

The Geography of Stories

When the link between culture, territory and language is lost



For further reading, see:

[Indigenous Living Heritage in Canada](#) (2020) by Karen Aird, First Peoples’ Cultural Council, and Gretchen Fox, Fox Cultural Research

[Spoken from the Heart: Indigenous Radio in Canada](#) (2019) by Indigenous Culture & Media Innovations under the direction of Monique Manatch

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Photo credit (cover): Mi’kma’ki - Home land of the Mi’kmaq people Adapted from Sable & Francis, 2012

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About the Author



Thomas Johnson currently works at the Eskasoni Fish & Wildlife Commission as the Executive Director. He is also a member of the Bras d'Or Lake Biosphere Reserve Association, the Canadian Biosphere Reserve Indigenous Circle, and sits on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. Thomas is a member of the Eskasoni Mi'kmaw Language initiative group which continues to promote and preserve the Mi'kmaq language. His work allows him to work very closely with elders with regards to cultural issues for sustainability of natural resources, and traditional knowledge. He has led many projects preserving Mi'kmaq traditional knowledge such as Mi'kmaq medicines as well as various forms of fisheries related activities. His 20+ Years of experience with audio/video recording has given him the privilege to work with elders once again. He is also the president of Universal Connections and Multimedia Enterprises where they specialize in Audio/Video production. He is the owner of the popular YouTube Channel Mi'kmaq Music, whose aim is to promote Mi'kmaq Music and Artists

About Eskasoni First Nation

Eskasoni First Nation is a Mi'kmaq Indigenous community in Cape Breton County, Nova Scotia. Eskasoni's elected leader is Chief Leroy Denny who has twelve elected councillors who help him lead and represent the community. The reserve is located approximately forty kilometers from Sydney, Cape Breton. Eskasoni First Nation is the largest Mi'kmaq community East of Montreal and has a population of approximately 4,554 registered band members as of December 2018. It covers an area of 8600 acres. In the face of a decline in the number of Mi'kmaq speakers, Eskasoni continues to lead in the preservation and oral transfer of knowledge through the Mi'kmaq language with the largest percentage of Mi'kmaq speakers.

Introduction

Pjila'si:

A welcome upon entering a wikuom; come in and sit down

Pjila'si, welcome, to my reflection – filled with interpretations from a Mi'kmaw perspective – on the beauty that exists in the relationship between my Indigenous language and the land. Pjila'si, welcome, as we begin our journey into loss – loss of language, loss of meaning, loss of land. Pjila'si, welcome, as we study our legends, and the names and places they evoke, to begin reclaiming what has been lost.

In the Mi'kmaw culture, the term Pjila'si has lost the depth of its meaning. I always understood this term to mean welcome; however, I learned from one of my elders, Mi'kmaq linguist Dr. Bernie Francis, that the word encompasses so much more. Pjila'si would have been most frequently heard in the wikuom (wigwam): our people used this greeting upon entering a Mi'kmaw person's dwelling. Dr. Bernie Francis said it was used as an invitation for the guest to take the most comfortable spot in the wikuom. The most comfortable spot would be lined with soft material, such as hides or furs from animals harvested for food from the land of Mi'kma'ki, the land the Mi'kmaq inhabited. The proper response to the invitation would have been Ketaqamu'k, which translates into "it looks quite comfy and cozy." This exchange embraced protocol, feeling, attitude, and respect between host and guest.

Ketaqamu'k:

The proper response to pjila'si; it looks comfy and cozy

Mi'kmaw:

Singular adjective to describe a person of Mi'kmaq descent

Kniskamijinnaq:

Our grandfathers or ancestors

The wikuom created the ideal atmosphere where the natural and supernatural realms were interwoven – a setting that allowed the easiest transferral of the traditional knowledge, language, and customs of my people. Once everyone was sitting comfortably around the warmth and light of the fire, the true exchange of cultural teachings could take place. The Mi'kmaq people have the greatest respect for our elders, who are a vital source of information regarding the land, its language, and its resources. The elders possess knowledge from past generations, including stories from our ancestors' (Kniskamijinnaq) interactions with their environments, and the knowledge that was shared with them from their elders.

