

Métis Mythology and Folklore: Mythological Figures.

Traditional Métis stories were told at wakes, when men and women worked, in the evening around campfires, at various social gatherings and in homes. For instance, men at parties entertained one another with stories while smoking their pipes. Their humorous tales usually drew gales of laughter, making the raconteurs the life of the party. When the men were on long and arduous freighting trips, they told humorous stories or ghost stories or tales about past hunts and adventures to pass time, keep their spirits from sagging and to celebrate life. Similarly, women told stories while picking berries, maple sugaring, processing pemmican or fish and while bead working.

On cold winter nights, people often gathered in a circle and made up the most outrageous tales possible. The winner sometimes received a prize for their story. At other times, a bag might be passed around and people would place items in it. To the amusement of listeners, the storyteller would then have to make up a story based on items pulled from the bag. The Métis used to call a man known to tell tall-tales a “*flècheur*.” This word is French slang and does not translate well into English. The closest would be “he who shoots the arrow.”

The most common mythological figure is the Trickster. The Métis have a plethora of Trickster figures, many of which they share with their First Nations/French Canadian/Scottish cousins.¹ Tricksters are universal figures often called Hero-Saviours or Hero-Benefactors². The Trickster is a creator-destroyer, transformer and a jokester. In cultures as far apart as northern Scandinavia and South America Trickster figures in the mould of Coyote abound. They are figures which inhabit the borderlands of religion and power and whose function is to prick pomposity, challenge the appearance of things and subject cultural, social and ethical assumptions to scrutiny.

Trickster Figures and Mythology

Trickster figures and the stories and myths surrounding them are a way of learning the truth about ourselves as human beings. The Trickster is an imperfect hero. Trickster tells us truths about ourselves and reveals sides of our nature that we might be more comfortable not to acknowledge. Through his actions all values come into being. The trickster is a paradox. As a shape shifter Trickster is all things to all people. The Trickster, by instructive example, allows us to break out of our stereotypes, whether imposed by our culture, our families or ourselves. He demonstrates the dangers that lie in wait for those with voracious appetites.

Who is Trickster?

¹ Other Tricksters such as Br'er (Brother) Rabbit came from African American slaves and the Cherokee Indians.

² See Joseph Campbell: *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

- Trickster is endowed with hero qualities but these are dormant. He has to undergo a long and painful process of trial and error, which leads to growth and metamorphosis.
- Trickster shows us that the mind can both blur our perception of what is real (i.e. misperceive) and carry our vision beyond what is accessible to our senses and reason.
- Trickster demonstrates that we must not just rely on the intellect we must use thought that arises from the heart as well.
- Trickster is at a human predevelopment stage where there is not as yet a clear distinction between the divine, the human and the animal. Trickster has no self-knowledge or life-knowledge in spite of divine parenthood.
- Although not really evil trickster does bad things through lack of awareness
- Male and Female distinction is blurred
- He inflicts damage on those around him but he himself suffers great defeats and indignities
- He is both cunning and stupid
- Selfish and philanthropical (unselfish)
- Is both generous and mean
- Plays tricks on others but is often tricked himself
- Trickster is transformed through his adventures

Blue Jay: a trickster figure.

Chakapish: The Michif name for the tricksters.

C'he-p-ski-boo: a boogeyman.

Coyote: the trickster figure of the high plains cultures from Canada to Mexico.³

Kaamoowachik: what the Michif call any cannibal spirit.

Kookoush: a Michif boogeyman. This is a Michif variation derived from Whiitigo (Witiko, Wendigo) creatures or spirits that could either possess characteristics of a human or a monster that had physically transformed from a person.

La vyay de la kaarem (the Old Woman of Lent): a boogeyman like the witch in Hanzel and Gretal.

Li Jhyaab, the Devil, the Handsome Dancer

Ma-ma-kwa-se-sak, Memeguayiwahk: The Little People, also called Li P'tchi Mound by the Michif and Mannegishi by the Crow.⁴ (See Appendix)

³ In modern times brought into the broader culture and depicted as Wile E. Coyote in Road Runner cartoons.

Manitokanac: a representation of the Pawakan (Cree), a spirit guardian.⁵ (See Appendix)

Mermaids: Michif, Cree and Dene fishermen on the large lakes tell of Mermaids, some of these stories are similar to Scottish tales. The Ceasg is a Highland mermaid whose contact, in common with most mermaids, is perilous to mankind. The Nibiinaabe are a race of water sprites from Anishinaabe folklore. Nibinabe are usually described as being shaped like mermaids, with human torsos and fish tails. They are said to be frightened off by loud noises.

