

The Beginning of the Cree World



BY

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Ahenakew, f. et. al. Native Voices. Canada:
McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1993.

After the Creator had made all the animals and had made the first people, he said to Wisakedjak, "Take good care of my people, and teach them how to live. Show them all the bad roots, all the roots that will hurt them and kill them. Do not let the people or the animals quarrel with each other."

But Wisakedjak did not obey the Creator. He let the creatures do whatever they wished to do. Soon they were quarrelling and fighting and shedding much blood.

The Creator, greatly displeased, warned Wisakedjak. "If you do not keep the ground clean, I will take everything away from you, and you will be miserable."

But Wisakedjak did not believe the Creator and did not obey. Becoming more and more careless and disobedient, he tricked the animals and the people and made them angry with each other. They quarrelled and fought so much that the earth became red with blood.

This time the Creator became very angry. "I will take everything away from you and wash the ground clean," he said.

Still Wisakedjak did not believe the Creator. He did not believe

until the rains came and the streams began to swell. After day, and night after night, the rains continued. The water in the rivers and the lakes rose higher and higher. At last they overflowed their banks and washed the ground clean. The sea came up on the land, and everything was drowned except one Otter, one Beaver, and one Muskrat.

Wisakedjak tried to stop the sea, but it was too strong for him. He sat down on the water and wept. Otter, Beaver, and Muskrat sat beside him and rested their heads on one of his thighs.

In time the rain stopped and the sea left the land. Wisakedjak took courage, but he did not dare to speak to the Creator. After long and sad thoughts about his misery, he said to himself, "If I could get a bit of the old earth beneath the water, I could make a little island for us to live on."

He did not have the power to create anything, but he did have the power to expand what had already been created. As he could not dive and did not know how far it was to the old earth, he did not know what to do. Taking pity on him, the Creator said, "I will give you the power to re-make everything if you will use the old materials buried underneath the water."

Still floating on the flood, Wisakedjak said to the three animals beside him, "We shall starve unless one of you can bring me a bit of the old ground beneath the water. If you will get it for me, I will make an island for us."

Then he turned to the Otter. "You are brave and strong and active. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of earth, I will see that you have plenty of fish to eat."

So the Otter dived, but he came up again without having reached the ground. A second time and a third time Wisakedjak praised Otter and persuaded him to go down once more. When he returned the third time, he was so weary that he could not dive again.

"You are a coward!" exclaimed Wisakedjak. "I am surprised by your weak heart. Beaver, I know, can dive to the bottom of the flood. He will put you to shame."

Then he turned to Beaver. "You are brave and strong and wise. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of the old earth, I will make a good house for you on the new island I shall make. There you will be warm in the winter. Dive straight down, as a brave Beaver does."

Twice Beaver dived, and twice he came back without any earth. The second time he was so tired that Wisakedjak had to let him rest

for a long while.

"Dive once more," begged Wisakedjak when Beaver had recovered. "If you will bring me a bit of earth, I will make a wife for you."

To obtain a wife, Beaver went down a third time. He stayed so long that he came back almost lifeless, still with no earth in his paws.

Wisakedjak was now very sad. If Otter and Beaver could not reach the bottom of the water, surely Muskrat also would fail. But he must try. He was their only chance.

"You are brave and strong and quick, Muskrat, even if you are small. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of the old earth at the bottom, I will make plenty of roots for you to eat. I will create rushes, so that you can make a nice house with rushes and dirt.

"Otter and Beaver are fools," continued Wisakedjak. "They got lost. You will find the ground if you will dive straight down."

So Muskrat jumped head first into the water. Down and down he went, but he brought back nothing. A second time he dived and stayed a long time. When he returned, Wisakedjak looked at his forepaws and sniffed.

