Windigo Mythology and the Analysis of Cree Social Structure

D. H. TURNER
University of Toronto

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article montre comment les mythes "cannibales" des Cris révèlent certains aspects de l'organisation sociale traditionnelle, quand on les étudie selon les préceptes du structuralisme. L'analyse porte sur des données recueillies récemment parmi les Cris "marécageux" du Manitoba du nord. Ces mythes démontrent que le système des Cris fonctionnait par incorporation et qu'il était formé par la tension entre des groupes possiblement autonomes à des niveaux d'organisation de plus en plus élevés.

SHAMATTAWA SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Recent research into Northern Algonkian social structure based on fieldwork at Shamattawa Manitoba (Turner and Wertman n.d.) has shown the system to be a 'production group unity' one, based on the formation of structurally undifferentiated production groups utilising incorporative, inclusive principles of recruitment at what may be termed the domestic, brotherhood and band levels. The domestic group is composed minimally of a man, his wife and their children. These children are defined as offspring of both parents considered as a unit, rather than as members of a group to which one parent belongs to the exclusion of the other. Husband and wife marry to form a new, relatively autonomous unit apart from their respective domestic groups of origin. Ideologically, husband and wife are 'one person'.

The primary brotherhood is composed minimally of offspring of females of the domestic groups of origin of women who have married into one's father's domestic group of origin the previous generation. (This includes what Dunning (1959:72-73) has termed the "patrilateral and materlateral relatives" grouping of the Pekangekum Objibwa). The secondary brotherhood is composed minimally of people in one's own generation in domestic groups whose members have married into the same domestic groups as members of one's own domestic group. (This includes spouse's same sex sibling's spouse, same sex sibling's spouse's same sex sibling's spouse and spouse's same sex sibling's spouse's same sex sibling). Brotherhood and domestic group mates on the same generation call each other *NISTĒS (NĪSĪM/nimis(nīsim)* and are people who produce or have produced together at some point in time.

The spousehood, on the other hand, is composed minimally of offspring of males of the domestic groups of origin of females who married members of one's father's domestic group of origin the previous generation. (This includes the 'cross-cousin'). These are normally people who do not work with EGO/ego and are ideal marriage partners. Spousehood mates are called *N/nitim* (opposite sex), *N/nīstāw* (same sex, male speaking) and *N/nicāhkos* (same sex, female speaking) by EGO/ego.

Determination of affinal alliance relations begins at the first ascending generation level and is certain only at the present level. Outside the range of relations defined by domestic (co-residential) and brotherhood ties of production association, and within the spousehood, choice of spouse is based on pragmatic considerations and is entirely negotiable.

The band is basically the set of relations encompassed by the brotherhood-spousehood system and insofar as these relationships reproduce themselves within a geographical area over time, they come to take on a territorial association. In other words, the band is composed of fellow producers and past producers whose descendants are potential future producers. At the band level the emphasis (in the absence of the registered trap line system) is on maintaining a mobile labour force over a collective range through the operation of a headman and/or (loosely constituted) council.

This labour force, in turn, is focussed on patrilocally and neo-locally formed work groups of brothers and their domestic groups, first of origin and then of marriage.

Theoretically, this type of social structure contains within it two opposed tendencies. First, there is the autonomy potential at the band level (see Lips (1947: 397-435) account of the Naskapi for an approximation); second, there is the autonomy potential at the domestic level (see Rogers' (1963: 25-26) account of the Mistassini Cree). The more either of these potentials is realised, the less chance there is that ties can be formed and maintained with people in other bands outside one's territorial range.

A WINDIGO MYTH

Nowhere is the logic of relations outlined above more apparent than in Cree Windigo mythology. If, in the version that follows, 'cannibalism' is taken as a metaphor for incorporation into (becoming part of) a social grouping, the various acts and relations described in the story can be seen as attempts at mediating opposed tendencies toward autonomy at the domestic, brotherhood and band levels.

In the beginning Windigo lived with his wife and his son. One time during the night this young man killed his wife and he started to eat her, and ate all of her. His son slept with his grandfather and the old man took care of her young boy, and the boy's father couldn't do anything to them. This Windigo started to hunt people and turned into a cannibal.

