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A Kickapoo Liturgy

At Christmas time in 1840, a Jesuit missionary named Nichola Point visited the Kickapoo Mission near present-day Leavenworth Kansas. He was appalled by what he found when he visited the Native community during their Sunday Mass. "The Indians listened open-mouth to . . . a Charlatn," Point reported to his superiors, whose only "proof of his mission was two inches wide and eight inches long, which was inscribed with outlandish characters symbolizing the doctrines he undertook to teach. What Point described is a Kickapoo Prayer Stick (circa. 1830) of the sort depicted above, and associated with the church led by the Kickapoo leader Kenekuk (1790-1851). The Prayer Stick, which is housed in the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., embodies many of the issues raised by other objects in the Hidden Literacies archive: 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?

These Kickapoo texts, for example, draw their meanings from a set of literacy practices whose immediate context is the Indian Removal Act of 1830. It is a law that purports to "provide for an exchange of lands with the Indians residing in any of the states and territories, and for their removal west of the river Mississippi."¹ Like most legal language this preamble to the text of the statute obscures as much as it reveals, soft-peddling the forced relocation (often by Federal troops) of thousands of Native peoples to unfamiliar and often hostile ground far from their homelands. The Removal Act's importance for literacy history is often overlooked because of its other, more devastating effects on indigenous life in North America. Yet, in Supreme Court Justice John McLean's concurring opinion in *Worcester v. Georgia* 31US515 (1832), a case that ruled on (among other things) the constitutionality of Removal, the Justice expressed concern

about “how the words of the treaty were understood by an unlettered people.”² In a sense, McLean thought that the implementation of the Removal Act ought to be considered in light of the differing levels and kinds of literacy that prevailed among the parties involved. He made it clear that “the rules of construction” regarding this legislation should take Indian literacy into account. While scholars have often sought the literacy issues McLean mentions in the subsequent memorials to Congress that many Native nations wrote in disagreement with Removal, these Kickapoo texts suggest that there were many, varied literacy responses among the indigenous peoples adversely affected by the Removal Act. 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 US.

To understand how the Prayer Sticks did this, we must follow Kenekuk’s own life story, whose arc in many ways parallels the historical trajectory of his nation. Kenekuk, who became known as the “Kickapoo Prophet,” was born about 1790 near the Wabash River in Indiana. Local people there remembered him as an abusive alcoholic in his youth who left the community just before the War of 1812 and wandered the countryside without purpose. Sometime during the war, however, Kenekuk had a vision that changed him forever. 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 Kickapoos “to instruct them in the ways of peace and love.”³ Kenekuk fashioned a symbolic representation of the Creator’s message into narrow ten-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 eleven-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 corn stalks.⁴

When returned to his village, the Vermillion Band of Kickapoos who lived along the Vermillion and Wabash Rivers, the message of his vision spread. Soon, Kenekuk rose to the leadership position of trusted council to Little Duck, an important leader in the community. As the Americans began hounding the Kickapoos for their land, Little Duck fell ill, and ceded his authority to Kenekuk, who refused to negotiate with the Americans. It was during this period that Kenekuk founded a church based on the teachings he received in his vision. Every member of the community who wished to join the congregation had to acquire one of Kenekuk's Prayer Sticks. When asked about them by outsiders, the congregants of Kenekuk's church called them "the Bible," and (according to Baptist missionary Isaac McCoy) "[n]o Indian thought of retiring for the night without first consulting his board." When a member of the church died, his prayer stick was buried with him.⁵

Although some outside observers thought the prayer sticks were imitations of the Catholic missionaries' rosary beads, they are actually quite different. There are no crosses, no Christ, and no Mary. Instead, they incorporate graphic marks unrelated to Catholicism. The diamond is not a cross, and corn is not a sacramental plant for Christians. But these images do indeed have important spiritual valences for the Native Americans who followed the Prophet's teachings. Most importantly, they appear to have fostered a reading practice that was unique to this Kickapoo community. A contemporary witness to one of Kenekuk's church services described how the prayer stick functioned:

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 sing-

song 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.⁶

This depiction of the congregation “reading” clearly shows that the wooden staffs functioned as texts. The sticks helped the congregation “preserve harmony,” that is, to constitute themselves as a united community whose shared oral performances confirm their membership. By using their fingers to trace up the prayer stick toward its diamond-shaped head, the parishioners enacted an embodied material practice by which reading became a devotional activity. Further evidence of the ceremonies surrounding the use of the prayer sticks suggest that the liturgy they encoded served a new kind of anti-assimilationist ideology that helped to voice Kickapoo sovereignty in the face of the Removal Act.