Mermaids and mermen are also used as a clan symbol by the Ojibwe (whose Mermaid Clan and its totem are called Nibiinaabe or Nibanaba.)

Nanabush: Ojibway/Saulteaux/Michif trickster figure.

P'tchi Jean, Chi Jean, Ti-Jean: French-Canadian/Michif trickster.

Paakuk, Pakakosh: “The Skeleton” an emaciated cannibal spirit and boogeyman, the patron of the “Give Away Dance”

Pahkack (Paakuk)—the Skeleton, is a mythic figure that has the power of snow. They go howling through the cold white forests in the deep of winter, their limbs cracking and screeching. Pahkack is associated with death, starvation, and illness. The emaciated or skeletal appearance of Pahkacks come from their origin as human victims of starvation or disease. To children, Pahkack was a boogeyman. Children were told that if they were not well behaved Pahkack would take them away, suck out their blood and eat all their flesh. Among Plains Cree, Pahkack is known as the originator or patron of the Give Away Dance, also known as the “*festin à tout manger*”, which reinforces the sharing principle. The symbolism of these feasts merges the concepts of offering, consubstantiation and creation of artificial famine, which is followed by successful hunting and trapping.

Raven: The trickster of the North-West Coast Indians and Métis and the Inuit and Métis of the north.

Roogarou, Rougarou, Loup Garou: A shapeshifter, the French/Michif Werewolf, a helper of Li Jhyaab (the Devil), may take the form of a black dog, wolf or black horse.

The Rougarou is the werewolf of Métis mythology. The Métis Rougarou is a syncretistic variation of the French-Canadian loup garou and the Cree shapeshifter figures. The Rougarou, is usually a person whom in some way has offended the Creator or has been possessed by evil spirits. Some also view the Rougarou as a variation of the Indian Bearwalk mythology. The Métis of Turtle Mountain had the belief that a person who is a

⁴ See Lawrence Barkwell, “Métis folklore: Ma-ma-kwa-se-sak.” <http://www.scribd.com/doc/49937988/Métis-Folklore-Ma-ma-kwa-se-sak?olddoc=1>.

⁵ See Lawrence Barkwell. “Manitokanac” <http://www.scribd.com/doc/52848134/Manitokanac>.

Rougarou changes into either a dog or a black mare rather than into a wolf. Another variation is that the Rougarou is half man and half horse. Some say that if one ever meets a Rougarou they must throw a skeleton key and hit him between the eyes. The Rougarou will then be turned back into a man. You had to keep his identity secret or you would become a Rougarou.

The Métis also believe that if a person does not pray regularly or otherwise neglects their spiritual well-being the Devil (li diable) or other demons would come to live in their home. The Devil usually appears incarnated as a black dog or a handsome stranger.

Thunderbirds: called Animikii by the Ojibwa and Wakíya by the Lakota a large bird, capable of creating storms and thundering while it flies. Clouds are pulled together by its wingbeats, the sound of thunder made by its wings clapping, sheet lightning the light flashing from its eyes when it blinks. In the Sun Dance or more properly Thirst Dance, there is a Thunderbird nest at the top of the centre pole (Tree of Life).

Whiitigo, Windigo: Michif/Saulteaux/Ojibwa/Cree cannibal monster. Wendigos are malevolent, cannibalistic, supernatural beings of great spiritual power. They were strongly associated with the winter, the north, and coldness, as well as with famine and starvation.

The Métis tell stories of the Wehtigo or Windigo. A Wehtigo is a spiritually powerful anthropomorphic monster that overcomes and feeds upon human beings. It is believed that many Wehtigos were once human beings who were transformed into this condition by committing famine cannibalism. Many contemporary Crees use the term as a metaphor to denote gluttonous, aggressive or murderous individuals (i.e. those who threaten communal well-being). Starvation and famine cannibalism are dominant symbols in the Wehtigo complex. In the woodland habitat where inhabitants led a roving life, and whose subsistence depended on the game they procured, individuals experienced famine due to regular game cycles. Those who could not stand this stress sometimes fed on the flesh of those that had died. They were then subject to preying on the living. A number of theories explain the disorder in terms of anxiety about hunger or famine cannibalism.

Wiisakaychak: Cree/Michif trickster figure.

Windigoken, Wiitigoken: The so-called “Backwards Medicine Clowns”. They come in on the north wind at the last round of Sun Dances. There is a Chippewa/Ojibwa warrior society based on this called the “No fight contraries” said to be inhabited by the Thunderers.

