Reflections of Historical Events in Some Traditional Fox and Miami Narratives

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Various positions have been taken on the question of the historicity of oral narratives. But absolutist positions on either side make little sense; there are different kinds of truth and different kinds of error. My approach to the Fox and Miami narratives to be discussed is rather, quite simply, to see what realities they reflect, and in particular to see how Indian traditions and European accounts may shed light on each other in certain cases.

The first narrative is the Fox story Truman Michelson called "The Mythical Origin of the White Buffalo Dance." This was written out in the Fox syllabary, probably in the summer of 1912, by Alfred Kiyana, whose title for it was "The Adventures of the One Who Was Blessed by the White Buffalo." Michelson published his edition of the text, with a translation based closely on one written out by Horace Poweshiek, in 1925.

The first part of this lengthy tale goes like this:

When the hero of the tale was one year old, his mother becomes lost out on the prairie while carrying him on her back. That night they are protected by a herd of buffalos. The next day, after she sets out, she is discovered and pursued by a large party of Sioux. Again a herd of buffalos protects them, and many of the Sioux are killed. The next day the boy’s father finds them in a forest.

The boy grows up to be a model child. When a girl who is one of his two closest friends falls sick and is nearly dying, the
boy goes and gets medicine from a white buffalo and cures her. The family gives a feast for him, at which he announces that he has his power from the Buffalo Chief (*okima·wi·nenoswa*).

On the way home from the feast, the boy asks his father to make him a bow and to make it very fine. But the arrowheads, he says, he will seek himself and he will tell his father how to fix them. After the bow is made for him, he announces that he will be gone four days. He goes into a cliff from which water is shooting out to visit a manitou there. After four days the boy indeed returns. The arrowheads are exceedingly fine, and he brings four of them.

The boy also reports to the people that he was told that yonder where the Missouri joins the Mississippi is where they are to go and make their village. At that place they will lead healthy lives, and there will be a manitou who will give them all everything. But the people do not know what things are called Missouri and Mississippi, so the boy somewhat indignantly says that he will return to the manitou place and find out.

The boy comes back with two diagrams drawn by the manitous, the Missouri in red and the Mississippi in green (or, if you prefer, blue). Half the people go with the boy to seek the new place, and half, skeptically, stay behind. The culture hero Wiisahkeeha comes to the group that stayed and urges them to move or they will all be killed by the Sioux. He says that he is going to the new place himself, and they all leave with him.

The boy reports that Wiisahkeeha is coming with the others. But now, he says, because some were doubters it will be difficult to go where the manitou is, and the manitou will not simply give them things. They will have to give him animal skins, but the beavers will be hard to kill, though numerous. Furs will be hard to get, and it will be hard to get what they will be given. And things will happen on the route they will always take, as it will be difficult in some way.

Later, after Wiisahkeeha and the other people have arrived, some of the people set out to go to the manitou, traveling by canoe. When they get near, they overset. The lone survivor reports that a manitou overset them because he did not want anyone to talk as they paddled by. After that, whenever they go, they paddle by that place in silence.

Some time later, Wiisahkeeha kills a raccoon and, with his one coonskin, joins the boy and some others who are going
to trade. As they paddle by the place where talking was forbidden, Wiisahkeeaha suddenly blurts out, "Say, where are we paddling to, anyway?" Immediately, they lose consciousness, and when they come to they are inside sitting in their canoe with their furs scattered about. The place where they are is not described, but a general knowledge of the behaviour of Algonquian underwater manitous would indicate that they are in the cave where the manitou lives. The canoes wrecked earlier are there, lined up in a row upside down, and there is a row of skulls as well.

Wiisahkeeaha gets mad and goes over and picks up a fire-sharpened stick. The manitou flees up the Missouri underwater, with Wiisahkeeaha pursuing him along the bank. At the far end of the river, Wiisahkeeaha grabs the manitou by the tail. The manitou promises never to do it again. The reason the Missouri is muddy and roily is because Wiisahkeeaha chased the manitou there.

