolish the assimilation policies of the reserves and schools. Increased publicity created a more sympathetic public, and material conditions on the reserves slowly improved. During the first half of the twentieth century, Native peoples in Canada, as wards of the Crown, were permitted to vote only if they relinquished their Indian status. It was only after 1960 that Native peoples were recognized in the federal arena as full and equal citizens.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate what can be learned about the Ojibwa from documentary sources. These sources include the records of individual traders as well as trading companies such as the Hudson's Bay Company. Information is also available from government documents such as treaties, missionary records and observations of early European travellers and settlers. These sources contain information about Ojibwa material culture and economy, conflicts with other Native groups and with early Europeans, as well as details about battles, treaties and Ojibwa participation in the fur trade. Yet the history of the Ojibwa remains incomplete.

Part of the difficulty in using only documentary record to write the history of the Ojibwa lies in the individuals who did the recording. Quite simply, they were European, not Ojibwa. They were traders, missionaries and government officials, and so recorded those things that were important to traders, missionaries and government officials. Many other details were simply overlooked or omitted because they were not considered important. For example, the pre-contact history of the Ojibwa was generally deemed irrelevant because it did not include Europeans. That the history of North America

began with the arrival of "civilized" European nations was a prevailing attitude in the contact period. As a result, much is still unknown about pre-contact Ojibwa society. It is impossible to discover from documentary record what conflicts the Ojibwa were involved in before the arrival of Europeans, what their trade patterns were, or whether the Ojibwa had always occupied the territory where the Europeans found them in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In recent decades, modern archaeological and anthropological methods have added to the general knowledge of indigenous material culture, but even these methods cannot provide a full and accurate picture of pre-contact Ojibwa society. Scholars using these methods can merely extrapolate and, essentially, make assumptions which they are often unable to prove conclusively.

Moreover, many of the early documents that do describe pre- or early-contact Ojibwa, were recorded after the Ojibwa had already had some experience in dealing with European explorers and traders. By this time, the influences of the fur trade, changes in material culture and, later, nativistic movements had had an effect on Ojibwa culture and organization. Early European sources reflect the socio-political environment of the post-contact period, after modifications and adaptations in Ojibwa society may have already occurred. Since Europeans were not aware of Ojibwa culture before they themselves arrived in North America, it is not possible to determine from their records whether profound changes had already taken place in Ojibwa culture by the time this information was recorded. For example, it is entirely possible that early Europeans mistook aboriginal institutions as post-contact developments, just as post-contact institutions may have been mistaken as aboriginal ones.

Just as a prevailing euro-centrism meant that pre-contact Ojibwa history was viewed as irrelevant to Europeans, this same attitude affected what was recorded during the post-contact period. Documentary record contains information about those events, including treaties, battles and trading patterns, that directly affected Europeans. Military conflicts and treaty negotiations were particularly important to governments and officials, and we clearly have a wealth of this type of information. It would be absurd to assume, however, that only those events that were recorded by Europeans actually occurred over more than three hundred years of contact. It is likely that there were conflicts between the Ojibwa and other Native groups that were not observed or recorded because they did not involve Europeans. Other events or activities that did not directly affect the European exploration and settlement of North America were simply not recorded. Changes in leadership or in seasonal patterns of subsistence, for example, were only recorded if they impacted the numbers of Ojibwa travelling to trading posts. There is also very little discussion of religious movements among the Ojibwa other than the successes and failures of Christian missionaries. As I will discuss in a later chapter, there is almost no reference to the Midewiwin in documentary record until the eighteenth century. A narrow reading of documentary record would suggest that unless it was recorded by Europeans, it did not happen, but this is simply not true.

Furthermore, European visitors naturally described their encounters and the activities they witnessed through their own cultural expectations and standards. This is an important consideration when using available written documents to reconstruct the history of the Ojibwa. According to Gerald Vizenor, "the cultural and political histories

of the Anishinaabeg [Ojibwa] were written in a colonial language by those who invented the Indian, renamed the tribes, allotted the lands, divided ancestries."[91] This is most apparent in the language that was used to describe Native groups encountered by Europeans, particularly in the early contact period. During his travels between 1768 and 1788, John Long referred to the Ojibwa as "the poor, untutored Indian", and as "barbarians".[92] In 1830, Edwin James, editor of the memoirs of John Tanner, echoed a popular sentiment when he described medicine men as "a set of crafty imposters."[93] Not all accounts describe Native groups in such unflattering terms, but the prevailing attitude was one of European superiority. J.G. Kohl recorded an old Simcoe farmer complaining that "[t]hey are a lazy race...they are too stupid and too idle to cut down the trees themselves."[94] Had this farmer had a better understanding of the culture and practices of Native groups, he might not have expected them to "cut down the trees" at all. These few examples demonstrate how European travellers and settlers frequently evaluated Native peoples by European standards, using vocabulary that painted Native peoples as primitive at best. This euro-centrism may have made it difficult for early Europeans to interpret or evaluate Ojibwa customs and behaviour accurately. Cultural bias or preconceptions necessarily influence an individual's interpretation, and colonizing

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[91]Vizenor, 19.

[92]Long, 59.

[93]Edwin James, ed. in John Tanner, *Captivity of John Tanner, US Interpreter at the Saut [sic] de Ste. Marie during 30 Years Residence Among the Indians in the Interior of North America.* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines Inc., 1830), 284.

[94]Kohl, 200 - 201.

nations, in particular, have often ignored or misjudged complexities in Aboriginal cultures.[95] Prejudice may have caused the recorder to omit essential details of an encounter or ceremony because those details did not seem important to him.

What is most obviously lacking in these sources is the Ojibwa perspective of events. Too often, the history of the Ojibwa and their interactions with European newcomers is told through the records and perspective of the newcomers themselves, and the perspective of the Ojibwa is obscured or totally absent.[96] I use the term "Ojibwa perspective" to refer to how members of the Ojibwa were likely to interpret situations, as opposed to common interpretations of the dominant European culture. Of course, just as there is not one single perspective to be found in written sources, not every Ojibwa individual viewed events or circumstances in exactly the same way. Within a culture, however, there is a similarity of perspective that may not be the same as one from without the culture. As discussed in Chapter Two, members of the same culture share a similar outlook and perspective, as a result of shared cultural values and expectations. This causes individuals to interpret events or experiences in a similar fashion.

While European documents can relate dates and events, traders, explorers and missionaries were recording their own observations. Few, if any, thought to ask the Ojibwa how they interpreted certain events. We cannot determine from these sources

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[95]Catherine Rainwater. *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformations of Native American Fiction*. (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 7.

[96]Roger Spielmann, *'You're so Fat!': Exploring Ojibwe Discourse*. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1998) 8.

what the Ojibwa thought of the arrival of the Europeans, or how they perceived the missionaries in their midst. For example, why did the Ojibwa participate in the battles and treaties that are recorded in documentary sources? Historians should not assume that the Ojibwa shared the same expectations as Europeans merely because they became involved in European conflicts. What were the expectations of the Ojibwa in those battles? What did the Ojibwa hope to accomplish in the Pontiac Uprising? Did the Ojibwa fully recognize the significance of treaties they signed, or battles in which they took part? What motivated some groups to negotiate peace treaties and agree to land cessions, while others did not? Historians can only make suggestions based on their interpretation of documentary record about what motivated the Ojibwa to allow their former adversaries, the Iroquois, and the United Empire Loyalists to settle in Ojibwa territory. This information is simply not included in documentary record.

Furthermore, written and secondary sources can describe the visible changes to Ojibwa material culture or lifestyle, but what are missing from these documents are the Aboriginal responses and reactions to these changes and developments. What, for example, motivated the Ojibwa to become involved in the fur trade? How did they view the changes that occurred in their material culture as a result of their participation in the trade? Were the Ojibwa conscious of the changes that were taking place? What caused the Ojibwa to adopt some elements of Christianity into their own beliefs, and reject others? Europeans recorded their own perspectives and judgements about what was happening to and among the Ojibwa, but there is little information in documentary record that can aid historians in understanding why the Ojibwa made certain decisions.

Even when two groups record information about the same event, for example, a description of a battle that occurred, their interpretation of that event is not always the same. Historians must consider both perspectives about that event in order to produce a balanced account of what occurred. Different expectations and different frames of reference result in different interpretations of the same events. Europeans and Ojibwa individuals were unlikely to view the arrival of Europeans to North America and the spread of the fur trade in the same way, yet documentary records can only provide the European perspective of these events and their interactions with the Ojibwa.

Can a history of the Ojibwa be complete if it is based only on documentary record? I do not believe so. Historians cannot produce a balanced history of a people without trying to find out what members of the culture thought or felt about events that occurred. Knowing how the Ojibwa perceived events that were recorded in European documents could change how we interpret those events, and those records that do exist. Scholars must consider other possible types of evidence to provide either an opposing point of view, or to corroborate existing documents. To base a history solely on one type of source that wholly excludes the perspective of one of the societies being examined is unacceptable. In the case of Ojibwa and European or European-Canadian relations, both parties must be equally represented, from a variety of sources, including the perspective of the Ojibwa people. How then can the Native perspective be incorporated into these histories to produce a more complete picture of their history?

In the following chapters, I will attempt to answer some of these questions with an examination of Ojibwa oral tradition. While I cannot fill in all the gaps left by

documentary sources, I will examine specific traditions, including origin myths and legends about the Midewiwin, to determine the type of information historians can gain from oral sources.

Chapter 4
Ojibwa Oral Tradition: A Case Study

In previous chapters, I have discussed how scholars have debated the use of oral tradition in the study of Native history, and some of the difficulties they have experienced in using oral sources. I have also examined the type of information that is available from traditional documentary sources, and the limitations of those sources. Based on the work of others, I also proposed a very general framework for approaching oral tradition. In this chapter, I intend to apply that framework to a variety of Ojibwa traditions to determine what sort of historical evidence can be obtained. I will demonstrate that oral tradition can be used in a number of different ways in the reconstruction of Native history. There are those traditions which appear to corroborate existing evidence provided by traditional methods such as documentary analysis and archaeology. These traditions, in particular, tend to contain more traditional information in the European sense, such as descriptions of material culture, migrations or periods of conflict. Other legends and traditions provide information that gives us a clearer picture of the Ojibwa, on topics already described in traditional sources, to provide information and perspectives that may be lacking in these sources, essentially filling in any "gaps". In addition, oral tradition can provide an Ojibwa perspective that is frequently missing from early documents and interpretations of those documents. Finally, oral tradition can be used to provide information that is unavailable in any other traditional source. In particular, I intend to examine traditions which describe a migration from the Eastern seaboard in ancient Ojibwa history, and their origin myth to determine what new insights can be gained.

Before we can consider the information oral tradition provides, we must consider the sources of these traditions. My research is based on traditions that have been written and published in English. As I discussed in the second chapter, this is certainly not an ideal situation. This does not mean, however, that nothing can be learned from these types of sources. Some of the collections I have used were prepared by non-Native scholars. These individuals, for the most part, chose to collect and publish these traditions because of a personal interest in the legends and stories of the Ojibwa. Furthermore, some feared the stories would be lost if they were not recorded. Others wished to provide a window into the culture of the Ojibwa that was not based on traditional documentary evidence. I selected collections where the editors maintained they had not performed any editing that would substantially alter the meaning of the traditions, or force them into a limited literary structure. Furthermore, I have avoided relying on the editors' analyses of the traditions where they existed, and have made an effort to examine the legends and stories based on my own research and proposed framework for analysis.

