OJIBWA THUNDERBIRDS: PERSONS OF POWER

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Introduction

From rock art to automobiles, Thunderbirds have been a symbol of power in North America from ancient times to modern. Through appropriation of the term, "Thunderbird" has become a household word for most Westerners, but few of us are aware of its aboriginal significance. Westerners' exploitation and transformation of this Native American term to serve as a symbol of technological power, although somewhat humorous, exemplifies the all too serious and destructive impact of Western civilization on Native American life-ways, identity and self-sufficiency. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the original sense of the power of Thunderbirds, I will examine them in the context of a particular Native American culture: the Anishnabeg, known to Westerners as the Ojibwa (Chippewa), Ottawa, Potawatomi, Menominee and other Algonkian-speaking groups. A survey of the literature on the Anishnabeg indicates that for the original inhabitants of the woodlands, Thunderbirds, and their particular powers, play a prominent role in the lives of all. This study will present a profile of the Thunderbirds, as portrayed in academic and indigenous sources, and their role in the experiential world of the Anishnabeg, where they are still both powerful forces in the cosmos and living "persons" in a network of social relations. To make this cognitive leap, my first step will be to situate the Thunderbirds within the context of Anishnabe cosmology. Secondly, my discussion will explore the multifaceted character of Thunderbirds and their special attributes. Finally, I shall survey the social functions of Thunderbirds, both their role in

myths as a model for ideal social relationships and, more importantly, the ways in which individuals and groups relate to them as "persons".

For several reasons, however, the reader must be prepared at the outset for considerable variation and individual interpretation. Since my sources include the statements of Anishnabeg from the early part of this century to the present, variations reflect their different experiences of the changing social and physical environment of post-reservation ways of life. These differences have been facilitated by the fluidity of the Anishnabe worldview. As Diamond Jenness (1935: 32) observed of the Parry Islanders: «One may gather, indeed, many statements about these supernatural powers that seem to contradict one another, for there are no fixed doctrines to which all the people have given their consent». Furthermore, with regard to two apparently distinct notions of the Thunderbirds, he notes: «the same Indians will subscribe to both notions without remarking any contradiction». Casting aside the baggage of "logical" contradiction, then, let us proceed to the cosmological orientation of the Anishnabeg (*idem*: 37).

Cosmology

In common with many Native American traditions, the Anishnabeg conceive of the cosmos as spherical in form, bisected by a plane which is the surface of the earth (often portrayed as a huge turtle floating in a vast ocean). Above and below the earth plane are the realms of the upperworld and the underworld. On the horizontal plane, the Persons or Winds of the Four Directions inhabit the outer extremities of an equidistant cross. While the individual may, of course, move across the surface of the earth, during the course of great or small ritual activities, he or she remains in a central position in relation to the cosmic sphere, the point at which a "cylindrical opening," "Ever-growing Tree" or "Axis Mundi" intersects vertically with the horizontal plane, thus connecting the upper and lower worlds.

The realms of the upperworld and underworld are inhabited by deities whose powers increase *in ratio* to their remoteness from earth. The relative position of the Thunderbirds is at the upper reaches of the sky domain, surpassed only by the Sun and Moon or Great Spirit. All sources agree that, as exalted sky deities, one of their most important functions is to maintain peace on earth by battling the equally powerful, and potentially dangerous, Underworld *Manitog* (1), either the Underwater Feline, or more commonly, the Great Horned Serpent.

The battle between Thunderbirds and Serpents is the theme of several well-known legends. In one, a young Underwater Feline put his tail over the rim of a canoe in which three girls were gathering rushes. Fortunately, one of the girls had received a blessing from a Thunderer, which enabled her to cut off his tail with her paddle. The girls were saved, but the young *manito* continued to harass people in the area, despite the admonitions of his father, Great Feline. Finally, a young man «who had received a blessing from a Thunder determined to destroy the monster. His Thunder *manito* smashed up all the rocks in the vicinity and killed the evil *manito*» (Jenness 1935: 45-46). In another legend, the water serpent *Nzagima* kidnapped a young girl. The people gathered together and called upon the Thunderers, who, in a dramatic battle of thunder and lightning, destroyed *Nzagima* and rescued the girl, who subsequently became a great medicine woman (Jenness 1935: 35-36).

