Storytelling among the Ojibwe (Anishnaabe): the Roles of Language and Story, and Similarity with Irish Celtic Tradition

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This paper examines the oral tradition of Anishnaabe people by looking at the roles of language and story in their spiritual tradition. Similarities will be shown with the Irish. Myths will be shown to be more revealing than logos for interpreting and comparing spirituality in oral traditions. Specifically, I propose to examine how language and story encode spirituality in ancient oral Anishnaabe and Irish traditions, to compare how these two spiritual traditions share a holistic unifying motif, and to speak to the question of whether orality rather than literacy makes language and story more effectual as conveyors of the sacred.

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The temptation of reason became a statement of tradition.
A last chance to listen.
It came as a song in the middle of the night,
whispering,
over and over again,
that it was cold and hungry.

(Robinson 1998)
Language as a Conveyer of the Sacred In Anishnaabe Storytelling Tradition

The idea of oral language as a means of conveying the sacred in traditional cultures is one of the major themes I wish to discuss, relating it to the Anishnaabe, and then viewing similarities with Irish oral tradition. Reflected in oral language is a world view, a particular way in which people of any culture understand themselves being in the world.¹

¹ An artist and poet who lives on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, Robinson says of his writings and images that they “explore a lost History and an uncertain future of the natural world and man’s place and responsibility within this living History. My point of reference is the Earth” (1998:1).

² The word Anishnaabe appears in different spellings. Pritzker (2000:406) notes that they are “also variously known by the band names Ojibwe/Ojibwa/Ojibway/Chippewa, Mississauga, and Salteaux…. With the Potawatomi and Ottawa, with whom they may once have been united….” He locates their groups as living “north of Lake Huron and northwest of Lake Superior … northern Ojibwas lived between the Great Lakes and Hudson Bay, and the Lake Winnipeg Salteaux lived just east and south of that body of water. Today, there are Anishinaabe communities and reservations in central and northern Michigan, including the Upper Peninsula; northern Wisconsin; northern and central Minnesota; northern North Dakota; northern Montana; and southern Ontario.” Referring to language, Pritzker writes: “The various Anishnabé groups spoke dialects of Algonquian languages.”

³ Although an ideal methodology for this type of study would be through personal communications with Ojibwe and Gaelic speakers, this paper is largely based on secondary published sources, supplemented with some personal communications between the writer and mother-tongue speakers from the Sudbury-Manitoulin Island areas in Ontario. See also my undergraduate thesis (Beck 2003).

A vital part of Anishnaabe cultural world view, incarnate in the Ojibwe language, is a profound spiritual sense of connection with the Creator, of being placed on earth and given their language, in which they carry out every aspect of life on the earth (Benton-Banai 1988; Beck, Walters and Francisco 1996). To understand spirituality as the cornerstone of an oral cultural tradition is difficult for a literate society to imagine. Some Anishnaabe believe that at one time, Creator gave all peoples the same instructions how to live (Dumont 1976). A central point I wish to make is that, in a traditional oral language, the cultural world view reveals an underlying inherency of a natural order spirituality. This point may be clearly seen through the writings of both Anishnaabe and British Celtic authors.

According to Ong (1988:14), “for most literates, to think of words as totally dissociated from writing is simply too arduous a task to undertake, even when specialized linguistic or anthropological work may demand it.” The term “logos” represents the way our literate Western world views what is real and true. “Logos” is associated with reasoning, therefore, logic; empirical investigation does not appreciate “mythos” in either of the two oral culture traditions of which I speak. Anishnaabe spirituality is understood through orality of story passing on through successive generations, and involved sensitivity to the mythical world and mind, which is critical for understanding this spirituality in its cultural form.
Language is a Relational Aspect within a Cultural Context

Reflected in the cultural language of Anishnaabe people are distinct patterns in lifestyle and behaviour. Traditional life is cyclical and holistic; spirituality is intrinsic to all their experiences, and is inseparable from the natural order of all daily life (Benton-Banai 1998, Nabigon 2006, and Lake-Thom 1997). The animal world and natural environment formed part of a relational world view inclusive of all creation, to and with humankind—all my relations (Lake-Thom 1997).

North American Native people learn morals and ethics through humour, experience, stories, legends, myths, symbolism and prayer. This helps us to understand Native cosmology—the connectedness to the natural order, e.g. Grandmother Moon, Grandfather Sun, Father Sky, Mother Earth—the theory that deals with one’s relationship to, and one’s interpretation of the universe (Eliade 1959; Dumont 1976; Johnston 1976, 1981; Hultkrantz 1987; Tooker 1979; Sun Bear, Wabun Wind, and Mulligan 1991; Swinomish Tribal Community 1991; Nabigon 2006; Spielmann 1998). All of these origin relationships are interwoven into traditional storytelling and held in the Sacred Teachings of the path of the Four Directions incorporated in the Medicine Wheel.

Ojibwe Language holds Cultural foundational features

As in many Native North American languages, the verb is

the heart of Anishnaabe language. Ojibwe has a very complex set of prefixes and suffixes that can be attached to words to indicate a variety of relationships to other elements of the sentence. Word order in sentences is not as static as in English. Differences in languages reflect different ways of thinking. At present, a pressing question in many Aboriginal communities is how important is it to preserve one’s cultural language in order to protect one’s sense of identity.

