
The *Wihkohtowin*: Ritual Feasting among Cree and Métis Peoples in Northern Alberta

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Abstract: I provide new data and interpretations on the *wihkohtowin*, a key ritual feast of Cree and Métis peoples in northern Alberta. I draw on my own interviews and ethnographic research, archived interviews, other archival data and published accounts of the *wihkohtowin*. As a historically important shamanic ritual practised in the contemporary context, the *wihkohtowin* is relevant to relations with animals and non-human nature, including spirits and the dead, as well as relations within human society. Taking an approach adapted from Don Handelman and my informants, I suggest that the *wihkohtowin* merits deeper analysis in its own right: historically, linguistically, phenomenologically and emotionally.

Keywords: Cree, Alberta, *wihkohtowin*, ritual, shamanism

Résumé : Cet article apporte des données et des interprétations nouvelles sur le *wihkohtowin*, une fête rituelle centrale chez les Cris et les Métis du nord de l'Alberta. Il s'appuie sur les entrevues et la recherche ethnographique de l'auteur, sur des entrevues d'archive, sur d'autres données d'archives et sur des récits publiés à propos du *wihkohtowin*. Rituel chamanique d'importance historique encore pratiqué dans le contexte actuel, le *wihkohtowin* renvoie aux relations avec les animaux et avec la nature non humaine—y compris les esprits et les morts—ainsi qu'aux relations au sein de la société humaine. Adoptant une approche inspirée du travail de Don Handelman et des informateurs de l'auteur, l'article suggère que le *wihkohtowin* mérite en soi une analyse plus approfondie, à la fois sur les plans historique, linguistique, phénoménologique et émotionnel.

Mots-clés : Cris, Alberta, *wihkohtowin*, Rituel, Chamanisme

Introduction

I examine historical and contemporary practices constituting the *wihkohtowin*, a ritual feast of Western Woods Cree and closely related Métis communities, or *sakâwiyiniwak* (bush people), in northern Alberta. I put on record here some new, extensive and thickly described data on the *wihkohtowin* in relation to other rituals and classes of ritual among the Western Woods Cree and neighbouring groups, providing valuable meta-discourses and cultural exegeses of the feast's characteristics. I draw on my participant observation, interviews that I conducted with Mike Beaver (near Wabasca, April 2010, April 2011 and September 2013), John C. Letendre (Red Earth Creek, June 2008) and Louie J. Cardinal (Peerless Lake, September 2004) and interviews by Aboriginal researchers since the 1960s. The communities where I have conducted most of my fieldwork—Trout Lake, Peerless Lake, Cadotte Lake and Wabasca-Desmarais—are located in a forested area inhabited mainly by Cree and Métis people (see Figure 1). In Trout Lake and Peerless Lake, most people speak Cree at home and eat wild foods daily. Sharing plants, meat and other bush resources relates closely to religious values based on reciprocity with people, animals and spirits. Elders describe the *wihkohtowin* ceremony as a central mechanism in this reciprocity.

My informants suggest that the frequency of the *wihkohtowin* began to decline by the 1960s, a time when many people began living more or less permanently in settled communities and when Pentecostalism became prominent in religious life. Nevertheless, *wihkohtowina* are currently regular events in multiple communities.

Between 2006 and 2008, I attended four *wihkohtowina* and other ceremonies led by Mike Beaver and John C. Letendre, elders from Wabasca-Desmarais and Loon Lake, who co-operated with one another and with other singers and drummers to sponsor these ceremonies. I had also attended one in 2004, led by a Woods Cree ceremonialist in a Plains Cree community. Each was



Figure 1: Indian reserves, other selected Aboriginal communities and waterways around Lesser Slave Lake, Alberta. By permission of Robert Alary, University of Saskatchewan Libraries.

bilingual (Cree–English) and attended by approximately 40 people. I learned from talking to people at these events that ceremonies put on by different persons share many common features but also have distinct elements. For instance, one singer might emphasize animals, while others focus on the four winds or other sacred concepts.

I acknowledge that my own understanding of the ceremony is shaped particularly by the knowledge and example of Mike Beaver. It is worth noting that Mike views the ceremony as being completely compatible with his Roman Catholic faith. He also leads Catholic rituals in church from time to time. Many Cree people share his view of unity between their spiritual traditions and Christianity; others strongly disagree.

Analysts from multiple traditions and perspectives point out the centrality of the *wihkohtowin* in connecting society and sacred domains. Painter and scholar Dale

Auger (2006) suggests that the feast and its lodge were gifts to the people from the loon, whom people had helped previously by freeing it from a net. The loon returned the favour by restoring spiritual power and the ability to hunt to a young man who had been a great hunter but who had angered the spirits through greed and selfishness, thus losing his ability to hunt. For Auger, the lodge commemorates and enacts an integral relationship of respect with ancestors, spirits, plants and animals, as well as the ability of humble humans to come back into accord with this community through ritual.

Regarding the *wihkohtowin*, Métis researcher and educator Cora Weber-Pillwax states:

It becomes the text by means of which the studies of northern Cree ontology and epistemology could most accurately be entered into and remain unchallenged as timeless knowledge with contemporary meaning and application. [2003:128]

The event teaches us and brings to our awareness that this is a part of our identities and beings as Cree people, and it brings into reality the connections we have with the rest of the family ... or the community, including present and ancestral beings. [2001:8–9]

Similarly, for anthropologist Robert Brightman, commenting on the Rock Cree of northern Manitoba, the *wihkohtowin* is a “totality, simultaneously implicating economic, political, social, aesthetic and religious principles” (2002:219). Father Roger Vandersteene, who attended ceremonies around Wabasca and Trout Lake, referred to “*la Wikokkewin*” as the Cree’s “most solemn ceremony” (1960:179; all Vandersteene translations are mine) and sought to build a church around its symbolism. Similarly, I have written (2013) that the *wihkohtowin* integrates Cree communities, both with one another and with the spirit world, and is good to think with about society. Yet I argue here that, in trying to identify the boundaries, distinctness and variability of a particular tradition, it is most useful to take a more agnostic view of ritual qua social representation or locus of social action, in favour of an analysis focusing on the intrinsic characteristics of a ritual “in its own right” (Handelman 2005).

In a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach that both draws on and distances itself from canonical and universalist definitions and approaches, Don Handelman de-emphasizes interpretations of ritual as primarily representative of society to argue that a complex ritual has its own phenomenal integrity, with recursive characteristics that draw people in, as it curls in on itself to become relatively self-sustaining and self-referential, like Gregory Bateson’s smoke ring (Handelman 2005). Potentially apart from its social context, ritual metaphorically torques back to make its own transformative impact on the cosmos, society and individuals.

Handelman’s is a theory where ritual exists, momentarily and provisionally, unto itself but also does things in society and the world. Handelman advocates a thought experiment where a ritual is metaphorically removed from the social in an attempt to understand intrinsic features of the ritual before analytically resituating it in its social surroundings. Apart from his useful theorizing on the ritual, physical and metaphorical characteristics of smoke, Handelman uses other relevant examples to develop his theory that make it particularly useful for understanding the *wihkohtowin*. These features include movement through built environments, music, dance, ritual slaughter, sacrifice and communal feasting.