We would listen to stories about the recent history of events (Aknutmaqnn), or to stories that involved places and people who had gone before us and were now considered legends (A'tukwaqnn). This experience was a natural occurrence for every Mi'kmaw from birth to adulthood. Many of the teachings helped shape who we were and how we identified ourselves in our existing environment of Mi'kma'ki. Not only did these teachings help our everyday wellbeing and survival, but they also taught us how to respect the land and to be gracious in giving thanks every day. We appreciate the land as a gift that has been provided to us by the Creator. Prayers of thanks are often given to Mother Earth and ceremonial prayers, sacrificial offerings of food, and giving thanks for a new day all come naturally to my people.

Aknutmaqnn:

Stories of events that are currently taking place or recently took place

A'tukwaqnn:

Stories of ancient times that refer to many generations

It was not that long ago that Silas T. Rand wrote that the Mi'kmaq could name every part, nook, and cranny of the wikuomⁱⁱ. Sadly, today, this is no longer the case; words have been lost and will have to be researched and brought back to the forefront. But this can only happen if they were recorded or exist in memory. In my journey, I have encountered many legends that would have been an integral part of Mi'kmaq daily life. They were passed down through many generations in a culture where the relationship between the natural and supernatural was intertwined, long before the legends were recorded by the anthropologists and missionaries who were interested in Mi'kmaq folklore. Some legends, however, have been lost.

I became intrigued by one legend in particular: *Kluskap's Journey*, which I discovered in an article published in 1915 by Frank Speck: *Some Micmac Tales from Cape Breton Island*ⁱⁱⁱ. The legend was shared with the non-Indigenous anthropologist, Frank Speck, by two Mi'kmaq chiefs: Chief Joe Julian of the Sydney band and Chief John Joe of the Whycocomagh band. For this knowledge transfer, an exchange had to take place between people who spoke different languages, and I wondered whether the names of places had been interpreted or translated correctly.

My feelings of excitement increased as I began dialogues with our elders about names they had never heard before. Here were names from a legend that were trapped in the confines of a book and were waiting to be discovered, revived, and restored by our people. I began to appreciate the dialogue between Frank Speck and the Mi'kmaq elders of his time. I valued the information and knowledge that had been transferred by our two respected leaders and admired their willingness to conduct an interview with a non-Indigenous anthropologist. My quest became one of further research and discovery to uncover old Mi'kmaw names and words, to visit the sites that the legend referred to, and to discover whether these geological formations still exist in our traditional territories.

Pjila'si, welcome. Join me on a journey recounting legend, visiting geological sites, and rediscovering lost words. Together, let us work to overcome the disconnect between land, culture, and language by taking a glimpse into my people's past and the Indigenous language of our land, the Mi'kma'ki.

