Mi’yep-Súmmesh – an example of Schitsu’umsh Epistemology

Subtitle: What’s in a Name? Lessons from the act of telling the stories of Rabbit and Jack Rabbit (originally told by Dorothy Nicodemus in 1927) and of a Healing Journey

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A. What is the source of knowledge, of Mi’yep – “Teachings,” and of Summesh – “Medicine”?  

While there are many ways to consider what is "knowledge" (what is knowable; an epistemology), one of the most essential forms of knowledge for the Schitsu’umsh is encapsulated in what is termed mi’yep and súmmesh. These essential epistemological attributes were established and handed down from time immemorial, originating with the Amotq̓n (the Creator) and manifesting themselves in the actions of the First Peoples, such as Coyote and Crane, Salmon and Chipmunk, and Rabbit and Jack Rabbit (also known as the Animal Peoples). It was they who created and “prepared the world for the coming of human peoples.” Through their adventures and sometimes misadventures, the First Peoples transformed the landscape, creating lakes, rivers, mountains and forests, providing camas here and pitch there, ridding the land of "man-eaters" and other monsters, and critically, embedding within the landscape the mi’yep – “teachings from all things,” in the lakes, rivers and mountains they traveled, as well as the very transformative power that brought the landscape into being, and that continues its vitality, súmmesh – “spiritual power.” In the mi’yep, these “teachings” inform what it means to be Schitsu’umsh, guide one in how to relate to other “peoples,” be they animal, human or spirit, and instruct in the skills necessary to survive in this landscape. In the súmmesh, or in English what is sometimes referred to as “medicine,” is the power to nurture and heal the body and soul of a person and of an entire landscape; it is the power of life itself. See Frey (2001:8-13,176-80, 261-62) for a discussion of some of these attributes.

This sort of knowledge is thus knowledge established from the very beginning, "since time immemorial," as "oral tradition." Knowledge is as a "trail," carved out of the landscape by the First Peoples, guiding humans to the best berry patches, hunting spots, and camas fields. Nevertheless, much of the trail remains a mystery, yet to be revealed. And when not well traveled, the trail can also be overgrown with brush and forgotten, only to be remembered with great effort and rediscovered. Knowledge is thus not something invented and brought forth anew through man’s curiosity, creativity or genius, expanding in an ever evolving fashion. All that is knowable is already embedded in the landscape. It is a mi’yep-súmmesh-endowed landscape. As you walk the lake’s shoreline and look out
upon the waters you are reminded of the teachings Coyote and the Rock brought into the lake. As you drive by Tekoa Mountain, the care and generosity shown by two brothers is reiterated. The camas, deer, mountains and lakes all have an inherent meaningfulness, intrinsically anchored to the actions of the First Peoples, the past creation time continued into the immediate landscape.

B. In what ways are the teachings disseminated and accessed?

The knowledge handed down from the First Peoples is conveyed and passed to generation-to-generation through a variety of ways. The most important ways revolve around sharing the oral traditions. What is considered “oral traditions” is in the storytelling of a grandmother, the songs performed by young and old, the regalia worn and dances around the family’s drum, the language spoken by the grandparents, and walking the trails to the berry patches to gather huckleberries with an auntie or to the hunting areas to find the deer with an uncle. What are the “oral traditions” are inclusive not only of stories, but of dances, art forms, social and ritual acts, as well as that itched in the landscape as rock outcroppings, river bends, buttes, and trees. As the Animal Peoples of the creation time are also the Animal Spirit Peoples of the surrounding mountains, lakes and prairies, mi’yep knowledge can also come during a fast from food and water while on a mountain summit. If the sacrifices made on the summit are worthy, an Animal Spirit, such as Bear, Eagle, or Wolf, might visit the vision quester and bestow a "gift." The young person will be instructed in mi’yep knowledge, as a song, a súmmesh, the voice of one's guardian spirit is bestowed.