The *wihkohtowin* has all the characteristics of a complex ritual with a high degree of interior self-organization and self-referentiality, similar to Handelman’s

characterization (based on Robert Minnich’s 1979 ethnographic account, which Handelman cites) of the *fuwez*, a Slovenian pig-sticking ritual, which mediates and transforms relations between humans, animals and the divine. Such rituals impress themselves strongly on participants and have corresponding impacts in other social, spatio-temporal and cosmic domains, while analytically retaining and signifying their own integrity. I use aspects of Handelman’s approach here and consider it consistent with a grounded analysis that honours the voices, perspectives, emotions and experiences of Cree participants as worthy of study in their own right.

Definitions and Etymology

The term *wihkohtowin* suggests, according to Mike Beaver (personal interview, near Wabasca, September 2013), “an invitation” to people, also openness, invitation or welcoming to spirits. Everyone is welcome. Symbolically, the whole community is present in body, name, thought and commensality, including the dead and other non-human persons. As we shall see, many elders focus on the invitational aspect of the *wihkohtowin* in discussing the ritual.

The *Alberta Elders’ Cree Dictionary* (LeClaire and Cardinal 1998:228) provides the following relevant definitions:

wihkohtow (Verb Animate Intransitive): S/he takes part in a feast.

Thus, *wihkohtowin* would be a feast, feasting (as a gerund) or the act of taking part in a feast. Related terms include:

wihkohkew (Verb Animate Intransitive): S/he hosts or puts on a feast.

wihkohkewin (Noun Intransitive): The act of hosting or putting on a feast; invitation...

The latter appear to be Vandersteene’s *wikokkewin*. Note that the invitational aspect is prominent in the latter definition, as in Mike Beaver’s definition.

The *Student’s Dictionary of Literary Plains Cree* (Wolfart and Ahenakew 1998:199) provides further information:

wihkohke- (Verb Animate Intransitive): hold a feast

wihkhohto- (Verb Transitive Animate): invite one another to a feast

Thus, *wihkohtowin* would then be a mutual invitation or the act of inviting one another to a feast. The invitation is to human and non-human animate entities.

It is unclear here (and occasionally elsewhere in my data) whether the term *wihkohtowin* refers to a particular ritual, to a genre of rituals or simply to formal collective feasting in general. Similarly, the precise relationship between the *wihkohtowin* and *wihkohkêwin* or Vandersteene's *wikokkewin* is unknown, though they refer to the same or closely related feasting rituals or genres.

A Composite Description of the Wihkohtowin

This section includes an expansion and comprehensive reworking of data and analyses that previously appeared in the *Canadian Journal of Sociology* (Westman 2013: 219–220). It is based on my own observations and on information provided by Mike Beaver, Louie J. Cardinal and John C. Letendre. As such, it may differ in its details from some of the other data presented below from other elders and observers, which will themselves also differ from one another in some details.

The *wihkohtowin* combines dancing, feasting, sacrificing, singing, drumming, praying, gifting, blessing and healing. Each of these practices is a dialogical encounter resembling elements of a discourse. The goal of the *wihkohtowin* is to bring about a set of conditions through these discursive practices to enable continued relations with human and non-human persons. The ritual was widely undertaken in spring and fall (also perhaps in midsummer, as some of my informants suggested), at important seasonal gathering sites. It was a major feature of social life, building solidarity among small bands throughout the season of their largest gatherings. It continues to serve an integrative function by honouring relations to ancestors and the spirit world, blessing medicines and sacralizing items of personal power such as bundles, bringing them into the rhythm of the seasons and of plant life. Apart from its seasonality and relation to plant life, the ceremony ties into the rhythms of the universe in other ways, in that the dancers' movements mimic the sun, the ritual is frequently held at the full moon and the ceremony typically starts at sundown and ends at sunrise. In these respects, both the contemplation and practice of the *wihkohtowin* tend toward and evoke circular, recursive and self-referential symbolism of a primal nature.

The main part of the ceremony consists of dancing, typically around four fires, in a clockwise direction and in single file in the *wihkohtowikamik*, an oblong lodge (Smith 1981:262) constructed from multiple conical teepee frames, partially covered with canvas or boughs but open across the top, save a transverse pole. The door faces east or south, with the altar, the area where the drummers sit, opposite. Another fire burns outside the lodge, for those

who need a break from the intense ritual or for those who are restricted from entering, such as menstruating women (Brightman 2002:221), which is consistent with a range of menstrual taboos in subarctic societies (Goulet 1998). The lodge is strongly associated with the ceremony, structuring it spatially into more and less sacred zones. The poles themselves have a special significance, as different trees represent community members of different age and sex statuses. The transverse pole with its greenery represents the spiritual leadership of the elder. The lodge represents the community prayerfully coming together to support future generations. In most cases, men and women sit together in families, while in some cases they sit separately. I do not have data on who cooks the food, nor was I able to confirm whether gendered food taboos are followed in the lodge, though, in general, people dismissed this idea (but see Brightman 2002:223). Rather, it is the lodge that symbolizes the unity and diversity of the group, gradating and referencing status differentials within it.

The ceremony opens with invitational drumming and prayerful invoking of the spirits—generally identified as the spirits of the dead but sometimes as animal spirits—to enter the oblong lodge and share in the feast. At the start and finish the door remains open to facilitate the entry (and departure) of spirits but is closed during the main part of the ceremony. One might feel a movement like a wind when spirits enter or leave, imparting their blessing. It is imperative not to look at the drummers at this powerful moment in the ceremony. The drummers themselves gesture with their drums toward the fire. The fires might leap up or die down at such times, depending on the movement of the spirits in the lodge and the power of a given singer or drummer. Norbert Letendre (a.k.a. Piskwas; “Little Nighthawk”), born in the 1890s and remembered by elders at Trout Lake and Loon Lake, was one singer who could make the flames leap up brightly.

After the spirits have entered, the head drummer or his helper puts food on the fire to the accompaniment of drumming and singing, while praying to the four directions. The meal is generally served at this time, followed by the pipe ceremony, during which the pipe is passed in clockwise fashion. At this time, bundles or ceremonial dolls may be danced around the circle, perhaps with ribbons, other gifts, offerings or sacred objects, before coming to their resting place in the most sacred part of the lodge.

Young men tend the fires and distribute the tea and food stored among them. This is a position of honour for young men, who thus learn the rudiments of the ceremony (Mandelbaum 2001:234). People sit around the

lodge perimeter, leaving open a trail for dancing clockwise around the central fires. Opposite the entry sit the singers and drummers, who take turns singing songs learned in dreams or from ancestors, over multiple rounds of singing, dancing, smoking and feasting. There may be six or eight drummers who take turns playing eight rounds or more. This ceremony can last most of the night or even consecutive nights and often involves multiple meals. It is considered critical that people eat as much food as possible. As not all the food is always consumed during the ritual, the remainder is typically put in the fire, eaten in the morning or covered to be taken home.