The Legend: Kluskap's Journey

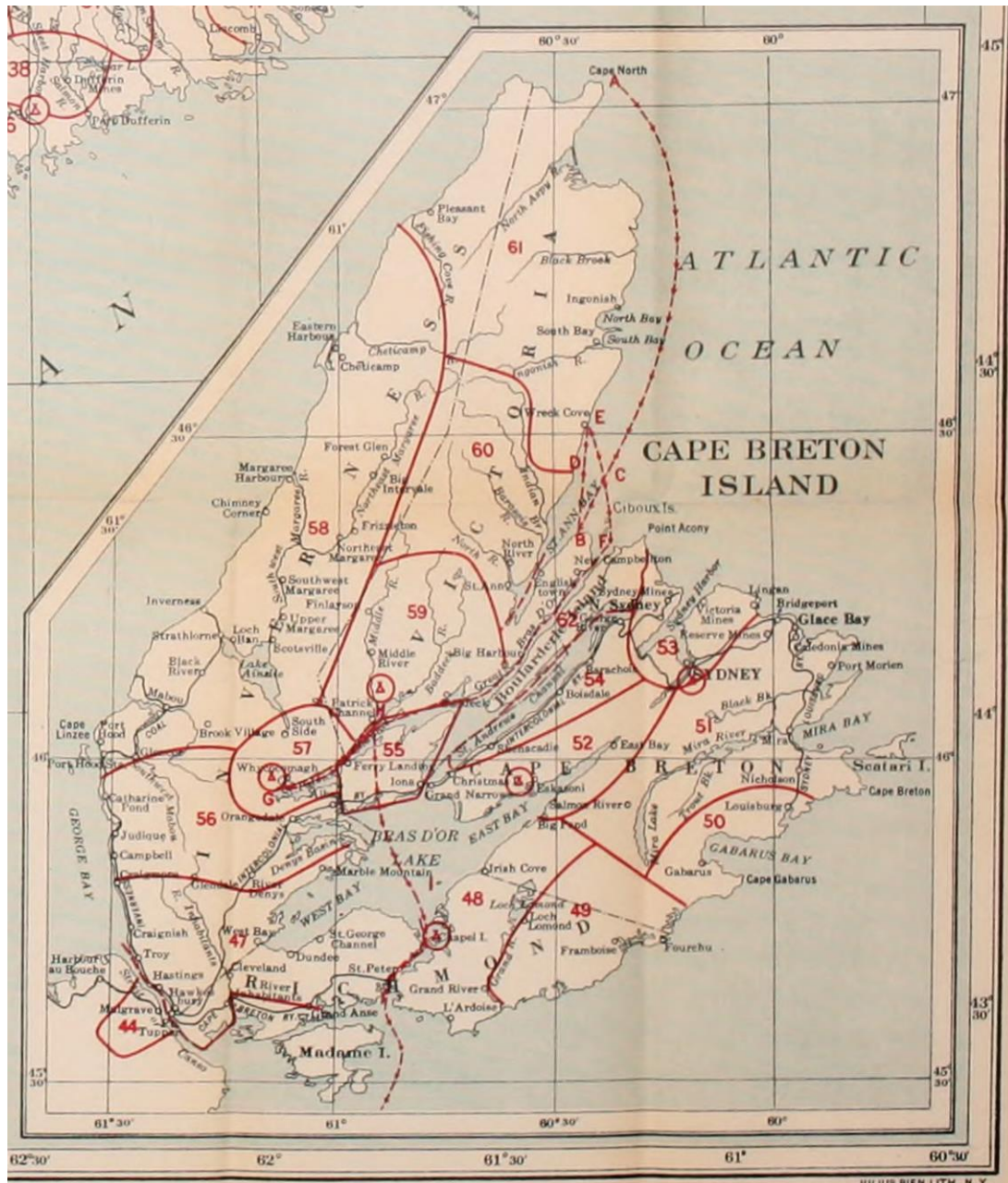
There are many legends that explain and depict the geography and geological formations of Mi'kma'ki; however, in the one I have chosen, there is a common character. *Kluskap*, who was mentioned in many legends of the Mi'kmaq, was considered the deity or god of the Mi'kmaq people. Spiritual healers, medicine men, and shamans would have been common in Mi'kma'ki. Some were known to the Mi'kmaq as the "Puowin" and the "Kinap". The Kinap were gifted persons who used their extraordinary abilities to help others, while the Puowin had a reputation for casting bad luck that would wreak havoc on others. As a young boy, I heard stories about the Puowin and what he could do if you disrespected him. The Puowin and Kinap appear in many stories of the Mi'kmaq throughout Mi'kma'ki. Most Mi'kmaq people would be familiar with these spiritual beings, along with Kluskap and his teachings.

I am offering one version of many Kluskap stories that refer to the same geographical area. This legend is the Cape Breton version of Kluskap's origin and journey through the Bras d'Or Lake and into the Bay of Fundy. As you discover this version of the legend, you can envision what is being conveyed; embedded in the legend is a geographical map that gives clues to geological formations throughout the landscape. These geological features would have

Kluskap:

Deity or god of the Mi'kmaq people as found in legends

been used as markers or references to aide in navigation within the tidal waters of Cape Breton. If you were to navigate throughout the Bras d'Or Lake, an inland sea, without any knowledge of the area, you would find it difficult to enter and exit. However, if you were familiar with the legend, you would know that it references two main areas where you can enter and exit the Bras d'Or Lake.



