

Surmounting Barriers to Understanding: Spiritual Elements and Worldviews of the Elders of Pukatawagan, Manitoba, with a Look at Teaching Application in the Community

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Key to References

- AA** – *Acaðōhkīwina and Acimōwina / Traditional Narratives of the Rock Cree Indians* (1989), by Robert Brightman
- CECD** – *Castel's English-Cree Dictionary and Memoirs of the Elders* (2001)
- DTN** – *David Thompson's Narrative, 1784-1812*, by David Thompson (1962; edited by Richard Glover)
- GP** – *Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human-Animal Relationships* (1993), by Robert Brightman
- OD** – *Orders of the Dreamed / George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823*, by George Nelson (1823; 1988 with notes and comments by Robert Brightman, Jennifer Brown, Stan Cuthand and Emma LaRocque)
- SNA** – *Shamanism in North America*, by Norman Bancroft Hunt (2002)

Note on terminology: *Rock Cree* is an ethnic self-designation of the people of the Pukatawagan area; *Woods Cree* is their dialect; *Woodlands Culture* is, in our context, an anthropological label for the beliefs and way of life, or *pimâtisiwin*, of speakers of Woods Cree, Swampy Cree and Oji-Cree whose traditional land is the boreal forest of northern Manitoba, northern Saskatchewan and northwestern Ontario.

Note on procedure: The brief presentation includes overhead transparencies and audio clips of a few statements in the original Cree. The audience will see and hear at least a sample of the original material.

Introduction

My previous presentation to CIESC (Toronto, May 27, 2002; paper revised October 2002) concerned the development of a community-based dictionary and anthology of interviews. The revision emphasizes the religious intolerance expressed in a mistaken notion of witchcraft that contributed greatly to the devaluing of aboriginal spirituality in many communities of central and northern Manitoba. The consequences for ancestral language teaching have been negative, as culture, religion and language are inextricably intertwined. Ideas of European witchcraft were based, as it turns out, on forged documents and fantasy that sometimes passed for history until the end of the

twentieth century. *See* my revised paper (2002), which includes a discussion of the “witchcraft” problem. (Cf. SNA 11, OD 158, 201-202)

Many of the elements of aboriginal Cree religion survive in communities where the Cree language is still viable. It is certainly the case in Pukatawagan, although many younger Cree now have little or no knowledge of these elements; it is not coincidental that language loss accompanies loss of understanding of traditional spirituality. English translations of key words are often very misleading when unaccompanied by semantic considerations that are informed by knowledge of culture and traditional religious concepts. There are no equivalents in English for traditional Cree concepts like *pawâkan* ‘dream spirit-guide’ and *mamâhtâwisiw* ‘he/she is a shaman or wise one, uses power’ (GP 87). A dictionary is not sufficient to the task: the stories need to be told again to shed light on the matter. Because of historical miseducation regarding such culturally essential concepts, it is the task of the school to build bridges of understanding between Cree spirituality and Christian spirituality. The meanings of words need to be taught more fully without prejudice—that is, within the context of the original tales told in the original language. Both Roman Catholicism and mainstream Protestant denominations have revised their stance towards traditional aboriginal beliefs, but the news has not always reached local congregations.

What the elders told us is compared with relevant ethnolinguistic data presented in publications by Brightman and others. Nine religious or supernatural topics will be discussed in this brief paper: 1) Roman Catholicism on the reserve, 2) the banishment of song and drum, 3) everyday practices like token burnt offerings and spilt blood ritual, 4) shamanic powers (directions by dream-guides, prophesy, flying or “thought travel,” curses), 5) nature of the *pawâkan*, 6) shamanic miracles like self-cannibalism and resurrection, 7) the anthropophagous wihtiko and ways of defeating it, 8) spirit islands, 9) supernatural little people.

The Validation of Roman Catholicism

All band members are to my knowledge at least nominally Roman Catholic. Some of the most devout practitioners display no reluctance to discuss the Cree elements handed down by their ancestors. In their worldview no conflict exists between the two, nor do they necessarily separate them, with the exception of overt shamanism itself, the practice of *using* supernatural power for good or ill. In fact, the elders we interviewed told me that some people in the community “still to this day have it in them” (CECD 273) but will not wield the power because it is contrary to the teachings of the church.

