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# HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE OJIBWA MIDEWIWIN

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# PRESERVING THE SACRED

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## MICHAEL ANGEL

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA PRESS

## THREE

# MIDEWIWIN ORIGINS: ANISHINAABE AND EURO-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES



The central concern of the Mide oral tradition was with origins: the creation of the world and of man, the origin of death, the introduction of the Midewiwin, and the ancestral origins of the Ojibwa people.<sup>1</sup>

### **Anishinaabe Perspectives: Midewiwin Origin Narratives**

Although Midewiwin origin narratives may vary according to time, place, occasion, and the person telling the tale, they all share common assumptions concerning the nature and purpose of life. All are deeply rooted in an Anishinaabe world view, in which manidoog and visions play an important role in providing the Anishinaabeg with blessings or powers to live a long life. Midewiwin origin narratives were (and still are) recited by Mide elders during each Midewiwin ceremony.<sup>2</sup> The origin narratives and, indeed, the larger cycle of narratives of which they form a part, together with the rituals of the Midewiwin, provide the means by which the Ojibwa can live "the good life to the fullest."<sup>3</sup>

The fact that the Midewiwin was an integral part of Ojibwa cosmology signals that it played a different role from that of Jiisakiiwin or the

Waabanowiwin ceremonies with which it is often compared. All three provided their practitioners with special powers, which were widely used in Ojibwa society.<sup>4</sup> However, within the Midewiwin, these special powers were gained as part of a process that also taught them the meaning of life and death, their place in the universe, and the origins of the Ojibwa people. In other words, it was more than just another ceremony, for it provided an institutional setting for the teaching of the world view (religious beliefs) of the Ojibwa people.

The popular connotation of "myth," the term by which they are often known, contains the implication that such narratives have nothing to do with the real world. Euro-American scholars have long studied such narratives, or "myths," since these myths contained the deepest expressions of truth that were held by a society.<sup>5</sup> Many twentieth-century social scientists have begun to understand myths within the context of the local environment and local social processes, often seeing in them a legitimization of social institutions. Other scholars have used the study of myths to analyze the human mind, seeing in them examples of how humans have attempted to deal with the ambiguities of the universe and society. Literary scholar Northrop Frye has argued that myths not only shaped community identity, but also shaped the way people looked at the living and non-living world.<sup>6</sup> Until relatively recently, scholars virtually ignored them as sources of factual evidence. Yet such narratives, as Africanist Jan Vansina and successive authors have shown, can sometimes provide useful clues to the historical past if certain precautions are taken.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the Midewiwin narratives are not concerned with a Western linear notion of time, nor are they concerned with the date when the Midewiwin began. As Nicholas Deleary, an Ojibwa follower of the Midewiwin, has stated, "past events are remembered for their symbolic meaning rather than as mere chronological dates."<sup>8</sup>

It must be remembered that the Ojibwa sacred narratives, or *aadizookaanag*, were part of the oral tradition of the people. As such, they followed certain conventions that distinguished them from ordinary communication, and from the written word. Moreover, the oral nature of the narratives shaped how these texts were interpreted by the Ojibwa, and the role that they played in Ojibwa society.<sup>9</sup> Above all, the narratives were considered sacred and their transmission was considered a very special, holy act, which had tremendous significance for the life of the community. The telling of these narratives by Ojibwa elders was first and foremost a "verbal art," which took place in a social setting. The "storyteller" was both a holy man and a teacher, who transformed the story to meet his and his audience's

needs, even while keeping within certain prescribed formats. Thus, a short version was considered sufficient in the training of a candidate for the first degree, but more elaborate narratives were used in the ceremonies related to higher degrees.<sup>10</sup> The primary function of the narratives was didactic, illustrating the process through which the Midewiwin arose and how it could benefit individuals and the Anishinaabe people as a whole, so exact wording was not essential. What was of primary importance was the process. Nevertheless, the core elements of the narratives remain relatively stable.<sup>11</sup>

There appear to be two, relatively distinct, traditions in the Midewiwin narratives: in the first, the agent who brings the Midewiwin to the Anishinaabeg is a *manidoo* or *Nanabozho*; in the second, the secrets of the Midewiwin are revealed to a human, who then passes on his knowledge to his/her fellow Anishinaabeg. In fact, the Ojibwa themselves would not have made such distinctions, since the gift of the Midewiwin to the Anishinaabeg was always traced back ultimately to an "other-than-human" source. Only the details differed; some versions concentrated on the reasons the Midewiwin came into being, while others concentrated more on how it was transmitted to the Anishinaabeg, and who the messenger, or *oshkaabewis*, was.

Many of the narratives that have been written down and published attribute the origin of the Midewiwin to *Nanabozho* alone, or in conjunction with *Gichi-Manidoo*, or with some other *manidoo*. The Midewiwin narratives usually occur toward the end of a cycle of narratives concerning *Nanabozho*, a version of which was related in the previous chapter. To recapitulate, in these narratives, the Underwater *manidoog* kill a wolf who is *Nanabozho*'s brother (cousin, son, grandson), so *Nanabozho* seeks revenge and kills their leader.<sup>12</sup> The surviving Underwater *manidoog* then flood the world, but *Nanabozho* escapes by climbing a tree or building a raft, and sends down an animal (usually a muskrat) to bring back mud and re-create the world, after which he creates the Anishinaabeg.<sup>13</sup>

At this point in the cycle of narratives, *Nanabozho* usually becomes involved in founding the Midewiwin, having created the Anishinaabeg from earth and placed them on the island he had fashioned from the mud brought up to him by Muskrat. In some versions *Nanabozho* himself brings the Midewiwin to the Anishinaabeg; in others the *manidoog* meet in council and try to appease *Nanabozho* by offering him the Midewiwin for the Anishinaabeg.<sup>14</sup> In what may be the earliest extant version circa 1800, *Mishibizhii* (*Mishibeshu*), the *ogimaa* of the Underwater *manidoog*, initiates the peace-making gesture himself.<sup>15</sup> In some other versions, the first humans disappear after they have been created, so *Nanabozho* realizes he

must ensure that the Anishinaabeg learn to live with other beings in the cosmos if they are to survive.<sup>16</sup> The Anishinaabeg must learn how to seek assistance from the manidoog, and how to make offerings to them.

Two of the most widely cited versions of the Midewiwin origin narratives include Warren's transcription dating from the 1830s or 1840s, and Hoffman's transcription from the 1890s.<sup>17</sup> While these two versions have come to represent Midewiwin origin narratives, there is no evidence that they were more representative than any other. It may well be that they have been preserved in print form as a matter of chance.

Warren's version is as follows:

While our forefathers were living on the great salt water toward the rising sun, the great Megis (sea-shell),<sup>18</sup> showed itself above the surface of the great water, and the rays of the sun for a long period were reflected from its glossy back. It gave warmth and light to the An-ish-in-aub-ag (red race). All at once it sank into the deep, and for a time our ancestors were not blessed with its light. It rose to the surface and appeared again on the great river which drains the water of the Great Lakes, and again for a long time it gave life to our forefathers, and reflected back the rays of the sun. Again it disappeared from sight and it rose not, till it appeared to the eyes of the An-ish-in-aub-ag on the shores of the first great lake. Again it sank from sight, and death daily visited the wigwams of our forefathers, till it showed its back, and reflected the rays of the sun once more at Bow-e-ting (Sault Ste. Marie). Here it remained for a long time, but once more, and for the last time, it disappeared, and the An-ish-in-aub-ag was left in darkness and misery, till it floated and once more showed its bright back at Mo-ning-wun-a-kaun-ing (La Pointe Island), where it has since reflected back the rays of the sun, and blessed our ancestors with life, light, and wisdom. Its rays reach the remotest village of the wide spread Ojibways.<sup>19</sup>

This tale, as the narrator went on to explain, traces the movement of the Ojibwa people from their original homeland somewhere along the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, up the St. Lawrence, through the Great Lakes to Bowating, and then to Chequamegon (La Pointe or Madeline Island). The migration is explained in the context of the Midewiwin's having been granted to the Ojibwa in order to protect them from illness and misery.<sup>20</sup> Warren's source for his version was probably Flat Mouth, the Pillager chief from Leech Lake, who also provided Nicollet (and thus Schoolcraft) with much of his information on the Midewiwin.<sup>21</sup> Flat Mouth's family origins are not known,<sup>22</sup> but the Pillagers apparently originated from among the northern bands of the Boundary Waters area, who pushed south and west

against the Sioux, eventually occupying the area around Red Lake and Leech Lake.<sup>23</sup>

