

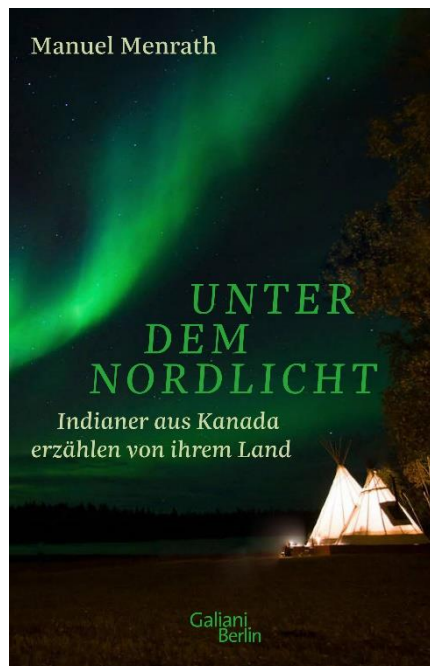
UNDER THE NORTHERN LIGHTS. Indigenous People in Canada Tell the Story of Their Land

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The Author About His Book **[not part of the original edition]**

‘You don’t find the stories,’ the Indigenous film director Michelle Derosier told me on a walk. ‘The stories find you.’ Her words encapsulated something that I’d long struggled to put into words. It was a sunny morning in the summer of 2018. We were standing on a grassy rise in the Canadian city of Thunder Bay, with an inspiring view of the deep-blue Gitchi Gamie, as the Ojibwe call the sea-sized Lake Superior. Out in the bay lay Nanabush, the legendary Sleeping Giant. The gentle waves lapping at the peninsula made it look as if it was breathing. People began canoeing along its shores thousands of years ago. Later, but still a long, long time ago, Cree and Ojibwe fished in rivers that ran through a boundless land until they flowed into Thunder Bay or the polar seas; they hunted in the thick forests, traded and celebrated great summer festivals.

These people were at one with the land. They lived on the back of a giant turtle surrounded by the ocean, and the turtle protected them. Then, however, mere generations ago, bearded men appeared out of nowhere, bringing with them metal tools and paddling in wooden boats far heavier than the Ojibwes’ light birchbark canoes. Some Indigenous people jokingly referred to them as *wemitigowuk* — people who row heavy wooden canoes. The waves on Lake Superior were a little choppy, but for a little while longer the surface remained calm.

The Ojibwe traded with the new arrivals and helped them through the harsh winters. However, people from the distant world kept coming and in ever-increasing numbers. They proclaimed Indigenous lands their property and their new home. Strange men in black robes with glittering crosses on their chests journeyed out as far as the Arctic Ocean to visit the Cree. In their hands they bore a leatherbound object which opened. Inside were sheets marked with mysterious signs, like lines of charcoal splinters in the snow. They called it Holy Scripture, the recorded word of Gitchi Manitou, the Great Spirit.

Now the weather changed. The waves on Lake Superior swelled, surged and came crashing down again. A huge hurricane brewed up over Thunder Bay and unleashed a thunderstorm of unheard-of savagery. It raged across the great land, spreading devastation from coast to coast and into the Far North, the home of *wabusk*, the White Bear. The Indigenous people’s world collapsed. Disease eradicated whole communities.

However, the drums, the heartbeat of Indigenous culture, never entirely stopped playing and its sound could soon be heard again. Secretly and hesitantly at first, but now it rings out everywhere, accompanied by traditional songs. The dances returned as well, more diverse and more colourful than before. The fragrance of the sacred medicine, a mixture of tobacco, sage, cedar and sweet grass, once more filled the air. Indigenous women, men and even children throughout the land spoke out,

demanding recognition and fighting for their rights. Artists from many different reserves began to paint, write poetry and prose and compose songs. What they had to say was shocking — it didn't match up to image of Canada so idolized and admired around the world.

Despite studying North American history for many years and travelling to the country several times, I had no knowledge of this other Canada. I'd never encountered Indigenous people on the Canadian tourist trail, nor did I know that the Indigenous people had long ago been driven out of the popular Banff and Jasper national parks. The Canadian world I had visited presented itself as a friendly multicultural nation, its roots overseas. Signs of the presence of Indigenous peoples were largely confined to museums or art galleries. I'd read many books about the state-funded and church-run residential schools where thousands of Indigenous children were forcibly assimilated, but I had no idea that these institutions were just the tip of the iceberg of a sophisticated colonial system whose impact has been so destructive that future generations of Indigenous people will still need to come to terms with it.

It was only when I set out to listen to Indigenous people in remote reserves in northern Ontario, accessible only by small plane in summer, that I gradually began to learn more about the dark side of Canadian history. In over 100 interviews they told me about how their ancestors had lived before the Europeans arrived and then established partnerships on an equal footing with them during the early years of the fur trade. This partnership lasted for a long time, but it steadily degenerated into a lopsided relationship to the white men's benefit.

Next, they explained how the Canadian state and the province of Ontario had ignored the sacred treaties they had signed to ensure that the land was shared for their mutual prosperity. They told of how the Canadians, without informing them, had built dams which flooded their lands scattered with holy sites and burial grounds. Paper factories began brazenly to clear-cut their forests and polluted the rivers with mercury. The Cree and Ojibwe who fished and drank from them fell sick. Many people died. Lastly, state officials flew seaplanes over their traditional territories to check whether they were complying with new national laws, confiscating people's nets and guns whenever they found someone hunting or fishing without permission. Indigenous people were even arrested and taken away by plane simply because they wished to continue to live off the land as their ancestors had done since time immemorial. Some never returned, and their grieving relatives never found out what had become of those deported. By the 1960s, hunger left the Cree and Ojibwe no choice but to settle in reserves where they received social welfare and food rations from the state, but fell into complete dependence.

In the 50 or so reserves spread over an area nearly the size of France in northern Ontario, the rates of suicide, child mortality, unemployment and poverty are several times higher than in non-Indigenous Canada. The situation is especially precarious in the more than 30 remote Indigenous communities without any connection to the

Canadian road network. In the Cree reserve of Attawapiskat on James Bay, home to 2,000 inhabitants, nearly 100 children and young adults tried to take their lives between September 2015 and April 2016. Every family in the community has suffered at least one death by suicide, and the same is true of many other Indigenous settlements. Among the causes are a shortage of housing, a lack of future prospects, the transgenerational trauma of residential schools and the resulting drug and alcohol abuse. Most housing in the reserves is in a decrepit condition, the roads are dusty and potholed, and the water in many villages has to be boiled. None of this fits the prevailing image of Canada — indeed, it is more reminiscent of a Third World country. On the other hand, Canada has grown incredibly rich on minerals such as diamonds and gold extracted from the traditional Cree and Ojibwe lands.