As much as possible, I have relied on traditions and legends provided by Ojibwa scholars and authors, among them George Copway, William Warren and Peter Jones. As noted in previous chapters, these sources have their own limitations. These authors were motivated to write about their people for a European audience, and often used vocabulary that mirrored accepted European attitudes of the day. Peter Jones, for example, refers to

his people as the "poor, deluded Indian" with "their imaginary gods".[1] Still, these authors were among the first Ojibwa to publish the history of their people and should not be overlooked.

I rely most heavily on those traditions published by more recent Ojibwa authors such as Basil Johnston and Norval Morriseau. They have an intimate knowledge of the culture, language, and tradition of the Ojibwa people, and these authors contend they are hoping to make their traditions accessible to Natives and non-Natives alike, without subverting the form or content of the traditions. Although these sources are subject to the same limitations inherent in reducing oral tradition to the written word, they are still among the most authentic sources of Ojibwa culture and identity available today. Basil Johnston, in particular, is one of the few remaining Ojibwa who both speak and write in the Anishnabe language.

Others, such as the work of Wub-e-ke-niew, I use more carefully, since he seems to write in an almost inflammatory tone, and often makes claims, without substantiating them, that oppose most of the other traditions I have examined. For example, Wub-e-ke-niew contends that there was no warfare prior to the arrival of the Europeans, and that all Native groups lived in complete harmony.[2] This is the only source I have found to make this claim: Johnston, Copway, Morrisseau and many others maintain that there was indeed conflict among different Native groups both before and during the contact periods.

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[1]Peter Jones. *History of the Ojebway Indians*. (London: Bennett, 1861), 152 and 93.

[2]Wub-e-ke-niew. *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought*. (New York: Black Thistle Press, 1995). 4.

While sources such as these should not be dismissed, the same concerns which historians consider in traditional sources, such as bias and motivation, must be applied to the study of oral traditions.

There is an Ojibwa legend that tells of the four sons of the woman Winona, and of Epingishmook, the West Wind. Part spirit and part human, each of these sons left special gifts for the Ojibwa people. The eldest, Mudjeekawiss, gave the Ojibwa courage and a heritage; Papeekawiss instilled in them a sense of beauty and ceremonies; Chibiabos gave the Ojibwa romance and poetry; and Nanabush, the fourth and perhaps most well-known of the brothers, gave the people humour and the art of story-telling.[3] This was a precious gift, as it is through these stories that knowledge and experience of one generation are passed on to the next.

According to the Reverend George Copway, there are three types of Ojibwa legend: historical, moral and amusing.[4] Among the historical legends are descriptions of a great migration west to the Central Great Lakes region from the eastern seaboard, as well as those which document conflict between the Ojibwa and other Native groups.[5] Also among the historical tradition are those that explain why some things are the way they are in the world. For example, there is a story of Bear and Chipmunk:

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[3]Basil Johnston. *Tales the Elders Told.* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1981), 7.

[4]George Copway. *Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway.* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1850) 97.

[5]Charles Kawbawgam, Charlotte Kawbawgam, and Jacques Le Pique. *Ojibwa Narratives of Charles and Charlotte Kawbawgam and Jacques Le Pique, 1893 - 1895.* Arthur P. Bourgeois, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1994), 114.

> Long ago Porcupine was appointed to be the leader of all the forest animals. Soon after he took his position he called all the animals together for a meeting. When they had all arrived, he stood and asked, "Shall we have night and darkness all the time, or shall we have day and sunlight all the time?" After a long debate, those in favor [sic] of darkness appointed Bear to explain their position. "Night is best," Bear sang. "We shall have night. Never will the light fall upon us as we roam our dark world." But Chipmunk, who wished for night to be followed by day, disagreed. Chipmunk sang, "The light will come. We shall have day. But night will separate the days. We shall have day."
>
> While Chipmunk sang, the sun began to rise, filling the forest with light. When Bear saw that Chipmunk's song had more power than his own, be became angry and tried to stop Chipmunk. The followers of Bear were angry, too. They chased Chipmunk, who sang as he ran. Chipmunk managed to escape into a hole just as Bear's huge claws scraped Chipmunk's back, leaving the marks that he still carries today.[6]

Traditions such as this one are very common, including those which explain why the eagle is bald or how the turtle got his shell. Another particularly important myth in this category is the origin myth of the Ojibwa. This tradition describes how the world was created, and where the Ojibwa come from.

Moral legends are those which reinforce accepted social behaviour, such as the importance of generosity and hospitality, and the careful treatment of animals and their remains. [7] These traditions often describe what could happen to an individual if he or she did not live up to the standards by which the Ojibwa lived. For example, consider the story of Weasel:

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[6]Anne M. Dunn. *Grandmother's Gift: Stories from the Anishinabeg.* (Duluth: Holy Cow! Press, 1997), 25 - 26.

[7]J.G. Kohl. *Kitchi-Gami: Wandering Round Lake Superior.* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1860), 65.

> There was a time in the long ago when Weasel did not change his coat in the winter time. But Weasel was quarrelsome, rude and unkind to the other animals and Great Spirit decided he needed a lesson. One day Weasel, who had been quarreling [sic] with his neighbors [sic] all day, ran into a hollow log to hide from them. But to his surprise he found he was not alone. Inside the log were several little people. They told Weasel that they didn't think he should be so quarrelsome, rude and unkind to others. But Weasel only mocked them. "I will be unkind to you as well, if you don't get out my log and leave me alone," he screamed. Now little people are not without power and they decided to take action to keep Weasel from hurting them. Quickly they rolled Weasel up in a piece of birch bark and sat on him. Weasel could hear them talking about what terrible things they would do to him now that he was helpless. Weasel was so frightened that he stuck the tip of his long tail into his mouth and began sucking on it for comfort. After awhile the little people left and Weasel chewed his way out of the birch bark roll., He felt just as good as he always had and thought that the little people had not done him any harm. But when he left the log he looked down and found that, except for the tip of his tail, he was snowy white. At first being white didn't bother Weasel but he soon discovered that it was difficult to hunt because he could not sneak up on his prey. Nor was he able to hide from those who hunted him. So he asked Great Spirit to reverse the spell that the little people had cast upon him. Great Spirit said, "It was not without good reason that the little people cast the spell upon you. I cannot reverse it...but I can change it. From now on you will only wear this white coat when there is snow on the ground." So Weasel has become a reminder to our children that they should treat others with kindness and respect, and they should avoid quarreling [sic] with their neighbors. [sic][8]

In addition to such remonstrations about behaviour, religious ceremonies and social obligations are also described and reinforced by these traditions. These contain information about the spirit world and Ojibwa cosmology. The traditions which describe

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[8]Dunn, 128 - 129.

the Midé are categorized as moral legends since they describe religious practices and ceremonies.

There are also a wealth of stories, mostly humourous tales, which were intended primarily for amusement. The most cherished were those that described the antics and escapades of the Trickster-hero Nanabush. For example:

> ...So the hungry Nanabush walked through the woods to the camp of the Giant Woodpecker, who was an old friend, and the two of them sat down to talk. Woodpecker seemed to have a lot to say and Nanabush began to think that he wasn't going to eat at all ... [Woodpecker] walked over to a shelf and took down two long, pointed bone pins. Putting one pin by each nostril, he went out the door. He flew up into a pine tree nearby and began to tap the bark with the bone pins. Within a minute, a raccoon came tumbling down from the branches above, and shortly afterward, a second raccoon followed it. Woodpecker roasted the raccoons and the two friends sat down to eat. The meal was delicious to say the least. At length, Nanabush got up and, thanking Woodpecker for his hospitality, prepared to go back to his own camp. As he passed the shelf, he took a good look at the two bone pins...When Nanabush arrived home, he pulled down his wigwam. He moved it further into the forest., putting is up again right under the branches of a tall pine tree which was just like the one by Woodpecker's wigwam. Then he made himself a pair of pointed pins. "I shall make my pins of wood," he thought. "Bone is too much trouble." By and by, Woodpecker came to call on Nanabush. The two friends went inside the wigwam, and sat down to talk. They talked and talked for so long that Woodpecker began to wonder whether or not Nanabush was going to offer him any dinner...Nanabush stood up and reached for his wooden pins ... He pushed the pins right up his nostrils and combed the pine tree. Inside, Woodpecker began to laugh quietly to himself. "Silly old Nanabush, " he chuckled, "he thinks he can hunt his food the same way we woodpeckers do. He doesn't know it, but using pointed pins is a magic trick, and only a woodpecker can learn the trick."... Suddenly Woodpecker heard a loud crash. Startled, he ran out of the wigwam, and saw Nanabush lying unconscious on the ground at the foot of the pine tree. Blood was dripping from his nose. Woodpecker propped Nanabush up against the tree and stopped

> the bleeding ... "Stupid Nanabush! You have now learned that there are some things which even you can never do. You must never try that trick again -- it is a woodpecker secret."[9]

Such amusing legends do not usually contain an explicit moral lesson; rather an underlying theme is often embedded within the legend, such as the importance of a sense of humour, or knowing one's limitations.

Much of the oral tradition of the Ojibwa generally reinforces what we already know about the economy and material culture of the Ojibwa through archaeological evidence and documents produced in the early contact period. The Ojibwa were hunter-gatherers who relied on berries, nuts, fruits, maple sugar and, in some areas, wild rice to supplement their hunting.[10] Among the principal animals they hunted were rabbit, elk, marten, moose, deer, as well as reindeer in the northern areas of their territory and some buffalo to the west.[11] The Ojibwa hunted primarily with the bow and arrow, and also caught fish and trapped smaller game. They traded with other tribes and nations for items such as salt and tropical shells, and made some tools and jewelry from copper.

According to oral tradition, the men of the Ojibwa were built for speed and swiftness, while the women were built for hard work.[12] The women performed much of

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[9]Sam Snake, Chief Elijah Yellowhead, Alder York, David Simcoe and Annie King. *The Adventures of Nanabush: Ojibway Indian Stories*. (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1979), 13 - 16. * *Nanabush* is an anglicized spelling. Other spellings include *Nanabozho* (Coleman, 70); *Nenebojo* (Radin 20); *Nana'b'oozoo* (Johnston, *Manitous*, 45); *Nanahbozhoo* (Jones, 32).

[10]Wub-e-ke-niew, 6.

[11]Copway, 25.

[12]Jones, 62.

the daily work, fetching meat the hunters had killed, dressing the skins, gathering food and wild crops, making clothing, belts, moccasins, mats, canoes and making maple sugar. There were many different games and sports that were a major part of Ojibwa life. Ball playing and foot racing, for example, were among the favourite leisure activities of the Ojibwa. In times of peace, games and sports were also an acceptable way of working out social aggression. In times of war, they kept the Ojibwa warriors in top physical condition for battle.

Conflict with other Native groups is also a part of Ojibwa tradition and history, and Aboriginal nations had their own war songs that were taught to children at an early age.[13] According to tradition, the Siouan-speaking Dakota and the Ojibwa had been in conflict for centuries, probably originating over the question game and right of access to fisheries, land and other resources in their overlapping territory. The Dakota claimed that the ancestors of the Ojibwa drove their own ancestors from their traditional territory around what is now known as Leech Lake, and many battles had occurred around this and Red Lake.[14] Ojibwa oral tradition also documents the prolonged struggle between the Huron and the Iroquois to the east of Ojibwa territory.[15] As we know from documentary evidence, the Iroquois defeated the Huron in 1649, and moved into their territory. The surviving Huron were pursued along the northern shores of Lake Huron,

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[13]Copway, 56.

