LORE: Capturing Traditional Environmental Knowledge

Edited by Martha Johnson
LORE

Capturing Traditional Environmental Knowledge
Our culture is something that surrounds us, something that is part of us, and is inextricably linked with the land upon which we have lived for thousands of years. Our culture has a past, and it is that past — especially as we find it embodied in our elders — that we are pledged to preserve. It also has a present — a present that threatens our culture, which we are pledged to protect. Our culture lives, and must have a future. We are pledged to promote our culture, especially among our young people, to ensure that they will identify themselves as Dene, in the full meaning of the term. The mission of the Dene Cultural Institute is to work with the people of the Dene Nation, and with other institutions and organizations, to preserve, protect, and promote the Dene culture, languages, spirituality, heritage, traditions, and customs.

The International Development Research Centre is a public corporation created by the Parliament of Canada in 1970 to support technical and policy research designed to adapt science and technology to the needs of developing countries. The Centre’s five program sectors are Environment and Natural Resources, Social Sciences, Health Sciences, Information Sciences and Systems, and Corporate Affairs and Initiatives. The Centre’s funds are provided by the Parliament of Canada; IDRC’s policies, however, are set by an international Board of Governors. The Centre’s headquarters are in Ottawa, Canada. Regional offices are located in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

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Foreword

In recent years, the value of the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples, and particularly their traditional environmental knowledge, has been recognized. This has unleashed a flood of research. Some of the research has been undertaken by scientists working alone, but the most innovative responses to this trend have been developed by indigenous researchers working in collaboration with Western scientists. They recognized early on that the main objective was not simply to collect reels of audio or video tape as a form of folklore, but to catalogue this information so that it could be compared from one region and one culture to other regions and other cultures, and, even more, so that it could be brought to bear on policies for sustainable development in remote and typically fragile ecosystems.

This book presents the results of a workshop on the documentation and application of traditional environmental knowledge through community-based research. Organized and hosted by the Dene Cultural Institute (DCI) based in Fort Hay, Northwest Territories, Canada, and supported by Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the workshop brought together a small number of teams, each composed of indigenous and nonindigenous researchers from Northern Canada, Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and South America. Their primary goal was to discuss effective methods for documenting the unique
environmental knowledge and understanding that characterizes the heritage of all indigenous peoples around the world.

In many ways, the workshop was unique. It represented an important initiative on the part of a Canadian aboriginal organization (DCI) and a Canadian development agency (IDRC) working together toward a common goal. The workshop was held in a traditional Dene camp along the shores of the Deh Cho (Mackenzie River) in the Canadian North. Participants flew to Canada from around the globe. Upon arrival in Canada, they faced another extended flight to Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories. From there, they were taken by bush plane and boat to the Dene camp. Daily life and workshop sessions took place in tents, which both represented typical living conditions during actual collection of indigenous knowledge and, unhappily but typically for the North, provided protection from the cold and rainy summer weather.

This book examines the process of collecting traditional environmental knowledge while using a participatory action or community-based approach. It looks at the problems associated with documenting traditional knowledge problems that are shared by researchers around the world and it explores some of the means by which traditional knowledge can be integrated with Western science to improve methods of natural resource management.

We hope that this book will assist others to develop effective, culturally appropriate research methods at a time when alternative understandings and approaches to sustainable development are increasingly critical to the survival of our planet.

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Acknowledgments

The Fort Good Hope workshop was a unique event and many people and agencies contributed to its success. The community of Fort Good Hope put on a show of hospitality that left our international guests with a true taste of traditional and modern Dene culture. The Chief and Council of Fort Good Hope provided generous logistical support for the camp. Star Tech Ltd lent tents and other camping gear and Northern Stores Ltd donated groceries. Special thanks go to Alfred Masazumi, Michael Lafferty, and Joe Cotchilly. They ensured that the camp ran smoothly despite inclement weather and a last minute change of site. Bella T seleie and Judy Lafferty assisted in setting up the camp, and Mary Barnaby and Margaret Kelly prepared some memorable meals of traditional Dene cuisine. Wilma Schreder of the Dene Cultural Institute made all of the travel arrangements.

Dr Evelyn Pinkerton served as the rapporteur for the workshop. Her work on the discussion summaries and her thoughtful insight on earlier drafts of the introductory papers were much appreciated.

Our special gratitude goes to Robert Ruttan, project biologist for the Dene Traditional Environmental Knowledge Pilot Project. His calm and sense of humour in overseeing the entire organization of the camp made the workshop the success that it was.

Thanks are also owed to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the Yellowknife Press Independent. Their generous publicity created better public awareness of the value of traditional environmental knowledge and the research that is being conducted to preserve and apply it today.
Finally, thanks go to all of the elders, community researchers, and scientists who travelled from the nearby community of Fort Good Hope and from the far corners of the globe to participate in this unique event. Their willingness to overlook the bad weather and the mosquitoes, and to share their knowledge and culture in the traditional setting that was the Fort Good Hope camp represented the true spirit of international and cross-cultural cooperation.

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An Experience in Oral History: One Researcher’s Account

The following text is a direct English translation of an oral presentation given in French by Brigitte Kone. From Mali, Mrs Kone served as a community researcher for the SOS Sahel Oral History Project. To retain the flavour of the presentation, this account has received only a very light edit.

Today, I would like to talk to you first about the area where the project was conducted, as well as the methods that were used. Next, I will talk about the problems I encountered during my research. Finally, I will mention the positive results of my study.

Our project, an oral history project, included seven villages. These villages form part of another large project on community development, for which I am the Women’s Activity Coordinator. However, the seven villages in which I conducted my research are not the same villages as those involved in the community development project. My point is that I did a lot of traveling between the seven villages to carry out my research.