The battle of the Powers Above with the Powers Below is not merely a legendary motif. It has a more immediate significance for many Anishnabeg. Irving Hallowell noted that the battle between the Thunderbirds and Underground *Manitog* was an integral part of the «behavioral environment» of the people of Berens River. When the Saulteaux hear thunder, it is the Thunderbirds «pursuing monster snakes that live on the earth» (Hallowell 1942: 5-6). Diamond Jenness (1935: 35) recorded that for the Ojibwa of Parry Island, when lightning struck a nearby tree, «it is a Thunder-*manito* driving away some water-serpent that is stealing through the ground to attack the man or his family».

Although some Western observers and some Anishnabeg portray the battle between the Thunderbirds and the Underworld *Manitos* as a contest between good and evil (Skinner 1911: 33; Vastokas & Vastokas 1973: 100, 103; Smith 1990), others assert that the relationship is not comparable to dichotomous Christian conceptions, and that the Upperworld and Underworld *Manitog* did not embody good and evil principles, respectively, until the Anishnabeg adopted Christian elements into their worldview (Jenness 1935: 39-40; Brasser 1976: 25; Philips 1989: 58; Smith 1990: 240).

The latter conclusion finds support in the fact that the Underworld *Manitog* are not consistently destructive to humans. Several myths portray the Underworld *Manitog* as assistants to humans in various endeavours, from success in war (Jenness 1935: 98)(2) to the provision of potent medicines (Densmore 1929: 182; Overholt & Callicott 1982: 108). In fact, many sources agree that the Underworld *Manitog* have a particular association with healing and medicine (Jenness 1935: 39 [3]; Brasser 1982: 22; Philips 1984: 24; 1989: 58), although due to their great power and unpredictability, the acquisition of their medicinal properties might entail some danger to one's self or relatives (Jenness 1935: 40; Smith 1990: 210, 211, 213).

In the context of the relationship between Sky and Earth, the Anishnabeg associate the Underworld *Manitog* with the female deity Earth (4). In this capacity, they control the fertility of plants, animals and fish, and by extension, the availability of these forms of sustenance to the Anishnabeg (Skinner 1911: 32; Jenness 1935: 40). The Thunderbirds, on the other hand, are associated with the masculine power of the sun as well as all airborne species (Skinner 1911: 30; Paper 1989: 61). Thus, the Anishnabeg may make offerings to the Thunderbirds to obtain success in hunting fowl of all kinds (Vecsey 1983: 75).

Jenness (1935: 40) notes that the negative attitude of most Parry Island Ojibwa toward the Underworld *Manitog* was influenced by both the latter's association with the Midewiwin society, of which there were but a few practitioners on the island, and Christian attitudes towards snakes and women:

> One old man, John Manatuwaba, even identified it (the Great Serpent) with the earth-*manido* of the *mede* society, *Nokomis*

("Grandmother," a title that to Georgian Bay Ojibwa outside the Midewiwin society signifies the moon); for he claimed that the serpent *manido* lived under the earth, and through the many subordinate *manidos* at its command controlled or guarded all the trees and plants. The majority of the Parry Islanders, however, have never seen the *Midewiwin* rites, they believed the society existed primarily for witchcraft and that the *mede* was above all else a sorcerer. Any *manido*, therefore, that the *mede* claimed to employ was by that fact evil. Then Christianity, with its teaching of the "fall of man" through the serpent, put its seal on this interpretation, which is the most prevalent today on Parry Island.

James Redsky (1972: 39) of Shoal Lake, however, a former Midewiwin priest who became a Presbyterian elder, incorporates the Christian motif of the "fall of man" through the "sin" of the serpent and the original woman in his narration of the Midewiwin creation myth. Although a detailed analysis of the status of female and related deities is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems likely that their association with the concept of "evil," as in moral corruption, is a post-contact phenomenon (5).

In another context, the Underworld *Manitog* are the food source of the Thunderbirds, and the latters' pursuit of the former is merely the act of hunting game (Morrisseau 1965: 11; Smith 1990: 156, 180, 181). The game taken by the Anishnabe hunter willingly gives itself for food if the hunter demonstrates the appropriate respectful attitude and performs the rituals which ensure its regeneration (Overholt & Callicott 1982: 146). The Underworld *Manitog*, however, do not freely give themselves to the Thunderbirds for game, nor do they respond to the ritual overtures of humans in a consistent manner (Smith 1990: 262, 263). This is probably because, like the moon and females in general (Jenness 1935: 96), they have the power to regenerate themselves. In the case of Underworld *Manitog*, their power of regeneration decreases their motivation to comply with the rules governing reciprocal relations with humans (Smith 1990: 242, 243).