Whether Flat Mouth was part of the northern or southern groups, he nevertheless was a participant in the westward migration of the Ojibwa. In fact, Flat Mouth and the Pillagers saw their village as the latest stopping point of the Midewiwin, and in later versions of the tale, the last stopping point was Leech Lake. Perhaps they felt they were approaching yet another period of "darkness and misery," since the Sioux continued to attack from the west and they were increasingly pressed from the east by the Americans. The supply of big-game animals had diminished, the fur trade no longer provided them with goods they had come to depend on, and epidemic diseases had taken a toll. Many Ojibwa, including Flat Mouth himself, temporarily abandoned the teachings of the Midewiwin and embraced the teachings of the Shawnee Prophet, and, as Tanner's narrative indicates, other minor prophets who were also active during this period.<sup>24</sup>

These prophets and their prophecies reflect the growing sense of powerlessness that many Ojibwa felt at the time—particularly in relation to the increasing number of Euro-Americans. For this reason, they often incorporated portions of the Christian message into the stories in the hope of obtaining some of the power associated with the Christian religious figures. Yet, they remained strongly rooted within the ancient visionary tradition, and whatever the prophets may have borrowed from Christian sources was placed within the traditional Anishinaabe world view. The Pillagers and other bands of western Ojibwa, despite growing pressures on them in the nineteenth century, were considerably more independent than most of their brethren to the east, who had borne the brunt of Euro-American advances. Thus, they continued to place their faith in the power of the Midewiwin and the Mide elders.

Warren mentioned in his book that there was another tale told by the Mide elders of Fond du Lac, in which, instead of the miigis, it was Otter who was said to preside over the Mide rites.<sup>25</sup> The following account from a Midewiwin origin narrative is Sikas'sige's (one of Hoffman's informants) explanation of a Mille Lacs chart,<sup>26</sup> but it is probably quite similar to the tale mentioned by Warren.

When Mi'nabo'zho descended to the earth to give to the Ani'shina'beg the Mide'wiwin, he left with them this chart, Mide'wigwas'. Kit'shi Man'ido saw that his people on earth were without the means of protecting themselves against disease and death, so he sent Mi'nabo'zho to give to them the sacred gift. Mi'nabo'zho appeared over the waters and

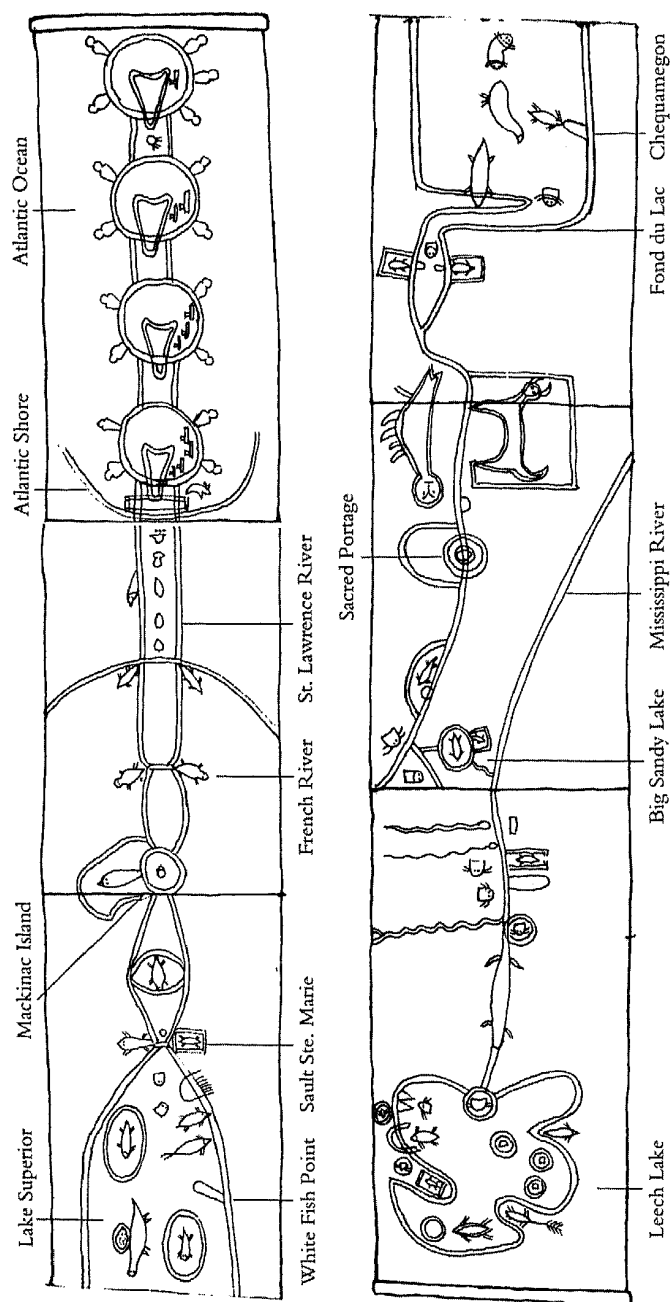


Illustration 2: Redsky's Migration Chart. Charts such as this illustrated both the story of the granting of the Midewiwin to the Ojibwa people, and the gradual migration westward of the Ojibwa people, as explained in the sacred narratives retold by William Warren in his *History of the Ojibway People*. (Redrawn from drawing by B. Nemeth. From Dewdney, *Sacred Scrolls*, 47-48. Courtesy of University of Toronto Press/Glenbow Museum.)

while reflecting in what manner he should be able to communicate with people, he heard something laugh, just as an otter sometimes cries out. He saw something black appear upon the waters in the west which immediately disappeared beneath the surface again. Then it came up at the northern horizon, which pleased Mi'nabo'zho, as he thought he now saw someone through whom he might convey the information with which he had been charged by Ki'tshi Man'ido. When the black object disappeared beneath the waters at the north to reappear in the east, Mi'nabo'zho desired it would come to him in the middle of the waters, but it disappeared to make its reappearance in the south, where it again sank out of sight to reappear in the west when Mi'nabo'zho asked it to approach the center where there was an island, which it did.

Then Ni'gik [Otter] asked Mi'nabo'zho, "Why do you come to this place?" Then the latter said, "I have pity on the An'shina'beg and wish to give them life; Ki'tshi Man'ido gave me the power to confer the means of protecting themselves against sickness and death, and through you I will give them Mide'wiwin, and teach them the sacred rites."

Then Mi'nabo'zho built a Mide'wigan in which he instructed the Otter in all the mysteries of the Mide'wiwin. The Otter sat before the door of the Mide'wigan four days, sunning himself, after which he approached the entrance where his progress was arrested by seeing two bad spirits guarding it. Through the powers possessed by Mi'nabo'zho he was enabled to pass these; when he entered the sacred lodge, the first object he beheld being the sacred stone against which those who were sick were to be seated, or laid, when undergoing the ceremonial of restoring them to health. He next saw a post painted red with a green band around the top. A sick man would also have to pray to the stone and to the post, when he is within the Mide'wigan, because within them would be the Mide spirits whose help he invoked.<sup>27</sup>

Sikas'sige had received a copy of the migration chart, upon which the tale is based, from the senior Mide at Mille Lacs in 1830, when, as a young boy, he had been received into the first degree of the Midewiwin.<sup>28</sup> Since the tale undoubtedly was originally told for instruction purposes, it provides a better context than the previous tale, of which, Warren had indicated, he had only transcribed that portion that had struck him most forcefully. The direct appearance of Gichi-Manidoo in Sikas'sige's version might at first appear to indicate a later Christian influence, since Gichi-Manidoo came to be identified with the Christian God, but this is not necessarily the case, since there are good arguments that the concept could have been either pre-contact or post-contact.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, despite their similarities, and some possible Christian influences, there are significant internal differences in the two versions transcribed by Warren and Hoffman. Most obvious is the fact that the *miigis* was replaced in the second version by the otter. Since the *miigis* was symbolic of the Midewiwin in general, while the otter represented the first degree, it is possible that the second tale was specific to the initiation ceremony for the first degree. However, Hoffman declared that the northern bands used Otter as their guide<sup>30</sup> and the southern bodies believed in the *miigis*. Dewdney made yet another division. Taking into account some twentieth-century sources, he suggested that in the southern Mide tradition, Otter acted as the messenger of the Midewiwin, while among northerners this role was filled by the more dangerous Bear.<sup>31</sup>