Indeed, this expanded “landscape of oral traditions” is intricately embedded with the teachings. As Lawrence Aripa, a Coeur d’Alene elder, once commented, the stories he told are like "textbooks; you’re to learn from them.” Whether it is the oral traditions story, song, regalia or dance, all are like "texts," to be listened to and learned from. These are texts spoken and heard, worn and felt, and moved to the beat of song, texts that come to life. This is one reason why so many elders feel that books cannot effectively convey the knowledge that is most cherished and revered. The written word for so many elders is "dead, no longer alive."

To illustrate the dynamic nature within which oral traditions are engaged, let us briefly explore the art of storytelling. To do so, we’ll consider two interwoven elements in the re-telling the stories of the First Peoples. The first element addresses the techniques used to tell stories by raconteurs. Let me just mention a few techniques, including the extensive peppering of word deictics throughout the text of the narrative, i.e., words such as “here” and “there,” which tend to anchor the story to an identifiable landscape. Storytellers will also sometimes vary the inflection in his or her voice, repeat key phrases,
and use their body language and hand motions, all of which adds drama and tension to their telling, as well as highlights key themes. Some tellers will expect some sort of audience response, an acknowledgement of their participation in the story, such as a nod of the head, or a voiced “yes.” Should the responses cease, so too would the story, as the listeners must “no longer be in the story.”

One elder stated that the story is like a “canoe,” traveling the landscape of the Animal Peoples. The teller is certainly the one guiding the canoe, but it takes all the “listeners” to be in the canoe and to paddle, if the “story” is to make it up stream.

The second element considers the expressive qualities of orality, in contrast with a literacy-based media. We’ll briefly consider two implications of this media interface. With regard to the physiological experience of the media, with storytelling and orality, the listener engages in an auditory experience that involuntary unifies him or her in a transitory, evanescent process. What is experienced is an event. In contrast, as one is involved in the physiological experience of reading and literacy, the reader voluntarily engages objects on a page as if permanent representations. What is experienced is conceptualized as an object, given separated concreteness. And secondly, there are significant implications with regard to how orality and literacy elicits, organizes, stores, and communicates meaning. In orality, meaning is pervasively embedded in socially experiential situations. It is engaged in stories, ritual, dance, song, regalia, art, architecture, landscape, the narrative text of which are contextualized in interpersonal dynamics. A close look at the text of oral narratives reveals that the wording is rather terse, as there are not elaborate descriptions of a locale, or of even what Coyote looks like. And there is minimal use of function words such as prepositions and conjunctions, which can connect phrases and their ideas. In fact, personal pronouns in the language are indistinguishable. In all these instances, it takes an engaged listener, embedded within this context of spoken references, to complete the thought, to provide an image of Coyote, and render its gender. In contrast, literacy-based texts, as expressed in books or through a computer, tend to be formalized, decontextualizes the reader from the content of the written narrative; the imagery and descriptions are more fully presented, standing on their own, needing little contribution from the reader to render it meaningful. To summarize, orality tends to spawn a participatory, non-dualistic engagement in a reality that is understood as continually unfolding, as “becoming.” Literacy tends to render you as a subject, an estranged viewer of a reality fixed as an “object.”

Both the techniques of storytelling and the media of orality itself coalesce to attempt to transform “listeners” of the stories into “participants” within them. As Cliff SjJohn would say, “to run with the Coyote,” traveling the world of the First Peoples/Animal Peoples in the “canoe” of the
unfolding story. Appreciating the contrasting dynamics and implications of orality (a culture based in the oral tradition) and literacy (a culture based in the written word) is essential in this regard. See Frey (1995:141-147) for a discussion on these implications.

The mi’yep texts, in whatever form they are encountered, are thus experienced texts, engaged in an experiential, participatory manner. In reference to learning about his sacred traditions, one elder said, "you can’t stand on the outside, but must go into the sweat house and feel the fire of the rocks and water." As the intensity of the heat of a Sweat House ritual is felt, so too is the dance or story thoroughly and deeply engaged, undergone, and, indeed, felt.

