

2021

Captikwł and The Laws of Nature; The Syilx People's Ethical and Cultural Connection with Mother Earth

Gabrielle M. Miller

Western Oregon University, gmill18@mail.wou.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/pure>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Environmental Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Miller, Gabrielle M. (2021) "Captikwł and The Laws of Nature; The Syilx People's Ethical and Cultural Connection with Mother Earth," *PURE Insights*: Vol. 10 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/pure/vol10/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at Digital Commons@WOU. It has been accepted for inclusion in PURE Insights by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@WOU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@wou.edu, kundas@mail.wou.edu, bakersc@mail.wou.edu.

Captikwł and The Laws of Nature; The Syilx People's Ethical and Cultural Connection with Mother Earth

Abstract

In this paper, I explore how the Syilx's oral history (*captikwł*) shapes their identity and ethics through their understanding and respect for mother earth. I analyzed the *captikwł* of the Syilx and their discourses about life; drawing on their orature (written oral history) to demonstrate that because oral history is an important aspect of Syilx culture, the Syilx people of the British Columbia and Washington region have learned to survive for centuries due to how they relate to their lands. The anthology of the Syilx *captikwł* are reviewed in the paper to gain a better understanding of how this collection of stories inspire an environmental ethical philosophy and justice that is deeply rooted in their identity as indigenous people and practiced across generations

Captikwł and The Laws of Nature: The Syilx People's Ethical and Cultural Connection with Mother Earth

Gabrielle M. Miller, Western Oregon University
Faculty Sponsor: **Dr. Isidore Lobnibe**

In this paper, I explore how the Syilx's oral history (*captikwł*) shapes their identity and ethics through their understanding and respect for mother earth. I analyze the *captikwł* of the Syilx and their discourses about life, drawing on their orature (written oral history) to demonstrate that because oral history is an important aspect of Syilx culture, the Syilx people of the British Columbia and Washington region have learned to survive for centuries due to how they relate to their lands. The anthology of the Syilx *captikwł* is reviewed in this paper to gain a better understanding of how this collection of stories inspires an environmental ethical philosophy and justice that is deeply rooted in the Syilx identity as indigenous people and practiced across generations.

INTRODUCTION

The Syilx people believe that the earth was once a human being; she was the mother of all people, the soil is her flesh, the rocks her bones, the grass her hair, the wind her breath, and when she moves the earth quakes. These are the words of the Elders, recounted to the Syilx people since time immemorial. They are continually whispered from generation to generation, and are taken into their hearts, and shown through their culture. Syilx are among several cultures including other indigenous peoples that view the earth as a living being, like a mother, comparing her winds to the soft lullabies sung to children, and her mountains and hills as extensions of her body. The Syilx people have learned her laws and assumed the responsibility of caring for Mother Earth and her creations (Syilx Okanagan nation, 2017).

The origin myth of the Syilx states that when the creator was making Earth, they asked Coyote to prepare the lands for their arrival (Armstrong, 1993). Coyote then went to the plants and animals who were just as intelligent and compassionate as humans to discuss how the humans were to survive. The Syilx believe that there are the four chiefs who represent all of those who live in our world, from all who walk

the earth, all who grow beneath it, all who grow above, and all who dwell in her waters. Bear, the wisest and strongest of the chiefs, offered up his body and all who walk the earth for the peoples' survival. After seeing his great compassion and sacrifice, the other chiefs offered themselves up as well, and all whom they represent ("The Lonely Bear Cub," 2015). Because of their great sacrifice, the Syilx understand that they in turn must always take care of them (P. Terbasket, 2019).

It is through this oral history that the Syilx understand how they are expected to live and survive on their land. In this paper, I explore how Syilx's oral history (*captikwł*) shapes their identity and ethics through their understanding and respect of Mother Earth. By analyzing the *captikwł* of the Syilx people and their discourses about life, I demonstrate that oral history is an important aspect of their culture; as with other indigenous people, the Syilx of British Columbia have learned to survive and thrive thanks to how they relate to their lands.

First, I will describe who the Syilx people are. This is followed by a brief review of the literature on the Syilx and their relationship with the Earth as expressed in their stories, art, and principles. I then discuss the Syilx understanding of their relationship with the earth and the ways in which

they go about protecting it according to the laws indicated through their captikwł. I conclude the paper by arguing that there is a lot that environmental activists and policy makers can learn from how the Syilx have protected their land if close attention is paid to their stories, art, and ethical practices.