In his later writing about Ojibwe language discourse, author and professor of Native Studies Roger Spielmann includes perspectives of several authors on the idea of language as identity. Sometimes considered controversial by non-mother tongue speakers, he quotes the Lakota writer Robert Bunge (1987:19) as saying that “[a] people who lose their language and the view of the universe expressed by that language, can no longer survive as a people, although they can survive as rootless individuals.” It is true that the ideal is to have known one’s cultural language intimately; however, some would argue that identity is not solely based on language. Because of history from the Residential School system, there was just cause for Native parents and grandparents not to teach the language, which many had retained in secret (colleagues of First Nations ancestry, p.c. 2006-2007). The general consensus was that this did not diminish their cultural identity of knowing themselves to be of Anishnaabe or Cree birth and ancestry. There were other ways of maintaining culture, ways of thinking and behaviour, passed on and perpetuated by familial relations strong within older family members.
Others share Bunge’s point of view, indicating a need for Aboriginal language revitalization and preservation. For many there is an important concern for the oral and cultural traditions of First Nations People in Canada. Brizinski (1993:67) suggests that “if a group’s language is suppressed, the culture begins to be lost.” Blondin (1989:15) claims that “speaking your Native language strengthens your identity, and in that way strengthens and maintains the collective culture” (quoted in Spielmann, 1998:53-54). After failed attempts at assimilation of Indian populations, the Government of Canada in 1996 held a Royal Commission, and recognized through their findings the identity within culture and language:

Language is the principal instrument by which culture is transmitted from one generation to another, by which members of a culture communicate meaning and make sense of their shared experience. Because language defines the world and experience in cultural terms, it literally shapes our way of perceiving—our world view. [...] For Aboriginal people, the threat that their languages could disappear is... a threat that their distinctive world views, the wisdom of their ancestors and their ways of being human could be lost as well (Vol. 3, p. 602, 603).

Many Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) people, both in personal interviews and within media circles, claim that culture is more than an expression of language. Culture comprises values and traditions as well as social and political formation uniquely defined by a group of people (Beck, Walters & Francisco 1996). It is evident from one’s understanding of historical trauma and policies of assimilation that Aboriginal people have demonstrated a tremendous capacity and volition to adapt to change, with a determination to preserve and maintain their ancient culture, at the heart of which is language.

**Spirit of Consciousness within Language reflects Spirituality**

According to Spielmann (1998), scholars like Bunge identify language as the principal way of differentiating a people as representing a symbolism of soul: “Language is not just another thing we do as humans—it is the thing we do. It is a total environment; we live in language as a fish lives in water. It is the audible and visible manifestation of the soul of a people.” An Irish born language teacher, discussing the depth and spiritual nature of cultural language, referred to soul being within one’s mother tongue. She believed that if her language were denied, she would have no soul, because she saw cultural language as being one with the soul.

According to Brown (1982:53), in North American Native culture there were no dichotomies between the spiritual and secular dimensions of life as in European based literate cultures:

This sense of relationship... extends outward to include all beings of the specific environment, the elements, and the winds, whether these beings, forms, or powers are what we would call animate or inanimate. ... All such forms under creation are understood to be mysteriously interrelated. Everything is relative to
every other being or thing; thus, nothing exists in isolation.

The soul is made vivid and empowered by the spiritual center or the Creator, with language in the Anishnaabe oral tradition empowered by its spiritual presence intrinsic to every spoken word and phrase, without any gender distinction in the language. Bunge (1987:17) would agree:

Language is a spiritual experience. [Our Aboriginal language] is not only the language of the sweat lodge, but is an everyday sacred way of perceiving and expressing these perceptions . . . the universe of discourse of Lakota and other Aboriginal languages is one of a personal, animate and moral state of being.

Graveline (1998), in her extensive writing on the cyclical nature of Native North American sacred teachings of the Medicine Wheel, uses an analogy from a Cree Elder relating the understanding of the sacredness of breath coming from the Creator:

The world is a spiritual creation of the Great Spirit who has also given us breath. . . . Should you become weak, strengthen yourself by looking at the world around you, and see that you are not alone in the sacredness of life which was, and is and always will be. (1992:346)

Breath is considered as coming directly from Creator, therefore traditionally, words were chosen and spoken with respect, as gift and life giving. Relating this to words forming a language, holds a spiritual context and is seen as evident in certain other languages, as Brown (1982:88) explains:

Native American languages are joined to other sacred languages of the world in the sense that words are not conceived simply as symbols assigned arbitrarily to other units of meaning, as tends to be the case with our own English language. Rather, words in themselves are experienced in an immediate manner as units of power. Thus, to name a being or any element of creation is actually to make manifest the power or quality, soul or spirit, of that which is named. For this reason words and personal sacred names tend to be used carefully in Native American languages.

Perhaps a final word about the sacred inherency in language, or its relation to the sacred can be summed up in the words of Brown (1982:3) as he discusses a “primal foundation”:

An aspect of the sacred potency latent in words in primal tradition is the presiding understanding that words in their sounds are born in the breath of the being from whom they proceed, and since breath in these traditions is universally identified with the life principle, words are thus sacred and must be used with care and responsibility. Such quality of the spoken word is further enhanced by the understood close proximity of the source of breath, the lungs, with the heart, which is associated with the being’s spiritual center.
Orality of the Anishnaabe in Summary of the Sacred

Orality of language gave traditional peoples a means to convey the sacred through story, song, dance, art, music, ritual and ceremony, which elements shaped the cultural mythos of Anishnaabe people. Mythos is, therefore, an all-embracing reality, determining who a people are, what their world view, origins and history are. The role of mythos is integral to Anishnaabe culture because it conveyed the importance of their place and value in the cosmos. This traditional and cultural world view contained in mythos is the genesis of the unique spirituality of oral Anishnaabe peoples, which can also be seen among ancient Irish, Scottish and Welsh Celtic peoples. Robinson (1998:15) shows in poetic form how reason or logos found in European western civilization unfortunately continued to change the course of their ancestral history:

Temptation sat huddled, like a dejected child, by our dwindling fire.
Waiting for salvation.
Waiting for dawn and the black of night to creep away like a thief.
We said nothing,
So it stayed.

Spirituality as a Living Entity vs. the idea of Religion of Institutionalism

Brown (1982) writes that spiritual beliefs are expressed through imagery and symbolism from the environment, and conveys the idea of spirituality as irrevocably related to the symbol of the circle, which represents cycles of life as found in nature. It is difficult to grasp exactly what constitutes the term spirituality from an Anishnaabe cultural perspective, since emphasis is not placed in a literal translation. Rather, the word Bimadziwin is correlated with meaning ‘the good/right path.’ This has been explained by Elders as associated with leading a traditional or spiritual life following cultural sacred teachings as relayed through stories (Aadizokan). Native writer and teacher of Ojibwe language, history and mythology Basil Johnston clearly articulates the difficulty in “retaining the substance of the meaning of the stories” involved in “translation and interpretation from one language to another” (2005:7). What is paramount in understanding the spiritual heritage of the Ojibwe is that it does not stand alone, but entails other aspects to express fully a spirituality embraced in a holistic cultural way of life, connected to other like Nations of Native North America. He explains:

If the Native Peoples and their heritage are to be understood, it is their beliefs, insights, concepts, ideals, values, attitudes, and codes that must be studied. And there is, I submit, no better way of gaining that understanding than by examining native ceremonies, rituals, songs, dances, prayers, and stories. For it is in

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4 This reference term Bimadziwin is often found within social work programs used to treat addictions and substance abuse, to overcome the effects of enforced programs of assimilation policies of western civilization. One source for literature using Bimadziwin /Spiritual Path teachings distribution is Zagehdowin Information Clearinghouse, on Health Healing, and Family Violence for Aboriginal Communities in Ontario at Whitefish Lake First Nation, Naughton, Ontario.
ceremony, ritual, song, dance, and prayer that the sum total of what people believe about life, being, existence, and relationships are symbolically expressed and articulated; as it is in story, fable, legend, and myth that fundamental understandings, insights, and attitudes toward life and human conduct, character, and quality in their diverse forms are embodied and passed on.

This articulation relating to one's cultural existence intertwined with spiritual dimension is a vital and important point in understanding oral tradition people such as Anishnaabe and Irish.

The word spirituality has its etymological roots in the Latin “spiritus,” breathing, breath, and spirit, connected to “spirare,” to breathe (Cunliffe n.d.). A modern view relates it to an “inner dimension of religiousness,” which has “always been an integral part of Christian life” as well as in “all religious life in virtually every tradition.” (Eck 1992:150-151). Eck gives a range of words, ruach, pneuma, and spirit, which she includes as meaning “human spirit” understood in “Jewish and Christian traditions to be God-given” of an “inner dimension.” The Native-produced book A Gathering of Wisdoms (1991:126-127), says of spirituality:

Spirituality pervades every aspect of Indian life in ways difficult to grasp for most non-Indians ... Spirituality is not treated as a separate or discrete part of life. ... It is understood to be a fundamental reality of all life and all people, inseparable, connected to physical reality, bodily events, interpersonal relations, individual destiny, mental processes and emotional well-being.

As with many other indigenous cultures in the world, there is no separation between sacred and secular as found in modern western civilization.

Western thought maintains a spiritual ideal within its religious institutions, but does not integrate the spiritual into everyday life, as in the previously held understanding of ancient days. Nabigon (2006), explains his book title The Hollow Tree as “a metaphor for what Western culture has become, an empty shell with no substance.” He expounds on the effects of how a religious tradition can bring harm and render devastation on a spiritually traditional life by holding a secular stance on what spirituality means from an Anishnaabe cultural worldview. Sadly, he is not alone in his experiences, as we have come to recognize through the media of late.

**Conveyor of the Sacred Power of Oral Language in Irish Gaelic Tradition**

There is undeniably an incredible power to language. According to Richard English (quoted in Brewer, 2001:49), one of the first occurrences we see of language being a primary source of significance in Ireland is with the Norman invasion of Britain in the twelfth century:

The Norman ... moves towards the creation of governmental machinery should not casually be dismissed. Another notable contribution was in the language spoken by the people ... and it was in the towns of the eastern side of the island that linguistic change was most concentrated. Towns tended to be in a state of direct subjection to the crown, and so Eng-
lish became the spoken language. Other cultural changes also grew.

The Irish were not the only Celtic people in history to have their vernacular speech altered through English imperialism. As Spielmann (1998:13) also noted:

The English knew the Highlands of Scotland would never be pacified until the Gaelic language was destroyed. The point articulated by Bunge was by destroying language, it resolutely affects the essence of a people. His further point: The first thing a victorious people does to a vanquished people is to disarm them—take away their weapons and take over their lands. . . . Then there follows something even worse—the theft of the psyche of the people.

Spielmann questions whether there is something inherent within written English language itself, in its nature and structure, which is in conflict with a cyclical oral tradition.

The Rev. Robert Lumley speaks of the famous Irish novelist James Joyce “whose great work Finnegan’s Wake, while portraying one family, was at the same time characterizing all families, everywhere, at all times in history. Within Finnegan’s Wake are topical and historical names, events, myths, songs, jokes and gossip in an effort to make all people, places, things, and times repeat and resemble each other” (p.c. 2003).

The technique Joyce used in this writing, even from the first sentence, is a literary representation of the relational theory of history. The Rev. Lumley interprets Joyce as “trying to go beyond” the story of Finnegan’s Wake, “where a man dreams the whole history of the world in one night, illustrating how language conveys myth” for “myth can take us anywhere we want to go, with analogy taking us both sides of the Creator and ourselves on the other side.” For Joyce, language contains spirit; it is the personification or soul of a people; therefore, the truth of any culture is always embedded in its spoken language.

Davies (2000:5) conveys the significance of language as a “primary expression of culture” in which the “affinities of language bring with them the affinities of culture.” He cautions that whether Celtic speaking people obtained connections from a “common cultural inheritance, or from culture contact through geographical proximity, or from both factors and in which proportion, is less easily decided.” Regardless, we recognize language as the most common way in which human beings express themselves to and among each other, being either oral or written. A cultural vision into language is something Robert Van de Weyer (1993) relays through his belief that sacred poetry and songs give voice to the ways of the ancient Celtic people, relating them to a spiritual reality.

Is a Cultural Language Soul of the Psyche as it engages Storytelling?

Discussing how language connects us to the soul invites us to consider the Irish tradition of the Bard and the Poet. This ancient tradition was originally connected to the filid who trained for twenty years to perfect their memory. The bard might form part of the filid; however, more importantly, their poetry was reflected in their world view, which contained an implied spirituality.
Irish religious poetry has existed for centuries and "certainly early law and probably pre-Christian religious traditions were passed down in the form of poetry," with elements remaining "in early written material from the Christian period" (Jestice 2000:282). Of modern poetry, Jestice contends it "can certainly be argued that a distinctively Irish spirituality is an essential part of what gives depth and resonance to this poetry." One can see how language relates to the soul of Gaelic people in Yeats, where "nothing can convey the distinctively Irish quality of his life-affirming spirituality" (Jestice 2000:217) in these lines from "Among School Children":

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossom,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

If the soul of a people was disturbed through loss of language, this would mean the psyche was also disturbed. There is interconnection between soul as spirit or being, interrelated with thought, or interpretation through the psyche or subconscious of the mind. What follows is the question ‘who am I?’ Or the discernable quest of trying to find where one's intimate self actually belongs.