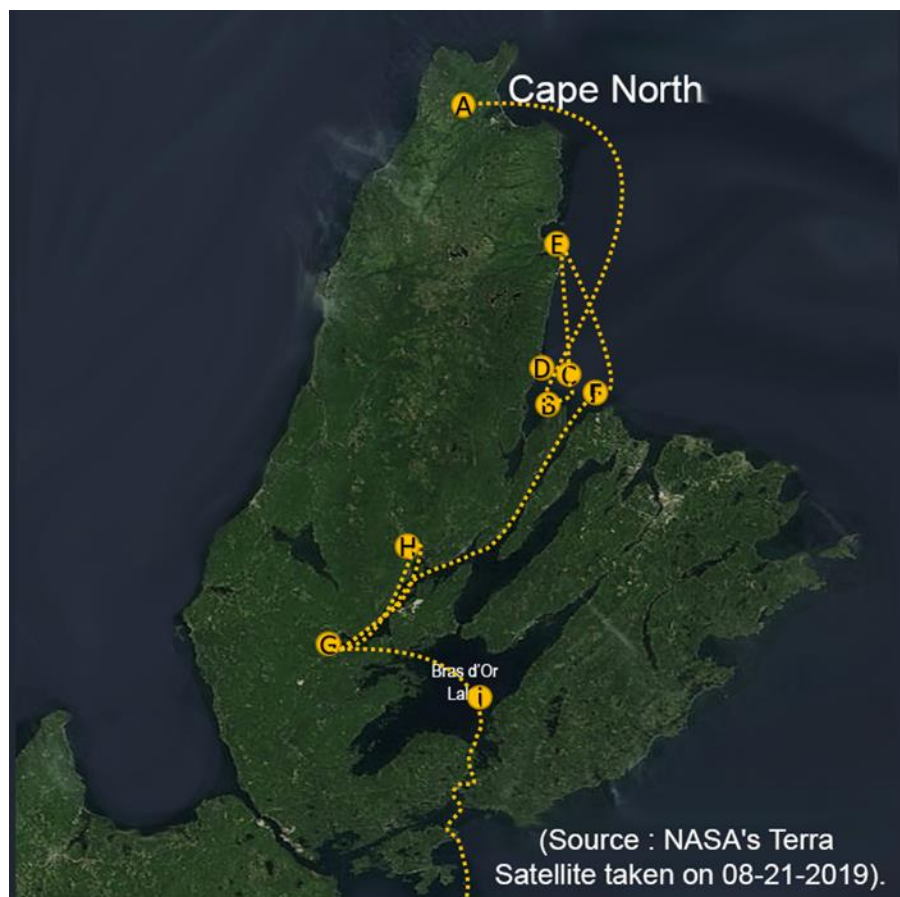
Map derived from Frank Speck's, Beothuk and Micmac^{iv}

Kluskap's journey consists of nine stops in and around the tidal waters of Cape Breton and into the Bras d'Or Lake. The Bras d'Or Lake portion of the legend ends with the beaver burrowing through the St. Peters Canal (prior to construction, there was an isthmus). Kluskap follows the beaver as it makes its way to Minas Basin and spends his remaining days in Minas Basin before he returns to Pictou Landing

and departs to the North Pole. Of particular interest is that this legend contains all the geological markers on a map that Frank Speck recorded as the story was being told to him by the two Mi'kmaq chiefs.

The Legend Revisited: A Journey of Discovery

I will focus on Speck's geological markers as I reflect on the journey that my ancestors would have taken or, more particularly, Kluskap's journey. This journey will be continued by others after me, as they fine-tune locations and bring back these legends to the people of the present. In the satellite Image of Cape Breton Nova Scotia below, you will see letters that connect the landscape to the legend.



A –North Mountain, Kluskap's Origin, **B** – Cape Dauphin, Fairy Holes, Kluskap's Cave, **C** – Ciboux and Hertford Islands, Kluskap's Broken Canoe, **D** – Breton Cove, Two Girls Turned to Stone, **E** – Wreck Cove, Kluskap's Moose Skin Canoe Mat, **F** – Table Rock Where Kluskap Has his Dinner, **G** – Indian Island, Where Kluskap Startles a Beaver, **H** - Middle River, Where Kluskap killed a young beaver, **I** - Red Island, where Kluskap threw a rock.

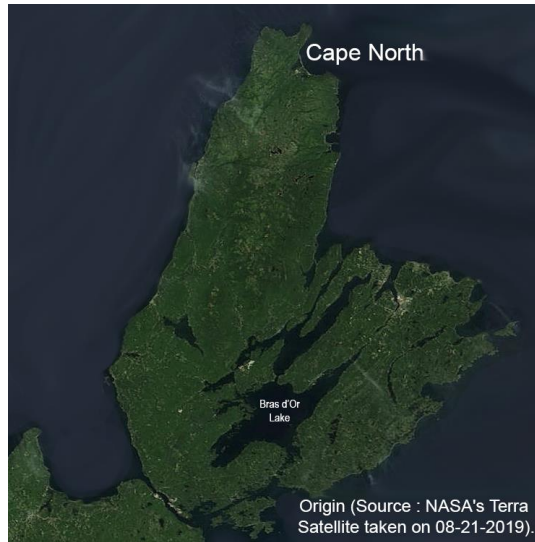


Figure A – Cape North, Kluskap’s origin.