Talking about my experiences with the people in Ontario's far north that summer morning with Michelle, a member of the Ojibwe nation, I also recalled the many wonderful aspects of those encounters. Never before had I been greeted with such hospitality. The Cree and Ojibwe welcomed me as a friend to their reserves, shared their food with me, showed me their land, took me hunting and fishing and, with their typical sense of humour, offered me deep insights into a world that had been previously hidden from me. I was allowed to make music, sing, dance and celebrate life to the full with them. Even though the pain caused by colonialism is deeply ingrained in them, many of them draw strength from the traditional lands around the reserve settlements. They are also filled with pride by the fact that despite all the state's attempts to extinguish all trace of Indigenous culture, they are still there.

Prior to 2015 I knew nothing about the Indigenous civilization of northern Ontario, which is 1,000 years older than the infant nation-state now known as 'Canada'. I happened to see a report about it on Swiss television. Curious to find out more about the history and culture of the Cree and Ojibwe, I contacted a young Indigenous woman from the Kasabonika First Nation who had appeared in the programme via Facebook. She told me about her life in the remote reserve and gave me some further pointers.

The following year, I travelled to Canada and met a large number of Indigenous people who put me in touch with the reserves in the north. Soon I was on board a small plane, heading into unknown territory. My journey took me, among other places, to Fort Severn, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninwug, Muskrat Dam, Sandy Lake, Fort Albany and Attawapiskat. There I talked to elders, medicine men and women, chiefs, councillors, survivors of residential schools, artists, filmmakers, musicians, authors, activists, women, men and young people. Often, I simply sat and listened for hours. That's how their stories found their way into this book.

Chapter 2: pp. 41–64

◁UP

ASKI

Land

At first light O-ma-ma-ma, Mother Earth, gave birth to the spirit beings of the world. Her firstborn is the mighty Binay-sih, the thunderbird. He protects the other land animals from Genay-big, the mysterious and destructive sea serpent. The second creature O-ma-ma-ma brought into the world is Oma-ka-ki, the frog, who can weave magic and makes sure that the world's insects do not get out of control. The thirdborn is called Wee-sa-kay-jac, a superhuman Indigenous person endowed with magic powers. He can assume the guises of other creatures. O-ma-ma-ma's fourthborn is Ma-heegun, the wolf. He often roams the forests with his elder brother Wee-sa-kay-jac, and they have many adventures together. After Ma-heegun comes Amik, the beaver. Next, O-ma-ma-ma gave birth to the fishes, the grass, the trees and the stones. For a very long time, only spirit beings and animals lived on the Earth.³⁴

Then all of a sudden, the rivers and lakes began to rise, flooding the forests. Some animals thought they had angered O-ma-ma-ma. Others believed that Mishipizhiwin, an underwater cat resembling a lynx, had dug a hole in the bottom of a large lake, piercing the Earth's watery core, and that O-ma-ma-ma would bleed to death. Most creatures drowned, but some birds and land animals found shelter on a small island where Wee-sa-kay-jac lived. Together they built a large canoe. The beavers felled trees, muskrats tied the trunks together with root twine and the frogs caulked the gaps with hard mud. The birds built a gigantic nest in the canoe so that everyone would be comfortable, and Wee-sa-kay-jac erected a protective roof over it. The incessant rains soon flooded the island, and the waters carried the canoe out into the ocean. For many years, the animals and Wee-sa-kay-jac drifted on the stormy seas.³⁵

³⁴ Carl Ray, James R. Stevens: *Sacred Legends*, Newcastle 1995, pp. 20-1.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 23.

One day, the rain stopped and the wind abated. Wee-sa-kay-jac realized with horror that he had forgotten to bring along a lump of earth to create the world anew. Someone therefore had to dive down to the bottom of the sea and fetch some clay. First, he sent Gitchi-Amik, the giant beaver. When the beaver returned lifeless and with no earth, Wee-sa-kay-jac pulled it back into the canoe. Next, he asked Ninigig, the otter, but it couldn't reach the bottom either and drowned. Finally, Wee-sa-kay-jac sent Wa-jusk, the muskrat. After some time, it too came floating to the surface of the water, and Wee-sa-kay-jac pulled it into the canoe. As it lay there motionless, he saw that it had a small amount of clay stuck between its tiny paws. Rejoicing, Wee-sa-kay-jac brought the three divers back to life. Then he boiled the clay in a pot until it spilled over the side of the canoe into the sea and formed into land.³⁶

The next day, Wee-sa-kay-jac asked Geen-go-hongay, the wolverine, to travel the world and see how much it had grown. When it returned after two days, Wee-sa-kay-jac knew that the Earth was still too small, so he boiled up more clay and added it to the land. Geen-go-hongay set out again. This time it took somewhat longer for the exhausted animal to come back. Still Wee-sa-kay-jac was not satisfied, and so he boiled up some more clay and sent the wolverine out again. This time it didn't come back. The world was big enough.³⁷

After all the animals had left the canoe, Wee-sa-kay-jac began to dream of creatures identical to himself. They sang and danced and beat the drums. Waking the next morning, he decided to create these people. He took a portion of the remaining clay from the pot and crafted the first human being on the shell of Misqua-day-sih, the turtle. This human was black, and Wee-sa-kay-jac didn't recognize him as Indigenous, so he let him be carried off on the wind across the great blue water to an unknown land. Taking another piece of clay, Wee-sa-kay-jac moulded it on the turtle's back. This time, it was a pale and unhealthy-looking human that took shape. This one didn't look like an Indigenous person either, and he hurled him over the wide waters. He shaped the last lump of clay with the utmost care. The human being that emerged this time had olive-brown skin. Wee-sa-kay-jac was satisfied.³⁸ This is how he created the Indigenous people on the great turtle island. Yet Wee-sa-kay-jac didn't only protect them, he also made all kinds of mischief with them. He could behave intelligently and play dumb, he was good and evil, had strengths and weaknesses, and showed himself to be honest one minute and sly the next. Wee-sa-kay-jac embodied all of life's contradictions and he passed these on to humans.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 23-4.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 24. An alternative version of this myth can be found in: James R. Stevens (ed.): *Legends from the Forest. Told by Chief Thomas Fiddler*, Newcastle 1999, pp. 22-3.