Sikas'sige's version of the origin narrative appears to neglect the westward movement of the Midewiwin and the Ojibwa people, but the migration is spelled out in more detail in the migration chart that served as a mnemonic aid to the elders who recited the tale. This particular migration chart simply represented the resting spots of the Midewiwin as dots on a line, but Sikas'sige was able to explain to Hoffman the geographical locations of each of these "dots." While not comprehensive, Sikas'sige's commentary provides the earliest and most complete listing of place names available. His commentary has been corroborated and supplemented by migration charts found in the Mille Lacs papers interpreted by Thomas Vennum in his article on the migration songs of the Midewiwin.<sup>32</sup>

In his analysis of these and other migration charts, Vennum makes the point that the locations vary considerably since the Mide elder who compiled them invariably made his own village the final (western) resting point. In this way, the Mide elders "establish certain local manidoog as intercessors in the curing rites as well as endow nearby landmarks with sacred attributes."<sup>33</sup> The relative scarcity of names in the eastern portion of the migration no doubt reflects the fact that no migration charts exist for areas to the east of La Pointe. However, this should not lead us to believe, as Dewdney argued, that La Pointe was thus the actual site where the Midewiwin originated. Dewdney appears to have based his argument mainly on the Mide Loon Foot's chart that he had shown to Kohl.<sup>34</sup> As Blessing has pointed out, other charts make it even clearer that La Pointe was simply one stop (albeit an important one) where the Midewiwin was made known in the Ojibwa's westward migration.<sup>35</sup>

The relative scarcity of origin narratives among eastern Ojibwa may reflect how little anyone knows (Euro-American and Aboriginal alike) about the early history of the Anishinaabeg, and, specifically, about the people

who were to become known historically as the Ojibwa. It also may result from the fact that many of the more eastern Ojibwa (or Mississauga, as they were often known in Upper Canada and the lower Michigan peninsula) found themselves uprooted, and in many cases were converted to Christianity much earlier than their western brethren. The leaders and many band members in these regions became adherents of one of the several Christian denominations that undertook missionary work among the people of the Great Lakes region. At a time when the Ojibwa of the southwest were beginning to identify themselves as Ojibwa in the context of Midewiwin narratives, many of the eastern Ojibwa converts, such as Peter Jones, George Copway, Peter Jacobs, and Allen Salt, were in the process of writing about the "Ojibwa nation" within a Christian context.<sup>36</sup> While the Midewiwin was still practised by the eastern Ojibwa during the nineteenth century, its adherents no longer played a central role in the affairs of most bands, except for those among bands in the upper Michigan peninsula and further west. Although some descriptions of the Midewiwin in the former areas exist, there are no transcriptions of any of their narratives, nor do any of their written records from the nineteenth century match those found for other areas.<sup>37</sup>

In another cycle of Midewiwin origin narratives, two new and seemingly unconnected elements were introduced. Most, although not all, of these narratives were collected in the Boundary Waters area of Minnesota in the twentieth century. This may account for some of their variations, since they differ in location and time. Certainly, there are implicit elements of Christianity in some of the most recent narratives. Nevertheless, the essential message continued to be that sickness and death would always be with the Anishinaabeg, but their effects could be mitigated through the Midewiwin, so that people could have a long and good life.

Whereas, in the earlier narratives, it was either the *miigis* or Otter who was responsible for bringing the Midewiwin to the Anishinaabeg, in many of these later narratives Gichi-Manidoo and the *miigis* ask Bear to be the messenger (*oshkaabewis*). The first portion of these narratives describes the journey of Bear westward with his Mide medicine bundle, stopping at various points to establish the Midewiwin. As with the previous versions, the last stopping point is usually the locality in which the Midewiwin is being performed. In some versions, Bear is forced to "break through" a barrier or barriers, prefiguring portions of the Midewiwin ceremony as it was enacted. Various Mide manidoog join him in order to help create new Mide ceremonials, and show how the ceremonies are to be carried out.

The second portion of this cycle of narratives involves a human intermediary in the process. Although the person is not identified in the following version given to Densmore, the narrator does explain the presence of human intermediaries in this cycle:

So the East Manido was selected to go among these Indians and teach them. Before he left the others he told them that they must get everything ready and decide how the Mide should be taught to the Indians. Of course the East Manido could not approach the Indians in his spirit form, so he was born of an old woman who had lived with her husband all her life but had no children.<sup>38</sup>

In other versions of this cycle, a young boy, who is usually called Cutfoot or sometimes Odaemin, receives instructions regarding the Midewiwin.<sup>39</sup> In Basil Johnston's version, the boy has died from a deadly disease and has been restored to life by Nanabozho. He is then given instructions on how to make use of herbal remedies for healing. The boy grows old, and passes on his power and skills to a young man so that the Anishinaabeg will always have the gift of life. In Ojibwa elder James Redsky's (Esquekesik) version, the young man is taken across the ocean by Nanabozho. There, the teachings are imparted to him, he returns, and transmits his powers to other Anishinaabeg.

In most earlier versions, Cutfoot is given credit for having received these "blessings" in a vision, and passed them on to his fellow Anishinaabeg. One of Ruth Landes's versions focusses on this aspect:

A certain Indian was the only one to be taught Earth midewiwin by a manito. [The manitou] was Shell, and he sent for [Cutfoot]. The Indian, then six or seven years old, was playing on the beach with his elder brother. At night the little boy did not return to the lodge, so the folks asked the elder brother. . . . They sought him many days. . . . Four years the old folks remained at the same place. One afternoon they saw someone walking down the beach. . . . They recognized him immediately. They fed him, of course, and asked him where he had been. He said he had been visiting, but would not say where. . . . Finally his father understood [that the boy had a mystic experience not to be divulged], quit questioning him, and told his wife to do likewise. . . .

After a time, he married and told his wife where he had been, what he had seen and heard. And he said, "I am going to do it. It is called midewiwin." No Indian had heard of it before. . . .

His elder brother became ill. . . . The boy said, "Oh, we'll put him through midewiwin. . . ."

When he finished with him [the elder brother], the boy was up and around, well as ever, except for being a little thin.

From then on, he [the visionary] taught the old men [the shamans] how to perform it. They claim that this is how midewiwin was started among Indians. It is a true story. The man's name was Cutfoot. He and his family lived at Yellow Hammer Beach [Madeline Island]. He had two children.<sup>40</sup>

Landes described another variation wherein Bear cured a woman using the Midewiwin, but there was no hint that she was the original intermediary who brought the Midewiwin to the Anishinaabeg. Landes attributed this to the "fact" that women generally were not visionaries, but it is more likely due to regional variations in the narratives. It is possible to document a number of female Midewiwin leaders, beginning with Schoolcraft's example of Catherine Wambose. More recently, a collection of narratives from the 1890s includes a tale related by Jacques LePique about a young orphan girl who was taken across the water by Gichi Ginebig (Big Snake), where she received the power of the Midewiwin from an old woman and her sons, who were the Four Winds.<sup>41</sup> In yet another twentieth-century version, a young man was taken by Nanabozho across the ocean to some other land, where the teachings were imparted to him. He then transmitted his power to other Anishinaabeg.<sup>42</sup>

Although there are numerous variations, all these narratives include a human intermediary who introduced the Midewiwin to his or her fellow Anishinaabeg. In some instances, the person had been sick, was physically impaired, or even dead and raised to life. In most, but not all, cases, the teachings and power appeared to the person in a vision. In most of the versions, there was considerable emphasis on rules and regulations for joining the Midewiwin, instructions about the ceremony itself, and rules for living a good life.

Commentators have tended to focus on the visionary aspect of these narratives. Vecsey suggests that this group of renditions of the origin narrative may represent a connection between the Midewiwin and the tradition as represented by the vision quest. In Vecsey's view, the Mide myths, as he terms them, are "stories about the gods coming to individual Indians with the promise of guardianship through the Midewiwin. Unlike traditional visionary patterns, however, in the Midewiwin myths the visionary is able to pass on the gift of the vision of the Midewiwin itself to the immediate community, and ultimately to all the Ojibwa people."<sup>43</sup>

Vecsey's interpretation suggests that at some time in the past, the Midewiwin began to supplant visionary experiences as a means of obtaining

“blessings” or power from the *manidoog*—presumably when some individual received a vision empowering him or her to pass on this knowledge to other members of the community. While in normal circumstances such actions were forbidden, there are other occasions when it probably occurred. Thus, for instance, the *Waabanowiwin*, which is sometimes considered to be an offshoot of the *Midewiwin*, in some traditions is said to have been started by a young man who had a dream after his father had refused to allow him to join the *Midewiwin*. It is impossible to date this event, but it may have been during the eighteenth century. Similarly, the *Drum Dance*, which appeared in the late nineteenth century at a time when the *Midewiwin* was declining in influence, arose when a young Sioux girl had a vision regarding the power of the drum to revitalize the Aboriginal people. The *Drum Dance* was taken up in large numbers by the Ojibwa as well—even though the Sioux were still their enemies.<sup>44</sup> It would appear likely, therefore, that Vecsey is wrong, since visionary experiences continued to play an important role in Ojibwa society, and within the *Midewiwin*, for that matter.

