Life Before Genesis

A Conclusion

An Understanding of the Significance of Australian Aboriginal Culture

(Second Edition)
his mother, although without the resources to support themselves. They might move away to take advantage of Iyas' recent partnerships but for the fact that all of them are in some way anomalous and therefore unformable.

In the end, the myth admits failure. Mediation by the individual across band lines is merely the illusion of a resolution. The real alternative is the one that is never mentioned in the tale: marriage and co-production ties transforming outsiders into insiders within the limits of the band.

Iyas rightly senses that he and his mother were no longer needed in this world.' He transforms himself into a robin, his mother into a toad. At least in these mutually-exclusive forms their reproduction as a domestic group will be impossible. Yet both will be free to follow their own routes to their own partners without infringing on other bands' domains -- Iyas through the air, his mother through water. Their efforts have failed to combine the uncombinable in any better form than is present in reality.

**Windigo**

The Windigo is a Cree cannibal creature whose depredations are recounted in Algonkian mythology. Cannibalism is a superb metaphor for the social process of incorporation: something external is internalized and becomes part of oneself. We have already encountered the metaphor in the Iyas myth in the form of the old cannibalistic witch and the women with the three ill-equipped daughters, all trying to incorporate unsuspecting victims to a degree that represents part of the problem the myth is trying to solve.

Incorporation is appropriate food for thought under extreme environmental conditions when fundamental questions about the social order are being raised. It is perhaps predictable, then, that Windigo creatures should appear in myth under conditions of winter freeze and summer storm when a crisis in resources is most likely.

Most observers, however, would rather see cannibalistic practices in myth as a record of actual behaviour under crisis conditions. This reinforces a prejudice deep inside us that the people who recount these myths are but one step removed from the animal kingdom. But let me reassure the reader: there is no evidence whatsoever of cannibalism amongst northern Algonkians. Not for purposes of acquiring food anyway. Ritual cannibalism, however, did exist. Here, some part of a slain enemy would be consumed in the belief that his valour would be transferred to the consumer. In principle this act was not unlike our Holy Communion where the congregation partakes of the 'flesh and blood' of Christ. In practice, though, the Algonkians did occasionally partake of more than was necessary to make a symbolic point. As Skinner in his Notes on Eastern Cree and Northern Salteaux remarks, "Famous persons, when captured, were sometimes tied to a stake, cut up piecemeal while alive, boiled and eaten before their own eyes. But as Skinner points out, the normal procedure
was merely to "eat a piece of fat from the thigh of the slain victim."

In a Cree myth recorded at Shamattawa, a man with Windigo tendencies eats his wife and would have eaten his son but for the fact that the son was living with his grandfather. The man now turns into a full-fledged Windigo and goes in search of more people to eat.

What we have at the outset, then, is movement toward extreme domestic group autonomy as in the Iyas myth, but which is prevented by the son's and grandfather's absence from the father. Objectively, father and son -- any people in adjacent generations are unincorporating. This is because people within each generation must form their own hunting partnerships albeit some of them through ties already established by their parents in the previous level. In the myth, incorporation of grandfather-son by Windigo would preclude the formation of such co-production ties.

Next in the tale, grandfather eats Windigo's son thereby realizing the tension emerging in the first episode in binary terms as one between two adjacent generations. Then a qualifier is introduced to weaken the opposition between them: Atouscan, as the grandfather is called, and the Windigo, his son, come together to stand against 'the people' or outsiders. Whether these are merely outside their own domestic arrangement or outside their band, the myth does not specify. Indeed it is the presence of these two outsiders who seem to force this relationship between the two men. What this seems to be suggesting, then, is that Cree co-production arrangements are not the positive aspect of Cree culture we thought they were but are rather a negative response to a threat from outside. The remainder of the myth, in fact, explores this very possibility.

Atouscan and Windigo now encounter and defeat successive groups of these outsiders. First they come across the tracks of humans which they follow to their camp. They wait until all are in their tents then rush in to 'twist their heads off'. But in the ensuing struggle the enemy prove too much for the younger Windigo and they begin to get the better of him. Hearing his son in danger, Atouscan rushes to his aid and breaks the back of one of the assailants. Then the two men set about killing and eating (i.e., incorporating) the rest.

In the absence of a weakening of the insider/outsider opposition at this level to allow a mediator, then, the strong overpower and incorporate the weak. This is an historical rather than a mythological scenario:

my band ➔ your band ➔ my band over your band.

And the consequences, too, are historical: the two men now hunt freely in the vicinity.