Mike Beaver emphasizes that the Creator (*kihci-manitow*) is ultimately the target of the prayers said in his lodge. Prayers could also be directed at animal spirits, to the four directions and to other spiritual grandfathers and grandmothers. Eddie Birdtail referred to this (in response to a question about the role of animals in the ritual during our interview at Trout Lake, October 2013), saying, “The ceremony is for the animal! They thank the animals, spirits, people who passed on. Like, he [the ceremonialist] invited them.” In many such descriptions, the spirits of animals and ancestors, among other entities, appear to be closely associated with one another as beneficiaries of the sacrifice. The ritual is thus situated in relationship to the environment, not only the terrestrial environment but also the cosmos.

I have been told to think of and wish healing for family members, as well as to think of my dead, while dancing at the ritual. People insisted that I actively participate and contribute, not only through eating, but also through dancing and preferably smoking. Actions undertaken in the lodge become dynamic offerings to the spirits invited through recursive and meaningful movement.

Cree Rituals and Ritual Genres

Ritual Genres

The wihkohtowin falls into a broader category of ritual practices: *isihcikêwin*, which H.C. Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew (1998:363) translate as “what is done; activities, culture, ritual.” The verb form, *isihcikê-*, translates as “to do things thus; proceed thus; arrange things thus; perform such a rite; perform a rite thus” (363). These forms are based on the particle *-isi-*, which translates as “thus” or “in this way” (35). Nancy LeClaire and George Cardinal define *isihcikewin* as a “large banquet; a resource” (1998:25). The verb form, *isihcikew*, is translated as “S/he makes a big feast or banquet; s/he throws a big party” (25). Separately, in an article focusing on

religious terminology, the editor of the *Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary*, Earle Waugh, translates *isihcikewin* as a “large banquet or resource that is then combined with *kihci* (i.e., implying ‘good’ or ‘holy’) to mean ceremonial, that is, *kihci isihcikewin* is to carry out a community-wide sacred activity” (2001:486). The wihkohtowin exemplifies such a community-wide sacred banquet, a holy activity carried out in a particular way.

Intriguingly, Métis scholar Elmer Ghostkeeper (1996:6) translates *isihcikewin* as “ritual” and *wuskarwewin* (literally, “movement”) as “ceremony.” The latter connotation does not appear in either dictionary I consulted but suggests that appropriate movement—the physical doing of things thus—is highly significant in Cree ritual. For Ghostkeeper, ceremony and ritual are important means of honouring connection to *misiwe uske* (“the living world”) through *mekiachahkwewin* (“spirit gifting”). Spirit gifting connects body, mind and emotions. Ritual practices are a pre-eminent means of spirit gifting.

Translations

One of the difficulties in discussing the wihkohtowin is the wide range of English terminology used to describe it. I have heard the wihkohtowin referred to as the powwow, Tea Dance, Round Dance, Dance of the Ancestors, Ghost Dance (though it is distinct from the historical US-derived variety), Medicine Dance and Medicine Lodge Dance. It is possible that each of these refers to a different ritual. Remarks from sources quoted below will show many of these usages. *Powwow* and *Tea Dance* are likely the most popular contemporary usages, though I avoid these terms except when quoting others.¹ Mike Beaver, who favoured the Medicine Lodge Dance translation, was adamant that the English terms *Tea Dance*, *Round Dance* and *powwow* each referred to totally different ceremonies from the wihkohtowin, although other knowledgeable people seemed to use these terms interchangeably. In Cree, for Mike Beaver, the wihkohtowin is clearly recognizable as a distinct ritual.

Cognate Rituals of Other Cree and Northern Aboriginal Groups

Further research is required to assess connections between the wihkohtowin and other Western Woods Cree rituals, including but not limited to those mentioned in the section above. Further research might also clarify apparent linkages between the wihkohtowin and Cree funerary and mourning rites. The latter may involve the invitational significance of fire, co-presence of the dead and ritual feasting (at the wake) that take on elements of sacrifice as one eats and smokes for and with the deceased while looking at images, texts and personal

items of the deceased, chatting and listening to religious music (Westman 2008:218–224).

Important early sources on Alberta and Saskatchewan, such as David Thompson (1971:115), refer to the religious character of Western Woods Cree dances. Such sources have potential to provide important insights; however, the rituals they describe typically do not closely resemble the *wihkohtowin*, beyond the focus on dancing and feasting.

There is potential for comparison to the historical rituals practised among the Plains Cree and Swampy Cree of the Saskatchewan River region. Geographer Henry Youle Hind's (1971:402–403) discussion of a Goose Dance, held in 1858 in the boreal forest along the Saskatchewan River, features some striking parallels to the *wihkohtowin* of northern Alberta. This Goose Dance involved dancing in a large lodge oriented within and around a series of carved manitou images (see Meyer 1975), echoing in some respects the plan Vandersteene (1960) describes.

The Dene Drum Dance has attracted attention from a range of ethnographers (Goulet 1998; Ridington 1988); less attention has been paid to the dance traditions of the Western Woods Cree. Cree healer Doreen Ducharme suggests that Western Woods Cree and Dene rituals are closely related, particularly in terms of their dances, a view echoed by one of my reviewers. On the other hand, Mike Beaver and Eddie Birdtail indicated that Dene practices were quite distinct in their sacrificial rites. Patrick Moore (1993) confirms that Cree dance traditions in northern Alberta are strikingly similar to neighbouring Dene dance traditions, owing to both related spiritual beliefs and common historical influences; however, Moore emphasizes that Cree and Dene dance traditions each have changed considerably over the past 200 years, possibly because of the influence of Christianity.

Many of the feast (*makushaanuu*) characteristics described by Adrian Tanner (2014:241–248) among the Cree of Quebec are present in the *wihkohtowin*. These include formal offerings of food and tobacco in the fire, communal access to a food surplus, ritualized smoking, seasonality, status-oriented seating, a focus on cleanliness, clockwise movement as a spiritual practice, attention to the final destination of the food served, emphasis on male roles and the presence of special foods. Significantly, Tanner (2014:244) notes the importance of drumming and singing at some feasts to communicate with spirits; also, the recipients of offerings and messages may include the spirits of the dead, as well as animal spirits and other spirits associated with hunting. These

observations bear a general resemblance to descriptions of Cree ritual practice in Western regions by David Thompson (1971) and by George Nelson, another 19th-century commentator (Brown and Brightman 1988). Nelson discusses a diverse feasting tradition, with feasts regularly held for many reasons, all oriented toward spiritual powers and sacrifice. Some feasts included drumming, singing and dancing.

There is thus evidence for a broadly similar Cree feasting tradition of communal calendric feasts with drumming, singing and dancing in both eastern and western parts of the northern Cree territory, including feasts with a mortuary or memorial character. Yet there are important differences between the *wihkohtowin* and the other feasts I am discussing. Aspects of the feast centred on animals, gender and status distinctions appear somewhat attenuated in the *wihkohtowin* as practiced in Alberta. In addition, the *wihkohtowin* as practiced in Alberta is generally larger and more associated with summer and fall.