Often, this is a painful realization of an immigrant, who has had to adopt a new life view, as well as a new language, and who is not yet immersed in the soul of the newly adopted language. This can result in an acute sense of disorientation, even if the spoken language remains the same, such as English speakers crossing from one English speak-

ing country to another; it is a significant loss to one's identity. Oral language of Irish people reveals a mythically spiritual and holistic life pattern, as seen through the traditional poets, bards and storytellers. Through traditional stories and legends, this holistic world view remained a constant while being passed down through successive generations by the mother-tongue keepers of cultural language.

**Story and its telling by Oral Tradition Ojibwe is Communication of a Sacred Order**

Storytelling is ancient and it is also modern. Who can resist a story? Who does not have memories of story as a child? What is learned, and can still be learned from story? What is the mystery contained in story that humans seek and savour? What has been transmitted, and who has been transformed, through countless generations, in the communicated knowledge and wisdom still found in the story of oral tradition peoples? I claim that in oral tradition, all stories and storytelling conveyed the idea of natural order in a spirituality of a universal kind (Nabigon 2006; Chamberlin 2004; Moses & Goldie 1998; Hultkrantz 1981).

The purpose(s) for telling and listening to stories appears to be much more conventional in Ojibwe culture than in North American non-Native society:

Traditionally among Native Americans the oral tradition of a tribe was its most important vehicle for teaching and passing on the sacred knowledge and practices of The People. . . . The human memory is a great storehouse ordinarily filled to only a fraction of its capacity. The elders knew this and tested and
trained the memory along with the other senses, so that the history and traditions of The People could be preserved and passed on. (Beck, Walters & Francisco 1996:57)

This can also be seen in the Bardic tradition of the oral British Celts as previously noted with its training taking a span of twenty years. The Bardic tradition had an “integrated relationship with the natural world” and possessed “an immense body of traditional lore” (Pennick 1997:28). Also, like Native North American People such as the Ojibwe, the Celtic “ancient skills and wisdom,” which today are a foundation of “Celtic spirituality, that is the synthesis of past and present,” are essential to “a continuing living tradition.”

Storytelling goes back to the beginning of life and is grounded in [Breath of] the Creator, who gave humanity a spiritually induced form or ability of speech, virtually becoming one’s oral language and place in the earth life, which may be interpreted on the Anishnaabe Medicine Wheel. Story is a circular vision of oral language for ‘The People,’ by ‘The People’ in the ‘Living Voice’ (Graveline 1998; Beck, Walters & Francisco 1996; Benton-Banai 1998; Brown 1992; Nabigon 2006). One important factor expressed by many Native North American writers is that wherever possible the voice of the people should address their own cultural knowledge in literate form. Beck, Walters & Francisco (1996:57-58), discussing their idea of story, write:

One of the most important of the oral traditions was storytelling, and the preservation of the origin histories. In these histories The People are told where we came from, how the stars were created, where we discovered fire, how light became divided from darkness, and how death originated. It is through these stories too that we are given the basic tools and ways of knowledge with which to survive in the world: healing ceremonies, prayers, dances, games, herbs, and models of behavior.

The concept of sacred breath of the Creator can also be seen in a somewhat different, but inclusive, context in the book of Genesis. Consistent with the oral tradition, it tells us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and was with God” meaning creation was made from [Spirit] words. Transforming words that say God is Spirit and breathed spiritual life into Creation, part of which was language. Thus, life [breath] and language are created from Spirit. The concept of sacred within a mythical cultural world view is ultimately verbalized in oral language, converted into story, creating a spiritual continuum through the orality of humankind’s language. I will expand upon this later in relation to orality and its inherency of power contained in language as it communicates with spirituality.

Discussing this point of sacred breath and oral tradition, Presbyterian minister Richard Cleaver (p.c.) said: “Moses was spoken to by God on two occasions when first given the Commandments which became written on stone tablets by God himself and then through inspiration gave the words of Genesis.” Questioned about this event being an oral tradition, he agreed, saying “most importantly is to remember all scripture is given through inspiration of God and eventually later in time became written down as the
words of Moses given through inspired breath of God." So, God was the inspired storyteller that Moses received sacred and wise words from, to pass on to successive generations of people worldwide, a universal message to all humankind. This shows a magnitude of power in the idea of belief in the traditional understanding of breath as sacred from Creator.

The idea of spirituality expressed orally can also be defined by looking at Spielmann’s (1998:20) interpretation of story and storytelling, as one is introduced to Anishnaabe world view and protocol, exercised in oral language, showing cross-cultural realities based in language and story. He says “everyday life experience of Ojibwe people” can be examined by the reality of social construction in “performative features of talk: storytelling, joking/teasing” having several themes. Furthermore, “legends and stories told in conversation are elaborately designed.” The “storyteller serves as a principal character in the story, directing the listeners to attend to certain features of the story in subtle, but specific ways,” ultimately illustrating a “moral maxim.” Story has two forms for Anishnaabe; Aadizookan (mentioned earlier) are traditional legends that carry sacred wisdom and teaching of sacred ways, and Tibuajmowin is a carrier of ordinary life news or happenings.

Is the Natural Phenomenon of Myth a Messenger in Oral Tradition?

Renowned storyteller Joseph Campbell recognized the power of story as a key to understanding our humanity. In The Power of Myth, (1988:xvi) Campbell sees mythography or story, as revealing a deep truth: “It’s what Goethe said in

Faust but which [George] Lucas [director of Star Wars] has dressed in modern idiom—the message that technology is not going to save us. . . . We have to rely on our intuition, our true being.” He is not alone in his statement; many have come to see and have written about the disenchantment of modern western society and the effects of western civilization (Taylor 1991).

Furthermore, for Campbell, myth is far from reason; he explains the hero’s journey is “not to deny reason” but rather “the contrary, by overcoming the dark passions, the hero symbolizes our ability to control the irrational . . . within us.” Campbell makes it clear, stories were told from the beginning about basic human events and how these related to the supernatural. The role of story or myth relating natural events to the supernatural did not change according to Campbell, as human society evolved. The story’s purpose is revelation; it speaks, offers knowledge and wisdom, guides and advances the way for humanity.

