The Oji-Cree

The religious and cultural beliefs and practices of the northern hunting and gathering peoples present a very different face to us.

I am going to focus here on the Algonquian (this is a linguistic label; see this site: http://www.native-languages.org/famalg.htm and this sub-page: http://www.native-languages.org/ojibwe.htm) Oji-Cree people of northwestern Ontario. More specifically, this is the area lying within the watershed of the rivers flowing into James and Hudson bays. Here we find a people who lived — and to some extent live today — entirely on hunting, fishing and gathering berries in season. The land provides no opportunity for settled agriculture (though there were attempts by Europeans in the 19th century to grow potatoes).

These are a people whose economic and cultural norms sit at an opposite pole to those of the Aztecs at the other end of the continent. Nature in these northern regions, as we all know as Canadians, seems capricious — we never know what weather will bring despite the most modern and scientific tools for forecasting this. Before the advent of science, then, for the Oji-Cree peoples, this must have seemed doubly so.

Beliefs focused on spirits who controlled these unpredictable factors — the weather, the availability of game, fish, or berries, the amount of snow, the flow of rivers, and so on — all the things that decided whether a family, or group of families, would live or die.

The Oji-Cree people were gathered usually in family groups in winter — or extended family groups and larger groups in spring and summer when joint effort was a more effective means to harvest berries or fish. Yet these groups seldom exceeded more than 100–200 people at any one time.

The individual had greater prominence among these people than among the Aztecs — for hunting in snow, in winter, was an individual or, at best, small group effort. If a particular hunter was more successful than the average at his task, others would gather about him as if some special 'power' explained his success, and the group would grow larger.

It is this concept of 'power' or, as one anthropologist terms it, 'power-control' that I will turn to now as it is the fundamental religious concept of these people.

It is sometimes translated by the English word 'respect', but these words are only approximations of an Oji-Cree concept which has no exact English equivalent. This 'power' or 'power-control' or 'respect' was inherent in the individual — who received power in a dream from the spirit world. Power was usually manifested in the ability of such an individual to effect some result — such as, for example, either causing or curing an illness. Respect and its corollary, a degree of fear, resulted because evidence of a particular power meant an individual might in fact have other power not yet revealed. Curing illness was especially indicative of power, because a second characteristic of 'power' was its relative nature. If someone became sick, this was thought to be the result of someone's power being used *against* the sick person — the ability to cure an illness caused in this fashion indicated that the one effecting the cure had greater power and was thus accorded even greater respect.

The concept of respect that I have used here to indicate the result of someone demonstrating 'power' could perhaps be better rendered in the phrase 'treat with respect' — meaning that one should 'treat with respect' any creature or element which may have the power to harm one.

The Oji-Cree ascribe 'power' to a range of living things and objects — not just to human beings, but to animals, fish, wind, and thunder. 'Power' was inherent in all living things and in much of what we consider to be inanimate. Thus respect commensurate to the degree of power in each was given — for to these people most things were seen as living to some degree.

Thus Oji-Cree people accorded respect to anything they encountered, unless the individual knew that his or her own power was greater — and this occurred usually only when the individual was a medicine man or **shaman**.

These individuals had greater-than-average power and were accorded an appropriate degree of respect or fear on this basis. Their chief function was usually curative — but as disease was considered not to have a natural basis, as I've said, but to result from 'evil power' directed against an individual, the appropriate response was to seek the help of a friendly shaman. Much of the power of these individuals came to them in dreams and in special knowledge of herbs and plants — which additionally had to be obtained from specific locations known only to the shaman. Another aspect of this power was that the shaman (or medicine man or woman) could not speak directly of it — to do so meant the power had gone. Power was displayed only in action, not in words or boasting — a medicine man who 'hung out his shingle', so to speak, was a medicine man no more.

Power, of course, did not rest only with shamans. Great success as a hunter was evidence of 'power' and would gain for that person a following of others who would give him respect and hope not to offend his 'power' or his personal spirit from which his 'power' came. This individual aspect of power was granted at puberty when each person underwent a '**vision quest**'. This involved a child's going into the bush for several days to fast — either at the top of a hill or, if necessary, in a platform built in a tree. It was hoped that at least one or more spirits would take pity on the child and become his or her protector — or source of power — for life. The vision quest is known among other native North American cultures, but what was unusual for the Oji-Cree is that both males *and* females underwent this process at puberty. Oji-Cree society was neither patrilineal nor matrilineal, but traced descent equally through male and female lines, which is called dual descent.

Finally, power could be enhanced throughout life by further fasting.

An individual would also receive from his spirit his or her 'secret' name, an indication of a belief in the power of words — especially of knowing 'names' — not uncommon in pre-Christian religion. The Oji-Cree individual would not find it unusual to have more than one name. This was another fact not unimportant when Christian missionaries began baptising people with Christian names — the Oji-Cree would understand in their own terms the spiritual importance of a name and have no trouble accepting the use of another name, seeing it as conferring additional power.

There are a few other aspects of Oji-Cree religion.

The '***shaking tent***' ceremony was employed by a shaman to determine who was causing harm to someone through use of evil power or to punish such a transgressor. The tent was constructed of an oval of poles encased in birch bark or hide, with a hole left at the top to allow spirits to enter.The shaman would crawl in under one flap, then call upon his spirits to enter. People on the outside would ask questions — who was harming them, who had taken a lost object, etc. The shaman would talk to his spirits...the tent would shake...answers would be given...and the souls of a transgressor called and punished, or even killed — or one sock would be returned from a favourite pair that just disappeared. See this link for more information on religion and spirituality of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Myths and stories of power were common to all northern peoples — some which explained the origin of the universe, others which explained ill fortune. Among the most prominent were both myths and stories about the **Windigo,** an immensely powerful evil spirit that was said to drive individuals mad and to cause them to do great evil such as murder. Often when these sorts of crimes occurred, the perpetrator was said to have 'gone Windigo'.

Summary

In general, the Oji-Cree sort of belief system or religion is called 'animism', the roots of this word not being the Latin for animal (*animalia*), but *animus* or spirit — the generalized belief that all things are invested with spirituality. More recently, the term 'primal' is used to describe this general category of religion.

To the northern Indigenous peoples, the universe is held in a delicate balance by these spirits which invest all creation — including humans — and it is to these spirits that attention and respect must be paid in order to keep all in balance. Showing a lack of respect, for example, to an animal killed for food will upset that animal's spirits and upset the delicate balance of the universe. So, too, must attention be paid to everything. This represents a sophisticated religious system which sees and pays heed to both the material and the immaterial world as constituting one complete system — the pre-contact native peoples of the north and of the south did not

compartmentalise their understanding of the world the way we do today. Rather, they had the sort of harmonious understanding of the interplay of all creation, similar to that of Christianity in the pre-modern period.

Yet it is not so different on a fundamental level from the more European type religion of the Aztecs, who also believed the universe was held in a delicate balance. For the urban and agricultural Aztecs, this balance was maintained through a complex of rituals guided by a priestly hierarchy. For the Oji-Cree, the balance was more individualised and personal — the responsibility of each individual, occasionally aided by shamans.