Robert Brightman's (2002) highly useful discussion of a Rock Cree *wihkohtowin* ceremony held in northern Manitoba in 1976 shows both many similarities to and some apparent differences from my data. The ritual was held in winter, inside a bush dwelling. Brightman describes quiet singing and drumming and mentions dancing as a former feature of Manitoba feasts. Brightman states that a special lodge was no longer used in Manitoba by the mid-1970s. The lodge had formerly been a well-known element of the ritual, which itself previously had been notably more significant and widespread among Manitoba Cree (Tanner [2014] makes similar observations about the use of a communal lodge in former times).

Brightman (2002) and Tanner (2014) each discuss Cree and other Northern Algonquian literature pertaining to an "Eat-All" tradition in feasting rituals, where a surplus is assembled and then must be consumed, either through gluttonous eating or through burning of the remains. Paradigmatically, no food would remain in camp, to entice the animal spirits to provide for the pitiful hunters. While Brightman associates the *wihkohtowin* more directly with the Eat-All Feast, Tanner identifies the Eat-All as but one variant in the broader *makushaanuu* tradition. Tanner does not focus on the Eat-All variant and considers it historical.

The sources and informants I discuss here do not put their attention on the Eat-All aspect of the *wihkohtowin*, if it existed in Alberta at all. My own notes are somewhat incomplete on this point, though they refer to the covered removal of food in at least one case.

Moreover, at the first ceremony I attended (the one not led by Mike Beaver and John C. Letendre), I did not stay to the end. So I cannot speak of the disposal of food at that feast, beyond being told repeatedly to finish what was on my plate. Mike Beaver, for one, acknowledged that covered food could be removed from his feasts. At the feasts I attended, people were equally, if not more, insistent that I dance and smoke as well as eat. Yet there remains a focus on eating a large amount, finishing what one takes, not disposing of or hiding food, and covering for removal the food that remains, while burning (in addition to the inaugural burnt offerings) inedible leftovers and perhaps some edible ones as well.

If the Eat-All variant takes the logic of Cree feasting traditions to its limit, it is a difference in degree, not in kind, from the broader tradition. Many aspects of Algonquian feasts symbolically address the problem of how to respectfully (both vis-à-vis animals and vis-à-vis humans) dispose of a surplus of game meat or other food, and the Eat-All is but a particularly elegant example of this. Importantly, some of the historical sources appear to allow for flexibility in the Eat-All norm, sometimes involving gifting (e.g., Nelson's discussion of northern Saskatchewan Cree feasts [Brown and Brightman 1988:100–101]). It appears that practical work-around measures have arisen that soften the Eat-All provision, much like the removal of covered food from the feast. Such strategies feature aspects of both sharing and concealment or deception, simultaneously extending and defying the logic of the feast. For Tanner (1975:305), a feast where the lodge is sealed and the surplus food is covered for removal retains many of the symbolic aspects of the Eat-All. It is the "Hidden Feast," rather than the Eat-All Feast, which he emphasizes. Aspects of a hidden feast, including the focus of attention on the door and on symbolically sealing or opening the lodge, appear highly developed in the wihkohtowin lodge.

Cree and Métis people in northern Alberta continue to practise a feasting tradition in which a designated and delineated lodge, drumming, singing and dancing remain highly important aspects of the ritual. It appears that the ritual is more widely practised, or practised by larger numbers of people together, in Alberta than in Quebec or Manitoba, while still largely retaining its character as a bush feast, given that it does not generally occur within communities. Possible explanations for its continued popularity include its distinctively preserved music, dance and architectural features. Such elements lend their own logic to that of the feast, bringing their own drama and rhythm, attracting the imagination in flow, as the ritual curls on within the smoky lodge to etch itself in consciousness and experience.

Constituent Rites and Symbols

There are many elements of the wihkohtowin that contribute to the sense of the ritual as a totality, as something efficacious and compelling in itself. The feast discretely encompasses rites and symbols that appear in other Cree myths and rituals.

Even the presence of fire is significant. A crucial component of the wihkohtowin is to put food in the fire for the *macustehekiwin* (burnt offering), which feeds the spirits, mimicking the offering people make when they feed the spirits by eating, drinking tea and smoking. Each fire is marked with its own stick standing in the ground nearby; the sticks have bark removed and are decorated with sacred markings. Another central element is the presence of sacred pipes, which are shared so that all may smoke together, with and for the spirits that are present. The burnt food and the pipe ceremony are offering rites that are practised independently in many contexts but serve to intensify the sacredness of the wihkohtowin as key elements of the larger ritual.

The pipe and the drum were the signature paraphernalia of the shaman and serve as means of contacting spirits. Between ceremonies, the pipes and drums, like bundles, are kept wrapped, clean and sacred, and there are restrictions as to who may handle them. Pipes and drums are reverently discussed and viewed in the lodge; many are painted or adorned with still other sacred symbols or objects.

Sacred bundles² are closely associated with the wihkohtowin, connecting private and public ritual life. Bundles are opened in the lodge, bringing in historical persons or events, so that the ancestors are part of the ceremony. As such, a bundle can be understood as a text with history, modelling on a small scale the text that is the larger ritual (Weber-Pillwax 2003:129–130). After being ceremonially danced in, bundles are elevated in the most sacred part of the lodge, behind the stone altar and the singers and drummers.

A bundle carrier, or "someone who knows something," puts on the ceremony, while teaching younger apprentices (called *oskâpîwak* [stickmen] because they use sticks to handle the fire, to light the pipe and perhaps to keep order), who will someday do the same. Like bundles and bundle carriers, sticks and stickmen each feature prominently at other rituals besides the wihkohtowin.

Another important element is the *manitohkân* (an image of a spirit) in the most sacred part of the lodge, a focus of offerings and devotion. Normally found in the bush, these statues are objects of sacrificial rites integral to emplacing spiritual relations.

The dolls people dance with resemble the manitoh-kân in that they are sacred likenesses. It appears the dolls are likenesses of deceased individuals, in some cases containing the deceased's hair. Jean-Guy Goulet (1998) discusses the power of human clothing, hair and likenesses, as well as the co-presence of the dead, among the neighbouring Dene Tha. Similar assumptions are likely operative among the Cree people, making bundles and dolls especially powerful elements of the ritual.

Wihkimâsikan (diamond willow fungus) is a sweet-smelling incense that provides a characteristic aromatic fragrance in the wihkohtowin and other Western Woods Cree rituals, heightening their power and mutually reinforcing their significance. *Wihkimâsikan* and other incenses are etymologically linked to the wihkohtowin, to feasting and to sweet tastes and smells. Here is another tangible, sensual, meaningful and reflexive trait or connotation of the smoke filling the lodge.

There is some debate about the practice of gifting at the wihkohtowin. Some individuals, who may have been referring to a different ceremony, stated that people would exchange small gifts while dancing (e.g., James Grandejambe [Meili 2012]). In contrast, Mike Beaver stated that this particular ceremony is not a giveaway, excepting perhaps gifts to the drummers, the ceremoni- alist (whom I presented with tobacco) and the spirits.

