



Seliš ontological perspectives of environmental sustainability from oral traditions

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Seliš [Salish] oral stories engage with deep time and hold potential to stimulate hierophanies that establish connection between humanness and nature. Creation stories are integral to the establishment of values and sacredness and how the 'sacred' should be treated. Oral traditions are fallen out of use threatening ontological teachings of the Seliš people, a Native American tribal group. Five Seliš creation stories are examined to establish the ontology that animals offer as reflection of a reality that the environment and Seliš people are intertwined in all aspect of life. This analysis also dispels Eurocentric stereotyping of Native American oral stories, establishing that the animals in these stories are much like humans of today, exhibiting failings, vices and defects.

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Introduction

The reality of life for the Seliš tribe of Northwestern Montana emanate from a complicated historical past shaped by US Federal Indian policy from the 1800's to present [1,2] and a complex and intricate ancient origin [3]. Events born from contact with outside influences have reshaped and realigned many of the ancient lifeways and philosophies of the Seliš. However, enduring are the core truths and values that have guided our people from time immemorial within the natural landscape.

Paramount to this is a maintenance of the connection with the landscape as a pivotal means of survival [4].

Landscape connection and the responsibility to sustain this link spiritually and pragmatically are captured and propagated in oral traditions [5]. Today, the pressures of assimilation and a disruption of the tribal socio-economic system have altered the usage of oral traditions of the Seliš. The demonstration of values toward the natural world in oral traditions have been subjugated resulting in a progression toward the 'othering' of nature [6,7]. A pathway to regaining and situating the oral traditions back into the lifeway of the Seliš tribes is advocated through an examination of the historical text to elucidate ontological meaning and the shaping of a Seliš environmental ethic.

The importance of this is highlighted in Seliš philosophical tradition and ecological knowledge found in the oral traditions in the form of creation stories. These oral traditions act as a living store of knowledge that document and perpetuate the ontology of a people [4,8,9,10]. Saxena *et al.* [11] identify that landscape and the environment are recognized as many different forms of entanglement with humans that shape our reality. Moreover, creation stories describe intimate relationships shared between the living and that which is considered other than human [12]. Specifically, Seliš creation stories embody an environmental ontological perspective that describe an intimate connection with a vast and fluid aboriginal territory [13]. Examples of these entanglements include seasonal food quests, spiritual/ritual observances and familial relationships. These are some important forms and processes that shape the ontological environmental framework and develop the belief that landscape is inseparable from all considerations.

This ontological environmental framework can be found in spiritual and ceremonial observances that pay respect toward and ensured future good fortune in securing food and other items. An example is the *Snq'eymncu't* that was observed when the first roots became available to harvest in early spring. This ceremonialism offered an opportunity to welcome back certain food plants similar to greeting a friend that has been on an extended leave. The ceremonial act was a chance to hold a mutually beneficial relationship in high regard to ensure the friendship did not deteriorate. This view is held by many other indigenous groups as a means show mutual respect toward food items in their environment [14,15]. The connection between the land, plants, animals and humans are demonstrated by these ceremonial actions and demonstrated through the responsibility to maintain them.

Today, the foundation of environmental ontology of the Seliš are still present, layered in the descriptions and processes found in creation stories where landscape is considered in all aspects of reality. Appropriately, many recognize that the return of oral traditions broadly can aid in societies valuing of nature [16^{*},17,18^{**}]. Similarly, many environmental disciplines have advocated for a return of other traditional forms of knowledge to the landscape including fire [19–21], hydrology [22–24] and soil [25–27]. Increasing the frequency and understanding of oral traditions across the social structure has implication toward sustainability and valuing of nature similar to the return of other traditional ecological knowledge to the landscape.

Seliš creation stories

In the 1850's the earliest oral traditions from the Seliš tribe were documented. Mengarini, Jesuit missionary, recorded in his memoirs the belief and reverence toward the Sun and the animals as powerful and favorable toward humankind. Mengarini in Clark [28] noted that “. . . the world was in perfect darkness, there being no sun; and the people [animals] being persuaded that the only cause of their wickedness was their darkness, they held a general council for the purpose of enlightening the world . . .”. As the story continues a number of animals attempted to enlighten the world yet each fail, not providing the ideal condition, some created too much heat, other too little, some provided daylight that did not last long enough or their light was too dim. Finally, the creator of all things, *Amotqn*, sent his son, *Spqni?*, to provide light to the world. Further, Mengarini connects this creation story with a belief and practice explaining that, “The worship which our Indians rendered to the Sun consisted in raising up towards it a morsel of meat or roots, before eating them, and saying: ‘Sun, have pity on us, so that animals and fruits may grow abundantly’” [28].

