

# DISCUSSIONS

## The Story of "Being Indian"

Cultural knowledge is not rigid and unyielding. The various forms of expressive culture both reinforce tradition and provide a means for incorporating flexibility and changing circumstances into a society's world view and self-definition. In the following article, Joseph P. Gone, a cultural anthropologist and Gros Ventre Indian, explains how a story of his own family history links tradition with a changing cultural context.

### "WE WERE THROUGH AS KEEPERS OF IT": THE "MISSING PIPE NARRATIVE" AND GROS VENTRE CULTURAL IDENTITY

*Joseph P. Gone*

In the summer of 1994, I inaugurated a journey that took me into the homes of many of my tribal elders on the Fort Belknap Indian reservation. I sought a better understanding of how contemporary Gros Ventres of my grandparents' generation make sense of being Gros Ventre, and detailed conversations with my tribal elders promised rich insight into modern Gros Ventre cultural identity. In one conversation with a respected elder, I was told that "being Indian" is "nothing but a story." Here, in the very words of this venerated elder, I heard a conviction shared by many proponents of narrative analysis (Mishler 1986, Somers 1994, Schiffrin 1996): identity and narrative are inextricably intertwined.

The narrative performance analyzed here is principally concerned with an account elicited from Mrs. Bertha Snow, my grandmother, in the spring of 1995. The historical events recounted in the "Missing Pipe Narrative" involve the traumatic discovery by an elderly Gros Ventre man that

one of the sacred Pipes entrusted to his care by the Gros Ventre people was missing from its ceremonial bundle. The events described occurred in the southwestern area of the Fort Belknap Reservation near the Catholic mission within a decade of the close of World War II. The narrative consists primarily of quoted speech attributed to Bertha's father interspersed with commentary provided by her. The narrative begins with Grandma situating her father at home in his cabin:

He said, "I was sitting here reading and happened to glance up." He said, "in fact, I got up to get myself a cup of coffee." And he drank coffee all day long, a great big pot. He said, "Here this kid was running toward the house, and gee, I didn't know who he was really, until he got close and I recognized him." And he just come up on the porch, and the door was open all the time, you know, in the summer time. He was all out of breath and he said, "Fred, my dad wants you." He turned and ran all the way back home. He'd run and then he'd walk and he'd run. "And, boy, I grabbed my hat," he said, "and checked to see if I had enough matches and Durham. And I took off and I walked real fast over there. And I got there and I went in." He'd go visiting and talk about things and, you know, listen to (them). Talk about serious things that [happened] long ago. He made it his business to go talk to these old people.

And he said, "When I went in, his wife was in the kitchen, that little lean-to shed on a little log cabin, they used that for kitchen and dining area, and they slept in the log cabin. Usually, when I come to visit him he's sitting on his bed which is right in front of the door. His daughters has a bed

over there. His sons have a bed. Two daughters and two sons."

"Here where I come in," he said, "that old man was sitting on the floor, and he had a plate of coals in front of him, and he was smudging. And he was crying. Tears were coming down his face. Geez, you know, scared me. For a while I thought maybe he had a heart attack or he got real sick and that's what I thought was wrong, you know." But he said, "After I saw him sitting like that, I just figured it was something else that was wrong (with him). So I sat down on a chair. They had a chair sitting right there waiting for me. I sat down and I didn't say a word. I figure in his own good time he's gonna tell me what he wants." So he got through with his smudge. He sat back, I guess. They sit like this you know, flat on the floor.

In the next segment of the narrative, the "he" in the story is the old man:

Then he took a deep breath I guess and he said, "Something unusual happened with that bundle this morning. When my wife got up to make fire, she happened to glance up there, and here she seen something laying on top of this bundle. So she goes closer and she looks at it and here it's a pelt. It's one of those pelts that belong inside this bundle." He said, "I'm scared and I don-no what happened. I don't know what to think. What's going on? I don't know. I don't know how to explain it."