Kt̓it̓nuk:
North Mountain,
Cape North
In Cape Breton
Kji-Niskam:
The Creator
Kji-Saqmaw:
The Great Chief

This journey begins on the northern part of Cape Breton, in a place called North Mountain in Cape North (Kt̓it̓nuk) (Figure A). This is where the Creator (Kji-Niskam) created Kluskap (Kji-Saqmaw) out of the earth and breathed life into him.



Figure B – Cape Dauphin, Fairy Holes, Kluskap’s Cave.

Wikuom:
Mi’kmaq traditional
dwelling.

Kluskap then departed from Cape North and headed south towards Cape Dauphin to his home or Kluskap’s Wikuom, also known as the “Fairy Holes,” as indicated in the recounting of the legend (Figure B). According to the legend, in the 1850s, five Mi’kmaq went into the cave with seven torches and could only go as far as the torches would stay lit. They departed from the cave and realized a rock had moved since they had entered. Presently, you cannot go in too deep into the cave because rocks have fallen and blocked the passageway.



Figure C – Ciboux and Hertford Islands, Kluskap’s broken canoe.

Kwitn:

Canoe in Mi’kmaq

As Kluskap continues his journey, he leaves Kluskap’s Cave (Wikuom) by canoe (Kwitn) only to have his canoe break into three pieces. As you look towards the water on the right-hand side of the cave today, you will see three narrow strips of islands (Figure C). These broken pieces are known today as Ciboux Island and Hertford Island, or also as the Bird Islands.



Figure D – Breton Cove, two girls turned to stone. View looking between the two Islands (Kluskap’s Canoe).

Te’wipukt:

It could mean where the water flows out, a canal, a harbour, or a lookout.

Kluskap may have been frustrated with this, for when he noticed two girls on the shore laughing at him, possibly because they had just witnessed his canoe breaking in three pieces, he became upset with them and turned them into stone and told them that this is where they would remain forever. This was at Plaster Cove (Tewipukt), which might have been a lookout point, but not too many people use the word today. We found Breton Cove where the original map states where the two sisters that Kluskap

turned to stone should have been located on the shoreline. However, no sign of the stones were seen that day. Further investigation will have to be conducted to determine where exactly these stones are or were (Figure D).



Figure E – Wreck Cove, Kluskap’s moose skin canoe mat.

Ketapukwesnik:

This translation was obtained from Mi’kmaq place names Cape Breton University.

The next geological marker in the legend is created when Kluskap leaps from his broken canoe and throws his moose skin canoe mat on the shore to dry at Ketapukwesnik (Wreck Cove) (Figure E). There is about 15 acres of bare ground that can be seen here today. We noticed that rocks, ranging from 1 to 6 inches, could be found along the shoreline about one Kilometre by fifty to sixty metres.



Figure F – Table Rock where Kluskap has his dinner.

Petawlutik:

is known in Mi’kmaq as a table and when you listen to the word in Mi’kmaq, it describes a place where you receive gifts (food).

The next destination in the legend is mentioned when Kluskap goes to Table Rock (Petawlutik), where he has his dinner. The greatest gift that one can receive is nourishment. Table Rock would have been a place where offerings were made to Kluskap (Figure F).



Figure G – Indian Island, where Kluskap startles a beaver.

We'koqma'q:

The literal translation of this community is where land begins, and some have said where the water ends.

Kluskap then makes his way into the Bras d'Or Lake through the greater Bras d'Or channel and heads to the western side of Whycocomagh, better known to the Mi'kmaq as We'koqma'q^{ix}. At Indian Island (Wi'sikk) Kluskap startles a beaver. In the legend, Frank Speck refers to this area as Indian Island (and Wi'sikk as meaning cabin). There may have been something lost in the translation here and the Mi'kmaq Chief may have been referring to the home, the beavers' home, or the beavers' den (Figure G).



Figure H - Middle River, where Kluskap killed a young beaver.

Wi'sikk:

Shaped like a beaver den. Wi's – beaver den, ikk would mean, shaped like.