On the other hand, the Underworld *Manitog* are not totally beyond need of interaction with the forces of the Upperworld. Their domain, both in lakes and underground is dependant for replenishment on the rains brought by the Thunderbirds. If we

take into consideration the association of the Underworld *Manitog* with the female Earth and the Upperworld *Manitog* with the male sky, then the struggle may be viewed in terms of cosmic copulation, in which the death of the serpent or feline is the seed of rebirth. Indeed, several scholars note that one of the Thunderbirds' functions is ensuring fertility through life-giving rain (Brasser 1982: 22; Philips 1989: 56). The corollary of the foregoing observation is that while the Underworld *Manitog* are hibernating underground in winter (Redsky 1972: 121), no growth takes place.

My conclusions with regard to the relationship between the Thunderbirds and the Underworld *Manitog* must remain tentative in this brief discussion. Although incompletely, we have seen that its imagery is complex and rich, allowing for a multitude of possible meanings. As I noted previously, however, the vertical tripartite division, which is the stage of the Thunderbird/Serpent drama, is only one dimension of the cosmic sphere. The Underworld *Manitog* dwell deep in lakes and within the underground veins of Mother Earth (Overholt & Callicott 1982: 87). The Thunderbirds, on the other hand, who dwell in the Sky domain, are related to the Persons of the Four Corners that form the horizontal cross, although the relationship is by no means clear and consistent.

Some scholars say that the Thunderbirds «lived in the four quarters and were sometimes thought of as messengers of the Four Winds» (Vecsey 1983: 75). Most sources agree, however, that the home of the Thunderbirds is in the West in the Land of the Dead where Nanabush resides (Jenness 1935: 30, 69; Benton-Banai 1979: 18, 21, 25;), or, more specifically, on the Western Mountain, which is surrounded by water beyond the surface of the earth (Barret 1911: 363, 364; Overholt & Callicott 1982: 97). Ted Brasser (1976: 25) notes that the Thunderbirds are portrayed in the western quarter on a Menominee war bundle painting. Jordan Paper (1989: 60) comments that the Thunderbird may even be «a semi-theriomorphic symbol of the West Wind». On the other hand, due to the avian nature of Thunderbirds, they are sometimes said to reside in the south, following the migratory patterns of birds (Jenness 1935: 35; Hallowell 1960: 32; Morrisseau 1965: 4).

These differences may be explained by individual interpretations and experiences, by the differences in environmental conditions and seasonal economic patterns of the Anishnabeg in various locations, and by the multi-faceted character of these powerful *manitog*. For instance, in the Northern Great Lakes region, thunderstorms generally approach from the West during the summer months. If one is considering the Thunderbirds as Thunder, they obviously come from the west. If, on the other hand, one is intent on observing the proper time to leave the winter camp to engage in whatever spring activities are practiced in that area, then one is likely to note the simultaneous return of birds from the south and the beginning of the season of thunderstorms. In the following section, I shall discuss these various aspects of the Thunderbirds, their character and special attributes.

Character and special attributes

Like all *manitog*, metamorphosis is one of the fundamental characteristics of Thunderbirds. Although «appearance cannot be taken as a permanent and distinguishable trait of the Thunder Birds» (Hallowell 1960: 34), they are frequently described as exceptionally large predatory birds, resembling hawks and eagles. Lightning flashes from their eyes, their voices roar and the flapping of their wings causes wind and rain. Some Anishnabeg have seen Thunderbirds in this form. Redsky (1972: 111) relates that «many people at Shoal Lake - saw a huge bird glide by which was - white on the underside and black on the top», and was followed by a thunderstorm. Jenness (1935: 37) recounts an incident in which some boys climbed to the top of a summit and found an unusual young white bird. One boy touched the bird and received an electric shock. Another boy touched the bird's closed eyes with a stick, which then split down the middle. The boys then fled, knowing it was a Thunderbird, and as they expected, soon a thunderstorm was upon them.

Hallowell (1960: 32) reports that a boy ran out of his tent during a severe thunderstorm and saw a strange bird on a rock.

He ran back inside and told his elders that he had seen a Thunderbird. His assertion was met with skepticism, since it was rare to see a Thunderbird in this manner, but it was accepted when the boy's description was the same as a Thunderbird one of the elders had seen in a vision. The rarity of such sightings, however, does not reflect a disbelief in the physical reality of the Thunderbirds. On the contrary, in most areas inhabited by the Anishnabeg, there are one or more Thunderbird nests, consisting of large circular piles of rocks located on remote high places (Hallowell 1960: 32). Archaeologists estimate that a nest at Wanipigow Lake dates from around 500 C.E. (Tacon 1990: 27). Contemporary Ojibwa continue to attest to their habitation (Smith 1990: 163). Redsky (1972: 110) has seen «red lightning flashing around the nest» at night, and inexplicably large animal skulls left in them by the Thunderbirds (6).