A Missionary's Account of the Wikokkewin

During our personal interview at Trout Lake, December 2005, Sarah Sinclair indicated to me that some missionaries attended her father's collective ceremonies and "never used to mind them" (translation: Peter Thunder). Other elders stated that churches tried to sow fear and destroy the lodge. Sarah likely had Father Roger Vandersteene in mind. Vandersteene, who participated in rituals around Trout Lake and Wabasca, made a significant contribution to the scholarly literature with his (1960) description of a large wikokkewin ceremony held in a ceremonial lodge near Wabasca. A spiritual innovator, he was not representative of many missionaries who wanted to eradicate Cree ritual traditions (Westman 2008, 2009). His understanding of the wikokkewin was biased by his view that it was essentially compatible with Christian rituals. He spoke Cree and was a knowledgeable participant in Cree ritual, becoming a pipe carrier himself. Furthermore, Vandersteene was invited to sit in the most sacred part of the lodge and made his observations from there. His remarks (originally published in Flemish and subsequently translated into French) thus merit consideration.

Vandersteene begins by discussing the Cree "cult of the dead" (1960:179) and the burnt sacrifice, tying the offering to respect for the dead. Significantly, he

compares the offering to other rites involving the dead person's clothes and personal items, like putting them in trees. He reserves special mention for the wikokkewin: "Mais la cérémonie la plus solennelle, l'expression la plus stupéfiante de ce culte des morts n'en reste pas moins la Wikokkewin, la solennité des défunts [But the most solemn ceremony, the most astonishing expression of this cult of the dead nonetheless remains the Wikokkewin, the solemn ritual of the dead]" (179). After participating in the ritual, Vandersteene writes, he had to reflect for a long period before he understood what had occurred.

In preparation for the ritual (apparently held in late fall), the elder, Ayamihewasou, had hung many small bundles in branches in the vicinity of the lodge that had been prepared. He personally invited Vandersteene, who had previously been unaware of the communal feast. Vandersteene arrived with a contribution of lard and some small game and was surprised to see all the members of his parish, as well as Protestants and even people from Desmarais, another settlement (182). He estimated a total of 250 participants, more Cree than he had ever seen assembled before: men, women and children sitting together in and around the lodge (183). His descriptions of the wihkohtowikamik are evocative:

Devant la tente, se dressent des rangées de jeunes têtes de sapins écorcées et peintes. Leur alignement parallèle forme une voie triomphale menant vers l'entrée... Une place m'est indiquée au centre du demi-cercle qui forme au fond de la tente comme une sorte d'abside. Sur une peau d'ours étalée devant moi l'on aperçoit des pipes, des poupées, des tambourins, et des petits paquets de *médicines*. [In front of the tent are arranged rows of young firs barked and painted. Their parallel alignment forms a triumphal pathway leading towards the entry... A place is indicated for me at the centre of the semi-circle that forms at the end of the tent like a sort of apse. On a bearskin spread before one, one sees pipes, dolls, drums and little packets of medicines.] [182]

Devant moi, le feu sacré. Au-delà du feu, le maigre Manitokkan orné d'anneaux et de rubans. En cercle autour du feu, on dépose les marmites et les casseroles que j'ai vues bouillonner quelques instants plus tôt sur les feux et qui exhalent une abondante vapeur. Des tas de banocks s'y empilent également. Derrière le Manitokkan, une série de quatre feux. [Before me, the sacred fire. Beyond the fire, the small Manitokkan decorated with rings and ribbons. In a circle around the fire, one deposits the pots and pans that I saw boiling moments before on the fires and which exhale an abundant vapour. Pieces of bannock are also piled there. Behind the Manitokkan, a series of four fires.] [183]

In preparation for the feast, Ayamihewasou placed bear fat at the four corners of the central part of the tent.

The elders talked of deceased people, inviting them into the tent by saying their names (183–184). Then the elders were served:

Lorsque chacun est servi, Ayamihewasou se lève, prend son bol et va se placer face au feu sacré devant le Manitokkan. Il élève la viande en signe d'offrande et murmure une formule que je ne peux saisir, parce qu'il la prononce à voix basse et qu'il me tourne le dos. Il jette l'offrande dans le feu et revient s'asseoir à sa place... [When each one is served, Ayamihewasou rises, takes his bowl and goes to place it at the sacred fire before the Manitokkan. He raises the meat as a sign of offering and murmurs an incantation that I can't catch, because he pronounces it in a low voice and turns his back to me. He throws the offering in the fire and comes back to sit in his place...]

Un second ancien se lève pour accomplir le meme rituel également à sa place. Et ainsi de suite, jusqu'à ce que chacun ait offert son offrande aux *Tchipayak*. [A second elder stands to accomplish the same ritual in his place. And thus so forth, until each one has made his offering to *Tchipayak*.] [184]

Here Vandersteene refers to elders offering burning meat for the dead (*tchipayak*) before the feast commenced. Meanwhile, incense was lit in offering and invitation:

L'offrande terminée, ils encensent le feu, les pipes, les poupées et les petits paquets de médecine. Ils font ensuite le tour de la tente et placent de l'encens devant le feu, à l'endroit où les esprits sont censées se tenir. [The offering complete, they offer incense to the fire, pipes, dolls and little packets of medicine. They then make a tour of the tent and place incense before the fire, in the place the spirits are supposed to keep.] [184]

Here details of the order of events are distinct from those described above by Mike Beaver and below by other participants. Several of these people described historical feasts in the Wabasca area and may very well have been in attendance at the same ceremony (or amalgamated ceremonies?) that Vandersteene is describing.

There was a moment of respite during which people smoked and chatted following the burnt offering, giving the dead a chance to come in peacefully. Then the musicians began to play and sing together (184) as a procession of young men danced around the fire carrying the dolls representing spirits of the dead; some dolls were 100 years old, Vandersteene writes. After moving nine times slowly around the fires, the dolls were placed

near the altar (185). The pipe was lit and passed to the elders, who, one after another, offered puffs of smoke to the fire: to the centre, right and then left. The pipe was presented to invisible spirits. Each pipe made a tour of the lodge, starting with the elders. When the pipes had made their round, they were placed at the dolls' feet, near the fire.

Now it had to be around midnight, but no one minded. The stickmen began to serve the meal gathered before them (185). A discussion of the food follows, with Vandersteene noting that no one ate until each had been served. When the feasters became full, he writes, they could cover their food and set it behind them. It is not altogether apparent what became of this food. After eating their fill, feasters could go outside (186)—in Cree this refers implicitly to relieving oneself—to chat.

Vandersteene refers to the tent, viewed from outside, being lit up like a Chinese lantern and to watching the aurora borealis—the spirits of ancestors dancing along. There is a strong symbolic association between the northern lights and the *wihkohtowin*, given that both involve the presence of the spirits of ancestors and of cosmic dancing (LeClaire and Cardinal 1998:371; Meili 2012:165–166). Back in the lodge, to start the dancing, Ayamihewasou began to beat his drum again, rhythmically. Then, before everyone had come back to their place, the other drummers began to play and sing as the dance started. A discussion of the dancers and drummers follows (Vandersteene 1960:188–189). The dance was beautiful and serious. The drums played until dawn.