So the old man who was taking care of the young boy travelled from place to place pulling the young boy behind him on a toboggan. Suddenly this old man, whose name was Atouscan, started feeling different than a human being. While he was travelling he turned around and ate the boy for lunch because he wasn't human anymore. So they both turned into cannibals (Atouscan and his son), and they were both against the people.

Once they saw fresh tracks of people. When they saw them they followed them until they found the camps. Those people didn't know anything and were putting up their *mihigwams* (log dwellings). The Windigos waited outside until everyone got inside and when it was late at night the Windigos went into one *mihigwam* and twisted the people's heads until they came off. Then the young Windigo was

being wrestled by the young man in the tent. The old Windigo in the other tent was just about killing everyone until he heard noises in the other *mihigwam* and ran and saw men werstling the young Windigo. This young Windigo was just about beaten. The old one when he saw this started to grab one of the men by the shoulder and broke his back. The Windigos stayed there until they ate everyone up. When they at everyone they started to hunt again.

They were wandering around looking for more food. The young one could have been eaten but the old one was very strong. Most of the time he defended his son.

Later, around springtime, they saw more human tracks so they followed them. They called the humans 'caribou'. The old Windigo grabbed a young boy and used him for a club until there was just an arm left. They killed everyone and stayed until they ate everyone.

Those two Windigos each had their own *mihigwam*. While Atouscan was at home his son asked him to look after his *mihigwam* until he returned from hunting so that the *wiyskejans* (Canada Jays) wouldn't eat everything. This Atouscan went to check his place and saw a kettle hanging in the *mihigwam*. So he looked inside and it was the hairy parts between a woman's legs and they were fat and he took them one at a time and swallowed them. When the young Windigo came back he was mad and called old Atouscan and said "You stole some of my cooking', and Atouscan replied that he saw *wiyskejans* there. The young one was getting more and more mad and told him to watch out. So they started wrestling and finally Atouscan put his son to the ground and was choking him. He was squeezing his throat until he noticed the young one wanted to say something so he let go. The young Windigo said 'Who will do the killing of 'caribou' for you?'. So he let go of him and kissed him and they ate everything they caught.

At the outset husband is living with wife and son. Wife is fully incorporated by husband, an attempt to realise extreme domestic group autonomy, and son remains with grandfather who protects him from incorporation by father. Son is eventually incorporated by grandfather. In the Cree system son mediates opposed brotherhood groupings on both the father's and mother's sides in the previous generation by forming a primary brotherhood grouping in his generation. That is, son forms brotherhood ties to people in domestic groups containing other people who were opposed to members of his own domestic group of origin the previous generation as 'non fellow producers' (marriageable). If son is incorporated by father he cannot perform this function as he will assume the father's network of brotherhood/spousehood

ties as if he were on his generation. But son can be incorporated by grandfather, an 'appendage" to his father's domestic group but a generation above him. At this point we have two different but closely related incorporating units: father/mother, grandfather/ grandson with grandfather preventing father from incorporating son. Both GF/GS and F/M, however, stand together as incorporators versus the 'people'. An encounter between GF/GS, F/M and the 'people' first brings conflict, then incorporation, then a successful hunt. Attempts by aliens to incorporate (capture, eat) F/M are thwarted by GF/GS (here, F, son of GF, would lose *his* mediating role in relation to groups juxtaposed by GF's marriage).

Another alien group is encountered and incorporation by GF/ GS and F/M is effected by means of a young boy (son, mediator) of the other group. The equation of this group with caribou here can be seen as a metaphor for a successful hunt.

The real relation that actually exists between GF/GS and F/M within the context of the domestic group is then established (GF/GS and F/M occupy separate tents, a symbol of insider/ outsider relations within the myth) and the stage is set for a restatement of the problem posed by H/W, F/S and M/S within domestic and brotherhood contexts. GF/GS 'discovers' a woman (outsider), symbolized by the *labia majora,* about to be incorporated by son and he incorporates her himself. F/M returns, is enraged by GF/GS's act (preventing him from beginning a new domestic group on his own) and starts to fight him. GF/GS (now also GM) gains the upper hand and is about to kill F/M (and presumably eat him). But F/M, F being son of GF, points out the disastrous consequences that will befall — 'no one to help hunt caribou', i.e., domestic group autonomy, no extension of alliance relationships (hunting large game requires communal as opposed to individual labour). GF/GM/GS allows F/M to live. The kiss which seals this bargain is perhaps a weakened metaphor for incorporation expressing the close, yet dialectical relation that exists between father and son and between alternate generations within the domestic group. In reality a son performs an incorporating function vis-à-vis his father's and mother's brotherhoods insofar as he strengthens the autonomy of the domestic group father and mother found and establishes brotherhood ties with the offspring