This is where Kluskap startles a beaver and chases the beaver towards Middle River. When Kluskap arrives at Middle River, he kills a young beaver whose bones could still be seen there at the time (Figure H). Sadly, we did not find anything that resembled giant beaver bones in this area. However, according to *The Journal of American Folklore*, a Mi'kmaq by the name of Tom Stevens had seen these bonesⁱⁱⁱ.

These bones, which were described as ribs up to 8 feet long and a monstrous hip joint, were taken to the Halifax Museum for preservation and further research. We did find a mastodon femur extracted from the banks of Middle River in 1834. Perhaps there is a connection to the legend, but this must be further researched.^{viii}



Figure I - Red Island, where Kluskap threw a rock.

Paqnukte'kan:

This word is still under investigation and requires further research. An example of the loss of the link between the landscape and language as another Indigenous word has lost its meaning.

After Kluskap killed the young beaver at Middle River, he continued following the beaver that he had originally startled and then lost. He returned to Indian Island (Wi'sikk) in Whycocomagh Bay and stood on its peak and threw a rock where he thought the beaver might be, forming Red Island (Paqnukte'kan) (Figure I).



Figure J - Cape Split (Pli'kan) Bay of Fundy.

Pli'kan:

This word refers to Cape Split or Split Rock.

I've asked elders and others from our communities about the meaning of this word (Paqnukte'kan) and every person I spoke to replied that they had never heard it before. Once again, we see the loss of the link between the landscape and language as another Indigenous word has lost its meaning. The next thing that is stated in the legend is that Kluskap startled the beaver again and that's when the beaver moved towards the St. Peters Canal and burrowed underneath, which may be an explanation as to why there are crooks and windings before you arrive at the canal. The chase continued into the ocean as the beaver went westward towards the Bay of Fundy. Kluskap arrives at Cape Split (Pli'kan) (Figure J) and uses his paddle to dig out a channel, forming Minas Basin in the Bay of Fundy, and the Bay of Fundy tides.



Figure K – Five Islands, Bay of Fundy.



Figure L – Partridge Island, Bay of Fundy.

Nearby is a small island referred to as pot rock. The reason it is called pot rock is that Kluskap killed the beaver in the Minas Basin and cooked the beaver in that pot. It was an amazing experience to see how the water along the shore bubbles there to this day -- it seems as if it were boiling in a pot on a stove. Another rock near pot rock is said to be the remains of Kluskap's dog since, according to legend, the dog was left behind and turned to stone. Turtle (Mikjijk), who was introduced as Kluskap's uncle, was also

said to have been turned into stone by Kluskap. These features would be found from Five Islands (Figure K) to Partridge Island (Figure L) in and around the Minas Basin area.

This is where the legend recounted to Speck regarding the geological formations throughout Cape Breton and Nova Scotia ends. There are many more legends about Kluskap that mention the Bay of Fundy and its geological formations, some of which can be accessed here:

<http://www.mikmaweydebert.ca/home/>.

Culture, Land and Language

As you can see, the landscape played a big part in the daily life of the Mi'kmaq and, to this day, there are community members who address these rocks and geological formations as ancestors. Looking at the landscape of Nova Scotia, I cannot help but wonder about the ancestors. How did they live before us? What was the landscape like? And, most importantly, how did their language reflect this landscape and what words have since been lost?

The Mi'kmaq natural and supernatural worldviews were woven together in the Mi'kmaq culture much like the braided strands of sweet grass that are frequent in many Indigenous ceremonies. The Mi'kmaq worldview included a form of belief system known as animism in which animals, plants, rocks, spiritual beings, and even words become animate. The Mi'kmaq language possesses life within itself. As Dr. Bernie Francis says, "Our language is verb oriented. We naturally see, and act, within the world differently than speakers of English and French, both groups speaking languages from the Indo-European stock"^v. An example of this would be some of the rocks or islands mentioned in this legend. A rock by itself would be inanimate, once that rock has been given a name or identity it becomes animate in the Mi'kmaq worldview^{vi}.

The animistic Mi'kmaq worldview guides the ways we interact with our surroundings. We all have a responsibility to maintain a balance for a healthy relationship with Mother Earth. But this relationship comes with responsibility. As elder Dr. Albert Marshall says, "We have an inherent responsibility to maintain the ecological integrity of the land." The language is embedded in the land and allows everyone to show gratitude in all they receive from the land. This allows for a respectful relationship not only with the land, but also with other animals and unseen entities. Some people may refer to these beliefs as customary law and, although these customary laws or beliefs may not be written down, they are the law of the land within a culture that has passed them down orally through ceremonies for thousands of years.