Storytelling

Michif storytelling is intergenerational. Elders and parents told stories to the young in order to reinforce their identity and prepare them for adulthood. Indeed, storytelling was the basis of a traditional education for most young Métis. Telling stories was a means to teach youth about the history of their families and communities, as well as to provide bi-

ographies of ancestors and important leaders. Through the Oral Tradition, the Métis honed their long-term memory skills. Storytellers would often have youngsters participate in the activity by acting out the principle of the story. In this way, through experiential learning, the story's lesson is made real and can more easily be remembered.

Some stories are sacred and are only told to certain people. These stories can only be told if the teller has permission from the story's original owner, and if the procession of people to whom the story was told is recounted. These special stories are seen as the "intellectual" property of a specific individual or a family lineage. Therefore, it is sometimes possible to trace a story directly back to the original raconteur. An Elder might say, "I am going to tell you a story about hunting ducks that I got from my father Antoine which he heard from his father Keewaypash..." It is always important to remember the proper protocol when telling traditional Michif stories.

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Appendix

Manitokanac

Manitokanac are images set up where one can bring a gift or receive a gift. These post-like human figures are associated with Cree practices and the Midewiwin religion of the Saulteaux and Ojibwa (Chippewa). Gifts of clothing, etc. were brought as prayers asking for better health and fortune. This is usually accompanied by a four night ceremony.



Manitokanac in poplar grove. Provincial Archives Manitoba, Edmund Morris Collection 3336, 1907.



Maniokanac (Mo-n-tou-e-kahn, on image label), 1930s Rocky Boy Reservation, Montana, Montana State University photograph # FM-1-117

In some places, gift giving is institutionalized around an image set up where one could bring a gift and receive a gift. The image is called a Maniokan and I remember one such idol at the Little Hills reserve. People would pick up something from

the gifts scattered around the Manitohkan and then they would leave another gift or some tobacco, just as they would when collecting medicines.⁶



FIG. 9.—A sacrifice of blankets, broadcloth, etc., to a man's guardian spirit.

This Manitokanac image appears in Alanson Skinner, "Notes on the Plains Cree," *American Anthropologist New Series*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Jan. - Mar., 1914: 68-87, at page 71.

Robert Brightman gives a further description:

Offerings are sometimes left at portages or at other sites associated with the beings petitioned. Some Crees associate the practice of sacrifice most strongly with the *manitohkan*, the wood statue carved to represent the head and sometimes the upper body of a humanoid figure. The *manitohkan* is usually a representation of the *pawakan*, carved and sometimes clothed and ornamented by the dreamer. Semmens (S.C. Semmens, *Mission Life in the Northwest*. Toronto:1884:109) observed in the 1870s on the shore of the Nelson River a group of ornamented *manitohkan* sculpted from trees cut off three feet above the ground. The four Cree images I observed had

⁶ Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988: 195.

been sculpted from three- or four-foot lengths of wood and erected singly near trap-line cabins. One image was ornamented with the ubiquitous billed cap of older Cree men, a neck handkerchief, a pipe affixed to the mouth cavity, and (without irony) sunglasses. The area in front of the images was strewn with cigarettes, unopened canned goods, dishes and utensils, and, in one case, a knife.⁷

Fromhold⁸ gives this description for *Manitokan*:

“Imitation/Pretend Manito.” Not actually spirits, but effigies, images of spirits, erected as a shrine. These are normally dedicated to spirits of human form—nature spirits having nature shrines. These are normally carvings of wood in rough human form. Interestingly, they are generally ‘dressed’ in European clothing, and are often depicted with beards and mustaches. They act as a focus for concentrating prayer, much as does the Christian cross.

A Métis variation on the Manitokanac reciprocity concept is related by Leah Dorion in her illustrated children’s book *The Giving Tree: A Retelling of a Traditional Métis Story About Giving and Receiving*.⁹ This book celebrates the Métis concept of generosity. The book explains the concept of the giving tree where Métis travellers often left food packages or everyday utensils in a special tree along the trail. This was to ensure that future travellers would have adequate food supplies or necessary tools if required along the trail. The traveller could take something from the cache and in return was obliged to leave something for the next person. In this way the Métis people practiced reciprocity.

Little People, Ma-ma-kwa-se-sak or Memeguayiwahk.

The folklore of the Métis contains a varied mix of monsters, trickster spirits, “little” people and other fantastic beings—all of which are a syncretistic mix of Algonquian and Western European supernatural beings. The “Little People” or Ma-ma-kwa-se-sak (Memeguayiwahk), are human beings, only very tiny. Myths of “Little People” are found in all cultures.

The Little People or fairies in England and Scotland are called Brownies (they dress in brown) or Gruagachs¹⁰ (in Scottish Gaelic). In the north of England they are more commonly known as Hobs or Hobgoblins. Brownies are said to inhabit houses and aid in tasks around the house. They only work at night because they don’t like to be seen. Tradi-

⁷ Robert Brightman. *Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human-Animal Relationships*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993: 117.