One of the most important ways to undergo and engage a text is to actively "listen" to it. In the act of thoroughly listening to a grandmother tell of Coyote, the listener travels with the Coyote, swirling around with the First Peoples in the unfolding story. Similarly, this engaged listening characterizes how one should encounter the beat of a song, the movement of a dancer’s step and sway of his regalia, as well as the sounds of the wind in the forest and cry of the eagle. In all instances, the listener is re-united with the perennial, creation-time landscape now traveled, in an all-inclusive kinship, what is called chnis-teem-ilqwes - "I am part of all." You witness to the transformations brought about by Coyote and Salmon. Consider the Sweat House and Tin Shed metaphors offered by Cliff SiJohn and Alan Old Horn.

It is in this act of participating in these all-encompassing story texts that the teachings ingrained within them can be “discovered,” revealed to the listener, but only with great effort. As stated by the Inuit of the far north, “all true wisdom comes far from the dwellings of man, in the great solitudes.” To get to that mountain slop to ear the wind of the forest you have to do a little hiking. Picking the berries is only done with great effort. To engage the stories is to actively participate in the unfolding creation, to contribute and work at it. It is not a passive process. As such, knowing is less a matter of a "belief" in or "theory" about something, as it is living and experiencing it fully, with effort. See Frey (1995:147-154) and Frey (2001:191-199) for discussions on the techniques of storytellers that transform listeners into participants within the stories.

As a participatory process, each individual listener necessarily comes to learn what maybe unique to him or her. As a story is told and engaged, with its many layers of meaning, each listener would discover those teachings appropriate his or her own level of life’s experiences. Given that level of one’s maturation and accumulated experiences, his or her particular “carry-on luggage,” the appropriate doors within the story would open to discover what lay beyond. With the passage of a year and the acquisition of new experiences, upon rehearing the same story, new teachings could be revealed. A six-
year-old and a sixty-year-old well equally find the story meaningful, though likely is very distinct ways. With the trails in the story’s landscape well anchored and fixed, and intricately numerous, the teachings important for any given individual are revealed when that individual is ready to receive them. This is why Aesop-like moral endings are not typically voiced at the complication of a story. In doing so could impose a limited range of lessons offered in the story, precluding the many possible discoverers that await the many different listeners. Similarly, in ceremonial activities, such as the Sweat House and Jump Dance, the overlay of ritual procedures do not so much dictate what might be encountered, as facilitate the individual to the threshold of the spiritual landscape to witness and discover what lay beyond for him or herself. There is thus an idiosyncratic dimension to what is known, individualized to a certain extent for each person, relative and appropriate to the level each individual is ready to receive it. Such is an acknowledgment that each Schitsu’umsh is at a varied stage of his or her life’s maturation, and further, that there are many paths of life each can pursue over the Schitsu’umsh landscape.

C. What does it mean to “actively participate in the unfolding creation”: the foundational principles of Mi’yep-Sūmmesh Knowledge?

For the Schitsu’umsh, the creation-time transformations of Coyote and Salmon, and of Rabbit and Jackrabbit are not something of a bygone time and distant place, to be viewed as if from afar. In the act of retelling the stories of the First Peoples their transformations are rendered immediate. You witness and indeed travel with Rabbit and Jackrabbit as they bring camas and pitch to a mountain slop, and offer up a teaching. What was is, in fact, what is. In the act of engaging the oral traditions, there is no temporal and special distance, no separations, no distinctions between the creation time and place, and the present time and place. And critically, in this act of retelling, the landscape now traveled is revitalized and perpetuated; camas and pitch are restored to Tekoa Mountain, and a teaching renewed. One actively participates in and contributes to the unfolding transformation. To address these important understandings, let’s first consider a couple of foundational principles of Schitsu’umsh world view.

To better highlight these principles we’ll contrast what is often termed “heart knowledge,” with what is sometimes referred to as “head knowledge.” While both forms of knowledge are found and appreciated among the Schitsu’umsh, today the contrast is often used to differentiate the heart knowledge of Indigenous peoples from the head knowledge of Euro-Americans. Nevertheless, elements of both forms of knowing are appreciated and utilized in all cultures. Simply put, heart knowledge for
the Schitsu’umsh is anchored in the world of Coyote and Salmon, and of the Creator and the elders. This is knowledge spiritually felt, which holistically integrates one’s being with the world. In contrast, “head knowledge” is the world of analysis and the intellect, which compartmentalizes the parts of one’s being, distinct from the parts of the world. Within Euro-American society one finds head knowledge amply expressed in the social and natural sciences, in rationalism and empiricism, and in positivism and the scientific method.