³⁸ Ibid. pp. 24-5.

³⁹ See Stevens (1999): *Legends from the Forest*, p. 17.

While some regions of the great turtle island were still uninhabited, two friends, a man and a woman, were walking across a never-ending plain when they met Ehep, the giant spider, who asked them, ‘Where are you going?’

‘We’re looking for a place to live.’

‘There’s a place down there,’ Ehep said, pointing it out. ‘It’s a big land. In winter it snows and gets very cold. In the summer it rains and gets very hot. But it is a very good land.’

The giant spider offered to take them there and let them climb into a basket woven from her thread. However, she warned them: ‘When I lower you down, don’t look over the rim of the basket until it has settled on the ground. If you do, there will be danger. Keep your heads down until you have landed.’

The man and the woman were gliding down to earth in the basket. It seemed to take for ever and so one of them stuck their head over the rim to see how far there was left to go. Their journey ended suddenly in an eagle’s nest at the top of a tall tree. To their horror the two of them saw that the trunk below the nest had no branches: it was impossible to climb down and too high to jump to the ground. They cried for help to a group of caribou they spied in the distance, but the caribous told them they couldn’t climb and continued on their way. Next, a bear came shuffling up and they appealed to it too. It looked up briefly and sauntered off, uninterested. Finally, a wolverine appeared. In despair, they called to it, begging it to fetch them down from the tree. Without a moment’s hesitation it clambered up the trunk and carried them safely to the ground, one after the other.

They thanked the animal and were overjoyed that they had at last arrived in their new homeland. They worked out how to survive in this land and had children who in turn had children of their own. Soon their descendants were living everywhere. They worshipped and thanked the Creator for entrusting them with this wide, open land, settled down and took care of all the creatures who provided them with food. This is the story the people known nowadays as the Cree and the Ojibwe have been telling for many generations.⁴⁰

Where the silence talks

‘No!’ said Chris Koostachin, the deputy chief of Fort Severn on Hudson Bay.

I had asked whether I could interview him today but wouldn’t let it go. ‘Or maybe tomorrow?’

The taciturn, powerfully built man, whom his friends call Night Owl, shook his head again.

⁴⁰ See Marj Heinrichs & Dianne Hiebert, with the People of Trout Lake: *We Are One with the Land. A History of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwuw*, Kelowna 2007, p. 21; O C C C (ed.): *Nishnawbe Aski Nation. A History of the Cree and Ojibway of Northern Ontario*, Timmins 1986, pp. 1-3; Louis Bird: *Ehep Legend*, www.ourvoices.ca/filestore/pdf/0/0/2/4/0024.pdf (06.03.2020).

‘The day after?’

‘No, never!’

I’d already interviewed the chief and the other councillors at the Band Office, but it was important to talk to the deputy chief too, so I begged, ‘Come on, Chris, you’re the second most important man in this village, and I’ve travelled thousands of miles from Switzerland specifically to interview you.’

‘No!’

I would just have to suck it up.

After a brief pause, he asked, ‘What are you doing on Saturday?’

‘An interview with you?’ I said jokingly.

‘No, but if you don’t have anything else to do, I’ll take you out into the country. Be ready before dawn and wear something warm and waterproof.’⁴¹

On that 12 August 2017 the sun was already up, but it was still early when there was a knock on my door. Chris had parked a quad bike outside my lodgings and was heading back to his house, leaving the engine running. I rushed out and climbed on it without any idea how to handle the thing. I can ride a motorbike, but I couldn’t figure out the quad first off, so I called after Chris. He came trudging back and explained somewhat sullenly how to work the gears.

When I’d parked at the end of his drive, he pressed a rifle into my hand and said, ‘You can at least shoot though, right? There are lots of polar bears out there and you might need to let off the odd warning shot.’

Feeling a little queasy, I nodded. I’d done a lot of shooting during my military service, albeit only ever with a pistol. Chris fastened the gun to the bonnet of my quad, then slung his rifle over his shoulder, got onto his machine and roared off. I followed him up the dusty gravel track towards Hudson Bay.

When we had crossed the tree line, Chris surprised me by taking a left turn, drove down a steep slope and forded a shallow river. I did the same, trying to keep up with him. The unfamiliar machine was more to my liking now I’d got more of a feel for it. We headed across country along the shores of Hudson Bay, through bushes and the marshy tundra grassland. Never before had I seen such a sweeping, deserted, grand landscape without a single road running through it. It was not at all monotonous, and everywhere I looked I saw species of plants and birds I didn’t recognize.

All of a sudden, Chris stopped and got off his quad. When I pulled up alongside, he pointed to some huge tracks on the muddy ground. I put my foot alongside one of the prints — there was room for three of my rubber boots inside it.

We drove a little further into the interior until we caught sight of a polar bear on a small hillock. My heart was racing. It was huge!

⁴¹ The following remarks are based on my diary entry on 13.08.2017.

Calmly, Chris said, ‘We won’t go any closer. You’ll see more along the way. They wait by the coast until the fall when the bay freezes over and they can hunt seals again.’

I didn’t need asking twice not to get any closer. The bear caught our scent and craned its neck. I put the quad into reverse. Chris gave a signal, and the huge predator laid down peacefully. The *wabusk*, as the Cree call these white bears, was a male weighing a hundred kilos. We saw over thirty more of them on our long trip, including mothers with their young. They were all well fed because the previous winter had been long, Chris told me. Yet he also pointed out that global warming endangered these animals because short winters left them too little time to hunt.

Almost 70 miles west of Fort Severn, we took a break by a river mouth. I hadn’t often heard Chris speak, but now he told me about his childhood.

‘We used to come out here in canoes to hunt caribou. I was a good runner and so the hunters would get me to beat. A few other lads and I would drive the herd towards them. We’d spend a few days in this area each time. When we’d killed enough animals, we’d take the meat and skins back to Fort Severn.’

