

# Twentieth Century Transformations of East Cree Spirituality and Autonomy

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The James Bay region has been the hunting grounds of Native peoples since sometime after the melting of the great Wisconsin glacier, several thousand years ago. People spent most of their annual cycle of hunting activities in small groups dispersed over the region, and in the summer gathered into larger groups at a good fishing spot, for social and ceremonial purposes. Europeans arrived in the 1600s, and for three centuries the Crees were summer sojourners to European-based trading post settlements, dominated in a colonial fashion by a trader, a small number of Company artisans and servants, and a missionary. Annually, for a few summer weeks, the Crees brought their furs to trade, briefly enlarging the colonial community. During the past century, the trading post communities have gradually become the year-round residence of the Crees. Starting in the second half of the twentieth century, the settlements were provided with government services (nursing stations, schools, welfare) and administration, and then politically transformed by being administrated by Cree townspeople.

My research looks at what happens when people who have long practiced a land-based spirituality move from their bush home areas into towns, become more sedentary, and identify themselves with a Christian or a pow wow religion. The transformations that took place involved blending or replacing major domains of life experience and portions of the indigenous Cree, land-based spirituality. These changes in experience and spirituality are a kind of deterritorialization. There are now some Crees who feel awkward when they go out on the land. At the same time, the processes of developing and maintaining personal autonomy have been substantially transformed, and have been complemented by developing political autonomy, at both community and regional levels. But this may be true globally. For instance, we can ask what happened to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam when those pastoralists moved many times, over many centuries, in many geographical and cultural directions — and now most recently into an uncomfortable juxtaposition with secular modernism? What has characterized their strategies for strengthening political autonomy?

Some traditional beliefs and practices were kept but reset into larger (supraregional) regions and culture areas, some were conflated with other peoples' beliefs and practices, some virtually disappeared (deterritorialization), and some were substantially revised to serve the politics of competing churches. In this latter process, the politics of conversion required having the power to compete with other religions. These were major institutional changes of social scale and religious behaviour and convictions, but the mystical or personal apprehension of the spiritual persisted through the centuries, allowing for the maturing of personal spiritual autonomy.

In the past century fundamentalisms in all three traditions that originated in the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have emerged in response to processes of modernization, especially in reaction to the accelerating velocity of processes of secularization and liberalization. We see happening now a tension between those accepting and engaging modernity, and those "fundamentalists" who reject it as immoral or ungodly, feel themselves disempowered, and reject the pressure of new experiences, new knowledge, and implied or explicit criticism and emendations of

their orthodoxies.

We may look for some of these tendencies in the Cree case. But what we find is a transformation of the ethos and world view of "bush" hunter-trapper spirituality into principled and firm political representations of Cree autonomy. Strategies of hunting-trapping seem to me to have resurfaced in politics, with preference for strategies of negotiation, so long as success can be achieved in that way. How, then, do people adapt to new beliefs and at the same time adapt the new into the existing Cree structure of knowledge and belief?

I define spirituality as a condition of wholeness or holiness, at once open to personal revelation and open to learning and being disciplined by respect for what has been learned by others, encompassing a whole mode of life experience. The Cree hunter's land-based spirituality was distinct from most other spiritualities in that it arose from and incorporated peoples' cumulative life experiences of the land and of hunting the animals — focusing on the animals' characteristic actions and their strategies for living and evading capture — and the human actions and strategies for tracking and killing some of them. The true locus of Cree personal autonomy was in this small-scale personal community, where practices of sharing back and forth between families, looking after the land and the animals on the land, and showing respect for creation by taking responsibility for trying to live well together.

The Cree world was constituted of a great community of persons, all of whom somehow came into the world in ancient times with the common goal of finding a home, and so of pursuing the means to eat and live well, according to their specific natures. Each species had their own characteristic kind of autonomy, sometimes with a strong sense of shared community (i.e., geese) and sometimes very solitary and asocial (i.e., wolverine). This great community of persons contrasts with the more socially elaborate societies of the universalist religious traditions, with their gardens to cultivate and harvest, or their herds of one or two species of domesticated animals, or, later, their industries. I believe that this is a very significant difference, leading to a difference in the way that autonomy and community are found in families and communities.