First Principle: **Chnis-teem-ilqwes** - "I am part of all." The Schitsu’umsh conceive of **time as perennial** and **space as interwoven**. The landscape and all of its elements are ultimately indivisible, made of up interconnected “peoples” – be they animal, plant, water, rock, human. Each is a kinsman with the other, none discrete objects estranged from the other. A deer is a "brother" to the hunter, offering its flesh as food when shown respect. You are fundamentally a participant, existing as a part of the world, and not an observer, existing apart from the world. There is no dualism found here. Similarly, temporal elements are ultimately indivisible; what had occurred in the past, as with Rabbit and Jackrabbit, can re-occur again, and again, and again. The **mi’yep** and **súmmesh** have been firmly planted in the landscape to re-flower and re-nurture each season. Time is re-occurring, and not understood a lineal, with its past no longer accessible. As we will consider, in the act of storytelling, the creation time can be re-entered, traveled and made immediate. The Euro-American concept of "history," the marking of events on a time line from past to present, has little applicability for the Schitsu’umsh. Schitsu’umsh history began with the arrival of Lewis and Clark. The Ancestors are not far off, waiting in the hills across the waters of the lake and preparing the camp for the day the rest of their family will join them. See Frey (2001:257-262 and 297-298) for a discussion on the concepts of "time" and "history."

Second Principle: **Súmmesh** – “spiritual power,” or “medicine.” As an epistemological attribute this elusive concept for non-Schitsu’umsh needs further attention. Understood among other Indigenous peoples as well, **summesh** holds that what is most real is the spiritual transcendent. It is the spiritual force, the life itself, which emanates through and from all things, be it a person, an animal, a plant, the water, even a rock. As with the perennial significances and great archetypical meanings of the world, the **mi’yep**, it is from the spiritual realm that this transformative force bestows life onto that world, a world is precipitated. This transformative power is the dynamic energy that animates the web of interconnected kinsmen, and that can bring forth and manifest the **mi’yep** into people’s lives and the landscape.

In contrast to head knowledge, the Schitsu’umsh heart knowledge is a participatory epistemology. As expressed in head knowledge, there is no quantitative, materialistic reductionism, or
secularism found in heart knowing; it emanates from a non-Cartesian, non-objectified world view. For our purposes here, two head knowledge principles will be enunciated.

First Principle: **Duality**. This is the world of objectivity, an objectified world, as if we are standing behind a great glass pane, autonomous, independent and distinct from that which we observe on the other side, which is just as autonomous and distinct, operating by its own laws, laws those following in the footsteps of Isaac Newton seek to know. This is the world of Rene Descartes, of the “I-thought” and the “it-material” distinction, of “mind” and “matter,” neither reducible to the other, of Cartesian Dualism.

Second Principle: **Reductionism**. What is most real and true are the “objects” on the other side of the glass pane, the discrete phenomena, accessible through the five senses, the world of material objects, all of which are reducing to discrete, quantifiable, statistical units of measurement. As Galileo first stated, and scientists since then agreed with, “the language of nature is mathematics.” Such objects are devoid of sentimentalism and transcendent spiritualism. Reductionism consorts with secularism.

Head knowledge has facilitated the powerful ability to quantify, analyze, and manipulate the physical world, of creating technologies and the techniques of surgery, space flight and digital telecommunications, and of creating chemicals and chemotherapies that can treat cancers.

