

SPIRITUALITY, THE HIDDEN REALITY: LIVING AND LEARNING IN ANISHENABE COUNTRY¹

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Abstract / Résumé

This paper is a reflective account of life in an Aboriginal community some two hundred kilometres north of Thunder Bay, Ontario. It represents the author's attempts to learn about the spiritual life-ways through his personal experiences, and how these might be interpreted in the context of the Anishenabe culture and view of the world. The reflections on these experiences have taken place over many years, and illustrate, on the one hand, the difficulties posed for non-Natives in understanding and appreciating Aboriginal spiritual life and, on the other, the immense richness of this life and what it has to offer to the store of global philosophical knowledge.

La présente communication est un compte rendu de la vie dans une collectivité autochtone située à environ deux cents kilomètres au nord de Thunder Bay (Ontario). L'auteur explique qu'il a tenté de comprendre, par ses expériences personnelles, les aspects de la vie spirituelle de la collectivité et la façon dont ils peuvent être interprétés dans le contexte de la culture et de la vision du monde des Anishinaabe. Les réflexions issues de l'expérience personnelle de l'auteur ont été élaborées pendant de nombreuses années. Elles illustrent, d'un côté, les difficultés éprouvées par les non-Autochtones pour comprendre et apprécier la vie spirituelle des Premières Nations et, d'un autre côté, la richesse incroyable de cette vie et ce qu'elle peut offrir à la somme des connaissances philosophiques mondiales.

... the darkness made them invisible to me, but their presence remained strong as their prayers joined the mix of chants, whistles and rattles in the steamy air... There was a joining together of other spirits in common survival and common re-dedication, an intertwining in voice, experience, thought and determination. It was hard not to feel a spiritual closeness (Ross, 1992:179).

Introduction

It took quite a while for me to realize that research into human communities involves a multi-faceted process of investigation. By "multi-faceted" I mean there are many different dimensions to how we perceive "reality." In the beginning phase of my research life in northwestern Ontario it was relatively easy to talk with people about their family and kinship ties. Economic and political matters were a little more difficult to delve into, probably because these matters were more private than the more "public" domain of family relationships. In time, as people became more familiar with me and my investigation, they were more willing to talk about their hunting, incomes, or their views on leadership. It was all partly a matter of the people's familiarity with me, and with a willingness on my part to push my investigation deeper into the realities of social and material life.

At first I was content with confining my investigation to matters of the material world, and to the economic and political areas of community life. It was only later on that I began to perceive the importance of a whole other reality, a whole other dimension to life, that I had hitherto either ignored or was otherwise incapable of perceiving. I was living in the midst of an entirely different world, what you might call a "spiritual reality", and I never realized it. The following account made this point abundantly clear.

Eyes of the Thunderbird

Fieldwork requires periods of reflection. For my part, I used to go for long walks on the trails through the surrounding forest, or along the railway tracks. On one of those hot muggy days in August, in the later afternoon, I ventured out on the railway tracks with the intention of taking a short stroll to clear my mind and try to think about a few other angles to the community study that I was immersed in.

The tracks of the Canadian National Rail line out of the First Nations village of Collins (see Hedican 1986; 1990 for more details) in northwestern Ontario pursue a straight course for about a quarter of a mile, then take a sharp bend through a rock cut. I had been this way many times before, and my mind began drifting in a general sort of way about the peculiarities of

field work in anthropology, about how difficult it is at times to keep focused on what you're doing, especially when this work requires that you are to be "on duty", or at least on call, virtually twenty-four hours a day.

After several minutes of this sort of meditation, I was startled to hear a sharp crack of thunder. It seemed so close, clear and crisp, as if it were just overhead. I also thought to myself, how strange, the sky is still pretty clear. There didn't appear to be any threat of rain.

Suddenly a sharp bolt of lightning struck several yards in front of me, hitting the steel rails of the tracks. This was followed in quick succession by several more bolts, also hitting the rails, as if they were acting like a lightening rod of sorts. I ran forward, stopped, then ran again, always fearful that I would be struck at any second. It must have been the way foot soldiers felt when bombarded by artillery. You just never knew where it was coming from, or whether you would be the next victim.

