

## Meaningful engagement and oral histories of the indigenous peoples of the north

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the question of what constitutes endemic evaluation, genuine success and engagement of Indigenous peoples and their communal oral histories. The materials discussed are derived from a range of oral history processes in the boreal and in the Arctic. Having long been an elusive and marginalized method of conveying cultural knowledge, oral history is enjoying emerging recognition in assessments of biodiversity, natural resources and climate change. As early as the 1970s, the Mackenzie Pipeline Inquiry utilized the oral histories of the Inuvialuit, Dene and Gwich'in. The 1997 Supreme Court Decision *Delgamuukw* validated Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations' oral histories as sound evidence in courts on matters of Indigenous history. This paper reviews experiences from the authors of the Mackenzie Pipeline Inquiry and the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations in a post-*Delgamuukw* era, to determine key aspects of oral history work. Additional examples of the uses of communal oral histories in environmental research, and their transferability, emerge from Canada, Finland and Sweden. At its best, oral history does what it is supposed to do – makes invisible histories visible. Such new readings of Indigenous landscapes are urgently needed to understand rapid changes currently underway in the North.

**Keywords:** Oral History, Delgamuukw, Canadian Arctic, Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, Sámi, Indigenous knowledge

### Introduction

This paper explores formality, meaning and success in the field of traditional knowledge and the oral histories of northern Indigenous communities. Natural resources, conservation and Indigenous issues have been bound-up with questions of the power and validation of mainstream histories for centuries (Smith 2005). Productions of reality, resting on power narratives of land and history, constituted a central colonial practice.

The rise and establishment of the scientific method and means of analysis

led to other knowledge traditions, such as Indigenous and traditional knowledge, being dismissed for a long time (Berkes 1999). Those human societies that rely upon, and still live in close proximity with, the ecosystems that surround them, were particularly affected. In the past thirty years IK (Indigenous Knowledge) and TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge), concepts often used interchangeably depending on the context, have entered the forums of conservation, natural resources management, climate and biodiversity assessments (Huntington 2011), seemingly alleviating this situation and past grievances.

This diversity, dialogue and expansion of traditional knowledge has mostly been propelled by academic reflections. Cruikshank (2005) amongst others has connected this awakening with the realisation that there is a gap in *how* the communities involved in the work constitute these knowledges themselves.

Given the academic recognition of traditional knowledge, we can also ask: what constitutes success in this field? Is the academic structuring of traditional knowledge providing *expected/convenient/compatible* narrations of said knowledges at the cost of real, often *under-discovered* and Indigenous-authored positions?

Cruikshank (2005) writes that the academic views on traditional knowledge have often focused on natural resource management-focused implementations. She (2005) argues that in order for us to be able to learn anything from narrative recollections and memories from history, tradition and life experience, which represent distinct and powerful bodies of traditional/local knowledge, they have to be appreciated in their totality rather than being fragmented into data.

Cruikshank (*ibid.*) criticizes management-driven studies of traditional knowledge and environmental parables, accusing them of often being unable to tap into the range of human engagements with nature – the diverse beliefs, practices, knowledge and everyday histories of nature that might expand the crisis-ridden focus of environmental politics.

Further, Cruikshank (2005) makes the important point that management-driven studies of traditional knowledge

often organise their data to support singular arguments that conform to environmentalists' primary concerns about animals, plants and ecosystems, ignoring what does not fit.

Cruikshank writes:

*“What looks similar on the surface often turns out to have different meanings and different aims. Codified as TEK, and engulfed by frameworks of North American management science, local knowledge shifts its shape. Sentient and social spaces are thus transformed to measurable commodities called ‘lands’ and ‘resources’. Indigenous peoples then face double exclusion, initially by colonial processes that expropriate land, and ultimately by neo-colonial discourses that appropriate and reformulate their ideas.”*

Arising from this double exclusion, this paper explores the definitions, dimensions and aspects of traditional knowledge cases that have constituted a *genuine success*, as understood within Western society and partially outside its reach. This exploration will be achieved by reviewing the case of the Delgamuukw Canadian Supreme Court Ruling from 1997 and its impact on the narratives of oral history.

*Success* in a legal recognition is then positioned into a critical dialogue using two qualitative narratives – one from the member of the involved Indigenous nation (Ardythe Wilson) another to a critical prism of one of the leading legal scholars of Canada on Indigenous rights, Justice Thomas Berger. In the process the paper explores elements of what constitutes *genuine engagement* (Cram 2018) in the context of Indigenous and traditional knowledge

work as defined and evaluated by the knowledge holders themselves.