Consequently, story or myth is, says Campbell (1988: xvii), a “mask of God, too—a metaphor for what lies behind the visible world,” which he separates from mystic traditions, explaining the difference as “they are in accord calling us to a deeper awareness of the very act of living itself.” Campbell’s interpretation of the mask of God is that “God assumes such different masks in different cultures,” saying, “masks of eternity” or images of God, reveal “the Face of Glory,” but also leave questions.

Bill Moyers (1988:xvii-iii) writes of listening to Campbell as a storyteller of primal [early] societies, and being transported by these stories to visionary places, where he “began
to understand how the voices of the gods spoke from the wind and thunder, and the spirit of God flowed in every mountain stream, and the whole earth bloomed as a sacred place—the realm of mythic imagination." His question became, "now that we moderns have stripped the earth of its mystery, how are our imaginations to be nourished?" Writer of Celtic spiritual traditions, Esther De Waal (1997) includes prayer as a means of showing the ‘religious imagination’ of ancient Celtic peoples, together with poetry and song.

**Anishnaabe Story as vision of Cultural Worldview**

With colonization, Christianity brought conflict of identity for Anishnaabe, whose culture and traditions have been left with continuous transition difficulties and social problems. Peggy V. Beck and Anna Lee Walters (1996:333) detail effectively the transition of their spirituality:

Throughout history since ...contact..., *The People's* resistance to loss of their identity, culture, and ways of life have earned them the condescension and intolerance of pre-dominant society. How this affects sacred ways of living by *The People* today is seen in the various court decisions that concern the freedom and rights of tribal people to continue to practice certain ceremonies, and to protect and have access to ancient sacred sites.

The circular vision of holistic thought and life, is a classic example of a way in which Native North American people deem themselves to have been given by Creator, and their stories reflect their beliefs. An integrative system of life is the Anishnaabe way, as opposed to the separative and linear perspective of our modern western civilization's worldview.

All Native North American storytellers reveal some universal themes in their stories. Moses & Goldie (1998) is a seminal source of the universality in traditional and cultural stories reflecting many different Aboriginal Nations of Canada. As noted earlier, Basil Johnston (2005) writes exclusively of the Ojibwe tradition's intricate relations between the spiritual and cultural world view, its holistic pattern, and its questioning vision of Kitche Manitou (the Great Spirit). He explains (1981:7) the role of Elders was to relate answers through stories, as well as integrating their use of humour to relate those "often deep and serious stories."

In the Sacred Circle of Anishnaabe tradition, the dream world is considered as a reality, and forms part of an acceptability of the conscious world. Professor of Religion Lee Irwin (1994:3) has written extensively in *Dream Seekers on Native American Visionary Traditions of the Great Plains* to explain the "central role of dreaming in the traditional religious worldviews." In the Foreword (viii) Vine Deloria, Jr. writes, "the greatest difficulty in exploring the religious world of the Plains Indians is getting the reader and/or scholar to take the material seriously." The example of dream included in the Circle motif, together with the placing of Sacred Teachings on the Medicine Wheel, illustrates culture in a worldview that includes the practical and visual of a thematic spirituality.

Another theme within Anishnaabe storytelling is perhaps related to the difficulty mentioned by Deloria. Dumont (1992:194) describes how "before humans were
created, many of the land animals lived in the mythic past in what Richard Preston (1986:241) terms ‘an evolving geography of relationships’. A traditional Anishnaabe story, When Beaver Had Human Form, tells of the relationship between humans and beavers, and may be compared with the Irish story of The Voyage of Maelduin. There are a number of themes at work in both stories, which suggests that in both traditions there are culture-specific ways of relating to one’s spirituality.

Writing the conclusion to his discourse analysis of a traditional legend, Spielmann (1998:204) turns to Campbell (1988:5) to show sacred truth in cultural world view and spiritual tradition, in the concepts of legend and myth, which is what Campbell saw as being a “basic function of indigenous legends and myths”:

What human beings have in common is revealed in stories... stories of our search for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and understand our story. We all need to understand death and to cope with death, and we all need help in our passages from birth to life and then to death. We need to... understand the mysterious, to find out who we are.

Belief and experience that all of life involves cycles of time, growth, birth and death, of circular change, became obscured and rejected by a scientific way of thinking and seeing, motivating the development of western industrial civilization and modernity in general. This radical change has led to a spiritual vacuum, with growing numbers of people today in the West searching for answers to some fundamental existential questions, such as who am I, where do I fit, if at all, in the nature of things? Looking to a cultural analogy, using story, may provide enlightenment.

Comparing Stories: Embracing of the Circle of Life

“For thousands of years, singers and storytellers have wondered about the relationships between real and imagined worlds, between life and art. ... And many of our conflicts across cultures come down to a disagreement over whether stories and songs create or merely communicate thought and feeling.” (Chamberlin 2004:135)

For the second objective of finding some basis for comparing the two spiritual traditions, I have relied upon the comparative study of religion to look at a traditional story from each of the two oral cultures. Scholars of comparative religion Mircea Eliade and Wilfred Cantwell Smith attempt to find commonalities in religions, so as to understand the nature and function of religion in human life. Following this idea I will compare the Algonquin traditional legend, Amik Anishnaabewigoban [When Beaver Had Human Form] recounted by Okinawe, a respected Elder from the Algonquin community of Pikogan, with the traditional Celtic story The Voyage of Maelduin. How might these shared themes relate to storytelling and the sacred? What is the unifying motif at the core of both traditional oral world views?

Both stories contain at their heart the theme of journey. There is an external journey. In the Irish story (Matthews
1992), the hero Maelduin and his three brothers head out to sea in their curraghs (small leather boats) and visit many islands. Each of the islands has a different topography and a different kind of experience to enjoy or avoid. In the Anishnaabe story, the hero embarks on a journey, across a vast land and many times needing to cross over turbulent waters. Bridges have to be built and then eventually a dam. One could argue that on the surface both Maelduin and Beaver are looking for a place to live; they are searching for a kind of Promised Land.