It soon became apparent to me that running down the tracks was a bad idea, so I veered sharply to the left, heading for a bush trail that I remembered led back to the village. The rain started at this point, striking my back in big, splattering blobs. What was even more strange was the ferocity with which I was now attacked by mosquitoes. It was like they had received a message that this was to be their last meal, and that I was the only warm-blooded creature left in the country. The biting insects spurred me to run faster. My wet shirt laid bare my skin, and this seemed to invigorate their desire for blood. The leaves and branches along the trail whipped my face as I ran through them, leaving welts and scratches all over my upper body.

It didn't take long for the rain to stop, for the biting bugs to return to their hiding places when they are not haunting the animal world, and the sun started to break through the clouds. It all happened so quick that I began to wonder if it had occurred at all. I had all these mosquito bites, which by now were becoming very itchy, but there was hardly any outward appearance of a storm.

By the time I reached the village I could see several columns of smoke rising from some of the buildings. Over at the school room, beside the store, the chimney had been blown to bits, leaving a smouldering pile of tin in its wake. At Donald's cabin down by the lake the chimney suffered a similar fate. When I went inside to look around I found Elizabeth, his elderly mother, cowering in the corner, quite visibly shaken by the incident. Donald started to tell me that the older people in the village are all afraid because they believe that the attack was initiated by the Thunderbird, and that the lightning is directed from his eyes. This was a sign, he related, of great impending doom. Someone in the village must have done something of

immense wrong to have brought on such misfortune, and the old woman was waiting "for the other shoe to fall", so to speak.

The whole incident had unnerved me as well, because it had occurred so suddenly. Without any of the usual indications of a natural phenomenon, one could only conclude that there were supernatural forces at work here. But what was the basis for it all? The explanation about the Thunderbird seemed eminently reasonable to me, because I had never seen anything like this before.

In the lore of the Ojibwa of the Nipigon area, there are two varieties of Thunderbirds. One of them is thought to have a bad temper, and is apt to destroy people with its lightning. The other is a more benevolent sort of creature, with a milder temperament, whose thunder is much quieter. The Ojibwa believe that lightening and thunder are shot out of the eyes of the Thunderbird. In early spring when the Thunderbirds return from their homes in the south, offerings of tobacco are made to them. This is thought to placate them, so that the birds will protect the people, rather than harm them.

The nests of the Thunderbird are believed to be located atop a large mountain out in Lake Nipigon and are made of stones. The top of this mountain where the nests are is blanketed with clouds, which disguises their exact location. When hydro-electric dams were constructed on the southern parts of Lake Nipigon in the 1940s, it is also believed by the Anishenabe people that White men had learned how to capture the power of the Thunderbird. They enticed the birds to shoot their lightening down to earth, where it was captured inside pipes and converted into electrical power. This harassment of the Thunderbird caused them to destroy their large stone nests in Lake Nipigon, and the blanket of clouds disappeared from the sacred mountain.

I couldn't help reflect later on the allegoric content of this Thunderbird episode. It is hard to ignore the parallel between the subversion of the Thunderbirds' power by the larger Euro-Canadian society to feed its voracious need for hydro-electric power on the one hand, and the general subjugation of First Nations by Whites on the other. The allegory in the Thunderbird narrative and a subversion of its power is suggestively similar to the loss of autonomy and control experienced by Native people as a result of their interaction with the European newcomers. To some extent, both Aboriginal peoples and the Thunderbirds have suffered the same fate, that is, an emasculation of their ability to control their own destiny in life.

It is perhaps ironic, though, that the Thunderbird continues to haunt the Aboriginal psyche, occasionally demonstrating an ability for an awesome outburst of power. The Thunderbirds live on, beyond traditional times, in

the hidden reality of the spirit world, demonstrating their continued vitality and penchant for destructiveness for those who might have forgotten about their existence.

Nanabozo, the Sleeping Giant

The allegoric nature of Ojibwa First Nation spirituality was brought home to me on several other occasions as well. On an unusually hot day during the Spring I had gone for a stroll along a trail that winds its way along the shoreline of Collins Lake, and then circles back through a series of cabins. People were particularly active on this day, which is what happens when your energy levels have been suppressed through the long winter months of confinement. There is an exhilaration felt by the body to get outside and do things. At one cabin, for example, an older couple had just set up a wood stove in front of their cabin. Many people cook outside during the summer, an idea that helps to keep the insides of their houses cool.