The paper assumes, following the review and fieldwork associated in the field, that *genuine success* can be detected from and through carefully selected experiences and the evaluation of practitioners and Indigenous knowledge holders (Kii'iljuus & Harris 2005, 122–123; Cram 2018), who have been a part of or who have established mechanisms to work with oral histories. The analytical core of such *genuine success*, it is argued, rests on the communal uses of oral histories that are guided by the keepers of a culture and sanctioned by the Indigenous governance processes (Kii'iljuus & Harris 2005, 122–123) of a given community.

Success should also be defined as political, research or social process that can fully include the outcomes of a genuine engagement with Indigenous peoples and their histories, equity issues and grievances. Otherwise the damages may persist as Talaga (2017) points out.

Thirdly, criteria for success and elements and divergence are reviewed in critical relation to decade-long community-based monitoring (Berkes 1999; Mustonen & Syrjämäki 2013) and oral history work in Jokkmokk, central Swedish Sámi area.

## Data and Methods

The initial case materials for the paper arise from the Canadian Supreme Court of Canada's *Delgamuukw* decision from 1997, and its relevance to oral history research. The ground-breaking legal document is then discussed in the context of a critical exchange between an Indigenous Gitxsan

and Wet'suwet'en First Nations participant in the court case, and an outsider, Justice, who both contributed to the legal frame in which the *Delgamuukw* decision emerged, and who has been following the use of oral histories in the Canadian legal context for over 50 years. This critical exchange constitutes an Indigenous evaluation (Cram 2018) of the outcomes and following emergence of new realities in the post-*Delgamuukw* context.

Materials for the last part of the paper then reflect on the use of communal and individual oral histories from the Sámi of Jokkmokk, Sweden, where a decade-long monitoring project collected traditional knowledge in order to document biodiversity and climate change impacts (Mustonen & Syrjämäki 2013).

The paper's methodological approach consists of an analysis of relevant literature, narratives discourses and policies from the *Delgamuukw* case, as well as field experiences from Northern Sweden relating to the applicability of oral history work outside the Canadian Indigenous context. Using such cases as a method (Huntington 2011) is justified when the aim of research is to explore similar international issues under a unified paradigm of Indigenous knowledge and evaluation (Cram 2018). Space does not allow for an extended research review. This will be left for the future.

The materials chosen and literature used here position the oral history and traditional knowledge work discussed under scrutiny for *genuine success* (or *failure*) and *genuine engagement* (or lack of). Genuine here refers to a context-related value where the members of a marginalised Indigenous

representatives provide the measure of success (Cram 2018), as opposed to a success defined from a mainstream position (i.e. that of courts, universities and wider society). This follows the recent emergence of ‘Indigenous evaluation’, where Indigenous communities themselves have successfully established their own criteria and measurements for the evaluation of success (see more for example Cram 2018; Mustonen & Feodoroff 2018).

## Building the Frame for Success in Canada: Case of the Mackenzie Pipeline

In the 1970s, Justice Thomas Berger led a globally-known Commission on the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline. The Canada Government at the time asked Justice Berger to assess the feasibility of constructing an oil and gas pipeline from the Northwest Territories down to Southern Canada (Berger 1977).

During the work of the Commission, which took several years, Justice Berger listened to and included the oral histories and traditional knowledge statements of the local Inuvialuit, Dene and Gwich'in peoples in the Commission's work. 40 years later, Berger (2017) reflected on the process:

*“When I wrote my report in 1977 the proposed pipeline of course was one that originated in Alaska in the Prudhoe Bay gasfield. In my report there were two major recommendations: one was that to protect the Porcupine caribou herd calving grounds from, from (sic) from the Yukon, the Arctic coast of the Yukon into Alaska there had to be*

*wilderness parks established in the Canadian side and the American side. I recommended there should never be a pipeline across the Arctic coast of the Yukon. The second thing that I recommended was that there could be a pipeline built from the Mackenzie delta south to Alberta and I indicated the route but that it should not be built until the land claims have been settled (sic).”*

The Commission on the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline thus arrived at a stunning recommendation for the time, one that the government subsequently followed – no pipeline should be built before the land claims of the Indigenous peoples of the area were settled. This decision is still in its own class globally in terms of how megaprojects and large-scale infrastructure initiatives can be assessed with deep quality and with the inclusion of the oral histories of the Indigenous peoples themselves.

What was the method that allowed Justice Berger to authenticate and understand the elusive, often hidden, oral histories of the Indigenous peoples of the region?