In the context of the Thunderbirds' relation to thunderstorms, however, they are often referred to simply as "Thunder," or the "Thunderers" (*Animikeek*, as opposed to *pinisewak*: Thunderbirds). This variety of terms has led one scholar to assume that the two terms refer to separate classes of *manitog* (Brasser 1976: 25), and another to be confounded by the difference between «invisible thunders« and «visible birds» (Jenness 1935: 37). To the Anishnabeg, however, behaviour, not appearance, is the determinant of identity.

Some Anishnabeg link the avian form of the Thunderbirds to their Thunder aspect: the Thunderbirds reside in the thunderclouds, from which they "shoot" their thunderbolts and sound their call. Redsky (1972: 111) reports that, during a storm, his father shot bullets in the air «when the Thunderbirds were too low» to make them fly higher. For others, the thunderclouds are the Thunderbirds, as in the case of one Manitoulin Islander who said that «if one looks closely at thunderheads one can see the wings and the head of the *pinisewak*» (Smith 1990: 158).

In keeping with observable differences in the behaviour of thunder and lightning, the Anishnabeg name different Thunderers according to particular attributes (7). Jenness (1935: 32, 35) and Skinner (1921: 49-50) record the names of twelve Thunderers, although neither the number nor the

particular attributes are universal among the Anishnabeg. Smith (1990: 155) found that a contemporary Manitoulin Islander knew of eight Thunderers who were virtually identical to those in Jenness' list. Following are several of the names which seem to be common to all three sources (8):

Ninamidabines: "the chief or leader who sits quietly and gives orders".
Nigankwam: "the leader in the clouds; the first Thunder to come in the spring".
Beskinekkwam: "Thunder that is going to strike; that gives a loud crack and sets fire to trees and houses".
Besreudang: "the "echoer aloft"; that comes from the highest (or blackest) clouds and marks the end of a storm".
Aiwitawewidang: "the scout or Look Around that goes all around in the sky".

The distinct characteristics of these Thunderers is evident in the story of the battle with *Nzagima* at Niagara Falls. Like all Underworld *Manitog*, *Nzagima* loves to sleep on the shore on clear, sunny days when no Thunderers are likely to be out hunting. To catch the sleeping Serpent off guard, «the medicine-men chose *Biangukkwam*, the second great Thunder who operates from a cloudless sky, to be their champion and lead the other Thunders to battle» (Jenness 1935: 36). *Biangukkwam* was able to surprise *Nzagima* with a lightning bolt from the clear sky. After a number of the other Thunderers took a crack at *Nzagima*, *Beskinekkwam* was called in to finish off the victim with fire .

The character of the Thunderbirds, and their function in the cosmic scheme of the world, give rise to two aspects of the every day lives of the Anishnabeg over which the Thunderbirds have and confer special power. The first of these is control of the weather. Redsky (1972: 112) recounts an incident in which he and his son were a long distance from their canoe when they saw storm clouds approaching. He took out his pipe and smoked to the Thunderers, asking that they withhold the rain until he and his son had reached the canoe. He describes the result of this procedure:

> Above us in the sky you would have thought that someone had cut that black cloud in half with a knife. It was clear and the sun was shining through. We got to the canoe dry not wet. I raised my hand to the great thunderbird, "Thank you, thunderbird".

Among the Ojibwa and Menominee that Barret (1911: 363-364) studied in the early twentieth century, the «most important function» of the war bundles, which were under the control of the Thunderbirds, was their control of the weather:

> In this particular matter their power is absolute, and it is the duty of every man who possesses a war bundle to so conduct himself toward it and toward the thunder birds that no misfortunes will befall, not only himself, but also the community at large, through bad weather conditions of any kind.

The owners kept the bundles supplied with tobacco at all times, and offered fresh tobacco to either the bundle or the Thunderbirds during active storms. In the case of drought, all owners of bundles gathered together to direct their smoke and prayers to the west, where the Thunderbirds were staying at home (9).

Any individual, however, who is fortunate enough to be so blessed, may call upon the Thunderbirds to bring or withhold rain. One method involves killing a snake or frog and placing it on its back on a rock. This attracts the hungry Thunderbirds, who will bring rain with them (Smith 1990: 256). Morrisseau (1965: 5) knew of a highly respected elder who had seen «white men» construct and erect a «hollow golden serpent». They placed it out on the plains to attract the Thunderbirds. Not to bring rain, however, but to capture lightning and make it into electric power.