All we have left that is truly authentic of the land – and is genuine – is our language. Our language was not developed overseas but was shaped and created by the landscape. Our people have lived within this area called North America for thousands of years. We always wanted to maintain a healthy relationship with the land and all its resources, and like any relationship, for it to thrive and be successful, there has to be a balance. If one side of the relationship dominates the other, then it will suffer. Usually the relationship will no longer exist or will not stay in its balanced state. Dr. Bernie Francis explains the relationship that exists between the Mi'kmaq people and Mother Earth when he states:

weji-sqalia'timk:

The place where one
has sprouted from.

weji-sqalia'tiek:

The place where we
have sprouted from.

“the Mi'kmaw verb infinitive, *weji-sqalia'timk*, is a concept deeply engrained within the Mi'kmaw language, a language that grew from within the ancient landscape of Mi'kma'ki. Weji-sqalia'timk expresses the Mi'kmaw understanding of the origin of its people as rooted in the landscape of Eastern North America. The “we exclusive” form, *weji-sqalia'tiek*, means “we sprouted from” much like a plant sprouts from the earth. The Mi'kmaq sprouted or emerged from this landscape and nowhere else; their cultural memory resides in her.”^{vii}

When we are disconnected from the land, we lose our language and many of our animate words, which are essential in maintaining that relationship and interconnectedness with the land. Reciprocally, losing our language has resulted in the costs associated with a breakdown in our relationship with the land.

Conclusion

It has been an honour to present this paper to you, especially at this momentous time. 2019 marked UNESCO's International Year of Indigenous Languages and was the year in which the federal government passed the Indigenous Languages Act in Canada. 2020 is the start of the Decade of Action for the Agenda 2030 goal of leaving no one behind, as well as the year of planning a new global biodiversity vision of “living in harmony with nature”. The UN declared an International Decade of Indigenous Languages, to begin in 2022.

The transfer of knowledge from our ancestors required a setting that was not dependent on time. Today, we have resources for entertainment and learning such as books, televisions, radios, smart devices and other tools that we can access quickly. Any questions and answers that we may have are now obtained through a simple click or voice command in English or French. It has become more convenient and faster to obtain knowledge in these languages, but these languages do not help us understand our relationship with the land.

Indigenous languages and words are being lost along with the Indigenous flora and fauna of the landscape. In order to rekindle the reciprocal relationship between Indigenous people and the land, we need to interact with it. Sometimes, we must look to the past to prepare for the future. Language and landscape come together in dances and songs that have been passed down by many individuals throughout Mi'kma'ki. We need to recount the legends that refer to the land. When language is practiced through oral tradition, our chances of saving and preserving it increase insurmountably, our relationship with the land becomes balanced, as do we. As the late Dr. Rita Joe states in her poem, “I Lost My Talk”: “... Let me find my talk, so I can teach you about me.”^x

ⁱ The apostrophe (e.g. Pjila'si) is crucial in the Mi'kmaq writing system (better known as the Francis-Smith orthography), as it belongs to the letter it follows and is considered to accentuate and lengthen the vowel or consonant's phoneme.

ⁱⁱ Rand, S. T. (1894). The Legends of the Micmac. p.36 In S. T. Rand, *The Legends of the Micmac* (p. xxxii). New York & London: Wellesley Philological Publications.

ⁱⁱⁱ Speck, F. (1915). Some Micmac Tales from Cape Breton Island. *The Journal of American Folklore*, p.59-60. Available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/534558?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

^{iv} Speck, F. (1922). *Beothuk and Micmac*. New York: Museum of the American Indian. p.146 <https://archive.org/details/beothukmicmac00spec/page/n235>.

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- ^v Sable, T., & Francis, B. (2012). *The Language of this land Mi'kma'ki*. p.26. Sydney NS: Cape Breton University Press.
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- ^{ix} Ta'n Weji-sqalia'tiek, Mi'kmaw Place Names <http://mikmawplacenames.ca/>
- ^x Joe, Dr. Rita. *Song of Eskasoni: More Poems Of Rita Joe*. Ed. Lee Maracle. Ragweed Press, 1988.