In March 2017, Justice Berger stated:

*I visited the fishing camps, I visited in the Inuvialuit area, their hunting camps where they had been hunting the belugas and drying them. And I visited camps where caribou meat was being dried and in Old Crow people took me out to the grounds where they caught the muskrat, so I found that and I said so in my report that this traditional economy deserved support.” (Berger 2017)*

The Berger Commission (1977) established important international standards of *success* that can be defined as a *genuine engagement* (Cram 2018)

with the Indigenous peoples involved. Methodologically, as described by Berger (2017), the success of this approach can be attributed to:

- Having enough resources and time to learn from and listen to the mostly *oral histories* of the affected Indigenous peoples;
- Developing critical reflections on the value of traditional knowledge, oral histories and Indigenous land uses in relation to modern society and its plans for the use of natural resources;
- Assessing the cultural values of the Indigenous peoples involved, and locations of significance to them, i.e. fish camps, hunting territories, remote on-land sites;
- Asking critically whether the oral histories and testimony of Indigenous peoples are being truly *understood*, rather than simply being included as a formality in the ‘expected’, normative process of a hearing.

Central to the grievances of the Indigenous peoples was the importance of settling their outstanding rights to the waters and lands under discussion, and recognition of their traditional knowledge. From today’s perspective, their contributions would constitute an Indigenous evaluation (Cram 2018) identifying the indicators of genuine success of such a hearing process. Berger (1977) followed this Indigenous assessment and its associated deductions, arriving at a policy recommendation supporting the land claim settlement. This subsequently opened the doors for wider progress on Indigenous rights in Canada.

## Emerging Traditional / Indigenous Knowledge

The role of indigenous and traditional knowledge in its diversities has been increasingly recognized globally in the context of biodiversity and climate change studies (Berkes 1999; Arctic Council 2013; Danielsen 2010; Huntington 2011; Johnson *et al.* 2015) over the past two decades. Many, albeit not all, of the features of today’s context of Indigenous knowledge build on the work done by Berger (1977) as part of the Mackenzie Pipeline Inquiry.

For example, in the 2010s, various UN and international forums have called for the fulfilment of Indigenous participation in governance. The recent Indigenous Heritage 2017 Conference in Helsinki, Finland, recommended that governments, businesses, academics and other stakeholders should:

*“16. Include indigenous peoples’ views and fully respect FPIC principle, at all stages of nominating world heritage sites and intangible heritage objects.*

...

*18. Support and encourage indigenous peoples’ initiatives to establish their own governance structures for their cultural heritage and sacred landscapes.”*

*(Indigenous Heritage 2017 Conference Statement 2017)*

These “sacred landscapes” coincide with biodiversity hotspots in many parts of the globe.

The inclusion of indigenous and traditional knowledge in biodiversity and

climate change assessments and research has placed the oral histories of these peoples at the forefront of this work (Macdonald 2000). For example the Expert Workshop on Climate Change Mitigation Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples held in Cairns, Australia, in 2012, included this statement:

*“The importance of oral history as a valid source of information for the IPCC....oral histories and testimonies should be a clear third mechanism of knowledge for the IPCC 6th and 7th AR but noted that this should be done with community validation and recognition.”* (Ramos & McLean 2012: 56)

The recent 9<sup>th</sup> International Arctic Social Sciences Conference in Umeå, Sweden, produced a Declaration on Indigenous Knowledge, that concludes: *“(as an action there is a need to), investigate methods that position Indigenous communal oral histories as being of equal value to peer-reviewed science in Arctic studies.”* (ICASS 2017)

## Oral Histories as Sources of Information

Globally, Indigenous societies, while sustaining immense defeats and damages to their knowledge and senses of the world in the past 200-300 years, remain story-telling cultures. As celebrated Nigerian author Chinua Achebe discusses in his novel *Things Fall Apart*, the transition from oral, spoken systems of interaction with the world into written forms is often a violent, imposed process. We should therefore acknowledge from the start that the documented versions

of oral histories are removed from their multi-dimensional cultural context and where the situated transfer of cultural significance takes place.

Communal oral histories (Mustonen 2013) combat the problems of equity identified by Achebe. They allow the affected Indigenous group or a community to define *genuine engagement* for themselves using Indigenous evaluation (Cram 2018). This measured approach also allows for internal checks and balances that govern how a given oral history or traditional knowledge is sourced.

A brief excursion into the literature offers evidence of a diversity of successful oral history work done over the past 20 years. Macdonald (2000), a long-time scholar of the oral histories of the Inuit of Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada, has remarked: *“Inuit traditional knowledge is characteristically personal, its acquisition and application, in varying degrees, specific to communities, families and individuals.”* His views are guided by a coordinated effort, spanning over 30 years, to document Inuit knowledge in one community, Igloolik in Nunavut. Macdonald (2000) provides us with a rare window into long-running community monitoring and oral history work.

Another example of extensive work was conducted by McDonald *et al.* (1997) who documented observations of the Inuit and Cree People in the Hudson Bay eco-region in the 1990s. Their observations regarding aquatic ecosystems, and especially inter-linkages between and across species, upstream habitats and fish, are very interesting. By investigating oral histories and conducting community-based



monitoring over several years, McDonald *et al.* (1997) were able to discern connections between seal behaviour and changes in sea currents, the impact of hydroelectric development on sturgeon, a local bio-indicator, and so on.

