Chapter 19. The Lone Trickster? Exploring Individualism in Anishinaabe and Omushkego Oral Traditions in Early Canadian Indigenous History

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Thank you very much to the National Science Foundation, to the conference organizers for putting this together, and to the Davids for organizing this panel. When I first began to think about the topic for this paper, I thought that this was my chance to explore some ethnic and cultural differences between two groups of indigenous people in Northern North America that I have been studying for over a decade. These are the Omushkegwak, also known as the Swampy Cree, a subgroup of the larger ethnicity of Cree, and the Western Anishinaabe, a subgroup of the general Anishinaabe also known as the Ojibwe, Saulteaux, and Chippewa. It is a really common problem in North American indigenous histories that so many different names refer to the same group of people.

Today the Cree are a large indigenous group in North America and they live across the boreal region and northern plains of Canada in the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta and in a few U.S. states: Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana. In Canada they number over two hundred thousand and have one hundred and thirty five registered bands. Scholars divide them into eight major groups: Naskapi, Montagnais, Atikamekw, James Bay Cree, Moose Cree—we have heard some people talking about James Bay Cree already with Colin Scott—Swampy Cree or Omushkegowak, Woods Cree, and Plains Cree. Outsiders developed the generic term "Cree" and its use spread in the 1800s, but people had more specific localized terms for themselves.

Anishinaabeg today is a self-designation used to describe Ojibwe, Ottawa, Pottawatomi, and Algonquin people who all speak various dialects of the Anishinaabe language known as Anishinaabemowin. Both Anishinaabemowin and Cree belong to the same language family and share many similarities. Today Anishinaabeg live around the Great Lakes, and to the west and north, covering the Canadian provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta and the U.S. states of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota. In Canada today the Anishinaabeg number roughly 140,000 and in the U.S. the number is approaching roughly 200,000.

There are many parallels between Anishinaabe and Omushkego history and culture. Aside from similarities in language, both lived in small hunting parties for most of the year, traveling according to seasonal cycles to make use of resources on their lands. They both became involved in the fur trade with French

and British traders. For both groups, spirituality was deeply important for surviving and flourishing in harsh environments because they called on spirits of animals to secure food. But there were some important differences between Omushkegowak and Anishinaabeg. The Anishinaabeg seem to be more communally oriented than Omushkegowak. Most Anishinaabeg expressed their identities and communities through a clan system, while the Omushkegowak did not. Anishinaabeg tended to organize their contacts with the spirit world into medicine societies that imposed a hierarchical organization onto communications with spirits, while Omushkegowak tended to communicate directly with the spirit world as lone individuals.

But I have to admit I am uneasy exploring the differences between Omushkegowak and Western Anishinaabeg. A conversation keeps replaying in my head that I had about a year ago with a woman named Blanche Cowley-Head, a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation. She is the descendent of a man that I had studied, Joseph Constant, who was a Metis free trader of French and Anishinaabe parentage. I had been confused about how Joseph Constant could so easily move among worlds and seemingly change his identity at will—from a French-Canadian voyageur, to a Metis freeman, to the husband of an Anishinaabe woman, to a Roman-Catholic "convert." One of his sons became a leader in the Anishinaabe Midewiwin, or Grand Medicine Society, another son became a staunch Anglican, and then both of these children became Cree tribal leaders. To further add to my confusion, Cree and Ojibwe people had been moving in and out of one another's territories and frequently intermarried, and anthropologists and linguists identified a new ethnic group that emerged in the mid to late 18th century called Oji-Cree, a combination of the two. And so I was having a lot of trouble figuring out who belonged in which ethnic category. Blanche Cowley-Head patiently explained to me that descendants of the Constant family did not care about ethnicity or tribal affiliation. Her ancestors did not ask whether they were Ojibwe, Cree, Oji-Cree, French, or Metis; rather, they cared that they lived and flourished in the area around The Pas in northern Manitoba and that they were proud that their families and community grew and supported one another over time.