[14]William Whipple Warren. *The History of the Ojibway Nation*. (Minneapolis: Ross, 1957), 83.

[15]Copway, 68.

and were eventually accepted and integrated into the tribes of their trading allies, the Ojibwa. This caused enmity and conflict between the Ojibwa and Iroquois. In the end the Ojibwa defeated the Iroquois, and there is an Ojibwa tradition that tells of the 700 canoes that converged at Kewetawahonning to drive the Iroquois from the peninsula.[16]

Archaeological evidence and oral tradition provide a fairly clear picture of the material culture and economy of pre-contact Ojibwa, and here we have seen a few examples of how oral tradition can be used to corroborate written documents. In these instances, conclusions drawn by archaeologists and anthropologists are frequently substantiated by oral tradition. Although oral tradition and traditional sources seem to provide the same information, it is not enough to merely consult one source over the other. Ojibwa oral tradition provided information about the same things observed by non-Natives with an important difference: oral tradition provides this information from an Ojibwa perspective, from inside the culture, rather than from an external position. As discussed in Chapter Three, euro-centrism may have caused early Europeans to record only those events they considered important, or to have judged Ojibwa practices by European standards. By combining traditional research methods with oral tradition historians may be able to gain a more balanced picture of Ojibwa culture in the early contact period.

In addition to substantiating historical evidence found in more traditional sources, oral tradition can provide information that clarifies observations or assumptions made by

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[16]Copway, 87.

early documents or non-Native scholars. It is essential that an Ojibwa perspective of events be included in the study of their history, yet one of the major limitations of written documents is the predominance of European perspectives and interpretations. For example, the system of totemic clans are described in documentary sources, but not fully explored from an Ojibwa point of view. Traditional sources indicate that clans were patrilineal in nature, and that members of the same clan were "brothers", but they often do not appreciate the powerful significance of these clans among the Ojibwa.[17] Charles Bishop refers to the totemic system in his *The Ojibwa of Northern Ontario* as "descent groups...or simply bilateral bands of kinsmen with animal names."[18] He proceeds to discuss cross-cousins and the restriction against marrying a member of one's own clan, but the picture remains incomplete. There is little exploration of the political or economic significance of the totemic system to the Ojibwa, and none at all of its social significance.

Oral tradition verifies that all members of the Ojibwa were organized into groups known as clans or *totems*. As observed by early explorers and traders, these totems were named after various animals, such as Bear or Otter, and every member of the clan was related, whether or not they were from the same group or family. What is not explained in documentary sources, however, is how these totems developed, or exactly what role they played in Ojibwa social organization. In fact, the totem was "the most important

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[17]Wub-e-ke-niew, 4.

[18]Charles Bishop. *The Northern Ojibwa and the Fur Trade*. (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974), 8.

social unit taking precedence over the tribe, community, and the immediate family."[19] Ojibwa oral tradition provides much of the information that is missing from documentary sources. Although more have been added today, Ojibwa legend tells of five original totems that came from:

> ...six great creatures [who] emerged from the sea. One exposed to the light and heat expired sinking back into the sea. The survivors came to the shores of the Land of the Anishnabeg by whom they were welcome. In appreciation, the five incorporeal beings offered to guide the Anishnabeg in the conduct of their affairs.[20]

The five totems represented the basic needs of the people and the five elementary functions of society: sustenance, learning, medicine, leadership and defence.

The most highly respected totem among the Ojibwa was that of sustenance, those with the ability to hunt.[21] Hunting required skill and resourcefulness, and was essential to survival. In Ojibwa oral tradition, "one of the recurring themes was that of hunger and starvation reflecting fact and fear. Nanabush was constantly hungry."[22] Being able to provide food, clothing and shelter, the basic and constant needs of the people, for one's family and community was regarded in great esteem.

Equally important were the members of the learning totem. Elders within Ojibwa society were highly respected for their wisdom and experience and also because they were

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[19]Basil Johnston. *Ojibway Heritage: The Ceremonies, Rituals, Songs, Dances, Prayers and Legends of the Ojibway*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 59.

[20]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 61.

[21]Jones, 66.

[22]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 66.

the storytellers and the keepers of history.[23] Elders served as role models for younger tribe members, possessing a wealth of knowledge and experience that was freely shared with all.

The third totem consisted of the Healers. Ojibwa medicine was based on the precept that physical health was directly linked to the inner health of an individual. Those who went beyond the healing of the sick and also took care of the spiritual health of the society were called medicine men and women. So that the knowledge of healing would be shared and perpetuated, the Ojibwa created societies like the Midewiwin to preserve the sacred wisdom and history of the people.[24]

Members of the leadership totem were trained in history, tradition, grammar and public speaking.[25] Although, as observed by early Europeans and Euro-Canadians, leadership was most often inherited, certain conditions of leadership had to be met. A leader among the Ojibwa was one who exercised "his prerogative rarely ... he speaks infrequently lest he be considered shallow...Moreover a leader was first in action, not merely commander; as a speaker he did not utter his own sentiments, but those of this people...He was a leader as example."[26] Ojibwa leaders led by persuasion, and were followed out of respect rather than fear.

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[23]Jones, 62.

[24]Basil Johnston. *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway.* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1995), xx.

[25]Johnston, *The Manitous*, 62.

[26]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 61.

According to documentary evidence, warriors, who were members of the defence totem, were most often the leaders in Ojibwa society. Oral tradition, however, suggests otherwise. According to some traditions, warriors were not always leaders, particularly in times of peace.[27] Warriors were seen as necessary to defence, but were expected to relinquish their leadership when the conflict ended. Although some Ojibwa authors, such as Wub-e-ki-new, have tried to assert that there was no warfare before the arrival of the Europeans, others such as George Copway and Basil Johnston agree that there was indeed conflict among Native groups prior to contact. What differs between oral tradition and documentary sources is the perspective and interpretation of that conflict.

Trader and traveller John Long claimed that Ojibwa warriors "often express these bloodthirsty sentiments, and too frequently put them into execution."[28] Long is echoing a sentiment held by many Europeans and Euro-Canadians about Native peoples in the contact period. These sentiments prevailed for centuries and, in a 1895 textbook, W.H.P. Clement described Natives as "upon the war-path...cruel, tomahawking, scalping and torturing with fiendish ingenuity. A stoic fortitude when himself tortured was about his only heroic quality."[29] That Native people were bloodthirsty warriors was a widely held prejudice until well into the 20th century.

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[27]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 68.

[28]John Long. *John Long's Voyages and Travels in the Years 1768 - 1788.* Milo Milton Quaife, ed. (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1922), 101.

[29]W.H.P. Clement. "The Indian Tribes of Canada," in Daniel Francis *The Imaginary Indian: the Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture.* (Vancouver: Arsenal Press, 1992), 169.

There exists another perspective that is less condemning. According to oral traditions, fighting was a "dangerous diversion, to be undertaken in summer and suspended whenever the need for food superseded everything else."[30] Oral traditions of the Ojibwa do not suggest that wars, or series of conflicts, did not occur, but that obtaining food was far more important. The Ojibwa recognized the necessity of warfare and defence, but elders preferred to council peace whenever possible. Conflicts were often brief and frequently bloody, but did not always lead to war. Fights over territory or game usually resulted in feelings of animosity and distrust on both sides, leading to a series of conflicts.[31] It is interesting to note that according to documentary evidence, the Ojibwa were engaged in prolonged wars with the Iroquois and Dakota, but from the Ojibwa perspective, these were perceived more as individual battles with specific causes and goals than part of an ongoing war with larger objectives. It may be that cultural differences and misunderstanding led early Europeans to interpret Native peoples as aggressive and war-like, when this was not necessarily the case. Furthermore, the totemic system itself took precedence over even prolonged conflicts and members of the same totem were considered brothers, even if they were in direct conflict, or from an entirely different group, such as the Dakota.

If information about totemic systems can help clarify an Ojibwa perspective on warfare, it may also shed some light on the difficulty experienced by early Europeans in

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[30]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 67.

[31]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 69.

determining who the Ojibwa were at the time of contact. Early documents provide a very confusing picture of the different Native groups encountered by Europeans during the early contact period, and the Ojibwa are rarely identified correctly in these documents.[32] Early Europeans may have inadvertently labelled unrelated groups as Ojibwa because they misunderstood the totemic system of brotherhood, and assumed members of the same clan were also members of the same Native group.

So far, I have demonstrated that oral tradition can be used to corroborate existing written sources, and to provide supplementary details where information may be lacking. This supplementary information includes the consideration of an Ojibwa perspective of many events or circumstances observed by early Europeans. The uses of oral tradition, however, are not limited to only these applications. Oral tradition can provide information about events that occurred before the arrival of Europeans, or even those events which were unobserved by Europeans until a later date. One example of this can be found in an Ojibwa tradition that describes a migration from the eastern seaboard in ancient times.

According to documentary evidence, the Ojibwa at the time of contact resided along the waters of lakes Huron and Michigan and Superior. During the early contact period, Europeans such as Alexander Henry documented an apparent migration radiating out from Lake Superior in all directions. Ojibwa authors such as George Copway also

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[32]Theresa M. Schenck. *The Voice of the Crane Echos Afar: the Sociopolitical Organization of the Lake Superior Ojibwa 1640 - 1855.* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1997), 105. Refer also to the discussion in the introduction about the many different names for the Ojibwa.

commented on this movement. There is no mention, however, of an earlier and very different migration that is contained in oral tradition, long before Europeans came to North America. In Basil Johnston's version of the story,

> According to accounts, a large group of Anishnabeg left their homeland in search of the Land of Abundance. Thinking that such a land lay to the east, the band travelled for many years in the direction of the morning. They at last came to a great ocean whose waters were salt. Unable to go further, the Anishnabeg settled on the lands of the salt waters. So long did they remain that the men and women forgot their origin. One day a small sea shell emerged from the waves of the great sea and hovered over the land of the Anishinabeg where it remained for a long time ...And the leaders immediately commanded the Anishinabeg to dismantle their lodges and prepare to go on a long journey. When the canoes, paddles, bows and arrows were ready, the Anishnabeg began their homeward journey to the west. One legend related that [a] little sea shell floated in the sky always to the westward drawing the Anishnabeg ever back to their homes...led ever westward by the sea shell, the prodigal Anishnabeg after many months at last arrived in their own land. Some say that the Anishnabeg settled at Boweting (Sault Ste. Marie); others said that the Anishnabeg went further west establishing their homes at *Moningwaukauning* (now La Pointe in Wisconsin.)[33]

There is no clear indication of how long ago the migration may have occurred, since Native peoples did not mark time in the same way Western society does. Although there is no specific date attributed to this migration, it must have occurred long before the arrival of the Europeans, given that Native groups such as the Mik'maq were well-established in the eastern regions of the continent when Europeans encountered them there. Archaeological studies may or may not provide physical evidence to substantiate this tradition; however, there are no records of any Ojibwa groups living along the St.

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[33]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 88.