THE SYILX AS A PEOPLE

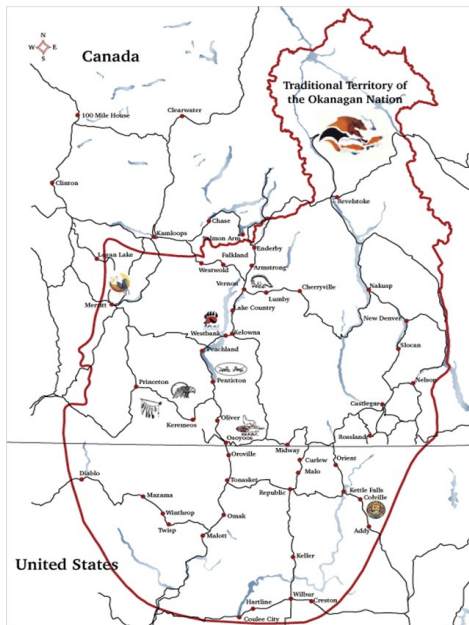


Figure 1. Mapped image of the Okanogan Nation (2007).

The Syilx, or the Okanogan people as they are now commonly called, have lived in British Columbia, Canada, and across the border in the state of Washington for thousands of years. Long before the arrival of the Europeans, they inhabited eight districts in which they moved freely; these districts were organized according to how the land was used and respected in terms of the norms and cultural traditions of the Syilx (Terbasket, 2019).

For instance, Carrie Terbasket (2019, p. 4), explained the nature of Syilx relationship with their land: she notes that "For Syilx people, culture is not separate from the natural world,

but rather one living and breathing entity. The methods of our survival have depended on our relationship with the natural world and expressing those relationships and resulting responsibilities through our creativity." Indeed, long before the arrival of the Europeans, the Syilx people had preserved the natural state of their land with the help of their cultural knowledge and respect of nature's laws as told through their captikwł. Captikwł is their indigenous word for their oral history and the stories that are told and handed down through generations. The concept represents an ethical philosophy encapsulated in Syilx identity thanks to this collection of stories that teach them about laws, values, customs, and moral principles. This knowledge is thus passed to each generation so that the land, as a part of the Syilx people's culture, can survive and thrive along with the tribe. In other words, it is the right and responsibility of the Syilx to guard and honor Nature's laws, with the view to ensuring the survival of all members, present and future.

Furthermore, the Syilx believe that by taking care of the land, they are respecting it to ensure the survival of generations to come. It is the responsibility of caring for the future, guaranteeing that the future generations have enough with which to survive in the future and present. One can thus argue that captikwł represents not just an environmental ethic, but also the identity and responsibility of the Syilx and all members of their tribe. It is this ethic that they look to as the core of their identity and the reason for their survival, which is taught to them through their stories.

For instance, when teaching the new generations about the Four Food Chiefs and their sacrifice, Syilx people draw on the notions brought to them by their captikwł. It enjoins them to be empathetic and compassionate towards the earth, thereby reflecting their understanding of actions and connections. Children thus understand the respect they must give to the berries they pick, the salmon they catch, and the

roots they dig. This ethical philosophy is ingrained in the people, culture, and language, even with the root word of their name,

Syilx noun see - ee - ul – ks : root word 'yil' - taking many strands and twisting to make one rope; a command for all strands of life to continuously bind and unify with the rest. The Okanagan word for ourselves is Sqilxw. Which in a literal translation means 'the dream in a spiral'. We recognize our individual lives as the continuance of human dreams. We know our lives to be the tools of the vast human dream mind which is continuing on into the future. At our very core, we honor our inherent creativity as our sacred connection to all of creation" (C. Terbasket, 2019, p. 3).

The above insight from Carrie Terbasket suggests that when members of the tribe call themselves Syilx, they recognize the etymology and meaning of that word, signifying a thread in a vast collection to be woven throughout time. It is the job of all members of the Syilx to unite and strengthen the dream for the future. This central part of Syilx culture has survived and continues to sustain them long after the invasion of the Europeans in the nineteenth century, and even to date when they have been incorporated into the modern world.