So I guess I am on the point of realizing that these tribal and ethnic designations really are mutable and potentially meaningless to the people who supposedly enacted them in the past. The ethnic categories certainly became important when scholars used them to make sense of indigenous people, and today the categories are enforced through government structures of band memberships and status cards. But before that time, people's lives were primarily shaped by family relationships, senses of community, common languages and alliances, and for the Anishinaabeg totems or clans. I think we are stuck using these generalized ethnic markers, but we need to recognize that Cree and Ojibwe are flexible categories with no firm line between them. So you are probably

wondering what my paper is about then. A solution to this dilemma may be to focus on specific tellers of stories located in distinct communities. I have decided here to focus on two men: one is Omushkego Louis Bird from the west coast of Hudson Bay and western Anishinaabe William Berens from the east coast of Lake Winnipeg.

Louis Bird, born roughly in 1930 (and he is still living), is a distinguished Omushkego scholar, collector, and teller of stories that illuminate the worldview and history of his people. Bird has been collecting stories for over 40 years. He said, "It is my wish and my hope to save the stories that had been told to us when I was young and that have been passed on to us by our grandfathers and their grandfathers and so on and so on."[1] In 1999 he began working with a team of scholars at the Center for Rupert's Studies at the University of Winnipeg in Manitoba to digitize his collection of audio cassette recordings, create new recordings of the stories, and make them available to Cree and English audiences. To date, Bird and his collaborators have published two English books, one is called *Telling our Stories*, 2005 and the other is *The Spirit Lives in the Mind*, 2007.

Western Anishinaabe William Berens¸ who lived from 1866 to 1947, grew up on the east coast of Lake Winnipeg and was the chief of the Berens River Band from 1917 to 1947. In the 1930s he shared his life, his stories, and his personal and dream experiences with anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell, who wrote them down. These have been recently published as *Memories, Myths and Dreams of an Ojibway Leader*, edited by Jennifer S. H. Brown and Susan Elaine Gray.

The western Anishinaabeg and Omushkegowak are traditionally oral cultures, developing, preserving, and sharing their communities' information in stories. They each have many different types of stories to reflect their sophisticated, extensive, and varied epistemology. Roughly, the narratives are divided into two general categories: one is *atanookanak* in Cree and *adsizookaanag* in Ojibwe, which means very old tales, where no one living knows the people involved. These tend to be mythic or sacred stories. The second is *tipachimoowinan* in Cree and *dibaajimoowinan* in Ojibwe. You can hear the real similarities in the names of those words. Those are younger narratives in which people can remember or claim a connection to the people in the stories. Often *tipachimoowinan* stories become *atanookanak* stories over time.

Let us turn our attention to spiritual practices. Although both Louis Bird and William Berens are Christians (I will use the present tense for simplicity's sake), they have clear connections to the traditional spirituality of their people.

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[1] "Our Voices.ca: Biography of Louis Bird." http://www.ourvoices.ca/index/louisbirdbio (accessed August 30, 2009).

Louis Bird's stories emphasize that a person must develop an individual relationship with the spirit world in order to survive and thrive in harsh environments. He explains that young people go on spirit quests or dream quests to form special relationships with spirits called *opowachikanak* and these spirits give them distinct powers.[2] Likewise, over half the stories that Berens told Hallowell involve dream experiences that either constitute the core of the narrative or mark a key turning point. A common theme was the need to exercise strong mental powers to overcome some kind of adversity in the form of a fear, adversary, or to escape a difficult situation. Mostly boys and sometimes girls went on vision quests to garner strong spiritual power. Their dream visitors or *bawaaganag*, who appeared to the fasting youths in their sleep, had great power to protect and help, or to hurt and hinder. In the dream quests, youths sought the blessing of a *bawaaganag* and hoped they would become guardian spirits.[3]

A key difference emerges in the Anishinaabe spiritual practice: expert spiritual power was developed within the Midewiwin, or Grand Medicine Society, an organized and somewhat secret society. Some scholars argue that it emerged only in the 18th century but others argue that it is as old as Anishinaabe culture itself. The trickster and culture hero Nanabozho is believed to be the founder of the Midewiwin. The Anishinaabe Mide members met as a society or group in Midewiwin lodges and regularly scheduled gatherings throughout the seasonal ceremonial cycle. At meetings they recounted the heroic deeds of spirits and shared stories that taught hunting skills and information about medicine.