After we had eaten our sandwiches, we drove on. Christ stopped from time and time and at each spot he told me about past events there. They were stories about his father, his grandparents and older ancestors. I could sense the land opening up and talking to me through Chris’s words. What seemed at first sight to be untouched, endless wilderness abounded in memories, myths and legends. For millennia it had been home to a civilization about which I knew nothing.

Chris cast his fishing line into crystal-clear stream. He immediately got a bite and within a very short space of time, Chris had caught twenty more fish. ‘We’ve got enough to eat now, with some left over for the family,’ he said.

As we packed the fish away, he added pensively, ‘If someone ever finds gold upriver, then this paradise is done for.’

His words cut me to the quick. It brought the whole problem facing the Indigenous peoples of Canada home to me, all at once. By now the sun was low on the horizon. With it on our backs, we drove back to Fort Severn, passing the polar bears again, their coats shimmering red in the evening light. It became clear to me why Chris was nicknamed Night Owl when darkness fell. I could hardly see a thing, but he navigated a safe path through the tundra dotted with bushes, rivers and lakes. I was happy to be able to follow his rear lights, as I’d have been lost on my own.

Arriving back at the village around midnight, Chris said, ‘I think you now know why I showed you the land. This reserve is like a prison, but out there is real life, our stories and our ancestors. If you only do interviews in the village without ever seeing the land, you’ll never understand who we really are.’

On this trip Chris Koostachin had shown me what the Cree and Ojibwe mean when they say that they are one with *aski*, the land. Since time immemorial, it has been the bedrock of their civilization and the wellspring of their culture. They believe the Creator entrusted it to them to look after and pass on intact to

generations unborn, which is why they can neither own nor sell it. Interviewing Indigenous people later, I noticed how often they mentioned the land. People in other reserves took me out to their hunting grounds too. When I was out there with elders, they would occasionally describe what the world looked like before the Europeans arrived. In such moments the land became a giant history book from which they read aloud. Often, however, they said nothing and just let me listen to the land.

The former chief Edmund Metatawabin, whose striking autobiography *Up Ghost River* I'd read, picked me up on the morning of 4 September 2017 from the airfield at Fort Albany First Nation on James Bay. He seemed even more taciturn than Chris Koostachin.

He first took me to my lodgings to drop my bags. When we got there he said, 'You need good shoes, a warm jacket and enough water.'⁴² Getting back into his car, I had no idea what he had planned.

We drove through the village and parked a little way outside, next to a log cabin in a forest clearing. Ed handed me a cool box and a couple of axes.

'Put those in the boat at the jetty!'

I had to guess where the landing stage was because I hadn't yet caught sight of the Albany river, so I strode off along a track. Through the bushes I soon spied two boats down by the bank. I loaded everything into the one with a few ropes lying in the bottom. Ed came down with a petrol canister and a chainsaw, motioned to me to take a seat in the front of the boat and started the engine. We chugged through dark forested countryside and past river islands to James Bay. Shortly before the river mouth, Ed steered the boat into a side channel and cut the engine. It was beautiful. We sat there without talking and drifted, rocking gently, past the reeds. Patches of bright-blue sky peeked through the low-hanging clouds. From here and there came the jabber of some waterfowl or other. An eagle wheeled in the distance. After a while, Ed started the engine again and took us back to the main stream.

We moored and climbed up the bank. When we got to the top, Ed said, 'We'll leave our jackets here. It's pretty warm in there.'

It felt almost tropical in the forest. Eventually we reached a clearing with two huts at its edge. I assumed this was Ed's family's camp. A little further on was a viewing platform. We clambered up the ladder and looked out far over the land. Before us lay a patch of lush meadow around a large pond. Ed climbed down without a word, leaving me on my own. The view was breathtaking. The silence was broken only intermittently by the odd flying insect, the twittering of birds or the crack of a branch in the distance. I began to dream with my eyes open and saw a black bear making its way through the grass. Next, a large-antlered moose emerged from the undergrowth to drink at the watering point. Two Cree hunters

⁴² The following remarks are based on my diary entry on 04.09.2017.

stepped silently out of the bushes to my right and, crouching low, stalked the animal with their bows and arrows.

‘Let’s go!’ Ed’s cry woke me, and I climbed down to him.

On the way back, we stopped to saw up a dry tree trunk that had been washed ashore. We loaded the chunks of wood into the boat, and towed another trunk along behind us.

It was evening by the time we made it back to the jetty. When we had unloaded everything, Ed invited me to have dinner with him and his wife Joan, then said, ‘I deliberately didn’t say very much because I wanted you to anticipate. That’s essential to survive in our world. We always have to keep our eyes open and anticipate. Also, talk scares away the animals. In the old days, if you saw a moose in the distance in the cold of winter, you only got one chance. If it gave you the slip, your family went hungry. So you had to stay quiet and patient. I left you up there on the platform so you had a chance to hear the silence of the land.’

When I thanked him for our trip, Ed replied, ‘No need to thank me. I took you along so you could see a bit of the land, and you helped me saw up that tree trunk. We each got something out of it.’ He added with a laugh, ‘It was a good deal — and all without money, which is worthless out there in the bush. Imagine you’re out in the country, many days’ walk from the nearest village. What good’s a \$100 bill to you then? When it comes to surviving, its only use is to get a fire started quicker. That’s all it’s worth out in the bush.’⁴³

We talked until it was dark outside. I learned quite a lot about the Crees’ traditional worldview. Ed explained that all the creatures of the land were interconnected, and so humans also had a bond with them. A tree was a major source of food for the squirrel, which in turn needed it to clean it and bury its seeds in fertile ground. This produced strong trees and healthy forests, which supported a host of other life.

My mosquito bites were itching and so I questioned whether any creature really needed these pests.

Ed answered, ‘If you don’t understand this connection, then you aren’t spiritual enough. Maybe you’re spiritual, but what I understand by spiritual has a deeper meaning. It’s got nothing to do with praying the whole time; it’s about how you relate to the other creatures around you. We’re all part of the same life. You have your job, the squirrel has its job, the tree has its job and the mosquitoes have theirs too. If you understand this relationship, the bite doesn’t hurt so much. It becomes just a slight sting, and that’s fine. After a while, you won’t even feel it any more. *And you train your spirit.*’⁴⁴

As I replayed the day in my mind that night in my lodgings, I realized how fundamentally different Western culture is from Indigenous culture. Whereas we

⁴³ Edmund Metatawabin, interview 2, at his home, Fort Albany, 04.09.2017.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

natter away, even when we have nothing to say, there are lots of pauses in Cree and Ojibwe conversations. Silence isn't something disagreeable. Also, the elders don't give unequivocal answers to certain questions, opting instead to encourage the other person to reflect.