Other people were raking up the winter's debris and burning the brush in small, aromatic piles of leaves and twigs. Near the end of this trail of cabins I noticed four or five men sitting on a pile of freshly peeled logs. They had begun an addition to a cabin which was now up three or four feet high. They were apparently in no hurry to work very hard. They just sat there enjoying the sunshine. I noticed several of the men were playing with small branches, stripping the bark off them, discarding it, then reaching down for another branch.

One of these fellows called me over. I recognized him and another younger man sitting beside him as men whom I knew from my tree planting days while I was a student at Lakehead University about five years before. These two knew me in a work-related context, rather than as an anthropologist doing fieldwork, so there was a certain comradery that I shared with them that was different from the relationship that I had with the others.

"Do you remember, Ed, when we used to work up at Kakebeka," motioning me over, "and you kept bugging us all the time to tell you those old stories." I chose a log to sit on, steadying it so it wouldn't roll off the pile. He turned to the other men, "He always thought we were 'b.s.ing' him, but we weren't. These were the things the old people told us when we were kids. Right?" looking over their way for a sign of agreement.

"That story about the Sleeping Giant. Remember?," he continued, "I bet you thought that I just made that up, didn't you?" The others smiled and laughed a little, which took to mean there was some "b.s.ing" that went on from time to time. The story teller made a slight facial expression of disapproval at this suggestion, but he pushed on.

"The Sleeping Giant is our Nanabozo, I think you know that, but did you know that he created the earth and human beings," he paused, taking a breath. "There are a lot of details here that would take days to tell, but we have to get back to work sometime," so he continued to relate the Nanabozo story.

Nanabozo is the Ojibwa's culture hero, the central figure in their mythology. He was the first person on earth, brother of Muheengun the wolf, part human, but with supernatural powers. The Nanabozo story can take on epic proportions, if one had the time to listen to it all, which the Aboriginal people did during their winters on the trap lines and in the hunting camps.

The gist of the story is that Nanabozo saved life on this earth, which they call Turtle Island, during the time of a great flood. All of the animals were just floating around clinging to logs and clumps of brush. Nanabozo summoned all of the aquatic animals together, and sent them down under the water to find some earth. One by one the great swimmers failed in their quest—the otter, beaver, and so on—until the lowly muskrat managed to accomplish the task. Completely exhausted, he surfaced with a small chunk of soil in his claws achieving this feat through sheer force of determination.

From this bit of earth Nanabozo fashioned a patch of ground that he magically kept enlarging until it was big enough for all of the creatures of the forest. He sent various birds off in all directions, but they kept coming back, so Nanabozo continued to increase the size of the earth until the birds no longer returned.

At this point in the story we are told that Nanabozo, having accomplished this great feat, becomes bored, and sought a companion to join him in life. He began to fashion a person like himself out of clay, which he put in a fire to harden. In the first attempt the figure was too light in colour, so he discarded it, and tried again. This second time the clay figure was burnt too much, and it is similarly thrown away. Finally, on the third attempt, a figure that is the right shade of brown was retrieved from the fire. Nanabozo breathed life into this figure, and thereby created the first human being.

After this story of creation, the epic tale unfolds in many directions. There is an episode, for example, when the waters of Lake Nipigon had dried up because it had been swallowed by giant snakes. Nanabozo battled these snakes, eventually puncturing them, one by one, until the water in the lake was restored to its original level. On another occasion he is spying on some young maidens who had gone down to the lake to fetch some water. In order to disguise himself, Nanabozo squeezes himself into a hollow log, but becomes stuck in it. As he tried to wiggle loose, the girls heard the commotion and started to investigate. They then realized that Nanabozo had plotted to peek on them. Displeased with this-unwanted intrusion on

their privacy, and finding Nanabozo stuck in his hiding place, they then proceeded to beat him about the head and poke him with pointed sticks.

One of these stories is my favourite of all, because it so aptly illustrates Nanabozo's capacity for ineptitude, despite his miraculous powers. Nanabozo, it is said, was hunting ducks one day when he managed to bag many more than he could possibly eat at one time. After building a fire and enjoying a good meal, he then proceeded to bury the ducks so that other predators wouldn't find them. The trouble was that Nanabozo needed to find them later, so he buried the ducks in the sand along a beach with their feet just barely sticking up.