Lawrence when explorers began moving to the interior of the continent. Furthermore, the fact that the Ojibwa "forgot their origin" would indicate an extremely long span of time, considering the Ojibwa ability to remember history and traditions.

Although some researchers have suggested that this legend actually refers to Lake Superior or Lake Huron, this explanation does not consider the reference to the "great salt water." Lakes Superior and Huron are, of course, fresh water. To which other body of water could this refer, other than the lower St. Lawrence River, or Atlantic Ocean? If the Ojibwa did indeed reside near salt water at some point in ancient times, this may explain the prominance of wampum beads in their record keeping, rather than materials more readily accessible in the Great Lakes region, such as bone fragments or stone. The use of wampum may have begun when the Ojibwa themselves were in direct contact with the sea and, after their migration, they continued to obtain wampum by trading with those Native groups still living by the salt water.

If we accept that the Ojibwa did in fact migrate from the eastern seaboard, this legend provides some valuable information about Native population distribution prior to the arrival of Europeans. The demographic patterns of North America may have been vastly different than is usually assumed today. Not only is this legend indicative of the wide-ranging travel of the Ojibwa at the time of contact, but it suggests that groups may have travelled extensively in ancient and pre-contact times. The migration out from Lake Superior during the contact period may be part of a much larger pattern and tradition of movement and travel among the Ojibwa.

Up to this point, the majority of traditions considered in this chapter have contained information that is relatively easy to access by historians because it is much like the information provided in traditional documents. But what about traditions that do not seem to contain this type of information? Traditions such as the origin myth which follows were also considered historical by the Ojibwa, but do not appear to contain information that is usually considered "historical" in traditional studies. These are narratives where animals and humans converse, and spirits cause mischief for Nanabush. It is these stories and traditions that fall the most outside our western understanding of historical documents. These are the traditions which provide the Ojibwa with the means to understand the world in which they live and contain information about the cultural values of Ojibwa identity. Moreover, these narratives explain how the world itself was created.

Kitche Manitou, the Great Spirit, created the world of the Ojibwa.[34] Oral tradition explains that *Kitche Manitou* created all the Native peoples and gave them all different territories, different languages and different religions. It was *Kitche Manitou* who taught the people how to act, and how to remember history and the experiences of their ancestors.[35] Although there is no widely accepted tradition which describes this creation,

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[34]There are many variations of the spelling of *Kitche Manitou* including: *Ke-che-mon-e-doo* (Copway, 164); *Kitche Manitou* (Johnston, *Tale the Elders Told Us*, 12); *Keche-munedoo, Kezha-munedoo* (Jones, 31); *Kijie manido* (Coleman, 57); *Git-chi Man-i-tou*, (Gringhuis, v.)

[35]Copway, 164.

it is generally accepted that *Kitche Manitou* created the land, trees, plants, animals, birds, fish and people from a vision:

> Kitche Manitou beheld a vision. In this dream he saw a vast sky filled with stars, sun, moon, and earth. He saw an earth made of mountains and valleys, islands and lakes, plains and forests. He saw trees and flowers, grasses and vegetables. He saw walking, flying, swimming, and crawling beings. He witnessed the birth, growth, and the end of things ... Kitche Manitou meditated to understand his vision. In his wisdom Kitche Manitou understood that his vision had to be fulfilled... Out of nothing he made rock, water, fire, and wind. Into each one he breathed the breath of life.... From these four substances Kitche Manitou created the physical world of sun, stars, moon, and earth... On earth Kitche Manitou formed mountains, valleys, plains, islands, lakes, bays and rivers. Everything was in its place; everything was beautiful. Then Kitche Manitou made the plant beings... After plants, Kitche Manitou created animal beings... Last of all he made man. Kitche Manitou then made The Great Laws of Nature for the well being and harmony of all things and all creatures... All things lived and worked by these laws. Kitche Manitou had brought into existence his vision.[36]

Many traditions, however, avoid such a detailed description, implying that the world simply was. The traditions do agree that the original world was pleasant and beautiful, bountiful and at peace. All nations were as one, and war and sickness were unknown.[37] No one ever went hungry, and every tree and bush yielded fruit.

The belief in an ideal world is much like cultural myths from around the world that describe a golden age in the past, an Eden-like paradise. This tradition provides many insights into the religious beliefs of the Ojibwa, including the belief in a supreme

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[36]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 12-13.

[37]Copway, 98.

and benevolent creator. This may explain why many of the Ojibwa readily accepted the Christianity of the newcomers. Although many converted, few practiced their new religion with the devotion missionaries had hoped for. While Europeans considered the Ojibwa heathens and in need of salvation, perhaps the Ojibwa did not perceive the two religions as being substantially different. Since they did not seem to contradict one another, Ojibwa converts continued to practise many of their aboriginal beliefs.

That *Kitche Manitou* was able to dream the world into existence demonstrates the Ojibwa belief in the power of thoughts and dreams, and the importance of visions. Since visions and vision quests are recorded in oral tradition as well as in the observations of traders and explorers, it is reasonable to expect that the Great Spirit would reflect this power. The Ojibwa believe *Kitche Manitou* communicates to them through dreams and visions. These dreams are not random or sub-conscious as most researchers claim. Instead, the Ojibwa were able to perceive things outside of the "normal" sphere of awareness.

Beautiful as the world was, it did not last. The original world, like this one, was infused with spirits, both good and bad, commonly referred to as *manitous*. *Manitous* inhabited every tree, leaf, blossom, stream, star and grain of earth. Playful and mischievous, sometimes malignant, these spirits often caused trouble for the people, and it is as a result of this trouble that the first earth was destroyed, and a second one created. It was the crafty Nanabush who forged the new world for the Ojibwa to inhabit:

> In the beginning, so the Ojibway story tellers say, the world in which we live did not exist. In its place was a far older world, the home of the first birds and animals, and of the mighty magician, Nanabush ... Now

in the old world, which existed long before our world, Nanabush and his young brother lived together by the shore of a lake.[38] For company, the two men talked and played with the birds and animals. They were friendly with them all -- all, that is, except the treacherous Serpent People,[39] the evil, giant snakes who lived beneath the water and who tried to kill the kindly animals who were Nanabush's friends. Nanabush and the Serpent People often fought with each other, and it was because of one of these fights that Nanabush made our world.

One winter day, Nanabush's brother was out hunting alone. When he did not come home in the evening, Nanabush thought that perhaps he had lost his way in the woods. The next day the young brother still had not returned, and Nanabush became worried. So he set out to try and find him. He had often warned his brother never to return home across the ice which covered the lake, but rather to walk around the shoreline on solid ground, He now began to fear that his brother had forgotten his warning and that he had been pulled through the ice by the Serpent People and drowned in the icy water below.[40]

Nanabush searched everywhere, but not a trace of his brother could he find. He knew that the worst must have happened : the Serpent People had drowned his brother just as he had feared. He set out again, this time to find the Serpents and punish them. Now the Serpent People were very cunning, and kept themselves well hidden. Nanabush tramped in vain through the woods and across the frozen rivers for days, and weeks, and months. Before he knew it, spring had come.

One day, just as he was approaching a steep hill, he heard a peculiar booming sound. "What can that be?" he asked himself. "I must climb the hill and find out." When he reached the top, he saw a little lake in the valley below, and there, sunning themselves on the shore, were two Serpents. The booming noise came from the pounding of their giant hearts. Quietly but swiftly, Nanabush drew his bow and shot an arrow at each Serpent. Though he hit them both, they were still very much alive, for they slithered into the water in the twinkling of an eye and disappeared.

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[38]In many versions, Nanabush's brother is described as a wolf (Johnston *Tales the Elders Told Us,* 16; Coleman, 70), or referred to as his adopted son (Coleman, 70).

[39]The Serpent People are sometimes described as evil manitous of other animals (Coleman, 71; Radin, 20).

[40]Nanabush dreamed of the danger to his brother (Johnston, *Elders*, 16).

Then a strange thing happened. The water in the little lake began to rise. It rose steadily, soon flooding the whole valley. "Oho!" exclaimed Nanabush. "The Serpents know I am hunting them. They are going to try and drown me." He climbed the tallest pine tree on the hill, but the water, which by this time had covered the hill, was lapping at his heels. He climbed as quickly as he could, and before long was at the very top of the tree. The water kept on rising and soon reached the level of his chin, but then, strangely, the water began to go down again.[41] It went down as quickly as it had risen, and when it had receded to its old level, Nanabush climbed down out of the pine tree. "They nearly drowned me," said Nanabush, catching his breath. "I shall have to be careful, or next time those evil Serpents will certainly kill me."

He then chopped down a number of trees and made a giant raft, which he left on the top of the hill. Wondering what he should do next, he wandered away through the woods again. He had walked for nearly an hour when suddenly he stopped. He thought he could hear a woman crying. He crept on cautiously, and came to a clearing where an old woman was sitting on a log and, just as he had imagined, she was crying.

"Why are you crying, old woman?"

"Ah, a sad thing has happened. That wicked man, Nanabush, has wounded my brothers with his arrows." Nanabush knew at once that the old woman was a Serpent Woman in disguise. He also realized that she did not know who he was. Smiling to himself, he exclaimed, "That Nanabush must be a rascal! But tell me, what are you going to do?"

"I am gathering herbs to heal their wounds," she replied. "I am also gathering basswood bark. We shall twist the bark into a long string and stretch it around the base of the hill. We shall watch the string and if it vibrates, we shall know Nanabush tripped over it. He is hiding somewhere on the hill."

"Where do the Serpent People live?" he asked next.

"All you have to do is follow this path to the lake," replied the old woman, pointing the way. "When you get to the lake, walk right into it. A short distance in, you will find a door. The Serpent People are inside." Without saying another word, Nanabush slew the wicked old Serpent Woman and dressed himself in her clothes.[42] He followed the path to the

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[41]Not all versions describe this first flood (Coleman, 71; Radin, 20).

[42]The old woman is a toad-woman in some legends (Johnston, *Elders*, 17) and a frog in others, and Nanabush is described as putting on her skin (Coleman, 71). In others, there is no old woman, but Nanabush disguises himself as a stump to get close to the evil manitous (Radin, 20).

lake and found the door. He opened it and found himself inside a huge lodge -- the home of the Serpent People. Walking along quickly, he soon came upon the two Serpents whom he had wounded, with his arrows still in their bodies. The Serpents were guarded by a group of fierce animals, and Nanabush discovered that one of the Serpents he had wounded was the Chief of all the Serpents. However, the fierce animals thought Nanabush was the old woman, and let him pass.

In another corner, he saw the body of his brother, who had indeed been drowned by the Serpents. In a flash of anger, Nanabush leaped forward and pushed the arrows deeper into the bodies of the two Serpents, killing them instantly. "Now I have avenged my brother's death!" he shouted. And, before the fierce guardian animals had time to realize what had happened, Nanabush slipped out of the Serpent lodge and raced back to the shore of the lake, running as fast as he could.

When the guardian animals realized what had happened they roared with rage and summoned the rest of the Serpent People, who immediately caused the water in the lake to rise again. But Nanabush heard the movement of the water as it began to rise, and he ran toward the hill where he had hidden his giant raft. As he ran he called loudly to his friends, the birds and animals. "Come with me, my friends!" he shouted. "Come to my raft on the hill. The water is rising again, and this time you will drown unless you come with me." The birds and animals answered his call not a moment too soon. Just as they reached the giant raft and climbed safely aboard, the water rose over the crest of the hill and set the raft afloat. In a few more minutes the whole world was covered by the surging water. There was not a single thing to be seen on the top of the water except Nanabush and the birds and animals on the raft. Even the highest hills were now lost from sight.