Banished Elements: Song and Drum

Throughout the Woodlands Cree and Oji-Cree cultural area the first priests and missionaries banned aboriginal singing and dancing (GP 25, 90, 104). Drums were destroyed or hidden. The old songs were sung no more, except in remote trapline areas out of earshot of the priest (GP 25). Aboriginal dances were replaced by European folk dances which are still popular. Many residents of Pukatawagan have expressed their sense of loss. In recent years, the Plains style of drumming and singing was introduced. It appeals mainly to younger people, and it is borrowed from another culture.

Some shamanic ritual may survive in the bush, which may be inferred from the well-maintained old rock paintings as well as very fresh, recent ones (CECD 176-177). Widespread in the Woodlands cultural area, these sites are tended and refreshed from time to time, but I could find no one who claimed to know anything specific about them, aside from Margaret Sinclair in her commentary on a legendary incident (CECD 580). Over a century of suppression has driven northern Cree spiritual practices literally into the bush (cf. GP 24-25). The late respected elder Emile Sinclair stated that the last Rock Cree drumming, singing and dancing occurred in Pukatawagan in his grandfather's time (CECD 528-529). He defends guardedly the praying and dancing of his people before the priest came. They did not often use their supernatural powers for ill purposes, but rather for good:

pisiskîđihtamowin â-kî-mîđ... mîđikowisicik mâni mâka îtokî kâ-kî-pawâhkwâ.
They received care from the divine (or supernatural), presumably through dream quests.

mwât n... mwâc ohci-âpacihtâwak naspâci isa tânisa... ahpo ta-kakwî-nipahâcik
They did not use them in the wrong way, you know, how ... even trying to kill

wîc-âđisiđiniwa ôho. mwâc, mwâc îkosîsi kî-itâpacihtâwak.
their fellow people. No, they did not use it (the power) like that.
(sound clip; CECD 528)

The latter point of view is commonly held, in spite of a more skeptical stance taken by a few community members (cf. GP 25).

Everyday Practices

Among the personal traditional Cree customs that are at least accepted if not still practised by many community members are rituals of burnt offerings and the cleaning up of spilt animal blood. Such rituals are often dismissed by detractors and nonaboriginals as “superstition” unworthy of serious study. This cannot be the attitude of anthropologists, obviously, nor should linguists and educators ignore these elements. They are possibly remnants of a primal religion that predates the world's dominant “great religions.” At any rate, they are very widespread in North America, and similar practices are found around the world (CF SNA 8). It is too easy to dismiss religions other than one's own as mere superstition when an objective look will reveal obvious parallels everywhere (cf. OD 200). The notion of sacred blood is certainly primal, also ritualized in Christian ceremony.

The following quotation from Keno Linklater's interview describes the burnt offering ritual that his grandfather Albert told him when he was about eight years old. Keno should never forget about the custom and should keep talking about it if he “would live a long life.”

akwâni mâna îkosi â-kî-tôtahkwâ îđiniwak kîkwâđiw â-nipahtâcik kîkwâđiw isa
People used to do something (perform a ceremony) when they killed something, you know,

kayâs isa ôhoko omosômiwâwa wîstawâw â-kiskisicik â-macostîhamawâcik.
long ago, their grandfathers, they would throw something into the fire (a sacrificial burnt offering).

akwâni îkosi nikî-isi-wâpamâwak nimosômak kîkwâðiw â-nipahtâcik kî-macostîhamawîwak
I saw my grandfathers, when they killed something, that they made a burnt offering,

anihi omosômiwâwa kîlhtwâm isa ta-mîðikocik kîkwâðiw nitawîðihtahkwâyi.
too, throwing in a piece for their grandfathers so they would be given something in return.

akwâni îkosi wîstawâw anikik *from* ayihîw ôhokok kimosôminawak
And likewise, the same thing, they too, uh, these ones, our forefathers,

kitâniskotâpîni-kimosôminawak. akwâni îkosi kî-pî-tôtamwak pîyakwan anohc.
our great-grandfathers. They did it just like right now.

kîyâpic anohc îkosi nîsta ôtîða kîkwan â-nipahtâyân akwâni nimacostîhîn
Still today, now, whenever I kill something myself [for food], I always throw a piece into the fire,

ahpo tîy â(y)-iskwastamân â-sîkinamân â-... nôhkom kiminahîtin tîy nititwân mâna.
even tea I usually save a little to pour into the fire and, "Here, Grandmother," I say to myself, "I give you tea."

