BLACKFEET LANDSCAPE KNOWLEDGE AND THE BADGER-TWO MEDICINE TRADITIONAL CULTURAL DISTRICT

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Formal interactions between archaeologists and Native Americans in the arenas of research and conservation provide excellent opportunities for learning how traditional knowledge is expressed by contemporary tribal members whose authority is called upon to monitor fieldwork, identify objects, or aid in the interpretation of features and patterns of artifact and site distribution. Field-based interactions range from informational site tours to monitoring excavation for inadvertent discoveries, and from resource-specific surveys to comprehensive landscape reconstructions. Limitations of project schedule and funding often restrict field-based interactions to short-term consultation with one or a few designated tribal representatives—generally elders or religious leaders who hold both the knowledge and the right to speak about it. Comprehensive landscape studies, on the other hand, depend on sustained communication with a larger group of people to fully succeed. These projects are ideal for better understanding the dynamics of traditional knowledge and for evaluating its potential role in the refinement of research frameworks and cultural preservation agendas.

Today’s studies of aboriginal land use are conducted within a more holistic framework than research originally done for the Indian Land Claims process, as they tend to incorporate native worldviews and consider the broadest possible range of past and present uses. Furthermore, a trend toward forming research partnerships with tribes and native organizations lends a new authority and vitality to landscape studies that otherwise would depend on few opinions and secondary sources. But perhaps most importantly, such comprehensive studies help to situate individual and collective knowledge in the context of daily practice (or lack thereof) and to unpack the nature and depth of connections between people and the landscape. Because of the complex historical trajectories of native land use and territorial politics in the U.S., every tribe holds different levels of geographical, historical, and cultural approximation to specific parcels of aboriginal land, which in turn conditions the types of knowledge applied by tribal members to identify material remains and explain use patterns. The following case study briefly illustrates the interplay of traditional knowledge and the exercise of use rights on ceded land by a contemporary tribe.

Blackfeet Land use in the Badger-Two Medicine Traditional Cultural District

The Badger-Two Medicine region (approximately 110,000 acres) is a strip of Rocky Mountain Front Range along the west and southwest portions of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in northwest Montana (Figure 1). The region, which comprises a chain of high peaks, the forested slopes to the east of the Continental Divide, and several major watersheds that empty into the Marias River, was ceded to the U.S. in the Agreement of 1896. What came to be known as the “Ceded Strip” is now under National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service management. Under the original agreement, the Blackfeet Tribe was to cede mineral rights but retain use rights. Even though rights of use and access to the strip have eroded over a century of federal management, tribal members continue to exercise them in traditional
The opportunity to explore in some depth how contemporary Blackfeet people incorporate traditional knowledge in the exercise of use rights on the Ceded Strip first presented itself in the late 1980s, when a peak in proposals to drill natural gas wells in the Badger-Two Medicine watershed of the Lewis and Clark National Forest prompted the documentation and assessment of the cultural significance of this region. Research by Biedl (1992), Greiser and Greiser (1993), Vest (1988), and Deaver (1988) resulted in the establishment in 1997 of the Badger-Two Medicine Traditional Cultural District (TCD), which is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Because of renewed interest in natural gas exploration, and as part of the National Historic Preservation Act’s Section 106 requirements, in 2004 the U.S. Forest Service sponsored anthropological research to ascertain the existence of Blackfeet traditional use areas on the northernmost portion of the Lewis and Clark National Forest, which was originally excluded from the TCD. The project was carried out by the author in partnership with the Blackfeet Community College and the Blackfeet Tribal Historic Preservation Office (Zedeño et al. 2006). In 2006, the Indian Land Tenure Foundation awarded to the Blackfeet THPO a research grant to complete the inventory of sacred sites and other culturally significant resources on the Birch Creek watershed, located to the south of the current TCD boundaries (Zedeño et al. 2007).

This collaborative endeavor pursued several goals: (1) document individual and family use histories and current traditional uses; (2) identify and catalog traditionally used localities, places, and resources; and (3) explicitly consider Blackfeet worldviews in the presentation and discussion of research results. To accomplish these goals, the project partners identified tribal consultants who had personal and historical knowledge of the study areas; developed a comprehensive object, resource, and place survey form that complements the National Register Bulletin 38, Guidelines for Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties; and selected the localities to be surveyed with project consultants.