**D. So what's in a name spoken, a story told, a prayer recited, a ritual danced?**

When spoken in Schiitsu’umsh, language has the **power to animate** and bring to life that which is described. To sing the song of logs moving apart and then together causes logs to do move across the waters. When an Indian name is bestowed on a child the words of that name will help nurture the child into his or her name. I am reminded of this understanding in the Crow words, *diyawákaawik* and *dasshússuua*. One does not say good bye, but instead, *diyawákaawik*, “I’ll see you later.” To say “good bye” is too final, and may bring it about, *dasshússuua*. That which is spoken aloud has the power to affect the world, *dasshússuua*, literally meaning, “breaking with the mouth.” Hence the expression, “stories make the world.” As Cliff SíJohn relates, in the act of telling the stories, “[it is] the First People who come alive in the story . . and who can swirl around you . . as the Turtle is saying his thing or as the Chipmunk is saying something . . . when it comes through the heart and out the mouth . . . the power of the Animal People . . is still here . . . *all these things suddenly come alive . . .*” When the words of a story are woven with great care into the rich tapestry of a story, the story's words bring forth that story
into the world. Language is not simply descriptive of the world, it is creative of it. See Frey (1995:154-158) and Frey (2001:191-199) for discussions of this performative, creative force in language.

In the act of giving voice to and replicating Coyote’s story of the world, or of an Indian name, a family’s song, a prayer, and of doing so from the heart, from one’s diíkaashe, from the very core of your being, the door is opened and you dwell in the perennial landscape, connected to and participating with the Animal Peoples, the Creator, connected to and participating with the spiritually transformative power (báaxpée), as it flows out from the world and our selves, as well as onto the world and our lives.

Or re-stated, as all phenomena is spatially and temporarily interconnected, chnis-teem-ilqwes, and potentially endowed with súumesh, when through symbols/words/actions the stories of the Creator and Animal Peoples are properly brought forth, so too is their inherent transformative power. Hence, in the act of telling Coyote’s story, as in donning dance regalia or singing a song, the oral traditions also perpetuate the world, reinvigorating life and meaning into the landscape and all of its varied beings. The Creation time is traveled, a camas field nurtured, and an illness healed. Reality and the oral traditions are one and the same. “Stories make the world.”

E. How is the seemingly mutually exclusive integrated?

So we are faced with head knowledge and heart knowledge, . . . the assumptions of each representing seemingly two mutually exclusive ways of knowing, and, one might argue, they are much too divergent to attempt to reconcile?

Certainly Cliff SiJohn and Tom Yellowtail didn’t think so. I am reminded of a little story Tom shared with me so many years ago. He envisioned the world as a “Great Wagon Wheel,” like the structure of the Sundance Lodge, the pattern of its dancers, and the Medicine Wheel itself, he would point out. The spokes represent the separate paths to the center, the distinct religions and peoples of the world, each with their own ways, languages and traditions.

Nevertheless each spoke is of equal importance. The wheel would fail to turn if some spokes were longer than the others, or eliminated all together; all are needed if the wheel is to turn. Yet all the spokes are linked to the same hub, the same source, the Creator, though each spoke might conceive of it and address it distinctly. During their lives, Tom was both the Sundance Chief for his people, as well as a devout Baptist, while Susie danced alongside her husband and practiced biomedicine as a registered nurse. There can be found no Leon Festinger and his theory of cognitive dissonance found in the actions of Tom and Susie.
Head and heart ways of knowing, the external and internal paths of healing, chemotherapy and an Indian Name, all are complementary with one another. Perhaps Tom is offering us all a little lesson, as we attempt to reconcile the seemingly incompatible, the mutually exclusive, the irreconcilable, as we engage our communities, our families, our lives with so many others, . . . indeed, as we reconcile our healing paths.

F. What then is most real?

Following from the previous discussion and an appreciation of the act of storytelling, we can begin now to glimpse what is understood as “real,” a Schitsu’umsh ontology. Simply put, reality exists at each moment of participatory convergence of all those participating. It is that moment of convergence of the Animal and Spirit Peoples, the human peoples, and all of the landscape. This conjunctive event can be witnessed during a storytelling session, while dancing and singing at a Pow-wow, during a Sweat House or Jump Dance ceremony, and while gathering camas with an auntie, or fishing with a uncle. What is understood as “phenomena” or meaningful sense-datum are located in the symbolic construction that occurs as participants negotiate and intersect their experiences with one another.