Kenekuk’s congregation “steadfastly refused to speak English, and they always performed their traditional music and dancing at religious ceremonies.”⁷ Like Protestant congregations a century earlier, Kenekuk’s church separated men and women, making gender difference manifest in a bifurcated seating arrangement that split the two sexes with the middle aisle. But Kenekuk went even further, and in a distinctly vernacular direction. Menstruating women were expressly forbidden to attend services, in a gesture that re-affirmed centuries-old Kickapoo practice. Even more scandalous to outsiders, the Kenekuk Church regularly featured the self-flagellation of confessed sinners.

The Prophet’s religion earned praise from such American travelers as the painter George Catlin (1796-1872), who was “singularly struck by the noble efforts of this champion of the mere remnant of a poisoned race, so strenuously laboring to rescue the remainder of his people from

the deadly bane . . . of drinking whisky.”⁸ When the Black Hawk War erupted in 1832, however, the Kickapoos realized their residence on the banks of the Vermillion would no longer be tolerated by the Americans. So, in early 1833, Kenekuk and about 400 followers, including over a hundred Pottawatomie converts, removed to settle along the west bank of the Missouri River, a few miles north of Fort Leavenworth. After a short time, Kenekuk’s congregation had established a prosperous village there.

John Irving, an American touring the west in 1833, visited Kenekuk’s village and found a bucolic scene. The settlement was situated on a

prairie dotted with wild-flowers. Three of its sides were enclosed by a ridge of hills, at the foot of which meandered a brook with a range of trees along its border. The fourth side was hemmed in by a thick forest, which extended back to the banks of the Missouri.⁹

To Irving, it was “a retired, rural spot, shut out from the world, and looked as if it might have been free from its cares also.”¹⁰ It is noteworthy that Irving thought the village was “shut out from the world, especially since he didn’t know that Kenekuk’s band had sheltered in that location precisely in order to regroup as a distinctly indigenous society, resisting missionizing and land-grabbing at every turn.

While Kenekuk’s village was prospering, many other Kickapoo communities were succumbing to alcoholism and poverty. Local traders plied the Shawnees, Delawares and Kickapoos with whisky in order to facilitate underhanded land deals. “Some freeze to death when drunk,” the Indian agent reported in October of 1839, and “several drunken Indians have been drowned in the Missouri this season.”¹¹ This state of affairs eventually led many Kickapoos in other Kansas settlements to voluntarily relocate to Oklahoma, Texas or Mexico. Yet it was during this period that Kenekuk’s village grew. Under his guidance, they cleared and plowed

fields, eventually producing a surplus of corn, beans, pumpkins, beef and pork, which they sold to local traders at a profit. In this period, the Indian agent found them “a lively, fearless, independent persevering people”—words we might use to describe a sovereign society.¹² The thriving conditions at Kenekuk’s village attracted other bands into the Prophet’s fold, and in 1849 the Potawatomi Chief Nozhakem presented a formal petition to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for permission to join Kenekuk’s community.

A Christian missionary visiting Kenekuk’s Sunday services during this time reported that there were more than 300 congregants partaking of the Prophet’s message—an astronomical number of parishioners for any denomination on the frontier.¹³ Significantly, Kenekuk led this service in the church built by the US government for the Euro-American missionaries. Essentially Kenekuk’s community had repatriated the federal building to indigenous oversight and ownership. Kenekuk’s popularity, his congregation’s “occupation” of a federal structure, and their embrace of selective aspects of capitalism all suggest that much more was going on in this Native village than Indian agents or missionaries could fathom.

The community continued to innovate its social and religious practices throughout the 1840s and 50s, always politely hearing out Christians who came to convert them before rejecting them in favor of Kenekuk’s teachings. In fact, the Prophet’s community and church lasted for more than 75 years, its durability due, in large part, to the successful transition its later practitioners made into alphabetic literacy as a supplement to the symbol system found on the prayer sticks. After Kenekuk’s death, a Potawatomi congregant named Wansuk took over the duties of pastor. At some point in the 1850s, he transcribed the Prophet’s teachings into an alphabetic form and made it into a manuscript codex. He was succeeded by four successive disciples who led the church until at least 1907, all of whom employed some combination of the

prayer sticks and alphabetic manuscript in their services. The typed manuscript **pictured above** was copied from the manuscript in 1906.