Dewdney has argued that powerful *Mide* officials perverted *Midewiwin* rites by relying more on their visionary powers, and that the practitioners of the *Midewiwin* attempted to harness the power of the more dangerous spirits by absorbing them into *Mide* rites and ceremonies, thus giving themselves more power.<sup>45</sup> Dewdney envisaged a situation wherein the *Midewiwin* among the Ojibwa became increasingly corrupted as it moved northwards to regions where a visionary tradition persisted.

Like many other observers, Dewdney subscribed to the view that there was an “orthodox” *Midewiwin*. In his interpretation, this orthodoxy developed out of *La Pointe/Chequamegon* and spread southwestward. Deviant forms developed among other groups of Ojibwa. Orthodoxy, however, is a concept more applicable to Euro-American religions than to those of the *Anishinaabeg*. I would suggest that notions of orthodoxy only developed when the *Midewiwin* was already in decline, and practitioners had begun to adopt Christian concepts as a weapon that could be used by the *Mideg* in their struggle against further assimilation.

Dewdney’s explanation ignores several important aspects of the role of visionaries in Ojibwa society. Visionaries who had had their power demonstrated and verified by the elders were bound to use it when asked. Since visionaries received their power to use “good and bad medicine” from a particular tutelary spirit, they had little choice in how this power was used. If they accepted the guardianship of a *manidoo* such as *Mishibizhii*, they were obliged to use “bad medicine” when asked—even if they did not want to do

so. If they didn’t, they risked losing all their powers. The two-edged nature of this “power” is indicated by the myth in which a man gained the power to perform marvellous cures from *Mishibizhii*, only to have his own wife and children die.<sup>46</sup> It was understood as a condition of life that power gained through visions could have both good and bad effects.

It must also be understood that candidates for the *Midewiwin* were initially required to have a vision. In the case of children, the sponsor would have a vision indicating that the *manidoog* were open to their candidacy and would ultimately confer on them the required power. Nicollet noted in his discussions with Flat Mouth in the 1830s that this system had become open to abuses.<sup>47</sup> Flat Mouth himself had been one of those responsible for instituting a reform that required two people to have a similar vision regarding a potential candidate before he or she could be considered. By the 1880s, when Hoffman was doing his research, the reforms appear to have been no longer in effect, since Hoffman suggested that an applicant could ask the *Mide* officials for permission to purchase a *miigis*, and if this was successful, then the procedures were the same for both types of candidates.<sup>48</sup> In later accounts, however, there are numerous references to visions being important for anyone who wished to gain sufficient power to function as a *Mide*.

Even in the 1930s, when Ruth Landes was doing much of her field research, visions were considered essential if one wished to be a “genuine” *Mide* official. The visionary experiences of these *Mide* officials no doubt help explain some of the continuing variations in both the origin narratives and ceremonial rituals. As Landes observes, “It seems reasonable to infer that the Ojibwa divergences from their older recorded forms were expedited by the people’s devotion to visions [even if] the Indians always said they were transferring faithfully the teachings of past times.”<sup>49</sup>

The foregoing examples indicate that there was an ongoing creative tension between the visionary tradition, and the formal tradition of passing on knowledge through the institution of the *Midewiwin*. As with all things in *Anishinaabe* life, the two need not, nor should not, be seen in dialectical opposition. Rather, they existed side by side, providing complementary ways of obtaining knowledge and, ultimately, power.

It could also be argued that origin narratives in which human intermediaries played a major role may also represent an adaptation of the concept of the Christian saviour. However, while there was undoubtedly a growing knowledge of Christian beliefs among the more easterly bands of Ojibwa, it must also be remembered that the role of *oshkaabewis* as messenger was well established in other aspects of *Anishinaabe* society.<sup>50</sup> It is more likely



that Mide visions during this period occurred in the context of the vision experiences of the leaders of revitalization movements such as that of the Shawnee Prophet. So strong was the appeal of some of these movements that even some Ojibwa Mide leaders such as Flat Mouth temporarily renounced their belief in the Midewiwin and threw away their *biinjigoosan* (personal medicine bags) in order to follow the teachings of the Shawnee Prophet.<sup>51</sup>

A Mide origin story collected by Schoolcraft appears to fall into this category, since it contains elements common both to Christian beliefs and to the revitalization movements:

About this time, a person in the shape of a human being came down from the sky; his clothing was exceedingly pure and white. . . .

This divine messenger then gave to the Indians laws and rules, whereby they should be guided: first, to love and fear *Kezha Monedo*, and next that they must love one another. . . . He then instituted the grand medicine or *metay we win* dance: this ceremony was to be observed annually, and with due solemnity, and the Indians, said *Nabinoi*, experienced much good from it; but unfortunately the foolish young men were cheated by *Mache Monedo* who caused them to adopt the *Wabano* dance . . . and this was finally introduced into the *metay we wining* (ie. medicine dance) and thereby corrupted it.<sup>52</sup>

The above tale, Schoolcraft tells us, was originally collected from an old Ojibwa chief, *Nabinoi*, from the Sault Ste. Marie (Bowating) region, by Schoolcraft's brother-in-law, George Johnson, in the early part of the nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, no further information is given about *Nabinoi*. Many of Johnson's and Schoolcraft's informants were Christian converts, but in this case we are not told if this was so. We also have no way of knowing whether it was originally related in Ojibwa, although this is probable since Johnson was part Ojibwa himself, and was employed as an interpreter. Presumably Johnson translated it into English, although Schoolcraft may have altered the text. It is impossible to determine to what extent the narration was altered by Johnson and/or Schoolcraft. Although Ojibwa freely adopted Christian concepts in their narratives when such additions were seen to be useful, the allusions in this story may well have been Schoolcraft's glosses or the work of the original storytellers.<sup>54</sup> Schoolcraft professed to do everything possible to maintain the structure and content of the original narratives, but his versions betray his own literary aesthetics and philosophical beliefs.<sup>55</sup>

Schoolcraft's version of the origin of the Midewiwin, although it could be one of the earliest recorded, is interlaced with Judeo-Christian themes. Ojibwa visions usually took the form of animals, not humans, and even messengers wouldn't normally be dressed in white. However, the vision had many features similar to a vision received by Neolin, the Delaware Prophet, in 1762, particularly its emphasis on the renewal of rituals.<sup>56</sup> It is possible that *Nabinoi* had come into contact with the Delaware Prophet's message, or had heard the version from someone who had. However, since Neolin's vision was well known to Schoolcraft (he translated it for inclusion in *Algic Researches*), it is also possible that Schoolcraft altered *Nabinoi*'s tale to make it conform more closely to that of Neolin. Certainly, the glosses about *Kezha Monedo* and *Machi Monedo*, and the excesses of the *Waabano*, all point to the hand of Schoolcraft, who was anxious to highlight what he considered to be the dualism of Ojibwa religion.

There is another cycle of origin narratives, collected by Jones at Garden River from an undisclosed informant around the turn of the century, which does not fall into either of the two major Midewiwin traditions.<sup>57</sup> The cycle begins with *Nanabozho* and his brother creating human beings and then *manidoog* to whom the *Anishinaabeg* could turn for help. Since the people must eventually die, it was decreed that *Nanabozho*'s younger brother would die, so that he could look after the souls of those who had died. Thus far, the themes are relatively similar to the previous narratives. However, the main tale centres on a mythic contest of powers between *Mighty One* (a *Potawatomi* of the Eagle clan) and *Black Tail of a Fish* (an Ojibwa of the Bullhead clan). *Mighty One*, who was said to be one of the first humans, received his power from the Underwater *manidoog*, while *Black Tail* was said to be an Underwater *manidoo*. In the contest, *Black Tail* used his mystic power to kill *Mighty One*'s wife and children, but then made peace. The *manidoog* of four directions, and those of above and below, hearing of the contest, came to learn about the Midewiwin and gain its medicines. Coming to *Black Tail*, they gave him goods and tobacco, saying:

"Pray, do you give us of your medicine and songs, that you may impart to us knowledge of everything we desire of you."