The boy leads the others out (of the cave), in time to see Wiisahkeeaha coming back along the river holding the manitou by the tail. Wiisahkeeaha reports that the manitou has promised that he will no longer forbid them to talk when they paddle by. The party then goes to trade its hides.

The one they go to trade things from is a manitou-trader (maneto·wi·ata·we·neniwa). He continues to give them anything, and he has everything. As there is no longer any danger, they go there any time. They get beads and little bells from him and put them in their sacred packs.

Some time later, after a further display of his power in fighting the Sioux, the boy proposes that they visit the trader. It is a fine day with not a sign of a cloud in the sky, and the boy says that is the kind of sky the manitou-trader likes. One from every house is to go (apparently all men), and they are to dress in their finery. And he says that on this trip it will be the way it would have been on the earlier trips if he had not been thought to be lying (that is, they will not have to trade for what they get). Before leaving they swim at length and scrub themselves clean.

The trader gives everyone a very large kettle filled with things like tools and knives. He says that in four days all the older women should come, but he tells the men not to have sexual intercourse with their wives. They come home
with kettles, pothooks and chains, knives, axes, flints, matches, pipes, dippers, dishes, spoons, spears, and spearheads.

When the older women go to the trader he gives them large tin pails, small kettles, and fine material, and he tells them how to fix it to clothe themselves. There are also combs, and there are beads that they are told to decorate with in sacred packs and also tiny bells. Those who had marriageable daughters, who were of course known to the manitou, were given all kinds of finery to take back to them. And everything was given freely, and to everyone equally. Later, those who boasted that they had received things because the manitou knew them (that is, had blessed them in particular) soon wore out their clothes. They never again were able to find that trader (Michelson 1925:46–64).

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The opening section of this ritual-origin myth is fairly teeming with historical allusions. The Fox are portrayed at a time when they had as yet no knowledge of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. I think it is likely that the cliff where water shoots out behind which a manitou lives is a reference, however vague, to Niagara Falls, the only cataract worth mentioning. In these features the Fox are presented as somewhere rather far to the east; we are reminded of the tradition reported by Major Morrell Marston in 1820 that the Sauk and the Fox had "emigrated from a great distance below Detroit and established themselves at a place called Saganaw" (Marston, in Blair 1911–1912 (2):146). To be sure there are timeless or, if you prefer anachronistic, features in this eastern country: hunting buffalo on the prairies and the unceasing enmity of the Sioux. But these need trouble us no more than the medieval unipeds that crop up in the Vinland sagas. A traditional account may contain historical truths even if it is not a precise chronicle.

An allusion of a different sort can perhaps be seen in the reference to the exceedingly fine manitou arrowheads that the boy brings back. The word (aša-te-hani) can also mean spearheads and, in fact, is so translated by Horace Poweshiek. This reference calls to mind the extraordinary obsidian spearheads found in Ohio Hopewell sites, made from obsidian from the Yellowstone region in the far west. James B. Griffin has hypothesized that the obsidian must have been brought directly from Yellowstone by an expedition from Ohio, as there is no
intermediate distribution of such objects (Griffin, Gordus, and Wright 1969).

The account of the trading voyages has a number of points of interest. In general it gives a picture of the reaction of the Fox to their first experiences with European traders. The objects the trader provides are so marvelous he is regarded as a manitou, but the hunting of furs for exchange is a burden. This first trader is located near the confluence of the Missouri with the Mississippi, an obvious allusion to St. Louis, which was founded just below this point in 1764 and soon became a center for the fur trade in the Missouri and upper Mississippi valleys (Nasatir 1952 (1):64). The Fox had had trade goods long before this date, even traveling down to Montreal, but St. Louis was the first trading center that was in the area the Fox were associated with in their later years. The manitou-trader combines the motif of the first encounter with trade goods with an allusion to the founding of St. Louis and its impact on the Fox of that later period. The anachronism is irrelevant.

The list of trade goods corresponds fairly well to what is known from historical and archeological evidence to have been traded to the Indians in the corresponding period. The most glaring omission is the lack of mention of guns and their associated paraphernalia, but this can be accounted for by the overriding need to use the general absence of guns as an icon to indicate the distant past in which the events of the story take place.