Atouscan and the Windigo now come across more human tracks which they again follow to a camp. Here they find the 'caribou people'. Apart from the implication that these are somewhat more alien than the previous group, the meaning of the association of people with caribou is obvious considering the previous episode: incorporable people=incorporable resources. They fight and the young boy from the alien camp who might have been a mediator is instead used as a club by Atouscan to kill all his fellow caribou people. Then Atouscan and Windigo eat everyone up -- all, that is, but the young boy's arm. This is perhaps a sign that mediation is still not dead as a possibility -- if only a weakening of insider/outsider relationships would precede it in the scenario.

Atouscan and his son now camp together but in separate tents as opposition once again begins to emerge between them now that the enemy has been defeated. The Windigo decides to go hunting and asks Atouscan to watch over his cooking pot lest the Canada Jays fly down and steal his food. But Atouscan looks in the cooking pot and sees the 'two hairy parts between a woman's legs.' He picks them out and eats them, and when his son returns
and finds out what he has done he is furious: "You stole some of my cooking!" he exclaims.

In fact, Atouscan has prevented Windigo from himself incorporating another woman and thereby becoming more self-reproducible than before. At the same time, Windigo's son -- now part and parcel of Atouscan -- has, by ingesting the 'woman', embarked on precisely the same course. The two generations finally stand equal and opposed.

They fight. And just as Atouscan is about to choke his own Windigo son to death, the young man tries to speak. Atouscan releases his grip. "Who will do the killing of 'caribou' for you?" pleads Windigo.

Atouscan releases him and kisses him. From that point on they eat everything they catch.

In other words, each is necessary to the other's success as a hunter both of animals and men. They need one another independently of the presence of a common enemy. Partnerships are a positive aspect of Cree culture not a negative response to a threat from outside as had earlier been hypothesized. Cross-generation relations through which co-production ties of brother/sisterhood are formed are complementary rather than opposed in contrast to the groupings they mediate. This complementarity is partly effected by incorporation of some of those on adjacent generations into the same domestic group.

The degree of incorporation appropriate to the relationship between father and son here is symbolized in the kiss -- a mingling of substance which leaves the independent existence of both parties intact.

In the final analysis the Windigo myth confirms the Cree status quo: the two men are separated on adjacent generations but united in the same domestic group, and complementary insofar as they link otherwise divided co-production groups. Together they are somewhat antagonistic to outsiders defined as those both outside the domestic group and the band.

The Iyas and the Windigo myths, then, are really two sides of the same coin, the first focussing on inter-group, the second on inter-generational, relations. Both confirm the status quo while leaving the basic problem endemic to Cree social structure intact. Both do so through basically the same process, though the Windigo myth barely passes beyond the stage of initial opposition in restating the case for Cree culture. Myth here, after all, as in all societies moved by the same laws as the Cree, is there to convince its audience that they live in the imperfectly best of all possible worlds.

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Standing midway between life as lived -- with all its conflicts and contradictions -- and life as thought -- in an effort to minimize the significance of these conflicts and contradictions -- we have encountered the realm of symbolic representation. It is this process that sees social incorporation as cannibalism. In contrast to mythological thought, symbolic thought is metaphoric and therefore devoid of critical commentary. Symbolic thought communicates images, not analyses and arguments. The Windigo figure itself, organs and sinews exposed, dripping ice from its extremities, is such an image. To the artist the image merely seems an appropriate way of communicating a process whose laws remain unfathomable. To us, though, it is rather evidence of the incorporative archetype set in particular historical circumstances which define its particular contents -- here, winter freeze.

Re-examine the Wescoupe print that introduced this Chapter. The man inside the bearskin inside the bear would seem to represent the three levels of incorporation which lie at the very foundation of Cree society -- domestic group, co-production ties established through the previous generation and those established through one's own marriage. The rainbow which bisects this figure reflects in turn the dualism which permeates all aspects
of Algonkian life -- male and female, insider/outsider, domestic group/band.

Were I to represent these dimensions, however, I would do so in this manner:

Figure 2. Analyst's Abstract Representation of Algonkian Social Relations.

To me, two sets of three concentric circles joined at a common focal point along their circumferences adequately represent the relevant spheres of incorporation extending out through some sex links from ties established within the domestic group of origin and marriage. Is this evidence of the analyst's superior abstracting abilities? I think not. Compare my drawing with the predominant motive behind Algonkian decorative art:

Figure 3. Algonkian Double-Curve Motif (after Speck 1914).

The 'double-curve design', as Speck describes it, consists of "two opposed incurves as a foundation, with embellishments more or less elaborate modifying the enclosed space and with variations in the shape and proportions of the whole". The difference between the double-curve design and mine is that theirs develops mine into an art. And, who knows, perhaps theirs proceeded from theory as much as mine did?