Syilx Native Language and Connection to Land

The oral history of Syilx is also told in their native language, a language that allows them to connect all members of the tribe which is an imperative part of being Syilx. Jeannette Armstrong (1993) is a Syilx poet and writer who is responsible for preserving and writing most of the Syilx oral literature and culture. In her contribution to this anthology, *We Get Our Living*

Like Milk From the Land (1993) she helps us understand how deeply rooted Syilx teachings reach into their identity. She underscores the importance of their language and oral history as she notes:

All who speak it are the Syilx because the language carries the teachings of a very old civilization with thousands of years of knowledge of healthy living on this land. The laws are always taught by telling the stories to each child and to any adults who need reminding. The land forms in the stories are teachings and are reminders to each generation that the land is at the centre of how we are to behave. The destruction of the story land marks and natural land forms are like tearing pages out of a history book to the Syilx People. Without land knowledge we are endangered as a life form on that land and we in turn endanger other life forms there" (Armstrong, 1993, p.1).

One cannot overemphasize the need to understand the connection that the Syilx have with their culture and land as influenced by their oral history as noted in the quote above. It is especially important for Western society to understand this relation between culture and land during modern times when indigenous lands are still being threatened by colonial advances and capitalist projects such as pipelines and observatories, where the sacred lands of indigenous people are desecrated and stolen in favor of the profit motive. To the Syilx the land they have preserved all this time is more than a piece of land as perceived in western views. Rather it is more than land on which they grow crops or build a house. It is the land that they have a relationship with, the one that from creation they have respected and cared for as the land has cared for and helped them survive. To take them from that land, or to destroy it truly is to destroy their history, and

identity as the caretakers of that land. Through their native language the Syilx have cultivated a mutual relationship with the land that has endured for generations.

Armstrong goes into more detail about the laws of nature the Syilx learn. The first law of the Syilx is to love and respect Mother Earth. They are taught the laws throughout their lives because the Syilx believe that humans were not given this instinct to protect the land, but that they were given memory instead, from the creator and the spirits. They attribute their survival to the understanding of land as a living entity. But there are other laws the Syilx are expected to also learn.

Below, I provide the full text by Armstrong that includes the Syilx words and translations so readers can gain a better understanding of the language and laws connected to their identity as Syilx:

The other laws are for people to get along with each other in a healthy way and for passing on ways which are respectful to all creation. We govern ourselves by these laws. These are the four stages.

1. *t'elsqilxw* (torn from the earth *sqilxw*) life form of first people without natural instincts to survive
2. *xatma?sqilxw* (in front of us *sqilxw*) first thinking people who learned the natural law to survive
3. *sqilxw* (dreaming ones, bound together, of the land) original people who learned to live together on the land in peace
4. *?awtma?sqilxw* (to struggle and/or come after *sqilxw*) today's *sqilxw* after the arrival of newcomers. (Armstrong, 1993, p. 1)

It is important to note that these stages of life that the Syilx as a people and culture teach and experience offers wisdom and ethical practice

for all people in the natural world to understand. They also serve as guidance about how we can live peacefully with others, whether it is the Syilx, other indigenous peoples, or Western society.

Throughout this paper, I have used examples of the first law of the Syilx to demonstrate how they must respect the land they live on out of respect for the Four Food Chiefs and their culture, and to preserve it for those who will live on it in generations to come. Now we take a look to the second stage of this law. Their second stage entails learning how to live on the land in relation to others, to share it not just for use in the future, but also sharing it with the other inhabitants. This may mean people from the other districts, neighboring tribes, or the newcomers as shown in the fourth stage above. This philosophy offered by the second stage is another essential aspect of Syilx ethical practices that ultimately has allowed them to survive through and past colonization even as they live together healthily. Their capacity to survive despite the destructive impact of colonization shows the tribe's capacity for adaptation in the Western world while keeping their principles intact.

Now that we have examined the depth to which the Syilx environmental ethic reaches into their core beliefs, identity, and how it bleeds into their daily lives to ensure their survival thus far, let us dive deeper into the future of this nation. It is easy to say that these are essential beliefs while looking at art and literature, but the examples above provided us with how the Syilx are actively applying these beliefs into the future of art and literature as essential not only to their nation but also to the outside world. Pauline Terbasket (2019) is a Syilx woman who has been a revolutionary and passionate about bringing back the original foods of the Okanogan Nation. It is with her respect and love of the Four Food Chiefs that she advocates for a change in her article "Syilx Perspective on Original Foods" (2019). In this article she gives the perspective of the Syilx on the land and the food the land

has given them. It also speaks on the changes colonialism brought, as well as giving a vision for the future. One area is the fisheries introduced in 2014 that have paved a path for the revitalization of the salmon and original fish that the Syilx had cared for.

