

## **Chippewa - Cree**

### **DRAFT**

#### **The Beginning of the Cree World**

The Cree were western members of the Algonquian family, which is the largest of the language groups of North American Indians.

Several forms of this creation story involving a great flood have been recorded from different Algonquian tribes. This particular version has been selected because it was recorded by the great explorer-geographer David Thompson before missionaries had been among the people who related it.

Wisakedjak (also known as Weesack-kachack and other various spellings) is the principal character in many Cree tales. His name means "the Flatterer."

After the Creator had made all the animals and had made the first people, he said to Wisakedjak, "Take good of my people, and teach them how to live. Show them all the bad roots, all the roots that will hurt them and kill them. Do not let the people or the animals quarrel with each other."

But Wisakedjak did not obey the Creator. He let the creatures do whatever they wished to do. Soon they were quarrelling and fighting and shedding much blood. □The Creator, greatly displeased, warned Wisakedjak. "If you do not keep the ground clean, I will take everything away from you, and you will be miserable."□But Wisakedjak did not believe the Creator, and did not obey. Becoming more and more careless and disobedient, he tricked the animals and the people and made them angry with each other. They quarreled and fought so much that the earth became red with blood.

This time the creator became very angry. "I will take everything away from you and wash the ground clean." He said.

Still Wisakedjak did not believe the Creator. He did not believe until the rains came and the streams began to swell. Day after day, and night after night, the rains continued. The water in the rivers and the lakes rose higher and higher. At last they overflowed their banks and washed the ground clean. The sea came up on the land, and everything was drowned except one Otter, one Beaver and one Muskrat.

Wisakedjak tried to stop the sea, but it was too strong for him. He sat down on the water and wept. Otter, Beaver and Muskrat sat beside him and rested their heads on one of his thighs.

In time the rain stopped and the sea left the land. Wisakedjak took courage, but he did not dare to speak to the Creator. After long and sad thoughts about his misery, he said to himself, "If I could get a bit of the old earth beneath the water, I could make a little island for us to live on."

He did not have the power to create anything, but he did have the power to expand what had already been created. As he could not dive and did not know how far it was to the old earth, he did not know what to do. Taking pity on him, the Creator said, "I will give you the power to re-make everything if you will use the old materials buried under the water."

Still floating on the flood, Wisakedjak said to the three animals beside him, "We shall starve unless one of you can bring me a bit of the old ground beneath the water. If you will get it for me, I will make an island for us."

Then he turned to the Otter. "You are brave and strong and active. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of earth, I will see that you will have plenty of fish to eat."

So the Otter dived, but he came up again without having reached the ground. A second time and a third time Wisakedjak praised Otter and persuaded him to go down once more. When he returned the third time, he was so weary that he could not dive again.

"You are a coward!" exclaimed Wisakedjak. "I am surprised by your weak heart. Beaver, I know, can dive to the bottom of the flood. He will put you to shame."□Then he turned to Beaver. "You are brave and strong and wise. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of the old earth, I will make a good house for you on the new island I shall make. There you will be warm in the winter. Dive straight down as a brave Beaver does."

Twice Beaver dived, and twice he came back without any earth. The second time he was so tired that Wisakedjak had to let him rest for a long time. □"Dive once more," begged Wisakedjak when Beaver had recovered. "If you will bring me a bit of earth, I will make a wife for you."

To obtain a wife Beaver went down a third time. He stayed so long that he came back almost lifeless, still with no earth in his paws.

Wisakedjak was now very sad. If Otter and Beaver could not reach the bottom of the water, surely Muskrat also would fail. But he must try. He was their only chance.

"You are brave and strong and quick, Muskrat, even if you are small. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of the old earth at the bottom, I will make plenty of roots for you to eat. I will create rushes, so that you can make a nice house with rushes and dirt.

"Otter and Beaver are fools," continued Wisakedjak. "They got lost. You will find the ground if you will dive straight down."

So Muskrat jumped head first into the water, down and down he went, he brought back nothing. A second time he dived stayed a long time. When he returned Wisakedjak looked at his forepaws and sniffed. "I smell the smell of earth," he said.