As luck would have it a fox had been secretly watching Nanabozo and was therefore aware of his contrivance to hide the ducks. One by one the fox ate these ducks, but being more clever than Nanabozo, the duck's feet were placed back in the sand to make it appear as if the cache was still in tact. Now, since Nanabozo did not need to eat very often, he would come by the beach periodically to check on his ducks. Seeing that they were still in their original up right position he assumed, of course, that his next meal was still safely tucked away. When the time came to enjoy his quarry, though, he soon found out that he had been tricked. Now, hungry and angry, he stomped around berating himself for his stupidity.

The story of the adventures of Nanabozo is an epic tale, akin to Homer's *Iliad* describing the siege of Troy, or the *Odyssey* recounting Ulysses' wanderings in the ancient world. I am led to believe, though, that the entertainment value of the Nanabozo narrative is considered by the Ojibwa to be of secondary importance to its moral or instructive content. In addition, what is especially peculiar about Nanabozo as a heroic figure are his personal foibles. He is clumsy around women, and possesses an almost humorous inability to see the faults in his grand designs and plans. Nanabozo has abilities which are prodigious in their magnitude, yet at times exhibits a naivety that is more child-like than which would be expected from one with such talents.

In one sense the Nanabozo epic is about two narratives running side by side. There is the "surface" narrative of Nanabozo's life and adventures. This narrative is entertaining in its own right, filled with all the ingredients of a good story, with humour, pathos, and irony. But under these surface manifestations of the narrative is the moral ingredient about proper attitudes and behaviour, about how people should live their life in the northern bush. For example, even the best hunter should not take himself too seriously. We are all prone to make mistakes. To correct them by altering our behaviour is the key to success. Humour takes the hard edge off the reality of the hunting way of life with its precarious food supply. Above all, an

arrogant hunter is doomed to failure, subjecting himself, his family, and all those other people who depend on him to possible starvation and misery. In an allegoric sense, we are all Nanabozo and should learn to live like him.

Bear Stories

It wasn't too long after this recounting of the life and times of Nanabozo that a young man, a student, came to talk to me about some of the things that happened to him when he was a child. There was the usual feeling out process, to ascertain how sensitive I was to Native beliefs and culture. He talked about growing up in the woods, in a small log cabin, with his younger brothers and sisters. For whatever reason, these children were raised by their grandparents, and there seemed to be no end to the supernatural phenomenon that occurred in and around their cabin. The student's grandfather was apparently a shaman, who, I gathered from the young man's story, was responsible for attracting these "other than usual" occurrences.

The children were constantly told to be on guard for strange creatures, for people who might look at them in an odd way, or for objects out of the usual that one might find along the path to their cabin. This was all pretty general stuff up to now, but the student, leaning closer to me, became more serious.

"One evening all of us, my grandparents and brothers and sisters, were just sitting around after supper when all of a sudden a large ball of fire, or lightening, burst through the front door of the cabin. We were all horrified, and scampered back to the inner walls as the ball whirled about, making several turns, before it disappeared through the window. We just stood there for a long time, afraid to move," he explained. He accompanied his story with dramatic gestures, whirling his hands around in circles, to depict the fire ball.

You could tell that he was quite sincere in relating this story, because even in the retelling of it his eyes revealed a certain shocked look in them, as if he were now reliving the event. The strange occurrences, he related further, were typical of the so-called "medicine fights" that his grandfather was involved in with other shaman in distant locals. Shortly after the fire ball incident, his grandfather encountered a large bear, walking upright towards him down the trail to their cabin. In hushed tones he wanted me to know that this was no "real" bear, because when a bear walks upright like that for a long period of time, you know that there is the spirit of another human being inside—the spirit of an evil medicine man.