McDonald *et al.* (1997) stress the need for a *socio-ecological* approach, meaning that the cumulative impacts, including on the Inuit and Cree, need to be assessed when development and coinciding degradation of natural ecosystems occurs. Huntington (2011) demonstrates a similar approach in his work with the Inupiaq whalers of NW Alaska. By carefully analyzing the observations and oral histories of the whalers, he observed a link between beavers damming aquatic ecosystems of freshwater streams, thereby preventing fish accessing saltwater environments, and beluga whale behaviours out at sea. Having lost their food source, the belugas moved to another location.

In an example of the application of communal oral histories in the European boreal and Arctic regions, Mustonen (2013) determined that communal oral histories can be utilized in the documentation of ecological baselines for river restoration processes in catchment areas where scientific studies do not exist or are scarce. Reviews of fish stocks, spawning areas and river health based on knowledge documented in communal oral histories can assist and complement ecological restoration studies.

Lehtinen and Mustonen (2013) argue that, given the rooted co-learning practices of the Indigenous societies of the Arctic, we should approach these oral histories, voices, events and communal practices

as a distinct knowledge category- known as Earthviews- that exists in relationship with- and on the same level as- [‘Western’] scientific practices. Earthviews are crucial in and of themselves and there is a need to address and listen to them. As Earthviews affect the knowledge-base upon which reality is constructed in a given space, they offer a more diverse and rich understanding of situations on the ground.

Even though this Indigenous and/or traditional knowledge has survived and remains a living part of Indigenous peoples’ societies and cultures in many parts of the world today, for the larger research community, these ‘Indigenous and / or communal’ oral histories often remain an enigma. Genuine success and genuine understanding (Cram 2018) seem to rest on co-authorship and a critical dialogue between knowledge systems.

## Oral Histories in Courts: Case of Delgamuukw

An exact legal definition of communal oral histories can be determined with reference to the Supreme Court of Canada decision known as *Delgamuukw* from 1997, §85:

*“The Aboriginal tradition in the recording of history is neither linear nor steeped in the same notions of social progress and evolution [as in the non-Aboriginal tradition]. Nor is it usually human-centred in the same way as the western scientific tradition, for it does not assume that human beings are anything more than one -- and not necessarily the most important -- element of the natural order of the universe. Moreover, the Aboriginal*

*historical tradition is an oral one, involving legends, stories and accounts handed down through the generations in oral form. It is less focused on establishing objective truth and assumes that the teller of the story is so much a part of the event being described that it would be arrogant to presume to classify or categorize the event exactly or for all time.”*

*“In the Aboriginal tradition the purpose of repeating oral accounts from the past is broader than the role of written history in western societies. It may be to educate the listener, to communicate aspects of culture, to socialize people into a cultural tradition, or to validate the claims of a particular family to authority and prestige. . .”*

*«Oral accounts of the past include a good deal of subjective experience. They are not simply a detached recounting of factual events but, rather, are “facts enmeshed in the stories of a lifetime”. They are also likely to be rooted in particular locations, making reference to particular families and communities. This contributes to a sense that there are many histories, each characterized in part by how a people see themselves, how they define their identity in relation to their environment, and how they express their uniqueness as a people.”*

*(Supreme Court of Canada, 1997, § 85)*

This Supreme Court ruling established a good benchmark for the definition of Indigenous oral histories. In essence, it establishes the ways in which oral histories, including traditional stories and songs, need to be addressed and worked with in terms of the assessment of history, production of social reality and legal context. The Gitksan

and Wet’suwet’en First Nations from British Columbia, who went to court to establish their oral histories as ‘valid’, shifted the global conversation on oral histories in a way that has relevance for assessments of biodiversity and climate change today (Wilson 2001).

In the Delgamuukw ruling, the Supreme Court of Canada (1997, § 92-93) further defined the quality and characteristics of the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en First Nations’ oral history as follows.

*“Those oral histories were expressed in three different forms: (i) the adaawk of the Gitksan, and the kungax of the Wet’suwet’en; (ii) the personal recollections of members of the appellant nations, and (iii) the territorial affidavits filed by the heads of the individual houses within each nation... The adaawk and kungax of the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en nations, respectively, are oral histories of a special kind. They were described by the trial judge as a “sacred ‘official’ litany, or history, or recital of the most important laws, history, traditions and traditional territory of a House”. The content of these special oral histories includes its physical representation totem poles, crests and blankets. The importance of the adaawk and kungax is underlined by the fact that they are “repeated, performed and authenticated at important feasts.”*

Several important realisations relating to Indigenous evaluation and achieving genuine success in these processes (Cram 2018) arise from this more specific court ruling on the contents of oral history. The Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en are recognized as possessing several cultural categories of



oral history of their own endemic design. These contain law, history, traditions and links to territories characterised by traditional uses of nature. For the purposes of this paper, the second element of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations oral histories in the ruling, the authentication of these narrations in a communal setting, is of paramount importance.

