

The Old Sun Community College Winter Count: Honors Our Siksika Way of Documenting History to Encourage Cultural/Historical Research and Literacy Enhancement

Abstract

Old Sun Community College from the Siksika First Nation (part of the Blackfoot Confederacy) in Alberta Canada embarked on a major research and curriculum initiative to develop and enhance Siksika Knowledge courses that the college takes the responsibility to offer. The ultimate aim is to regain Siksika Knowledge and Ways of Knowing to help us to become the people that our ancestors intended for us to be. Siksika Knowledge Keepers (all possessing ceremonial rites) were the key partners in the development of the comprehensive slate of Siksika courses and the implementation of them; only they possess certain knowledge and only they can determine what is appropriate to share in the public domain.

To lead by example and to apply the important ancient knowledge being gained, Old Sun Community College honored the Siksika way of documenting history by commissioning a Winter Count on a buffalo robe to commemorate its 40th anniversary (1971-2011) as an adult learning centre (now a college). Protocol was followed in the development of the Old Sun College Winter Count; only those with the transferred rites can document history in this way.

The symbols and the events depicted on the robe came from researching older winter counts and adding oral histories shared by our knowledge keepers. Some of these accounts present the Siksika version of what is in print or more importantly what has not been documented anywhere else. The beautiful robe emanates a spirit such as becoming a powerful tool for organizing information into seven time periods that will be presented in various multimedia formats for teaching Siksika oral and archival history to all age groups. The robe also has been a springboard to other initiatives such as a Story Robe Literacy Project. The Winter Count, when presented to school students, sparks an interest in Siksika history and students are now inspired to develop their own story robes (the layman's version of Winter Counts) on various themes such as depicting major milestones of their families. Students of all ages are conducting research and documenting findings both in symbols and in text.

This workshop will describe the process to develop the Siksika Knowledge courses at Old Sun Community College that are based on triangulating information from archival documents, published works and above all oral histories. Some of the symbols that depict Siksika history on the Winter Count will be explained and some of the student works will be shared. How this work has nourished the learning spirit and become a springboard to other projects will also be described.