For me, this theme of responsibility and respect for others is highlighted in the examples of the failure to observe this standard — where people interfere in the autonomy of another, and the consequences that follow. A mythic paragon of interference and transformation is the Cree trickster figure, whose (usually) unwitting interference in the lives of others is the source of deep mirth and wonder at the absurdity of irresponsible (or better, pre-responsible) behaviour. The Cree writer Tomson Highway sees the trickster as the Indigenous equivalent of the Christ figure of Christian myth, or more accurately, he sees the Christ figure as a version of this universal mythic "first-born" and unsocialized moral nomad and teacher of the full complexity and ambivalence of life, but Christ is simplified and morally sanitized by centuries of Catholic religiosity.

The Crees sought what value they could find in, or behind, the words and actions of Europeans, whose ineptness in the bush would indicate that, while they claimed great authority, they were not infallible. Things of value that blended especially well with Cree traditions included prayers and hymns that focused on hope for the animals' gift of food, and baptism as protection from the threat of sorcery. In the 1970s, the new pow wow traditionalism was brought to James Bay from the west. Often shown in television newscasts, it is marked with loud drums and songs, which like hymns (but unlike the hunting songs) are sung in unison. Pow wow is mainly social for some participants, but it is taken as deeply spiritual for others. It is said that the big drum replicates the heartbeats of mother earth. These performances are not solitary, but social. Some participants feel deeply moved by the drumming, and by experiences of the sweat lodge. The songs mostly have a story behind them, so

that there is a parallel to the regional/family oral traditions. Many people see and respect the discipline of mind and body that it includes, and are accepting of people who believe in its spirituality.

What kinds of Cree autonomies emerge from these encounters? I am of the opinion that political autonomy, as practiced by nation-states, is the polar opposite of individual or personal community spiritual autonomy of the kind I have claimed for the Crees. Political autonomy makes eminent sense as a term for the negotiation of collective distinctness when a group is encapsulated within a nation-state. Negotiation and credible identity are unlikely to be achieved without speaking the recognizable and approved language of those in political power, as the Crees discovered in the early 1970s. But since political autonomy carries the sense of legitimizing and maintaining a bounded separateness, there is a radical attitudinal problem if this political and externally directed sense of autonomy is allowed to leak over into the formation and nurturing of community. A much earlier example of the wrong kind of community autonomy was seen in the competition between the denominations represented by missionaries. It was their ambition not only to win converts, but to define and maintain boundaries that would exclude people of other denominations.

The type of autonomy that is congenial to individuals, or more accurately, to personal communities, is based on inclusion rather than exclusion. In families, or in marriages, or in larger personal communities, autonomy of the type that evidences a shared ethos based on sustained responsible, respectful decisions and actions is successful, where exclusionary and power seeking autonomy is destructive. The political stance of Cree leaders has sometimes very effectively emphasized the distinctness of Cree lands and identity using the morality and principle of respect for Cree self-determination and other human rights. From a Cree perspective, this includes spiritual as well as economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions. Some professionals in the area of Indigenous politics say that the Crees are at the leading edge of developments of this sort. Some aspects of hunting spirituality have been transformed, or carried forward, into political ideology.

The hunters way of being (*ehntohowatsiwin*) is still alive and a factor in how the Crees manage their politics. To a significant degree, this may well be because the Cree leaders negotiate using the spirit of hunter-trapper's survival strategies ensuring the integrity of the land. Distinct societies, including Cree society, may be better safeguarded and further developed through discussion with governments, with exclusionary confrontational politics kept in reserve as the "worst scenario" alternative if negotiations prove to have been in bad faith, or fail for other reasons.