îyako kîyâpic nîsta nikiskisin îyakwîðiw ana kisîðiniw â-kî-itwît ana îyako ana nimosôm *Albert*.
This I still remember, [it was] that old man who said this, that one, my grandfather Albert.
(sound clip; CECD 276; cf. GP 90, 107-109, 116)

Respect for butchered game animals is shown by custom, Keno explains, as he speaks to future generations:

pisiskisîsa â-nipahât îðiniw toni kî-manâpahkikawinam mihko.
A person who kills an animal should really be careful about spilling the blood (not to spill it!).

iskwîw ta-pâsitaha îyakwîðiw kî-kâskinihtâw. kî-itwîwak, môða tâskôc anohc. ahpo mâyiða
If a woman steps over it, she would scrub it. That's what they said, not like right now. But maybe

îtokî kîyâpic anohc. îkosi pîyakwan nîsta ôtîða îyako kîyâpic nipimitisahîn ahpo kîkwan
it still happens. I do the same thing, too, still follow this (sacred custom),

ahpo â-pî-asamikawiyân ôma toni papîyâhtak nipamihtân toni nitasowâpahtîn ahpo
even something that is given to me to eat. I am really careful with it; I even watch to see

mihko ta-kitiskinamân moscihtakâ. sîmâk nipâhkwhîn nipiy ohci.
that I do not spill the blood on the floor. Right away, I wash it out with water.

ahpo nântaw ita isi mihko ta-astîk, îyako kîyâpic îyako... iða... î-pimitisahamân.
Even when there is blood somewhere, that I still ... that (custom) I still follow.

akwa ati-nîkâni îyako, îyako ta-kanawâpahtamîk isa ôma ati-oski-pimâtisihîko
And in the future, you will regard it in this way, you know, you who will be in your younger years

three generations from now îyako ta-kanawâpahtamîk. kîspin kipîhtawinâwâw
three generations from now, are to look at it in this way. If you are hearing me,

âsay nîða na-ka-nisiwanâtisin îkospî.
I will already be gone by that time.

(sound clip; CECD 244-245; cf. GP 112-113, 116-117, 207, 211)

Shamanic Power: above the Earth and below the Water

Attempts to use shamanic power date mainly from unspecified times of long ago or from the early twentieth century. Some of the stories concern historical persons, such as Michel Dumas, “the one who flew” (CECD 484-485) and slept in a coffin at the bottom of Granville Lake for an entire winter so he could dream down there and gain greater power. He survived, of course (CECD 257-258, 487-489; cf. GP 81-82).

Out-of-body travel, often thought of today as thought-projection, was believed to be one of the powers of a great shaman. Keno tells of a man who flies to a remote place to observe a group of enemies in the midst of a plot. Invisible, he sees and hears all in a very short space of time. (CECD 271-272; cf. SNA 12-13 & OD 64-65) In this incident and in many others like it, shamanic power is used to avert harm to the tribe.

There were, of course, a few instances of the use of supernatural gifts to do harm. One of the most intriguing tales, perhaps alarming to non-anthropologist readers, is a rare tale of apparent literal self-cannibalism, in which a man, as well as his wife, eat his flesh to survive after starving because of a hunting curse placed on them by a malicious shaman. Eating human flesh is taboo, but in this case it is done to counter a greater evil. It is an unusual traditional story of cannibalism and resurrection, retold by Miles Bighetty (CECD 481-486; cf. GP 93-94).

