When they tell legends, stories from a long time ago, that have been passed on, it’s all verbal, there’s all kinds of versions. That’s what happens. So this is the way I heard this one. (Malcolm Diamond, Washkaganish, Québec)

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate a continuity between legend, which may be “full of lies”, and observed or experienced events, which are said to be true. Excerpts from four stories related to me in 1983 by the late Malcolm Diamond from Washkaganish in the Cree Region of Québec will serve as illustrations of continuity in patterns of behaviour as described in atiukan, stories which no one can remember to whom or where the events took place, and tipachiman, stories of more recents events. Continuity, and therefore truth, lies not in a particular version of a story, nor in the credibility of events, but in the meaning of behaviour as it is illustrated by a story. This sample is necessarily limited for the purposes of this paper.

The first story, about the beginning of conjuring, is a legend, an atiukan, full of incredible events, including a child born of miraculous conception and a boy transformed into a man with extraordinary abilities. In a rather dramatic context the story provides examples of both competent and incompetent behaviour, focusing particularly on how people look after each other in a socially responsible manner. If the incredible aspects of the story only are considered, the significance of both the types of action described and the consequences
of that action may be missed. The second story, although a *tipachiman*, may seem equally incredible or amazing; however, the events were observed by the story-teller many years ago. It is also in the action and its consequences that the significance of this story lies. The last two stories, also *tipachiman*, are accounts of events which the story-teller experienced. It should be noted, all the stories are illustrations of “looking after others”.

1. *Tchu-Shwash*

This is the story of the beginning of conjuring, interpreted by the story-teller’s son. I have edited it slightly to reduce length, but not content.

A group of people were living in the bush and there was with them a young girl who was expecting a baby. No one in the group seemed to know who the father of this baby was. When it was discovered that the girl was pregnant, her father said, “We’ll pass the baby around to all the men in the group and when the baby urinates, that will be the father.” So, when the baby was born, they started passing the child around to see who the father was. There was one man there whose name was Owl and when he got the baby he spit and said, “He peed on me, so it’s my child.” But the others saw it wasn’t urine, it was spit, and they continued passing the child around until it came to a young boy. When he held onto the baby he was peed on, so the others said he was the father.

When everyone knew the boy was the father, they told the girl it was up to him to be responsible for their survival. Then the people decided to leave them by themselves, to survive alone. So they started taking all their teepees down. When they started to leave the young girl started to cry, naturally, but the young boy told her not to worry. Instead he told her to collect all the roasting sticks for him, the sticks people use when they roast meat by the fire. After he got all these sticks together he tied them into a bundle and heated it, just like you heat a goose on a string. As it got warm the grease from the bundle started dripping. After this the boy started to look for a place to make a shelter. He told the girl to look for some scraps of moosehide and cloth which might have been left under the boughs where the teepees had been. When he got these pieces together he started shaking them and after awhile they started to expand into a tarp. This is what they used to cover their teepee. After the boy built a shelter for them, he asked the girl to make a shaking tent for him. He got the covering the same way as he had for the teepee. The young boy remembered how he’d seen the shaking tent
made, so he told the girl how to make it. After she finished he went in and performed the ceremony just like an older man. It worked out the way he had seen it done. After he had been in the shaking tent for awhile he called to the girl and told her he was finished, it was time for her to take the cover off. When she took the covers off she found a full grown man.

After the boy became a man, he told the young girl it was time for him to go hunting. He came back one evening with a lot of caribou chins sticking out around his waist, so she knew he had killed caribou. They went back and got all the meat and hide and entrails. He was acting like he had been a very experienced hunter, like this wasn’t anything new to him. When they had cleaned and stored their food from his hunt, he said he was going to go out again. The same thing happened again, he came back with more caribou. They cleaned and stored that food also. They stored a huge pile of meat on a high cache.

After awhile the boy started thinking of the people who had left them behind. He told the girl he had some mixed feelings. He said, “I feel as if they are having problems getting food.” He decided to go and check on the others and walked in the direction they had gone. When he came to a trail he noticed by the tracks he saw that it was made by a person who seemed to be weak, without energy (without any hustle). When he came to their camp there wasn’t any activity outside so he went into the teepee. The people who were there were all very weak from hunger, so weak they couldn’t move. They didn’t know it was the boy they had left behind, because he was a full grown man, until he told them, “Your grandchild has plenty to eat. Your grandchild says if you want something to eat, you are welcome to come to our camp.” Then they knew who he was. At last they decided to go with him back to his camp. So they followed his trail back and when they got there sure enough he had lots of food. So they stayed there and were able to survive with the boy’s help. This is the beginning when they started having shaking tents and people conjuring.