Anachronistically late would be the mention of matches, but perhaps it is only the translation that is anachronistic. The list of trade goods has as successive items 饬ko’hka’ni and aškote’hka’nani, which Horace Poweshiek translated as ‘flint rocks’ (though the form in Kiyana’s manuscript is actually singular) and ‘matches’. But the word which today means matches is etymologically simply ‘fire makers’, and as there are no guns the flints must be fire-making flints rather than gunflints. Very likely, then, aškote’hka’nani ‘fire-makers’ was earlier the word for ‘firesteels’ and the two words can be translated as ‘flint and steels’, commonplace early trade items.

The highpoint of this section of the narrative is clearly the encounter with the manitou who overturns canoes. Such a creature, encountered on the way downriver to St. Louis, is ev-
idently to be identified with the so-called Piasa (rhymes with "try a saw" local English), formerly to be seen on the bluffs north of Alton, Illinois, between the mouth of the Illinois River and that of the Missouri (Temple 1956; Belting 1973; Jacobson 1984). The name Piasa is not attested until 1778, but the creature was described in reports of the 1673 expedition of Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet. When these explorers were among the Menominee in Green Bay that year, the Indians tried to dissuade them from going down the Mississippi, reporting not only that there were enemy peoples ahead but that the river was also full of fearsome monsters that swallowed up men and canoes together; there was even a demon, who could be heard from a great distance, who barred the way and sank those who dared approach him. Later, between the mouth of the Illinois and that of the Missouri, the explorers saw two monsters painted on a high cliff next to the water which frightened us at first, and which the boldest Indians did not dare to gaze upon long. They are as large as a calf. They have horns on the head like deer, a terrible look, red eyes, a beard like a tiger, a face somewhat like a man’s, the body covered with scales, and a tail so long that it goes all the way around the body, over the head and back between the legs, and ends in a fishtail. Green, red, and a kind of black are the three colors that make it up. What is more, these two monsters are so well painted that we cannot believe that any Indian is responsible for them, since good painters in France would find it difficult to do so well — considering also that they are so high up on the rock that it is difficult to get at them conveniently to paint them. (Claude Dablon’s account, cast as if written by Marquette; JR59:94–96, 138–140. For the sources of this account see Delanglez 1946b, 1948:91–99.)

Immediately below, they heard the noise of a rapid and encountered the spectacle of the muddy and debris-choked discharge of the Missouri into the Mississippi.

Jolliet made a sketch of these monsters and copied it (or perhaps only one of them) on his lost map. Several maps based on Jolliet’s have survived, notably Jean-Baptiste Louis Franquelin's manuscript 1678 map entitled “General Map of Northern France [!]”, Containing the Discovery of the Illinois Country

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1 I am grateful to Jerome Jacobson for a copy of his unpublished paper, and to William C. Sturtevant for information on Franquelin (1678).
Made by Sieur Jolliet” (Franquelin 1678; Parkman copy reproduced in Bakeless 1961:335). This has near the mouth of the Ohio a neatly drawn unlabelled monster with a long tail curved over its back, clearly representing the creature of Upper Great Lakes mythology known as the Underwater Panther. A manuscript map of the same period by Hugues Randin that drew on the same source has on the east side of the Mississippi between the Illinois and the Missouri legend “representations of monsters” (figures de monstres), and it is evident that Jolliet drew one or two of the monsters at this location on his map (Delanglez 1946a:116–121).

Henri Joutel saw the monsters in 1687 and described them as “two poorly drawn chalk or vermilion pictures on the side of a rock” eight or ten feet up, where they could be touched with the hand (manuscript Delisle abridgment as translated by Delanglez 1946a:117–118). Jean-François Buisson de Saint-Cosme saw them in 1699 and reported that they were nearly effaced (Shea 1861:65–66). Both reported that the Indians venerated the figures, and Joutel describes them as making a sacrifice.