"Go again. If you bring me even a small piece, I will make a wife for you, Muskrat. She will bear you a great many children. Have a strong heart now. Go straight down, as far as you can go." This time Muskrat stayed down so long that Wisakedjak feared he had drowned. At last they saw some bubbles coming up through the water. Wisakedjak reached down his long arm, seized Muskrat, and pulled him up beside them. The little creature was almost dead, but against his breast his forepaws held a piece of the old earth.

Joyously, Wisakedjak seized it, and in a short time he had expanded the bit of earth into an island. There he, Muskrat, Otter and Beaver rested and rejoiced that they had not drowned in the flood.

Some people say that Wisakedjak obtained a bit of wood, from which he made the trees; that he obtained some bones, from which he made the second race of animals.

Others say that the Creator made all things again. He commanded the rivers to take the salt water back to the sea. Then he created mankind, the animals of today, and the trees. He took from Wisakedjak all power over people and animals and left him only the power to flatter and to deceive. □ □ After that Wisakedjak played tricks upon the animals and let them into much mischief. That is why the Indians tell many stories about him, to amuse themselves during the long winter evenings.

"Oral Tradition: The Beginning of the Cree World," Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre, <http://www.sicc.sk.ca/heritage/ethnography/cree/origin/oral.html>, accessed 09/11/2007

## **Language and Relations**

The Chippewa tribe is one of the most populous and widely distributed Native American groups in North America, with 150 bands throughout the north-central United States and southern Canada. They speak the Algonquian language, Ojibwe. There are five main dialects of Ojibwe: Western Ojibwe, Eastern Ojibwe, Northern Ojibwe, Southern Ojibwe, of which the Chippewa speak, and Ottawa. While there are several differences between the different dialects, they can all be easily understood by one another.

The Plains Cree ('kre) spoke a distinct dialect that was a crucial element of their identity. Cree is a Central Algonquian language that is closely related to Ojibwa, Fox, and Menominee.

## **Homeland**

From Lake Superior, the Chippewa moved westward, entering Montana with the Metis in the second half of the nineteenth century. During the seventeenth century the group of Cree now known as the Plains Cree began to move southwest into the Plains, spreading through northern Alberta. Coming into contact with each other on the plains, these groups – the Cree and Chippewa - adopted a new identity through intermarriage and adaptation to the plains lifeway.

After the epidemics of the 1830s, many Plains Cree and Assiniboiné were wiped out, and therefore the Chippewa were left as a more dominant group on the plains. After 1850, several Chippewa continued to travel with the Metis, joining them in their

journeys to the plains of Alberta and Montana. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, more Chippewa continued to break away from the parklands and forests and migrate to the western plains.

### **Treaties**

In 1817 the Chippewa, along with the Assiniboiné and Cree, ceded lands along the Assiniboiné and Red rivers to the Selkirk Colony. In the following years they established close ties with the newly emergent Métis communities, particularly in areas east of the Turtle Mountains and as far south as Devils Lake. Other treaties in North Dakota and in Manitoba affected the Chippewa tribe,

Many Chippewa, however, were not recognized by the United States in several of the treaties that covered the western plains of North Dakota and Montana. Throughout the following few decades, therefore, the Chippewa, along with many Métis Indians, were referred to as “landless” and sought their survival by migrating throughout areas west and northwest of the Turtle Mountains. Some chose to live with the Assiniboiné on Fort Peck Reservation in Montana, while others joined the Plains Cree who were married to Crows or Assiniboines in the area of Fort Belknap, the Bear Paw Mountains, and the Mussellshell River.

### **Land Base**

It was a long process that took many years for the Chippewa to become legally recognized by the United States and/or Canada and to gain trust lands. In 1882, the Turtle Mountain Reservation was created for the Chippewa and the Métis, yet was reduced two years later. As a result of this reduction, many Chippewa traveled westward once again. Some settled on Cree reservations in Saskatchewan, while others remained in Montana and settled on the Blackfeet, Flathead, Crow, Northern Cheyenne, Fort Peck, and Fort Belknap reservations.

### **Tribal Government**

In 1917, Rocky Boy, named after a Chippewa leader, was established in Montana by the government for the Chippewa, Cree, and Métis tribes.

### **Abstracted from:**

Erdoes, Richard, and Alfonso Ortiz. “A Gust of Wind.” *American Indian Myths and Legends*. New York: Random House, 1984.

“Native Languages of the Americas: Chippewa.”  
<http://www.native-languages.org/chippewa.htm>