Now said *Black-Tail-of-a-Fish*: "Thus shall it be as long as the world lasts, from a great distance shall (the people) go to ask for medicine and songs, in just this way as you six have come."

Now, therefore, was *Nanabushu* nearly ready to complete the various forms of the mystic rite that were to be. . . .

Thereupon did *Black-Tail-of-a-Fish* set to work giving away the medicine; and in a while the kettle-drum and the (bear-hide) case (for

the drum) did he give the men; when he had given them everything, it was then that he began to sing to them. And when they had learned (the songs), he then spoke to them, saying: "You shall not go back home. You (are the ones who) shall go forth to carry the mystic rite [Midewiwin] into different places. . . ."

Truly went they into the four directions from whence blow the winds, and to the other side of the underworld, and yonder into the sky. It was then that thence departed Black-Tail-of-a-Fish to go to where Mighty-One was. In a while he went into where he was. Lo, he was smiled upon by him. Black-Tail-of-a-Fish was told by him: "No longer do you anger me. How could you anger me, when you really did not kill those children of mine? Simply to another land have they gone. After a while I shall go to where those children of mine are. And the same thing shall happen with you as with me when we leave this world. In after-time it shall come to pass that till the end of the world the people will sometimes strive against one another, with their children up for a wager."<sup>58</sup>

In another tale in this cycle, Mighty One died and, as predicted, his body became "magic paint," which provided his granddaughter with great power. She later conceived a boy child, to whom Black Tail (before he, too, died and became "magic paint") passed on the knowledge of the Midewiwin, including numerous Mide songs, which are spelled out in detail. The young boy in turn grew old as a result of singing the songs. And he spoke to the people, saying:

"Such is the length of time that the world shall last. O ye people! I too shall soon depart hence. Off over this way from whence comes the morning shall I (go to) harken to the people. And in future time, while the babe is yet bound to the cradle-board, is when I shall be the first to be called upon by them that wish to perform the mystic rite. And by them whose child has died shall I be called upon. This is all that I have to say to you, O ye people! I am the Red-looking-One, according to the name that I have been given. It is now for you to go back home. This, no doubt, shall suffice the people as long as the world shall last. From no other place shall magic medicine ever be derived."<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the most significant element in this tale is the fact that it centres on a power duel between two rival Mideg. Power struggles were an integral part of Anishinaabe life. However, they appear to have become increasingly common in ritualized form towards the end of the nineteenth century, when Ojibwa society was under stress from a number of different quarters. In one part of this tale there is even a hint that the Midewiwin itself had become engaged in a duel with the religion of the Whites. Black Tail

explained "that whites will exist one day, and they will live by the manitous' directions in a way different from the Indians. If they speak ill of Mide, making fun of it, the Thunderers will be angry and destroy towns. All people should regard the mystic rite as manitou."<sup>60</sup>

The duel prefigures parts of the Midewiwin ritual itself—for Mighty One's wife and children die, but are revived into another life. And it is through a similar death and resurrection ritual that new initiates are welcomed into the Midewiwin, and later demonstrate their own mystic powers.<sup>61</sup> While it might be tempting to attribute this theme to Christian influences, it is more likely that the theme is indigenous, since it fits perfectly into the cyclical world view of the Anishinaabeg, which permeated all aspects of their existence.

It is possible to trace significant shifts over time in the Midewiwin narratives' portrayal of specific manidoog, the concepts of good and evil, and the question of the afterlife, although none of these affected the fundamental nature of the Midewiwin. Nevertheless, there are a number of ambiguities in the narratives. Some of these are easily explainable. The degree of detail and the focus of the tale could and did vary, depending upon the intended purpose of the narratives. Those connected with initiation rites for higher levels of the Midewiwin contained additional information not found at lower levels. Most significantly, individual visions of Mide officials personalized the telling of the narratives.

With the coming of the first Euro-Americans, the visions of Anishinaabeg began to change, and Midewiwin narratives also changed—sometimes in ambiguous ways. Anishinaabe Mideg received visions incorporating Christian deities and symbols into the Anishinaabe cosmology and Midewiwin narratives. However, the basic belief structure of the Midewiwin remained intact. As time went on and conditions worsened for the Anishinaabeg, prophets arose who had received visions telling them to renounce the ways of the *Wayaabishkiwed* ("White People") and return to their former lifestyle. There was no single revitalization movement among the Anishinaabeg, but many of them temporarily became followers of such leaders as the Delaware and Shawnee prophets. Other Anishinaabeg received visions that explained that the religion of the Christians was meant for the *Wayaabishkiwed*, while the Midewiwin was intended for the Anishinaabeg. Narratives of Aboriginal converts to Christianity who had died and been refused entry into the Christian heaven (since separate heavens existed for

Aboriginal and White men) circulated widely throughout the nineteenth century among the Anishinaabeg.<sup>62</sup> In the final analysis, most of the Anishinaabe people were impervious to missionary appeals that they renounce their beliefs and practices, and become Christians.

The incorporation of new figures and beliefs (from other tribes and later from Euro-Americans) into Anishinaabe cosmology was a well-established method of dealing with change.<sup>63</sup> However, as a result of the distinctions between Anishinaabeg and Wayaabishkiwed, Midewiwin beliefs and practices began to take on a more exclusivist form, which was alien to traditional Anishinaabe cosmology. This growing exclusivism, which was more closely akin to the revitalization movements than to traditional Anishinaabe beliefs and practices, introduced divisions into Ojibwa communities. So, too, did the acceptance of an exclusivist Christianity by other portions of the Anishinaabe community. The two tendencies ultimately helped set the stage for the development of factionalism in Ojibwa society.

Other ambiguities in the Midewiwin narratives have continued to perplex succeeding generations of Euro-Americans. Simply put, the origin narratives appear to imply that an institution that was established in order to assist the Anishinaabeg to lead the "good life" was done so with the assistance of the forces of evil. In many versions, the narratives tell how Mishibizhii (the ogimaa of the Underwater manidoog) stole the first humans, so Nanabozho decided he would create the Animikiig (Thunderers) in order to watch over them. However, as Theresa Smith explains, in some accounts, the first humans had been created by the Underwater manidoog, and in others by the Underwater manidoog in conjunction with the Thunderers.<sup>64</sup> In at least one tale (recounted by Johann Kohl), they were originally formed like man, but had the scales of a fish.<sup>65</sup> Although Kohl's tale has strong Christian overtones (including a Garden of Eden episode), there is no denying the connections between the Midewiwin and Underwater manidoog and other water creatures. In one sense, it is conceivable that the tale of the Anishinaabeg originally living along the shore of the great salt water might also refer to their mythic origins in the distant past, when they lived in the sea. Certainly, this would tie in with those narratives in which the original humans had scales. There might even be, as Smith speculates, "a rather unsettling kinship between the [Underwater] monsters and the Anishinaabeg."<sup>66</sup> This is certainly suggested in the tale about Mighty One and Black Tail, who is named after a creature from the water, and is sometimes termed an Underwater manidoog.

These narratives sketch a very ambiguous relationship between Mishibizhii and the Underwater manidoog on the one hand, and the

institution of the Midewiwin on the other. After all, the Midewiwin came into existence in order to bring the means of life to the Anishinaabeg. Surely it would have been more "logical" (in Western terms) for the Thunderers to have been associated with the gift of the Midewiwin, since Nanabozho had created them in order to protect the Anishinaabeg from Mishibizhii. But it is precisely this ambiguity of existence that permeates all aspects of the Anishinaabe world view. Nothing is what it seems at first glance: that which may help you survive, may also result in your death, if used in the wrong way, or if used to excess. The evil Mide whom everyone fears may have the power to cure you, while the seemingly friendly stranger may bring death along with his gifts. So it is with all things in life, including the Midewiwin.