In the nineteenth century the monsters Jolliet saw were well known, and a number of antiquarians commented on them. The first clear allusion to them in print was apparently in Amos Stoddard’s Sketches, Historical and Descriptive of Louisiana, in a passage defending Marquette and Jolliet’s discoveries on the Mississippi: “What they call Painted Monsters on the side of a high perpendicular rock, apparently inaccessible to man, between the Missouri and the Illinois, and known to the moderns by the name of Piesa, still remain in a good degree of preservation” (Stoddard 1812:17; misquoted by T. F. Nelson in Bayliss 1908:76). An earlier mention of “Piasas”, with no explanation, appears on Thomas Hutchins’ map of 1778 in the correct location (Tucker 1975, Plate 29).

A series of references in the 1830s and 1840s seems to be traceable to John Russell, a professor of Greek and Latin at Shurtleff College in Upper Alton, Illinois, who visited the drawings in 1836 and published an article on the Piasa in The Family Magazine (Russell 1836); Armstrong (1887:28) and Bayliss (1908:75, 1909:116) give the date of Russell’s visit as 1848, relying on what was apparently a reprinting of this article that year in The Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate. Russell recounted “The Piasâ. An Indian Tradition of Illinois”,
which he claimed to have obtained from Illinois Indians; this has the dramatic embroidery typical of the "Indian legend" as a nineteenth-century White folk genre, and Russell himself, though claiming that the Indians had a somewhat similar tradition, admitted that his published story was "somewhat illustrated" (McAdams 1887:5). According to this tradition, the Illinois Indians slew a giant, man-eating bird called the Piasa and, in commemoration, depicted it on the cliff. "Even at this day, an Indian never passes that spot in his canoe without firing his gun at the figure of the bird. The marks of balls on the rock are almost innumerable" (Russell 1836:101; misquoted in Armstrong 1887:30 and McAdams 1887:3). Of more interest in the present connection than Russell’s tale and its possible sources is his report of his own field investigation. High on the bluff he entered a cave and discovered that the “floor of this cave throughout its whole extent was a mass of human bones. Sculls and other bones were mingled together in the utmost confusion” to a depth of three or four feet (Russell 1836:102; misquoted by McAdams 1887:3–4, who gives the name as Russell, and Armstrong 1887:28–31).

Abner Dumont Jones visited Alton in June of 1836, and in his book *Illinois and the West* he gives an alleged Illinois Indian tradition of the “Piasau Bird” that closely resembles Russell’s (A.D. Jones 1838:52–58). His remarks on the Indians shooting at the creature add circumstantial details:

The spot became sacred from that time, and no Indian ascended or descended the Father of Waters for many a year without discharging his arrow at the image of the warrior-destroying Bird. After the distribution of fire-arms among the Indians, bullets were substituted for arrows, and even to this day no savage presumes to pass that magic spot without discharging his rifle and raising his shout of triumph. I visited the spot in June (1838) and examined the image, and the ten thousand bullet-marks on the cliff seemed to corroborate the tradition related to me in the neighborhood. So lately as the passage of the Sac and Fox delegations down the river on their way to Washington, there was a general discharge of their rifles at the Piasau Bird. On arriving at Alton, they went on shore in a body, and proceeded to the bluffs, where they held a solemn war-council, concluding the whole with a splendid war dance, manifesting all the while the most exuberant joy. (A.D. Jones 1838:59; the quotation in McAdams [1887:7] is not entirely accurate.)

A similar account was obtained by Edmund Flagg in 1836
and published in 1848 (Thwaites 1906:122–125).

A painting by Henry Lewis of the cliff with the two monsters on it and Indians shooting at them was published in *Das Illustrierte Mississippithal* (Lewis 1967: Plate 58, opp. p. 298); the first fascicles of this book were issued in 1854, but this plate was toward the end and most likely appeared with the fascicles issued in 1857; incorrect dates are given by McAdams (1887:9) and T. F. Nelson (in Bayliss 1908:76). This shows only the head of the left-hand figure, the rest having apparently been on rock that had fallen away. If the cliff on which the paintings were found was quarried away in 1846 and 1847 (McAdams 1887:9), Lewis could not have seen the drawings on his trip in 1848. Lewis cites the Piasa legend from Flagg (Lewis 1967:281–283), and it seems likely that his painting of the monsters, like his depiction of the Indians in the same scene, was a reconstruction based on information and traditions obtained locally. Lewis and Flagg both mention the existence of bone-filled caves in the vicinity (Lewis 1967:279, 281; Flagg in Thwaites 1906:124–125).