In addition to opening to our view of hitherto unrecognized Native literacy practices that supported the sovereignty of one indigenous community, the Kickapoo texts also shed light on how such items were eventually collected by ethnographers, and how and why the archive of American literary texts has thus far excluded them. The Prayer Stick and alphabetic text were collected by amateur ethnographer Milo Custer in 1906. Custer was the member of an antiquarian club who sought out ceremonial mounds and other elements of America's indigenous past in an effort to preserve them. In 1906, Custer appears to have become aware of the Kenekuk Church, traveling to the community to interview surviving members of the congregation. When he arrived at the Kickapoo Nation, Custer befriended the pastor of the Kenekuk Church, John Masquequaqua, who agreed to help him gather the history of his faith. Masquequaqua gave Custer the prayer stick that is pictured above as gift of friendship. He also agreed to show Custer the manuscript liturgy that had been handed down to him by previous leaders of the church. The text Custer saw was about 30 pages long and "written in Pottawatomie with English letters." Custer had copied only a few pages when a tribal elder came to Masquequaqua's house to ask that the transcribing be halted. Although Custer interpreted the elder's request as a result of "superstition," he acquiesced and stopped copying the manuscript. Upon discovering that Custer had been given a prayer stick, the elder tried to get it returned, offering to allow Custer access to the manuscript liturgy if he returned the sacred object. Custer declined, and what our archive now shows is a text whose meaning was fraught with local and national significance, and which was not freely given to outsiders. Whether or not these texts should be public, as they are in the National Archive and the archives of the Kansas Historical Society, is thus an open question, one

that only the combined Kickapoo and Potawatomi community can answer. They appear here, for now, as a springboard for debate about indigenous literacies, sovereignties and intellectual property.

Literal Translation of the Alphabetic Text

Now then, my brethren, this is what [he] brought us
Explained to us, right here in this world
We are poor, Three colored.

Now then, this is it, how he was,
Our Father, when he worked,
When he made the world right here
Where we are now, [and] again made us.

After a while began our Father [his heart?]
Before right here, where we live
There was nobody right here,
Where we are now.

After a while, now then, our Father wandered
To be my children, he thought.
After a while, now then, he felt awful
His heart began to fill up.

Note on Sources

There are few interpretive works discussing the Kickapoo Prayer Sticks and the literacy practices they embody. Joseph Herring's study, *Kenekuk: The Kickapoo Prophet* (University Press of Kansas, 1988) is the most complete study. Michael Garrett's recent "More than a Façade: The Kenekuk Religion Revisited," (*Great Plains Quarterly*, 2017) argues that the Prayer Sticks reflect "a belief system that realigned cultural identity along religious parameters and advocated self-discipline to those revitalized standards," (307) but acknowledges that there is still much we don't know about them. More generalized studies of Native religions, like Vine Deloria Jr.'s indispensable *God is Red* (1975), and Native intellectual traditions, like Robert Warrior's *Tribal Secrets* (1995) offer useful methodological approaches to these liturgical texts. Several recent study on the varieties of indigenous literacies in North America also help contextualize these objects. Birgit Brander Rasmussen's *Queequeg's Coffin* (2012) and Hilary Wyss' *English Letters and Indian Literacies* (2012) are two of the best.

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¹ Indian Removal Act, Statutes at Large, Chapter CLVIII 22nd. Congress. <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=004/llsl004.db&recNum=458> (accessed June 17, 2019).

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³ Herring, Joseph B., *Kenekuk: The Kickapoo Prophet*, (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas 1988), 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶ Custer, Milo, "Kannekuk or Keeanakuk: The Kickapoo Prophet," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1908-1984), Vol. 11, No. 1 (Apr., 1918), 50.

⁷ Herring, 35.

⁸ Catlin, George, *Illustrations of the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1876), 98.

⁹ Irving, John Treat, *Indian Sketches, Taken During an Expedition to the Pawnee And Other Tribes of American Indians*, (London: J. Murray, 1835), 44.

¹⁰ Irving, *Indian Sketches*, 44.

¹¹ Herring, *Kenekuk*, 90.

¹² *Ibid.*, 90.

¹³ This was the observation of Father Herman Aelen, of the Catholic Pottawatomie mission nearby. Quoted in Garraghan, Gilbert, *The Jesuits of the Middle United States*, (New York: America Press, 1938), 418.