wéeyekweʔnipse 'to sing one's spirit song': performance and metaphor in Nez Perce spirit-singing

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ʔipnetxsúukt 'introducing, introduction'

This paper presents a discourse analysis of ethnographic texts relating to Nez Perce shamanism. I explore the semantics of shamanistic discourse and practice in what is called *wéeyekweʔnipse* 'to sing one's spirit song' or, in more direct literal terms, 'to seize with the mouth one's spirit guardian song'. To understand the form and style of this type of ritual phenomena, I utilize an 'agent-centered' view of performance to capture the emergent qualities of shamanistic speech and its relationship to the contextualizing features of the winter 'spirit singing' performance. The analysis draws attention to the expressive aspects of metaphor in the shaping of human experience and action in Nez Perce culture.

wéeyekweʔnipse 'to sing one's spirit song'

Spirit-singing is a little known but important, persistent cultural phenomena among the Sahaptian-speaking peoples of the southern Columbia Plateau region of western North America. Among the Nez Perce-speaking peoples the *wéeyekwecet* 'spirit guardian dance' is more rare having died out during the 1960's due to acculturative influences and modernization. Recently, however, a *wéeyekwecet* 'spirit guardian dance' was held on the reservation in 1999 near Kamiah, Idaho suggesting its revival. Similarly, among the linguistically related Columbia River Sahaptin-speakers, they refer to the spirit-singing simply as *wáanpša* 'to sing one's spirit song.' It too is experiencing a renewal and is regularly held each winter at various locations among the Warm Springs, Yakama, and Columbia River communities. From 1987 onward, the author has attended and participated in many of these winter spirit-singing gatherings, including similar functions held among the Salishan-speakers in Washington, western Montana and southern British Columbia.

Herbert J. Spinden[1] (1879-1967), then a graduate student of Harvard in

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[1] In 1907, upon reaching Lapwai, Idaho, one of several communities on the Nez Perce reservation, Spinden collected ethnographic and myth texts from an aged 'renegade' Nez Perce by the name of Jonah Hayes (Spindend 1908a).

1907, was among the first ethnographers to collect data on the Nez Perce *wéeyekwecet* 'spirit guardian dance' complex. Spinden describes this ritual phenomena as "the most essentially religious of any performed by these Indians. It was a concrete expression of their most deepest religious ideas" (Spinden 1908a:262).

> Both men and women participated. The song sung were those obtained during the sacred vigil or those inherited. Each man or woman was leader when his or her song was sung. The singer started the song and the dance alone, and other dancers then took up the words and joined in the singing. There was very decided mimicry of the animal mentioned in the song, both in contortions of the body and in yelps and cries. There were also some stage devices, such as bladders filled with blood which were broken so as to suggest wounds. Many of the dancers cooperated to make the presentation of the particular animal more striking. Wolves and coyotes would hunt in bands, for instance. The fervor of the dancer who led was often such that he would fall into a stupor and to all appearances be dead. No musical instruments were employed in the dance. (Spinden 1908a:262-263)

We can infer from Spinden's description, as well as from more recent accounts, a number of basic elements that characterize the Nez Perce *wéeyekwecet* 'spirit guardian dance' as ritual performance. First, the underlying structure of the *wéeyekwecet* can be thought of as a set of culturally conditioned cognitive states that frame and orient collective human action. That is, they draw upon the cognized experiences of individual transformation and empowerment as performance. In particular, these transformations are characterized by their hierarchical arrangement and temporality as 'phenomenological phases' or 'rites de passages' representing life stage transitions, life crises, or moments of empowerment and powerlessness. Second, the emergence of a Nez Perce sense of self from these culturally conditioned cognized states is indexed via the individual ritual performance of *wéeyekweʔnipse* 'to sing one's spirit song'. Thus, to engage in *wéeyekweʔnipse* 'to sing one's spirit song' one must possess a *wéeyekin* 'a guardian spirit' as a result of adolescent vision questing, involuntary visions, inheritance or life crises. The critical distinction that arises here is that, for

many Nez Perce, to possess a *wéeyekin* 'guardian spirit' as symbol is to accept the canonical scheme governing its overall ritualization in addition to its actual expression as individual performance. Metaphorically, these notions are partly subsumed as embodied experience as suggested in the combined verb root *we-* 'with the mouth' and *ʔinipí-* 'to seize' which literally expresses the idea of singing as 'to seize with the mouth'.