"My grandfather attacked this bear creature with an axe," he said, making a downward chopping motion with his hand; to make the point, "splitting his skull open. We learned later that this-old man in a far away

village died about the same time, so that was probably him who was sending us this bad medicine," he related, again with a lowered voice and serious tone. I have always found this matter of the role of the bear in the northern Aboriginal psyche an interesting phenomenon. In Collins, I used to wonder why bear meat was not greatly desired, even though, in economic terms, bears provide the highest proportion of edible meat per animal next to the moose. Although they are fairly numerous in the Lake Nipigon area, bears are not usually hunted, but are shot when they become a nuisance to the village. While some people claim to eat bear meat, others say they avoid it because a skinned bear looks too much like a human being. There is also the idea expressed that bear meat should be smoked because if it is eaten fresh it will cause diarrhoea. The idea here is not that the bear meat itself causes this ailment, it is because the bear is considered a sacred animal and, accordingly, one should avoid eating too much of such creatures. While it is not readily admitted, the attribution of anthropomorphic characteristics to the bear could be taken as evidence of the widespread magico-religious mystique associated with the bear in the northern hemisphere. In a similar vein, I also occasionally saw large bear skins stretched out on frames outside people's cabins which, since the skins are not sold or used as rugs, I took to be an attempt to ward off other bears.

This mystique associated with bears in northern areas is probably a reflection of the fact that both bears and humans occupy a similar ecological niche—they are both omnivores, scavenging sorts of creatures—that are apt at times to come into conflict with one another. This could happen, for example, at berry picking time in the fall, or during the fish runs in the spring. Bears are also thought to be very intelligent creatures, which might account for the notion that bears and people are "brothers" in some respects.

I had my own encounter with a couple of bears which I found quite unnerving, yet instructive as to their nature. It was a habit of mine to take time away from the life in the village by going on short hunting trips. This was in the fall time when people were out in the bush wandering around, and so were the bears. I would borrow a .22 rifle and head out to the stands of deciduous trees to hunt for partridge. The leaves had mostly fallen by now, although the weather was still warm. As I walked along the trail I listened intently for the faint rustling sound of the birds feet as they scratched around looking for things to eat. Off in the distance you could hear the loud "thwap, thwap", like an out board motor, as male partridge beat their wings against a log, as part of their mating ritual.

All of a sudden I heard a different noise. It was coming toward me, softly, sounding sort of fluffy, "woosh, woosh". I looked up just in time to see a huge snowy owl, with a wing span which seemed about four or five feet,

trying to dive bomb me. It's large claws dangled dangerously below it, opened as if to grab hold of the top of my skull. I dove face first onto the ground, and quickly turned to see this large lumbering bird making its slow ascent over the trees behind me. I was never too sure whether it was just trying to scare me, like warding off an intruder, or if it really meant to do me some harm. I suspected that this huge bird was quite capable of doing whatever it pleased with the top of my head.

It took me several hours of strolling around to shake off the effects of this strange encounter. You can't help looking over your shoulder to see if something else was coming at you from behind. It was probably for this reason that I wasn't paying too much attention in front of me to see where I was going. At one point the trail made a sharp L-turn on an elevated patch of ground overlooking a large lake below. Quite suddenly I was nose-to-nose with a mother bear and her cub. I knew instinctively that this situation meant a lot of trouble for me as the mother bear would do anything to protect her offspring.

I looked down at my .22 rifle and realized that this was a pretty useless weapon in such a situation. Nevertheless I quickly formulated a plan to entice the bear if possible to rear up on its hind quarters, exposing her underbelly, so I could get a shot off in the mid-section. It all happened so fast that the bear apparently still didn't know where I was. It just sniffed around, in an agitated fashion, wondering where this strange smell was coming from. For myself I was just frozen stiff, knowing that the slightest movement could spell disaster. If I turned and ran the bear would surely dart out after me, and they can run faster than most people, I am told. Even though the bear was no more than a few feet away from me I don't think she ever actually saw me. She just sniffed around some more, and eventually began to make a slow descent down into the valley below towards the lake. I could do nothing more than just stare at them in amazement, with my feet rooted in the ground. I was thinking all along that if I could just keep my cool, without panicking, the bear would find no harm in me. For whatever reason it worked, much to my relief, even to this day.

The older generation of Anishenabe (Ojibwa), if they met a bear in the bush, would stop and start to talk to it. They would address the bear as "our grandfather", and then watch for movements of the bear's ears and head as an indication that it understood. It is thought that if a bear were addressed properly it would no longer be angry, and would release its hold on one with the appropriate supplicatory remarks. The bones of a bear were shown great respect. Bear skulls were occasionally decorated with ribbons and paint, and hung in trees. Smaller bones were utilized as charms or as

instruments in medicinal rites in which foreign objects, implanted by sorcery, were sucked from the body.