Adam Fiddler, a former chief from Sandy Lake, once explained it to me like this: 'The elders will never tell you exactly what you have to do. Ask a question and you won't receive a direct answer. They will tell you a story, though, and it is up to you to listen carefully and extract the core message. It's always a lesson. My grandmother never told me how to do this or that. But from listening to her talking to her friends, I learned things from the past. That kind of education was really important to me when I was young.'⁴⁵

Elders play a central role in Indigenous society and are treated with great respect. Individuals are not called 'elders' for reasons of age alone, but more so due to their wealth of experience, their knowledge, their wisdom and their prior deeds for the benefit of the community. It is also worth noting that the telling of Indigenous history is still predominantly an oral tradition. Before the Indigenous people had their own books, an elder was a kind of walking encyclopaedia. As the guardians of knowledge, they were involved in every major decision-making process. This is still true of Indigenous society today. Elders are therefore regarded as the highest authority when it comes to interpreting history and handling political relations with the Canadian state. You must never interrupt an elder but wait until he or she has finished speaking. I wasn't aware of this rule initially and often asked follow-up questions until one day someone pointed it out to me. In addition, you should avoid direct eye contact while listening, since — as in most cultures around the world — this is also seen as being inappropriate. The Cree and Ojibwe adopt most of white people's customs when talking to them. I did notice, however, that some elders were more comfortable sitting alongside me in a car or on a bench as we talked.

Since time immemorial, the ancestors of the Cree and Ojibwe have inhabited to the south of Hudson Bay in the subarctic landscape of tundra, forest and marsh, crisscrossed by rivers and containing about 200,000 lakes. Nowadays the former live near the coast. They call themselves Mushkegowuk or Swampy Cree due to the marshy nature of their region. The Ojibwe have settled further south in an area of forests and lakes. Between the two are the Oji Cree, who are linguistically related to the Ojibwe but consider themselves culturally Cree.

Archaeological excavations have shown that northern Ontario has been settled by humans for the last 5,000 years at least. In 2010, Indigenous fishermen discovered a skeleton in a burial ground not far from the Oji Cree settlement of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inniniwug on Big Trout Lake. It belonged to a person who,

⁴⁵ Adam Fiddler, interview 1, Seattle Coffee House, Thunder Bay, 28.11.2017.

analysis showed, had lived 4,600 years ago.⁴⁶ Indigenous people and archaeologists also found arrowheads and spear tips, tools and rock drawings thousands of years old in several different locations.

Surviving in this inhospitable region with its extremely long winters required precise knowledge of the different ecosystems and their resources, as well as the innovative skills necessary to exploit them to the full using a narrow range of tools.⁴⁷ The precondition for this was a knowledge of the land and of how it changed with the seasons.

Christopher Metatawabin, Ed's younger brother, explained to me that the Cree had six seasons: spring (March, April), breakup (May, June), summer (July, August), fall (September, October), freeze (November, December) and winter (January, February). During breakup and freeze, the rivers are no longer navigable. Additionally, you always had to anticipate: 'In each of these six seasons, you have to think ahead to the next one or the one after that and make preparations. If you don't have any wood in the fall, you won't survive the harsh winter. During the freeze, you sometimes have to spend up to six weeks in one place because you cannot travel by sledge or canoe. That's why people collect wood in the fall, and then they use it to make snowshoes, oars or tentpoles during the freeze and have firewood for the winter.'⁴⁸

The Indigenous peoples of northern Ontario moved around the land for millennia as hunters, fishers and gatherers. Roy Morris from Muskrat Dam, who was born on traditional lands, described his experience of moving around as a kid.

'We never stayed in one place. But we weren't just crisscrossing the region at random. People often think that nomads wander around aimlessly. Of course, that isn't true. We knew all the places and sought them out for specific opportunities. There were always good reasons for being in that particular place. When I was a kid and we were in one place, my parents would say, "Hey, let's go there because the berries are ripe now and the fish should be there as well." Then we would paddle off and when we got there, they would spread their nets and pick the berries. Then we would set up camp and stay for about a week. After that, they'd decide to move on because something else was ready in another place, and they wanted to go there to harvest whatever it was. We never travelled around at random. The land is like a house. Inside, you have your bedroom, a kitchen, the living room and the bathroom. You don't just wander around your house for no reason. You have a good reason for going to the kitchen. It's like that with the land too. Also, it tells us when we can harvest. When the partridges fly past, that's the right time to hunt them, but we stop for the rest of the year. And the same applies to the geese. They come for a

⁴⁶ www.independent.co.uk/life-style/history/rare-4600-year-old-ontario-burial-lifts-lid-on-prehistoric-canada-2008310.html (07.03.2020).

⁴⁷ See Olive Patricia Dickason & David T. McNab: *Canada's First Nations. A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*, Don Mills 2009, p. 40.

⁴⁸ Christopher Metatawabin, interview 3, Band Office, Fort Albany, 05.09.2017.

week and then they leave again. It's the same with the caribou. They come at a particular time. Society thinks we hunt all the time and overhunt, but we don't. Everything has a time, and the land sets that time.'

The Cree and Ojibwe could read the land. They learned to do so through precise observation and handed down their complex knowledge from generation to generation. As Christopher Metatawabin remarked, 'The strength to survive comes from the bush. The environment gives it to you. It depends how receptive you are and whether you understand the language of nature. When you go out into the land, the trees speak to you. The river speaks to you. The air speaks to you and so do the birds and the animals. You can understand what they say. If a lone wolf appears in the area and howls, then the whole pack comes running because it's told them, "Come here, I've found food." Birds do the same. If a stranger enters your area, the birds tell you, "Something's up. Someone's coming." Now you know that someone's coming and you can get ready. It's the same with the river. Listen to it and it'll tell you if the water level's rising fast. And if you hear thunder, it means that the ice will soon break up. Even the rapids make lots of noises. As you're paddling you can tell you're approaching rapids and whether you can take them or have to go around them on land. Everything speaks to you if you only know how to listen.'⁴⁹

Peggy Beardy from Muskrat Dam remembers how her father would read nature's signs: 'My father could tell the weather by looking at the sky in the evening. He'd look west and say, for example, "OK, tomorrow's going to be a nice day." Because he could read the cloud formations. That's how he knew. He listened too. The wind carries many clues about what the weather's going to do. He taught us to keep an eye on the leaves in summer. If they twist a little, that means the weather's going to turn bad. South of here is the Windigo River. When you hear it nice and loud, as if it were just down here, that means the weather's really bad. Those are just a few examples, but there are many more.'⁵⁰

Elders also told me that they got their information about the coming weather from observing the northern lights, the moon or the sun. They take their lead from the stars to tell the days of the month or the time at night.