Algonkian spatial representation follows the same pattern. In Bringing Home Animals Tanner describes it as based on "a concentric model with the camp space at the centre surrounded by geographic space, that is the forest and lakes, inhabited by the animals, at the farthest reaches of which, as well as above and below, are located various spiritual entities associated with natural forces". In the 'walking out' ceremony held to mark the transition in a child's life from 'one who is carried' to 'one
who carries him or herself', the infant is led about a prearranged space, the boys feigning hunting, the girls collecting, as they move along. Then they return to their respective same sex parents with their 'catch'. The double-curve base of that space is readily apparent:

![Spatial Layout of Cree Walking-Out Ceremony (after Tanner 1979)](image)

Figure 4. Spatial Layout of Cree Walking-Out Ceremony (after Tanner 1979)

Algonkian totemism reflects locality-incorporative precepts not so much in the nature of the animal totemized -- all are appropriately incorporable as edible species -- as in the way the animal is totemized, that is, on an individual animal to individual person basis. Moreover, the totemic association is effected through much the same means as one person becomes associated with another in a hunting-collecting partnership -- through a personal quest. Likewise, because the association is with the individual it does not prevent the instigator from 'killing' others of the species. This emphasis on the individual over the species also explains why the Algonkians are so fond of keeping pets.

Of course, locality-incorporation is not only a system in space but a movement in time -- in fact, a lineal movement in time with progress consisting of technological development and/or the overthrow and absorption of other peoples. It is not surprising, then, that Algonkians should consider life an irreversible movement through to death and beyond the stars to the domain of Manitou and the land of the ancestors. Some ethnographers claim this vision to have been European-induced. Perhaps. But then one would still have to explain why European ideas of 'God' and 'Heaven' were readily translatable into Cree and had such an immediate appeal. There is, in fact, some controversy over whether or not the Algonkians had a notion of one God; but the confusion, again, is perhaps the anthropologist's. Each incorporating band, of course, recognized only its own single Creator which led observers of all bands to posit that there were many.
The aboriginal myth of Nambirrirrma deals almost exclusively with the problem of communication. I have treated it elsewhere (1978a) but without its fundamental mythological structure in mind.

The myth is remarkable for its lack of opposition. Two men journey across Bickerton Island, meet a man who has descended from the sky, work out how they're related to him, bring back the people within whose territory they are situated, work out some more interrelations, provide him with a wife, then go home. The stranger has a son and later dies. Unless you know something of kinline-confederation principles, you wouldn't be aware that conflict was even potential in this story, but it is.

Without going into great detail about the intricacies of inter"clan" relationships in the myth, let me just say that the story involves people in four "clans" -- A, B, C, and D. "Clan" A man sets out from his country (below) and moves along the beach toward "clan" B country. As he does, the stranger, Nambirrirrma, descends with the rain from the sky and sits down in B country. As A moves inland from the beach into B clan territory, he spots Nambirrirrma sitting there. He thinks perhaps he's a man from "clan" C.

Meanwhile, a "clan" C man has, in fact, set out from his own country to go fishing in "clan" B territory.

The "clan" A man is certainly having a difficult time identifying the stranger. Perhaps he's from the mainland. He is certainly a different kind of person. Finally A asks him who he is and Nambirrirrma replies that he is "clan" B man. A then asks his name: "Nambirrirrma", he says. Then the "clan" A man spots "clan" C man approaching. He calls him over and asks him if he recognizes the stranger. He doesn't and suggests that Nambirrirrma might have come from God (the story is being told in 1969 after about a generation of mission contact). C asks Nambirrirrma what language he speaks and he replies, "our language".

Now it is Nambirrirrma's turn. He enquires of the whereabouts of the owners of "clan" B territory. A answers that they are over on the other side of the island with the people of their mother's "clan" (in this Aranda-like society this is the one they marry in alternate generations). C now shows Nambirrirrma the location of his own country, prompting Nambirrirrma to ask where "clan" B territory is, in fact, located. A shows him, then points out the location of his own territory. From all this Nambirrirrma concludes that A is his mother-in-law's clan. The "system" now begins to fall into place. A and B marry C and D in alternate generations (B marries C in Nambirrirrma's generation).

This settled, A tells Nambirrirrma he should be over in D territory with his own B people. But Nambirrirrma refuses to go. "Clan" A man offers to go and fetch them instead. Nambirrirrma agrees. "Clan" C man then goes home to fetch his own people.