There are inconsistencies in some of the descriptions, but these can be ascribed to variant recollections or interpretations of the deteriorating figures and need not detain us. The presence of wings in the nineteenth-century depictions and descriptions probably merely reflects European conceptions of what dragons look like projected onto the unclear pictographs; McAdams (cited by T. F. Nelson in Bayliss 1908:77) reported that the visibility of the figures varied depending on weather conditions and that the wings were sometimes visible and sometimes not. As for the name Piasa, McAdams (1887:8) seems to credit Russell with having popularized it when he writes that “‘Dragon’ or ‘Flying Dragon’ was the common name for it before Russell’s story of the Piasa came out.” Although the earlier appearance of the name on Hutchin’s map and in Stoddard’s account demonstrates that Russell was not its ultimate source, it does not appear to be attested in Illinois, Miami, or other Algonquian languages. Attempts to derive the name Piasa from words in Indian languages (Belting 1973:305; Jacobson 1984) assume unidiomatic formations or distortions so extreme as to vitiate the proposals.

It is evident that the manitou that overturns canoes in the Fox myth corresponds in all specified respects to the figure seen
by Jolliet on the cliffs above Alton (later called the "Piasa") and is to be identified with it. The prominence of the manitou's tail in the myth is noteworthy. Although the Fox words for Underwater Panther (*peši'pešiwa, na· mi-pešiwa*) do not appear in the myth, the manitou is clearly one of this type. Note that the trader-manitou in the myth is clearly identifiable as an underwater manitou by his ascribed aversion to clouds, an indication that he, like the Underwater Panther, is an enemy of the thunderers. The myth also suggests that the Fox knew of the cave full of bones that Russell visited. And in general, the account of the manitou in the myth can be taken to furnish an Indian perspective for the events recounted in the history of the European exploration of the Mississippi.

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Entirely different are the historical parallels of a Fox story set in the recent past that Jones entitled "The Killing of Blue-Chief" (Jones 1907:218–227). Blue-Chief (*wi·pekokima·wa*) and his wife Lake-Woman (*kehčikami·hkwe·ha*; Jones: Woman-of-the-Sea) are trapping along the Missouri. One night Blue-Chief has a premonition and gives his wife a piece of paper which he tells her to keep carefully, as it might in future be a benefit to her. That day they encounter some Sioux, who kill the man and take the woman north as a captive. After a time, the Sioux who had captured her tells her that she is free to return to her people and advises her on how to reach a White trader on a great river. Eventually she reaches the place where the White man lives and gives him the piece of paper. The trader's wife gives Lake-Woman her own clothes to wear, and the couple hide her for several days. When the steamboat is ready to depart downriver, the trader nails Lake-Woman into a dry-goods box and white men carry her on board. Through a crack she can see the Sioux standing on the shore. She takes the boat to St. Louis, where she boards another boat for Rock Island and is reunited with her people.

Compare the following related by John Brickell, who was a captive of the Delawares in Ohio from 1791 to 1795:

On one of our annual visits to the rapids [of the Maumee] to receive our presents from the British, I saw Jane Dick [another white captive]... When I saw her she lived at large with the Indians. She became suddenly missing, and great search was made for her;
but the Indians could not find her. After my release from cap­
tivity I saw her and her husband at Chillicothe, where she and
her husband lived. She told me how she was liberated. Her hus­
band had concerted a plan with the captain of the vessel who
brought the presents, to steal her from the Indians. The captain
concerted a plan with a black man, who cooked for M'Kee and El­
liot [British agents], to steal Mrs. Dick. The black man arranged it
with Mrs. Dick to meet him at midnight in a copse of underwood,
which she did; and he took her on board in a small canoe, and
headed her up in an empty hogshead, where she remained till the
day after the vessel sailed, about thirty-six hours. I remember well
that every camp and the woods were searched for her, and that the
vessel was searched; for the Indians immediately suspected she was
on board: but not thinking of unheading hogsheads, they could not
find her. (Brickell 1842:51.)