## Post-Delgamuukw: Formal Success Meets Hard Truths on the Ground

Communal oral histories, as assessed in Delgamuukw above and present in the Commission work led by Justice Berger, emerge as situated within the local lifeways and communities of the Indigenous peoples concerned. Delgamuukw can be defined as a partial *genuine success* and a threshold between a *formal* recognition (in courts of Canada) and an Indigenous process that was 'opened' to outsiders, as a part of the legal proceedings, to demonstrate the capacity, extent and scales of Indigenous governance.

Ardythe Wilson (2001) explains how the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations approached positioning their oral histories in the mainstream court system as part of the Delgamuukw process:

*"We trained people to be translators because we took our case forward with our historians, our Elders as experts. Therefore we had to develop wordlists with our words on there because it was our words that were spoken in court. Those types of activities. We had to train our people to use computers, we had to train our*

*people to do media, learn how to work with media. You have to educate the outside of your needs or what you want to do. Because for the most part people on the outside do not know about you because you are a small part of the population. And when the money, the economy is based on the resources that they are taking from your traditional territory sometimes they do not want to know because it makes them uncomfortable."*

Justice Berger (1977; 2017) recounts how he was able to expand his appreciation and understanding of the northern 'traditional economy' by travelling from the regional capitals of Yellowknife and Norman Wells out to remote settlements such as Old Crow and Fort Good Hope and to fishing and hunting camps where the socio-ecological matrix was alive and present. Indigenous rights and oral histories to the land were conveyed using oral histories even though their formal legal recognition would have to wait for another twenty years.

Many of the methods of documenting and working with communal oral histories were therefore already present in Berger's work in the 1970s, even though they were 'validated' with the state courts through the Delgamuukw decision. Berger (2017) assessed the 1997 decision from his viewpoint as follows:

*"In that case the Supreme Court of Canada said it may be evidence, and it has to be respected. I think that they've laid down certain standards: it has to be something that has been repeated from one generation to the other. And it seems logical in that where you don't have written language, tradition, knowledge descends through oral communication....So I think it*

*is perfectly reasonable that they should rely on oral history about how certain landmarks got their name, about whether they had a fishery at a certain location a hundred years ago. No one alive can remember but oral history should be helpful to establish that. I think that aboriginal people revere their Elders in a way that perhaps those of us with European descent do not. Because they'll respect them, because their Elders are the vessels who carry this knowledge and tradition from generation to generation. They are the libraries. I think the Delgamuukw Supreme Court judgement is altogether sound."*

A reflective assessment of the impact of the Delgamuukw decision on Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations was carried out some years after the initial ruling by the Indigenous peoples involved. Ardythe Wilson (2001), a member of the Nation, was rather sceptical about the assertion that the ruling had brought about a wider change in relations between Indigenous Peoples and the Canadian state, despite progress being made:

*"In terms of our relations with the rest of Canada very little has changed simply because what you will find is that you would achieve a certain ruling in the court but it does not translate to different policies on the land. Unfortunately business as usual continues to reign on the land. I think that what the other side of the coin is that if you as a people believe that you still have those rights and you never gave them up and to certain point the court supports you in that then it is your obligation, your responsibility to ensure that you enforce that ruling on the land and make people accept and recognise that that is the case."*

Wilson discusses here how formal recognitions of oral histories in courts are slow to translate into practice, for example in natural resource management or indigenous rights applications. She also puts forward the central theme of agency (Smith 2005) – if the Indigenous community in question has un-ceded rights, Delgamuukw –style rulings are helping the people themselves to exercise these rights in the local context. Here the Wilson's narration demonstrates that, while Delgamuukw did establish *public success* of oral histories and Indigenous rights, from her viewpoint it did not constitute a *genuine success* if evaluated from the perspective of the affected Indigenous Peoples (Cram 2018). Partial at best, the legal definition did not translate into shifts in decision-making concerning natural resources.

Wilson also asserts that maintaining a public, legal battle for the recognition of oral histories and rights is also major financial burden:

*"We do not have the financial resources to get that work done. And although the desire and the capacity may exist within the Nation to go forward, a lot of times the money just is not there to implement your version of your governing systems in today's society. And there is no political will on the part of provincial governments who, for the most part, are the ones that have the power to assert over resources rather than the federal government."* (Wilson 2001)

Here we can detect a line between *public* and a *genuine success*. Indigenous evaluation can be used to determine the costs and resources needed to arrive at a certain

level of success. This success on the other hand can be critically reviewed, as Wilson shows, with regards to the actual impact of a court decision on land-use practices. To what extent can *genuine success*, as defined by Indigenous peoples themselves (Cram 2018), be achieved when we consider the compromises required to achieve success as defined by the nation state?