Ignace Gull, chief from Attawapiskat, named another special skill that helped people survive. 'Everything's important when you grow up on the land. You need good eyes, good hearing, a good sense of smell and a good sense of taste. Touch is important too. We developed another extra sense too. In Cree we call it *mooneseewin*. It's a form of premonition that something's going to happen. You can already see and hear it. That's how I was brought up in the bush, because survival was the most important thing. If something moved under the grass, you had to be able to see it. Animals including migratory birds also have this sense. For

⁴⁹ Christopher Metatawabin, interview 9, Band Office, Fort Albany, 12.09.2017.

⁵⁰ Peggy Beardy, interview, Learning Center, Muskrat Dam, 01.11.2017.

example, Canada geese take to the air in late fall and come back down. They feel the approach of cold weather and know they have to move on. That's *mooneseewin*. You sense something. Our ancestors taught us all of this when we were growing up in the bush. Because if you're out in the bush and something happens to you, there's no one there to help you. You have to be able to survive.'⁵¹

The land provides

The land provided humans with all kinds of medicine. Traditionally the Cree and Ojibwe used well over 50 species of plant for medicine.⁵² The elders showed me various medicinal herbs on our excursions — for example the fragrant Labrador tea — and described their purpose.

Ignace Gull told me about an accident. ‘One time I injured myself badly with an axe. My grandmother took care of the wound. She looked for willows out in the bush and extracted something from the substance under the bark. She boiled it in hot water and applied it to me, then splinted my leg with a piece of wood. A month later it had all healed. That's how people used to do it, but you had to be healthy and fit to withstand the pain. You had to be mentally, physically and spiritually strong. That was very important if you wanted to survive.’⁵³

I was treated with natural medicine once on a trip to James Bay. I'd cut my finger, and a Cree took me to a fir-like tree and scraped off a bit of resin before rubbing it carefully onto my wound. This natural plaster had a disinfecting, pain-killing effect, and the cut healed quickly. Along with plants, humour and healing rituals were regarded as medicine men and women's best remedies.

The language of the Cree and Ojibwe were also shaped by the land; one elder even went so far as to call it the soul of the land. Adam Fiddler explained the main difference from English to me.

‘Our language is visual. If you listen to someone speaking, you can see him painting a picture. “Cup” is *minkwagun* in my language, for example. It means “something you drink out of”. “Table” is *weesineewinatik*. That can be translated as “a construction from which you eat food”. It's a descriptive language. There are no nouns like “cup”, only “something you drink out of”. That's why it takes so long when you translate it into English. The elder Sidney Fiddler from Sandy Lake told me that he listened to his grandparents telling legends when he was a boy. He said it was like being at the movies. If you listen to someone, you can really see every detail and you can feel it too. I don't know, I can't really describe the difference. A

⁵¹ Ignace Gull, interview, Band Office, Attawapiskat, 01.08.2018.

⁵² Marj Heinrichs & Dianne Hiebert, with the People of Mishkeegogamang: *Mishkeegogamang. The Land, the People and the Purpose. The Story of Mishkeegogamang Ojibway Nation*, Altona 2003, p. 49.

⁵³ Ibid.

conversation between two people is one thing, but when you listen to someone describing something in their own language, you feel a connection with it. You connect with what they're saying and with everything around you. You become one with your surroundings. That's where the idea comes from that we are one with the land. It's not you and the land — you're part of it. Listening to someone, you understand this and feel it. It's a feeling, a way of thinking. Not just words.'⁵⁴ If I didn't know why you should never interrupt an elder before this conversation, I did now.

The Cree and Ojibwe kept emphasizing to me that they can give precise details in their language of where a river course, a sacred site or a particular patch of forest is. Their language has many expressions about the landscape that simply don't exist in English. The Cree expression *kaskaywae*, for example, means: 'There's a moose up there. Jump out of the canoe and drive it to the other side of the loop in the river while I paddle over there to head it off.'⁵⁵

Just as the land moulded their language, it also shaped Indigenous people's worldview and their society. Joe Wheesk thinks that the land is the most important textbook there is because it illustrates everything.

'Everything our language describes revolves around nature. When elders speak, they sound like poets. For instance, if we talk about someone's final days, we use the image of the setting sun. When someone's born, we call it a sunrise. A child flowers in spring. Everything is beginning and getting ready. In summer there's lots of strength around. It's like youth, which is full of energy. Then comes the fall and everything slows down. Your strength diminishes and you calm down. People in their fifties are like the fall. They don't have their children anymore and they are not so busy. Then comes the winter, and the snow turns everything white. Like old people with their white hair. They don't move very much anymore, but they do think back to everything behind them. They remember when they were children and teenagers and adults in their prime. That's why winter's the time of year when old people tell us about the old days. These elders have all these phases of their lives behind them and they can teach us how to avoid disaster, how to lead a good life, how to bring up children and how to hunt.'⁵⁶

Joe went on to explain that the Indigenous laws governing social interactions also come directly from the land. 'When our ancestors, who didn't know the Europeans' writing, signed a contract with an X, that held meaning for them. For the white men, an X meant that someone was uneducated, but for the Cree it stood for the four points of the compass, associated with the four laws. X stands for uprightness, friendliness, physical strength and spirituality. These four make up a person, because humans are psychic, emotional, physical and spiritual beings. Uprightness is found in the trees, because they stand straight and tall. Friendliness

⁵⁴ Adam Fiddler, interview 2, Seattle Coffee House, Thunder Bay, 28.11.2017.

⁵⁵ Lawrence Bluecoat, interview 3, Niska Inn, Fort Severn, Ontario, 05.08.2017.