The parallels between these two accounts are so striking that
it seems likely that the story of Mrs. Dick's escape has been
grafted into a Fox story of captivity among the Sioux. One
might well wonder whether the transmission was oral or derived
from Brickell's account, which was published in Chillicothe,
Ohio, in 1842. Each account contains details not in the other,
but Brickell's seems more circumstantial, notably in the role of
the Black man. There are three details unique to the Fox tale —
the written message, the use of a White woman's clothing,
and the peering out through a crack; the first two would fit
better in a story about a White woman's escape and the last
would fit any such account. I would suggest, then, that an
oral version of the escape of Jane Dick reached the Fox in the
nineteenth century.

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Finally I would like to mention a case in which an In­
dian tradition casts light on an historical mystery, the fate
of the trading ship that was built by René-Robert Cavelier,
Sieur de la Salle, above Niagara Falls in 1679 and lost un­
der unknown circumstances in Lake Michigan later that year
(Quimby 1966:45–62). Historians generally refer to this ship
as La Salle's bark (calquing French barque) or as the Griff­
on (or, erroneously, Griffin), following the statement of Louis
Hennepin that this was her name; Delanglez has pointed out
that the name is not given in primary sources and argues that
Hennepin's name is unlikely to be correct (Delanglez 1941:65,
The ship disappeared on her way back to Lake Erie after setting sail on September 18, 1679, from the Island of the Potawatomis, an island near the entrance of Green Bay which has been identified as Rock Island by Ronald J. Mason (1974). Hennepin wrote in his *New Discovery* that the ship was lost in a storm (Hennepin 1698:89–90, 1903:121; Quimby 1966:58–59). Claude Charles le Roy, Sieur de Bacqueville de la Potherie, no doubt drawing on information from the *coureur de bois* Nicolas Perrot, wrote that she was attacked and burned by Ottawas after putting into a small bay (Blair 1911–1912, 1:353). La Salle sent some men to look for her, but they made a circuit of Lake Michigan without seeing her or hearing any news about her; La Salle later concluded that she was destroyed by her captain and crew, who were captured by Indians on the Mississippi on their way to join with Daniel Greysolon Dulhut to trade with the Sioux (Parkman 1905, chap. 13:182, chap. 14:193–194, chap. 21:322).

I do not believe that the following Miami account, recorded by Charles Christopher Trowbridge in the winter of 1824–1825, has previously figured in discussions of the fate of La Salle's ship:

The earliest incident in their history which they recollect is the arrival of the French in the lakes. The Wyandots who then lived upon Lake Huron, sent word to the Miamis and Potawatamies, that a strange people had arrived there, whom they feared because they were white and had long beards, and that they desired the assistance of their brethren to destroy them. When the Miamis & Potawatamies arrived they found four vessels loaded with French. The three nations ambuscaded and when the visitors had disembarked they attacked and destroyed them. A few remained in one of the vessels who hoisted sail and made their escape. (Trowbridge 1938:7.)

The editor Vernon Kinietz adds in a note: "There is no counterpart of this story in the French documents." But I do not think there can be much question that this account is in fact a tradition of the destruction of La Salle's ship by Upper Great Lakes Indians. One ship has become the conventional four, and one of these four escapes to tell the tale — a common motif in Algonquian battle accounts. The identity of the Indians is open to question, but it is likely that individuals from more than one tribe were involved, given the situation in the Lake Michigan
settlements at the time. In fact the Island of the Potawatomis was earlier called the Island of the Huron (the Huron being the proto-Wyandots), and the association of the Potawatomis and the Wyandots in the Miami story would accord well with the situation in the second half of the seventeenth century on the western side of Lake Michigan.

The only point I wish to make, as I said at the outset, is that these Indian traditions and White historical accounts shed light on each other; considering them together enriches our understanding of both. I hope this is not a controversial suggestion.

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