Continuing, in 1884, Hoffman, an ethnographer, documented six stories titled; Coyote and the Mud Hen, How the Lynx got a broad face, How the Rabbit had a cut lip, The Coyote and the Fish, The Coyote and his neighbors, and The Salmon and the Wolf [29]. In the story, Coyote and Mud Hen, Coyote is hungry so he tries to sneak up on a group of waterfowl by camouflaging himself with leaves. The Swan see him and asks what is on his back. Coyote confidently lies, indicating that the leaves are his songs. Swan questions him further asking him to sing his songs for them. Coyote agrees and invites them all to his tipi to hear him sing. A number of waterfowl begin to travel to Coyote's tipi. Meanwhile, Coyote quickly sets up his tipi, starts a fire and proceed to cover all escape holes with the intent of killing the flock. When the waterfowl arrive, he begins to sing and the congregation start to dance. Coyote then puts the fire out inside the tipi explaining that he didn't want anyone to injure themselves stepping on hot coals. In the darkness he proceeds to grab and kill

birds as they pass him. He continues this pattern until Duck get curious and notice less of them dancing and singing. Coyote then rebuilds the fire again to catch the last of the waterfowl. Once the fire is glowing again the remaining waterfowl see a pile of their murdered companions. They make a run for the door with Mud Hen trailing at the end. Coyote kicks Mud Hen in the legs as it runs through the door. This results in the Mud Hen having awkwardly protruding legs.

In this short story the reason for the characteristic shape of the Mud Hens legs are described yet the story also exemplifies an important value and relationship. Specifically, Coyote is dishonest and cruel as he deceives the waterfowl. His dishonesty and greed are inspired by his hunger and establishes that waterfowl are easily fooled and can provide an easy source of food.

In a contrary instance, Coyote is living with his wife and five sons a great distance from any other inhabitation. He decides to take his youngest son to visit some of his nearest neighbors. He arrives at Elk's home and finds it empty. Coyote begins to complain that he is tired and hungry from the long walk. Soon, Elk arrives home and customarily offers to feed Coyote and his son. Elk grabs a sharp stick and proceeds to tear and dig into his own hip to produce camas roots. Coyote scoffs at the notion of eating the food as he perceives it as Elks own dung. Elk convinces him that it is not dung but camas roots. Coyote agrees to try it and finds it very good and proceeds to eat until he his full. Coyote then prepares to depart and invites Elk and his youngest son to visit his home the following day. When Elk arrives with his young son, Coyote customarily welcomes them and offers feed them. Coyote grabs a sharp stick and begins to tear at his flesh just as Elk had did the day before. Elk observes Coyote for a time and finally puts a stop to Coyotes painful attempts to mimic his him. Elk explains that this method is his way to procure food and no one else ought to try to copy him. Elk then offers to produce the camas root and Coyote explains smugly that this was his intention all along. This patter is repeated on his visit to the homes of Bear home. On this visit, Bear slices a piece of meat from his wife's hip and subsequently when Bear visits Coyote he takes a knife and severely cuts up his wife in an attempt to feed his visitor. On his final visit, he goes to Kingfishers home and is fed fish that he catches as he dives through a hole in the ice. In the case, before Kingfisher arrived Coyote fixed his and his sons' hair in the same manner as Kingfisher because he longed to look like him. When Kingfisher arrived, he attempts to dive into the river that has been froze over without first breaking a hole in the ice. Consequently, he continued to injure himself in this process. Each time Coyote attempted to mimic his visitor's manner and custom of producing food he failed and hurt himself or his wife. Each time, his visitor intervened to stop Coyotes antics

and thus produced food for Coyote in the same manner as they had when he was visiting them. Also, they each explained to Coyote that this was their unique manner and custom and that Coyote should not attempt it as he was not proficient in its use. In the end, Coyote stopped trying to copy his neighbor's method and returned to his own manner and custom.

This story demonstrates an important concept relating to the origin and value of important food products. The origin of camas, one of the main vegetables for the Seliš, from the flesh of Elk indicate that camas and meat may be symbiotically related. Camas is an important food for Elk and also a cultural keystone species for many Native American tribes [30–32]. The importance of camas to both human and elk lead one to believe that each must be valued equally where one cannot exist without the other. To this extent, the Seliš, in ancient times, performed a camas dance similar in nature to the *Snq'eymncu't* to welcome back the camas root in June.

Continuing, Coyote again demonstrates undesirable values that lead to negative consequences for himself. Specifically, Coyote demonstrates a yearning to have the gifts and characteristics that he sees in others. His desire is so great that he risks injury and death of himself and his wife. His disingenuousness and vanity are blatant yet Coyote maintains a tradition where one must always accommodate visitors by the offering of food. This tradition is important as is the reciprocal act by the recipient.