There are also stories about people who had certain special dreams about bears. This was at the time of a young person's medicine dream or, in more general terms, of the *manitou-kauso*, or vision quest. The bear would appear to this person and say that it would be its guardian in life. The guardian would look after the person, protecting them from harm and giving them special powers. This bear-spirit would also say that the young person must show respect for the bear and never kill it. At the end of these instructions the bear would then enter into the body of the dreamer. As the young person grew up they would, therefore, believe that there was a bear hidden inside their body.

This "bear-in-the-body" phenomenon, however, could cause great distress. If an evil conjurer wanted to injure such a person, say for purposes of revenge, the bear inside the person could be poisoned, causing sickness or death. A hollow bear bone could also be used to try and suck out this sickness, but it probably would not be successful if the evil conjurer's medicine was too strong.

The Ojibwa of the northern forests are a peaceful people, generally, and are not usually prone to outward acts of aggression or violence. One is at first struck by their patience, laughter and self-control. It is common to find people freely sharing their possessions, or families cooperating in all kinds of ventures. They do this with good humour, and a genuine feeling of love for their fellow human beings. It is this "caring-for-others" attitude that I personally found so remarkable among the First Nations people that I met in the Lake Nipigon area. However, there are also certain other deeper psychological realities of Aboriginal life.

In terms of a social-structural understanding of northern Ojibwa life, one is apt to wonder about how the problems of latent hostilities that all human societies face are dealt with if no overt manifestation of these troubles are allowed in face to face interaction. The cordiality in interpersonal relations that is so evident in every day life, one suspects, has a counterpart in the deeper functioning of social affairs. If open hostility is discouraged, and self-restraint the expected rule of social behaviour, then it would be reasonable to seek an indirect mechanism for the discharge of aggressive tendencies.

It is this indirect means of venting, or resolving, strains in the social fabric of the community which is responsible, I believe, for the people's resort to supernatural avenues for settling interpersonal problems. This would provide, then, a covert and indirect, yet nonetheless aggressive means for evening up such personal slights as insults, gossip, and various

other causes of latent hostilities. The Ojibwa people are not allowed by their moral code to openly quarrel with others, but magic and sorcery are socially sanctioned institutions for venting anger in lieu of overt physical aggression.

Ruth Landes, an anthropologist who lived with members of the Manitou Rapids Band in the 1930s, wrote that their Chief was "so feared that few shamans dared to enter shamanistic combat with him when he insulted them with slighting remarks." Landes continues:

Influential persons who are known or suspected to be sorcerers are recognized in more general ways than in being deferred to professionally. People cower physically before them, shrink away, hush their talk, straighten their faces lest the shaman suspect some intended offense in their behavior... One boy became paralysed shortly after the shaman chose to be offended by his careless laugh. It is perfectly consistent with this attitude that laughing, particularly on the part of women, is not loud but light. Paralysis, incontinence, twisted mouth, and the windigo insanity are sent by shamans who have been offended by casual behaviour. The shaman's exquisite sensitiveness to slights, real or imaginary, is intelligible to the people because it is only an accentuation of the sensitiveness felt by every person (1937:113-114).

Of course this covert use of magical force raises all sorts of other problems, maybe more than it actually solves, because one can never be sure who is or is not in the process of poisoning or otherwise harming you in some way. Any injury or ill health is apt to lead to a search for previous social slights that could have triggered the hostilities of another person. Under the masks of cordiality could lurk the evil intent of a sub rosa conjurer. The belief that other human beings could do you some harm in a covert way could lead to all sorts of unconscious hostilities in human relationships. One remembers dreams, and these might be gone over in meticulous detail in a search for the clues or signs that one's inner privacy is being invaded for malevolent intentions. This can obviously lead to an abnormal concern with personal introspection on the one hand, and latent suspicion of people on the other.

There is no easy solution, in social-structural terms, to this sort of problem in human society, except for people to try to keep on good terms with their neighbours. In fact, this could well be a pretty fair functionalist explanation for the resolution of interpersonal conflicts in societies, such as northern hunting and gathering ones, in which cordial social relations could be a very prerequisite of survival. The use of conjurers to fight ones' battles removes an interpersonal hostility above the level of the everyday natural

world, into a new, etherial plane of existence. The battles there are unpredictable, even capricious, in their outcome, making people wary of offending others. Cordiality and cooperation is thus promoted below, while epic magical contests are waged above. Both the gods and people would appear to be happy with the continuance of this arrangement.

