

AN INTRODUCTIVE ENQUIRY
IN THE STUDY
OF OJIBWA RELIGION

BY
PAUL RADIN



Reprinted from "Papers and Records of The Ontario
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Although the present paper is concerned almost exclusively with the Ojibwa of South-Eastern Ontario, there is little doubt that the data presented hold likewise for all the other divisions of the Ojibwa group, except perhaps for the extreme western branches in western Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and the so-called Northern Saulteaux, where they have come in contact with the Cree. Even there, however, we do not anticipate any great changes, for the investigations of Wm. Jones on the Manito belief of the Sauk and Fox, and those of Alanson Skinner among the Cree and Menominee, seem to indicate that the Ojibwa beliefs differed only in detail from those of these other tribes.

In dealing with the subject of the religion of primitive peoples, it will be well to bear in mind that it must be treated in the same manner in which that subject is treated among civilized people. The unjustified and unsubstantiated assumption that there is any real difference has been the cause of considerable confusion hitherto and has resulted in the development of some erroneous conceptions on cardinal points in the religious life of the North American Indians. But, perhaps, more harmful than any erroneous point of view, has been the utter absence of critical analysis with which the sources for religious life have been treated. Rarely have investigators made an attempt to go behind the data, to realize its individual significance, the character of the individual or individuals from whom it has been obtained, his relation to the tribe, and numerous other pertinent points, and as a result we see primitive religious beliefs discussed as though they pertained to some vague social unit. No suggestive or correct view-point can possibly grow out of such a treatment.

Just as among us, there are religious and unreligious people among the Indians, and it is a matter of the very gravest consequence—of far more consequence than among us—from whom our information is ob-

tained. By "unreligious" is meant not "unbelief," but a passive attitude toward religious beliefs; their acceptance, but accompanied only by a modicum of religious thrill or emotional response. The Indian system of education—from now on, we will refer exclusively to the Ojibwa and Winnebago (a culturally kindred Siouan tribe)—is possessed of great elasticity and permits an individual within certain limits to stress that particular bent of mind which fits him most naturally. If he is religiously inclined, he will prepare for the life of a shaman, and preparation means essentially, endless and ceaseless repetition on the one hand, and persistent fixation of the attention upon religious life, on the other. Those individuals who do not prepare for such a life are deficient in just these points. However, in addition to the shamans, almost all the gifted individuals, those who excel in any walk of life, be it as hunter, fisherman, warrior, craftsman, etc., attain to a great degree of knowledge, much of which is associated with a high development of religious feeling and consciousness, for in their education a large amount of attention is fixed upon religious practices. And when it is remembered that success and efficacy of individual powers depends not so much upon the performance of a rite and the attitude of prayer, but upon the individual's emotional attitude—the power of complete absorption while at prayer, in his religious emotion to the exclusion of all others, then it will be easily realized how intense the religious life of these individuals must be, and how far removed from that of the other members of the tribe. Such an intense participation, while it does, on the one hand, act as a bulwark for the conservation of past beliefs, must, on the other, lead, in a number of cases, to an assertion of individual points of view, that become in time centres for the development of innovations both in belief and ritualistic practice. This two-fold function of the "gifted" man, it is of great importance to bear in mind.

The conclusion to be drawn from the above remarks is certainly a common-place one, namely, that there exists among the Ojibwa a group of men possessed of "esoteric," and another group of "exoteric" knowledge. These terms have generally been used in connection with secret societies, but there can be no objection to extending their meaning to include the grouping given above.

The majority of the Indians are what we have called unreligious, their attitude being one of passive acceptance. However, it may be well to define this passivity more clearly. It is to a large, preponderating extent, not the passivity of choice, but what may be called the "passivity of fact." These individuals, representing the normal run of men, simply

did not have the necessary temperamental make up; manitos did not appear to them, or having appeared to them were of an inferior order, or bestowed upon them "blessings" of a minor kind. Certainly they regarded the religious beliefs, the religious manifestations, with all the awe and veneration they were capable of, and showed themselves punctilious in the observance of such religious injunctions as they were taught. In order to obtain a moderate degree of success in the pursuits of life, in obtaining food, success on the war-path, etc., they purchased from their more successful brethren efficacious herbs and medicines, to which offerings had to be made in a prescribed way, deviations being regarded as nullifying their efficacy. The most punctilious observation of ritualistic details was for them what a complete and consciously directed absorption in their religious-emotional selves, was for the shaman.