At dawn, Ayamihewasou stood to face the *manitokkan* before the fire. Everyone sat. Three drummers tapped their instruments, then jumped to the hearth, drums in hand. The principal drummers sang and prayed:

Merci pour les bienfaits de l'année écoulée! Aidez-nous dans les mois à venir! Epargnez-nous vos interventions malicieuses! Ne nous rendez pas l'existence intenable! [Thank you for the benefits of the past year! Help us in the months to come! Save us from your malicious interventions! Don't make our existence untenable!] [190]

Vandersteene's translations of ritual songs and prayers allow a glimpse of fear as one of the emotions at play. Other sincere incantations and supplications followed, he writes, as the feasters went from darkest worry to purest hope (190). When the dawn prayer was complete, they grabbed for the food stashed behind them. Those who lived closer start for home (perhaps implying a removal of food?), but most went to sleep.

Vandersteene's understanding of the feast, in terms of its relation to Christian principles and sacraments, crystallized when he asked himself: Why not substitute God for tchipayak (the dead)? Flowing from this, he incorporated the wikokkewin into his dream of a Cree Catholic Church (Waugh 1996:117). The theological and ecclesiological implications of Vandersteene's understanding of the ritual are beyond the scope of this article; however, such innovations attest to the centrality of the wikokkewin around Wabasca and Trout Lake between the 1940s and 1960s, as observed by Vandersteene.

Accounts of Elders and Ceremonialists

I have assembled data from a range of sources and will quote from several knowledgeable individuals who, since approximately 1900, observed, assisted in or led wihkohtowina held within 250 kilometres of Trout Lake. Information about the linguistic provenance of the data is not always available. In most cases, the informant was likely interviewed in Cree; I quote from a translation. For Roy Yellowknee (1990), the archived Cree tapes are a potential source for further research on ritual, myth and terminology.

Dianne Meili (2012) and Dawn Martin-Hill (2008) published accounts of ceremonies and interviews with elders and ceremonialists, including John C. Letendre (Martin-Hill 2008). While I do not have space to consider Meili's or Martin-Hill's works at length, they are generally consistent with my data. They also show the specificity and variability of wihkohtowin practices in particular families and communities.

The remarks of Jimmy Meneen (Tibeyimisuw), born near Trout Lake around 1890, demonstrate how the calendric ceremonial lodge and its offerings functioned within the socio-political context of shamanic leadership of mobile hunting bands by "gifted" individuals with "powers" (Meili 2012:36). Other commentators confirm that the ceremony was mastered by shamans or medicine men, who used it to communicate with animals and other spirits.

To further demonstrate the centrality of reciprocity with plants and animals in the wihkohtowin, I present remarks from a Peerless Lake elder, Louie J. Cardinal, whom I recorded during a September 2004 interview, which was translated by Andrew Orr (who initially used the translation *pouwow* for the wihkohtowin). Louie stated as follows:

Grandfather [i.e., Samuel St.-Arnaud] said, way back then, if somebody puts on a wihkohtowin it's only like, his time. After that he has to pass down how he

knows how to put on the wihkohtowin. It's basically a given thing. Spirits teach them what to do, how to help people out. Same thing with the roots. The spirit taught how to make that potion to cure the people. These are what these people back there are passing down, like they keep doing that all the way down. And that's how people used to know what to do, like dreaming things to have the help of the spirit, eh?

See, wihkohtowin, one of the reasons those are put in fall and spring, the spring is the beginning of the roots and also the fall is the ending of the season. That's why wihkohtowin is like that, because of the respect for the roots and everything.

Another reason is that they approach elders to teach them a song, the history that they learn from the elders' songs when they want to help out in the wihkohtowin. They can help out in the wihkohtowin, in the singing, that's why. That's why they want to learn those songs, so they could help out.

Louie's remarks emphasize the importance of the wihkohtowin in enacting relations of reciprocity with different classes of beings and echo Mike Beaver's comments on the importance of bringing medicinal herbs into the lodge. Also clearly emphasized are the dual roles of the elder/shaman and the apprentice/stickman. Louie's comments on the wihkohtowin, together with the composite sketch based on my observations and interviews (as referred to above) with Mike Beaver and John C. Letendre, set the stage for the other data I will discuss.

During the 1990s, as part of a community-based cultural land-use study, George Deminche Auger, of Wabasca-Desmarais, stated as follows:

The medicine dances were different back then. Most of the guys who set up the dances were medicine men themselves. There were two main dances each year: one in the early spring or summer, another later in the fall. Everyone was invited by word of mouth, traveling by horseback, canoe and by foot. And everyone came.

There was a totem set up by the person who set up the ceremony. He sat beside the pole with a bundle and had two servants who look after everyone and serve them. The poles of the tipi would each represent a spiritual thing, such as grass, trees or animals. The medicine man would drum and invite people into the very large tipi. All the people in the community would fit into the tipi, that's how big it was. The first people in would have their own bundles. The tipi faced east and they would come and enter the way the sun goes (clockwise, but we didn't have clocks way back, so the direction was the way of the sun). People without bundles followed.

The medicine man says a prayer to the Great Spirit and makes an offering of tobacco. He would ask the Great Spirit that the hunting and trapping would be good for the whole year and give thanks for the year before. Then he would ask for the most plentiful fish and berries for the next year.

After this ceremony, the dancing started. Each singer sings four songs, then the next person would sing four more new songs and so on. [Bigstone Cree Nation and Métis Peoples of Kituskeenow 1999:79–80]

George emphasizes that the people hosting the ceremony were generally shamans or medicine men (today, Mike Beaver and others would not say that they are shamans or medicine men).

George's remarks about ceremonies in the Wabasca area support Mike Beaver's comments about the directional orientation of the lodge and the dancers, the importance of the manitohkân (here "totem" or "pole"), the bundles and the need to either give thanks for a winter's survival or beseech it, depending on the season. George also confirms Mike Beaver's emphasis on the invitational character of the feast and its emphasis on the Great Spirit (likely the translation of *kihci-manitow*, the target of prayers in Mike Beaver's lodge).

Women elders offer authoritative perspectives on the ceremony. In 1976 Julie Auger, of Desmarais, related the following to community member Solomon Yellowknee, emphasizing the enjoyment of participating in the ceremony and helping one another:

Where my mother would enjoy herself was at a medicine dance or at a Pow-wow. This is one of the reasons why we still like to keep our culture, even though people have discarded some of our culture.

Medicine dance is very religious to the native people. Pow-wow is a promise; for example, all winter, people would have problems or troubles, hard times they've encountered, many a time they've promised to the Almighty that they'd offer food to the neighbors, to enjoy themselves when they got through their hard times, because of the promise they've made. Promises will help a person, if they have faith in it. . . .