In addition to 30 Blackfeet individuals whose expertise contributed to the establishment of the TCD (Greiser and Greiser 1993), the present landscape study involved 60 male and female consultants, including five Canadian Blackfoot speakers. Consultants’ ages ranged from 25 to 96 years of age and represented numerous user groups, including religious society leaders and members, individual religious practitioners, bundle holders, firefighters, forest managers, hunters, trappers, plant gatherers, timber collectors, ranchers, campers, and outfitters. These user groups exemplify the diversity of interests currently present on the Badger-Two Medicine region. By comparison with written records, we estimate that the combined historical memory of the consultants goes back at least six to eight generations, or approximately 150 years, which predates the establishment of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation and many other events that shaped the use history of the Ceded Strip.

Fieldwork undertaken with the Blackfeet consultants consisted of packing and surveying expeditions and day trips to selected localities (Figure 2). Consultants who could not travel were shown maps and photographs of the project area to elicit their participation. Additionally, Blackfeet project partners held a winter meeting that followed traditional storytelling protocols. Sixteen traditional activities (past and present) were documented in 2004–2005; associated resources comprise 65 plants, 52 animals, 14 minerals and fossils, and 16 landscape features. This inventory grew in 2006 to include dozens more landmarks and resources. Cultural features identified in the surveys consist of historic and contemporary and nontraditional ways.
hunting campsites, bundle offerings, prayer flags, cairns, a sweat lodge, stacked lodge poles, fasting circles, trail markers, tipi rings, wikiups, traps, hearths, rock art, isolated lithic artifacts, and a modified bison skull (Figures 3 and 4). Oral traditions, navigational knowledge, place names, individual experiences, and historical events were also recorded along with evaluations of resource condition. The resulting inventory shows a range of landscape uses and a depth of cultural connections beyond those previously documented for the Ceded Strip.

Concept and Practice in Blackfeet Knowledge Systems

The active participation of Blackfeet consultants in all research stages furnished the opportunity to situate landscape use history in the Badger-Two Medicine watershed within the parameters of their knowledge system as it exists today. In Blackfeet epistemology, knowledge is power and power is secrecy, but it is the form of knowledge acquisition, rather than its content, which gives people the ability to tap the power of the landscape. The notion of transfer, or the sanctions of knowledge exchange among humans and between humans and other-than-human persons, was given to the Blackfeet at the time of their Creation. Thus, orthodox practitioners assert that improperly acquired knowledge is powerless at best, fatal at worst, and certainly un-Blackfeet.

Not surprisingly, Blackfeet scholars and religious leaders are constantly preoccupied with teaching “ways of knowing” (Bastien 2004), as these are paramount to maintaining ethnic identity and sovereignty. This point was taught to the author by means of a fable:

Two Blackfeet friends went to fast on the Sweetgrass Hills; each obtained from the spirits a particular medicine bundle. In their old age, one friend transferred his medicine bundle to a grandson, who in turn fasted in the same place as his grandfather and got the same power. The other friend died without transferring his medicine; his grandson also fasted with that old man’s bundle, but the medicine he obtained was Cree [JM].

The moral of the story is that people who disregard sanctioned ways of knowing could bring the end to all things Blackfeet—hence the importance of learning Blackfeet culture in traditional contexts and through sanctioned channels.
Knowledge acquisition through transfer is a widely recognized and respected cultural precept that should and does guide individual and group behavior. The fact that it is often diluted by cultural loss, altered by external influences, or interrupted by the demands of reservation life has not deterred traditional sectors of the tribe from practicing and teaching this epistemology. However, Blackfeet land users variously incorporate cultural information obtained from other ethnic groups and in alternative learning contexts. Interethnic marriage, Christian indoctrination, or school education, for instance, continuously add new dimensions to traditional knowledge obtained through transfer. Whereas one would expect new information to increase variation in land use signatures, the core of most conspicuous uses (hunting, trapping, plant gathering, fasting, and paint collecting) remain remarkably faithful to a handful of concepts and practices that have endured the passage of time. Traditional land users are nonetheless able to detect subtle deviations from the norm (e.g., unfamiliar ceremonial offerings and rock features built in unusual places), which they attribute to external influences.