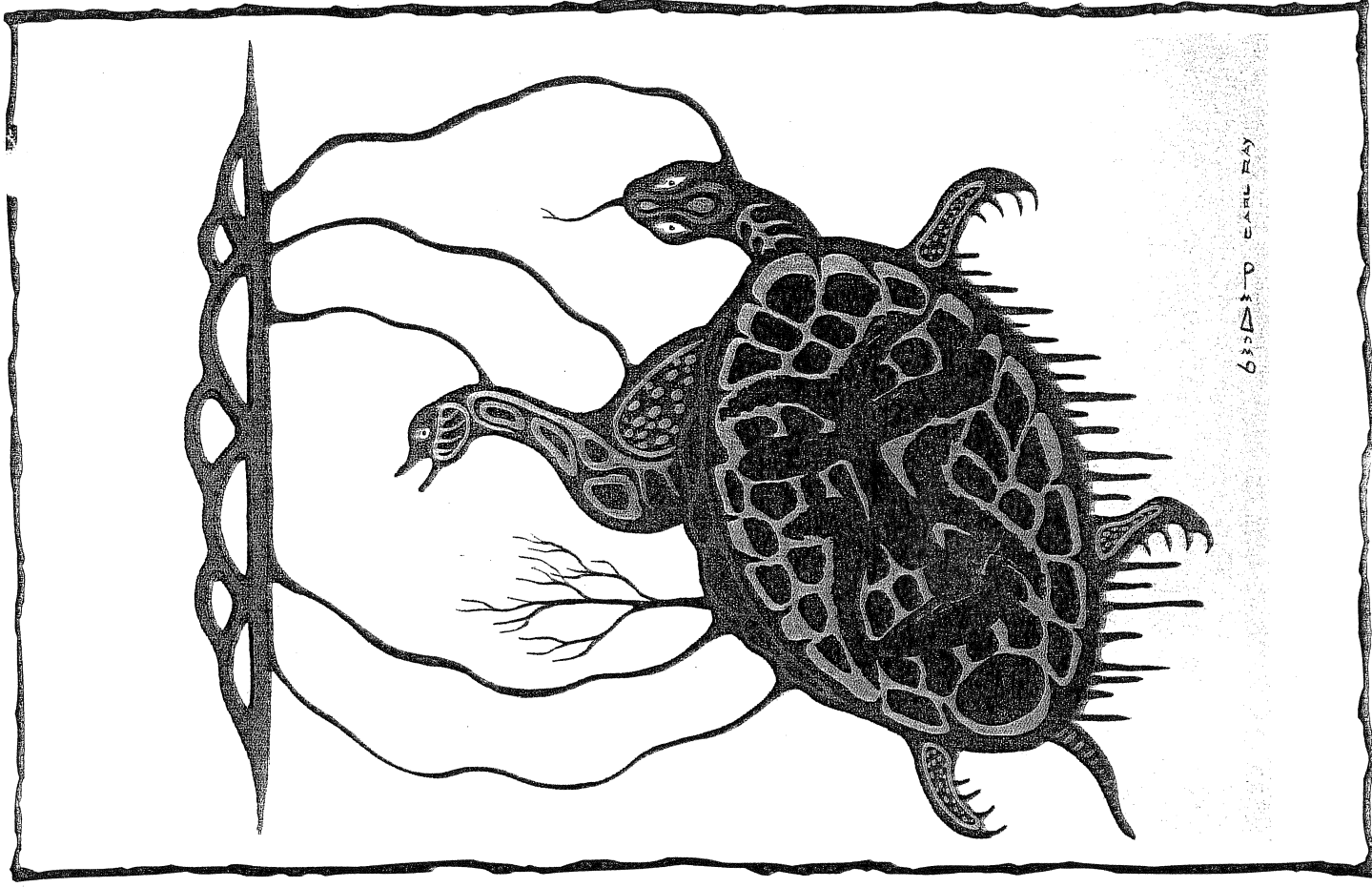
"I smell the smell of earth," he said. "Go again. If you bring me even a small piece, I will make a wife for you, Muskrat. You will have a great many children. Have a strong heart now. Go straight down, as far as you can go."

This time Muskrat stayed so long that Wisakedjak feared he had drowned. At last they saw some bubbles coming up through the water. Wisakedjak reached down his long arm, seized Muskrat, and pulled him up beside them. The little creature was almost dead, but against his breast his forepaws held a piece of the old earth.

Joyously, Wisakedjak seized it, and in a short time he had expanded the bit of earth into an island. There he, Muskrat, Otter, and Beaver rested and rejoiced that they had not drowned in the flood.

Some people say that Wisakedjak obtained a bit of wood, from which he made the trees, that he obtained some bones, from which he made the second race of animals. Others say that the Creator made all things again. He commanded the rivers to take the salt water back to the sea. Then he created humankind, the animals of today, and the trees. He took from Wisakedjak all power over people and animals and left him only the power to flatter and deceive.