We believe deeply in the culture of yesteryears, Indian promises. An offering an individual makes, it has been said many times, that his voice is loud and clear when he's offering and promising to the Almighty, asking him for better luck and health. He got answers so many times, even I have done this, I promise to the Almighty, that I'll try to help and please my native friend, to ask my neighbor to join me in celebrating. I still see that it works. [S. Yellowknee 1976:5]

Julie's remarks point to the *wihkohtowin* as having a function or purpose: as it torques back into society and the cosmos, *it works*. This functionality is in relation to promises and offerings that an individual makes, either in hard times—typically in winter when starvation was a concern in some camps—or as a gesture of thanks in good times, to bring people together in celebrating to help them. Again "the Almighty" is likely a reference to or translation of *kihci-manitow*, the greatest spirit or god.

In 1995 Johnny Halcrow, of Cadotte Lake, stated to community member Rhonda Laboucan:

I remember some of us used this thing called tea dances. We were shown all about herbs to be used for medicine after the tea dance was held. . . . This is what we were taught at these tea dances. This is what we were taught at these tea dances. How they used to run those dances, the old timers made a big teepee. Then the people were asked to come, there was a lot of food inside and the people were allowed to eat. All the young persons went around with the food to feed the people and then the next ceremony performed was the smoking of the pipe. They used to make a circle, after the pipe had made the circle, the young people would take the pipe around inside the teepee then, after this was done, everybody was allowed to eat and then the dance would begin. Sometimes it would go until daybreak, sometimes you would eat three times. That is how they used to run some of the tea dances. This was a lot of fun for the people. There was no drinking, there was no arguing, everything went well. That is one way of living back then. I remember going to a lot of these tea dances. I remember working at these tea dances when I was a young person. I think I was about sixteen years old at the time. Just about every year, sometimes twice a year. One in spring time after the trapping was done and one was held in the fall again. Before it starts to get cold. Around September and then again the next spring. This was a long time ago.

Like Julie, Johnny mentions the enjoyment and relaxation of the ceremony, while emphasizing again the importance of the ritual in sacralizing medicinal plants.

Laboucan (1995) also discussed the *wihkohtowin* with elders Josephine and Edward Laboucan, of Little Buffalo Lake. The main speaker is apparently Josephine, born around 1920:

The old people that knew how to hold tea dances and who received visions, these were the only people that knew about the herbs that were used for medicine. This is a gift that was given to them. And these were the ones that were able to pass it on to someone else. . . .

They believed in this and I remember when they held these tea dances. . . .

They went hunting, they made these preparations before this tea dance was to be held. They would take all the good things for these tea dances and this was kept until the day of the tea dance. They had moose meat and they made dry meat and sometimes they made pemmican and this was all fed to the people. And this was the way this was for the people, this was given to the Native people.

The significance of hunting for feast game is central in Josephine's account, as is the ritual's relationship to medicinal plants. Notably, the remark that "this was all fed to the people" is one of the few utterances I am discussing here that clearly opens the door to the possibility of an Eat-All feature having been a significant part of the feast in northern Alberta during the 20th century, though even here this is not clear and could be a product of the translation.

Lazare Merrier and the Transfer of a Ceremony

In a 1968 interview (Yellowknee 1990) at Wabasca-Desmarais with Roy Yellowknee (a young community member), Lazare Merrier, born in 1886, recorded his memories of the *wihkohtowin* and its songs. Lazare was one of those with the knowledge of how to put on a powwow, which, typically, he had learned from his father. Both Mike Beaver and John C. Letendre stated that they learned the ceremony from their fathers.

Lazare emphasizes that the powwow's songs are gifts from the spirit, available to those who can "use their own minds" (Yellowknee 1990:178). Yellowknee's translation here likely implies the use of shamanic power, as it clearly does elsewhere, that is in Yellowknee's translation of Augustin Auger's account of the shaman Cutwing (54).

Songs may be passed down the generations, though the recipient does not have to be a relative. Songs cannot just be made up by anybody (178). Lazare attempts to entice his interviewer, Yellowknee, to take up the ceremony, saying he can tell that Yellowknee believes in such things. Partly as a result of this dynamic, these data are especially engaging and important.

Lazare comments on the importance of the *manitohkân*, calling it the offering pole, or *weepinahso'nahtik* (178), referring to the pole's distinctive markings. Symbolically, the Creator planted the pole, and it reached to heaven. Such a pole can change the weather when it is being carved (178). All the lodge poles are symbolic, adorned with feathers or ribbons to indicate life and death, recalling the remarks of other elders about

the sacred symbolism in the structure of the lodge. The Creator gave us this teepee, Lazare states. It was *tchahkew-achayohkan* (a mythic figure) who created bundles and who was given the knowledge to use bundles and treat them with respect. This hero, who is also the subject of other narratives, used the hair of his parents. Even today, the bundles containing hair and tobacco are central to the ceremony:

When people get up (to start the ceremony), they make a smudge to purify them. Then they give the bundle to the designated people and this bundle is then taken around the fires. [178]

Pipes and drums are treated with respect and also go around the fire:

The pipe is passed around the same way, for the people to smoke. The way people offer the pipe to the ones who have left us, the way the smoke is offered to the Creator. [181]

Pipes, bundles and drums are redolent with symbolism. Lazare's drums are painted with a cross, symbolizing the four directions; the sacred bundles are sung about in songs. The cross may also appear at the lodge altar. Quite apart from their Christian overtones, such movements and situations of symbols maintain the curvature and interiority of the ritual through their structuring recursivity and the power derived from their torque into domains beyond the lodge.

Lazare refers to the importance of the stickmen, who light offerings and pipes, manage the fire and serve the food. They do not carry the bundles, he comments, but they have to dance while the bundle carrier is leading the dancing (184–185). Lazare states that the blessings asked are different every time.

Besides bundles, one can take around the rosary before the dancing starts (185), recalling Goulet's analysis of the Prophet Dance among the Dene as a moment "when the drum and the rosary meet" (1998:193), as sacred domains become one. Similarly, according to Lazare, it used to be that a white ribbon was spread in the lodge along the dancing trail, marking the trail to heaven (Yellowknee 1990:183). Again, the Dene literature, emphasizing the dance as a trail to heaven inspired by prophets and possibly linked to Christian imagery, may be of use to analysts of Cree ritual.

Lazare is concerned to transfer the ceremony to Yellowknee or perhaps to other future knowledge holders: "This is a very important thing. It is like it helps us" (183). In this spirit, he comments on and records powwow songs for Yellowknee. Lazare and Frank Eskagen (also born in 1886) each sing powwow songs in Cree on the

tapes. Only Lazare's are transcribed or translated into English by Yellowknee and his collaborator, Liz Hare:

I will sing these for whoever will be listening to us
from all over. Maybe people are wanting to have a
powwow.

Singing: When I am troubled, I go to the Creator
When I am troubled, I go to the King
Who walks on the road, Hayas walks on the road
He walks on the sun. [186–187]

The mythical figure who found the bundles had walked close to where the sun travels, in one of Lazare's narratives. Perhaps the reference to the sun is a reference to him. The road could refer to the trail to heaven. A second song refers to both celestial and terrestrial entities:

Singing: Look toward Heaven, look toward Heaven,
think of the Creator.
Look toward Heaven, think of the King
Look toward Heaven, the King is going to give you
the earth
The one who created Heaven will give you Heaven
He will give you daylight, the one who made Heaven
He will give you animals, the one who made Heaven.
[186–187]

It is unclear whether the discussion of heaven draws on Christian influences or whether it is merely an evocative translation from Cree. Further research with the Cree tapes might assist in this. Drawing on perspectives from Vandersteene, Goulet and Mike Beaver, I would suggest that there was likely a degree of convergence between Christian teachings and wihkohtowin practices during the historical period, at least in some lodges.