A more common method of attracting Thunderbirds involves the use of thunderstones, which are «actual missiles hurled by the thunder birds... who in reality own and control the stone, and who by special favour permit a human being to retain it for a time» (Barret 1911: 362). On Manitoulin Island, these small, spherical stones may be found at the base of trees that have been struck by lightning (Smith 1990: 118). Charles Leland

(in Smith 1990: 174) knew of a man who found one «in the crotch-root of a spruce tree».

Densmore (1929: 113) acquired a thunderstone from a woman who had used the stone to avert thunderstorms successfully for fourteen years. The woman told her that «the thunder bird likes this stone as a hen likes the egg she had laid and will not hurt it». The woman instructed Densmore to put the stone on a birch leaf with a little tobacco anywhere out of doors when she wished to prevent a storm. While the Thunderbirds may bestow thunderstones through a stricken fir tree, the woman probably knew that they never strick birch trees. According to a legend from the same area, the birch is a «child» of the Thunderers and its markings are little pictures of Thunderbirds (Densmore 1928: 384).

The second aspect of the lives of the Anishnabeg in which the Thunderbirds play an especially important role is war. Since reservation life has put an end to war in its traditional form, this aspect of the Thunderbirds' power does not presently have the same application that it once did. My discussion, therefore, will primarily focus on the relationship of Thunderbirds to war in the past. However, the memory of war, and the values of the traditional warrior still linger on in the lives of the Anishnabeg. For instance, the primary subject of Redsky's book is Mis-Quona-Queb, said to be the last of the great Ojibwa warriors. Although there was no tribal warfare when Barret (1911: 363) published his study, the Thunderbirds, «perhaps the most important of the mythological beings among both the Menominee and the Chippewa,... controlled absolutely the fortunes of war». Today, veterans are honoured at pow wows in songs, dances and speeches, as well as by carrying the flags and eagle staffs during grand entry.

One reason why warriors sought the aid of the Thunderbirds was that they could transmit to humans the ability to shoot forth lightning through certain objects imbued with power obtained in visions. As Densmore (1929: 79) observed:

> It was a belief of the Chippewa that by possessing some representation of a dream subject one could at any time secure its protection, guidance and assistance. There seems to be inherent in

> the mind of the Indian a belief that the essence of an individual or of a "spirit" dwells in its picture or representation.

Since objects depicting Thunderbirds were in effect the *manitog* that the owner had met in a dream or vision, warriors treated them with respect and, at least in some cases, supplied them with tobacco (Barret 1911: 361).

Ruth Philips (1984: 28) and Ted Brasser (1982: 21) have both noted that many war-clubs bear images of Thunderbirds. As I previously mentioned, Thunderbirds were frequently the guardians of war bundles. Thunderbird pipe stems, when pointed at the enemy, will strike him dead like a lightning bolt (Paper 1989: 60). Skinner (1921: 259) describes how one Menomini man used a certain pair of beaded garters to aid in his war exploits:

> When adorned by [the garters], that renowned warrior became imbued with the power of the [thunder] birds they represented, and was able to call the lightning from the skies to strike his foes. It is related that he once slew an enemy in this way. No doubt the design of these garters was dictated by the old warrior's familiar demon or dream-guardian during his puberty fast.

As I shall demonstrate, weather and war are not the only areas of life in which the Thunderbirds play a part, nor are control of weather and success in war the only powers which they may confer. In the following section, I shall explore other attributes of the Thunderbirds, as well as the nature of their social relationship with the Anishnabeg as a group and with individuals for whom they have become guardian *manitog*.

Thunderbirds and social relations

So far, I have discussed encounters with Thunderbirds as thunder, as birds, in myths and in visions. Smith (1990: 144) notes that the Anishnabeg employ separate terms to describe the Thunderbirds in these different contexts: 1) *animikeek*: Thunderers; the action of Thunder in causing a storm; 2)

pinisewak: Thunderbirds or birds; 3) *atisokanak*: in myth; "Grandfathers," or tales of the "Grandfathers"; and 4) *pawaganak*: "dream visitors" (10). In the foregoing section, I dealt primarily with the first two of these contexts, while in the present section I shall concentrate on the latter two.