⁸ Joachim Fromhold, *The Western Cree (Pakisimotan Wi Iniwak) Ethnography*. Calgary: Heritage Consulting, 2010: 351.

⁹ Dorion, Leah M. *The Giving Tree : A Retelling of a Traditional Métis Story About Giving and Receiving* [Laarbr kawmaekit: aen kiitwam achimook aen histwayr chi maykik pi aen ootistikook]. Written and illustrated by Leah Dorion ; Michif translation by Norman Fleury. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, 2009.

¹⁰ The Grogan, a Highland Scot Brownie helps around farms. The Doonie is a shape shifting Scottish Fairy who could take the shape of a pony or an old man or woman.

tionally people exchange small gifts of food for their help—they enjoy honey and porridge. The house elves in the “Harry Potter” movie and book series are derived from the folklore on Brownies

It is the belief of Métis and other Aboriginal people that the “Little People” live along riverbanks, the sand hills by large lakes and in caves. They like to live under rock.¹¹ The “Little People” are there to protect you; if you see one your luck will change. If you feel sad or sick, you will feel better. Sometimes they venture into urban areas, mostly to visit the Native people. They are the reason your everyday objects go missing. They are said to particularly like shiny objects and will take tin foil or spoons and other cutlery out of people’s homes. They also like to eat sweets. For this reason Métis will put out sugar, candies and tobacco as offerings to them in places they are known to frequent. If one is camping on a lake shoreline and hears noises coming from the ground at night this is believed to be the Little People working.

Brown and Brightman note:¹² “There are also spirits which are relatively benign and comical. The Mîmîkwîsiwak or Mēmēkwēsiwak (Plains Cree) occupy coulees and river banks in the prairies. Sam Moostos from Fort à la Corne, saw a Mēmēkwēsiwak standing in the water of the North Saskatchewan River and yelled with fright. When his mother came, it ducked under the water but you could still see the ripples. Others have seen them at Gordon’s Reserve, near Punnichy. They are harmless little people and friendly to humans but they can play tricks on some people who are non-believers. In the north I heard many stories of the Mēmēkwēsiwak. They are reputed to live in caves near Nistowiak Falls, at the north end of Lac la Ronge where it empties into the Churchill River, and many people had gone to see them.”

Eleanor Brass writes: “Long ago, it was said these little people were crafters of arrowheads, flint knives and stone heads for hammers. These they traded with the Indians for buffalo meat, hides, porcupine quills, and other things they needed but couldn’t get for themselves. These tiny people had mysterious powers and often played tricks on the Indians. Hence every time anything peculiar happened, they attributed it to the May-may-quay-so-wuk.”¹³

David Westfall gives the following account from Pukatawagan, Manitoba:

Hunt mentions tiny but powerful supernatural little people of the northern woods who are often malevolent. In our interviews, the elders make it clear that the little people do not like humans, but it is usually the humans’ own folly that is their undoing rather than any overt acts of the mîmîkwîsiwak, or ‘little rock people’. Adam Castel’s tale “The Women-Seekers Who tried to Follow the Mimikwisiwak into the Rocks,” for example, focuses on human frailty. The little rock people are described as having faces like a fish, with no noses. They are shiny and glisten like a fish, as well. However, there may be two categories of little people at Pukatawagan, if one is

¹¹ Albert Lightning says: “I have heard stories and read about the May-may-quay-so-wuk, known to the Cree as little people who live far under the ground, among rocky places, and under the water in marshy areas... Some say it was the task of the little people to record history and that their writings can be seen on rocks in the wilderness, yet no one can read them anymore.” In Diane Meili, *Those Who Know: Profiles of Alberta’s Native Elders*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1991: 80-81.

¹² Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988: 197.

¹³ Eleanor Brass, *Medicine Boy and Other Cree Tales*. Calgary: Glenbow Museum, n.p.

to categorize them by appearance. The other little people, the apisciðinîsak, resemble Germanic dwarfs, hairy and walking about on land. The mîmîkwîsiwak move about on the water in tiny canoes, rob people's fish nets and live in the cracks of rocks by the water. Even today, some people claim to see both kinds of little people on rare occasions.¹⁴



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¹⁴ Davis Westfall (Brandon University), "Surmounting Barriers to Understanding: Spiritual Elements and Worldviews of the Elders of Pukatawagan, Manitoba, with a Look at Teaching Application in the Community." Presentation at the *CIESC Annual Conference* (Dalhousie University/University of King's College, Halifax, May 28, 2003: 6-7.)