Now, it follows from the fact that so much attention was paid to the formal expression of beliefs by the "exoteric" element of an Ojibwa community, that nothing pertaining to the beliefs handed down from generation to generation, was ever touched, and that some had already become formulae and others were on the road of becoming such. For the average individual religious education consequently consisted in the learning of a certain number of formulaic beliefs, which might or might not call forth a religious thrill.

We have used the phrase "religious education" as though there were other kinds of education for the Ojibwa child. But with the exception of etiquette, every activity of life to him was so intimately associated with a religious sanction, that to speak of "religious education" is to speak of the entire system of education. It goes without saying that for the average Indian of whom we have been speaking, as for the average individual among us, a fact is a fact, standing out strongly from among other things. The killing of a deer or the catching of a fish are real facts to him, even though he may be thought inclined to attribute some of his skill to the efficacy of certain ritualistic practices. There can be no question that when they are asked, they will answer that lack of success is due to failure to properly perform certain ritualistic injunctions. But it does not follow that the converse is true, that he consciously realizes the connection of cause and effect, between the performance of ritualistic observances and his success in killing a deer, **when he is actually hunting**. These observances are formulaic in nature; are associated with hunting; are accepted by him as always occurring together; but it is to him certainly not a cause and effect relation, and calls forth little or no religious response.

Thus far we have been speaking of **normal success**. The moment the question shifts to that of exceptional success, which is of course due to exceptional ability, and deals with events out of the ordinary run of life, then the point of view is entirely changed. Exceptional success places a man immediately in the "esoteric" group. But how about this other element, the crises of life, or as the culturally kindred Winnebago say, "the narrow places of life?" And the idea of life's crises is not an assumption. It is insisted on from earliest childhood. The old grandfather says, "Life is full of crises. What will you have, when they come upon you, to successfully surmount them? Fast and obtain power to use on these occasions." In other words, for the average man the religious aspect stands out prominently in relation to all the material and immaterial possessions of life, during the crises of life. At such a time, we do not doubt that ritualistic observances are regarded by the individual as directly responsible for increased skill, for normal skill even.

This discussion has taken us somewhat afield. But it was essential, and before leaving it we wish once again to insist not only upon the materialistic side of the "exoteric" but also upon that of the "esoteric" religion. There are no religious observances given merely for the glorification of a manito or manitos. They are always associated with undertakings of practical consequence for the tribe and the individual, and for the specific furtherance of these undertakings. To say, then, that religion is an attempt at the explanation of life is erroneous, in this case. It has assumed this aspect among certain shaman, but to the majority of Ojibwa, religion is essentially a means of strengthening life, of enriching the contents of life specifically.

If we now look at religion in its various manifestations we will find that it assumes among the Ojibwa those forms found among other peoples. There is a general animism taking the rather concrete form of the manito; the religious fasting at puberty; the religious exaltation; the auto-suggestion, prayer, etc.

There is an indefinite number of manitos. They are found associated with practically all material objects and with many immaterial objects, from our point of view. Their form is indefinite, the large majority having an animal form, although some have human form when they appear to individuals. Any attempt to divide them into spiritual and corporeal beings would be futile, owing to the general belief in a possibility of transformation possessed not merely by them, but also by powerful shaman. Many of them are associated with specific powers; some "bless" individuals with success on the war-path; others with success in

hunting, or fishing, or love. Almost all "bless" individuals with long life. A man fasts on many occasions in life, but his important fast is that which takes place at the age of puberty. He is then given some charcoal to blacken his face and told to go out to some deserted place and fast. It will be best to give a first-hand description of such a fasting experience.

"I was about ten years old when I fasted, that generally being the age at which grandparents want you to fast. I don't suppose I should ever have fasted if I hadn't had a grandparent living at the time.

"About the middle of Little-Bear month (February) she came and took me to her house. I did not know what she wanted of me, at the time. About two days afterwards she told me that she wanted me to fast. The next morning I received very little to eat or drink. At noon nothing at all was given to me. In the evening I again received a little food and water. There were seven of us fasting together, and all day we would play and carefully watch each other so that no one would break his fast. We were to fast for ten days.