William Beren's grandfather, Yellow Legs, was a powerful leader in the Midewiwin. Yellow Legs was probably the first Anishinaabe to move into the Lake Winnipeg region and probably introduced the Midewiwin to that area. Anishinaabe along the Berens River also practiced the Waabano, sometimes called the Dawn Ceremony, which split off from the Midewiwin and became its own spiritual and healing organization, especially under the direction of a powerful shaman named Fair Wind. William Berens chose not to join the Midewiwin or the Waabano or even to go on a dream quest, but he nonetheless encountered the other-than-human spirit who had blessed his grandfather, and these powers were open to him if he had wished to pursue them. In Louis Bird's community, people used the term Mitewiwin, but he explains that "Mi-te-wi-win was developed individually. A person would develop it for his own capacity as much as he can acquire. And sometimes when he has his own power he doesn't

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[2] Louis Bird, *Telling Our Stories: Omushkego Legends and Histories from Hudson Bay*, edited by Jennifer S. H. Brown, Paul DePasquale, and Mark Ruml (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2005), 38-9.

[3] Jennifer S. H. Brown and Susan Gray in William Berens, *Memories, Myths and Dreams of an Ojibwe Leader*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 82-3.

share it, what he knows, he doesn't preach…."[4] The Omushkegowak developed their spiritual gifts individually through the dream quest, reflecting, according to Louis Bird, the more individualistic, less communal nature of Omushkegwak society. The organizational structure of the Anishinaabe Midewiwin seemed to be the main distinguishing feature from the Omushkego spiritual practices. For both Anishinaabeg and Omushkegowak, the Mi-te-wak were individuals who were gifted with spiritual powers developed through dream quests and other ceremonies, but for the Anishinaabeg, the Midewiwin lodge and society provided a physical and social structure in which to develop spiritual gifts.

Is this difference of individualism vs. communalism reflected in trickster tales, which were important sacred stories for the western Anishinaabeg and Omushkegowak? A quick word on trickster tales. They are common in many cultures and folklores. Among northern indigenous people they are spirits who are both creators and destroyersand who wander seemingly aimlessly, governed by their appetites, usually for sex and food. Stories of the trickster are told individually or as part of a cycle of tales, like heroic episodes. And trickster tales are usually both didactic and highly entertaining. Louis Bird's stories of the Omushkego trickster, Wisakaychak, or as Louis often called him "the pain in the neck," focus on Wisakaychak tricking people and animals to get his own way and then being beaten "by his own making." In stand-alone stories, strange landmarks are attributed to the foolish doings of Wisakaychak, such as large random boulders in the muskeg and configurations of oddly colored rocks. Other stories focus on his stupidity about women and his duplicity in trying to have sex with them. One very well-known cycle of stories is about Wisakaychak tricking geese by offering to show them his bag of stories, but only inside of a lodge where he encourages them to dance with their eyes closed. He manages to kill a large pile of them before the others catch on and flee. In the next story in the cycle Wisakaychak decides to take a nap while his geese are roasting in the sand upside down with their feet up in the air. He leaves his bum in charge of keeping watch. Next, some humans manage to sneak the geese away by cutting off their feet and leaving them stuck in the sand. When Wisakaychak wakes to discover the theft, he beats his bum in frustration. His bum takes revenge by farting every time Wisakaychak tries to hunt. In another cycle of stories, Wisakaychak tricks a bear by making him believe that his eyesight was poor and that the only remedy would be to squeeze berry juice into his eyes. When the bear was rolling around in pain from the juice in his eyes, Wisakaychak killed him by dropping a large boulder on his head. Wisakaychak was so excited about eating the whole bear that he convinced some tamarack trees to squeeze his stomach so that he could digest his food more quickly. When the trees had him in their grasp, they then

[4] Bird, *Telling Our Stories*, 88.

held him and invited all the animals to come and feast on Wisakaychak's bear. The moral of these stories seems to be that one should live moderately and not become greedy about taking food from the environment, and if you are greedy you will always lose out in the end.