Pauline Terbasket (2019) recognizes that there needs to be a shift in how we view nature in order to survive as inhabitants of this earth and that it is imperative and essential that indigenous perspectives are used. These perspectives have helped the people care for the land for thousands of years with a mutually beneficial relationship between nature and man, a relationship that the Western world has not only not adopted, but in many cases, has strived to eliminate in favor of profit. However, the Syilx will not sit by and stay silent on environmental issues; they will speak for the land and continue to fight for its survival. These stories are a part of their everyday lives. They are not stories they hear once as a child, but stories that they will continue to hear until the words echoing in their hearts. Then they will tell the stories to others until they, too, recognize their power.

In each example I have provided how the authors have told their origin stories, how they have addressed the importance of these stories, how much they have written about them, and how they are living. We have seen how these stories have kept them alive and thriving to the present day, and we will continue to see their stories' usefulness in the future as the Syilx use them time and time again to express their beliefs about Mother Earth.

To the Syilx, these stories do not represent static teachings; instead, they are dynamic through time. It is for this reason that Carrie Terbasket (2019) proposes that the Syilx stories can provide a framework needed for the planning and teamwork that accompany the city planning board of which she is a part of. She points out that these stories are a continuous thread in their lives that guides them into the

future. She also says that for future generations to thrive as they have, these teachings must be continually taught as well. Carrie Terbasket draws inspiration from the story of Fox and Coyote as an example of how the Syilx knowledge and responsibility is embedded in the way they are, and how that knowledge is needed in cultural planning. Like the Fox and Coyote, each member of the society will compile important pieces and breathe life into it. Through discussion and dialogue, they expect to take on new meaning and life they have created together and honor it.

Other than the background of her people and the meaning that their name allows, Carrie Terbasket (2019) sheds more insights into the importance of their stories. This is elaborated in the proposal Carrie Terbasket sent to the head of this planning board (2019), which asked for the inclusion of these indigenous cultural perspectives to serve as a framework for cultural city planning. This is a monumental step towards the recognition and protection of indigenous rights and voices, and the consideration of indigenous perspectives in environmental activism, and business. It is also a step toward recognizing oral literature as tried and true knowledge that finally provides a platform for the Western world to respect and value indigenous cultural knowledge and perspectives. It is hoped that the Syilx will continue to use their voices to tell these stories, and that through their oral history, the Syilx will share the ethical principles learned through their captikwł with the world. These principles may establish deep respect and care for Mother Earth before it is too late to revive her.

Art as Expression of Syilx Culture

It is important to point out that a Syilx artist Clint George (Bonneau, 2020) uses art as an expression of his culture. He welds steel sculptures that are inspired by his peoples'

creation myths and oral history. For example, his most famous piece is about the Four Food Chiefs that sits outside the Okanagan College. To him it is important that the sculpture be placed outside the school, so the future generations can be taught and reminded of their origins and identity. Athena Bonneau (2020) has underscored in her article the fact that the Four Food Chiefs are an essential part of their ecosystem, and that a failure to respect them would cause a collapse of the Syilx Indigenous nation and beyond; it is imperative that they must always respect nature's laws. It is George's hope that when all the students of the college see the sculpture, they will be inspired to learn more about their traditional history and the laws of nature, and respect that knowledge. Therefore, he wants the world to know that the Syilx are not going anywhere; they will continue to survive and thrive on the land they have taken care of since the beginning of time (George in Bonneau, 2020).

Indeed, through Clint George's art we can see the ways in which the Syilx have inherited and sustained their survival based on their ethical respect for the world. It also points to their understanding of art as an expression of themselves and the world they see. What Clint George's interpretation of Syilx oral stories exemplifies is that they are not myths and legends that are told not just to teach a lesson, but are a history, a precedent, and law by which the tribe must abide by. This is one instance that illustrates how modern Syilx artists use their culture as inspiration to translate these oral histories into art pieces and poetry, thereby bringing them with the world for all to see. Sharing their culture and practices into the western world allows the tribe to provide the West with practices and views that have been lost and have caused damage to our earth and her creations. The West may learn as the Syilx have, and perhaps may change yet.