After that, Wisakedjak played tricks upon the animals and led them into much mischief. That is why the Indians tell many stories about him, to amuse themselves during the long winter evenings.



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Carl Ray Re-Creation of the World After the Great Flood c. 1975

The beginning of the Haida world

Almost every tribe had one or more myths about the creation of the world. Among the Coast tribes of British Columbia, Raven was the central figure in the stories of creation. Some people considered him a symbol of creation; others considered him a symbol of an ancient deity.

The following is one of several creation myths once told by the Haida Indians of the Queen Charlotte Islands. In many of their villages, the raven was the most important symbol on the totem poles.

Long, long ago, before the world was created, Sha-lana ruled in his kingdom up in the grey clouds. All below his kingdom was a vast stretch of water.

Raven was the chief servant of Sha-lana. One day Raven made his master angry and so was cast forth from the land of the grey clouds. Back and forth he flew over the vast sea until he became weary. But there was no place where he could rest, no place where he could light.

Angry at finding none, he beat the water with his wings until it reached the clouds on both sides of him. When the water fell back, it was transformed into rocks. There Raven rested. These rocks grew and spread themselves on each side until they stretched from North Island to Cape St. James. Later, the rocks were changed into sand. After several moons had passed, a few trees sprang up on the sand and grew there. After many moons, the sand and the trees had grown into the beautiful islands known today as the Queen Charlotte Islands.

After Raven had enjoyed his kingdom for a while, he became lonely. "I need someone to help me with my work here," he said to him self.

One day he piled up on the beach two large heaps of clam shells and transformed them into two human beings. Both of them were female. In a short time these two beings became unhappy and complained to their creator, Raven.

"You should not have made both of us women," they said.

At first Raven was angered by their complaint, but after thinking about it, he understood why they were unhappy. So he threw limpet shells at one of them and changed her into a man. Then they were happy. The man and the woman became the ancestors of all the Haida people.

Seeing the two people together made Raven feel very lonely. So he made up his mind to visit his former home in Cloudland and try to obtain a wife among the daughters of the chiefs up there.

One bright sunny morning he started on his long journey. He flew high up above the great sea until the land he had created seemed the

size of a small mosquito. At last he came to the wall around Sha-lana's kingdom. There he hid himself until evening. Then he changed himself into the form of a bear, scratched a hole in the wall, and through it entered Cloudland.

There Raven found that everything had changed greatly. He learned that everyone was now a chief, ruled by the Chief of Light, who still had supreme power. The Chief had divided his kingdom into villages and towns, into lands and seas. He had created a moon and stars, and he had made a great sun to rule over all the other bodies of light. Raven observed everything carefully, so that he could make a similar kingdom down on his earth.

At last, still in the form of a bear, Raven was brought before the ruler. As he seemed to be a handsome and tame bear, the Chief kept him as a playmate for his young son. For three years Raven lived in the beautiful lodge of the ruling family. Many of the things that he saw there he decided to take with him when he returned home.

In Cloudland it was the custom for children to disguise themselves, to change themselves into bears or seals or birds. One evening Raven, in the form of a bear, was strolling on the beach, looking for clams for his supper. He saw three bears approaching him, but he knew that they were the children of a chief.

"Now is the time to return to my own country," Raven said to himself.

He transformed himself into a large eagle, swooped down upon the three children-bears, and gathered up one of them. He seized also the sun, which was just then setting, and the fire-stick that was used in kindling fires. With the child in his claws, the sun under one wing and the fire-stick under the other, he started away from the Land of Light.

When the people in the upper world learned that the sun had been stolen, they were alarmed. Many of them rushed to the Great Chief to report the theft.

"Search everywhere, at once," he ordered. "When you find the thief, we will throw him to the ruler of the lower world, the world below the great sea."

Just before the search started, a messenger arrived, crying out, "I saw a large eagle flying off with the sun under one wing!"

Everyone then gave chase, following Raven, still in the form of an eagle. In his hurried flight, Raven dropped the child. The child fell down through the clouds into the sea that was close to Cloudland. Still carrying the sun and the fire-stick, Raven flew away from his pursuers and reached the earth safely.