The world is a subjective (all are intrinsically connected as a complex gestalt; as opposed to dualistically divided parts), transactional construction (in the act of interaction the world is created). Hence, what is “real” is the act of interaction, existing as a process, and not a finite, discrete object. Even in the act of looking out onto the world, you are a part of it, albeit engaged only this visual interaction with others; nevertheless, you are helping create meaningful phenomena, helping create the world. The Schitsu’umsh view humans as active agents, co-creators of their own constructed realities. They have an active role in the perpetuation of the up-folding creation. You cannot be a passive observer, per se.

I had a distinct illustration of this transactionally-negotiated, transitory reality upon driving back from the Crow Reservation many years ago. As I drove south on the Interstate that afternoon, I noticed a rainbow to my left. A rain shower had preceded my drive, the air still filled with its moisture. I then noticed that as I speed along, so too did the rainbow, in fact, at the same speed I drove. And then, when the terrain grew with a hill, the rainbow would near, but as the land flattened out, the rainbow would distance itself from me. It was my special rainbow that afternoon. Then I wondered if those driving south with me also saw what I saw? And what about those driving north, did they see my “special rainbow,” moving south as I drove south? And then I thought, would that “rainbow” even exist, if I didn’t?
Now consider what goes into creating the phenomena of a “rainbow,” or, for that matter, a storytelling, ritual dance, or gathering of camas? You might suggest a certain relationship with light, a certain interaction with water molecules in the air, and a certain physical as well as conceptual engagement with it all? Echoed by Owen Barfield (a British philosopher of language, who also spoke of the example of the “rainbow”) in his book, Saving the Appearance: a study in idolatry (1965), phenomena exists at that momentary construction of those participating in a given local at a given time; it is the “world made in the act of participating in it,” a continually unfolding process. For the Schitsu’umsh, reality is not concrete, discrete, quantifiable, measurable, absolute and materially based. It is not an objective and dualistic world, with autonomous and independent of its participants. And as reality is contextually-based, relative in time and locale to the participating actors, anchored only by consistency of the perennial mi’yepp teachings and summesh animation, the Schitsu’umsh landscape is multifaceted. As exemplified in storytelling, while framed by the mi’yepp teachings, constructed moment will differ in meaning between each participant, given his or her particular entry point and carry-on luggage brought to the story’s landscape. Those engaged within it are participating in a “relativist ontology” – a landscape with multiple realities. Thus, in the act of telling the story, the teller and listener participants travel the landscape with Coyote, Rabbit and Jackrabbit. This engagement is what is most real. Stories don’t attempt to “suspend disbelief” about what is real in order to take you to another world; they create it.

This notion that there is no world accessible outside that which is constructed by the interaction of those participating has critical implications for those wishing to study it. There is no fixed “targets” out there upon which the objective social scientists can attach his or her research, without also acknowledging their role in co-creating that which is observed.

G. What is the most important implication in gaining Mi’yepp-Summesh Knowledge?

As a participatory process, in the act of re-telling the stories and re-singing the songs, something is "given back." Each time you run with the Coyote as the Rock Monster chases you, the landscape traveled is revitalized and rendered meaningful. When the storytelling ends, the story continues. The "blue of the lake" is perpetuated and the teaching - "to help those in need" - is reinvested back into the world. When the summesh songs are sung each winter, the spring rains will nurture, and the camas and deer will be plentiful. In re-singing the songs of the First Peoples and re-telling the creation stories of the lakes and mountains, the deer, camas, and humans, and of the relationships between them all, the landscape that is subsequently traveled is revitalized with meaning and animation. Hence the
expression, "stories make the world." It is a great responsibility shouldered by grandmother and grandchild as they bring voice to story and song. See Frey (2001:199-204 and 257-262) for a discussion on how the world is perpetuated through narrative and ritual actions.

What is this book (*Landscape Traveled by Coyote and Crane*)? What does it represent and how is it like a Coeur d’Alene storytelling?

A few sources:


