

Beaver Dreaming and the Prophet Dance: The Appeal of Monotheism

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Dane-zaa, “Real People,” is the term of self-reference used by the Beaver Indians, a Northern Athapaskan group that occupy the Peace River region in northeastern British Columbia. They practiced no agriculture, and their vegetable food was limited to cow parsnip, several berries and roots, and the inner cambrium layer of birch and poplar trees. Much of their folklore speaks of starvation (Goddard, 1917, p. 213). In the late eighteenth century, the Beaver encountered Western traders, acquired guns, and contacted Christianity, resulting, around 1800, in a revitalization movement founded by Makenunatane, “He Opens the Door,” the so-called “Sikkani chief.” The anthropologist Robin Ridington (1978) suggested, however, that the phrase did not originally refer to a leader of the Sekani Indians, who live immediately west of the Beaver and are culturally very similar. A Northwest Company trader’s journal referred to a leader of the Beaver Indians as “the Cigne Chief” in a 1799 entry (O’Neil, 1928, pp. 251, 255). The term also occurs in the journal in its correct French spelling as *cygne*, “swan,” the name of the primordial culture-hero who became both the sun and its shadow, the moon. Ridington (1978, p. 31) suggested that the expression “Sikkani chief” was likely a corruption of the phrase “Cygne Chief.”

Makenunatane is remembered as the founder of Beaver prophetism, who foretold the coming of white people. We are on firmer ground with Maketsueson, “He Shows the Way,” an early prophet who can be dated on genealogical criteria to the second half of the nineteenth century (Ridington, personal communication, 2009). In either event, the legend of Makenunatane includes an episode that portrays him as a Beaver hunting leader. It seems reasonable to infer that he was either historically or legendarily a hunting chief who introduced the Prophet Dance to the Beaver (Ridington, 1978, p. 42). The Prophet Dance is a name that Spier (1935) gave to an early nineteenth century revitalization movement that he found to have been distributed throughout the Northwest.

Among these peoples there was an old belief in the impending destruction and renewal of the world, when the dead would return, in conjunction with which there was a dance based on supposed imitation of the dances of the dead, and a conviction that intense preoccupation with the dance would hasten the happy day. From time to time men “died” and returned to life with renewed assurances of the truth of the doctrine; at intervals cataclysms of nature occurred which were taken as portents of the end. Each of these events led to the performance of the dance with renewed fervor, only to have it fall into abeyance again when their expectations remained unfulfilled.
[p. 5]

Further features of the Prophet Dance were belief in the divine punishment of disbelievers, active proselytizing, and the divine judgment of the dead post-mortem (pp. 12, 16).

Spier noted the prophetism of the Beaver but, because the data available to him were limited, ventured only that the Beaver and their eastern neighbors, the Chipewyan, had “beliefs and dance highly analogous to those of our Prophet Dance complex” (p. 28). Beaver prophets at least sometimes presided over the only communal ceremony, a semi-annual gathering when the officiant placed offerings of food in the fire and prayed that the tribe might be fed with similar food in the future. Prayers were also made for good hunting conditions. Following the sacrifice, men and women danced throughout the night in a clockwise direction around the fire (Goddard, 1917, pp. 228-29).

Ridington's (1978) extensive fieldwork amply established that Beaver prophetism was an instance of the Prophet Dance. The songs to which the Beaver danced had been taught to the latter by dead prophets in heaven. By dancing, people could make themselves eligible to go to heaven when they died (pp. 24-25).

Apocalypticism remained an integral component of Beaver prophetism. Charlie Yahey, the last great prophet of the Beaver, predicted:

Now the winter will never stop. I don't think it will ever stop now. It will keep going for two or more years. It won't be like it's winter for a while and summer for a while. I don't think there will be any summer; just the winter will be on always. The sun will never move around....All those animals like horses and birds coming back from the south and bears coming out and moose having calves, those things don't happen soon now so I think it is getting to be hard. The snow doesn't go away soon now.

All these things were going to stop. God will make these things stop. He wants all those good animals to die and go to heaven and the good people will go to heaven and only the bad people will still be living and everything will sure rough. When the time really comes all the good things will die and go to heaven. He wants to separate out the good and the bad things. [p. 73]

If God wants to he would stop all the farmers crops from growing. The next 2 or 3 times will be the last chance. It will be either too cold or too hot for animals to live. He has given us 2 or 3 chances and the fourth time there will be no luck. This is our last chance now. The fourth time will bring the cold weather. The weather won't stop for 12 months and there will be no animals living. There may seem to be many animals here now but when it gets cold there will be none left. There will be no more children born and no more baby animals born. [p. 88]

The legend of Makenunatane, the first Beaver prophet, was similarly consistent with the general pattern of the Prophet Dance. Makenunatane predicted that white men would come to Beaver territory the year before they arrived (Ridington, 1978, p. 91; 1990, p. 75). He was said to have died, gone to heaven, and revived, before he introduced the new teachings (Ridington, 1978, pp. 78-79). He introduced the idea of God in heaven (p. 90) and taught that only the good go to heaven when they die (pp. 32, 80). Disbelievers in his teachings were punished providentially. "That winter those who didn't believe had a hard time. They were starving and they didn't get anything" (p. 91).

Beaver prophetism persisted continuously until Charlie Yahey died in 1976. The survival of the dances was in question for some years afterward, until the occurrence of several deaths that disturbed the community led to a re-invigoration of the practice, which is presently a continuing cultural concern (Ridington & Ridington, 2006, p. 185).

This essay depends extensively on the ethnographic fieldwork of a single author, Robin Ridington, which I have summarized and excerpted with his permission. Ridington has also graciously made editorial comments on my manuscript that have led me to revise the text at various places. In organizing Ridington's findings, my initial purpose was to survey the data on Beaver dreaming; but in retrospect I found that the materials addressed a question of general theoretic interest in the study of religion. The ethnographic evidence of the Prophet Dance of the Beaver bears on the much-speculated but seldom demonstrated question of the appeal of monotheism.

Beaver Dreaming

Ridington (1978) suggested that "Prophet dreaming may be seen as a logical extension of medicine dreaming, identical to it in form, and different only in extent and in purpose" (p. 27). Among the Beaver, preadolescent vision quests were termed "dreams" (pp. 7-8), as were sweat lodge visions prior to the hunt (pp. 9-11) and shamanic healers' out-of-the-body journeys (p. 10). Prophets alone were termed *naáchi*, "dreamer" (p. 13). To understand the appeal of the Prophet Dance, one must detect the innovative features that set prophetism apart from other religious uses of dreaming.

To Beaver thought, dreams are journeys of the shadow out of the body during sleep, and songs were means to control dreams (p. 6). Because fasting and sleep deprivation were used to induce dreams during vision quests (p. 8), the term "dream" presumably covered more psychological phenomena than the dreams of natural sleep alone. Ridington (1990) suggested that dreaming occurs "in what we would call a state of trance or deep meditation" (p. 62); I would expect hypnagogic states, between waking and sleeping, to have been important too.

Childhood Vision Quests. Beaver children undertook vision quests from about five years of age upward. They went out into the bush alone and remained there for as many as ten and fifteen days (p. 127). During a vision quest, a child was believed to encounter one of the giant animals discussed in myths of the culture-hero Swan, who became the sun/moon *Saya*. An informant stated, "It comes suddenly on a man. Suppose some animal takes pity on him or likes him and gives him power" (Goddard, 1917, p. 227). In the primordial era described in the myths, giant animals hunted people until *Saya* defeated them (Ridington, 1978, pp. 7-8). During a vision quest, a child attempted to acquire control over a giant animal as *Saya* had done in the primordial era (p. 8). The control consisted of one or more songs (p. 6). The children also received spirits' instructions regarding the making of medicine bundles (Ridington, 1990, p. 127).

It was expected, however, that the animal power would prove "too strong" for the child. Overwhelmed by the power that s/he was attempting to master, a child returning from a vision quest would be dominated by the power and act as an animal.

The child is said to forget human speech, to fear the smells and sounds of camp and to skulk around the bush surrounding the camp, like a wild thing until hunted down and brought in by an older person. Only after the child has slept (and dreamed) under the medicine coat of an older person whose power is recognized, does (s)he begin to return to the world of human beings. [Ridington, 1978, p. 8]

Ridington recorded the following account of a vision quest. It was spoken in Beaver and immediately translated into English by the son of the man who was telling the story in Beaver (Ridington, 1988, p. 57).

My dad said that when he was a boy, about nine years old, he went into the bush alone. He was lost from his people. In the night it rained. He was cold and wet from the rain, but in the morning he found himself warm and dry. A pair of silver foxes had come and protected him. After that, the foxes kept him and looked after him. He stayed with them and they protected him. Those foxes had three pups. The male and female foxes brought food for the pups. They brought food for my dad, too. They looked after him as if they were all the same. Those foxes wore clothes like people. My dad said he could understand their language. He said they taught him a song. [Ridington, 1990, p. 7]

My dad said he stayed out in the bush for twenty days. Ever since that time, foxes have been his friends. Anytime he wanted to, he could set a trap and get foxes. When he lived with the foxes that time, he saw rabbits too....

The first night out in the bush he was cold and wet from the rain. In the morning when he woke up warm and dry the wind came to him, too. The wind came to him in the form of a person. That person said, "See, you're dry now. I'm your friend." The wind has been his friend ever since. He can call the wind. He can call the rain. He can also make them go away. One time when I was twelve, I was with my dad and some other people when we got trapped by a forest fire. One of our horses got burned and we put the others in a creek. My dad told all the people to look for clouds, even though it hadn't rained for a long time. They found a little black cloud and my dad called it to help us. In just about ten minutes there was thunder and lightning and heavy rain that put out the fire. We were really wet but we were glad to be saved from that fire....

After he had been in the bush twenty days he almost forgot about his people. Then he heard a song. It was coming from his people. He remembered them and went toward the song. Every time he got to where the song had been it moved farther away. Finally, by following that song he was led back to his people. [p. 8]

Ridington (1990) supposed "that children do live with animals and learn to speak their language. If ethologists can do this, surely Indians, whose way of life brings them onto intimate terms with animals, can attain the same rapport" (p. 58). Ridington's informant Peter Chipesia discussed the experience in terms appropriate to an alternate state of consciousness.

When you are close to something, an animal, you are just like drunk. You don't know anything. As soon as this happens you have trouble thinking straight, like being drunk. Everything is just like when you see this animal it is as if he were a person. [Ridington, 1990, p. 127]

Chipesia's wording did not make clear whether the animal was seen to be a person by means of sense perception or in a vision. An episode in a legend indicates, however, that the Beaver did not confuse encounters with live animals with the vision that the physical encounter might inspire.

A man was hunting in a canoe when he saw some young yellow geese. He paddled up to them and caught them. He thought they were too small to kill. Tying them to the canoe, he told them to tow him to their mother's country. He lay down in his canoe and fell asleep. He slept very soundly and a long time passed before he woke up, and then the geese were nearly large enough to fly.

It was not this earth on which he stood when he woke up, but he thought he was still in his own country. [Goddard, 1917, pp. 248-49]

In this tale, a man acted benevolently toward young geese and later fell asleep. When he awoke, he was in a land in the sky. Implicitly, the spirits of the geese had befriended him in response to his treatment of the young geese, and they flew with him up to the sky. This event occurred as the content of a vision but was called being awake because the man had awakened to the spiritual dimension of reality.

Although an encounter with a helping spirit ideally culminated in the animal's gift of its song to the visionary, reality did not always conform with the cultural ideal. Spirit helpers were sometimes acquired without recourse to songs.

[My grandfather] say

one day he came to these little fox, you know,
 they were playing outside their den,
 outside their den, you know,
 and he say when he walk up to them,
 walk up to them little fox, he say,
 "Where's your mother?"
 and them little fox told him,
 "Our mother and father went hunting."
 Little fox told that grandfather.
 That's how he knew.
 They never--they never sing or anything for him
 but he just know 'em, you know.

 You can ask for help, you know.
 They remember you. [Ridington, 1988, p. 192]

Visions were kept secret. The identity of the spirit was never spoken, and the power gained from the animal spirit was not used in adolescence and often not even in early adulthood. Only after a person had become fully adult did s/he begin to display medicine powers to other people (Ridington, 1978, pp. 8-9).

Adult Retrieval of the Vision of Childhood. It was customary for a young adult to dream about re-tracing his or her steps through the years to the childhood encounter with the animal spirit. Through the renewal of contact with the animal spirit, the person was taught how to control the spirit's power. The most important means of control was the spirit's song (p. 9). Coinciding with the retrieval of the song were instructions from the animal spirit regarding behavioral taboos related to its species. Not only was it forbidden for a person to eat members of his or her spirit's species of animal; but other people had to observe taboos in the presence of the person, or the power would become "too strong." The person would lose control over the spirit and revert to acting-out the spirit's behavior, until sung over by another person, in the manner that children returning from vision quests were sung over (Ridington, 1988, pp. 52-53).

A third topic of instruction would be the construction of a medicine bundle containing objects that were symbolic of the animal spirit (Ridington, 1978, p. 9). A Beaver tale ascribed fabulous power to a medicine bundle.

He had with him some beaver teeth which he always carried, for according to his dream, he could do anything he wished with them. He put them by the water's edge and said, "I want these to turn into a good canoe tonight."...when they came to the shore of the lake a fine canoe was floating there, where he had left the beaver teeth. [Goddard, 1917, p. 269]

The motif of transformation may be treated here as a storytelling device. It encapsulated the belief that the power of the spirit that was attached to the beaver teeth arranged for a lost canoe to lodge on the lake shore, at the location of the teeth.

The Beaver used the term "song" to refer simultaneously to the song, the animal spirit that the song controlled, the taboos associated with the spirit, and the medicine bundle (Ridington, 1978, p. 9). The term *ma yine*, literally "his, hers, or its song," was consequently translated into English as medicine power (p. 6). Another euphemism for the medicine power complex was "knowing something" (Ridington, 1990, p. 19). A person who had medicine power was said to "little bit know something" (p. xv).

Power was not always associated with an animal. A Beaver tale included the following detail about a boy who had a power to travel over snow.

Addressing the youngest boy he asked him what supernatural help he had. "My dream was of newly fallen snow that does not pack," the youngest replied....He came where he had left his snowshoes, put them on, and made his escape. [Goddard, 1917, p. 247]

Hunters' Visions. A hunter who had dreamed back along his trail and retrieved his song was also able to dream ahead along the trail of the hunt that he intended to take. In both cases, the mind traveled away from the body (Ridington, 1978, p. 9). Dreams of the hunting trail were regarded as a necessary prelude to a successful hunt. In his dreams, a hunter traveled along the trail that he would take during the intended hunt until it intersected with the trail of an animal (p. 7). The animal spirit then gave itself to the dreaming hunter, in promise of a gift of its body during the hunt (p. 9). Although Beaver hunters conceptualized their dreams as supernatural encounters with game animals, the dreams can also be regarded as culturally institutionalized efforts at creative problem-solving. Hunters saw themselves thinking like the animals in their dreams, but their dreams can themselves be seen as efforts to accomplish the same ends.

Because in Dane-zaa thought a hunt can be completed only after the hunter has negotiated a relationship with his game in a dream, an animal will come to a snare only after such a negotiation has taken place. The hunter's skill lies in his reading of the landscape in relation to his dream encounter with the animal. He must think like the animal in order to set the snare in an appropriate place. [Ridington & Ridington, 2006, p. 204]

After such a dream, a hunter who was initially unsuccessful at hunting would persevere, confident that an animal had already given itself to him (Ridington, 1988, pp. 128-29).

Animals made gifts of their bodies in the expectation that people would use and dispose of their remains in a respectful manner that would allow the animals to reincarnate (Ridington, 1978, p. 41; 1990, p. 61). Women, for example, were forbidden to eat fresh moose meat; they might eat only dried meat (Ridington, 1978, pp. 106-7).

The legend of Makenunatane included an episode that had him gain credibility in his new role as a prophet by functioning in a traditional role as a hunting chief. He led a communal hunt that succeeded despite the absurd use of an axe as a hunting weapon.

They told him to eat whatever has been killed by an axe. They told him, "They will listen to you if they do that." It was sure cold for them but some of them did not believe him. Some of them thought that he was just saying that. Some others thought, "He is the one who said this so let us go look for something with just an axe." They just took an axe and looked for something. They followed a fresh moose track and from the tracks they knew it was a good moose. Some of them stood so as to form a surround and one old man with an axe, stood one place by the tree and saw the moose running towards him. He stood well behind that tree and held the axe. Then he threw the axe at the moose and it stuck in the moose. Pretty soon that moose fell down. He threw that axe and it stuck into him. Pretty soon that moose fell down and they all gathered around the moose, butchered it and all took home lots of meat. [p. 79]

The Beaver prophet Charlie Yahey said, "A person who is a prophet does not just dream for himself. He dreams for everybody" (Ridington, 1978, p. 24). Prior to the introduction of modern hunting technology, Dreamers were hunting chiefs who would visualize in their dreams where animals were to be found, and how hunters should position

themselves during the hunt (Ridington & Ridington, 2006, p. 178). Once again, what Beaver hunters regarded as supernatural abilities, we can conceptualize in terms of creative problem-solving.

Snare hunting often involved coordinating the efforts of several people to drive an animal toward a snare site. Dane-zaa oral tradition describes how Dreamers could visualize the pattern of these hunts in their dreams....The dream in which a Dreamer visualizes hunters in relation to an animal may be seen as a form of social technology. It represents a plan of action that members of the task force hold in common. [Ridington & Ridington, 2006, pp. 204-5]

Shamanism. Henri Faraud, a Catholic priest, reported that Beaver shamans in 1858 employed the sucking ritual, along with chanting and touching (Faraud, 1866, p. 225). Goddard, conducting fieldwork in 1916, noted that Beaver shamans influenced the weather by singing, drumming, and dancing. Illness was treated by blowing, sucking, and singing. Shamans were active in warfare, foreseeing the location of the enemy and sometimes the outcome of the battle (Goddard, 1917, p. 227). Beaver tales mentioned shamans who demonstrated their powers by reviving after death (pp. 258-59).

A half century later, Beaver shamanism was extinct. However, adults whose competence established them as people who possessed spiritual power sang their *Naachene-yine*, "Dreamers' songs," over a person who was ill, or a child returning from a vision quest. Most Dreamers were men, but some were women. Women Dreamers sing but do not drum. Dreamers receive their calling through an initiatory illness that is regarded as a death and return to life. They have the ability, during their dreams, to fly like swans to heaven (Ridington, 1978, pp. 10-11; Ridington & Ridington, 2006, p. 177).

Prophetism. The Beaver prophet Charlie Yahey claimed that he came by his apocalyptic predictions in dreams. "I know these things are going to happen because they told me in my dreams. Other people know from what they are told on earth but I know from what I am told by dreamers in heaven" (p. 84).

Prophets' songs were called *ahata yine*, "God songs," as well as *nachene yine*, "dreamer's songs," because they were believed to have been brought to earth from heaven (Ridington, 1990, pp. 61-62). However, God was not ordinarily seen when dreamers visited heaven.

God stays above heaven. If people in heaven want to see him they look with binoculars, but you can't see him well. It is really bright, shiny, fancy. The people who go to heaven he has stay below him. He sits in a chair like a big boss. Lots of people who dream to heaven, they don't see God. They just see the people who are working for God. Not very many see God. [Ridington, 1978, p. 95]

Only prophets had the power to journey to the land of the dead and return, that is, only prophets could die and revive (p. 7). Other people apparently did not travel as far as heaven in their dreams.

Gerry...told me about having been very ill a few years before. In the hospital with a high fever, he experienced his shadow leaving his body. He told me that he looked down on his body from above the bed. Then the old people in heaven communicated with him. They told him to go back down and join his body. After the fever broke, Gerry came back to the world. [Ridington, 1988, p. 225]

When Charlie Yahey was asked how dreamers got their songs, he explained:

They just go up. They just sleep and they get those songs. They go up there in dream. They go there in dream and grab those songs. They haul them down and come back. Then they get up; just like right now when we sing, it is just like we know that song before. Then he starts to sing. That is how he gets it. They grab it up there and they wake up with that song. They just start to sing it right then. they know how it turns; how the song turns up and down. Sometimes they grab the song in heaven but it is just like something covers it up. They get up and try to sing it but they get lost. They take it away again. Sometimes when a person goes to heaven and gets really tired so he can hardly walk they send a song down. They send it down to that person walking and the song hits him. From there he sings the song really hard. He sings it with a long voice and after that he does not feel tired and feels nothing going over those bad places in the road. He just keeps going. That is how a medicine man (dreamer) who is still alive here, gets that person in dream. He hears the loud song that has been sent down to the person as he sings it. He takes that song in his dream. The medicine man hears in his dream the song that that woman or man is singing. The next morning he dreams about how that person has started talking and singing that song. [Ridington, 1978, p. 15]

When prophet dreaming is compared with medicine dreaming, we find that the ghosts of the dead in heaven replaced the spirits of animals in the bush; but the acquisition of a song remained the goal of a prophet's vision quest. The power of song was thoroughly reconceptualized, however.

The Prophet Dance is danced to songs that prophets brought back from dead prophets in heaven. Unlike medicine songs, which were secret sources of private power, prophets' songs are public knowledge. They are vehicles of preaching and proselytizing. Depending on opportunity, they were sometimes made public immediately upon their revelation. Their use at dances provided opportunities for them to be learned by all who attended.

The Prophet Dance was conceptualized as a form of penance. To Beaver thought, the shadow was the part of the human being that ascended to heaven after death, but it could only do so when it was light, as was the case with the shadows of innocent children. Bad deeds weighed a shadow down, keeping it on earth. Accordingly, every shadow had to shed its burden of bad deeds before it could journey to heaven post-mortem. It did so by retracing the trail of its life (pp. 24-25).

You gotta pay for your sin if you're bad.
If you're bad, you can't make it to heaven.
Gotta follow your tracks all over the place.
You know, you have to pay for your sin.
They tell you it just like courthouse, you know. [Ridington, 1988, p. 178]

A sinner was obliged to retrace his steps "till he's baby" (p. 205). A ghost had to wander about on earth to do its penance. However, a live person could retrace his or her trail by dancing the Prophet Dance. Performance of the ritual atoned for bad deeds and made the shadow eligible for ascension to heaven (Ridington, 1978, pp. 24-25).

There are lots of people who have their name in heaven
but there are some people who don't have a name there.
It's too bad for them.
They should sing like me and try to go to heaven. [Ridington, 1988, p. 92]

Drumming and dancing the Prophet Dance also gave joy to the dead in heaven. The dead reciprocated by causing success in hunting (Ridington, 1978, p. 81; 1988, pp. 82, 89).

I dream of heaven and somebody told me,
“You people should play drums and sing
so you won’t have any trouble with meat this summer.
Sing and drum and you will kill lots of moose this summer.”
The guy I dream about told me to get everyone together
and sing for the moose. [Ridington, 1988, p. 86]

Relations between the living and the dead were ambivalent. The dead wished their living relations to come to join them in heaven.

I’m dreaming about people waiting at the gate to heaven.
The people in heaven are waiting
for their relatives to come to heaven.
They are crying for their relatives to come to heaven.
Everybody in heaven sings that song
waiting for their relatives.
That’s the gate to heaven song. [pp. 85-86]

When the dead in heaven arranged for the living to die and join them, prophets were unable to stop them (Ridington, 1978, p. 76). The ghosts of sinners posed a danger as well. They attempted to separate a good person’s shadow from his or her body in order to try to follow the shadow up the Trail to Heaven (Ridington, 1988, p. 87). Children were at special risk. Their shadows were so light that they could easily be startled out of their bodies, at which they would rise spontaneously to heaven. Not only a ghost that was too heavy to rise to heaven, but a living person whose shadow was heavy with bad deeds could summon a child’s shadow out of its body, setting it on its way to heaven, and so cause the child’s death. Due to the dangers that a heavy shadow posed to children, refusing to participate in the Prophet Dance was considered both self-destructive and anti-social (Ridington, 1978, pp. 24-25).

The Novelty of the Prophet Dance

Beaver tradition claimed that Makenunatane revolutionized Beaver religion. Charlie Yahey explained:

Makenunatane is the one who made this world good for us. After Makenunatane made all this world good, there have been lots of prophets. Long time ago it was not good. Long time ago, before Makenunatane, any time people wanted to kill each other they would just kill each other. It was no good, but now after him it is good. Makenunatane told people that only good ghosts are going to heaven. Even now we are seen by heaven, what we are doing every day. [p. 80].

After the first whitemen came, lots of people have dreamed like me. God wanted some of the people to know what was happening through their dreams. Before that all the Indians used to kill each other. After that one of them started dreaming there was God. Some of them believed that man and there was no more war, no more killing. They stopped those wars. They didn’t want any more wars or medicine killings to be done. They started to

believe in God. Before that they didn't know there was God. They just kept on killing and making war. He made all of them dream so everybody would know there was God. They told those who didn't believe, "You will burn in the fire." [p. 86]

Religious syncretism sometimes proceeds through the adoption of elements of another religion that resemble existing features of the religion. In other cases, religions borrow precisely what they do not already possess (Hartman, 1969). The Prophet Dance of the Beaver exhibited both processes. The continuity of dreaming from the hunt to prophetism was explicitly asserted in the legend of Makenunatane, yet tradition emphasized the novelty of his ethical teachings. The Beaver remembered the introduction of prophetism as an ethical transformation of Beaver religion. For the first time, access to heaven was understood to be conditional upon ethical behavior. It was no longer possible to kill with indifference to the consequences.

The claim merits serious examination. The version of the Beaver culture-hero myth that Goddard (1917) collected included an episode concerning an ascension to heaven.