1 q-*wéeyek-we-ʔnip-s-e*
1SG-to.receive.a.guardian.spirit-with.the.mouth-to.seize-IMPERF-PST
lit.: *I seize with the mouth a guardian spirit song*
'I am singing a guardian spirit song'

An inherent element in each of these characterizations of the *wéeyekwecet* 'spirit guardian dance' complex is the ritual communication of information relating to individual *wéeyekin* 'guardian spirit'. Rarely, if ever, did individuals relate information concerning one's *wéeyekin* 'guardian spirit' outside of its ritualized context, nor was it ever encumbent upon individuals to do so rather it was only during times of war or life crises that such identities were revealed. As observed by a more recent ethnographer, "It is patent, therefore, that the source of and special perogatives of one's weyekin were not made formally public until a state of phyical maturity had been attained, or until occasioned by some critical situation" (Coale 1958:139).

Here, we arrive at one of the first indications that possessing a *wéeyekin* 'guardian spirit' is a culturally conditioned cognitive state. Associated with this cognitive state is a general constraint on communicating the immutable aspects of one's deepest spiritual experiences. This constraint, informally expressed as a basic linguistic ideology, asserts that the symbols and meanings associated with one's *wéeyekin* 'guardian spirit' are embodied as "grammar(s)" of experience. These grammars of experience emerge as discrete states over one's life time. Not only do they impart important spiritual and world knowledge, they also contribute to the overall success of the individual.

Two broad conceptions of a Nez Perce sense of self are further indicated as 'ways of speaking'. The most prominent notion is the social condition *wéeyexniń*, that is, to be 'blessed with a guardian spirit, a person with power' as opposed to its opposite condition *weyexnéeý* 'without guardian spirit, powerless'. Derived from these social conditions are a set of speech behaviors that inform one's social identity.

> Indians call that *wéeyekin*, when you have medicine. If you don't, they call it *wéeyekni'ɛwɛs*[2]. Indians a long time ago could tell if you had weyekin because you were respectable and well-mannered. If you were rowdy and loud mouthed, they said you were *wéeyekni'ɛwɛs*. (unidentified informant, Coale 1958:140)

A basic notion of *wéeyekin* 'spirit guardian' and its inherent experiential reality thus constitutes a continuum of possible human knowledge in a Nez Perce world view. Notably, knowledge as a mental process is evident on at least two sensory-level dimensions (see Fig. 1). The first sensory dimension is construed as fields of perception in what is refered to as a *corporal schema*, that is, the "transposition of the indexical ground of reference from the body to more abstract aspects of communicative context" (Hanks 2000:23). The second sensory dimension is simply a condition of knowability, where spiritual knowledge is at least constitutive of one possible domain.

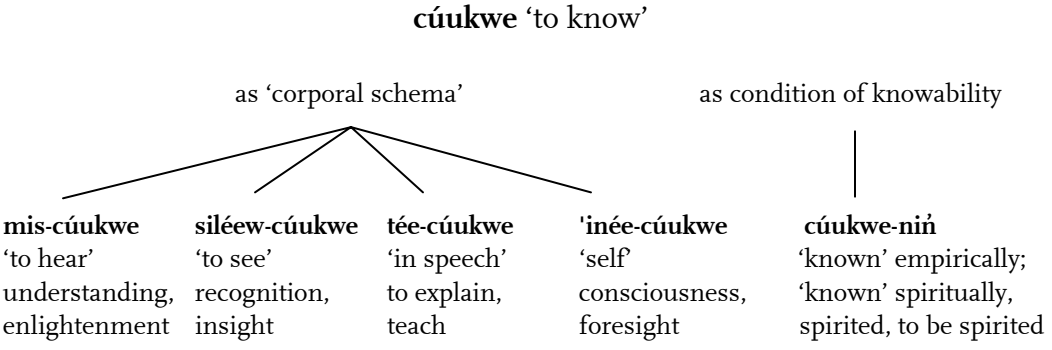

Fig. 1 Nez Perce Knowledge.