The vegetation in these villages is very similar to that of the Sahel, with hardly any trees. There is a lot of sand, many ravines, and the ground is flat. This is basically what the villages, where I conducted my research, are like.
I would now like to talk about my research methods. The questionnaire was completely new for me as it contained scientific terms. However, the project head helped me by explaining their meaning. This made the questionnaire much easier for me.

Before beginning my research, I visited the chief of each village, because where I come from, you can’t work in a village unless the chief agrees to let you do so. The chief also chose the old men and women I was to work with. This was very valuable to my research. I also worked with storytellers and blacksmiths, men belonging to a particular caste. In fact, the questionnaire had to be translated from French into Bobo, the local language. This was pretty difficult, as I had to retain the meaning of the questions.

The problem I had when conducting this study was the mistrust of the villagers. Their mistrust of people, because of ethnic group, is by nature very great. This is because we all have secrets and we don’t want to pass these secrets on to anyone who is not from the same village. This is why people always mistrust one another.

You have to know people for a long time in my ethnic group to gain their trust. Once you have gained the trust of my people, you can be comfortable working with them and be sure you have their trust. To achieve this, we have a tradition: to gain someone’s trust, you give this person gifts, especially if he is an older person.

Therefore, when I went to interview the old people, I took along either kola nuts, tobacco, or I bought them a dolo, the local beer. This made them very happy. Each time I went to see the old people, I brought them a small gift and they would be happy to speak with me.

Another act of diplomacy I made use of, is that often, when I went to see the old person, who may have been sitting under a tree among the rubbish, I would sit down beside him or her to show that I was on the same level. And when I would buy them a dolo, which I don’t normally drink, the old people would make me drink it to test me, to see if I could take it. So I’d take the dolo and I’d drink it. Also, there were meals that weren’t all that healthy. I’d accept the meal and I’d
eat it, just to gain their trust. This helped to make the people appreciate me, which made my work much easier.

Another problem I had, the worst problem, was transcribing things. It's very difficult to translate ideas from Bobo into French, because you have to translate without changing the idea. And the people speak in images. They never speak directly, they always make allusions to something. I, therefore, had to translate everything correctly, to do justice to the original words.

For example, an old woman told me that if you want to get rid of a mouse, you have to get rid of the smell of soubala. Soubala is a spice you put in sauce to increase its flavour. It has a strong smell, and the mice in the house will look for it and take it. So if the mice looks for that because they could smell it, you have to get rid of the smell of soubala to get rid of the mice.

I had problems with this image, which was new to me. It was hard for me to understand this idea and translate it into proper French. This shows that the amount of knowledge passed on to the children by the old women was incredible. According to the old women, the children were well educated in the past. Now they are not well educated, and she said that this wasn't the children's fault, but the fault of the mothers in this generation, because they are not properly educating their children. That's what the proverb was all about: rather than getting rid of the mouse, you should get rid of the smell of soubala. This means that rather than accusing the children, because they are poorly educated, accuse the mothers.

Another problem I encountered was the dictation machines. There were two of us carrying out the study: myself and a man. And there was only one machine. Whenever he needed the machine, I was using it. We got in each other's way. This made it pretty difficult for us.

Now I want to tell you about the positive effects of the study. The research allowed me to trace my roots, to discover where I really came from. This is because I discovered a lot of things in the very area I worked in.
Because my family is Christian, I had never had the chance to see a fetish. But this time I saw one. I was shown one. I saw what a fetish is. A fetish can be a stone, it can be a very simple stone, it can just be a pot, and it can be an animal’s tail. And the traditional Bobo believes in his fetish. Because they’re farmers, they won’t work the earth without consulting their fetish. They won’t do anything without consulting their fetish. The fetish represents God for the traditional Bobo. Sacrifices are often made to the fetishes. The animals used for sacrifices are goats or sheep, and chickens are often used, or a type of food like gruel is offered to the fetish.

I even had the chance to see a creek, the village chiefs took me to the creek to show me the sacred spot. In the past, there was a spring that bubbled up out of the ground at this place. This was something extraordinary for them. There were always fish in that creek. There’s a fetish in the creek beside the spring, and every year they make offerings to the creek. I had the chance to see this.

I also discovered something about the local trees. We have several different kinds of trees. I discovered that each tree is used for a traditional medicine. We trust traditional medicine much more than modern medicine. I also discovered that the local trees are often used by artisans. For farming, there’s the pickaxe; all farming tools are made using the trees.

Something else I discovered, another interesting detail: the location of the hearth in a house. I did not know that in the past, the kitchen hearth had a special spot. I found out that the hearth is always facing the west of the village the house is in. I asked why. They told me that the dead are buried so that the husband faces east and the wife faces west. The wind, which comes from the west, carries the smoke with it. This way, the smoke won’t get in a person’s eyes.

We really believe in this because for us, the dead are not really dead. They are still alive and their lives and their spirits have to be preserved.

The other positive point for this project was the accessibility of the villages. We can now reach all seven villages easily. The large community development project also benefited. And this year, it was
very easy to choose the new villages, because we have already established a certain amount of trust.

I would also like to emphasize the education of the farmers. The farmers also learned a lot through their oral history, because the project made the farmers aware of their own problems. They have become more aware of the situation they are living in.

From my position, I was lucky, because when they tell the name of certain trees, it’s hard for me to describe this tree. So my role was to find out the trees’ scientific names. These names are in my translation. I wrote down the local names of the trees, and then I had the chance to do some research on my own, to discover the scientific names of these trees. This was a step forward for me, too.

That’s about all I have to tell you. I am very happy, because the research gave me the chance to find my roots.