"So I made her take it down," he said, "and bring it over to me, and sure enough, she took the whole bundle down she didn't touch that pelt. She took the whole bundle off of the nail." And see they'd tie it like this, with part of the string over this way, and

then they'd tie it around here so that it's got a handle. And that's hanging on a nail. So she brought it to him, and he—they—both looked at it really good to see if it had been tampered with, because right away I guess they thought maybe their kids got into it. But you know, in a way, they thought that people might think their kids got into it. But he knew his kids wouldn't get into it because he was an oldtimer and he knew he had his kids trained not to even consider touching that bundle, you know. And when the daughters got to that age, that bundle wasn't supposed to be in the house, when they have their menses. So they had to know. The mother told them to tell them when they did, they'd take the bundle and put it outside in the back of the house. So those four days—four, five days—that bundle would be outside.

Anyway he said, after they looked at it real good, and they said the knots and everything looked like they had never been tampered with. It was just the way it was—lord knows when was the last time they opened it you know. And so they—he opened it I guess to put this thing back in there. He said when he opened it, the Feathered Pipe itself was gone. He said, "And I'm responsible for this bundle. What are the people gonna say about me? How am I going to explain that pipe is gone? It's gone. What am I gonna do, you know?"

The significance of this cataclysmic event is narrated in terms of the consequences surrounding a pivotal existential crisis. The disappearance of the sacred Pipe that has been entrusted by the community to his care threatens not only to throw Gros Ventre belief and tradition into complete disarray but also to disrupt

the old man's relationships with community members. The narrative voice then shifts to Grandma's father's response to the old man's predicament:

"Oh gee," he said, "I didn't know what to say. I really pitied this poor old man, because I know he's innocent. I know he would not ever consider letting anybody, or you know, his family wouldn't. I know his family wouldn't touch it. So I just said a prayer in the way I know how to the Blessed Virgin Mary, 'Please help me. Give me the right words to put this poor old man's mind at ease, so that he won't be blaming himself for something that he's not responsible for. If it be God's will, let me say the right words.'"

So I guess he started to talk. I don't know what all, but this is just what he told me: "I told him, 'This is, you know, we were all taught to respect and love this pipe, because all these years, far back as we could remember, our people have told us what this pipe has done for us. Down the years, it's been our father our grandfather our leader our protector. It's told us when to move. It's told us where to find buffalo to feed our families. It's told us everything. It has guided our lives all our lives. But today, they're teaching our children a different religion. Our children are learning things we never did learn.'" And he said, "Being as the Supreme Being gave us this pipe in a supernatural way, to protect, guide, and take care of us all these years since we got it, why shouldn't he take it back when he thinks we don't need it anymore?"

For Grandma, Gros Ventre spirituality is characterized by a radical *historical discontinuity* (Gone 1996) whereby ancestral Gros Ventre ceremonial tradition has been decisively and irre-

versibly superseded by Catholicism, as a result of white domination and supernatural design. In the present narrative, the significance of the disappearance of the sacred Pipe is interpreted by her father in just this way. A second line of argument employed by Bertha's father pertains to the Pipe's status as an "orphan," given the drastic decline in ceremonial knowledge since the death of its greatest Keeper, Bull Lodge:

"You know yourself it's an orphan. It didn't leave a successor to Bull Lodge. Ever since Bull Lodge died, the pipe's been an orphan. His brothers took care of it. You know that yourself, you lived with it. You've been taking care of it, and you know your daughter isn't gonna be able to take care of it. So? It stands to reason that the Great Spirit came and got his child. That's all I could tell you. That's the way it looks to me. But I think that's what happened," he said.

The significance of orphan status in Gros Ventre life would be difficult to overemphasize, given the emphasis placed on *kinship obligations*. For example, my grandmother's esteem for this cultural ideal (Gone 1996) involves the expectation that Gros Ventres will provide materially for both their immediate and extended families (raising their sibling's children, if necessary) and generally support their "relations" in any significant family matter.

