

## 11-Phil Round Repaired-Final.mp3

**Mary Mahoney** [00:00:00] From Trinity College. This is Hidden Literacies.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:00:18] Hello and welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast. On this show, we'll hear from contributors to the Hidden Literacies Anthology on the sources they've selected, how they became hidden, the lessons we can learn from them, and what they reveal about the stakes of each contributor's scholarship.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:00:36] My name is Mary Mahoney and I'm the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. On this episode, it's my privilege to bring you a conversation with contributor Philip Round. Professor Round, contributed a Kickapoo Prayer Stick and transcription to Hidden Literacies that offers significance for its time and our own. To begin, I've asked Phil to introduce himself and offer a description of the items he's contributed.

**Philip Round** [00:01:03] My name is Philip Round and I'm at the University of Iowa in Iowa City and I am providing some, two pieces of text for the anthology called Hidden Literacies. One of them is a piece of wood is carved in a special way so that Kickapoo parishioners in a church in the 1830s could follow along with a prayer cycle that their pastor had created for them. He also was Kickapoo. And then the other document is an alphabetic transcription of that wood text that was made two generations later by Kickapoo congregation members who had gone to the English language school and learned how to write their language in an alphabetic form.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:02:04] In his commentary. Phil identified a question common to all the pieces in Hidden Literacies. Quote, Why have some communities constructed alternate textualities that demanded unique literacy practices, sometimes in direct competition with those promoted by the US common school system and Anglo American middle-class sociability, end quote? In part, he suggests, the pastor who created the Kickapoo Prayer Stick and his followers use the prayer sticks and later translations as part of larger efforts to rebel against any attempts to assimilate with American culture. As my conversation with Phil and his writing on these pieces bears out, this desire to create and maintain an autonomous identity apart from American culture drove both the original creation of these texts and more recent attempts to archive and translate them. I asked Phil how he became aware of these objects.

**Philip Round** [00:03:03] So the first item, a wooden stick is called a prayer stick in the anthropological literature. And I found it mentioned and photographed in a bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology, probably 1930 or something. And it's like so much of what I work with in the field of Native American studies, it was treated in those days as a kind of curiosity, and it was maybe so to the other two offhand way, in my view. So I track it down because I want to look at it closely to see what it was like. Luckily, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History had a beautiful photograph of a lot of material culture objects to this in their collection.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:03:56] Part of what Phil set out to do was not only understand these objects and their importance to the Kickapoo for whom they were sacred religious texts, but to put them in context and understand their meanings, powers, and uses.

**Philip Round** [00:04:10] And then I put together with the material object, all kinds of historical texts, people who witnessed the Kickapoo congregation using these sticks in