This tension is also reflected in the gap between communal oral histories as a part of pre-colonial First Nations societies and the reality of reserves as government-designated living spaces of today:

*“Our small reserves, which are very different from our traditional system, our traditional system is the one that reigns over our traditional territories, but our small discreet communities come basically under the jurisdiction of the federal government, department of the Indian Affairs, and there they are program-minded, and their programs are really restricted to social type of activity and just a few capital projects.”*  
(Wilson 2001)

Partial progress resulted from the Delgamuukw decision. Victory in the court in 1997 opened the door for more indigenous knowledge –oriented natural resources management, according to Wilson (2001):

*“We have signed agreements with provincial jurisdictions where we develop our own systems of management and where we broaden the scope so that it is not departmentalised or compartmentalised. It is more holistic in nature where we are looking at watershed management and not just district management because it is based on unreal boundaries. Whereas for us watershed management encourages us to deal*

*with other tribal groups, other interests that live in our area, which include non-Aboriginal interests.”*

## Oral Histories in Sweden: A View from the Arctic

In northern Sweden Mustonen and Syrjämäki (2013) utilized *Delgamuukw* –style oral history research with the Sámi Council and local Sámi located in the Jokkmokk region for a decade from 2003 to 2013. The Sámi of Jokkmokk have been researched endlessly throughout the period of time since first contact with the Swedish Crown. Scandinavian research methods, stemming from the heritage of Russian and German historical research, tend to value written sources. If it has not been written down, it does not exist.

Therefore, in the Sámi world, there is a gap between what is spoken and what is written. It has often been said, for example, amongst the Skolt Sámi, that their own culture, worldview and ways of being with the world do not get proper attention, because their oral histories are not made visible. On the other hand, a number of cultural texts produced by the Sámi themselves, such as Kuoljok (2008), have provided a more varied array of written Indigenous knowledge and histories. For example Ryd (2007a,b) used participatory field observations and long-hand recording of stories to gather many of the oral histories of the local Sámi in Jokkmokk.

Borchert (2001, 3) affirms that *“the Sámi kept no written records of a traditional subsistence practice”*. Though of course we can argue that traditional Sámi symbols,

place names, pictographs, sacred places and other expressions of oral culture are physical manifestations of their land use and occupancy.

In the court cases of the early 2000s, the Sámi called for a need ‘to use other evidence in courts’, referring specifically to oral histories. Classical reports from the area, such as those provided by Jannes and Riwkin-Brick (1961), portray the Sámi as ‘targets’ of documentation. Problems persist on this topic. Zorich (2008) quotes archaeologist Broadbent, who says that in 2002 a Swedish court dismissed even the use of archaeological evidence to demonstrate Sámi land use.

Our purpose through the work with the Sámi was, simply, to present the oral history materials as valid spoken – and then documented – *events*, through which the Sámi have named and recounted their world and its issues.

The oral historians were chosen by the Sámi themselves through a communal process, with the assistance of the Swedish section of the Sámi Council. The people participating in the oral history work in Jokkmokk were also pre-selected, or recommended, by the Sámi themselves. This does not remove local biases or conflicts, but it transforms the oral histories from ‘mere’ documents or anecdotes into *communal* and, in some cases, *family* processes (Mustonen & Syrjämäki 2013). Often, for example, a recording of an oral history would prompt an Indigenous co-researcher to point to a new person who might know more about a specific theme, for example seining or star-lore.

In this process, we took (Mustonen & Syrjämäki 2013) the Delgamuukw

precedent seriously from the very start, in that the Sámi would possess their own situated oral histories in Jokkmokk. Placing trust in focusing oral history efforts in a secluded part of the region proved to be a successful, exportable element from Canadian Indigenous context, even though the specific context of the Jokkmokk Sámi varies greatly from the North American situation.

It is worth mentioning that the oral histories from Jokkmokk, gathered as part of a decade-long process, found their apex moment in a three-part oral history document produced by masterful storyteller Lars Pirak (1932-2008), entitled “*Bear – Wolf – Spring – Climate Change*”.

This particular oral history reflects, in many ways, ‘classical’ aspects of Sámi storytelling. It narrates the private experiences of a Sámi family, before recounting the history of a clan, a nation and their mythical relationship with the bear, then returning to private recollections and connections to wolf and other animals. The story then proceeds to make an observation about the traditional sacredness of water springs and, in closing, the impacts of weather change. It can be seen as a *genuine engagement* where the Indigenous knowledge holder was able to convey cultural structure and knowledge of a landscape into a recorded version of the oral history.