At the end of this story my mind was racing with questions which I began to ask: how did the girl get pregnant, who was Owl, how did the boy remember conjuring if this was the beginning of it, etc. There are others, but these are particularly noticable. I was told that Owl wanted the girl for his wife, that’s why he tried to claim the baby. When I asked about the boy’s previous knowledge of conjuring, the interpreter explained that the boy could see into the future. In this way he realized he had power to conjure and also knew how to
impregnate the girl. The baby had not been conceived in the usual manner; instead, when the girl had urinated on the ground, the boy had urinated in the same place. The story-teller explained that the others didn’t know about the boy’s power until he came to their camp when they were starving. My questions finally brought this response:

This is the end of the story and it’s full of lies. When they tell legends it’s all verbal, there’s all kinds of versions. That’s what happens. Like today you have newspapers so you hear one story and it’s written in another paper another way. It’s a different story altogether. So when they tell stories from a long time ago that have been passed on there’s a lot of variations and this is the way I heard this one.

Why be concerned with the truth of this legend, or any other legend or story for that matter, if the story-teller has admitted it is full of lies? As previously noted, to attempt to locate truth in the incredible aspects of the story is a snare and a delusion. Truth is to be found, however, in the actions and interactions of the protagonist which, in this story, are examples of socially responsible behaviour, or Cree social competence. This is one of many stories illustrating how one looks after others.

The story begins when a hunting group decides to leave a young couple behind to survive on their own. Obviously, the couple is being censured for having a child without the community sanction of marriage; however, to leave inexperienced young people alone in the bush deliberately is an unusual means of social control. This ostracism, or unwillingness to look after others, was uncalled for and potentially as devastating for the group as for the abandoned couple. In traditional Cree belief, the group is putting itself at risk because it is not known what may become of the youngsters. In the old stories, the legends, there are many examples of people who, lost or abandoned, become transformed into damaging, dangerous persons.

An expression of disapproval through public gossip is to be expected, but a young mother normally can expect assistance in learning her new role from her female relatives. The young girl is probably upset with the present reality of losing family as much as she may be with any future possibility of hardship or starvation. The boy immediately begins to demonstrate his competence, assuming responsibility for his family and providing them with food and shelter. Through
the medium of the conjuring house his marital status is confirmed: boy is transformed into man, a skilled hunter. His competence is further demonstrated when he goes to tell the starving group that he has enough food for them also. He assumes responsibility for their survival, holding no ill will for their former lack of responsibility toward him and his family. The group’s behaviour, their unwillingness to look after the youngsters is an example of incompetence in stark contrast to the young man’s behaviour, which demonstrates a willingness and ability to look after the others as well as his family, to put up with their short-comings and at the same time try to help them when needed. Looking after others involves being willing to move beyond past differences in order to try to ensure the survival of all.

2. Edward Ottereyes

Further questions brought this response: “This one’s finished. I’ll tell you a story about one time when I saw Edward Ottereyes do the ceremony, go into the shaking-tent.

We were living in the bush together at that time and we were really having a hard time killing animals and getting food. It was during the spring and the ice had broken up on the rivers. My father decided to ask Edward if he would go into a shaking-tent if they made one for him. Edward said even if they did set it up it would not help because there were no animals around at that time. They set up the shaking-tent anyway and after Edward went in there were a lot of animal spirits that went in. Then his mistabeo said he was going to sing about the moose. Once the spirit went inside the shaking-tent the singing that came out was very high, the voice was young like the voice of a child. It was a young moose that was singing. After he had finished the ceremony, the next morning, he went out in his canoe alone. He wasn’t gone very long when we saw him coming back. We went down to the bank to meet him and he had killed a young moose, it was about a year old. Because he had gone in the shaking-tent he knew that he was going to get a young moose. This isn’t a legend I’m telling. This is the story of what I saw Edward do. He used the shaking tent to know where the animals were.

Note the distinction being made between atiukan and tipachiman. The story-teller was aware of the lack of confidence that non-Cree, and many younger Cree, have expressed in the shaking-tent phenomenon. Although the events may seem amazing their credibility is verified because the old man saw them happen. The point of
the story, however, is not to verify amazing events, but to illustrate a competent hunter's willingness to try to help others and how he succeeded in doing this. During spring thaw it is difficult to travel, and as noted in the story, game is hard to find at this time of year. The moose which was killed would provide enough food to keep the hunting group over this difficult period.

3. Knowing Where To Set Your Fish Net

I was told other stories about Edward Ottereyes' amazing ability, particularly his ability to kill bear whenever he wanted. Clearly he was a respected example of a competent hunter whose behaviour was a demonstration of social responsibility. At last, the old man began to draw on his own experience to illustrate how one looks after others.