Lazare tells Yellowknee that there are stories to the songs and, like other elders, underlines the centrality of the wihkohtowin to Cree life:

At that time a person believed in this, the same as in praying. If you believe in the Creator, you believe in asking him for a good life. You believe in these things. This is the same with the powwow. It is the same if you believe in life or for it to help you in life, it is the same. [189]

Lazare's remarks here resemble those of Julie Auger: the wihkohtowin is a means of helping people in concrete ways, and it works. Putting on a wihkohtowin is like making or fulfilling a promise; participating in one is like praying. Such concepts recall the comments of one of my informants, Paul Okemow, who asserted in our October 2005 interview at Peerless Lake that the wihkohtowin was above all "a living tool," that is, a

means to maintain life, not a dance for fun (translated by William S. Houle). The ritual, owing to its own integrity, has an impact outside itself.

One of the ends of the wihkohtowin is healing. Like other elders, including Mike Beaver and John C. Letendre, Lazare mentions a family member being healed through powwow dancing or through the promise to dance powwow. Women could conceive or bring a baby to term by participating in the ritual or promising to do so. People used to dance sometimes after someone had just died, so the wihkohtowin has been part of the mortuary ritual in some cases, as well as commemorating the dead more generally. There are strong elements of commemoration and even *rites de passage* in such accounts. It is notable in Lazare's remarks and in comments from other informants and sources that women are key participants in the wihkohtowin, even though the stickmen are responsible for managing the meal, the tea and the fires. Lazare comments that women can even sing songs but that this is unusual.

It is quite likely that other publications, archival sources and elders could confirm, elaborate on or contradict the above accounts. I present here the most authoritative accounts of which I am aware to describe the ritual as thickly as possible in its own right.

Conclusion

The wihkohtowin has variable practices and implications, even within a particular region and time period (a long 20th century). Defining its characteristics, and describing its relationship to other rituals, particularly historically, requires further research. The principal analytical and practical distinctions within the Cree feasting tradition are between interpretations of feasts that emphasize animals and those that emphasize ancestors (more prominent in Alberta). At the same time, both ancestors and animals are important in eastern and western feasts.

It is possible that existing elements of Cree sacrificial feasting traditions relating to the dead were emphasized, and those relating to animals (potentially including the Eat-All tradition) accordingly de-emphasized, in the western parts of Woods Cree territory, through a historical process, hypothetically involving influences from Dene, Assiniboine, Plains, Ojibwa and Iroquoian peoples and rituals (the latter two, historically represented in the fur-trade workforce, practised feasts for the dead) or an increase in mortality, which itself resulted in historical shifts in funerary and memorial practices (Hackett 2005). In addition, as with the Dene dances, the wihkohtowin has likely absorbed Christian influences, partly via contact with Métis individuals and

families and partly through the influence and participation of particular missionaries like Vandersteene and innovative members of their Cree flock.

The wihkohtowin honours and petitions the living world, not only animals, plants, seasons, or ancestors but the entire cosmos and indeed life/death itself. Analyses focusing mainly or exclusively on human–animal relations close off avenues toward a fuller understanding of Cree ritual. Indeed, one might suggest, based on the data here, that plants are equally important to, if not more so than, animals in the wihkohtowin, among the potential recipients of the sacrifice (e.g., Wolfart and Ahenakew 1998:199). Nevertheless, relations with animals remain a key concern, even for informants who suggest the ceremony is mainly oriented toward plants or the dead. Animals from terrestrial, aerial, watery and chthonic realms are symbolically recognized. Game animals particularly play a pivotal role in the collective feast. Sharing food, paradigmatically game meat, brings the community together in thanks for a bounty, enacting the wish for continued bounty and collective survival. Even the drums played are made from moosehide, while bundles contain sacred animal parts. Animal spirits feature as the intended audience of many of the songs, prayers and offerings in the feast. This is particularly important as many participants may have experience with an animal guardian. Songs mention animals: loon, eagle, bear. Like the spirits of dead ancestors, the animal spirits are in the lodge dancing with the participants, while the living animals remain outside the hidden feast.

There is, perhaps, a more complex symbolism at play, in which animals and the dead stand in for one another, mutually signifying and foretelling in a manner suggested by Goulet (1998). It is significant that many of the historical Cree mourning practices discussed by Paul Hackett (2005), including the destruction of personal goods, closely resemble the logic of the Eat-All Feast (and indeed any communal feast at which a surplus of food is consumed or distributed as a sacrifice), given that each involves the waste or flagrant disposal of needful things. The smoky, darkened lodge collapses distinctions between temporal frames and orders of being, as the ritual twists back on itself, becoming more meaningful and captivating, while simultaneously torquing out to integrate different domains.

Like the rituals of the hunter, who disposes respectfully of animal parts and makes burnt offerings, the wihkohtowin exemplifies the reciprocal relationship of spirit gifting (Ghostkeeper 1996). The gift goes beyond the eaters, as the food nourishes absent and deceased kin. The ceremony feeds a collectivity of past and future people while, in some analyses, also welcoming the

animal spirits into that community, the commensal *domus* that is the lodge.

Experientially, relevant emotions include not only joy, thankfulness, hope and nostalgia but also fear, grief and perhaps—given the symbolically hidden characteristics of the feast—the cringing guilt of withdrawal or the thrill of deceit. Together with the inherent aspects of the feast, within the lodge’s literal and figurative structures, each of these emotions contributes to the feast’s experiential imprint, in movement through a dramatic, dynamic, satisfying and self-referential ceremony.

At the conclusion of one feast, Mike Beaver congratulated participants on completing the ceremony with him. “You have made this wihkohtowin a success,” he intoned. Other elders use remarkably similar wording. People use the wihkohtowin because it *works*, because they enjoy it deeply and because not to use it can court disaster. As well as provoking a heightened emotional response, the ritual promotes harmony and reciprocity with living and deceased community members and with various non-human persons, including animals. The wihkohtowin recognizes these linkages and dynamically maintains them as it torques out into the cosmos and the society. Within the lodge drawing together this cosmic community, dancers, like offerings of smoke, curl about, moving forward around the fires to the rhythm of the drummers keeping time.

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Notes

- 1 The wihkohtowin is not synonymous with the secular Plains Cree Tea Dance (*kickwepahtawin*) described by David Mandelbaum (2001:219), although it does resemble

Mandelbaum's (211–212) description of the Plains Cree Round Dance (*wasakaecimuwin*) in some respects (see also Deiter McArthur 1987:9–12, 40).

- 2 Mandelbaum (2001:170–174) provides extensive information on the importance of the bundle (*wiskwe-hpita-kan*; “kept in a clean place”) of sacred objects for the Plains Cree. James Smith (1981:263) also affirms the importance of bundles for the Western Woods Cree.

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