The *wéeyekin* 'spirit guardian' as a system of knowledge is brought into being as a result of culturally conditioned cognitive states. The expression *cúukweniṅ* 'known spiritually' or that which is 'spirited, to be spirited' references these cognitive states by virtue of their experiential totality. Morphologically, this is indicated by the passive participial suffix *-(n)iṅ* as a

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[2] This expression may be a variant of *weyexnéeẏ* that is, *weyexnéeẏ wées* literally 'being without a guardian spirit, powerless'.

stative quality. Thus, when one is *wéeyexníí*, that is, to be 'blessed with a guardian spirit, a person with power,' a Nez Perce logic states that one experientially emerges from a generalized state of unknowability to one of knowability or *cúukwenií*.

This analysis offers that the "grammars of experience," as metaphor, may be more accurate than previously thought since they do not conform to the limits of the corporal schema, rather, as a principle, they are attributed to discrete states of meaning that irrupt the human unconscious and conscious via the symbols associated with the *wéeyekin* 'spirit guardian'.

In the section that follows, I will contrast disparate texts to show how the grammars of experience are formulated as discrete states of transcendent meaning.

I used to know nothing. One time I went down to the log cabin in Spalding. An old fellow was singing. I started shaking and crying. He was singing about the Stick Indian and I thought I didn't know nothing about it, but I got scared and didn't know nothing (e.g., was unconscious) for a long time. I used to always dream I was flying, especially in high mountains, from canyon to canyon. That's the way Stick Indian travels. (unidentified informant, Coale 1958:140)

Ká́la wéet̓u ʔipnéecuukwenuʔ, kuʔstíit wéet̓u titóoqan pecúukwenuʔ kaa hiweʔnipóʔqa ʔilx̣níipe.

'He will not know himself,
in the same way, the people will not know when he would sing in a crowd.' (Jonah Hayes in Cash Cash 1999:43)

This song is for my own good, my own good. Whenever I feel low or sad I sing this song to give me strength. If I sing this song, anyone that hears it will be cured by hearing it...I never sing it just anywhere. Only when we have a medicine dance do I sing that song before the people. (Piluyekin in Thomas 1970:28)

Kawánnax̣ titlúunm pemscúukóʔqa, kuʔús hihíce yóx̣ke hiweʔnpíse.

'Surely then, our elders would understand in hearing it, thus what he is saying in that (song) which he is singing.' (Jonah Hayes in Cash Cash 1999:44)

Whenever I venture through the mountains, my song echos into the mountains which is heard by every creature. Those that are low and sick will receive it, and it will help their sickness in their bodies. This song will help if they believe it. (Piluyekin in Thomas 1970:28)

ʔeẏíickiṅike
kakonyá waẃáamnuuẋ
pecicúlikecetetu ʔipelikínm.

'On this beautiful side,
toward the head of the creeks,
the many breaks of the hills that
always come together--that cloud!'
(Jonah Hayes in Cash Cash 1999:45)

An Indian doctor told me once, "it's like you fall dead, it's good for you." The doctor said, "you learn more about your power and how to use it. It's good for you." (Piluyekin in Thomas 1970:28)

Kaa waqíiman tiwéetim konapkí péetaṅweeťaẋ. ċalawí ċaʔá ċíiqin ʔáatkiťaẋ, kawá patóoʔyaqnooẋ. kaa titóoqan péeẋnaẋ kuʔús ʔéete hihíce.

'And an oldtime Indian Doctor he would speak to him there. If his talk were true as it would go out on to him, then he would faint from it. And the people would thus see what it surely means. (Jonah Hayes in Cash Cash 1999:46-47)

A doctor comes and sings his song, blows his breath on you and lays his hands on you. You open your eyes and go on. (unidentified informant in Coale 1958:140)

Konkí kakáa ʔiske pinmíikin kawá titwéetim paasapúupuxpuxṅaẋ. kawánnaẋ kúnk̓u hiweʔnpíťaaẋ.

