

Culture



Julie CRUIKSHANK, in collaboration with Angela SIDNEY, Kitty SMITH and, Annie NED, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990. 405 pages, \$22.95 (paper)

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By Jo Anne Bennett

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As part of a continuing preoccupation with Native female narrative, Julie Cruikshank tried to get three elderly Native Yukon women to tell her the stories of their lives. What she hoped to hear was autobiography. What she heard often sounded more like myth. Each of the three women (from mixed Athabaskan and Tlingit backgrounds) insisted on weaving traditional narratives throughout the accounts of what, in our own cultural tradition, we usually think of as "personal" history. Moreover, each woman insisted — in the face of the ethnographer's agenda — "that these traditional narratives were important to record *as part of her life story*" (p. 2, italics Cruikshank's).

The range of traditional stories the three women interspliced into their life-histories is impressive. There are clan histories, parental anecdotes, second-hand accounts of the Yukon gold rush, as well as the kind of narrative we usually catalogue as myth. As a reviewer and generally interested anthropologist I found myself wanting to know whether the Native women themselves made linguistic distinctions — in either their own languages or in English — between these different (to us) kinds of narrative. Unfortunately, the book does not tell us.

How does such a broad range of narrative qualify as part of one individual's life story? The easy answer, of course, is to say that other cultures have different traditions of biographical narrative. Cruikshank, herself, does much to address the gap in narrative expectations between the women who relate their life stories and the wider Canadian/American reading audience. She presents each biography as a series of sections, interleaving the more western-style biographical accounts with sections in which the women relate the clan histories, family stories and legends by means of which they reflect upon and evaluate the significance of events.

But making accommodations to others' notions of what constitutes biography or autobiography is

only half the answer. There is a deeper question raised by Cruikshank's book: which are the stories that make sense of our lives? From whom do we receive them? These Yukon women apparently know, for they name their stories, and understanding Cruikshank to be unfamiliar with them, they relate them to her at length. We may envy these women their sense of groundedness at the same time as we deplore the general suppression of Native voices in Canada and elsewhere.

As Cruikshank notes, social science, too, "is a form of story telling" (p. 356) and the manner in which stories are told determines who will listen to them. Prodded by Annie Ned, Cruikshank encourages us to ponder which is more correct, the archaeologists' re-construction of Yukon pre-history from bones and stone chips strewn over the ground, or the oral traditions of the Native people who live there? If the two accounts come into conflict how do you tell who will be said to be 'right'?

A brief look at one of the 'autobiographies' will give a sense of how this book is put together. Angela Sidney begins her life story with a detailed rendering of her own and her mother's family history (the same, since her people are matrilineal), her father's family history, and finally her husband's. This is followed by a section giving Angela's narration of stories concerning the creation of the world and the arrival of the animals and the seasons. A third section presents more personal information about Angela's parents — where they grew up, their siblings, their travels, their work. This is followed by Angela's versions of stories she heard *from* her parents and from people of their generation — stories about caribou migrations, glacial flooding, the origins of the Klondike gold rush, etc. It is only in the fifth section that Angela appears in her own tale: she was born, she tells us, in 1902 — already thirty pages into her text. The following sections carry her from childhood and adolescence to old age, weaving back and forth between western-style chronological ordering and Native-style narrative. One criticism I have of the book is that it is not always clear why certain narratives are placed where they are in the text — i.e. we cannot always understand their relevance to the sections immediately surrounding them.

Several themes of interest emerge from all three life-histories: the cultural importance of travel in maintaining a sense of community, the sense of place, the value put on words/language/stories — "words are schools".

A persistent question intruded as I was reading this volume: where and when would stories such as those related by these three Yukon elders be used — outside the context of writing this book? All three women, Cruikshank tells us, are renowned story tellers. When do they practice their art? On what occasions do they feel compelled to speak in parables? What are the forms of etiquette that surround, and possibly limit, their narrations? These matters are only fleetingly addressed by Cruikshank and might, one imagines, form the stuff of an entire study.

This is an extremely readable book, one which makes the lived experience of women from other cultures easily accessible. By rights it deserves a wider audience than social scientists.

Earle WAUGH, Sharon ABU-LABAN, Regula QURESHI (eds.), *Muslim Families in North America*, Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1991. 369 pages, \$39.95 (cloth).

By Parin A. Dossa

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The study of the relationship between Islam, the diverse ethno-cultural family backgrounds of North American Muslims, and the larger secular society is multi-layered and exceedingly complex. Such an enterprise is best explored at two interrelated levels: (a) ethno-cultural manifestations of Islam and (b) its progressive engagement with the larger society. This four part volume, of thirteen contributed papers, captures one dimension of this dynamic: differential impact of Islam on Muslim families in North America. This dynamic is documented in relation to historical circumstances of migration, ethno-cultural backgrounds of migrating families, receptiveness of the host society, generational perceptions and variables of age and gender. While the volume is replete with varied data on the ethno-cultural manifestations of Islam, the issue of how a religiously rooted ethno-cultural identity may be reconstituted in a secular environment, though acknowledged, is not documented in all its complexities. Given the negative stereotyping of Islam, conceptualized as "orientalism", and the insidious distinction between the Other (Muslims) and Us (North Americans), this is a sig-

nificant omission. In spite of this limitation, the volume makes a useful contribution in providing much needed data on diverse forms of Muslim family life in North America.

In part one, three contributions by Abu-Laban, S. Qureshi, and Waugh examine the normative and or ethnic dimension of Islam as a boundary marker for Muslim families. Abu-Laban presents an insightful differentiation between cohorts of immigrants and their descendants. The dynamic interplay between religion and family illustrated in this article is muted in Qureshi's monolithic and descriptive account of the scriptural framework of Muslim family life. Qureshi's conclusion that a Muslim's (referred to as "He"; women are rendered invisible) social environment and socialization are sufficient to enable "him" to establish a family in any part of the Islamic world contradicts the stated theme of dynamism. Waugh's article is refreshing, being one of the few which addresses the issue of complex engagement of the Islamic tradition with the larger setting of Canadian society. The argument advanced here is that while the acknowledgement of racial and ethnic pluralism has enabled Muslims to draw upon their socio-cultural identities, absence of a Canadian national religious identity, has muted the religious dimension of Islam. Waugh's conclusion that a Muslim's practice of Islam is achieved through nationally accepted ethnicity illuminates the dialectical articulation of Islam with the larger secular environment.

The second part of the volume dwells on the theme of generational transmission of Islam. The first two contributors document the differential engagement of two Shi'a communities (Nizari Ismailis and Twelver Shi'a Muslims) to maintain the continuity of their religious traditions. Ross-Sheriff and Nanji's account of the Nizari Ismailis is informative in so far as it portrays the role of the *Jamat Khana* (place of worship), community organizations, women and the elderly in revitalization of family life. Schubel discusses the role of ritual (the *Muharram Majlis*) as a medium through which Islamic values are transmitted to the younger generation of the Twelver Shi'a. Although both accounts elucidate patterns of adaptation which are unique to these communities, they are, nevertheless, unidirectional and descriptive. The dialectical interplay between minority Shi'a communities and the larger encompassing socio-cultural forces is encapsulated in the process of generational transmission of values. This point is