Next, in a longer story, Salmon along with Wolf and his brothers compete for Mountain Lion's daughter. Mountain Lions, already tired from rejecting a long line of suitors proclaims that the one who can break his elk horns will marry his daughter. Each of the Wolves try to break the elk horn without success. Salmon tried and broke the horn and then married Mountain Lion's daughter. Before he could leave with his wife, Wolf and his brother become angry and started to battle Salmon. They battled for days while Salmon slowly backed toward a river. Rattlesnake was on the opposite side of the river and decided to help Wolf whom was his cousin. Rattlesnake shot Salmon in the neck with his arrow. Then Wolf took Salmons wife and left. Some other fish threw water on Salmon and he was able to stay alive and make his way into the river. He went down the river to live with Fish Hawk who healed him. After a year's time, Salmon asked Fish Hawk if he sees Wolf and his wife when he is flying around. Fish Hawk told Salmon that he does see him and that he is a great hunter. Salmon takes Rattlesnakes arrow and leaves to find Wolf but first he visits Rattlesnake. Salmon hears Rattlesnake singing about how he killed the powerful Salmon and helped his relative the Wolf. Salmon approached and when Rattlesnake seen him, he acted as if he was mourning the death of Salmon. Salmon asks Rattlesnake if the arrow he has belongs to him.

Rattlesnake says yes but explains that he dropped it while hunting ducks. Salmon then burns him to death by lighting Rattlesnake's grass lodge on fire. Salmon then proclaimed that from then on Rattlesnake would not bite anyone and when seen that he should be kill. He then locates the Wolf brothers and with the help of Louse and Flea, tricking them to enter a tipi one at a time. Each time one entered he killed them. The last Wolf to enter his tipi was sliced in half. Because the last Wolf was powerful, he did not die but escaped in the smoke that was rising out the top of the tipi.

In this example, the animals demonstrate confrontational relationships as they fight for Mountain Lions daughter. An understanding that nature and the environment face conflict for resources are apparent and also common in intertribal relations. Also demonstrated are alliances where Fish Hawk helped Salmon and Rattlesnake helped the Wolves. Alliances are demonstrated as an important part of survival on the landscape. The most prominent part of the story are conflict and murder brought on by jealousy and revenge. The story also characterizes how Rattlesnake will be viewed in future interaction with other animals and humans. These realities form the belief that within our natural world we will be required to engage in conflict and form alliances with the environment.

From 1899–1900, McDermott collected 38 creation stories from the Seliš [33]. The stories present an assortment of animal relationships and interactions. In one story Coyote tracks a deer that he and his wife failed to capture and shoot. As he continues to pursue the deer his snowshoes become heavy. He notices that mice are attached to them and proceeds to shake them off. This happens a second time and the pattern is repeated, however this time she shakes them off and kills them all. He then divided the mice into two piles, one with five mice for his children and his wife and the remainder, a larger portion, for himself. Once his wife and children arrived she notices the disparity in the division of food. She gets angry and leaves with their daughter while leaving their son with Coyote. Coyote and his son proceed to eat and then continue to track the deer. Soon, Coyote becomes distracted by sliding down a large snowy hill. His son begins to cry and become increasingly cold. Coyote thinks his son is laughing so he continues to slide down the hill. Then the crying stops and Coyote finds that his son has frozen to death. Coyote buries his son and continues about his business without any consternation. Here and among other Tribes, Coyote is generally central to the display of undesirable traits such as deception, murder, jealousy, carelessness and greed [34].

The previous story is an example of undesirable behaviors; however, some stories demonstrate sources of good behaviors and fortune. In this story, a man and his family

are having poor luck in securing food. Upon returning home at night from an unsuccessful hunt, the man hears his children crying from hunger while his wife ensures them that their father will return with food. He hears this and returns to the forest to continue hunting. During his hunt he can hear the animals whistling so he decides to play dead. All the animals lay their bow and arrows down and began to approach the hunter to check on him. Then the hunter hollers, fearing they will kill him. The animals all scatter leaving behind their weapons. The man then collects the weapons that the animals dropped as they ran away and waits. Soon the animals return and ask for their weapons back. The man refused unless they pay him. The animals all agree and instruct Wolf to pay him. Wolf gives the man an arrow that he says will never miss its target either day or night. From then on, the man always had plenty of food for his family.

This example offers a glimpse into a transitional period where humans first begin to appear on the earth alongside animals [35]. This period marked a time where humans and animal spoke the same language. During this time animals also imbued humans with certain values and skills to live in a world they had already become accustomed to. In addition, the interaction of animals and landscape had directly and indirectly provided tangible products such as tools, food, medicine and fire. These become important because the animals stop talking and interacting with humans, leaving them to their own domain on the earth, a theme that is common in Indigenous communities in the North and South Americas [35,36,37*,38].