⁵⁶ Joe Wheesk, interview, at his home, Attawapiskat, 02.08.2017.

is symbolized by sweet grass. Our heads remind us of sprouting plants, which is why we wear our hair long and plait it, as we do with sweet grass. And everything you see, all the birds, is physical. Stone represents spirituality because it's hard. This is the basis of the four natural laws, which correspond to the four elements: sun or fire, water, air and earth. These need sharing because they are what make life possible, because everyone should be equal. That's why the elders understand that we have to share the land with one another and then we will all get on together. We help one another. That's the law. Sharing means helping one another.⁵⁷

Before the Europeans arrived, the Indigenous peoples moved around the land in the north of present-day Ontario in groups of about a dozen people. Two related families would often travel together. They would follow an annual route and go at particular times of the year to particular places where they would set up camp for a specific amount of time. Several families would gather together in summer. This tradition endured far into the 20th century. Modern-day reserves were generally established in these gathering points, which also served as trading posts during the years of the fur trade.

Roy Morris from Muskrat Dam told me about these gatherings. 'People from this region gathered on Big Trout Lake, where we would set up a tipi town over the summer. People even came here from the shores of Hudson Bay and the Prairies. We took care of a lot of business. We made various decisions, for example who should marry who. We also decided who should go trapping with who in the fall and where each group should go. There were all kinds of social decisions to settle. Of course, we also conducted our ceremonies. We also had to make sure that everyone had enough fish while we were there. There were different duties, but it was also a social occasion because we visited one another and exchanged information. In late summer we broke camp and moved back to our traditional camps or to the places we visited to hunt and trap at that time of year. At the same time, the newlyweds were put in the care of a married couple. They had to live together for a year to learn how to work in harmony. It was a sort of training for newly wedded couples.'⁵⁸

Parents arranged marriages for their children, as Stan Beardy, the chief of Muskrat Dam, noted. 'For as long as anyone can remember, we have paid attention to blood lines because we had to prevent inbreeding. That's why parents decided who their children would marry. They chose a suitable partner from an unrelated extended family, a clan. The woman would then leave her clan and join her husband's. In principle, our society is made up of a large number of different clans. Even today, each reserve community has dominant family names going back to a clan. That's how the community is structured. But arranged marriages are no longer the norm. In the past, though, people were very careful and had to ensure the same

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Roy A. Morris, interview 1, school, Muskrat Dam, 27.10.2017.

blood line does not cross. If you want to survive in a harsh environment, you have to be physically and mentally fit. There was no way of looking after people who weren't healthy.⁵⁹

In the 19th century, the clan system was the backbone of the Indigenous society south of Hudson Bay. Although they no longer have any role in Cree society, the Oji Cree and the Ojibwe still boast around 20 different clans. They have animal names such as Bear, Beaver and Fox. The word for clan in Ojibwe is *doodem*, which gives us the English word 'totem'. In the Sandy Lake First Nation reserve, for example, five *doodems* are represented: Sturgeon, Sucker, Pelican, Crane and Caribou. People felt a spiritual bond with their *doodem* animal. Each animal was considered to be a teacher, with its own strengths and weaknesses. The more you were aware of these, the easier your passage through life would be. Sometimes people would have their animal symbol tattooed on their face, arm or chest. Whenever two strangers met, they would ask each other: 'Which *doodem* do you belong to?' If they happened to have the same clan name, they would treat each other as brother or sister, even if they were not related. There were occasional conflicts between individual clans, whereas others would join forces. Each was represented in public by a chief, although he was not a leader but rather something akin to a spokesman. People who didn't belong to any *doodem*, perhaps because their father was a European fur trader, could be adopted into one through a ceremony.⁶⁰

Although Indigenous society was not explicitly hierarchical, some individuals were granted a level of respect equal to that afforded to elders. This included shamans, medicine men and women, healers, midwives and people who created works of art or were regarded as outstanding hunters. Shamans could employ their powers either to the community's benefit or detriment. The Cree and Ojibwe have a lot of stories about shamans who kill someone by their thoughts alone. However, there were spiritual defences against these kinds of attacks such as ceremonies and amulets — in the Indigenous conception of the world, every force has a counter-force. If one or other got the upper hand, the balance of the world was disturbed and people had to put it back on an even keel.⁶¹

This was also the foundation of the Indigenous legal system, which was based on the idea of social inclusion. If someone broke the laws of the community, he or she would be sentenced not by a judge but urged by everyone involved to decide on a punishment for himself or herself. This would involve the perpetrator and the victim sitting with their relatives in a circle to discuss the impact of the crime. The affected person or group would describe their loss. The circle bound everyone

⁵⁹ Stan Beardy, interview car 3, on the way from First Lake to Muskrat Dam, 31.10.2017.

⁶⁰ See Heinrichs & Hiebert (2003): *Mishkeegogamang*, pp. 219-20; Thomas Fiddler & James R. Stevens: *Killing the Shamen*, Newcastle 2012, p. 6; Stevens (1999): *Legends from the Forest*, p. 16.

⁶¹ See Dickason & McNab (2009): *Canada's First Nations*, p. 57.

together, and the perpetrator was shamed for having broken this bond. Over the course of the conversation, the sentence would gradually become clear and would finally be pronounced by the perpetrator in order to reset the balance. For example, if a man had injured someone so badly that that person could no longer hunt, from then on he would have to take care of the victim's family too.⁶²

There was a division of labour between men and women, but this dividing line was not set in stone. Men hunted the big game and brought in firewood. Women fished, trapped hares and took care of the children. As every task was essential to the community's survival, however, there was no hierarchy between them. Grandmothers in particular played a central role, as I found out from many conversations with Cree and Ojibwe. They were not only looked up to as elders, but also maintained family cohesion.