Both stories involve water. In the Irish tradition, the Otherworld is over water and generally to the West where great mysteries of the gods, immortality, and the empowering sources of the spiritual quest are found. The sea symbolizes the origins of life, as it does in almost all mythic traditions. As Matthews (1992) writes, “To return purposefully to the sea” and voyage towards discovery “is a significant act” of returning to “the womb of the mother in order to be reborn or mystically transformed. To voyage on the sea of life is to discover and find oneself, to understand one’s own unique immram” (journey). In the Anishnaabe Beaver story there is also a water theme—the Beaver and his wife have to enter the water, which Beaver dams, so as to harbour all the power of water.

Both of these stories are about an inner journey. There are tests. Maelduin and his men have to fight many obstacles and monsters as well as resist their own inner demons such as lust and greed. Beaver has to battle his way through many natural obstacles, rescue his wife from drowning, and then escape the enemies who have come to kill him.

These journeys in both traditions can be seen as a kind of Shamanic quest. Shamanism is perhaps a modern term in the West, but it does refer to the reality that some go to the Otherworld to learn some deep truth. Beaver was on a Shamanic quest; he was good at adapting to his environment, but he needed to learn to not forget his loved ones. He did escape with his wife, but their children were killed. Maelduin went to the Otherworld filled with hatred for the men who had killed his father; he needed to learn that vengeance might have satisfied him in a superficial way, but it still would not have closed the door to this dark force in his soul. Maelduin needed a transformation of the soul from hatred to kindness, from anger to friendship. In short, Maelduin needed to be healed in the deepest sense. And healing is the purpose of the Shamanic journey to the Otherworld.

Journey, then is a central theme in the two major stories I have considered from these two ancient oral traditions. A second major related theme is symbolism of the circle, which conveys the cyclical nature of their mythical world views. In both oral traditions, every part of life involved cycles—the seasons of nature, the seasons of human life, the cycles of sun and moon and formations of the stars. Thus the spirituality of these two traditions involved a deep holism—to be well, meant living in synchronicity or balance with everything and everyone else.

Spirituality is a realm of experience that is neither logical nor decipherable by reason because it relates to soul. And soul, as we learn from these two ancient traditions, cannot be disconnected from any human being—but is an integral
part and foundation of what it means to be human. These traditions teach that soul, heart, mind, and will are interrelated, and they move and grow with the seasons of life and nature, which evolve on a cyclical and natural order.

The circle is at the core of a traditional oral way of seeing the world, because it is a representation of the renewal and constant movement of all life. This idea of circular movement can be seen explicitly in the design of the Celtic knot pattern found on Irish High Crosses or on stones like those guarding sacred passages such as Newgrange. Bradley’s (1993:83) interpretation of the Celtic knot is found in the lines of T.S. Eliot, who wrote: “What we call the beginning is often the end and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”

The three images of Circles at the end of this paper show features which symbolize a holistic cultural world view from each tradition, with the third representing what I see as integrative similarities in both cultures. While there is insufficient space to give details here, seeing the holism within the idea of cultural world view should help to show their similarity.

The preservation of knowledge carried through story and language shows how orality was a conveyor of traditions and culture of both Anishnaabe and Irish peoples. With reference to the Celtic oral culture, Gaelic speakers Caitlín and John Matthews have written an extensive encyclopedia on myth and legend and their spiritual inherency (Matthews and Matthews 2004), translating directly from Gaelic language. Matthews also shares her knowledge of Celtic spirituality and wisdom in a guide (Matthews 1995). Alwyn and

Brinley Rees (1961) give an intense lengthy account of story and its integrity within their Celtic culture. One asks if literacy embraces the same spiritual connotation found in oral traditions? What has humanity lost with its loss of oral tradition wisdom inherent in story, language, ritual and custom, its traditional way of knowing life? These are probing questions into the immensity of the power of ancient oral storytelling which modern humankind has yet to fully understand.

**Orality of Spoken Words rather than Literate Minded Culture**

The third objective of this paper addresses the question of whether orality rather than literacy makes language and story more effective as a conveyor of the sacred. Greek civilization has had a great impact on the Western world and orality. Havelock (1963:134) refers to the Homeric state of mind to show how “in any culture” language was organized. He writes:

> One discerns two areas of communication: (a) there is the casual and ephemeral converse of daily transaction and (b) there is the area of preserved communication, which means significant . . . and in our culture means ‘literature’, using the word not in an esoteric sense, but to describe the range of experience preserved in books and writings of all kinds, where the ethos and the technology of the culture is preserved.

This identifies two forms of communication: oral and literate. Within memory of an oral people, world view
implicates the way they think and communicate orally to each other. Havelock suggests that the early Greek consciousness, which speaks in poetic fashion, is transformed into expressions of conversation and communication in a poetic way. The way we think becomes materialized and expressed from our communicative worldview. We now think and formulate our thoughts differently, because literacy has altered our formulation of conscious thought with its expression in written form.

Havelock’s point is that a Homeric and “general state of mind” was reflected orally in “preserved and significant speech” and that worldview of the pre-literate Greek world was preserved in myths and stories. In other words, we formulate our thoughts in a different way once exposed to literacy. The human thought process became changed when we transferred oral knowledge into a literate form. Oral culture sealed its actions in the thought consciousness of a mythical worldview solely in stories and other cultural links to their ancestral past.

The orality of primary peoples had a significant and structured form, which Ong (1988:9-10) reviews, explaining its structural organization. He calls the modern literate society unwilling to recognize oral legitimacy. Citing Finnegans, he writes:

The scientific and literary study of language and literature has for centuries, until quite recent years, shied away from orality. Texts have clamoured for attention so peremptorily that oral creations have tended to be regarded generally as variants of written productions, or, if not this, as beneath serious schol-

arily attention. Only recently have we become impatient with our obtuseness here.

Ong says the Greek development of the art of rhetoric, and its status as an academic subject in Western culture over centuries, has shown a dominance of textuality in a scholarly mind. Further, Ong believes this has not been conducive to the art of orality whether consciously put in writing or otherwise. Another point Ong raises (p. 14) is the interiorising of the alphabet by the Greeks that he sees as creating a conflict between orality and literacy. In time, history has evolved to show us the development of writing and its eventual impact upon our mostly western cultures, which Ong (1988) calls a “technologizing of the Word.”