Euro-Americans often see the world in terms of dualities: us and them, good and evil, here and there, now and then. Mishibizhii and the other manidoog of the waters, such as snakes, had the potential to do evil, but they were not "evil incarnate" in the same terms as the Christian devil. Mishibizhii cannot be confused with "Matchi-Manitou," whom the Christian missionaries equated with the devil. Not only was he one of a number of manidoog who were considered to be "evil manidoog," but, as has been indicated, he also possessed the capacity for good. Nevertheless, in Smith's words, "he acted as a kind of cosmic bully," who often used his great power to disrupt things and throw creation out of balance, causing the Anishinaabeg to feel "out of control."<sup>67</sup> They were then left with the option of "begging for pity" and making him offerings of tobacco, or of turning to the Thunderers and begging for assistance from Mishibizhii's greatest foe. The important thing was not that one side would ever be the victor, but that everything would remain in balance—and they would feel "in control." In times such as when the pestilence visited them in the east, the time of evil practices at La Pointe described by Warren,<sup>68</sup> or the time when they were forced to give up their lands and settle on reservations, the world was out of balance and the Anishinaabeg felt very much out of control and at risk. Nevertheless, gradually the balance always returned, and with it, the Midewiwin in its positive aspects. Viewed from the perspective of the Anishinaabeg, Mishibizhii's role in the Midewiwin is not so anomalous as it may seem at first.

When the Midewiwin is considered from within the context of the Anishinaabe world view, it is clear that it is an integral part of this world view, rather than an appendage grafted from an alien culture. From the perspective of these narratives, contact with Euro-Americans was important, but it was not world-shattering—whatever the effects of disease, alcoholism, and the loss of their land may have been. Euro-Americans, along with some of their

goods, and some of their views, were gradually incorporated into the Anishinaabe world view. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that explanations of the Midewiwin's origin and purpose began to take on accretions from the Euro-American culture. However, these accretions never altered the fundamental Anishinaabe underpinnings of the Midewiwin.

### **Euro-American Perspectives: The Search for Certainties**

Early Euro-American observers represented a wide variety of beliefs concerning the nature of their world. Although many of them would have professed to be Christians, few, other than the missionaries, practised their beliefs with any diligence, since there were extremely few priests and ministers in the Great Lakes region until the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, most Euro-Americans would have had a better knowledge of basic Christian beliefs than would the average nominal Christian today. While these beliefs would have varied considerably, depending upon the nature of the denomination, most Euro-Americans would have believed in a personal God who was both creator and the source of goodness, and the devil, who was the source of evil. Most believed in the natural sinfulness of humans, and the need to achieve "salvation" here on earth, so that one could reside for eternity in "heaven" after death.

Christians believed themselves to be the "People of the Book," for their beliefs were said to be contained in the writings of the Bible. And while all knowledge about how to lead a good life and achieve salvation could be found in the Bible, there were many disputes over the correct interpretation of what had been written. Members of each group believed themselves to have found the true interpretation and were anxious to convince all others of this "good news." Unlike Anishinaabe religion, which was open to a progressive revelation and was non-proselytizing, the adherents of different branches of Christianity each believed that theirs was the only true religion, and that only they would be spared the fires of eternal damnation.

Upon meeting Aboriginal people in the "new world," Euro-Americans were faced with the need to integrate them into their world view, just as the Anishinaabeg attempted to integrate the Wayaabishkiwed into theirs. Most Euro-Americans regarded these new people as "heathens," since they appeared never to have heard of the Christian gospel. Moreover, Aboriginal people were classed as "savages," since they lived in forests, which Euro-Americans found frightening, practised customs common to "wildmen," and appeared to have neither laws nor morals that conformed to Euro-American standards.<sup>69</sup> With the passage of time, many Euro-Americans

came to believe that Aboriginal people had originally possessed a more highly developed civilization. Some, such as William Warren, suggested they were part of the lost tribes of Israel that had been banished. For Christians, Aboriginal people represented a constant reminder of the work that had yet to be accomplished in bringing God's word to the world, and of what could happen to those who repudiated the gospel. But the task of conversion was difficult. Aboriginal languages were unintelligible, so communication for most was, at best, second-hand through an interpreter. It must also be remembered that Euro-Americans encountered Aboriginal peoples on the latter's territory. While they might have outwardly held on to a belief in their inherent superiority, many Euro-Americans were no doubt frightened by the alien environment in which they found themselves. It should not be surprising, therefore, that early Euro-American descriptions of the Anishinaabeg and their religious ceremonies were strongly coloured by their own world view, and their limited understanding of Anishinaabe life. It would have been as difficult for Euro-Americans to comprehend such concepts as *manidoo*, *miigis*, *bimaadiziwin*, or the significance of drumming and the sweat lodge, as it was for the Anishinaabeg to grasp the meaning of "divine," "atonement," "trinity," or the significance of baptism or communion.<sup>70</sup>

A major problem in using Euro-American reports of the Midewiwin is that they usually referred to only a single aspect of the Midewiwin ceremonies the observer may have witnessed, or was particularly impressed with. Thus, what was described simply as a White Dog Feast, or a sweat lodge ceremony, may well have been part of the Midewiwin ceremonies—or it may have been a separate ceremony, depending upon the context in which it occurred. Since Midewiwin ceremonies usually took place over a period of several days, most observers would have had only brief glimpses of the entire event. Moreover, since observers often disapproved of "Indian" dancing and drumming, they made no effort to distinguish different types, and so often employed an arbitrary generic term for all reported occurrences. In a number of instances, for instance, what was described as loud drumming at "Waabanowiwin" ceremonies most likely took place at Midewiwin ceremonies, since the sound of the Mide water drum would have carried much further than the hand-held "tambourine" form of drum used at Waabanowiwin ceremonies. On the other hand, some ceremonies were described as Midewiwin simply because a payment of fees occurred. However, they could well have been Shaking Tent ceremonies, since Jiisakiwininiwag were also "paid" by people who wanted their assistance in communicating with the *manidoo*.

Even more crucial to how we use these sources is the fact that few observers looked beyond the surface events to understand why the Ojibwa and their neighbours were performing these ceremonies.<sup>71</sup> Clothed in the righteousness of their own beliefs, they preferred to view such ceremonies as representing the work of primitive minds, when, in fact, the Midewiwin was more complex in structure than many of their own Christian ceremonies. Scholars, therefore, need to be as critical of Euro-American sources as they have been of Anishinaabe narratives when trying to understand the Midewiwin.

### Was the Midewiwin an Indigenous Institution?

Early writers on the subject of the Midewiwin generally did not question whether it was a pre-contact or post-contact institution. The issue was only raised with the pioneering and controversial works by ethnohistorian Harold Hickerson in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Hickerson believed that the disruptive effects of European contact had significantly altered Aboriginal cultural expressions. Therefore, the issue of dating had special importance for him. Using an historiographic technique called "negative evidence," he concluded that the Midewiwin could not have existed prior to European contact because it had not been mentioned in any of the earliest documents.<sup>72</sup> Hickerson's conclusions have been accepted by many, though not all, Euro-American ethnohistorians. Many Ojibwa, however, consider his theories to be culturally arrogant as well as inaccurate.<sup>73</sup>

Jennifer Brown and Laura Peers have observed in the critical review attached to the revised edition of Hickerson's *The Chippewa and Their Neighbours* (1988 reprinted edition) that negative evidence does not offer a definitive and conclusive argument. This is particularly true with respect to the study of the Midewiwin if one broadens one's collection of sources to include scrolls and other artifacts. For instance, Mide artifacts collected by the Glenbow Museum strongly suggest that the Midewiwin was practised as far west as Saskatchewan during the nineteenth century, despite the fact that there are only scattered written references to this fact.

Even in the eighteenth century, when the first documents mentioned the Midewiwin by name or implication, most Euro-Americans had little comprehension of what they were trying to describe, and constantly confused or conflated the various Ojibwa ceremonies. Moreover, Hickerson was obliged to recognize that some of his nineteenth-century sources, such as the Protestant missionary William Boutwell, were biased in their statements about Ojibwa religion.<sup>74</sup> It is interesting to note that even though

Boutwell and his colleagues lived in what has been described as the "Midewiwin heartland," they made only a few references to it. If our history of the Midewiwin in the nineteenth century were based solely on these sources, the ceremony would have received only a passing notice! Yet Ojibwa narratives and Mide scrolls collected from this region during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggest that it was regularly practised and formed an integral part of Ojibwa community life.

