

## 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.

The Metis version of Manitokanac is told by Leah Dorion's children's book *The Giving Tree*.<sup>1</sup> This book tells the story of a young boy who recalls travelling with his family to a neighbouring Metis village, and his first encounter with the "giving tree." This tree had a hollowed out core that Metis people would put things in – sugar, tea, flour, mocassins, letters, etc – and people could take what they needed as long as they placed something in the hollow in return.



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

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<sup>1</sup> Leah M. Dorion. *The Giving Tree: A Retelling of a Traditional Metis Story*. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2009.



Manitokanac (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.<sup>2</sup>



**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

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman, *The Orders of the Dreamed*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988: 195.

from trees cut off three feet above the ground. The four Cree images I observed had 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.<sup>3</sup>

Fromhold<sup>4</sup> 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.

As noted above, Metis 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*.<sup>5</sup> This book celebrates the Métis concept of generosity. The book explains the concept of the giving tree where Métis travelers often left food packages or everyday utensils in a special tree along the trail. This was to ensure that future travelers would have adequate food supplies or necessary tools if required along the trail. The traveler 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.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell  
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research  
Louis Riel Institute

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Brightman. *Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human-Animal Relationships*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993: 117.

<sup>4</sup> Joachim Fromhold, *The Western Cree (Pakisimotan Wi Iniwak) Ethnography*. Calgary: Heritage Consulting, 2010: 351.

<sup>5</sup> 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.