'Because when he is as if asleep, then the Indian Doctor would blow his healing breath on him. Thereupon, he would always sing his song. (Jonah Hayes in Cash Cash 1999:47)

The people who have received the spiritual gift have received it as words, as songs. It is to strengthen himself and other people. The song could be recognized as a healer. It would make him well, make him good, make him feel better. If a man or woman were sick, the I could sing my song. If I couldn't understand this sickness, then I would sing again the next day. I got the power to sing this thing; I was given the understanding to cure sickness of man or boy. I did the curing myself, but never claimed to be a doctor, just a helper, that's all. (Piluyekin in Thomas 1970:58-59)

ʔiléx̣ni ʔinmíiwit páy̓s páaqaʔptit ʔinmíiwitpa, koná hitwetiwíiṫax̣. kawá ʔoykalana péecuukwenuʔ. konkí ḱóomayniʔsna, wéeṫu ʔisíinm páamtakteltetu. kaa peeṫéetu "watíisx̣ kiẃala táʔc ʔée wiċéeyuʔ!" kawá yoq̓opí ʔewséetatu konkí ċaʔá. wáaq̓is hiwséetatu. ċalawí méṫu péex̣nax̣ waq̓íima wiyáaqan kaa péex̣nax̣, "kál̓a wéwtukt kawá ʔée tiṅxnuʔ!" kawá yoq̓opí ʔewseeṅax̣

"Many years, perhaps fifty years, there he would treat a sick person as in doctoring. Then everyone will know (of his powers). With that one that has sickened, nobody but him can ever treat the sickness as it passes by. And he is saying (to the sick one), "Tomorrow at this time, you will become well!" Then that one, his being, becoming right with that. He becomes well. But if he would see it was an old time sickness and then he wouls say, "Just one day and then you will die!" Then that would be so. (Jonah Hayes in Cash Cash 1999:48-52)

A general pattern becomes discerneable here when we take an 'agent-centered' view of the shamanistic display in each of these texts. That is, the 'grammars of experience' expressed by each ritual participant is communicable as ritual action, song, and sometimes as actual utterances. As such, it does not conform to the universal notions of personhood and action as portrayed by contemporary speech-act theorists. Rather, a Nez Perce *wéeyekin* system aligns itself more with a Turnerian perspective of ritual whereby ritual behavior is the smallest unit of meaning (Turner 1979:144) *from which one's grammars of experience are assembled* (added emphasis mine). These

meaning units create an indexical frame by which symbols are ritually communicated. The particular form of communication chosen will most likely be those that retain their greatest illocutionary force percisely because interlocutors are not restricted to ordinary chanels communcation, rather they have the option of communicating via culturally conditioned cognitive states.

Thus when a Nez Perce narrator describes the ritual actions of a shaman assisting a neophyte singer as in the sequence below:

2 **Kaa waqíiman tiwéetim konapkí péetaʼweeṫaẋ.**
ċalawí ċaʔá ċíiqin ʔáatkiṫaẋ, kawá patóoʔyaqnooẋ.
kaa titóoqan péeẋnaẋ kuʔús ʔéete hihíce.

'And an oldtime Indian Doctor he would speak to him there.
If his talk were true as it would go out on to him, then he would faint from it. And the people would thus see what it surely means.
(Jonah Hayes in Cash Cash 1999:46-47)

We are given a microcosmic view of illocutionary force of the highest degree since 'the oldtime Indian Doctor' in this instance is directly addressing the unconscious, those culturally conditioned cognitive states that are assumed as a consequence of *wéeyexniʼ*, that is, to be 'blessed with a guardian spirit, a person with power'.

hiʼnaqitpa 'conclusion'

The premise of this article is to expand our understanding of Nez Perce ritual in relation ritual communication. My findings have at least partially indicated that the unconscious and the conscious play a critical role as to how communicative frameworks are established in ritual contexts. These communicative frames can be appropriately thought of as 'grammars of experience'

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