Nanabush and the birds and animals floated around aimlessly on the raft for many days and nights. At first Nanabush thought the water would go down again, but after they had been on the raft a full month, he realized that the old world was submerged forever beneath the water and that the wicked Serpent People had drowned with it. Nanabush himself would have to find a way to create a new one. "Loon!" he called, when he had decided what he should do. "You are an excellent swimmer. Dive down and bring me a lump of mud in your bill." The loon dived in to the water and was gone a long time. Presently, he returned. "I couldn't reach the old world," he reported sadly. "It was too far down."

"Beaver!" called out Nanabush, "you are a good diver. You try next." The beaver dived in and was gone much longer than the loon had been, but he too failed to reach the bottom of the vast ocean. "Muskrat!" exclaimed Nanabush, "you must try for us." The muskrat dived in and was gone for so long they were certain he had drowned. Just as they were

giving him up for lost, he suddenly appeared on the surface, motionless, floating around as if he were indeed dead. Nanabush pulled the muskrat onto the raft and revived him. He noticed that the little animal was holding one paw tightly closed. He pried it open -- and there were a few tiny, wet particles of sand. The muskrat had reached the old world after all!

Nanabush took the grains of sand and dried them carefully. He fashioned them into a tiny globe, on which he breathed lightly. Then he planted the globe gently on the water beside the raft, and commanded it to grow. The little ball began to revolve and spin on the water, and soon it started to grow in size. Within a few minutes, it had grown large enough to hold two ants which Nanabush placed on it. The ants made the globe spin faster and grow bigger. In no time at all, it had grown large enough to hold two mice. Thus it was that the little ball grew and grew. At last, when the moose -- the largest of all animals -- had climbed onto it and disappeared from sight, Nanabush commanded the globe to stop growing. He himself stepped onto it, and said:

"Here is the new world -- a home for all the birds and animals."

And that, so the Ojibway story tellers say, is how Nanabush created the world in which we live today.[43]

Many variations of the origin myth exist among the Ojibwa. Some details are emphasized more in one tradition than another, and variations such as whether Nanabush disguises himself in the old woman's clothes or her skin occur widely. And yet, these variations are minor considering the remarkable similarities in the stories told among Ojibwa groups from South-eastern Ontario to Eastern Saskatchewan, from Northern Ontario to North Dakota. Among the Ojibwa, these traditions are no more static than is their history. There exist many versions of the same traditions where details that are emphasized in one version are not considered important in another. These minor variations do not alter the core of the message -- the major elements remain the same --

[43]Snake et. al., 1 - 7. * I chose to include this tradition because it contained more of the various elements of other origin myths within it *

whether the wolf is his brother or nephew, or disguises himself in her skin or clothes, does not substantially alter the legend and its message. While each teller may have embellished or updated the tradition as he or she told it, the core of the tradition remains the same.

This legend explains what is unknown in the world of the Ojibwa, just as other cultures have their own myth of creation to explain how the world we inhabit came to be. Myths such as this one are illustrative and do not provide information in the same way as traditional documents. Although it does not provide concrete data such as specific dates or outline territorial boundaries, this tradition does provide information about the culture and beliefs of the Ojibwa. From the description of the Serpent People and their animosity towards Nanabush, we learn that the Ojibwa believed the world contained good and bad spirits, some of whom wished to do Nanabush and the people harm. These spirits were also subject to human emotions such as jealousy and anger which, in a version recorded by Basil Johnston, caused them to seek revenge on Nanabush for his successful hunts. But their behaviour is inappropriate by Ojibwa standards, and Nanabush is justified in seeking vengeance for his brother's murder. Individuals or groups are accountable for their actions, and in one version of the myth, the Serpent People are forced to pay retribution to Nanabush for killing Wolf.[44]

This tradition also shows that the Ojibwa valued their relationship with animals, elevating them to the level of brothers and sisters, which is very different from the European view of dominance over wild and domesticated animals. This relationship is

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[44]Sister Bernard Coleman, Ellen Frogner and Estelle Eich. *Ojibwa Myths and Legends*. (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1962), 58.

further illustrated by Nanabush's desire to save the animals from the flood, and by conversing with them as equals. The animals and Nanabush work together to recreate the earth, and without Muskrat, Nanabush would never have be able to get the few grains of sand from below the flood waters. The importance of animal participation in this myth demonstrates not only that the Ojibwa believed animals were their equals, but that the Ojibwa are dependent on them for their very survival.

The origin tradition again reinforces the value of dreams to the Ojibwa. Nanabush is warned of the plot against Wolf in a dream, and is able to warn his brother of the danger. Nanabush senses the animosity of the Serpent People, and sees their evil plot in his dream. Although he does not succeed in keeping Wolf off the frozen lake, we see that he has fulfilled his obligation to his dream and warns his brother of the danger.

There seems to be a great deal of information that we can learn about Ojibwa culture and beliefs, but why is this type of information important to the study of history? Although the origin myth does not provide the evidence of the sort historians are accustomed to finding, it does describe cultural patterns and expectations that help explain how the Ojibwa think. In turn, this may assist researchers in determining why the Ojibwa behaved as they did in different situations, by describing what motivated them, or how they might interpret the actions of others such as the Europeans. For example, the origin myth describes the loyalty Nanabush feels toward his brother, suggesting that it is a quality that is important among the Ojibwa. This may help explain why the Ojibwa engaged in a conflict with the Iroquois just as they absorbed the dispossessed Huron. In a time of tumultuous change, the Ojibwa chose to fight the Iroquois, rather than ally with

them against the threat posed by the European newcomers. It may be that their sense of loyalty led the Ojibwa into conflict as a way of seeking vengeance for their Huron brothers.

In a more concrete vein, the origin myth outlines the very real danger of flooding. Just as the oral tradition of the Dene and the Bella Coola documented volcanic eruptions and massive earthquakes, it is possible that the Ojibwa also recorded geological disasters in their legends and history. Perhaps an archaeological study would provide evidence of a flood in the ancient past of the Ojibwa that was recorded in this legend thousands of years ago. This is, of course, conjecture, but the danger represented by massive flooding is very real. In the last decade we have seen the destructive power of flooding in the north central United States and Manitoba, as well as around the world. It would be absurd to assume that this phenomenon did not occur in ancient times as well. A massive flood would threaten the survival of the Ojibwa by threatening wildlife and destroying much of the flora in the area. As earthquakes and volcanic activity would inevitably influence oral tradition, so too would a flood of the proportions described in Ojibwa tradition.

In hearing this legend repeated many times throughout his life, an Ojibwa would no doubt come to a much deeper understanding than I am able in this paper. A young Ojibwa might learn that he is to respect animals and to take care of them when the need arises. He may also learn to take care of his family, and to take very seriously messages and dreams from *Kitche Manitou*. Perhaps he will follow Nanabush's example of courage, and learn to be bold in his own life.

Ojibwa oral tradition thus contains many types of myths and legends that can be used by historians. There are those that contain more concrete evidence such descriptions of hunting and trapping practices, as well as providing "maps" to different sugar bushes or sacred land. There are also many illustrative legends that must be examined more carefully, searching for figurative rather than literal meanings, to gain cultural and historical information. By following a careful methodology, historians can use oral tradition to substantiate available written records, to provide an Ojibwa perspective where details may be lacking in traditional documents, and to contribute information that is not readily available elsewhere. By studying the oral tradition of the Ojibwa, we gain a clearer understanding of how they perceive their physical and spiritual environments. It is this culture and identity that shapes the actions of individuals and communities, and provides historians with the framework to understand their history.

So far this study has considered primarily those traditions which agree with documentary evidence, or provide information that is not available in written sources. This is not always the case: oral tradition often contradicts the observations or interpretations found in written documents. A few of these contradictions are discussed in the following chapter. I will consider the questions of Ojibwa territory at the time just before contact, and the debate about the origins of the Midewiwin, to determine how contradictions between source bases may be approached and whether they can be resolved.

Chapter 5
Ojibwa Territory and the Midewiwin

So far in this discussion we have examined the history of the Ojibwa based on documentary evidence, and some of the limitations of that evidence. We have also considered the nature of oral tradition, and some of the difficulties researchers face in the study of this tradition. In Chapter 4, we explored what we know about Ojibwa culture and history from oral tradition, and discussed some of its uses and limitations in the study of history. I have argued that oral tradition can be used in a variety of ways: to corroborate existing written documents, to supplement those documents where gaps may exist and provide an Ojibwa perspective, and also to provide information that may not be found in any documentary evidence. What happens, however, when information about an event or cultural aspect is described in both documentary evidence and oral tradition, but the information is contradictory? If the evidence in written documents and secondary sources makes an assertion that is the opposite of evidence found in oral tradition, which source base is to be believed? In addressing this question, I will examine two specific cases: aboriginal Ojibwa territorial boundaries and the Midewiwin.

Early European documents record Ojibwa territory at the time of contact as marked by the waters of Lakes Huron, Michigan and Superior, stretching to Michipicoten Bay to the north-west.[1] Traders and explorers observed the Ojibwa with whom they were in contact remaining, for the most part, within reach of the western Great Lakes,

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[1]Vivian J. Rohrl. *Change for Continuity; the People of a Thousand Lakes.* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981), 1.

particularly Lake Superior, and the falls at what we know as Sault Sainte Marie. These boundaries were later expanded during the contact period to include Northen and Southeastern Ontario, Manitoba, Eastern Saskatchewan, Minnesota, the Dakotas and Wisconsin.[2]

At first glance, Ojibwa oral tradition seems to corroborate the information found in the journals and letters of traders and missionaries, agreeing that the Ojibwa were centred for the most part around the Great Lakes Region.[3] However, there is a discrepancy concerning the size of territory that they occupied prior to the arrival of the Europeans and the spread of the fur trade. According to George Copway:

> When the Champlain traders met them [the Ojibwa] in 1610, its eastern boundary was marked by the waters of Lakes Huron and Michigan. The mountain ridge, lying between Lake Superior and the Frozen Bay, was its northern barrier. On the west, a forest, beyond which an almost boundless prairie. On the south, a valley, by Lake Superior, thence to the southern part of Michigan. The land within these boundaries has always been known as the country of the Ojibways.[4]

The Reverend Peter Jones claims that, "until there arrived great canoe, carrying a strange people as wise as gods, powerful as thunder, faces white as snow," the Ojibwa occupied an immense territory stretching from 42°- 52 ° north latitude and 75 ° - 100 ° west longitude

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[2]Please refer to figures 1 and 2 on page 71 in Chapter 3.

[3]The migration from the eastern seaboard discussed in the previous chapter does not contradict this information. Oral tradition describing Ojibwa territory around the Great Lakes refers to their territory in more recent years leading up to contact.

[4]George Copway, *Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1850), 1 - 2.