When they return, B confirms Nambirrirrma's status and with A they arrange for him to take a wife from "clan" C. C meanwhile are camped separately by themselves on the beach. When they hear of these plans "clan" C protest, but to no avail. "Clan" A now tries to persuade Nambirrirrma to take either a woman with child, or two women. Nambirrirrma refuses. One young girl is what he
wants and one young girl is what he gets. They marry, she has a child and Nambirrirrma dies.

What is potential in this tale but is never mentioned, let alone activated, is a claim to an estate on the basis of residence or occupation instead of totemic affiliation. "Clan" B's lands are vacant and "clan" A makes the first move to occupy them. He at least has some claim as a member of B's totemic fraternity (i.e., is in a "clan" B never marries). But then Nambirrirrma appears in the form of a mediator standing between A's and B's proper, standing between occupation and "clanship" as an ambivalent 'stranger/owner'. C's arrival is likewise mediated by Nambirrirrma who now successfully works out his relationship to these men and their "clans" in their terms. And yet he does not seem to know where his own "clan" estate lies.

Through the course of their conversation, A and C's ambitions are weakened by all admitting to the real nature of the "clan" alliance system as they attempt to work out Nambirrirrma's true identity. If Nambirrirrma is not who he claims to be then "clan" A land remains vacant but is now occupied by C and A. If he is who he claims to be then jurisdiction is established despite the presence of C and A. Now there is an attempt to remove the "clan" weaker and the mediator Nambirrirrma by persuading him to join his own people on the other side of the island, itself a recognition of the "clan" principle. This possibility meets with opposition from Nambirrirrma which, in turn, resolves "clan" A man not to press the point further. He separates to "clan" D territory to fetch "clan" B people himself. C separates to fetch his own people.

Now representatives of all the "clans" return to B territory, but A, C, and D sit on the sidelines while Nambirrirrma and the B people establish their common identity. C are in the weakest position, being camped alone by themselves on the beach. A is weakened by being separated from the rest of his people, having opted instead to go and fetch the B and D people. C have the numbers to press a claim but would have to do so without the A's and in opposition to B and their D allies. Of course it never comes to this: A collaborates with B, and C capitulates by allowing one of its women to go to Nambirrirrma. His job done, Nambirrirrma himself now separates, i.e., dies.

The proclivity of people in production group diversity/kinline-confederation society for analytic thought is aptly demonstrated throughout the tale as each element in the society's blueprint is removed from its context, painstakingly examined, and then put back into place, all without anything being fundamentally altered. And how could it? In theory there is no problem to be 'resolved'.

I have suggested elsewhere that Nambirrirrma might in fact represent a Macassan visitor who actually performed a mediating function between aboriginal "clans" whose members were often away from their estates for long periods of time. The Macassans may have been unwitting mediators, however, with little idea of why they were associated with one "clan" or another. The Macassans simply came each year, and the Aborigines may merely have taken advantage of this situation -- even encouraged them to do so -- knowing full well that they would eventually sail back to their own country on the prevailing east wind at the end of each trading season.

The myth itself may have originated with the emigration of the Warnungwadarbalangwa from Bickerton to Groote Eylandt -- an actual historical event. They are, in fact, "clan" C, the "clan" that is singled out for special instruction. The departure of one "clan" on an island of four where it takes that many to make a system would represent an impending crisis of considerable magnitude.
Yandarranga

The story of Yandarranga, or Central Hill, is but one of the many myths I collected on Groote Eylandt in 1969 which had to be relegated to a trunk in my study as basically undecipherable. What I mean is that I could follow the story and, indeed, recounted it in my 1974 monograph, but, at that time, I did not understand it.

Like Nambirrirrma, Central Hill's is a travelling tale — interminably boring and uneventful unless, of course, you are aware of the potential problem it is seeking, at all costs, not to mention. Research into what's not in a tale is, of course, an almost impossible task without as much knowledge of the context as the audience themselves.

Central Hill is, in myth, a mediator whose ability to link exclusive and otherwise unconnected jurisdictions is weakened by the exclusivity principle itself which ties him down to each "clan" he visits and which, once removed, allows opposition to (potentially) emerge between himself, and his fraternity-mates. But this eventuality is avoided by the participants — including Central Hill -- separating and withdrawing one from the other.

Central Hill begins his journey on the mainland, travels to the coast, moves across to Bickerton Island, meets a blind woman, 'deposits' some children there, makes his way over to Groote Eylandt — apparently against the wishes of this woman — reaches the eastern part of the island and assumes his present form as the highest point on the horizon at 600' above sea level.

In so journeying, Central Hill connects up four local "clans" into an exogamous totemic company: the Ngalmi of the adjacent mainland who, together with the Warnungamadada, sing "behind" Central Hill, the Wurrenggilyangba who sing "to the side", and the Warnungangwurugwerigba who sing "in front".

Central Hill originated in the lands of the Nemamurdudi "clan" in central Arnhem Land. From there he moved eastward to Ngalmi territory where he sat down. But it was too dirty so he went on to Warnungamadada country on the coast. But he kept sinking down in the mud so he moved out into the sea and came across to Warnungamadada country on Bickerton Island (where that "clan" had been given an estate as an inducement to move over from the mainland to take the place of the departing Warnungwadarbalangwa "clan" mentioned earlier). From there he cut across land to Wurrenggilyangba country where he 'threw out his anchor' (i.e., landed, as in a canoe). While he was drying himself off he again sank down in the mud, so he 'threw off some sons' to make himself lighter so he could move on. At another place in the same "clan's" territory he discarded some wild apples. There he met the blind woman Dimimba and helped her dig up some yams for food. But now he began to sink down into the mud again, so much so that he could barely drag himself along.

So he left Dimimba and made his way across to Groote Eylandt oblivious of the fact that Dimimba had gathered up her spears and spear-thower and was now hurling them at him from behind. She missed; but where the spears struck the land, new places were created. Then she began to gash her head until the blood flowed (a sign of grief or of anger), so much so that it spilled into the sea and washed all the way over to Groote Eylandt. Then she returned to her own country with Central Hill's 'sons'. And the 'sons' spread the Aniplilyaugwa language (the language of Bickerton Island and Groote Eylandt) everywhere. Then Dimimba covered herself with a paperbark covering and finally sat down.

Meanwhile, Central Hill had reached a point on the coast of Groote Eylandt belonging to the Warnungwudjaragba "clan" (situated in a different totemic company), though the actual spot where he landed is said to belong to the Warnungangwurugwurigba. Here he again began to sink down and so threw off some more 'sons'. These 'sons' told him to leave this place: "Go on to Warnungangwurugwurigba country," they said. So he did, sitting down there and making himself comfortable. Then he made Lake Hubert (an inland sea) where he caught lots of fish. That's all: "Ngawa bin'da."
Unless you know in advance that Central Hill is a totemic connector it is impossible to see the potential threats to him carrying out this function. A potential for settling down exists in each "clan" territory in turn, but each time it is overcome by Central Hill himself, though in the final analysis with some help from his sons. Here he seems in danger of confusing one place belonging to his "clan" with his "clan's" territory as such. The misapprehension is corrected and he moves on to his final resting place in the appropriate "clan" territory.

But it is with Dimimba that the dangers loom largest. Central Hill sinks down twice in her country and later enters into a co-production arrangement with her. This relationship is anomalous in all respects: cross-sex working relations occur only within marriage and these are two people within the same totemic company. This relationship, in fact, contravenes all the rules, the man helping the woman in her gathering activities. Co-production as such is being raised as a basis for forming social relationships. So too Central Hill's sedentary tendencies. Central Hill's sedentary tendencies could also be interpreted as attempts to establish land rights by residence.

What, of course, is happening here is that the "clan" principle itself is being removed to allow him to complete his purpose and link these exclusive and otherwise isolated jurisdictions. But in so doing, all that this society is not, potentially looms on the horizon. But before that is realized -- before violence erupts within the fraternity -- the characters separate and withdraw. The spears that are thrown never reach Central Hill who continues on oblivious to the violent intentions. Dimimba misses because she's blind -- blind, perhaps, to Central Hill's true identity. There has to be an excuse, not a reason, for the potential coming into being.

For his part, by actually completing his journey, Central Hill implies some kind of unity amongst the "clans" he visits -- he deposits his 'sons' in various places and they go about instructing the 'world' in one language. The implication is avoided, however, in what would otherwise appear a paradoxical episode. It is Central Hill's sons who, in fact, insist that he move on and settle down in the estate of but one "clan", the "clan" that will henceforth name him their principal totem. Central Hill separates from his sons and withdraws, now being as remote and incommunicable as were the other "clans" before his journey. It is not without significance that it is Central Hill, not Dimimba, who is the tale's only non-human character, 'alien' with respect to the 'clans' he connects.

The mythological conclusion, 'separate and withdraw', is obviously one that can readily be translated into behaviour. And if we are to take the Australians' myths of the Macassans as intellectual attempts to come to terms with these visitors seriously, then 'separate and withdraw' is exactly what we would expect them to have done.