Moreover, there is still room for further interpretation of the old sources. For instance, Hennepin, in his "A Continuation of the New Discovery," mentioned in passing that the people around the Great Lakes "believe that there is a Master of Life, as they call him, but hereof they make various applications; some of them have a lean Raven, which they carry always along with them, and which they say is the Master of their Life; others have an Owl, and some again a Bone, a Sea-Shell or some such thing."<sup>75</sup>

The *miigis*, in the form of a seashell, as has been seen, played a crucial role in both the oral traditions concerning the Midewiwin and the ceremonies themselves, and is not connected with any other Anishinaabe ceremony. It would seem likely that this chance remark indicates that some form of Midewiwin ceremonies was being practised at that time. Similarly, the remark concerning a use of a bone probably referred to a healing ceremony involving a *Nenaandawiiwed* (sucking bone doctor). Conversely, Hennepin's comments could well have been referring to the *biinjigoosan* (sacred medicine bundle) used in the Midewiwin. The skins of birds and animals were used for the different degrees, and the bundles contained several sacred objects, including bones and a *miigis*.

Hennepin then went on to note, "As for their Opinion concerning the Earth, they make use of a Name of a certain Genius, whom they call *Micaboche*, who has cover'd the whole Earth with water (as they imagine) and relate innumerable fabulous Tales, some of which have a Kind of analogy with the Universal Deluge."<sup>76</sup> In his work on the Midewiwin, Hoffman rightly made the connection in this quote with the Midewiwin origin myths in which *Nanabozho* gives the Midewiwin to the Anishinaabeg.

Hickerson chose to dwell at length on another description (from Jacques Marquette, a seventeenth-century French missionary explorer), which Hoffman had quoted: "When I arriv'd there, I was very glad to see a great Cross set up in the middle of the Village, adorn'd with several White Skins, Red Girdles, Bows and Arrows, which that good People had offer'd to the Great Manitou, to return him their Thanks for the care he had taken of them during the Winter, and that he granted them a prosperous Hunting.

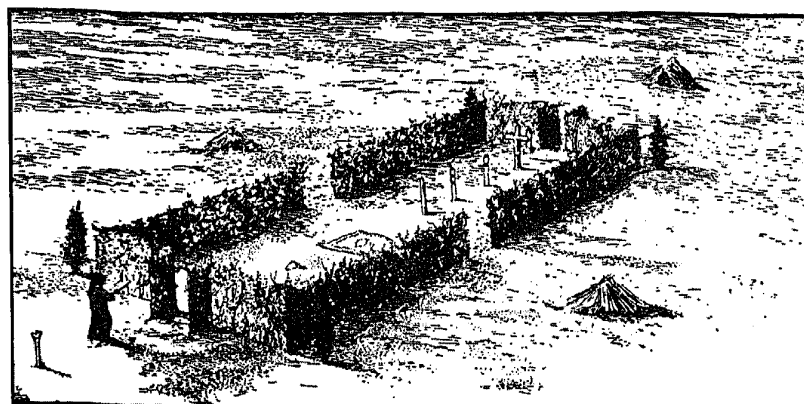


Illustration 3: View of a 4th-degree Midewiwin Lodge. The roof has been removed in order to indicate the four Mide posts, including the 4th-degree cross that has been the subject of considerable controversy over whether it indicated a post-Christian influence. (From Hoffman, "Grand Medicine Society," 256.)

Manitou, is the Name they give in general to all Spirits whom they think to be above the Nature of Man."<sup>77</sup>

Hoffman had noted that, while Marquette appears to think that the cross was a Christian one, it really was a Midewiwin medicine pole of the fourth degree, which had been erected for entirely different reasons. This is discounted out of hand by Hickerson, who attempted to prove that the cross had, in fact, been left there by previous French missionaries.<sup>78</sup> Hickerson implied that the cross used as a mark of the fourth-degree Midewiwin had been appropriated from Christian sources. He did not consider that this symbol might already have meaning in Ojibwa cosmology. It is possible that the cross had been left by some French missionaries, since it was their practice to erect them in prominent places, while members of the Midewiwin who had been initiated into one of the degrees normally placed their medicine poles in secluded spots known only to them. Nevertheless, the practice of garlanding them with skins and ribbons, and painting them in different colours, is definitely related to all degrees of the Midewiwin. Moreover, there is another ancient tradition of erecting medicine poles beside houses in which the occupant had had a dream and the strength of the vision was in him or her. In the spring the owner would hold a feast, and the guests who wished a long life would bring tobacco and a garment, which they would tie to the pole.<sup>79</sup> The erection of decorated poles, in the

form of crosses, or otherwise, was hardly new to the Anishinaabeg. Furthermore, the concept of four corners, sides, or directions was a fundamental feature of Ojibwa cosmology. Whether the cross in question was Christian does little to prove or disprove the antiquity of the Midewiwin itself.<sup>80</sup>

The third reason that Hickerson gave for considering the Midewiwin to be a post-contact institution was that "the payment in goods of non-Indian production as fees for instruction and initiation"<sup>81</sup> was an indication that the monetized economy had influenced the conduct of the Midewiwin ceremony. As an economic determinist, Hickerson either ignored or made little attempt to understand the Anishinaabe world view, except in economic terms. Instead, he concentrated his analysis on the economic significance of gift-giving in the context of the fur trade. The interpretation completely ignores the fact that such gift-giving was integral to the Anishinaabe world view prior to contact with Euro-Americans, and extended beyond the Midewiwin to all aspects of Anishinaabe life that involved contact with the manidoog, including Shaking Tent ceremonies. The latter ceremonies certainly predated European contact. That such a wasteful attitude should have shocked the more materialist Euro-Americans is hardly surprising, but it should not cause us to interpret the practice in terms of "fees for service." While continued contact with growing numbers of Euro-Americans may have caused some Ojibwa gradually to adopt a more individualistic behaviour and to hoard material goods, there is no concrete evidence that early Mideg (or others) kept for themselves all the presents given to them. If anything, they allowed for a sharing of goods. The question of whether the goods were Aboriginal or Euro-American in origin is seldom mentioned in either Anishinaabe or Euro-American sources. It would appear to have been of less concern to members of the Midewiwin than to followers of revitalization cult leaders such as the Delaware and Shawnee prophets.

The next reason Hickerson cited for a post-contact Midewiwin is the fact that "there were occult practices in the performance."<sup>82</sup> What he means precisely by this is uncertain. However, he was probably referring to the "shooting" and reviving of the candidate by the Mide officials during the initiation portion of the ceremonies, or he may have been alluding to an earlier part in the ceremonies when the Mide officials showed the candidate the contents of their medicine bundles, and explained the properties and merits of the various articles. They then employed a couple of "tests" that demonstrated the power of the Mideg, and assured everyone that the candidate was worthy. These tests usually involved a series of beads that were made to roll by themselves, as if animated, and small figurines that were made to move by themselves, as if possessed of a life of their own.<sup>83</sup>

Even as sympathetic an observer as Hoffman believed the latter test, in particular, to involve trickery to deceive members of the Midewiwin and visitors alike. Few Euro-American observers, no matter how sympathetic or objective, have been willing to accept the possibility that inanimate objects could be possessed of a life force, or, barring that, that the actions could be taken as symbolic. Nevertheless, it is puzzling why Hickerson should have singled out such practices in the Midewiwin as evidence of outside influences, since almost all Anishinaabe ceremonies used similar practices to demonstrate the power of the *manidoog*.

Hickerson's final point was that "the very existence of an organized priesthood seems improbable as an aboriginal institution."<sup>84</sup> He implies that "primitive" Aboriginal people could never have "developed" to such an organized stage on their own. This is consistent with his belief that the Midewiwin occurred as a result of complex forms of social organization, which, in turn, were the result of the Ojibwa's central role in the fur trade. From a materialist, evolutionary viewpoint, this explanation may sound plausible, but it shows a lack of understanding of the Ojibwa world view and the role this world view played in Anishinaabe society.<sup>85</sup> Suffice it to say at this point that the organizational structure of the Midewiwin, including the roles of various officials, was tightly interwoven into the fabric of Anishinaabe society and world view.

There is no evidence in any of the early Midewiwin narratives or rituals that gives any indication that the Midewiwin had developed in reaction to earlier beliefs and practices, that it was influenced by the fur trade or other aspects of Euro-American culture, or that it contained any features usually associated with an established priesthood, such as were found in more sedentary societies. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that all types of individuals, who had received power from whatever source, were incorporated into the Midewiwin. The symbolism of the rituals and beliefs continued to be consistent with beliefs of other, similar, Aboriginal cultures.<sup>86</sup> While individual Ojibwa could progressively gain more power in their efforts to live a "good life," and while this involved a complicated set of rituals, and considerable payment of goods, there was no organized secret society set aside from the rest of Ojibwa society. Power continued to reside in the individuals in Ojibwa society, not in the Midewiwin Society.<sup>87</sup>

In using nineteenth-century sources to understand pre-contact forms of Anishinaabe life and world view, as Hickerson recognized, scholars may commit the error, implicit in "upstreaming," of assuming that today's institutions have existed forever. My argument is not to suggest that changes in the Midewiwin have not occurred. Rather, it is that the changes were incorporated into the

basic structure of the Ojibwa world view. The result was not a radical break with the past, but was, instead, part of a gradual adaptation process, which had been going on long before the arrival of Europeans.