Among ubiquitous landscape users, knowledge in all its traditional, neotraditional, and Western expressions is at once experiential, intellectual, and mystical. Individuals engage multiple knowledge sources in daily activities and appeal to these sources when asked to explain the logical sequence of their actions or the importance of a particular place or resource they use. Recalling the teachings of persons who inhabit the Blackfeet pantheon and their culture hero, Napi, as they personally understand them, further allows land users to frame their activities within culturally and socially accepted parameters and to unpack networks that connect places and resources.

In conclusion, Blackfeet landscape knowledge owes much of its prevalence to the people who engage its power to cope with individual and collective crises, and use traditional resources in everyday life. Aside from being a source of tremendous ethnic pride, intimate knowledge of the landscape is a foremost mechanism for asserting sovereign rights and for maintaining social memory. For the contemporary Blackfeet, the Badger-Two Medicine landscape is not simply a repository of knowledge, but a teacher of life’s principles. It was in the spirit of preserving the last of such teachers that consultants agreed to participate in the research projects.

The Badger-Two Medicine landscape can accommodate changing environmental, cultural, and sociopolitical conditions as long as critical resources are not permanently damaged, and spiritual qualities are not desecrated beyond repair. Whereas tribal and state institutions may find a preservation middle ground that benefits the collective and respects cultural fundamentals, the expert eye of the traditional land user can best determine what types of actions will adversely affect not only the physical integrity, but also the cultural viability of particular places in the landscape.

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human remains in the trunk of a car to Venda country, the body parts then were distributed among struggling shopkeepers who wished to obtain some of the spiritual potency believed to reside within the remains.

Traditionally, particularly during times of drought and widespread crop failures, those farmers with good harvests were often branded as witches by the chief and his immediate followers. The chiefs, who together with their diviners and ancestors were generally held responsible for the fertility of the land, were willing to blame certain successful individuals for their own failures. Successful people without an extended family were particularly favored as ritual murder victims. Normally, accomplices of the chief ambushed and murdered the victims in isolated locations. The chopped-up remains of the victims were boiled in big ceramic pots to extract the fat. This fat was mixed with grain within the pits of the chief’s settlement, while the decapitated head was placed on the side of the pit. Sorghum seeds mixed with the fat were eventually distributed to the rest of the population for planting. In this fashion, people believed that the fertile powers thought to reside within the remains.

Many ethnographers and archaeologists claim that informants tell you what you wish to hear. However, my own experience has been that informants sometimes had to rectify my misunderstandings of their statements. For example, when I referred to spirit animals, such as snakes and leopards at caves and pools, as ancestor spirits, Venda people went to great lengths explaining that these apparitions are messengers of the ancestors, or ancestor familiars, instead of the ancestors themselves.

Perhaps it is a result of my personal research style that I did not find a list of prepared questions very fruitful—it is from recognizing the potential significance of at least some unsolicited statements and actions of my excavation assistants that I obtained the most meaningful information. At the same time, I almost certainly missed the importance of many other statements and actions, in no small part due to my unfamiliarity with the Venda language and incomplete knowledge of their complex culture and intricate history. All in all, instead of disregarding the thoughts, speech, and actions of impoverished and disenfranchised descendants, it behooves archaeologists to pay close attention.

**Situation Archaeology**

Some of my Venda assistants hinted that archaeologists are no different from diviners seeking ancient remains to further their own careers. To them, archaeologists’ attempt to attain knowledge from the past is nothing more than a journey into the world of the dead. Decaying carved wooden drums and seemingly abandoned ceramic jars that are still to be seen in some settlements of living Venda people are material representations of dead ancestral spirits. When I mentioned to a Venda headman that the badly weathered wooden drum on the edge of his assembly area can be conserved at a museum, he insisted that the drum is better off left to decay and blend with the ancestors in its current location. In another instance, I saw a broken ceramic jar sticking partly out of the dirt next to a vegetable garden. Chickens sat on its rim and goats drank rain water that accumulated within. Assuming that the ceramic was a good example of so-called “utilitarian ware,” I enquired if I might purchase the vessel for my comparative collection. The owner declined my offer on the grounds that the vessel was deliberately placed to attract ancestors at night time. This and other instances of artifact contexts have shown to me that distinctions between “utilitarian” and “ritual” artifacts are often oversimplifications.

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