Exploring the Hidden Reality

Fieldwork involves penetrating different levels of reality. Perhaps the word "level" is not an entirely appropriate term, because it implies some sort of hierarchy. Probably what I mean is that there exists a hidden dimension to fieldwork that may be only partially perceived and partly experienced by the ethnographer. Even in a community like Collins the people themselves would appear to have different perceptions of the supernatural world, depending on such factors as age, personal experiences, what was taught to them by their Elders, and the like. As with other cultural phenomenon, though, there is no doubt a sharing within the community of supernatural knowledge.

Any investigation on the part of a fieldworker into this hidden dimension of people's lives is a more difficult matter than more conventional research into the material and social parts of life. People may not want to appear unsophisticated, superstitious, or backward to the university educated researcher. People may also wish to guard their inner views on supernatural matters lest they be open to ridicule. These factors, and more, can hamper research into the supernatural world.

It is as if life exists, or is experienced, on two separate planes of reality—the mental or spiritual, and the physical. This "hidden world" of spiritual beliefs and symbolic systems for most is apt to be only dimly perceived, if at all, by the researcher. Normal methods of investigation, such as the interview, might be all but useless, as people will probably shy away from direct questioning procedures. Much more tact is required, usually involving casual conversation. This is what occurred during my conversation with Steve concerning the "cheebuy" (ghost) incident. There was a curiosity on this fellow's part about Ed Pigeon's (the previous owner of my cabin) ghost, and whether I had seen it. Perhaps he only wanted to know if, by seeing the ghost myself, that I was able to participate in his own hidden, spiritual reality.

Steve had stayed in my cabin for several nights before this conversation about ghosts, when I was away buying groceries at Savant Lake, and I felt at the time that he was trying to reciprocate in some way. There are always matters that you wish you would have pursued further in your fieldwork, and this is one of them. I wasn't really interested in "cheebuy", in fact I was a

bit concerned that if I started to see Ed Pigeon's apparition floating around my cabin at night this could preoccupy me in some way that could ruin my fieldwork.

I realized that I was on touchy ground here. There was this desire to participate in the Aboriginal world, but I was mainly trying to restrict the investigation to material or physical matters—economics, leadership and the like. Reflecting back, there was a separate reality out there that I probably didn't want to get involved in, as a way of insulating myself, of allowing some things in, but keeping others out. I didn't want to "go Native", and wanted to prevent an erosion of my academic, theoretical, ethnographic modes of thinking. This protectionism was something that I wasn't usually aware was going on at a conscious level.

The degree to which we are able to allow ourselves to take chances in fieldwork is all probably a personal matter, but I suspect that those who are better at it are willing to cast aside the insulating blanket of their own cultural constructs in order that they may be in a more opportune position to experience the "other reality" that is in the minds of the people among whom they are living. It wasn't very often that people in Collins would come forward on their own, as Steve did, to volunteer information to me, especially on such a sensitive matters as ghosts and the after life. Don't get me wrong, for I didn't avoid the subject altogether. We did talk about Pigeon's ghost for some time, but only in a light, humorous sort of way. Why Steve should think that I would see this ghost over behind the wood stove, I cannot say. Perhaps over the last several nights he had seen the apparition, and it was near the stove that he had witnessed it. If this was the case, it apparently didn't startle Steve enough to scare him away from my cabin. When I think about it now, the ghost of Ed Pigeon was probably something that Steve would actually expect to see—if he wasn't there that might be considered unusual. Maybe, too, others had seen the ghost as well, such as Sogo Sabosans who actually owned the cabin and was letting me stay there. In all, I did feel a certain camaraderie with Steve for this sharing of experience, even though these "sharings" were not based all that much on a mutual understanding of each other's concepts of spirituality.

For that matter, I don't even know if a literal translation of the Ojibwa "cheebuy" as "ghost" is an appropriate juxtaposition of ideas. It implies a mutual, overlapping of conceptual territory that I should not presume actually exists. In an earlier period of anthropology, back in the 1960s, there were all these studies in cognitive anthropology, or "ethno-science" as it was sometimes called, that postulated huge difficulties in transposing the "conceptual domains" from one culture to another. To "get into the head's" of Aboriginal people was supposedly the goal here, but in the end it seemed

like an intellectually impossible and fruitless task. You can ask all the questions you want, but it doesn't necessarily bring the conceptual world of the researcher and the Aboriginal person any closer together.