Both *atisokanak* and *pawaganak* are categories which describe *manitog* in different contexts of experience. Hallowell (1960: 44) observed that the «meaning of the term *manitu*,... may be considered as a synonym for a person of the other-than-human class ("grandfather" *atiso'kan, pawagan*)». The category of person in the Anishnabe worldview is not limited to human persons. Other-than-human persons do not differ from human persons in kind, they differ in degree of power. For instance, all *manitog* can change form at will. On the other hand, while all humans have the potential for transformation, only some achieve this «earmark of power», and only with the help of other-than-human persons: *manitog* (*idem*: 39).

According to Hallowell's analysis (1960: 22, 46), the relationship between *manitog* and humans is functionally identical to that between human grandfathers or grandmothers and their grandchildren. This relationship pattern is based on a principle of reciprocity. While one is born with human grandparents and they are often readily at hand, an individual must acquire a relationship with an other-than-human "grandparent". In the past, such relationships were generally formed during the isolation of the puberty fast or vision quest.

The Anishnabeg considered the puberty vision quest essential to successful living, and it was undertaken by everyone (Skinner 1921: 34; Jenness 1935: 48). Unfortunately, enforced "acculturation" brought about an end to this practice in many Anishnabeg communities, while in others, contact with Euro-American institutions brought about changes or forced the traditional practices into secrecy (Rogers 1971: 285-286). During the eighties, Smith (1990: 52) found that many Anishnabeg made "pilgrimages" to Dreamer's Rock, just north of Manitoulin Island, for inspiration. These contemporary vision questers, in contrast to former times, do not seek visions upon parental demand at puberty. Rather, they voluntarily seek a relationship with a *manito* at any time of life, as they also seek

out tribal elders, human "grandfathers and grandmothers," who are the repositories of traditional knowledge.

During the course of visionary encounters with *manitog*, it is common for humans to receive blessings or powers which are usually quite specific. Since Thunderbirds are especially powerful and generally beneficent *manitog*, they are one of the most desirable to acquire as one's personal guardian. The following story of a boy's puberty vision serves to illustrate the intensity of the experience, the formidable character of the Thunderbirds (in this context *Pawaganak*), and the manner in which one might receive a blessing:

> Nigankwam, "Leading Thunder", carried off a lad to thunderland. At times he forced the boy so close to the mountain crags that the lad saved himself from being dashed to pieces only by the use of a spear. The chief of the thunders said to him, "Now you know all that lives. We shall bless you through our powers". Leading Thunder still carried him along until his spear was almost worn away from constant usage. He said to the thunder, "Now you will kill me, for my spear is worn down to my hand". But Thunder said, "I shall not kill you, I am giving you a long life" (Jenness 1935: 54).

In addition to the blessings of success in war, control of weather and long life, it is within the power of the Thunderbirds to confer the blessing of healing. Skinner (1921: 133-135) reports that, in a puberty vision, the Thunderbirds gave one man the power to heal chronic headaches through the use of tattooing needles, the Thunderbirds' «spears of lightning». In treating a patient, the man tattooed a Thunderbird over the afflicted area, while thinking «steadfastly of the Thunderers».

Densmore (1929: 57) describes an incident in which a seriously ill youth was cured by receiving a name from a man whose guardian *manito* was evidently a Thunderbird. More recently, Smith (1990: 177-178) reports that three Thunderbirds in human form visisted a man while he lay ill in a hospital. Immediately after their visit, he saw lightning outside his window and heard the thunder of the *manitog* calling his name three times. An elder subsequently told him that if they had called his name four times he would have died. Following his recovery, he showed the utmost respect toward the Thunderers,

as he understood that their protection carried with it certain obligations.

Since Thunderbirds are both powerful and versatile, many shamans have them as guardian *manitog*. Jenness (1935: 70) and Dewdney (1975: 39) mention that Thunderbirds have a close connection with the Midewiwin society, but more often, scholars report that they are especially favoured by conjurors (*jessakkids*), or shamans who perform in the Shaking tent (Jenness 1935: 65; Smith 1990: 148, 149). In 1823 George Nelson wrote a detailed account of an Ojibwa Shaking tent ceremony. Nelson (Brown & Brightman 1988: 39-40) relates that while all other *manitog* entered the Shaking tent with the conjuror, the Thunderbirds remained outside, lest their presence break the structure apart. Brasser (1976: 26) discusses dew-claw rattles, incised with Thunderbirds, which are placed on the four corners of the Shaking tent's frame and rattle with thunder when the *manitog* are present.