Suddenly he came to a trail that had been used by people. There he shot at a stump. The arrows were pointing up. "Do not get it," he was told. He thought it was quite close and followed it clear to the sky. Then he went on after it until he came where some people were living. The people to whom he came lived on nothing but caribou....

After he had remained there a short time he thought he would go to his own country. [p. 234]

There is no ethical dimension to this conception of hunting grounds in the sky.

The Beaver also related a myth that Goddard entitled "Crow Monopolizes the Game," whose variants are widely distributed in Native North America. In the myth, people were starving because the game animals had disappeared. Crow alone appeared to be well fed. The other people watched him carefully and discovered that he had driven all the animals into the earth and shut them up. The people attacked Crow and released the animals. Crow had revenge by making the animals difficult to kill (Goddard, 1917, pp. 250-51). Luckert (1975) demonstrated that this myth expressed the paradigm of hunting ritualism. Ethical concerns were notably absent. Every act of hunting was revenge taken against Crow; every difficulty in the hunt was an act of Crow's revenge against hunters.

It is incorrect to assume that religions everywhere advocate ethics. Cooper (1931) noted that the hunting peoples of the north devoted their religions to their gods and spirits and treated ethics as secular concerns. Native cultures advocated ethics, but they did not link their ethics to the concerns of their religions. To this general rule, there was one exception. The gods and spirits of hunter cultures demanded devotions that included reverential treatment of the animals that hunters killed. The ritual obligations often included the demand that people exhibit generosity in dividing meat within the human community. Because the animals were generous in providing the meat at the cost of their lives, hunters were to make gifts of the meat to their community members.

With the notable exception of Beaver prophetism, Beaver religion was consistent with the general pattern of northern hunter religions. Ridington (1988) remarked: "Animals only give themselves to people who are generous and cooperative with other people....the Beaver attributed lack of success to misunderstanding, disharmony, and a lack of generosity" (p. 73). "Dane-zaa Dreamers say that the animal people know when humans are not generous with one another. Animals know when people do not respect the bodies the animals have given to feed people. They do not choose to give themselves to these people" (Ridington & Ridington, 2006, p. 181). Goddard (1917) recorded two versions of a tale concerning "The Hair Scrapings

Man,” who came into being from the hairs left by buffaloes. The man possessed the power of transforming into a buffalo and hunting buffalo with extraordinary success. His success created an ethical dilemma.

They were starving, when someone reported having seen buffalo that did not know people were about. After the others had gone to bed he took arrows from each man and went to the buffalo. When he came near them he transformed himself into a buffalo and started to play with them. He killed them all and started back....

He told his grandfather that each man who knew his own arrows would know which buffalo belonged to him....They thought the buffalo were lying there alive and they were sitting over them ready to shoot....When he came to them he said, “Take the ones your arrows are sticking in.” [p. 239; see also: p. 241]

In this tale, the ethical obligation to respect animals’ self-sacrifices to hunters by treating their meat and other bodily parts with respect included the specific obligation to share the meat with other members of the human community. Another story mentioned that the division of meat was contingent on need. “From a man who had many children he had taken two of his arrows, but if there was only one child he took only one arrow. With these arrows he had killed all the buffalo, allotting them one or two animals according to the number of children” (pp. 241-42). These motifs do not imply a religious concern with ethics in general. The division of game was the only observance of traditional hunter religion that was explicitly ethical.

Beaver prophetism radically altered the relation of ethics to Beaver religion. The legend of Makenunatane endorsed the traditional obligation of generosity with game meat (Ridington, 1978, p. 79); but the Prophet Dance provided a religious rationalization for ethics in general. Beaver prophetism made the heavenly afterlife conditional, among other matters, on ethical conduct. “One person above the heaven looks down on us. Everything people do he marks down; the good things, the bad things. If a person does too many bad things, drinking, stealing, lying all the time, that person doesn’t belong to heaven....Nothing is hidden. God knows everything that happens one earth” (pp. 94-95). Under Catholic missionary influence, beginning with Henri Faraut (1866) in 1858, Beaver prophetism likely increased the specific injunctions that Makenunatane introduced. The list of prohibitions included murder, suicide, incest, excessive fornication, stealing, fighting, lying, swearing, and “not to think bad about other people” (Ridington, 1978, pp. 78, 80, 96-97, 102, 104; 1978, p. 28; 1988, pp. 92, 186).

The Prophet Dance and Christianity

Spier (1935) thought that the nucleus of the Prophet Dance was indigenous and ancient; and Ridington (1978, pp. 2-4, 40; 1990, p. 78) made a similar claim for its Beaver variant. Without challenging their contention, I would like to emphasize the Christian component of the revitalization movement. Beaver prophetism contains several core features that are strongly suggestive of Christian influence: a God in heaven; divine judgment of the dead post-mortem; the heavenly abode of the righteous dead; penance; exhortatory moral preaching; morally contingent prophecies; and apocalypticism.

Goddard (1917) remarked that “the development of prophecy in the north is unusual for America. Beside the accounts from Indians, the half-breeds, and even the white traders have stories of the foretelling of events or the description of contemporaneous events at a considerable distance” (p. 228). Ideas of a post-mortem judgment were unknown to the Northern Algonkian tribes until they were introduced by Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century (Hultkrantz, 1980); and there is little reason to assume that their western

neighbors, the various Northern Athapaskan groups, entertained ideas of a judgment of the dead prior to contact with Christianity.

Christian influences on Beaver prophetism must assuredly have increased over the generations since Makenunatane. The Prophet Dance is scarcely imaginable, however, without core features that were taken from Christianity. These features were fairly basic and simple; they could have been acquired through contacts with traders rather than missionaries.

When the Prophet Dance is interpreted as a revitalization of Native American vision practices by borrowing from Christianity, the peculiarity of the acculturation becomes the more acute. The Prophet Dance syncretized both Christian ethics and Christian apocalypticism. There was both an ambition to emulate Western culture by adopting its ethical teachings, and a hope that Western culture be utterly destroyed in a world cataclysm.

The Appeal of the Prophet Dance

Although Beaver informants praised Makenunatane for introducing a concern with ethics into Beaver religion, it would be naive to assume that an increase in ethics has an inherent appeal, as something intrinsically nobler or finer. Even if we postulate that ethics have a cross-cultural basis in human biology and psychology, so that it is meaningful to speak of an increased awareness or raised consciousness about ethical concerns, we must acknowledge that most of humanity exhibits a lamentable disinterest in ethical behavior. Ethics have not swept the globe displacing myth, ritual, and magic; and there is no reason to assume that the Prophet Dance appealed to the Beaver simply because it was ethical.

Beaver prophets claimed that dancing the Prophet Dance was an act of penance; but like many religious rituals, it was a performance of symbolic penance that was done in substitution for actual reparation to the victims of misdeeds (Merkur, 1991). The fear of heaven promoted ethical ideals, but dancing the Prophet Dance provided a magico-ritual alternative to ethical behavior. If the introduction of the Prophet Dance increased Beaver awareness of ethics, it also provided a substitute for the obligation to behave ethically.

Moreover, the traditional Beaver claim that Beaver prophetism introduced an ethical revolution fails to account for the Prophet Dance's apocalypticism. The Prophet Dance was a compromise formation that accommodated conflicting attitudes to Western culture without ever reconciling them. Christianity was both admired and detested. The genocide and cultural onslaught that Euro-Americans boasted as Enlightenment, Progress, and Manifest Destiny, Native Americans feared as the end of the world. Their response, the Prophet Dance, was an indigenous effort at acculturation, an attempt to accommodate the essence of Christianity to traditional Native religions. What Natives perceived as the essence of Christianity included apocalypticism. The Prophet Dance was an instance, in psychoanalytic terms, of identification with the aggressor that coincided with manifest resentment of the aggressor.

The Prophet Dance's conflicted response to Christianity was consistent with conflicts that may be noted elsewhere in Beaver culture. Consider the Beaver concept of personal taboos. Helping spirits were overwhelmingly powerful. A child newly returned from a vision quest behaved as an animal because s/he could not control the medicine power. The child had to be "sung over" in order to be restored to normalcy. Forever after, the child had to observe one or more personal taboos in order to keep the power from becoming "too strong." Although the child was prohibited from telling others what power s/he has, others had to obey the taboos as well. Otherwise, the person would be overwhelmed by the power and turn into a cannibalistic monster, called a *wechuge*. A *wechuge* was always the person's own animal spirit, acting not in its familiar form as a helper, but in its mythic primordial form as a gigantic cannibal (Ridington, 1990, pp. 162, 166-67).

The following account of a man who became *wechuge* may be used to illustrate the underlying psychological issues.

Asah, a man in his early seventies, had....his own house and was fed by whichever other family had fresh meat. His youngest daughter, a girl of about five, lived with him and slept in the same bed. He was, in a sense, everybody's grandfather and was called Asah by most of the younger people. Whenever meat was being distributed, the hunter's wife always made sure to send a portion over with some child to Asah.

According to the story I was told, some people from another community were visiting the reserve where Asah lived. Perhaps they were from the group to which his former wife belonged....A woman or women among the visitors sent Asah some meat that had been hanging for a time. There were fly eggs on this meat. Because the meat was a gift and because he had not been asked by the visitors if he could eat it, he had no choice but to accept the gift. He ate the meat and began to get "too strong." He was a tiny man, but his behavior was frightening to the point of throwing the whole community into a panic. The little old man had climbed up onto his bed and began jumping up and down like a frog, singing his medicine song. It was well known in the community that one of his medicine animals was Frog....

To the people in camp, the little old man bouncing up and down on his bed was becoming the person-eating monster, Wechuge...the Giant Frog, a warrior and gambler of superhuman power. The people could no longer relate to him as a person. Some gave way to their fear and prepared to flee from him. Unless the power growing stronger within him was returned to its proper place, he would begin to eat his own lips....