(from south of the Great Lakes into Northern Ontario and from Eastern Ontario to Western Manitoba).[5] Wub-e-ke-niew argues that "since time immemorial, the land of the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* and our close relatives stretched from the land now called North and South Dakota, to the Atlantic Ocean; from the sub-Arctic, south to where St. Louis is."[6] Furthermore, Wub-e-ke-niew maintains that the Ojibwa have occupied this region since the Pleistocene Age, or for as many as 40,000 generations.[7]

Clearly oral tradition and documentary evidence provided by early Europeans are at odds. There is even some discrepancy among oral traditions. What might account for these different interpretations? Were traders and explorers simply mistaken in their observations, or does oral tradition exaggerate the size of Ojibwa territory? If this is the case, what might motivate the Ojibwa or early Europeans to misrepresent the size and boundaries of Ojibwa territory? In answering these questions, historians must carefully consider their sources.

There are a few factors that may have influenced the recording of Ojibwa territories in oral tradition. Although somewhat vague, Copway's description of Ojibwa territory falls in line with what was recorded by explorers and traders. This is not surprising since Copway was not only writing for a European audience, but reflected many

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[5]Peter Jones, *History of the Ojebway Indians*. (London: Bennett, 1861), 27 & 40.

[6]Wub-e-ke-niew. *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought*. (New York: Black Thistle Press, 1995), 3.

[7]Wub-e-ke-niew, 4. * Since a generation is usually calculated at twenty years, this would put the Ojibwa in this region from about 798,000 B.C.

of the prevailing attitudes of the period. It may be that Copway is repeating what his contemporaries believed to be pre-contact Ojibwa territory. Jones describes a pre-contact territory that is somewhat larger. The boundaries he reports include much of the territory that documentary records include in the Ojibwa expansion during the post-contact period. The complex network of alliances and family groups may have made it more difficult to determine definite boundaries. For example, when Ojibwa individuals met Europeans in the early seventeenth century, the Ojibwa were a strong force within the Native tribes, and their numbers once included the Sauks, Menomenies, and the Ottaways.[8] While these tribes are considered separate and distinct today, most legends and traditions agree that these groups, as well as the Potawatomi, were at least close relatives of the Ojibwa nation, and spoke dialects very similar to one another. As a result, the Ojibwa may have seen their territory as any place where they would be welcome.

Furthermore, the totemic system among the Ojibwa may have led them to consider other members of their totem to be brothers and sisters even though they were from different peoples. Moreover, the concept of ownership may have contributed to the dispute about pre-contact Ojibwa territory. If the Ojibwa perceived territory not in terms of ownership in the European sense, but in terms of land where they could move freely, they could have considered the boundaries of this territory as much more extensive than did the Europeans.

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[8]Copway, 25.

More recent Ojibwa authors may exaggerate the aboriginal size of Ojibwa territory for political reasons. Land claims struggles are a major issue today, and being able to demonstrate that a specific region was traditional Ojibwa territory from "time immemorial" may add greater weight to a particular claim. Whatever the motivation, claims such as Wub-e-ke-niew's are less likely to be accurate simply because of the number of distinct Native groups living in North America. The first residents of North America were divided into approximately 2000 different societies and cultures, that held a wide variety of values and beliefs.[9] It seems doubtful that the Ojibwa alone would have occupied nearly half of North America.

Just as oral tradition must be examined carefully, so too must the records of early Europeans. If we accept that the Ojibwa may have occupied a larger expanse of territory surrounding the Great Lakes than reported by early Europeans, what may have caused inaccurate information to be recorded by explorers, traders and missionaries? As discussed earlier, early Europeans may have been mistaken in whom they considered to be Ojibwa, and may not have realized the size of Ojibwa population or extent of their territory. In chapter three we saw that there was a proliferation of terms that were applied to the Ojibwa and their allies, which caused some confusion in determining just who the Ojibwa were. This confusion may have led Europeans to underestimate the population of the Ojibwa. If they were unable, in the early contact period, to differentiate

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[9]Robert F. Berkhofer. *The White Mans' Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to Present.* (New York: Random House, 1978), 3.

among closely related groups, it is unlikely they were able to accurately record the numbers of those who saw themselves as Ojibwa.

Clearly, it is difficult to estimate the population of the Ojibwa before the arrival of Europeans in North America. Charles Bishop contends that archaeological evidence suggests approximately twenty Ojibwa summer villages of 100 to 300 inhabitants.[10] This approximate total of 6,000 seems extremely low, however, given that the Ojibwa population in both Canada and the northern United States was roughly 160,000 in 1970.[11] An increase of nearly 2,700 % in only 350 years is absurd, especially given that the Ojibwa, like other Native peoples in Canada, were decimated by warfare and disease throughout the contact period. It is much more likely that the population was closer to 100,000 at the time of contact.

Traders, particularly in the early period, who kept population records dealt primarily with the Ojibwa hunters who came to the trading posts. It was not until much later that Europeans came increasingly into contact with the rest of the population. This limited contact may have made the Ojibwa numbers seem less than they actually were. Furthermore, the Ojibwa moved to different areas from season to season. It would have been impossible for newcomers to have had an accurate sense of how many Ojibwa existed.

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[10]Charles A. Bishop. *The Northern Ojibwa and the Fur Trade: An Historical and Ecological Study* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974), 7.

[11]Robert E. Ritzenthaler. "Southwestern Chippewa" in Bruce Trigger *The Handbook of North American Indians* vol. 15, (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1978), 743.

It is also possible that Europeans did record their own observations accurately, but that they were unaware that what they were observing in the post contact era was very different from the reality of the pre-contact era. For example, the effects of disease on the Ojibwa population may have resulted in a misrepresentation of their actual numbers. Diseases such as tuberculosis and small-pox decimated the Native populations of North America for decades, and even centuries, after the arrival of the Europeans. Even before the Ojibwa themselves came into contact with Europeans, they would have felt the effects of these diseases. Although early exploration and European trade were carried out mostly in the more eastern regions of the continent, diseases would have been passed through Native trade routes long before the Europeans themselves arrived in the interior, likely wiping out much of the aboriginal Ojibwa population. As a result, the information recorded in earlier documents may reflect the Ojibwa population after thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, had been lost to disease.

It would seem reasonable to assume that as their numbers decreased as a result of disease, the Ojibwa would not occupy as much territory as before, perhaps banding smaller groups of survivors together. Furthermore, this reorganization may have appeared as a general movement or migration to Europeans. It may also be that as the fur trade expanded, the Ojibwa moved not into new territory but familiar land they, or their ancestors, had occupied in the past. Although the land had been abandoned following the sweep of European diseases, it is likely that the aboriginal territorial boundaries would be preserved in their tradition, rather than descriptions of merely the territory regularly occupied after contact.

Having considered both source bases and the potential influences on these sources, it is most likely that size of the pre-contact Ojibwa territory lies somewhere in between. Europeans likely recorded their observations accurately, but were unaware of circumstances that may have made those observations inaccurate. Considering how the population was decimated by disease, and the number of Ojibwa living in North America today, it is reasonable to conclude that the size of Ojibwa territory prior to contact was much larger than Europeans recorded. It is, however, unlikely that the Ojibwa occupied the majority of North America as Wub-e-ke-niew claims. Given the number of Native groups that existed at contact, and today, it is extremely unlikely the Ojibwa were so widespread. It seems most likely that while the Ojibwa were centred around lakes Huron and Superior, various groups ranged a good distance from the centre of the territory from season to season. What the Ojibwa considered their aboriginal territory probably overlapped territory occupied by the Dakota to the south in what is now Minnesota, the Cree to the west and north in eastern Manitoba and northern Ontario, and the Huron to the east.

While the exact boundaries of the Ojibwa may never be known with absolute certainty, what is certain is that the Ojibwa occupied more territory than originally believed by Europeans. If historians relied solely on documentary evidence, however, we would have an inaccurate picture of aboriginal Ojibwa territory. This discrepancy between documents and oral tradition has not eliminated either as a credible source. Instead, oral tradition can serve to clarify information provided by documentary evidence, and disagreement between the two does not discredit either of them. By carefully

examining external circumstances, and considering the sources of the information and influences exerted on them, we can use oral tradition and documents together to gain a more accurate picture of the size of Ojibwa territory and population that would not have been possible without both sources.

Another contradiction exists between oral and written sources that may not be so easily reconciled. The history of the Midewiwin has been a source of contention between Native and non-Native scholars throughout the twentieth century. Early European observers described the Midé as an organized priesthood of "dangerous sorcerers" who performed "occult" practices and ceremonies, using herbs and medicine bundles.[12] Obviously the Ojibwa saw it differently. Usually described as the "Grand Medicine Society" of the Ojibwa, the Midewiwin, or Midé, is, in Basil Johnston's definition "a society of medicine men and women that was formed to preserve and advance the knowledge of plants and healing and to establish the relationship between health and upright living, known as walking in balance."[13] According to tradition, the Midé preserved more than healing practices. The Midé was made up of medicine men and women who were able to use the properties of plants to cure illness and heal wounds, and also to establish a balance between physical and spiritual health. The teachings of the Midé included the religion, songs, ceremonies, philosophies, and tradition and history of

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[12]Harold Hickerson. *The Chippewa and Their Neighbors: A Study in Ethnohistory*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970), 52.

[13]Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway*. (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1995), 243. * Also spelled Medaewaewin (Johnston, *Manitous*, 243); Midewewin (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 81); Me-day (Copway, 175).

the Midé, and of the Ojibwa people.[14] Members of the Midewiwin were a select group, and those who were uninitiated were never permitted to observe or take part in the ceremonies. To become a member of the Midé, an individual had to undergo rigorous training and testing in medicine, tradition and ceremony.[15] Admittance was not easy, and potential initiates were required to study for many years before they were accepted as members of the Midé.

Descriptions of the Midewiwin are included in most collections of Ojibwa oral tradition. George Copway, Peter Jones and William Warren all describe the ceremonies and orders of the Midé in their histories of their people. At the time when these histories were written, there was little concern over when the Midewiwin developed, so no discussion of this issue can be found in these works. All three authors simply state that the Midé is the religion of their people. More recently, Basil Johnston describes the Midewiwin in great depth in his work *Ojibway Heritage*. Johnston does not question when the Midé originated either, but instead describes how it developed from "simple" healing and medicine into an elaborate complex society. Another source of Ojibwa tradition maintains that "the Midé is a compilation of the wisdom of the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* over the course of millions of years."[16] Here it is argued that the

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[14]Jones, 65.

[15]Copway, 167.

[16]Wub-e-ke-niew, 4.

Midé was established almost as long ago as Nanabush created the earth, and that it has preserved the religion, tradition and history of the Ojibwa since time immemorial.

There are a number of traditions that recount the origins of the Midé. According to George Copway, "[w]hen Keshamonedoo made the red men, he made them happy. The men were larger, were fleeter on foot, were more dexterous in games, and lived to an older age than now."[17] In this earlier time, there was a vine that stretched from the skies to the earth, by which spirits would visit the Ojibwa. One young man was favoured by a spirit, and this caused others to be jealous of him. To escape persecution, the young man asked to be taken back to the skies with the spirit. When she saw him leave, the young man's grandmother cried out and tried to climb up the vine to follow him. Just when she reached the top, the vine broke and she fell back to the earth:

> The news of the disaster spread rapidly from village to village. Some numbers of men, women, and children were singularly affected. Some complained of pains in their head, and others of pains in various parts of their bodies. Some were unable to walk, and others equally unable to speak. They thought some of these fell asleep, for they know not what death was. They had never seen its presence... Disease was the consequence of the breaking of the vine. Death followed. One day in the midst of their distress, they consulted each other to determine what could be done. None knew. They watched carefully for the descent of those being who used to visit them — and at length they came...They asked the nations what they wished to tell the Great Spirit in their distress...At length they came, and gathered near the eager people. They told them that they must die, as the vine that had connected earth to heaven was broken; but the Great Spirit has sent us to release you, and to tell you what you must do hereafter. The stranger then gathered up all the flowers from the plains, river and lake sides; and after drying them on their hands, blew the leaves

[17]Copway, 169.