A long time ago we were living in the bush near Matagami, just my wife and me, before any of our children were born. I looked for a place where there was fresh growth, where the trees were just starting to grow. That's where to look for partridge. I managed to kill two partridge right away. I didn't think about the supplies here at Rupert House. I wasn't worried about starving to death. When you are out in the bush like that you have to plan and you have to carry out what you plan. While we were paddling to the place where we were going to stay, when we were about 100 yards away, I had fishing hooks set ready. I put those in the water with poles and some string. Then we went ashore to where we were going to camp. I told my wife to get together some firewood and I went down to check my hooks. I had three pike. So that's what you see happens when people are willing to work for something. They usually get it. My wife hadn't been in the bush before we were married. She had been always in the settlement of Rupert House, but I had been always in the bush. I could sense that my wife was nervous, worried that we would have enough food. But I wasn't nervous at all. I knew where to set my fish net. Not like it is with people today, rushing to the store all the time.

In general this account of personal experience parallels that of the young conjuror in the atiukan. A competent young hunter provides for, or looks after, his wife who is less confident of their survival than he. Although his ability as a young man is not quite as amazing as the young conjuror's, he successfully carried out what he had planned. The old man then contrasted his own experience with that of the present generation of young hunters, saying,

Right now hunting, trapping and living in the bush, once a person runs out
of supplies, the first thing he does is jump on the skidoo and come back right away. There’s a lot of people in town here that haven’t seen or haven’t heard how people used to live here, not really long long ago, but in the past 100 years. Now presently in this community there are people who are married who don’t know how to live off the land or haven’t experienced it. Take one of my sons for example, he only knows about hunting geese.

4. **Dreaming**

This final example of social responsibility, or looking after others, was related to me when the old man, who was not only a competent hunter, but also an experienced dreamer, was trying to help me understand how one comes to know the meaning of one’s dreams. It is a long story, a *tipachiman*, interpreted by his daughter, which I shall not repeat in detail, but from which I have extracted particular points of significance. The discussion which followed the story is relevant to the present discussion of truth and continuity in behaviour patterns.

Some years after he was married, but still a young man, Malcolm dreamed a child was born to a woman in the village who had no children at that time. In the dream he was told the child was his. At the time he thought the dream did not mean anything at all. Later, after the dream, he heard that a woman expecting her first child had been in labour for three days. Finally the woman’s relatives came to him saying they did not know what to do and asking if he would come to try to help her. To make a long story short, the baby was delivered successfully, mother and child both survived. After he returned home, the relatives came to him again, asking him to come to name the baby.

“When this happened,” he said, “I remembered my dream right away. The woman in my dream who was to have a baby was called Ethel, so I named the baby Ethel. That’s what happens sometimes, even though you don’t know what your dream means, later on you find out what it really means.”

In response to my comment, “Even though you were a young man, you seemed to know what to do,” the old man explained,

As far as I can remember, when there was a problem, they always come to ask, I was always invited to come to help. I always tried to help somebody else in my life. When I was younger I was trapping for maybe five different people besides trying to trap for my own family. I trapped beaver to support my own family and then trapped beaver for somebody else that was lame
or too old to trap, so they could have some money too. It was like that a long time ago when the older people didn’t have any other help, like welfare or anything, it was the younger people who helped them out. That’s the way they were supported. As far back as I can remember I’ve been helping others, and then, finally, I became chief.

He not only assumed responsibility for others, finally, he was given that responsibility. Stories abound about the accomplishments of Malcolm Diamond. Many were told to me by his wife, others he recalled himself, some I learned from his children, and still others are a part of the everyday fabric of life at Washkaganish. He was a traditional leader, an elected chief, and finally, a wise and respected elder.

In March 1983 when we were discussing the relative "truth" of stories, I asked the old man if people used the legends to help them interpret or understand what they saw happening around them. His answer was,

Yes. These legends that were passed on from a long time ago, when people used to tell them, they used them to improve their hunting. Many of the legends had to do with hunting, living off the land, survival. You always learn something from them.

In a paper on the lives of Athapaskan women, Cruikshank (1984) pointed out that the women who were recording life history material for her were concerned that traditional Athapaskan stories be recorded as well, because, from their perspective, the traditional stories provided a model for how life should be lived.

I am not prepared to argue that the old man would have considered the traditional stories as providing a model for living one’s life, yet it is clear he considered them a medium for instruction. They provide examples of behaviour, as well as its consequences, in particular situations. Although he might not have said, as an old Athapaskan woman is quoted as saying, “I’ve tried to live my life right, just like a story,” (Cruikshank 1984:1) no doubt he would have understood what she meant.

An obvious continuity and therefore truth is to be found in the leadership qualities and socially responsible behaviour as described in each of the stories discussed here. Although only two are about Malcolm Diamond’s personal experience, his life and leadership were
contemporary examples of the truth to be found in legend, maintaining a continuity between past and present.¹

REFERENCES

Cruikshank, Julie

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