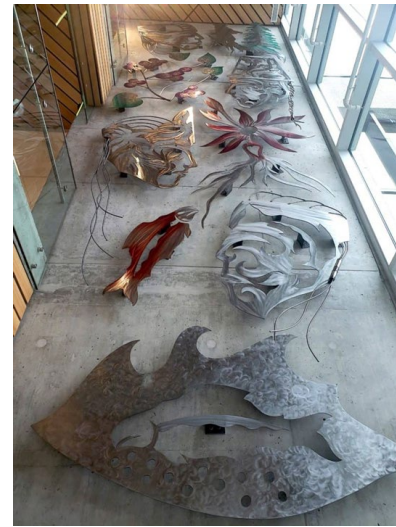


Figure 2. Clint George's (Wapupxn) sculpture of the Four Food Chiefs in the Okanagan College, Kelowna Campus. An artistic representation of the Syilx origin story. (<https://www.facebook.com/Clint.George.art/>)

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have seen how Syilx stories are ingrained in their identity as indigenous people through the eyes of artists, poets, city planners, and environmentalists. In examining how the Syilx translate their understanding into this environmental ethic, Armstrong (2009) explained this concept:

The Syilx Okanagan environmental ethic is a philosophy expressed in the practice of Indigeneity as a social (cultural) paradigm and is identified by an inter-reliant experience in the land, as demonstrated in land-use practice which is shaped by the land's realities as observed, learned, and communicated to succeeding generations. Syilx Okanagan Indigeneity reflects an epistemology that optimum human wellbeing cannot be achieved through a human-centered ethic, but must focus on the optimum ability for the

environment to regenerate itself.
(Armstrong, 2009, p. 8)

I have argued that these stories are the foundation to Syilx's identity, which have shaped their ideas about environmentally ethical views of Mother Nature. The Syilx ideology about Mother Nature as living entity thus provides the tribe and humanity with the necessary tools of survival through the learning of her law. In other words, the continuation of Syilx philosophies ensures the survival of future generations on that land. By listening to the story of the Four Food Chiefs and understanding the sacrifices of those foods that allow humanity to survive, captikwł establishes an empathetic link to the world around us, one that western societies, which are dominated by meat industries and our artificially grown fruits, can learn from. From time immemorial, the Syilx have survived, and will continue to survive, because of the stories they tell about themselves and their connection to Mother Earth. These stories are vital for the survival of the Syilx, both physically and culturally, and this provides justification for the continuation of the teachings of their captikwł.

REFERENCES CITED

- Armstrong, J. (1993). Original People- chapter 1. We get our living like milk from the land. In J. Armstrong (Author), Okanagan tribal history book. Theytus Books.
https://www.syilx.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Original_People.pdf
- Armstrong, J. C. (2009). Constructing indigeneity: Syilx Okanagan oraliture and tmixwcentrism [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Ernst-Moritz-Arndt Universität Greifswald. <https://d-nb.info/1027188737/34>
- Bonneau, A. (2020, November 04). Syilx artist Clint George welds oral stories into massive steel sculptures. Retrieved December 19, 202, from <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/11/03/syilx-artist-clint-george-welds-oral-stories-into-massive-steel-sculptures.html>
- Map. (2007). Retrieved March 09, 2021, from <http://www.okanagannationbusiness.com/map.shtml>
- Syilx Okanagan nation. (2017). Retrieved March 11, 2021, from <https://www.syilx.org/about-us/>
- Terbasket, C. (2019). "Weaving our collective threads: offering a pathway for syilx creativity within the city of kelowna." Retrieved January 21, 2021, from <https://www.kelowna.ca/sites/files/1/docs/community/Culture/weavingourcollectivethreadsfinal.pdf>
- Terbasket, P. (2019). "Syilx perspective on original foods: Yesterday, today, and tomorrow." *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 9(1), 1-6.
- "The Lonely Bear Cub." (2015). An Okanagan legend - creation of the animal people. YouTube. Retrieved December 20, 2021, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_8eR9VuAZg