> with their breath, and they were scattered all over the earth, — wherever they fell, they sprang up, and became herbs to cure all disease. The Indians instituted a dance, and with it a mode of worship. These few, there met, were the first who composed a Medicine Lodge: they received their charter from the Great Spirit, and thus originated the "Medicine Worship".[18]

Another variation of the tradition of the Midé is provided by Basil Johnston. He describes a deadly disease that struck the Ojibwa and almost destroyed them. No one who contracted the disease recovered. When a young boy went to the land of souls, he was asked why he was sad. When he replied that the people were dying, the spirit spoke to *Kitche Manitou*. Feeling sorry for the Ojibwa, *Kitche Manitou* promised to send them the gift of healing, and he brought the boy back to life:

> Sometime after the boy's restoration, Nanabush appeared among the afflicted Anishnabeg. He sought out the young man who had been restored to the Land of the Living. Believing that this young man possessed the mystery of life and well being, Nanabush determined to teach him the art of healing...Nanabush constructed an open air lodge and said a prayer of thanksgiving within its walls. He prepared medicine from the roots and administered it to all the men, women, and children who were ravaged by the disease. Soon, all recovered. During the next few years Nanabush taught young Odaemin. Plants, he said, possessed two powers, the power to heal and the power to grow. Nanabush, moreover, taught young Odaemin that plant beings could lend their powers of healing and growing to other beings...Nanabush left; Odaemin continued to learn...What knowledge he gained, the mode of learning he used, Odaemin passed on to the Anishnabeg...Medicine and its practice was to be kept alive. Moreover, a gift of medicine was to be acknowledged in the celebration of the Midewewin.[19]

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[18]Copway, 169-175.

[19]Basil Johnston. *Ojibway Heritage: The Ceremonies, Rituals, Songs, Dances, Prayers and Legends of the Ojibway*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 80-81.

Although the framing narrative differs in these two traditions, both recognize the gift of medicine bestowed upon the people by *Kitche Manitou*. In each case, *Kitche Manitou* brings the Ojibwa medicine after an outbreak of disease against which the Ojibwa are powerless. That the knowledge must be preserved is also emphasized, and it is explained that the formalized society of the Midewiwin was created to pass the teachings to future generations.

An integral part of the Midé society are the scrolls on which members recorded their history and traditions. According to early European documents, the Ojibwa were illiterate, although non-literate is a more accurate description. While it is certainly true that no documents existed that resembled the European idea of literacy, Ojibwa oral tradition contends that the Ojibwa did, in fact, preserve their history and legends in a written form. According to Ojibwa oral tradition, the Ojibwa have had writing for millennia, consisting mostly of picture-symbols used to preserve valuable cultural and historical information.[20] In the absence of a European-style alphabet, pictographs were most prevalent among the Ojibwa, and this writing was carefully preserved on birch bark and on plates of stone, copper or lead. These records preserved hunting songs, medicine, the code of moral laws, ancient forms of worship and information about Nanabush's recreation of the earth following the flood.[21]

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[20]Wub-e-ke-niew, 224.

[21]Copway, 10.

George Copway describes a sacred place where these records were kept. These were hidden places near the waters of Lake Superior, and every fifteen years, in August, these caches were opened and the records were carefully examined for decay. Any that were beginning to rot were carefully recopied and the old plate was preserved as a sacred artifact.[22] At first, the pictographs used in the scrolls served as a memory aid for the keeper of the scroll, in much the same ways as wampum belts were used by messengers. As the society became increasingly complex, the symbols also became more elaborate and standardized, so that medicine men and women from distant groups could, for the most part, accurately interpret scrolls of another group, especially since the information preserved was so similar.[23] During the 20th century, these records have been studied in detail by scholars such as ethnologist Selwyn Dewdney, but are virtually unmentioned in documents of the early contact period.

Both oral tradition and documentary evidence agree that the Midé was of central importance to the Ojibwa. What is not agreed upon is when the Midé became important. Oral tradition insists that the Midé is an aboriginal institution that has preserved the medicine tradition and wisdom of the Ojibwa for countless generations before the arrival of the Europeans.[24] Interpretations of documentary evidence, however, seem to indicate

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[22]Copway, 131

[23]Fred K. Blessing Jr. *The Ojibway Indians Observed: Papers of Fred K. Blessing Jr. on the Ojibway Indians*. Alan R. Woolworth, ed. (St. Paul: Minnesota Archaeological Society, 1977), 115.

[24]Wub-e-ke-niew, 194.

that the Midé did not appear among the Ojibwa until well after contact, in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century.[25] A number of historians argue that the Midé was created among the Ojibwa around the beginning of the eighteenth century and was not mentioned in records of traders before 1804.[26]

Anthropologist Ruth Landes produced a comprehensive examination of the Midewiwin in 1968. Her study of the Ojibwa in Western Ontario and Northwestern Minnesota explored the many levels, rituals and traditions of the Midé, through her Ojibwa contacts Maggie Wilson and Will Rogers. In addition to a great deal of information about the Midé society, Landes also considered how such a ritualistic and organized society could operate so effectively within the individualistic culture of the Ojibwa.[27] She argues that although the ceremonies and record keeping of the Midé are highly structured, the society does, in fact, promote individualism through dreams, visions and songs. During her work with Will Rogers, Landes was introduced to the birchbark scrolls of the Midé, but does not delve deeply into their importance to the Midewiwin, instead describing them briefly in an appendix. Nor does Landes consider the debate over the Midé origins to any extent. Instead she examines the role of the Midé in the past without indicating when that past began.

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[25]Hickerson, 52.

[26]Christopher Vecsey. *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and its Historical Changes*. (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 174.

[27]Ruth Landes. *Ojibwa Religion and the Midewiwin.* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1968) 71.

A more intensive study of the scrolls themselves was produced by ethnologist Selwyn Dewdney. Working closely with the keeper of a set of scrolls, Dewdney provided a detailed account of the types of tradition and history preserved in Midé record. The scrolls Dewdney studied contain a linear series of pictographs engraved on the soft inner bark of the birch tree which serve as a memory and translation aid for the history and tradition of the Ojibwa. Dewdney discovered that the scrolls preserve three specific records: origin scrolls, migration charts, and master scrolls or ritual charts.[28] Although his work is predominantly an interpretation of the scrolls, and a comparison of the interpretation with published oral tradition, Dewdney does devote some space to the debate about the origin of the Midé. Dewdney argues that while the Midé provides insight into post-contact Ojibwa society and religion, he finds little to suggest that the society developed before contact.[29]

In the past, historians have argued that the Midé was an attempt to preserve Ojibwa culture from the influences of European society.[30] External forces such as the fur trade, colonization and Christianity put a great deal of pressure on the Ojibwa and other Native groups to conform to European ideals. Many scholars maintain that the Midewiwin developed as a response to European influences and as a way to formalize and preserve Ojibwa teachings and tradition. Although historian Olive Dickason agrees that

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[28]Selwyn Dewdney. *The Sacred Scrolls of the Southern Ojibwa.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 21.

[29]Dewdney, 165.

[30]Vecsey, 174.

the Midewiwin was a post-contact development among the Ojibwa, influenced by the arrival of the Europeans, she adds that the Midé "...was deeply rooted in pre-contact traditions...[and] as with other nativistic spiritual movements, it was a cultural reaffirmation in the face of strange new forces."[31] Dickason does not believe the Midé was consciously created in the post-contact period, but that it may have originated from a desire to preserve Ojibwa culture, religious practices and history in the face of considerable external socio-economic pressures.

Scholars such as Harold Hickerson argue that one of the characteristics of nativistic movements is that the Native culture often adds elements of the dominant culture to ancient ritual practices.[32] Embedded within Midé belief and ceremony are elements that appear to have originated in Christian belief. There is some argument, for example, that *Kitche Manitou* is a reflection of the Christian God, and there are other similar elements in Ojibwa tradition, such as the flood that destroyed the earth.[33] The manner in which *Kitchi Manitou* created the world also seems to reflect the Christian myth of creation, as both God and *Kitchi Manitou* spoke the world into existence. These similarities are among the reasons early Europeans and more recent researchers are reluctant to believe the Midé existed prior to contact.

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[31]Olive Dickason. *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 237.

[32]Hickerson, 52.

[33]Vecsey, 174.

What if, however, the interpretations of early European observations are incorrect? Oral tradition clearly maintains that the Midé has been the religion of the Ojibwa throughout their history, and not just since the arrival of Europeans and Christianity. Furthermore, the Midé is not considered a mere composite of Christian mythology. Instead, the Midé perpetuates many aboriginal beliefs and traditions, such as the belief in *manitous,* and reinforces socially acceptable behaviour.[34] That certain elements seem to reflect Christian mythology should not be surprising, considering that many similarities occur among religions around the world. Belief in a supreme creator, for example, is very commonly held, and is not concrete evidence that the Midé was inspired by Christian beliefs. Reference to a great flood that destroyed the world is equally inconclusive. In the previous chapter I discussed the origin myth of the Ojibwa and demonstrated that a major geological event, in this case a major flood, could have been incorporated into Ojibwa oral tradition.

As we saw with the fur trade, Ojibwa members were selective in the items they incorporated into their material culture; it is reasonable to expect they would only incorporate "supernatural" elements that equally suited their Ojibwa philosophy and religion. If they were wise enough to reject those elements of European material culture that were impractical, they were also capable of rejecting those elements of European influence in the spiritual sphere that contradicted their existing Ojibwa beliefs. At the very least, whether or not the Midewiwin incorporated certain aspects of Christianity

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[34]Vecsey, 177.

cannot imply that the rest of the history and knowledge preserved by the Midé does not reflect traditional Ojibwa culture and tradition.

Long before Europeans arrived on the continent, Native groups used plants and herbs to heal ailments and injuries. Indeed, when Champlain and his men were plagued with scurvy, they were given the cure by the Natives they encountered. This knowledge would have to be preserved and shared with successive generations. Although we have seen that oral tradition preserved a great deal of information and history, the traditions of healing were not necessarily shared with everyone.[35] Storytellers and healers belonged to separate totems, and it seems reasonable that healers would have used a specialized system to preserve their knowledge and skill. It is likely that this information was preserved by the Midé. Fred K. Blessing produced an extensive study of the Midé in which he provides a through examination of the Midewiwin. Blessing considers the scrolls of the Midé in detail, and argues that keeping records, including healing practices, on birch bark was a well-established practice at the time of contact and that the Midé leaders were the primary keepers of these records, even before the arrival of the Europeans.[36]

On the other hand, researchers such as Harold Hickerson and Christopher Vecsey maintain that mention of the Midé in documentary evidence does not appear until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Why might this have been the case? It is important

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[35]Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*, 71.