of people in a formerly opposed relation. But in so doing he also forms a new domestic group and established ties and production relations entirely different from those of his parents. The problem of domestic group autonomy and generation divisions in the face of cooperative, collective necessities still remains in the myth, but F/M and GF/GM/GS live to hunt another day.

Although the band ('the people') level of organisation is alluded to in the myth the focus is on potential autonomy at the domestic level. What is omitted, though, is mention of the conditions under which the self reproduction of the domestic group (or the band for that matter) *becomes potential.* A clue as to what these conditions might have been, however, is provided by a description of the Windigo being itself. At Shamattawa, as almost everywhere, the Windigo is presented as a frozen ice creature and is nearly always associated with extreme winter conditions. This can be illustrated with reference to the *Death of Pe-Ce-Quan* myth recorded by Stevens and Ray (1971) in their book *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree.*

> ...the snow continued to fall at the camp of these people. Every day it floated relentlessly from the sky covering the snares and traps of the people; animals could not be captured and our people were very hungry (p. 129).

Other people now began to develop the Windigo sickness and one man has to be shot as he is about to turn into a Windigo. The myth continues,

> Still it kept snowing and it remained desparately cold. Keewatin, the north wind, hurled across the forest in icy blasts. Some of the hunters died, frozen to death on their trap lines (p. 129).

In another tale, *The Windigo at Berens River,* a man has devoured his wife and three children on a winter trapping expedition. Two men are sent out to capture him. The appearance of the Windigo is heralded by 'the intense cold... making their bodies turn numb and stiff" (p. 127). Subduing the Windigo and relieving his symptoms here, as in most Windigo stories, is accomplished by thawing him out before a fire. Extreme cold is opposed by extreme heat (extreme winter by extreme summer?). But rather than effecting a cure (i.e., a resolution), the heat only

alleviates the cannibalistic (incorporative) tendency, leaving the Windigo man less than normal and he soon dies.

In the story *The Windigo Woman* the hero Dark Sky casts a spell over a young woman he desires as a wife but cannot have, thereby transforming her into a Windigo. The spell is effected by turning a ball of snow into ice (normal winter conditions into extreme winter conditions?). This is accompanied by a similar transformation in nature:

> Outside, the freezing north wind began to blow and howl insanely. Snow lashed at the lodge of Dark Sky and coldness sunk into the bones of his family. Soon the wind carried deathly screams and moans of people in the distance. Dark Sky sat in the lodge knowing that he had transformed the young woman he had desired as a wife into a Windigo. As a possessed being, she had destroyed her camp and devoured her own parents, brothers and sisters (p. 125).

Dark Sky melts the ice from her body and she regains normality, bue she kills herself when she learn of her past actions as a Windigo. In terms of our conception of Cree social structure, the young woman, having been incorporated into one group (albeit an aberrant one), is precluded, as she would actually have been in the society, from entering another (i.e., with Dark Sky).

Lest all this seem to imply an ecological determinism whereby variation in environmental conditions produces corresponding variation in social structure, it must be pointed out that we are dealing with *extremes* on either end of a continuum of conditions in these myths. We are not dealing with normal social and environmental fluctuations. The Structural theory of band society holds that social relations are arranged so that a wide range of demographic and ecological conditions can be accomodated. Hunters and gatherers are in social control of their land and resources: the land and resources are not in control of them, *under conditions of normal or expected variation.* People space themselves over the landscape so that social relations of a certain kind must follow (among the Shemattawa Cree a small enough population occupied a large enough territory so that social and economic relations could be more or less self contained); the social relations do not follow from the spacing of the resources. It is only under extreme conditions that this arrangement is threatened. Ties may then be pushed outside or pulled within depending on the cir-

cumstances (for a discussion of these and of the literature on band structure see Turner 1977 and Turner and Wertman n.d.).

