

Brief – The Oral Tradition, Oral History Research & Traditional Use Studies (TUS)

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The Oral Tradition

The oral tradition is knowledge that passes from one generation to the next through the spoken word (orally) (*Getting Started in Oral Traditions Research*, Section 2.1). In many cultures, including First Nation and Aboriginal cultures, the oral tradition has been the primary form of knowledge transmission and has been the way to communicate complex information about culture, politics, the environment and economics (*Chief Kerry's Moose*, page vi). This knowledge has been accumulated, held, cherished, transmitted, learned and respected as forming cultural identity and wisdom. The use of oral sources is "as old as history itself" (*Oral History: The Spoken Record* by Jocelyn McKillop – in *Oral History Information Package, Archives of Manitoba*, pg. 65). It is only within relatively recent history that the written tradition has become dominant and widely adopted as a form of information transmission.

Oral History Research and Interviews

Oral History research is a method of doing research that involves interviewing people to learn about their life, their culture or history. Many people, especially the elders within a community or culture, may be holders of a great deal of history and knowledge that has never been recorded. (*Getting Started in Oral Traditions Research*, Section 2.6).

Although there is a body of written information about First Nations' history and culture, most has been documented by outsiders and therefore very little of it is in a format meaningful within Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal peoples realize there is value to the creation of a written tradition to complement and document the knowledge and history contained in the oral tradition. This written record becomes another way of preserving and passing along traditions to future generations (*Getting Started in Oral Traditions Research*, Section 2.2).

The purpose of conducting oral history research and interviews is therefore:

- to document a person's knowledge, experiences and thoughts
- to allow those who do not write down their experiences to become a part of history
- to assemble oral knowledge and information as a contribution to a broader set of research (see **Traditional Use Studies** below)

Oral history interview topics can include:

- life history of the interviewee
- a particular period of time or specific events, activities, or places
- genealogy (tracing family relationships, community connections)
- knowledge and use of lands and waterways
- environmental descriptions over time

- cultural traditions
- occupancy patterns

Information obtained by oral history is often verified, analyzed and put into historical context.

Traditional Use Studies (TUS)

Traditional Use Studies (TUS) are community-based research projects designed to capture and record Aboriginal peoples' patterns of physical use and occupation of a territory over time. Types of data collection (or tools) that typically characterize a TUS include:

- Interviews and discussions with Elders and holder of land-based knowledge (see **Oral History Research and Interviews** above)
- Historical and other types of research
- Mapping and recording of traditional uses, including sites and activities

TUS can be thought of as the “geography of oral tradition, or mapping of cultural and resource geography” (*Chief Kerry's Moose*) or as a way of depicting some of the relationships of Aboriginal peoples to their lands.

TUS evolved out of the need to prove Aboriginal title in court and to depict the impacts of outsiders' activities on Aboriginal peoples' survival using evidence that is understood and accepted in non-Aboriginal culture. “Possession and control of cultural data translates into considerable political power, at both the negotiating table and in court” (*Chief Kerry's Moose*). TUS became particularly important following the 1997 landmark Supreme Court of Canada ruling in *Delgamuukw*. Although the court found that oral testimony does have weight in law in terms of Aboriginal title, the court also underlined the need to demonstrate physical occupation of territory.

A lot of information about land use and occupancy can be mapped by First Nations and Aboriginal peoples. For instance:

- Places where animals and plants are harvested for food, clothing, medicines, tools, shelter, fuel and other purposes
- Places where rocks, minerals, and soils are collected for making tools, conducting ceremonies, and other purposes
- Ecological knowledge of habitats and sites critical to the survival of important animal populations; for instance, caribou migration corridors, islands where moose calve, waterfowl breeding grounds and staging areas, and spawning beds.
- Aboriginal place names and habitation sites, such as settlements, trading posts, cabins, camps, and burial grounds
- Spiritual or sacred places such as ceremony sites, rock paintings, areas inhabited by non-human or supernatural beings, and birth and death sites
- Travel and trade routes
- Legends and other accounts about specific places

In undertaking TUS, it is important to distinguish between ‘use’ and ‘occupancy’. Use refers to activities involving the harvest of traditional resources. Mapping of use creates a visual record of the locations where activities like hunting, fishing and travelling occur. Occupancy refers to the area which a community regards their own “by virtue of continuing use, habitation, naming, knowledge, and control” (*Chief Kerry’s Moose*). Occupancy mapping records locations where people have knowledge of ecology, legends and indigenous place names, locations of habitations and burial grounds.

Some of the uses and benefits of TUS (*Chief Kerry’s Moose*):

- Documenting Elders’ oral history before more knowledge is lost
- Determining shared use areas and reconciling boundary conflicts between neighbouring aboriginal communities
- Providing evidence for court cases involving aboriginal rights and title
- Settling treaty and claims under land claims processes
- Identifying lands for land selection and entitlement
- Supporting compensation claims
- Negotiating co-management agreements
- Negotiating protective measures and benefits from industrial development
- Determining probable impacts of development
- Supporting injunctions to stop unwanted development
- Supporting administrative programs such as land use permitting
- Developing education curricula
- Providing baseline data for long-term community planning and lands/water management

Sources:

Chief Kerry’s Moose

Getting Started in Oral Traditions Research

Oral History Information Package, Archives of Manitoba

Oral History: The Spoken Record by Jocelyn McKillop – in *Oral History Information Package, Archives of Manitoba*

Whelan Enns Associates Guide to Oral History Interviews