The old man's froglike performance began only when the women and children were in camp. To attempt to cure him, they turned to the person closest to his power, the five-year-old daughter who slept as he did under the medicine bundle containing, among other things, tiny images of frogs that were alive and moved when the bundle was opened. The young girl took down his medicine bundle and brought it close to him....and gently pass[ed] the bundle over his body....this action had the desired effect, and he began to grow calm. The cure that she had begun through the application of his own medicine was completed when other people arrived on the scene and used their own powers to bring him back. [Ridington, 1990, pp. 170-72]

Asah's grandson Peter Chipesia commented:

Lots of people make a mistake. That's why lots of people have gotten strong. They make a mistake. I wouldn't be like that, me. I wouldn't be like that now. I know it helps lots to know something, but you have to watch all the time. People are scared of you. Even when I go down to Rose Prairie, they're afraid to feed me. They have to ask me first if I like to eat that. Even beaver meat, they ask me if I eat that kind of meat. I say, "Sure, I eat it." Lots of Indians are afraid of any kind of man. You never know if, me, if I know something. You wouldn't know. Just like that, you don't know with another kind of person. [p. 168]

Peter Chipesia had apparently abandoned the belief-system that would oblige him to turn *wechuge*. "I wouldn't be like that now. I know it helps lots to know something, but you have to watch all the time. People are scared of you" [Ibid.].

It was not simply that a person had to observe personal taboos in deference to his/her helping spirit. Most Native tribes believed that violations of personal taboos resulted in failures at hunting, in sickness, and other misfortunes. The Beaver imagined that violations caused people to turn *wechuge*, and people actually did turn *wechuge* when their taboos were violated. Because everyone who “knows something” had the potential to turn *wechuge*, s/he had always to be on guard against doing so. Unconsciously, however, s/he had also to be on guard to find opportunities to turn *wechuge*.

Self-deception formed an integral component of the *wechuge* complex. The secrecy that prohibited discussion of medicine power also prohibited volunteering information about one’s personal taboos, and the standards of formal etiquette that prohibited refusing a gift worked to create situations that obliged people to become *wechuge*. These rules could be exploited for purposes of malice. Ridington suspected malice when he questioned whether the woman who gave Asah the fly eggs might have been a relation of the wife who had recently left him. Malice must also be credited to Asah, who both kept silent about his personal taboo and knowingly ate the forbidden eggs.

Wechuge was, at minimum, a culturally sanctioned context for acting-out rage. Unconsciously, it was this rage that “you have to watch all the time.” Useful as rage may have been during the hunt, it had destructive consequences for social relations.

Consider the following account of a medicine fight. One of Ridington’s informants, named Tommy Attachie, had burned his leg when he was drunk and rolled into a fire. He did not accept his own responsibility for the mishap.

Tommy told me he knew from dreaming that an enemy with power in his mind had attacked him and driven his body toward the edge of the fire when his dreaming mind was clouded by alcohol. While Tommy’s body struggled to restore itself, the enemy continued to direct his mind’s power against Tommy. The recovery did not go smoothly. There were infections that undermined his strength. Tommy focused all his life’s energy on dreams in which he could confront the enemy. He drew upon powers that were the secret legacy of his training in the bush as a child....

Finally, he was able to identify and confront the enemy. The confrontation took place in a dream. They faced one another squarely, mind to mind. The edge between them was the possibility of death. Tommy knew he had the power to kill the enemy. He opened his mind to reveal that knowledge to him. Tommy also knew he did not wish to kill. He did not want to take that man’s burden on his own destiny. He thought of the Creator. He thought of what Charlie Yahey said about the Trail to Heaven, Yagatunne. A person who kills will be too heavy from the wrongs done by his enemy to follow the trail of song up to heaven. When his trail on earth comes to an end, his shadow will have to walk back by night, along the trail he took by day during his life. Tommy opened his mind to the enemy as he thought of what the Dreamers said. Faced with the combination of Tommy’s power and his adherence to the Dreamer’s teaching, the enemy retreated. After the dream confrontation, Tommy began to recover....

As Tommy told me the story of his medicine fight and the teachings of the Dreamers, he began to sing some of their songs. These songs are sent down by the Dreamers in heaven to those who remain on earth. [Ridington, 1988, pp. 220-21]

Tommy’s fantasy that an enemy had attacked him with medicine power was a projection of his own rage. Although he very likely gave the person in question oblique signal that damaged social relations by indicating his hostility, his dreams of confronting,

overpowering, and being on the point of killing his enemy were fantasies that manifested his resistance to his unconscious knowledge of his own responsibility for falling into the fire.

It is in this context, I suggest, that we may appreciate the appeal of the Prophet Dance. Tommy resolved his experience of psychic conflict when he accepted his responsibility for mastering his rage. He did not gain the insight that his desire to rationalize his rage had led him to fantasize that he had an enemy. Neither did he appreciate that in refraining from killing his enemy, he was manipulating manifest symbolism in a manner that mastered his rage. Ideas of a divine judgment post-mortem provided him with manifest symbolism that he was able to utilize in mastering his rage. What he experienced was the inner peace of a resolution of psychic conflict.

Aku, another of Ridington's Beaver informants, would appear to have been making much the same point when he identified the significance of the first two Beaver prophets not only with the introduction of ethics, but also with the transformation of the meaning of the sweat lodge rite.

Those two men, Makenunatane and Maketchueson knew well. Before them there were bad people but those two men knew well....There would be no more killing people with medicine. These two men made them stop....Lots of people used to kill with sleep medicine. Those people had some animal friends. They would make a tipi and heat some stones inside it. That's how they would call their friend. That is called chezutl. Now people use that to make smoke for God. You pay a medicine man to make that tipi and you leave your sins there [Ridington, 1978, pp. 100-101].

The Prophet Dance appealed, I suggest, because it resolved the conflicted psychology of the medicine fight, while projecting the abiding rage outward in apocalyptic fantasies of the world's end.

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