Ontology and oral traditions

The body of documented creation stories is vast. However, the transmission of the body of knowledge from these stories has waned in the past two decades. While many of these stories have fallen out of use their teachings have been transmitted in the lifeways of the Seliš people. For example, there remains a deep understanding that these stories are only told in the deep winter [3,12,13]. This tradition remains strong as a show of respect to the animals. The understanding that the stories are filled with embarrassing narrative and unbecoming deeds guide the rule that the stories are only told in the deep winter, when many animals are hibernating and cannot hear their past transgressions. Additionally, most storytelling occurs at night in the deep winter for a similar reason, to respect the dignity of animals that are not hibernating but asleep. This deeply held respect is reflected in the understanding that animals and nature are a source of power that humans can access [39]. For example, young people were sent to a remote location in the wilderness to seek spiritual guidance and power [40]. The spiritual guide often manifested itself in the form of an animal that shares with the young person a spiritual gift to acts as a guide for the remainder of their lives. These gifts connect human

relationships with nature that goes beyond the physical realm.

The brief sample of Seliš creation stories presented here tell of a reality shaped by relationships between animals and the land. These stories provide a look back into deep time to understand that which bounds life and living. These creations stories are similar to touching physical archeological material (e.g. artifacts) that provide an enchantment effect into the present and thereby create what Fredenberg [41] calls a deep-time hierophany, or a manifestation of the sacred in the present [42*]. Consequently, stories give prominence and sacredness to natural phenomenon, such as the existence of the Sun as the offspring of the creator of all life. As such, the Sun and all thing that give life are recognized daily through prayer and offerings of material items but also during ceremonialism such as the Seliš *Snq̓'eymmncu't*. Similarly, food items, sourced from plants and animals, are regarded equally as life givers and companionship are offered to ensure a lasting mutual friendship.

Overall, the stories of the relationship between the animals offer a look into a mirror, reflecting a reality that the environment and Seliš people are intertwined in all aspect, good and bad including the murderous, deceitfulness and harshness of our environment. The stories are not meant to conjure a romantic view of a life in harmony with nature but a practical and realistic look. Yakar [43**], in her examination of Turkish human and nature relationships, recognized that living in harmony with nature is at the core of a nomadic lifestyle. She acknowledges that for Turks, the idea of living in harmony is "shaping life according to nature, struggling with the mercilessness of nature to survive [making these] the main elements that determine the character of the society in general [43**]."

Oral traditions and environmental sustainability

Eurocentric views of Indigenous thought concerning nature can be misleading. The idea that Indigenous people are not agents of competition and control over nature while maintaining a harmonious relationship is often referenced [44,45]. This simplified and idealized relationship between humans and nature is not exemplified directly in the oral narrative presented here. The listener of these stories can see that the animals were much like the humans of today, exhibiting failings, vices and defects. Other tribal groups share a similar understanding, acknowledging that the oral stories situated in their past context highlight violence, murder and rape [46].

While a Eurocentric version of these stories could highlight the heroic nature of Coyote, his folly are much more pronounced. The understanding in the stories are not

direct lessons to guide one's life, but rather an allegory of the realities of nature, a landscape full of danger and potential unpredictability. They reflect how one must consider all the realities of nature with the thought that in order to live sustainably one must recognize that humanness and natural order are one in the same. This, as a guide, allows nature and the environment to be seen like our own human to human relationships. In 1882, Seliš War Chief Arlee, one of the last War Chief of the Seliš, embodies this thought when he was negotiating payment for land that was to be used for the Northern Pacific Railroad. He said;

Yes, we are all good Indians, and we have a nice country, and I don't wish the Great Father should bother us by a big railroad through the reservation. When we heard of your coming we made up our minds what to say to you, and I said it to you yesterday. You seem to like your money, and we like our country; it is like our parents [47].

Equating the land to parents establishes realistic harmony and sustainability concept that Yarak [43**] recognized in Turkish cultures where "A person with a harmonious and balanced relationship with nature will keep the same balance in his or her family and in society."

Concluding thoughts

Traditional Seliš creation stories allow a listener to engage with deep time and potentially elicit hierophanies when viewing the totality of humanness and nature similar to those described in Fredengren [26]. The development of sacredness in this manner strengthens the need for an understanding of behaviors, relationships and powers or gifts emanating from the landscape. Reaching into the past through creation stories give us a chance to view the origins of our own being and accordingly assign our relationships with it. Creation stories, as an integral form of transmission of knowledge, help us establish value and sacredness and how the 'sacred' should be treated. Furthering these understandings resituates the idea of harmony from a Seliš perspective.

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Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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