The arguments of anthropologist Karl Schlesier and historian Richard White concerning the world of the Anishinaabeg and Euro-Americans in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are much more convincing than those of Hickerson.<sup>88</sup> Looking at the same documents as did Hickerson, Schlesier and White saw in them the description of a society of refugee villages under great stress, rather than Hickerson's view of a strong, vigorous society of large, stable villages.<sup>89</sup> The villages that the documents describe, they argue, were composed of a diverse group of people fleeing the attacks of the Iroquois, or the ravages of epidemics. Their old world had been destroyed; most of their old hunting and fishing territories were forfeited, numerous of their kin had lost their lives, and now they were forced to seek new lives in conjunction with strangers whom they neither knew nor trusted.

While Schlesier and White may overstate their case, the world they describe is truer to the documentary evidence than the version offered by Hickerson.<sup>90</sup> The period following the Iroquois destruction of the Huron Confederacy in the southern Ontario peninsula in the 1650s brought French support to the Anishinaabeg, but also a new danger. The epidemics that had helped to destroy the Huron nation now threatened to wreak havoc on the refugees from the Iroquois. Moreover, the Great Lakes environment forced changes on the refugees, for not only were horticulture and large-scale fishing limited to a few locations, but the concentration of large numbers of people put severe strains on big-game resources in the surrounding area. Nevertheless, the Saulteurs (Ojibwa), along with their Ottawa (Odawa) and Huron (Wyandot) neighbours, did survive, and by the 1670s were actively engaged once more in trading furs to the French. By the next decade they had begun to act as middlemen with the Sioux.

By 1700 the tide had definitely changed, and after several disastrous defeats, the Iroquois had been forced to sue for peace. At least some of the refugees could return to their former lands. Nevertheless, historians now generally agree that the period of the diaspora contributed to the disintegration of many of these tribal groups.<sup>91</sup> Most severely affected were the Huron, Winnebago, and, to a lesser extent, the Menominee, Ottawa, and Potawatomi. Although most of these groups did emerge with new forms of social integration, many of their traditional cultural institutions disintegrated. The Ojibwa probably were least affected by the tremendous upheaval, since their society had been the least structured and their numbers



had been widely dispersed. Nevertheless, the experiences they had faced, and would continue to face in the decades to come, placed considerable strain on their society. In some important ways, they, too, emerged from the experience a different people from before.

If one accepts that the world in which the Anishinaabeg lived during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was torn asunder, it is tempting to look at the Midewiwin in terms of a "revitalization movement," as Schlesier has done,<sup>92</sup> or as an example of a "crisis cult," as Julia Harrison did several years earlier.<sup>93</sup> However, such definitions imply that the Anishinaabeg were not only reacting to new and external problems facing them, but that they drew the majority of Midewiwin beliefs and practices from outside their own tradition.

The essential elements of the Midewiwin were clearly elaborations of traditional Anishinaabe beliefs and practices. What seems likely is that the role of traditional healers and diviners took on a greater importance, and healing ceremonies became more complex, as the Anishinaabeg attempted to deal with those forces that threatened their existence. Gradually, the Midewiwin healing ceremony in response to specific illness of individuals was transformed into a communal ceremony in which all those who had been initiated demonstrated their power to overcome the increasing numbers of maladies confronting them.<sup>94</sup> Through this "renewal" of their powers, the Anishinaabeg were reminded of the obligations placed on them, and they were reassured that the powers received from the manidoog could and would allow them to survive any new assaults on their way of life.

Any "revitalization" that occurred was within the context of traditional Anishinaabe beliefs, unlike revitalization movements such as those of the Delaware and Shawnee prophets, whose teachings represented a major shift from traditional beliefs and often placed them in opposition to traditional religious practices such as the Midewiwin. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Mide elders also began to distinguish Anishinaabe society from that of the Euro-Americans in response to the increasingly aggressive stance of the latter.

Although the Midewiwin, as it was described by early Euro-American observers, laid stress on the knowledge of rituals in obtaining power, visions continued to be an essential element of the process. There was far less difference between the role of Jiisakiwininiwag and Mideg in Anishinaabe society than there was between that of Catholic priests and Protestant ministers in Euro-American society. While the difference between traditional religious leaders and the leaders of revitalization movements was more pronounced, even the revitalization figures functioned within the context

of traditional Anishinaabe beliefs regarding the transferral of knowledge and power from the manidoog to the Anishinaabeg. This is evident in Tanner's description of Manito-o-geezhik, a minor Ojibwa prophet who preached a newly revealed message from the "Great Spirit." Tanner explained that, while he was sceptical, such messages were received with great respect by his Ojibwa and Ottawa colleagues. The prophet called upon his brethren to give up war, thievery, defrauding, lying, and drinking alcohol, which, Tanner observed, had a salutary effect on their conduct for several years.<sup>95</sup> It appears that contemporary observers and later scholars have tended to emphasize the differences, and have missed the context of traditional beliefs that served as the basis of the Anishinaabe world view long after the community appeared to adopt Euro-American beliefs and institutions.

Before leaving the problem of the origin of the Midewiwin, one might consider the question of where and among whom it originated. There is almost unanimity among scholars that the Midewiwin originated among the Ojibwa or the clan-based groups that preceded them. Such beliefs are based on the fact that the earliest Euro-American records refer to the ceremony as practised among the Saulteurs (Ojibwa),<sup>96</sup> and on the fact that other Algonquian tribal groups that practised the Midewiwin appear to have considered that the Ojibwa gave the rites to them. Nevertheless, at the time of the Midewiwin's institutionalization, neither the Ojibwa nor most of the other Algonquian groups had strong tribal identities. Thus, it is more likely that the Midewiwin was originally an Anishinaabe healing ceremony.

It is certainly possible that the institutionalization of the ceremony may have first developed among the Saulteurs, and spread from them to other Algonquians who considered themselves Anishinaabeg. However, one should not assume that because a strong tribal component developed in the Midewiwin teachings in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the tribal component was always dominant. It is much more likely that various refugee groups that came together in large "multi-tribal" villages viewed the Midewiwin ceremonies as a reaffirmation of their ability to survive their trials.<sup>97</sup> While each of the disparate groups of refugees was bound together by family ties and social structures that differentiated them from other groups, most shared a common language base and world view. Most also participated in loose alliances, in which intermarriage was encouraged.<sup>98</sup> All had similar beliefs regarding their relationship among themselves and other creatures, including manidoog. All also believed in the culture hero and trickster figure, Nanabozho (although his name and characteristics varied somewhat), and all groups had similar earth-diver



narratives regarding the creation and re-creation of the world. Since they also shared similar ideas regarding the origin and cure of disease, it should not be surprising to find reports of the Midewiwin being practised by the majority of these groups, plus several neighbouring tribes, during the late seventeenth, the eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries.

However, since the Midewiwin died out more rapidly among many of those groups, it is the Ojibwa form of the ceremonies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that most of the surviving documents describe. Many of the Ojibwa materials, including Warren's published history of the Ojibwa, suggest that the Midewiwin's place of origin was Chequamegon (La Pointe). At least one modern scholar, Selwyn Dewdney, comes to the same conclusion.<sup>99</sup> While Chequamegon certainly became an important centre in the early growth of the Midewiwin, and in what appears to have been the gradual development of the concept of the "Ojibwa nation" during the latter part of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it cannot be singled out as the birthplace of the Midewiwin. In most of the origin and migration narratives, the origin of the Anishinaabeg and the birth of the Midewiwin began at a point far to the east. Therefore, one must look farther back in the Ojibwa past than their first settlement at Chequamegon—regardless of its pivotal role in later Ojibwa history.<sup>100</sup>

Indeed, it makes little sense to look for a precise place, or a single historical event that marks the origin of the Midewiwin. While most Ojibwa narratives agree that the origin took place in the east, they make no attempt to identify the precise geographical location, and note only that it occurred "in the time of our Grandfathers." In other words, the Midewiwin narratives were *aadizookaanag*, or sacred stories. As such, they dealt primarily in eternal truths rather than in geographic or historical truths.