This story was recorded in one session with the late Lars Pirak (see the whole documented narration in Mustonen and Syrjämäki 2013), who was a well-known artist and handicraft master in Jokkmokk. Such a piece of oral history begins to resemble, indeed it is, the epic storytelling of Northern peoples, spanning

myth, relationships, kin, belongings, sacred places and contemporary events in a fluid and masterful recounting. It forms the story-telling arch of our book and closely resembles North American examples of a communally preserved and recounted oral history.

The purpose of conducting community-based work in this way is to respect Indigenous governance and cultural mechanisms in terms of *how* oral history and traditional knowledge are handled and discussed – in each and every place this is different (Cram 2018). Oral history is human history too – it contains its problems, challenges, misrepresentations and mistakes, just like any other source of knowledge.

Oral history documentation will not easily solve all the problems associated with the hierarchies of power and knowledge production. However, the presence and increased visibility of Sámi oral histories is crucial today because, even if the information they contain challenges the majority view, at least *we have a view* that challenges the established knowledge structures of Fennoscandia.

As always no one research action can untangle what has happened in Jokkmokk – the forced relocations, relationships, and family issues remain and, in our opinion, should remain in the Sámi world of Jokkmokk. As Nordin-Jonsson (2010, 21) says, the documentation and discussion of Sámi knowledge are not exercises only for the researchers, they can and should be something for the whole of Sámi society. Oral history work such as this can only provide a window. Such a window can be criticized, dismissed or applauded,

based on the viewpoint of the reader. But communal oral histories allow the hidden to emerge and challenge mono-culturally constructed truths of history and reality in Fennoscandia.

## Methodological Implications for Further Oral History Work

In the post-Delgamuukw landscape, oral histories have also gained validity as a method outside of courtrooms and legal contexts. Yet the gap between the spoken world and the written world remains. McMillan (1999) identified different truth statements and understandings when he explored the cultural heritage of the British Columbian Nuu-chah-nulth, Ditidaht and Makah First Nations', their uses of the land and histories. While he recognizes that there are gaps regarding how and where history has been made and happened, it is important that, in the post-*Delgamuukw* context, he identifies these oral histories as crucial sources of information.

Six years after *Delgamuukw*, the Haida First Nation in British Columbia participated in a major multi-disciplinary investigation (Fedje & Mathewes 2005) into the past of the Haida Gwaii archipelago off the west coast of Canada, close to Alaska. Aspects of this work are worth mentioning here too. Kii'iljuus and Harris (2005, 122–123) identify that while general oral history research often analyzes events as either re-created in each generation, or unable to transfer knowledge from thousands of years ago in an unbroken line, in fact the Haida open their cultural doors to provide us with an astounding revelation.



According to Kii7iljuus and Harris (2005, 122–123) the Haida *trained* a handful of oral historians from each clan and family to learn *all* of the oral histories of that people. Or as they say: “*The Xaayda protect the integrity of the oral histories by allowing only those who are properly trained and have the right to tell their clan stories to do so.*” (Kii7iljuus & Harris 2005, 122-123).

Similar Indigenous-controlled and –trained systems of knowledge protection and preservation may exist in the larger tapestry of human society. However, the experiences of the Inuit, Nuuchahnulth, Haida and other Northern Indigenous peoples, who have successfully engaged with ‘Western’ histories, are leading the way to a more holistic understanding of place, time, and events.

Helander (1999) makes a convincing argument, based on her fieldwork both in Jokkmokk and in Utsjoki and Kaldoaivi areas in Finland, that the Sámi have *their own kind of knowledge*, as well as time-space apparatus. If this is the case, and Sámi oral history needs to be conveyed using these specific means of social capital production and relationships which manifest best in Sámi language, then this demonstrates the need for oral history work such as this present volume. Translation of materials into English diminishes the inherent value of oral history, but on the other hand makes oral histories available to a wider readership.

## Discussion

Academic criticism is often directed at the communal interpretation and representation of oral histories. Critics may say that the indigenous societies, such as the Sámi or Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en First Nations, speak in a way that presents images of a ‘golden past’ or ‘best possible stereotype’ of their cultures. Biases in interpretation lead scholars astray.

It is true that, on occasion, the Sámi provided mis/dis-informative accounts of their lives and cultures across Sápmi in the 1800s and early 1900s. Whether these events were carefully planned cultural defence mechanisms or just plain humour at meeting the arriving peoples, is hard to say. But what we do know is that the Sámi have been *aware* of the research ‘image’ of themselves throughout the times of contact and colonization, and have responded accordingly.