Due to the awesome power of the Thunderbirds, the protection gained through developing a relationship with them in visions engenders grave responsibility and is not to be taken lightly. These *manitog* are particularly sensitive to ritual neglect, and any demonstration of disrespect is likely to incur their wrath (11). For example, Redsky's father was an unfortunate victim of his own imprudent confidence. He had just put up a new tent when a visiting friend pointed to a single dark cloud in the sky. «Aren't you worried about the thunderbirds in that cloud, my brother? - His father replied - Ha, I am not worried about that small cloud. There is just one thunderbird in that cloud». Later that afternoon, a thunderstorm and strong wind came from the single cloud and blew his new tent into the lake. His friend remarked ironically, «you are lucky, Redsky, that there was only one thunderbird in that cloud» (Redsky 1972: 113).

Yet occasionally, the destruction caused by the Thunderbirds is not attributed to any heedless act on the part of humans, but to the immaturity of the fledgling Thunderbirds who have not yet learned to control their powers or to behave responsibly. Although the older birds try to «correct these foolish young birds,... they do not learn because they are too young» (Redsky 1972: 110-111). In this respect, the behaviour of the Thunderbirds resembles that of human familial relations.

The image of one large Thunderbird hovering over two smaller ones is a common motif on Anishnabe bags and pouches (Philips 1984: 27).

The similarity between human and other-than-human families also extends to the structure of Thunderbird society, as the following well known myth demonstrates. A female Thunderbird, (in this context *Atisokanak*), who had temporarily assumed human form, entered the lodge of ten brothers. She chopped wood and cooked for them but was never there when they returned from hunting. The youngest brother, however, found her there one day and married her. The oldest brother was jealous and shot her in a fit of anger. Disregarding a taboo she had imposed upon him, the younger brother followed her trail of blood, whereupon she resumed her Thunderbird form and returned to Thunderland. The remorseful and lonely youth undertook a perilous journey to follow her to her village in Thunderland. Upon his arrival, the Thunderwoman's father, Chief Thunder, gave her to him in marriage.

He remained for some time hunting with his new brothers-in-law, although their food did not always please him. One day, Chief Thunder, knowing that his son-in-law was lonely for his own people, offered to give his remaining nine daughters in marriage to the man's nine brothers. The happy young man and the ten Thunderwomen descended to earth, where they all assumed human form, thereby establishing kinship ties between the Thunderbirds and Anishnabeg (Hallowell 1960: 32-33; Overholt & Callicott 1982: 55-61) (12).

Hallowell (1960: 33) makes some insightful observations:

> It is obvious that the Thunder Birds are conceived to act like human beings. They hunt and talk and dance. But the analogy can be pressed further. Their social organization and kinship terminology are precisely the same as for the Ojibwa. The marriage of a series of female siblings often occurs among the Ojibwa themselves. This is, in fact, considered a kind of ideal pattern.

What Hallowell fails to emphasize, however, is that the structure of social relationships of the humans and Thunderbirds in this myth is more than an analogy. It would best be described as a continuity, for the central theme of the

myth is the establishment of kinship ties between two families of persons; one of the human class, and one of the other-than-human class. Before Chief Thunder legitimately established the marriage, the youth's journey to Thunderland was fraught with difficulty and peril. The journey back, on the other hand, was easily accomplished with the aid of his new Thunderbird wife. Chief Thunder affirms the obligations of his new role as "grandfather" by stating: «I'll be related to the people on earth now and I'll be merciful towards them. I'll not hurt any of them if I can possibly help it» (*ibidem*).

As *atisokanak*, then, the Thunderbirds instruct the Anishnabeg as to the benefits and obligations involved in maintaining congenial social relations. As *pawaganak*, on the other hand, the Thunderbirds initiate the Anishnabeg into the social order, together with its rights and responsibilities. The relationship between a human and an other-than-human "grandfather" is both a pattern for and a pattern of the relationship between a human and human "grandfathers". Thus, all Anishnabe relationships are governed by the central values of reciprocity and sharing that typify one's relationship with one's guardian *manito*. As I have shown, young Anishnabeg today are reclaiming traditional practices, as well as their accompanying relational patterns and spiritual empowerment.

It is, however, precisely the social aspect of the Thunderbirds' character that Westerners neglected to borrow from the Anishnabeg. While the Thunderbird automobile calls to mind the power, majesty and perhaps even war-like attributes of the Thunderers, the subtler aspects of reciprocity and respect are entirely lacking in our culture of automobiles, and its relationship to Earth. This neglect, however, may have surprisingly deleterious effects for us all. Bearing in mind the elemental nature of the Thunderbirds and the wrathful vengeance that they inflict upon the heedless, Westerners may be advised to consider the consequences of irreverence. Ironically, the fumes emitted by automobiles are one of the major contributors to the controversial "greenhouse effect" that is threatening to permanently alter weather patterns on the entire planet. The Thunderers may yet have the last word, the thunder of vengeance, in their primary capacity as controllers of the weather.