Alternatively, the oral voice in Anishnaabe tradition has kept stories, poetry, songs, ceremonies and rituals intact with its spiritual world view through the ages to the present day. Ancestors passed on their cultural spirituality, using orality to teach Anishnaabe sacred ways. In their tradition, stories continue to be told orally. Why? Because oral story expresses more powerfully traditional beliefs and mythical world view, and includes the listener. In the modern world, however, this is not done with ease, nor does it even hold respectability within the concept of modern thinkers.

Take the example given by Chamberlin (2004:10) of Gitskan Elders in British Columbia speaking to Judge Alan McEachern in their claim of traditional lands, which held their ancestry and storied history. Chamberlin, a Senior Researcher with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, explains how Elders gave word-by-word accounts of their ancestral history of thousands of years, sometimes breaking
into Tsimshian language and song to explain the story. The Judge dismissed them, calling them “barbaric” people whose ancestors had no “written literature,” further saying they were “roaming from place to place like beasts of the field.” The Elders were incredulous of the strangers’ claim to their land, and one of them finally posed a question, “If this is your land, where are your stories?” Chamberlin then writes, “He spoke in English, but then he moved into Gitksan, the Tsimshian language of his people—and told a story. All of a sudden everyone understood . . .”.

In the Irish tradition, we find the same determination to maintain the tradition of telling old stories orally. In ancient pre-Christian time, orality and story was the domain of the Bards and Filiad or Poets. These ancient Bards undoubtedly created fascinating experiences for listeners—so they too became part of the narrative and consequently interconnected the sacred circle of meaning. W.B. Yeats (1902) in his book *the Celtic Twilight* said these stories need to be retold to keep the ancient Irish world view alive. He said of his late storyteller friend Paddy Flynn: “Let us go forth, the teller of tales, and seize whatever prey the heart longs for, and have no fear. Everything exists, everything is true, and the earth is only a little dust under our feet.” This claim speaks of the cultural worldview to which Yeats belonged.

**Language: Human Culture and Revitalization**

Rabbi David J. Wolpe (1992) evokes the power and fascination of words in the Preface, to his book *In speech and in silence*:

> Words can reach to the depths of our nature. They echo inside . . . Somehow experience is not full until we can frame it in language . . . Our life is bracketed by the wonder of words: we celebrate the first prattle of infancy, strain for the concluding wisdom uttered in last moments. Words are the currency in which we trade the information, the sentiment, the stuff of human life.

In our quest for knowledge within academic circles, or an even wider human circle, let us not make the mistake of overlooking the human aspect of what it is we are talking about; its commonality or inclusivity, as opposed to pointing out the distance between two points.

My purpose in writing and speaking of storytelling is to properly engage in something I know little about, in relation to the myriads of scholarly texts already written in this regard. However, I do know from my own experience of speaking English, living outside of my homeland, but functioning in another English-speaking country, that I own a differently worded cultural vision. Chamberlin (2004:14) says something similar through words of Plato, saying, “if we change the forms of story and song—he was especially concerned about music, but could have been talking about language—we change something fundamental in the moral and political constitution of a society. That’s why he didn’t want to change or translate them; and that’s why others do.” Rather than divide with a ‘Them’ and ‘Us’ mentality, as Chamberlin suggests, “shouldn’t we be trying to find common ground across cultures in language itself?” I believe if we look, we shall surely find those commonalities in
our humanity.

The aspect of our humanity which is universal is the ability to speak and put into words all the things connected with the what, who, where, why, and when that we want to address in sharing a most human relationship with one another. Wolpe (1992:xii) explained his amazement at the vitality that words held even inscribed generations ago, when studying important old religious works. He holds words as "the vessels in which human connection is carried" and this is perhaps something of importance to remember when we might otherwise be tempted to scorn a tradition that is unfamiliar or not well known to our scholarly minds. Our language, as our heart within human culture, whether spoken, written or sung, as Wolpe (1992:4) says, "untangles the ages, allowing a historian to peek back through time" and more importantly, "it is alive." So, we might ask, how alive are the indigenous languages of the Celts and Anishnaabe? What does the future hold in respect to these languages of ancient cultures? Again, limited space only allows for a very brief mention of an example or two of each Peoples group.

Within Irish, Scottish and Welsh culture there is a great resurgence of recognition and celebration of the spiritual and language traditions. Pennick (1997:138) writes of "contemporary Celts" realizing that the old traditions of Celtic wisdom and its spirituality are not an ancient legacy but a timeless spirituality rooted in "the deepest eternal secrets of existence." This also means recognition of the utmost value of cultural languages of Gaelic, Irish and Welsh, among scholars and writers such as mentioned in this paper, whose texts are being translated today.

At Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, a Gaelic College for language learning on the Isle of Skye, I spent several days sitting in the library, researching and reading. The college has led the way in reviving Scottish Gaelic language and culture. Students spoke only Gaelic as they socialized between classes, and I learned of a new Gaelic language, education and heritage centre in Islay, another island. The College also has an exchange program with Gaelic speakers from University College Cape Breton. Grade school children also attend classes in Gaelic at the primary levels in Scotland. Along with language revitalization, the area of cultural music is also seen as integral to language learning. Instruments like the bodhrán (Irish hand drum), harp, and uilleann pipes along with flutes and guitar, promote traditional song and music, reinforcing language use and its strengthening of culture.

The Irish language is prominent in its revitalization efforts both in Ireland and in North America. The language is being taught at the University level in places like Ottawa, Ontario and Texas in the U.S., although not without its difficulties, according to Dr. Aileen Curtin, who spoke at this conference of finding alternate routes to introduce and teach the courses. At the primary level, Irish is being taught to young pupils on a volunteer basis at a private venue in Sudbury, Ontario, which provides annual workshops and a festival. Language learning is also reinforced through classes for Irish dance, song, and the playing of tin whistle, using artistic expression to integrate culture with language learning. Since Irish was given official status as a working language by the European Union in 2007, there is a certification process in Irish Syllabus and Testing. Dr. PJ Mac
Gabhann of the University of Maynooth is also present at this conference to explain the rudiments of the certification process, as well as testing of language participants.