These sorts of conceptual difficulties, of course, also bring to the forefront the larger philosophical, or methodological issues about how one perceives "reality" in one's own culture, never mind anyone else's. Handle this conundrum any way you want, but for my purpose I am willing to begin by conceding, first, that life takes place on two planes of existence. On one plane is the physical world which we perceive through our senses. We smell the freshness of wind blowing off a northern lake, we see a hawk drifting overhead, or feel the ache in our bones caused by the winter's cold.

The mental plane can be every much as "real", even when it comes to sensing sounds, sights and feelings, but it seems there is a wider scope involved in this other plane of existence. We can travel, for example, through time and space in our thoughts and dreams in ways not possible in the ordinary physical plane. Our imagination allows for the construction of a reality without bounds in the ordinary, mundane sense of life. It is a reality without the normal constraints and boundaries, without the limitations that restrict us down on earth. In our minds, we can become the soaring hawk, or the breeze off the lake.

The question here, having to do with research in Collins, is about understanding the Aboriginal concept of the spiritual plane, and how it might have evolved over time the way it did. In other words, is there a relationship between adaptation in the physical world of the hunter-gatherer life, and the evolution of mental constructs whose changes could work in concert with the adaptive process to the physical mode of existence? A reasonable assumption here is that the two planes of existence do not constitute dual, separate realities, but an intertwining of the physical and mental, where changes in one circle back to effect changes in the other.

In this light spirituality and the wide corpus of symbolic, belief systems work in concert with one another. It is not just that one world is "real" and the other is not, for the physical and the mental are both constructs of a human mind imbued with the shapes and forms of cultural life. Rupert Ross, a lawyer in the Kenora district of northwestern Ontario, has expressed the matter in a particularly cogent manner. "To many Native people," he writes, "the spiritual plane is not simply a sphere of activity or belief which is separate from the pragmatics of everyday life; instead, it seems to be a context from within which most aspects of life are seen, defined and given significance" (1992:54-55).

Ross' exploration of "Indian reality" in northern Ontario would suggest that the emergence of this reality in historical terms can be understood as

an aspect of survival in a hunter-gatherer context. In other words, traditional times were survival times; survival by small family groups alone in the wilderness. Life in the boreal forest must have been a perilous existence in many ways with food shortages, and even starvation, a shaper of the Aboriginal person's reality. This reality in traditional times, when people lived and died depending on their own skills, luck and fate, can therefore be understood as providing the conditions in the way the mind must work in order to enhance a survival strategy.

Life for the Cree and Ojibwa in the northern forests was lived to a large extent at the mercy of the elements. Long winter snow storms could prevent hunting, forcing people to huddle together in their tents, becoming ever colder and weaker. Summer was a more abundant time, but rain storms could curtail hunting and fishing as well. Aboriginal people lived at the mercy not only of the elements, but furthermore, at the mercy of the spirits which controlled these elements. Religious ideology and mode of production are therefore interrelated phenomenon in subarctic Native life (i.e., Hedican, 1995:115-121; Ridington, 1988; Rogers, 1962; Tanner, 1979). The "master of the animals", for example, gives and takes away the availability of game depending on the capricious nature of rituals of respect and a proper observance of hunting etiquette.

In this cultural and ecological context knowledge of the spiritual or mental plane of existence is probably more crucial to a group's survival than abilities in the physical realm, such as tracking skills, or knowledge of fish and animal habits. For all of a hunter's skill is useless if it cannot be applied; if the animal spirits refuse to release the game for human consumption. In an existential sense, therefore, it is not the spirit world that is dependent upon the world of physical reality, but the other way around. Life in the subarctic forest is predicated on an ability to interact in propitious ways with the supernatural entities that make human life possible.

It is probably because of this fact of life, that people lived at the mercy of the spirit world, which would make people guarded about any discussions with an outsider concerning the supernatural world. The risks of upsetting the "balance of nature", of displeasing the spirits, are too great when survival is at stake. Of course there is humanitarian aid that makes starvation in northern Canada unlikely today, but still, there is a strong tendency for culturally-defined views of the universe to endure, propelled forward by the so-called "weight of tradition."

Note

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