Foretelling the future is a common theme in the Cree repertoire of traditional lore. Keno’s statement may be taken as traditional opinion concerning such prophesy: *î-kanawâpahtahkwâ[w] kayâs ayihîw nîkâni î-kî-itâpicik îyakwanik idiniwak*, “Long ago they looked into the future, these people did.” Skeptics may easily dismiss such stories as examples of people who just happened to get the news ahead of the rest of the clan—people who understood English and heard radio reports. And in fact, many of these early twentieth-century tales foretell things that lay in the *immediate* future, such as the building of a road or railway, or the arrival of airplanes for the first time. Nevertheless, they were taken at the time as indicative of prophetic powers. Today, opinion is divided regarding the authenticity of such prophecies. (CECD 255, 260-261; 346-350; cf. AA 180-182, SNA 12)

One of the most difficult concepts to explain is that of the *pawâkan*, the personal dream-spirit guide that may represent an animal or even something we usually think of as biologically inanimate (rock or ice) but can come in human form in the dream. The *pawâkan*, a dreamed entity, is not as simple as a Christian guardian angel watching over us, nor is it a benevolent saint who may hear our prayers; like the drum, the belief in or use of it was deemed incompatible with Christianity and thus banned by the first priests and missionaries. In a dream-quest, the *pawâkan* may give directions (orders) to the recipient concerning a successful hunt or information about dietary matters. The *pawâkan* demands certain rituals in return. The recipient does not normally reveal to others, directly, what the *pawâkan* is. (GP 90, 101, OD 139, 145)

In our interviews, the *pawâkan* is mentioned as a matter of fact but never elaborated upon. Almost casually, elder Margaret Sinclair tells how the first of her people located the correct place (Pukatawagan) to establish a settlement. The man’s *pawâkan* told him where to go, and she has seen the rock painting he made of himself holding a bow and arrow. In another story, a woman’s *pawâkan* came to get her in her sleep; the *pawâkan* appears to be associated with nightmares, too. (CECD 340, 578-581; 594-596)

In previous centuries, Christians generally made no attempt to understand the nature of Cree religious concepts. George Nelson is an exception, although his own prejudices are apparent. Curiously, he believed in the authenticity of the power of shamanism but attempted to equate its elements and spirits with those from European pagan religions, especially the Greek (OD 55-59).

Some people are thought to have special medicinal powers; often women, they learn the healing properties of various plants and eventually pass the knowledge on to someone else. This is the role of a Pukatawagan woman known locally as *wâpos* ‘rabbit’. Margaret Sinclair swears by “native medicine,” as does another elder, Hyacinth Colomb, who prepares and drinks his own *wihkîs*, or calamus, tea every morning. Both are well into their eighties and, some will say, “living proof” that their medicine is superior to Western medicine. (See CECD 273, 286, 592-596) There is much talk of the *land* and the good things in *it*: for every ailment there is a herb or other natural cure. Among the northern Cree and Oji-Cree I never heard a traditional elder who is either monolingual in the aboriginal language or effortlessly fluent in it refer to the land in his or her own language as “Mother Earth,” a concept borrowed from Classical mythology into English only in the late 1500s. The land, *askiy* [*ahki* in Oji-Cree], is an inanimate noun which has to Brightman’s knowledge no discernible “female or maternal associations” (GP 50).

There are also tales of would-be shamans who became the butt of jokes. A skeptical Adam Castel tells of one who claimed not only to have the power to fly but also to walk on water (CECD 380-384). They had more alcohol in them than other special spirits.

Spirit Islands

A feature of many Cree and Oji-Cree communities is the *mantônak* ‘spirit island’ or *mancônakos* ‘little spirit island; in fact such islands can be found as far east as Quebec. For the people of Pukatawagan, their *mancônakos* is located in Highrock Lake downstream from the community. The abandoned community of Prayer River is nearby; today, a few people have returned to live at the community of Highrock. A spirit island is the one at which one must not point a finger. Doing so will raise a strong wind, and drowning (or freezing on the ice in winter) may ensue. Stern warnings concerning ignorant pointing are contained in the interviews with Keno Linklater, Athanase Castel and Miles Bighetty (CECD 240-242, 295-303, 489). Miles states that it is the *mîmîkwîsiwak*, the supernatural ‘little rock people’ who cause the gale. Other people claim not to know who causes the wind but nearly all agree that it is very dangerous to point with a finger at the island. Taking pictures with a camera, on the other hand, is perfectly safe (CECD 301 & 303).