A brief mention in regard to the Welsh people and their language will close this paper. When I informed relatives in England of my plans to travel along a certain coastal route in Wales, they voiced surprise at my venture into ‘Welsh’ Wales. Unknown to me at the time was that the areas I chose were predominantly Welsh-speaking areas. In Porthmadog, I had occasion to speak with the postmaster about the language and its vitality in Wales. He was surprised at my interest, picking up my English accent, but proceeded to tell me that Welsh was being used in the primary schools with the children, and that many areas were mother-tongue Welsh speaking areas, with employment requiring the Welsh language.

Similarly, the reason for studying Aboriginal languages in a contemporary context is that they remain a solution to the survival and growing strength of the nations who have spoken them for centuries. There is a close link between language and identity necessary for that survival and growth. As we saw earlier, language provides identity and roots to both individuals and nations in concrete, tangible ways. For First Nations peoples, language is the original and most natural way of transmitting traditional stories and of the wisdom of generations of Elders. To understand the uniqueness, beauty, insight and power of an Aboriginal language, it is not enough to merely know its structure. You have to hear it in its social context, in the places in which it belongs.

Along with my First Nations student colleagues, as I learned the Ojibwe language, I began to see the interweaving of cultural perspectives in language. Many classmates became frustrated with the difficulty of learning a ‘new’ language, but were able to relate how the thinking, doing and behaviour of their older family members was reflected in the language they were trying to learn. Revitalization of languages under long oppression from a dominant culture is a slow process that requires great determination and patience on the part of learners as well as those who are trying to teach what to them is their mother tongue, whether Gaelic or Anishnaabemowin.

Understanding a language enables us to better understand a people. Through language we can begin to appreciate how people think and behave. Every culture has specific ways of interacting in a variety of contexts, and an understanding of how these activities are accomplished gives us a glimpse into peoples’ minds and hearts. In this paper we have explored a number of issues relevant to the social dimension of languages. Another common thread may be that oppression by a dominant civilization to vanquish indigenous languages has a major effect on the cultural spirituality of those oppressed, since spirituality is innate to language.

The Anishnaabe Medicine Wheel illustrated below is an example of traditional holistic teachings (Nabigon 2006; Benton-Banai 1998). Each quadrant explains how I have seen the elements related to our topic, as well as giving an image of cultural tradition that is used across every aspect of life teaching in community services. Caitlin Matthews also offers an example of how ancient Irish tradition held to the
cyclical ideas of place and events showing holistic thought. She also places seasons and festivals cyclically, and outlines each quadrant in a range of colours.

In conclusion, orality is perhaps sacred mostly for its very humanity, which is the ability to bring forth speech through uttering of words. We cannot ignore the technology of the word and its varied modern media, but we should never lose the ability to bring memory and story into existence through orality of language and story. May we continue to be inspired in our resolve to retain, and be refreshed, in our cultural heritage, which contains our stories. May we be encouraged to pursue and meet the challenges that come with such endeavours and know we are not alone in our resolve to do so!

Adapted and excerpted from Graveline (1998:55). Graveline writes: “Spirituality is experienced as an ongoing process, allowing the individual to move towards experiencing connection— to family, community, society and Mother Earth.”

The Medicine Wheel includes all people groups of humankind, represented by colours: East-Yellow, South-Red, West-Black, White-North, presenting the inclusive balance and wholeness on earth as a habitat. Provision is given to the Seasons, Human conditions, Times of day, the Elements and Virtues in being human. It actually contains over three hundred Teachings.

This circle represents an interpretation from my own perspective of how I see the relational aspects of looking at language and story and its inherent spirituality and wisdom.
The Four Airts of Ireland

An old Irish proverb gives the qualities of these “Four Winds of Erin” (Pennick 1997:119): “The east wind is dry and puts fleece on the sheep, the west wind is generous and puts fish in the nets. The south wind is moist and makes the seeds flourish. The north wind is harsh and makes people sad.”

The Quadrants showing the colours of the Four Winds and Four Mystical Directions of Ireland, with each being divided into one-third sections (Matthews 1989:9, 22, 89):

East: Purple, Yellow, Red.
South: White, Pale Green, Green.
West: Pale, Grey, Dark Brown.
North: Black, Dark, Speckled.

Similarities of Oral Tradition Anishnaabe and Irish Celtic Peoples Culture

The Circle represents a Holistic and Integrative Worldview and includes an interconnectedness of Spirituality.

The cultural world view of traditional oral Anishnaabe and Irish Peoples can be seen as holistic by looking at a cyclical image. Beginning with Cultural Language of both oral traditions gives relevance to a way of being in the world, giving an understanding of a common way of thinking and behaviour, a world view.

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Both traditional cultures had Story Cycles to explain their ways of seeing life, death, history, legend, and cosmology including their relationships with land, water, people and animals. The elements of ritual and sacred space were prevalent in daily life as well as seasonal and annually.

Anishinaabe and Irish Peoples were artistic and creative in developing many expressions of their lingual world views through their customary traditions as shown in the West direction. Of particular note is their use of Botanical Medicines for healing of the body, still present today.

Within the Cultural identity of both Peoples, was spiritual awareness of the Divine/Creator.

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Murder in the Classroom

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A startling title, and a strange concept: learning via murder, yes. And though promoting murder seems inherently wrong, this paper will explain how effective our murder mystery dinner events and projects have been as entertaining learning tools both in the classroom and in the Irish speaking community in Dublin. Having just finished our eighth murderous event, we feel that it is time to let others in on our dirty secret.

English-language box dinner party kits have been used as the basis for task-based learning projects and oral exams for Trinity College’s Irish language module courses for the past three years to great effect. Participants in these courses were mostly first-year students, with varying levels of fluency in Irish, working together on group projects in Irish as a means of improving their language skills. Their final term task was to produce a murder mystery dinner party event conducted completely in Irish. The events were filmed and an external examiner evaluated their language ability while they combed through character relationships, events and clues to find out whodunit!

These projects were also used as Irish language community dinner party events during Seachtain na Gaeilge in Dublin and proved to be valuable in drawing people from different Irish language circles together, linking learners and seasoned fluent speakers of all ages in the process.