But if the theory is correct, the extreme circumstances alluded to above should be located as much at one end of the environmental-social scale as at the other. In other words, extreme summer conditions should pose much the same problem and engender much the same solution as extreme winter conditions. In fact, as we have seen, extreme heat (= summer drought or storm?) does not produce normality in any of the myths investigated to this point and thus cannot be defined as a 'resolver' as indeed it should not be if the theory is correct. I have been able to locate one myth in the Stevens and Ray collection where summer extremes do, in fact, pose structural problems for the Cree to the extent that they give rise to the Windigo.

In *Red Tail and the Windigo* the Cree are found in a summer rather than in a winter camp. The approach of the Windigo in the story is here associated with the dark (storm) sky to the west and with a wind so strong it blows their tents to the ground. We have, then, summer extremes. Red Tail (red = fire?) is assigned the task of stopping the creature before he reaches the camp, and just as he begins his magic and lights his sacred pipe (= fire = extreme heat),

> Outside thunder rolled and wind began tearing up the trees. Then Red Tail ran out to meet the formidable Windigo. Above the noise of the storm the people in the camp heard three shots. (There were no firearms in those days.) Then the wind stopped and the sun came out (p. 123).

Environmental extreme → possible incorporation of band by outsider (Windigo) → incorporator thwarted → environmental conditions return to normal. Summer extremes, finding people grouped as a band in the summer encampment place favours extension *out* by that body as a whole. Winter extremes, finding people dispersed in local hunting and trapping groups, favours withdrawl *in* by domestic groups. Lest determinism once again be implied, I would insist that were the larger grouping of people to occur in winter rather than summer we would find the causal relationship reversed. Extreme winter conditions would produce band level organisation and outward pushes; extreme summer conditions would produce domestic level organisation and pulls inward.

CONCLUSION

If this, indeed, goes some way to unlocking the Windigo mythology code, we are on the verge of being able to use the myths themselves as clues to the kinds of social structures possessed by the Algonkians, both in the recent and more distant past — perhaps even in the pre-Cartier past. If myths can be located in which kinship, marriage and production relations are defined in greater detail, we should be able to gain a more precise understanding of the subtleties of incorporative logic and group formation. There are still some problems in my own work which might be clarified through such analysis — spouse's same sex sibling and same sex sibling's spouse's same sex sibling are not *NISTĒS(NĪSĪM)/nimis(nīsīm)* yet are fellow producers and should, according to my model, be in the same brotherhood. The nature of the band as such is also not entirely clear. But this all awaits further work.

What this analysis does support is McGee's (1975) contention that we must look elsewhere than to socio-biological and psychological paradigms for an explanation of the Windigo syndrome. As McGee points out (1975: 111), writers like Fogelson (1965),

> have attempted to maintain Neo-Freudian approaches (Hay 1971) or to employ nutritionally based bio-social arguments (Rohrl 1970). Bishop (1973) questions the claims that the psychosis is aboriginal, although he seems to accept the psychological basis of the disorder... Paredes (1972)... fails to free himself from seeking a European derived psychological etiology.

McGee's (1975:113) suggestion that 'the windigo myth functioned to define the concept of human personness for the northeastern Algonkians' is certainly compatible with the interpretation offered here insofar as domestic, brotherhood/spousehood and band membership are connected both with personal identification and with the parameters of incorporative processes and problems. In fact, McGee (1975:119-122) is able to locate a domestic/non-domestic theme running through one Micmac Windigo myth in particular and relate it to corresponding distinctions between local territory/band territory, one band's territory/another band's territory, kinsmen/non kinsmen, and

fire/ice. As we have seen, in a body of myths widely separated in space and time, these distinctions (some of them true oppositions) reflect the Cree's preoccupation with questions of social, economic and environmental extremes (e.g., pulls inward toward the domestic group and pulls outward beyond the band; summer storm and winter freeze) which, in turn, produced those 'experimental' reflections on existing social arrangements we call 'Windigo myths'.

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