Little People

Hunt mentions tiny but powerful supernatural little people of the northern woods who are often malevolent (SNA 48). In our interviews, the elders make it clear that the little people do not like humans, but it is usually the humans’ own folly that is their undoing rather than any overt acts of the *mîmîkwîsiwak*, or ‘little rock people’. Adam Castel’s tale “The Women-Seekers Who tried to Follow the Mimikwisiwak into the Rocks,” for example, focuses on human frailty (CECD 366-370). The little rock people

are described as having faces like a fish, with no noses. They are shiny and glisten like a fish, as well. However, there may be two categories of little people at Pukatawagan, if one is to categorize them by appearance. The other little people, the *apisciðinísak*, resemble Germanic dwarfs, hairy and walking about on land. The *mîmikwîsiwak* move about on the water in tiny canoes, rob people's fish nets and live in the cracks of rocks by the water. (CECD 235-249, 363-370, 487-491, 534-535; cf. AA 150-151) Even today, some people claim to see both kinds of little people on rare occasions.

The Wihtiko

Legends of the *wihtikow*, or wihtiko, known in English mainly by its Ojibwe name windigo, are numerous. Many examples are included in the *Memoirs*, and still others have been recorded but not yet transcribed. Sidney Castel's popular rendition of the defeat of a wihtiko has been used as a bilingual reader in the local school, with illustrations by two school children. Grandparents once employed the wihtiko threat to make children go to bed in the evening.

Brightman identifies half a dozen historical categories of wihtiko, which appear to have changed in description over the centuries (OD 85-94, 158-171; GP 151-156). The Pukatawagan memoirs clearly reject the idea of the wihtiko as simply an evil spirit, one of the older categories. In his memoirs, written in old age many years after first hearing of wihtikos, David Thompson comments, "Weetiko is one of the names of the Evil Spirit and when he gets possession of any Man, (Women are wholly exempt from it) he becomes a Man Eater, and if he succeeds; he no longer keeps company with his relations and friends, but roams all alone through the Forests, a powerfully wicked Man, preying upon whom he can, and as such is dreaded by the Natives" (DTN 194). In two respects, Thompson's statement is suspect: women did sometimes become wihtikos. Simply relegating the wihtiko to a Christian concept of Evil Spirit is cultural blindness; in fact, the Cree had no concept of a single evil spirit, nor of a single god. George Nelson's description is more convincing, although he, too, lapses at times into the narrow European point of view (OD 85-94, 161).

The Pukatawagan elders describe the wihtiko as a cannibal monster that was once a human being. Wihtikos always came from the north in late spring as solitary, mute individuals and were probably Inuit. They never ate white people, only Natives. They are to be pitied because they went insane out of hunger. Nobody cared for them, and so they turned into inhuman monsters. They were powerful but of normal human size. The female wihtikos were far more powerful than the male wihtikos. It required much shamanic power to defeat a wihtiko; often such power came through a *pawâkan* acquired in a dream-quest. The last wihtiko sighting was reported around 1959. At least two wihtiko skulls have turned up in Pukatawagan. (CECD 231, 266-267, 314-325, 336-336-346, 350-355, 370-373, 435-445, 481-486, 536-537, 594; cf. AA 154-180)

Conclusion

A brief presentation allows for little more than a cursory overview of a very complex subject. I can only touch upon many things that are discussed at length in the *Memoirs of the Elders*. For in-depth studies of traditional Woods Cree religion and culture, I recommend Brightman very highly. I do not recommend English-language materials that do not provide the Cree-language sources in the form of recorded verbatim oral texts. Too many old misconceptions have been passed along from a faulty source to a faulty retelling. Although I would not detract from his remarkable achievements as a surveyor and cartographer, David Thompson is a case in point. Language does matter. The deep meaning of untranslatable concept words like *pawâkan* and *wihtiko* matters a lot.

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