There is some debate about whether Wisakaychak really is a trickster. He has company in the sacred stories. Another well-known character named Chakapesh, known as the dauntless little man, was an intensely curious shaman who lived with a wise, older sister who constantly worried that her little brother's curiosity would eventually lead to his death. The pattern in Chakapesh stories is that he sees or hears something that excites his curiosity, he reports back to his sister who warns him to stay away, he disobeys and wanders into arduous situations, and always manages to extricate himself until the final story in the cycle where he is drawn up into the moon after staring at it too hard and too long.

The Anishinaabe Nanabozho, on the other hand, is widely believed to be a trickster and a culture hero, and acknowledged to have created the world as it is. He is viewed as a human, a spirit, a hare or a wolf, taking on many different forms and personalities, so he is really seen as a composite, synthetic figure with complex and contradictory characteristics. He is widely believed to be responsible for the great flood because he angered the water serpents who then tried to drown him. He managed to fashion himself a raft and rescue a few animals. He sent one after the other down to retrieve soil from the bottom of the sea so that he could fashion a new land. He invented totems or clans, central to Anishinaabe cultural identity. He taught humans how to survive in the world, how to find food, how to find medicine, and invented an array of tools to assist them in their survival. The cycle of stories about Nanabozho involve his birth, his theft of fire, his battles with his brothers (who were the winds and flint), his travels with wolves, his altercations with the underwater spirits, the deluge, the earth-divers, and his re-creation of the world after the great flood. The lessons from the Nanabozho stories seem to be striving for balance within oneself. The stories also emphasize that humans should strive for alliances and share with one another to survive.

So William Barrent's stories follow these patterns. He related a clear cycle of trickster stories to Hallowel, a man who magically impregnates his daughter, giving birth to the four winds, flint and the hare, who is Nanabozho. Flint kills their mother during the birth with his sharp edges and in revenge the hare breaks him up into small pieces. In the next set of stories the trickster takes revenge on the great lynx who murders his stepson, a young wolf, and the lynx then floods the earth and the trickster with the help of other animals, notably the successful earth-diving muskrat, and recreates the world on a floating raft. So this story also turns up in some Omushkego communities. But in Barrent's stories the trickster is actually named Wesekajac, rather than Nanabozho, even though the stories follow typical Anishinaabe patterns, and likewise Louis Bird notes that some

Omushkegwak call Wesekajac Nanabush. Some of Barrent's trickster stories share more than a common name, some of them clearly echo Omushkego tales of Wesekajac and Shakapesh. Both sets of trickster tales contain the story of men asking Wesekajac to grant their wishes to live forever. Wesekajac turns them to stone, ensuring indeed that they will endure. So perhaps the biggest difference in stories about Nanabozho and Wesekajac is that Nanabozho works in conjunction with others, whether they are wolves or earth divers, while Wesekajac seems to operate more in isolation.

Yet these divisions cannot be made so simply. The stories of Louis Bird and William Barrents between characters, plots, and morals and this paper have given me a chance to explore in a preliminary way some of my thinking about people living in the north, northern boreal forest, and sub-arctic scrub lands of Canada and though, as I said, I am uncomfortable with the dividing lines between Omushkego and Anishinaabeg, it does appear that as people lived further north in harsher environments their stories and spiritual practices reflect a movement towards individuality rather than communalism. This probably makes sense further south where the environment is richer; people could afford to live in larger communities and generally be more populous as the land could support them. They then could develop more social institutions and group-oriented activities, and then so we see this in the Midewiwin and we see it echoed in the Nanabozho stories, people could afford to specialize and this included spiritual specialization. But further north where the environment was harsher, people lived in smaller hunting groups and did not live, did not actually form or congregate in large groups. More attention was paid to individual spiritual development, every person had to find the will and the strength to survive alone and in small groups. So perhaps William Barrents' stories echo those of Louis Bird because his community of Anishinaabe was on the northern fringes of that cultural group. People did not necessarily think of themselves as Ojibway, Cree, or Ojicree, but they thought of themselves in terms of kin relations, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, and children, and of course they thought of themselves as the grandchildren of both Nanabozho and Wesekajac. Thank you.