In this context, then, "orphan" status is seen to involve alienation from familial comfort and guidance as well as from shared material resources. As such, orphans are truly "pitiful" in Gros Ventre society, and Grandma quotes her father as portraying the Pipe as horribly alienated from the

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# DISCUSSIONS

## The Story of "Being Indian" (continued)

kinship relationships that it formerly enjoyed with its ceremonial Keepers. Recall that previously the old man cast his dilemma in terms of the potential for disrupted social relationships that might attend the inexplicable disappearance of the Pipe for which he cared. Grandma quotes her father as concluding his monologue in response to this concern:

"Because you looked at that bundle. You say it hasn't been tampered with. I believe you, and I think everybody else would believe you too, because that's what people think of you. They think very highly of you. They would never accuse you of mishandling this pipe."

The old man's anxiety regarding the social consequences of his predicament emerges from the significance of social relationships for Gros Ventre personhood. For Gros Ventre people, personal status depends to a large degree on the relationships one maintains in the community. This intricate connection between individual status and social ties motivates my grandmother's esteem for the cultural ideal of *community-mindedness* (Gone 1996). Thus, to be severed from one's relationships in the community is a fate almost too horrible to contemplate. Grandma's father speaks to this angst by closing his monologue with comforting words designed to assuage the old man's fears.

The conclusion of the Missing Pipe Narrative centers on the old man's response to this explanation for the Pipe's disappearance:

The old man listened and listened I guess and didn't say a word. He says, "Yeah," he says, "maybe you're right. It really shook me up." And dad says, "You know

what? Maybe I *am* right. Where did I get those words from? I got help from the Supreme Being."

This resolution is significant for two reasons. First, Grandma uses the present tense three times in quoting the words of first the old man and then her father. This switch to present tense may function to mark the interpretation ratified in the resolution as significant for Gros Ventre understanding today. Second, neither the old man nor Grandma's father is portrayed as dogmatically asserting the truth of these interpretations—both use the qualifier *maybe* in this segment of dialogue.

This caution in accepting interpretations of spiritual matters is reminiscent of two other features of my grandmother's world view. First, a moral universe saturated with spirituality raises the issue of *authority* for Grandma (Gone 1996), for the meanings of spiritual phenomena require considerable expertise and experience if they are to be discerned. The absence of such expertise in modern Gros Ventre life—given the abrupt discontinuation of Gros Ventre tradition—confronts my grandmother with the same crisis of authority that probably confronted (to a lesser degree) the narrative characters as well, given the significant decline of ceremonial tradition even at that time. Second, even if seasoned spiritual leaders existed then or today, there would be no guarantee that an authoritative interpretation of spiritual occurrences was always possible. For it is the nature of the numinous, according to Grandma (Gone 1996), to resist conclusive rational analysis—spiritual phenomena tend to retain their *mystery*.

Grandma herself offers an alternative explanation, in which she evalu-


ates the fact that photographs were taken of the sacred Pipe at a public opening of the bundle long after the precise details of the ritual had been forgotten:

Well, maybe, maybe they shouldn't have done that. Because taking pictures of things like that is a taboo. And they took a lot of photographs that time. That's when that pipe had his nose twisted out of shape and so he pulled out.

In these words, Grandma Bertha recognizes the alternative explanation to the "divine plan" scenario, namely, that Gros Ventres themselves are responsible for the disappearance of the Pipe owing to *ritual malfeasance*. Each of these explanations has serious implications for the kind of cultural identity available to modern Gros Ventre people. If the Pipe is understood to have disappeared as a result of ritual negligence on the part of the Gros Ventres, the kinds of cultural identity available to modern tribal members emerge from the failure of *tenacity* (or effectual ambition) and the subsequent loss of *primacy* (cultural ideals important to my grandmother [Gone 1996]) to Catholicism and its Caucasian advocates. In contrast, if one understands that the Pipe was taken away by the Supreme Being because a Gros Ventre conversion to Catholicism was in the divine plan, then modern Gros Ventre identity may proceed with its cultural ideals intact and even reinforced (Fowler 1987).

Source: Adapted from Joseph P. Gone, "We Were Through as Keepers of It: The 'Missing Pipe Narrative' and Gros Ventre Cultural Identity," *Ethos* 27:4, December 1999.





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