"About the end of the fifth day, I became so hungry that after my grand-parents retired, I got up and had a good meal. They must have found out what I had done, for I had to start all over again. This time I resolved not to break my fast, for I did not wish to start from the beginning again.

"At the end of the tenth day, they built me a wigwam under a tree not far from their house so that they could watch me conveniently during the day. My grandmother had told me before not to accept the first manito that appeared to me in my dreams, for some would try to deceive me and the acceptance of their "blessing" would lead me to destruction.

"The first four nights I slept very soundly and dreamt of nothing, but on the fifth night, I dreamt that a large and very beautiful bird appeared and promised me many things, but as I had made up my mind to refuse the 'blessing' of the first manito who appeared, I did not accept his offers. As the bird disappeared in the distance, I saw that it was only a chickadee. In the morning when my grandmother came, I told her that a chickadee had appeared and that I had refused its offers. She told me that I had done well, for chickadees had deceived many people already.

"After that I did not dream of anything until the eighth night. Then a large bird appeared to me, and I determined to accept his blessing, for I was getting tired of waiting and staying in the wigwam. The

bird took me far away north where everything was covered with ice. There I saw many other birds of the same kind. **Some were very old and they offered me long life and immunity from disease.** This was quite different from what the chickadee had offered. I accepted, and the bird brought me back to my wigwam. As he was starting he told me to watch him as he disappeared from view, and I saw that he was a white loon.

"In the morning my grandmother came and I told her all that had happened. She was delighted, for she said people were rarely blessed by loons. From that time on, I have been called White Loon."

Now this is emphatically the experience of an "unreligious" man. Although it does not seem entirely correct to assume a highly developed degree of religious susceptibility for children between the ages of ten and twelve, still it was greater among Indians than among us. However, there is an entirely different consideration to be borne in mind here. These fasting experiences are only told long after the age of manhood has been reached (i. e., if they are ever told), and an individual sees them of course through the vista of what life has given him, in emotional development and in practical experiences. The shaman reads his puberty experience in terms of his success in life and the "unreligious" man in terms of his; and while it would perhaps be erroneous to deny a different religious temperament for the two from the start, yet the other factors must be recognized and given their full value.

Let us now give in outline the fasting experience of a Winnebago shaman,⁽¹⁾ identical we believe with that of Ojibwa shaman.

"When I had reached the age of puberty, my father wished me to fast, that I might become holy; invincible and invulnerable in war; become like one of those about whom tales are told in the future. Thus I would become if **I made special efforts in my fasting.** I would be 'blessed' with long life, he told me; I would be able to cure the sick; life would not be able to harm me in any way. No one would dare to be uncivil to me for fear of incurring my enmity. He pleaded with me to fast long and intently, for only then would the various spirits 'bless' me.

"There was a hill near my father's wigwam called the Place-where-they-keep-weapons. **It was a very high hill, steep and rocky. They said it was a very holy place.** Within that hill lived spirits called Those-who-are-like-children (i. e., liliputians). There were twenty of them and they possessed arrows. My father was in charge of these (i. e., some powerful manito had in his 'blessing' placed these under his control). When he

(1) The father of this man was himself a very famous shaman.

wished to 'bless' a man, he would do as follows: He would take his bow and arrows in both hands and take the spirits around the hill into his wigwam (into the middle of the hill), where stood a stone pillar. On this pillar he drew the pictures of various animals. Then he danced around the stone and sang, and when he was finished, commenced to breathe upon it. Then he walked around it again, shot at it, and it turned into a deer with great antlers. So I could do if I wished, and if I poured tobacco and fasted. My father was a great hunter, and I would have been delighted to be like him.

"Through fasting one obtains the power of curing disease. While I was fasting the spirits came to me from a doctor's village up above. The shaman gathered around me and told me it would be difficult. Then he who was in front began to breathe audibly and all those in the wigwam helped him. When they finished this, they began to sing. This they showed me and they said, 'When a person is sick and in a critical condition and all others have failed to cure him, they will call upon you and offer you tobacco, which you are to direct toward us' Certainly I should have been holy, for very earnestly I labored.'