Notes

1. Although there is no word in the English language that adequately conveys the Anishnabe concept of *manito* (plural *manitog*), it may best be understood in terms of a particular "spirit" or "spirits". In some cases Anishnabeg may also use the term as an adjective applied to animate beings who display powers characteristic of *manitog*.

2. Brasser (1982: 21) and Philips (1984: 28) also note that weapons such as ball-headed war clubs often portrayed horned panthers and serpents, which indicates that their assistance was a valuable aid to the warrior.

3. Jenness (1935: 39) notes a beneficent relation between *Nzagima*, the Great Horned Serpent and Midewiwin "medicine-men".

4. Two references in Jenness (1935: 96, 98) indicate that the Underworld *manitos* may be associated with *Nokomis*, Grandmother Moon. The first is in connection with the menstrual seclusion practices of adolescent girls: «She must trust her Grandmother, or (else) the lion *manido*, on whose hide the first maid sat, will destroy her mind and make her crazy». This may be a reference to the Underwater Feline. In the second, a girl receives a blessing in a vision in which *Nokomis* instructs her to call upon *Nzagima*, the Great Horned Serpent, who will come to her aid.

5. For an analysis of this issue, see Jordan Paper 1983, 1990.

6. Morrisseau (1965: 5) tells a story similar to that told by Jenness (1935: 37) about two curious boys who, «some eighty-five years ago», climbed to investigate a well-known Thunderbird nest site, only to be frightened when they discovered two newly hatched birds with flashing eyes. Morrisseau is careful to recount that he heard the story from two individuals, one a relative of his, and the other a man who had known the boys in his youth.

7. Many humans were named after the Thunderers or given names related to the Thunderbirds in some way. At Parry Island, several healers bore names of Thunderers (Jenness 1935: 51, 52). Skinner (1921: 46-50) reports that among the Menominee, people of the Thunderbird totem often received Thunderer name. Vecsey (1983: 75) notes that many Ojibwa were given Thunder names by a Thunderer in their puberty visions.

8. I have used Jenness' spellings and commentaries, occasionally inserting a comment from Skinner where applicable.

9. Jenness (1935: 35), Redsky (1972: 110) and Smith (1990:148-149) also mention the widespread practice of offering tobacco and smoking to the Thunderbirds, while Brasser (1976: 27) notes that images of Thunderbirds frequently decorate the stems of ritual pipes.

10. See also Hallowell (1960: 33-35) for *pinisewak* and *atisokanak*.

11. As we have seen, the Thunderbirds, like all *manitog*, are especially fond of tobacco. Ritual observances therefore focus primarily on various times and methods of offering tobacco.

12. Morrisseau (1965: 6-12) tells a variation of this story in which the young man does not return to earth with Thunderwoman's sisters. Instead, Thunderwoman's uncle gives the man medicine which transforms him into a Thunderbird. He remains permanently in Thunderland while his

brothers marry women from the east. The older brother's attempted murder forfeited the opportunity for generations of Anishnabeg to benefit from kinship ties with the Thunderers.

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Summary

The article deals with the shift undergone in the symbolism of the Thunderbird from its original role as cosmic force in Anishnabeg mythology to the new meaning acquired in euroamerican culture. After describing and discussing the different perspectives anthropologists adopted in studies on Thunderbirds the A. points to their centrality in legitimizing social relationships among the Anishnabeg. Finally the A. argues that, in the borrowing of Thunderbird symbolism, western cultures, while stressing its character of power and majesty neglect to elicit its more crucial aspects relating to reciprocity and respect, thus in a way detracting from its original symbolic nature.

Sommario

L'articolo tratta del mutamento dei Thunderbirds nel simbolismo Ojibwa dal loro ruolo originale di forza cosmica nella mitologia degli Anishnabeg al nuovo significato acquisito nella cultura euroamericana. Dopo aver sintetizzato e analizzato le diverse prospettive adottate dagli antropologi nello studio del Thunderbird l'A. ne sottolinea la centralità nel processo di legittimazione delle relazioni sociali tra gli Anishnabeg. Conclude che, nella traslazione dalla società nativa alla cultura occidentale, l'immagine pare contrassegnarsi più per i caratteri eclatanti di forza e potere che per i tratti del rispetto e della reciprocità, essenziali nell'orizzonte simbolico tribale.