their prayers on Sunday, and also the famous Native American portraitist, the use of native, he painted a lot of native portraits, George Caitlin in the 1830s. And again, these paintings hanging on the walls of museums around the country, but nobody had put all of these things together because Caitlin painted members of this congregation and they all demanded that he paint them with their prayer sticks in their hands and in the manner of prayers. He wrote it in his notes on these paintings. So my job was to really discover something brand new, except that kind of had been forgotten. My job is to try to bring this stick and this congregation back into the conversation about what 19th century American literacy and religious activities were like for removed native peoples of the Kickapoo nation, which had to be removed by the federal government from Indiana to Kansas.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:05:26] So let's back up and use some of Phil's commentary to understand the context of Kickapoo Prayer Sticks, their translation, and their importance. As Phil writes in *Hidden Literacies*, Kenekuk, called the Kickapoo Prophet, was born in 1790 in Indiana. Locals described him as an abusive alcoholic in his youth who wandered away from the village sometime during the War of 1812. Around this time, the divine intervention changed his life and sparked his ministry, as Phil describes, quote, The Great Spirit reached out to him in his misery and gave him a piece of his heart, which he was to share with his fellow Kickapoo, to instruct them in the ways of peace and love. End quote. Kenekuk returned to his village and took on a leadership role, inspiring members with his message, which he inscribed on prayer sticks. As Phil describes in his commentary, quote, Kenekuk fashioned a symbolic representation of the creator's message into narrow 10-inch walnut boards he inscribed with a private symbol system. These were arranged into a five-character group toward the bottom of the stick, followed by an 11 character cluster near the top. The apex of the staff was often carved into a diamond shape, reminiscent of the point of a crown. The rectangular head of these staffs also featured an escutcheon whose left side depicted a building with a similar diamond on its roof and whose right side featured what early ethnographers thought were a row of cornstalks. End quote. Prayer sticks played an important role in the church Kenekuk created. Every member was required to have a prayer stick, and they were so highly valued that they were buried with members upon death. A contemporary witness described the role prayer sticks played in services, quote, Congregational worship is performed daily and lasts from one to three hours. It consists of a kind of prayer expressed in broken sentences, often repeated in a monotonous singsong tone equaling about two measures of a common psalm tune. All in unison engage in this and in order to preserve harmony in words each holds in his or her hand, a small board upon which is engraved arbitrary characters which they follow up with the finger until the prayer is completed. To outsiders, this service may have resembled a Christian service with a prayer stick resembling the ritual of a rosary, for example. Not so. This was no embrace of Western religion or American missionary work. Visiting the Kickapoo Mission near Leavenworth, Kansas, in Christmas of 1840, Jesuit missionary Nikola Point said of a service he attended, quote, The Indians listened open-mouthed to a charlatan, end quote. As Phil writes in his commentary, the prayer sticks, and later, translations of these texts, represent the ways the Kickapoo held themselves apart and resisted assimilation. Descriptions he'd found of their services and the use of prayer sticks, quote, shows that the wooden staffs functioned as text. The sticks helped the congregation preserve harmony, that is to constitute themselves as a unified community who shared oral performances, confirm their membership. By using their fingers to trace up the prayer stick toward its diamond-shaped head, Phil writes, the parishioners and acted an embodied material practice by which reading became a devotional activity. Further evidence of the ceremony surrounding the use of prayer sticks suggests that the liturgy they encoded served as a new kind of antiassimilationist ideology that helped to voice Kickapoo sovereignty in the face of the removal act.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:09:27] When the Black Hawk War of 1832 broke out, the community realized that Americans would not tolerate their proximity for much longer and removed to the West Bank of the Missouri River, a few miles north of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. There, they established a thriving community made up of Kenekuk and his 400 followers. An American visiting the community remarked on the ways it was, quote, shut out from the world. But as Phil Round reminds us in his commentary, the Kickapoo had, quote, sheltered in that location precisely in order to regroup as a distinctly indigenous society, resisting missionizing and land grabbing at every turn. This was the era of removal. And Supreme Court Justice John McLean's concurring opinion in *Worcester v. Georgia*, a case that ruled on, among other things, the constitutionality of removal, the justice expressed concern about quote how the words of the treaty were understood by an unlettered people. As Phil notes, by creating this prayer stick and its non-alphabetic script Kenekuk seems to have presented his community with a viable alternative to the unlettered image that the lawmakers in Washington forced onto the native peoples of the U.S. This Kickapoo community did not speak English. It resisted the influence of alcohol and formed a self-sustaining economy, not relying on American or missionary culture. The faith community Kenekuk created lasted another seventy-five years. Its longevity relied in part on an alphabetic translation of their prayer sticks created sometime in the 1850s by Kenekuk's successor, who used it to create a manuscript. Codex, the typed manuscript that appears in the *Hidden Literacies* anthology was copied from the manuscript in 1906. Amateur ethnographer Milo Custer collected the prayer stick and alphabetic text when he visited the community in 1906. He was a member of an antiquarian club who sought out ceremonial mounds and other elements of America's indigenous past in order to preserve them. Having heard about the Kenekuk church he traveled to the Kickapoo Nation where he befriended the pastor, the pastor gifted him a prayer stick in friendship and allowed him to copy the manuscript literacy. Custer was only a few pages into copying the manuscript when a tribal elder arrived and requested he stop and requested the prayer stick, he returned, Custer declined even when he was told he could copy the full manuscript if he returned the prayer stick. The prayer stick and transcript we have today are the results of this fraught exchange and speak to what motivates broader attempts to reclaim indigenous translations from these early ethnographic exchanges.

**Philip Round** [00:12:14] Again, when we asked the first question, well, how did you find this? Well, it's kind of hiding in plain sight, like most of the stuff I work with. But if you never looked at what I consider the proper way, which is as a living text, that can be translated by a lot of people today and kind of reconsidered in our contemporary times. And that's been going on a lot in the last 10 years in different native communities, going back and re-translating stuff that non-Indian ethnographers transcribed and perhaps transcribed poorly or misunderstood way in the past.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:12:57] As Phil describes, the translation of these pieces and the recontextualization as living text reflects the larger goals of his scholarship.

**Philip Round** [00:13:07] All of my research in the last 10 years has been about the way that different Native American communities in the 19th century had made all kinds of different efforts to preserve their cultures. And I, because I'm a literary language person, focusing on the way they used language, their own and English, in books and in writing at different times. And so for me, every one of the stories, and this Kickapoo Prayer Stick is a really outstanding example of it, every story along these lines is a story of perseverance of a really, really strong will of a community to maintain itself on its own terms, even in the

midst of being forcibly taken from their homelands by federal troops and relocated into a very different landscape in this case in Kansas.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:14:07] This story, which Phil shares in Hidden Literacies and will expound on in a book project, offers a narrative of resistance.