These two examples illustrate all the important points in the fasting experiences of the Ojibwa. The two most essential elements are the control exercised by the older generation and the formulaic character of what is taught.

It will be seen by a glance at the first fasting experience that a great control is exercised by the parent or grandparent on the blessings to be accepted. How minute this control is has not been determined, but it is extremely probable that practically everything is given with the possible exception of the specific individuality of the manito itself. In other words, the youth does not go out to fast vaguely, for some indefinite, hazy object, but as we have seen, for something definite; something sharply circumscribed and which he is subsequently to clothe in religious-literary formulae that have been handed down from generation to generation. That there are variations of detail must not be overlooked, but they are not essential.

In the second example, the control of the parent is exercised in another way. Being himself a powerful shaman he has the natural desire to have one of his children inherit all his supernatural powers and the material wealth it has brought him, and to do so he surrounds his son with conditions that practically make it certain that he will be blessed by the same spirits in the same way. Practically the son inherits these powers and gifts, but only that son who duplicates those religious con-

ditions his father submitted to when he "was blessed," and consequently only that son who shows especial aptitude and conscientious endeavor will obtain them. If no son should show such an aptitude, the powers will pass to some more distant relative.

The religious intensity of the shaman, of the gifted man, thus turns out to be not a question of chance variation, but one due to conscious selection of specially endowed individuals, from generation to generation, within a small number of families.

A number of other points relating to the manito belief will now have to be discussed, namely, the localization of the manitos; the existence of two great manitos, and the nature of manito as a general "force."

It is extremely significant that in many instances where individuals are "blessed" by animal manitos, these are always found to be **definitely located**. An individual is "blessed" not by some general manito-snake, for instance, but by a definite manito-snake, located in some definite place. For instance, a person is crossing a certain lake, and a terrible storm comes up; but he has been "blessed" by the particular manito in control of this lake and by the appropriate prayers and offerings, the storm is allayed. A man is "blessed" by a number of manitos, but he does not call upon them indiscriminately. Had the foregoing Ojibwa not been "blessed" with the particular manito in question, he would have been drowned.

The question of the belief in two all-powerful manitos, one in control of all the good, the other in control of all the bad spirits, is extremely difficult to discuss in the present state of our knowledge. Christian influences may have penetrated here. Still the belief is found among the linguistically kindred Pottawattomie, Ottawa, Menominee and the culturally kindred Winnebago. There is no question in our mind that the belief will turn out to be a development of the shaman, for it is always found in the great ritualistic legends that have undoubtedly been developed by them. It seems likely that the "exoteric" group did not possess this belief in the beginning and that the influence of the whites and its similarity to that of the Christian God and devil made it spread more generally among these Indians than it would have done had there been no contact with the whites.

Of the "manito-force" discussed by Wm. Jones for the Sauk and Fox, and which has been taken by all investigators to apply to the Woodland Indians generally, we find no evidence, and we are strongly inclined to believe that Jones' formulation is over-systematised. The

difficulties encountered in obtaining adequate and precise information on this subject are, it is known, almost insurmountable. Yet the overwhelming balance of the data, and it seems to us even that quoted by Jones himself, indicates that the Indian regards an object as manito, sacred, because it contains a manito, and if the conditions were propitious, he could be "blessed" by it. If a belief in a manito "essence" or "force" exists it is as a characteristic of a manito. That the "essence" exists apart and separate from the manito is, we believe, an unjustified assumption, an abstraction created by investigators.

But there is a vagueness about the nature of the manito which has perhaps led investigators, and even Indians, astray when they attempted to translate the concept into words, for purposes of explanation, and which is paralleled by that which exists in their belief in the transformation of individuals at will, under certain conditions, into animals, trees, immaterial forces (from our point of view), ghosts, etc. The nature of the manito is properly that of a *tertium quid*, from our point of view. The whole question is, is it that from the Indian's point of view? We do not think so; for he does not make the opposition of corporeal and non-corporeal; data obtained through direct sense impressions and that through mediated sense impressions, in anything like our way. To investigate exactly, what, if any, opposition they make in regard to these matters is, perhaps, the most fascinating, as it is certainly the most difficult of ethnological problems.

We have dealt only with the most characteristic and fundamental points of Ojibwa religion, for the space at our disposal will not permit us to discuss more.