

With the loss of native language fluency and use becoming critical in so many Indian communities today, more and more of the oral traditions are being presented by Indian storytellers in the English language. In addition, as these narratives are increasingly being shared before predominately white audiences, such as during educational conferences or in public school presentations, some native storytellers modify the story texts to accommodate the sensibilities as well as plot and character expectations of their white audiences. But a reoccurring criticism voiced by other elders of English-told stories is that, “the words have more meaning in the Indian language.” Certainly, the unique linguistic nuances, play on words, and contextual references that often energize stories with humor are typically lost when presented in English. The “creative power” of the native spoken word is also lost. Complicating the situation further is the growing reliance on previously published written texts as sources of revitalized oral presentations. Such texts are often subject to editorial revision before publication, typically deleting repetitive phrases, and omitting linguistic and oral performance nuances, for example, all of which contributes to the intended meaning of the oral traditions.

Nevertheless, even when told in English the narratives continue to be powerful teaching tools within many Indian families today, helping pass along family values and enhancing a sense of “Indian” identity. Essential lessons, characters, actions, and significances are retained. To listen to examples of English-told oral traditions, see the Internet project developed by the Coeur d’Alene Tribe of Idaho (Schitsu’umsh and Frey, 2002). In this capacity, the English-told narratives remain critical windows into the Indian experience, providing opportunities for ethnographic interpretation, as well as cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

References

- Schitsu’umsh (Coeur d’Alene Tribe) in collaboration with Rodney Frey: *Coeur d’Alene - Lifelong Learning Online*. (Coeur d’Alene Tribe, University of Idaho, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2002).
<http://www.L3-lewisandclark.org/Sites>ShowOneSite.asp?SiteID=50>