The best postcolonial scholarship can only hope to demonstrate, by working in close proximity, but still as outsiders, with the respected and chosen cultural carriers of the Indigenous peoples, to produce an authentic and truthful representation and interpretation of events, peoples, places and change. A methodological tool for this is *genuine engagement* and *success* using emergent Indigenous evaluation approaches (Cram 2018). This, while being context-dependent, often implies a just dialogue between the ‘outsiders’ and the affected Indigenous community in question.

The Supreme Court of Canada (1997, §87), in its Delgamuukw ruling, followed similar logic:



*“Notwithstanding the challenges created by the use of oral histories as proof of historical facts, the laws of evidence must be adapted in order that this type of evidence can be accommodated and placed on an equal footing with the types of historical evidence that courts are familiar with, which largely consists of historical documents.”*

In Justice Berger’s assessment (2017), these rulings have truly shifted the context and wider recognition of communal oral histories in Canada. He states:

*“In some parts of the country, the forest industry, the mining companies, they do not even think of going ahead with project without consulting aboriginal people. They have the right to be consulted, established by Supreme Court of Canada in 2008, but that all of this has occurred is remarkable. Now, you still have social pathology in these villages and my view has been, in my role as a lawyer, which is a limited role, my obligation is to do what I can to assert their rights and extend their rights, but I don’t pretend to know what the answer is to these questions of social pathology. Because Aboriginal peoples can speak for themselves...they have their own history, their own traditions, their own languages and they have in most places, an economy, and that still survives.”*

In Berger’s view the Delgamuukw ruling, and other events in Canadian society that have recognised the validity and importance of oral histories, have produced some reforms in natural resource governance. They constitute *success*. He also demonstrates clear awareness of the social grievances and equity issues – oral history rulings and rights recognized in courts will not solve

all issues at once. He also underlines the role that the agency of the Indigenous peoples themselves has to play in defining the extent, scope and role of development and policy on their lands.

Ardythe Wilson (2001) from the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en First Nations reflects on the transferable impact of decisions like Delgamuukw across political jurisdictions, saying:

*“I think that efforts around the world...if we strive to protect our history, who we are based on where we live, then it benefits all Indigenous peoples around the world. The battle may be hard, because the money is not there, but it does not mean we should give up. We should always strive to protect our identities and always fight for our rights. I think that to look at the environment and to look at management in a holistic manner because in the long run the whole issue of climate change for example, people are approaching it in a really focused way and in a tunnel view. Yet, we need to approach it on a holistic basis. In all aspects of our lives it affects us and that’s how we should deal with it. So I encourage people to learn about that, to learn about different cultures to take advantages of the battles that have been fought before even though they are in different countries. Maybe there are ways by which we can assist each other by the work that has happened before.”*

In conclusion, only by understanding hidden histories that can be made public can we start to understand the legacies of power that exist in the Arctic and North (Taluga 2017). At its best, oral history does what it is supposed to do – makes invisible histories visible. On the other hand, as

Taluga (2017) demonstrates in relation to the grim situation of the Ojibway in Ontario, *success* in courts and in formal arenas can translate painfully slowly to policy and practice. A new reading of Indigenous landscapes and oral histories is therefore urgently needed (Cram 2018, Mustonen & Feodoroff 2018).

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## Postscript, January 2019

As alluded by Talaga (2017) and Wet'suwet'en knowledge holder Ardythe Wilson earlier, the formal success in one part of society, for example in courts, translates painfully slowly into cross-sectoral and societal transformation on Indigenous lands.

According to a range of media reports (including National Observer 2019, NY Times 2019) TransCanada, a Canadian

energy company and Unis'tot'en, one of the Houses of the Wet'suwet'en entered into a direct land conflict in late 2018. TransCanada plans to construct "Coastal Gaslink" Project, a 670-kilometer and 6.2 billion CAD long pipeline across the Wet'suwet'en territory. The purpose of the pipeline is to deliver fracking gas to the proposed LNG terminal proposed for Kitimaat on the coast of British Columbia.

Territory known to Wet'suwet'en as *Wedʒin Kwa* and Canadians as "Morice River" is the site of the contemporary land conflict. Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs have taken the principled stand that all lands in their home territory fall under the jurisdiction of the traditional chiefs. Much in line with this, the Tsilhqot'in 2014 that the Supreme Court gave recognized Aboriginal title over specific areas of land. The conflict also revolves around state-recognized band councils that have been in favour of the pipeline and the Indigenous governance of the hereditary chiefs that opposes the pipeline.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police – RCMP has used military-style force to take down the Wet'suwet'en blockades on the access roads at Gitdumden, arresting 14, and TransCanada has bulldozed camps, traplines and Indigenous sites in the process of the land struggle. While it is to be expected a solution will be found over the spring to the acute conflict, the colonial imposition continues as Ardythe Wilson stated already in 2001: "Very little on the ground is changing."

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