[36]Blessing, 117.

to remember that the Midé was a very secret society. If uninitiated members of the Ojibwa were not permitted to view all of the ceremonies and rituals, it would be reasonable to expect that its mysteries were not revealed to outsiders such as the Europeans during the first period of contact. In fact, very early contact was often limited to European traders and Native hunters, so it is entirely possible that the Midé could have gone undetected for some time. Even as Europeans grew closer to Native groups and as the missionaries arrived, it seems presumptuous for Europeans to assume they were privy to all aspects of Ojibwa society from the very beginning. If Europeans were not permitted to attend any Midé rites until much later, they might easily have been misinterpreted the Midé as "developing" in the post-contact period.

It is also entirely possible that Europeans didn't know what it was that they were witnessing. Just as there were many different names applied to the Ojibwa, the society may not have been called the Midé or Midewiwin in early records. This does not prove that it did not exist. Explorers and missionaries may have interpreted the rituals through European standards which dismissed them as shamanistic, pagan practices that were not well-organized or formalized. Furthermore, Europeans who recorded this information would have described it using the vernacular language of the time period. There are many references to "shaking tent" rituals, or medicine men, "shamans" and "sorcerers", and there is no reason to believe these couldn't be references to Midé practices. Perhaps traders and missionaries did not grasp the complexity of the society because they did not expect to find such an organized religion among the Native groups they encountered who

appeared to lack any central political or spiritual organizations as found in European cultures.

Having considered both oral tradition and interpretations of early records, it seems most likely that the Midé did exist prior to the arrival of the Europeans. That birch bark scrolls existed prior to contact, and that these scrolls contained important information about the Midé and healing practices cannot be ignored. As an institution that survived for hundreds of generations, the Midé is extremely complex. It is clearly a religion far more sophisticated than early Europeans were able to recognize. This would indicate that the Ojibwa were also much more organized than was originally assumed. An aboriginal Midé suggests a very formal process of education that was in place for thousands of years, and of which Europeans were wholly unaware before the nineteenth century. This does not preclude changes that may have occurred in the society as a result of post-contact pressures. Missionaries made concerted efforts to convert Native groups, and the Midé probably became even more formalized as these pressures increased. Western-style literacy has further entrenched the Midé in Ojibwa culture, making it more accessible to both Natives and non-Natives alike. These modifications in the Midé, however, do not appear to have substantially changed the pre-contact Ojibwa culture or tradition.

Regardless of whether the Midé is a pre- or post-contact development, its structure, tradition and very existence provided historians with valuable information concerning Ojibwa history. We have seen in chapter two of this study that cultures and societies are always reinventing themselves, and the Midé could be an example of this process occurring among the Ojibwa. The adaptation among the Midé provides us with

valuable insight into the response of the Ojibwa to the arrival of Europeans in North America. As the Ojibwa recognized an increasing loss of autonomy under European authority, the Midé may have provided the venue in which to preserve their culture and traditions. This conscious attempt to preserve traditional practices would indicate that the Ojibwa were aware that their culture was being affected and took steps to minimize European influence. The post-contact development of the Midé would reflect a very sophisticated culture and religious system. The Ojibwa formalized their spirituality and tradition in a way that could withstand the socio-economic pressures of European society. The Midé demonstrates the inherent adaptability of Ojibwa culture and tradition that has allowed it to survive into the twenty-first century.

Is it possible to have a "right" answer or should historians accept that we may never know absolutely? That different interpretations of evidence will always occur? Determining conclusively whether, in the case of the Midé, oral tradition or documentary evidence is accurate may be beyond the scope of this study. Regardless of whether we accept the Midé as a pre- or post-contact development, certain truths remain: the Midé provided the Ojibwa with a vehicle to preserve their culture and history for generations. The culture and tradition of the Ojibwa did not disappear as most Europeans and Euro-Canadians expected. Nor were the Ojibwa assimilated into the dominant culture as readily as missionaries or the government had hoped. Instead, the Ojibwa maintained a powerful society that preserved their history, religion, culture and tradition in spite of assimilationist policies and a great deal of pressure to abandon their traditional teachings.

The Midé demonstrates that history and heritage were and continue to be very important to the Ojibwa people.

In Chapter 4, I examined how oral tradition and documentary sources often complement each other, either by corroborating evidence already available or by providing information to fill in the gaps left by the limitations of each source. In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate how contradictory information found in these sources can also provide insights into Ojibwa history. Conflicting accounts do not mean that one of the sources is right or wrong, and neither should be entirely discredited. By examining both sources of information, historians can gain a better understanding of why certain information was recorded by European documents or in oral tradition. Even in disagreement, oral tradition helps clarify information left by Europeans, and provides greater insight into Ojibwa history in ancient times.

Conclusions

Although we are able to obtain a great deal of information about the material culture and social organization of the post-contact Ojibwa, the history which can be created from written documents remains incomplete. Much is still unknown about pre-contact Ojibwa society, since written documents are available only after European contact and provide only very limited insight into pre-contact Ojibwa culture, religion, tradition, philosophy or history. Furthermore, documents which exist for the post-contact period contain certain weaknesses. European expectations often influenced how events and peoples were described, and this was reflected in the language used in journals and early records. From first encounter, European colonists viewed Native North Americans through a filter of their own pre-conceptions and prejudices. This image has fluctuated from bloodthirsty warrior to Noble Savage, from respected elder to disgraced alcoholic. The images of Native peoples that have been perpetuated from generation to generation have typically represented the prejudices and biases of European culture, rather than actual Native society.

Misinterpretations of language or cultural boundaries, the profusion of names applied to the Ojibwa and their allies, as well as numerous spellings also make early documents less reliable. Moreover, they are unable to convey how the Ojibwa themselves interpreted events during the contact period. These written sources may provide empirical data about what happened, but they cannot explain why the Ojibwa did what they did, or what the Ojibwa thought about the newcomers and their interactions with Native cultures.

The apparent lack of sources which could convey this information has raised the question of how historians could reconstruct Ojibwa history with limited resources. I have argued that the careful study of the oral tradition of the Ojibwa can help solve this problem. Oral traditions are, in fact, an Aboriginal approach to history. These accounts preserve, in narrative form, information about significant events, personalities, and important places, such as ancestral homelands and sacred sites, as well as important elements of genealogy and geography. In addition to information essential to survival, oral traditions are a vehicle for instruction about cultural identity. Among the Ojibwa, oral traditions are essential in instilling a sense of identity and belonging. Myths rationalize existence, explain the unknown, and communicate skills required to survive in a harsh world. These myths outlined an individual's place in society, his or her responsibility to that society, and their purpose in life. They were, and are still, a vessel for documenting and communicating one's past, and a means of sharing common experiences. Equally important is oral tradition's preservation of religious beliefs and practices. These stories and legends contained vital information that enabled the Ojibwa to interact with the non-corporeal world they inhabited. Understanding those beliefs can help historians understand why Ojibwa people made choices they did in the past.

Some concerns, however, over the use of these oral traditions in the study of history have been raised. How might historians and researchers educated in the Western tradition access the information in oral traditions? Could researchers overcome the language and cultural differences to accurately interpret these oral traditions? I have argued that those Native speakers of Ojibwa who have published their traditions have

helped to solve some of the language barriers. These individuals are better equipped to translate images and themes that are common in Ojibwa narratives that may be very different from European cultural images. In recent studies, the use of the tape recorder and video camera have allowed researchers to preserve the context and performance of the oral tradition. Basil Johnston, among others, argues that Ojibwa oral traditions are open to individual interpretation, according to Ojibwa values and beliefs. As long as the historian is armed with knowledge of Ojibwa culture and is sensitive toward their tradition and belief, he or she should be able to use oral tradition effectively to gain historical information about the Ojibwa, and insight into their historical behaviour.

Clearly, historians must apply the methods of established historical method to oral tradition just as we do to written documents. We must consider the story-tellers' reasons for telling the story, and the audience to whom the tradition is being told. Just as we evaluate the written sources for bias and cultural preconceptions, so too should oral tradition be carefully examined. George Copway, for example, wrote his history of the Ojibwa for a predominantly European audience in nineteenth century circumstances, while Wub-e-ke-niew seems to be making a political statement that addresses twentieth-century issues. These considerations do not eliminate oral sources as historical evidence. Researchers must be aware, however, that biases may exist.

When these methods are applied and the traditions are collected carefully and correctly, Ojibwa oral tradition can provide historical information. Oral tradition can be used in a number of ways: to corroborate existing written documents; to provide supplemental information, where there are gaps in traditional sources; and to offer

information that cannot be obtained from other available sources. I demonstrated that oral tradition provided corroborating evidence of what archaeological and documentary evidence could tell us about the material culture of the Ojibwa, and could also provide greater insight into the philosophy, culture and religion of the Ojibwa prior to European contact. Oral tradition also provided information about territorial boundaries, migrations and the Ojibwa thought world that was not recorded or may have been inaccurately recorded, in written sources.

Even where oral tradition contradicts traditional documentary evidence, those contradictions can provide valuable information and insights. In particular, I considered the question of aboriginal Ojibwa territory, where documentary and oral sources disagreed. By considering both source bases, I was able to suggest a more likely picture of the size of Ojibwa territory before contact. I also briefly examined the debate surrounding the origins of the Midewiwin. Documentary evidence places the development of the Midé in the post-contact era, while most oral traditions assert that it was developed long before Europeans arrived on the continent. Even for those who consider the Midé merely a nativistic movement that developed in response to decreased Ojibwa autonomy in an increasingly European dominated society, we gain valuable insight into how the Ojibwa reacted to the presence and pressures of a new socio-economic environment.

I argued, however, that based on oral tradition and sorting through conflicting interpretations, the Midé was more likely a pre-contact institution. As a secret society, it was probably not revealed to Europeans at the outset, and when it was, members of the Midé were often described as "sorcerers" or "jugglers", European terms which could easily

have obscured the actual scope and purpose of the society. The Midé demonstrates that the Ojibwa were extremely sophisticated in their healing and religious practices, and possessed a high degree of social organization. The Ojibwa were capable of maintaining a formal and complex system of education and preservation of their culture and history. The Midé clearly shows that the Ojibwa were capable of resisting external pressures of the increasingly dominant European society.

Over centuries of European contact, the socio-economic institutions of the Ojibwa people have been modified to reflect a changing world. Residing as far east as lakes Erie and Ontario, west into Montana and eastern Saskatchewan, north into northwestern Ontario and northeastern Manitoba, and south into Wisconsin and Minnesota, Ojibwa settlements are not merely duplicates of Euro-Canadian or American societies. Modified by their participation in the fur trade, Ojibwa culture has exhibited a remarkable adaptability and resiliency. Despite European influences, the Ojibwa have endured the past 300 years, and have not been entirely assimilated into Western society. Instead, modern Ojibwa culture is a composite of aboriginal features and European influences — a result of the desire to preserve distinctive cultural elements and adapt to an increasingly complex world.

While written sources can provide important details and information about the contact period, they can provide little insight into how the Ojibwa viewed the interaction between cultures, or information about Ojibwa prior to arrival of Europeans. In order to find this information, historians must include oral tradition in their study of Native peoples. This tradition must be approached with cultural sensitivity, and by applying

historical method. A history of the Ojibwa written without consulting their oral tradition will not accurately represent the experiences of Ojibwa people or their culture. Unless historians learn to incorporate the oral tradition of Native peoples into their studies of Aboriginal history, much of that history will remain unknown or unappreciated.

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