**Philip Round** [00:14:14] And of the story that I tell partly in the anthology and in a book I am working on now is the story of several generations of this congregation and how, while other members of the community of the Pottawatomie and Kickapoo who were relocated to this general area, did not do well. Their farming was not very successful. They fell prey to unscrupulous land speculators, to traders who sold them alcohol, when they shouldn't have been. The Kickapoo congregation in the Pottawatomie, members of the Kenekuk church, they prospered and they continued to worship on into the 20th century using the original text that were written in wood back in 1830. So to me, it's a really hopeful story of the way that this community used its religion, its language to maintain themselves as a unique community within the United States and they have elements of Christianity that they use in their prayers, and they also have elements of traditional Kickapoo ceremonial practices too.

**Philip Round** [00:15:34] So it's just for me, it is the kind of story you don't, you are not used to not hearing that much about native people. That is instead of extinction, it's survival, it's change, it's innovation. And all the stories, and this one in particular, that I've been collecting over the years have that element. People are very, very creative in the 19th century in the way they approach the colonial onslaught of the Europeans.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:16:05] This story has resonance for indigenous repatriation and language reclamation efforts today.

**Philip Round** [00:16:11] I have a blog called The Repatriation Files. And on that blog, I kind of talk about events all around the world in which indigenous people are fighting for land rights and things like that. And I talk about the UN's Declaration of Indigenous Peoples Rights and every story of contemporary Mexico and Latin America.

**Philip Round** [00:16:35] There are stories just like this Kickapoo story. There are stories of people who innovate, who wish to maintain certain traditional values in the face of modernization, globalization. And so it's a kind of a story that is being retold in communities all over the Western Hemisphere. And and so that's one of the things I think is very relevant today. As you can see it happening in different forms with the computer, with web sites and with the systems of writing languages that had never been written before, all over the Western Hemisphere.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:17:11] Phil's work is part of a larger movement to reclaim indigenous language from colonial destruction.

**Philip Round** [00:17:16] I would say it's just been in the last 10 years that native linguists, linguists who are members of the communities of the language they study rather than outsiders, have begun to reclaim a lot of the texts that were collected in the 19th century and to look at them again for the purposes of language revitalization in their home communities. There's a lot of these languages are not being spoken as much as they should be, and so we have this huge body of text in so many native communities that are written down by outsiders that can be read, interpreted by contemporary native people to revitalize their language. Uses of words that you don't hear in everyday speech anymore

that need to be returned to the language so that people can build the language again for those kinds of uses. And so there's a good example of a linguist, and I don't remember his name right now, he went back and re-translated the opening preface to the Black Hawk Autobiography written in 1833, transcription of the Warrior Blackhawk's description of the Black Hawk War. And this linguist retranslated that which was written syllabic Sauk, the tribal language of Black Hawk. And his revisioning and retranslation is just really illuminating in how Black Hawk sounds and how he was trying to frame his autobiography as a traditional Saukan-Fox narrative. In other words, a literary genre that was in his community as an oral form. He was careful to try to frame the book that he knew they were writing from the transcript as something that was still his, and still his communities.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:19:11] This shift to center translation and preservation work around tribal communities reflects changing practices in archives and special collections.

**Philip Round** [00:19:21] At Berkeley they have a great language archive on wax cylinders that they were able to use digital technologies to recover. And they're much more listenable now. Also at the American Philosophical Society, they've done so. And the important thing to mention is that all of these projects are being done in cooperation with the native communities from which the original recordings were taken. So there is a bit of ethical responsibility that's being added back into the process as well.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:19:52] Phil's own approach to this work reflects this turn towards foregrounding Native American cultural sovereignty with indigenous translation and archival policies leading the way.

**Philip Round** [00:20:03] And that's why I am working with Mike Zimmerman, who is a former tribal historic preservation officer for the Pottawatomie, Michigan. He's going to help me with the translation, teach us the language, and he and I are going to collaborate on that translation for the anthology. So that we will be respectful of contemporary Pottawatomie's understanding of what's going on in the text rather than my position on what we're seeing there.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:20:35] Listeners interested in exploring Phil's work can check out his 1999 book, *By Nature and by Custom Cursed: Transatlantic Civil Discourse and New England Cultural Production, 1620-1660*. 2008 *The impossible Land Story and Place in California's Imperial Valley* or his 2010 book *Removeable Type: Histories of the Book in Indian Country, 1663-1880*.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:21:03] *Hidden Literacies* is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to *Hidden Literacies*. For more information on *Hidden Literacies* and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit [www.hiddenliteracies.org](http://www.hiddenliteracies.org)