The child, when it fell into the sea, cried for help. Hearing him, a great shoal of little fish came to his rescue and carried him on their backs to the shore of Cloudland. Today many of these fish swim around Rose-spit, and their forms have been pressed into the blue clay along the near-by beaches.

The Great Chief in Cloudland, a lover of peace, did not allow his people to follow Raven to the earth. He feared that their pursuit might cause the ruler of the lower world to come to Cloudland and

give them trouble. Instead, the Great Chief created another sun to shine over his kingdom.

When Raven reached his kingdom, he showed his people how to make fire with the fire-stick he had watched people use in Cloudland. Ever since, the earth has had light and heat, from the sun and from fire.



Other supernatural beings

Similar to Nanabozho of Chippewa mythology and to Wisakedjak of Cree mythology are Napi or Old Man of the Blackfeet, Coyote of the western plateau tribes (and of other tribes in the United States), and Raven of the tribes along the Pacific coast. Each appears as the main character in innumerable stories, sometimes as a human being, sometimes as an animal, always able to do supernatural deeds. Each personage has the same combination of contradictory qualities: cleverness and stupidity, benevolence and malicious mischief.

Raven and Coyote appear in tales in this volume. Napi made the sun and the world, animals and the first people. He created the first buffalo and told the Indians to shoot them with the bows and arrows he had made. He gave the Blackfeet the first specimens of every article that they use, and they made the copies. Everywhere in the Rocky Mountains are places where Napi slept or walked or hunted. As a culture hero, he was much like Nanabozho; as a cruel prankster and trickster, he was much like Coyote.

Characters similar to them are found in the mythology of many tribes. Mink is one of these supernatural beings. Old-One of some plateau tribes, the Three Brothers, the Four Brothers, and several supernatural beings whose names mean simply "the Changer" travelled about, transforming the early world and its inhabitants into the forms we see today.

Glooscap, the main character in the stories of the Micmacs and the Malecites of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, appears only as a benefactor and as a human or superhuman being, never as a trickster or as an animal. "Glooscap was the friend and teacher of the Indians. All they knew of the arts he taught them. He taught them the names of the constellations and the stars. He taught them how to hunt and fish and cure what they took, and how to cultivate the ground."

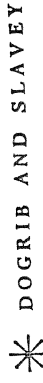
He travelled up and down the St. John River in his stone canoe, and over the land on his snowshoes, improving the life of his people. His canoe was an island, now called Perce Island. His stone kettle is now known as Spencer Island. His snowshoes are the two is-

opposite Mactiquack. His carrying strap was the rainbow; when he was at home, he hung it in the sky, so that his people would know that all was well. Finding that enormous beavers were troublesome, he broke their dam with his big stick and so formed the Reversing Falls in the St. John River.

He killed giants and monsters and all the dangerous animals. Large animals that were not dangerous he changed to their present size. He transformed a moose into the Isle of Holt and his pursuing dogs into rocks; the dogs still sit on their haunches, their tongues hanging from their mouths. On a cliff at the Narrows, he made a picture of himself before he left for a distant land. Indians seeing the face and head of Glooscap on the rock used to throw tobacco into the water as a sacrifice, to insure a calm voyage.

Glooscap, usually accompanied by his brother, had many adventures with Half-Stone, with Thunder, with Turtle, and with others of the ancient people. Some storytellers say that he is still living, in the south end of the world. He does not grow old, and he expects to live as long as the world lasts.

Glooscap, the Four Brothers, Old-One, Coyote, Raven, Wisakedjak, and Nanabozho are important characters in some of the stories that follow.



The big snow in the northland

Long ago, the animals and birds and fishes along the shores of Great Slave Lake lived in peace and friendship. All spoke the same language at that time, when the world was new and people had not come out yet. No animal ate another animal. All lived on plants and leaves and berries.

One night in this long ago time, the darkness was very thick and snow began to fall. All night it fell. The night continued, so that it seemed never to have an end. The snow became deeper and deeper. Plants and bushes were covered, and the animals had difficulty in finding food. Many of them died.

At last their chief called a council of all the living.

"Let us send messengers to the Sky World," the council decided. "They will find out from the Sky People what is causing this long night and the deep snow."

So they sent as messengers one member of every kind of animal, bird, and fish that lived on the shores of Great Slave Lake. Those who could not fly were carried on the backs of those who could fly. So all reached the Sky World and passed through the trans-