Cathleen Sutherland from Fort Albany recalled her *nokum* — the Cree word for 'grandmother' — with great affection. 'Women and men have their own roles, and when I was growing up, my grandmother made sure everyone had enough to eat. She looked after the children and grandchildren. The men did their bit. They collected wood or carried heavy things to the camp. They made sure the tipis were up. My grandmother fished with a net. It was her passion, and she enjoyed picking berries too. She collected medicinal herbs like Labrador tea. Growing up, I saw my grandmother doing all those things. She was a real coordinator too. She liked delegating things to people. For example, she would take her grandchildren along fishing to help her, then she would take out the fish and cook them for everyone. It's funny, actually, because now I do the same. I like delegating too. Looking back, I think, "Oh, I'm following in my grandmother's footsteps." She was my role model. She didn't smoke or drink, and she was very spiritual. She told us the stories and legends of our land. I think she's the person who had the greatest influence on me.'⁶³

The Cree and Ojibwe would travel in the warm months in canoes made of birch bark, which were light and were easy to carry on land if they had to avoid dangerous rapids. When there was snow on the ground and the rivers and lakes froze over, they would load their goods onto dog sleds. News would get around, even if the families only met up the following summer.

'As people moved around, they would leave signs in particular spots that others would pass,' says Elder Allan Beardy from Muskrat Dam. 'These messages told people what had gone on in a camp. It was a sophisticated communications system, but the next people would only get the news when they passed the places with the signs a few weeks later.'⁶⁴

⁶² See Priska Friedli: *Restoring (the) Balance. Die Rechtspraxis der Yurok und ihre anthropologischen Grundlagen unter Berücksichtigung der Scham*, Master's dissertation, University of Berne 2019: <https://nanlegal.on.ca/restorative-justice/> (13.03.2020).

⁶³ Cathleen Sutherland, interview 1, Band Office, Fort Albany, 08.09.2017.

⁶⁴ Allan Beardy, interview 1, Learning Center, Muskrat Dam, 30.10.2017, tr. Peggy Beardy.

The signs were sometimes colourful and provided details of the group's exact location, the direction in which they had moved on, the distance to the next camp and the general situation, for example if someone was sick or had died. Sometimes people also made smoke signals which were visible for miles around in the flat landscape.⁶⁵

In Sandy Lake, the elder Sidney Fiddler once held out a dried mushroom to me. It was quite a lot larger than his hand. I recognized the mushroom, which grew on birch trunks.

Sandy said, 'Nice, eh? Know what this is used for?'

I remembered Ötzi the Iceman had two mushrooms with him and answered, 'As medicine, I imagine.'

Sidney replied, 'Maybe. But our ancestors used these mushrooms to help them take their fire as they moved. It was more practical than kindling a fire by hand using a flint or little arrow when it was cold. The softly glowing embers inside it keeps for a long time. You only had to take the mushroom out of the bag, blow on it, hold a bit of birch bark to it and the flame would come alive.'⁶⁶

The Indigenous peoples of northern Ontario erected various dwellings to protect themselves from the extreme climate: conical tipis, oval wigwams or small log cabins. Tipis, which were used in the icy winters, were made from wooden poles bound together with root twine. They insulated the gaps between the poles with moss and clad the structure with birch bark to waterproof the whole thing.

To build a wigwam, they bent the branches or trunks of young birch trees, embedded them in the ground, tied them together and covered the structure with bark. They would spread out cedar branches on the ground as comfortable bedding. When they moved on, they would leave the wood behind, taking only the birch bark as this was easy to roll up.⁶⁷ They would sometimes use animal skins as cladding for their dwellings. The land provided them with everything they needed.

While the men went off hunting for many days, the women would carry out various tasks as well as looking after the children. They cured meat by drying or smoking it, made fishmeal, oil and fat, prepared the animal skins from the hunt, built canoes and made baskets from birch bark or snowshoes. From the tanned moose, caribou and deer hides or the pelts of beavers, hares and otters, they made clothes, gloves and moccasins. Clothes were made from the hides and pelts of the animals the hunters had killed in the autumn when the fur was at its best. They sewed the skins with sinews and nettle fibres, using a bone needle. The brown clothes were embroidered in certain places with prepared porcupine quills and

⁶⁵ The Crees of Waskaganish First Nation (ed.): *Search and Rescue Protocol*, Waskaganish s.a., p. 3.

⁶⁶ See Heinrichs & Hiebert (2003): *Mishkeegogamang*, p. 54.

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 64.

sometime painted with blue, yellow, red or green dyes made from berries, flowers and roots.⁶⁸

The Cree and Ojibwe did not regard themselves as the pinnacle of creation. The fact that they needed animals and plants to survive, whereas other creatures could get by perfectly well without humans, taught them to be in awe of other living beings. According to Indigenous myths, humans had also been introduced to the world after the other creatures, and were therefore neither more nor less important than them. Whenever a hunter killed an animal with his bow and arrow or spear, he would make an offering.

Catherine Sutherland remembers stories about her great-grandfather. ‘Our people lived off moose, caribou, geese and fish. They always gave an offering in return for taking the animals’ lives. This was somewhat lost when they forced people to leave for the reserves, but now it’s on its way back. My generation always makes offerings of tobacco before killing an animal. According to family stories, my great-grandfather took very few things with him when he went out to hunt caribou or moose. Life was different back then. It was hard. My great-grandmother used to say, “I don’t know how he does it. He only takes a few things with him when he goes away for weeks and then brings back lots of food for the whole family.” I think — well, my uncle told me — that he did ceremonies out there to establish a bond with the animals so they would give their lives and he could feed his family.’⁶⁹

For the Indigenous peoples south of Hudson Bay spirituality was part of daily life. Prayers and rituals were commonplace. There was also a wide range of ceremonies accompanied by chanting and drumming. Their purpose was to strengthen and protect the community, to bring them luck in the hunt and reconcile them with the animals they had to kill.

Furthermore, the dead did not go on to some distant hereafter but remained by their descendants’ side. They would appear to them in dreams and visions and offer advice for the present and the future. Some sites where people had had spiritual experiences were especially important. The Cree and Ojibwe sought them out to hold ceremonies there. They would, for example, engage in ritual fasting for several days and embark on visionary journeys to find answers to important questions. A central element in this was the so-called ‘shaking tent’. This involved a few people gathering around a small, closed tent in which a shaman might sit. The people outside would begin to sing and drum until the shaman entered into a trance and made contact with the spirit world. Animal voices would announce the spirit beings, and the tent would quiver. Then those outside would ask their questions and generally received answers. The ceremony could also be carried out by a single person capable of communicating with people far away, among other things. The

⁶⁸ Ibid. pp. 60 ff.

⁶⁹ Cathleen Sutherland, interview 2, Band Office, Fort Albany, 08.09.2017.

shaking tent, which is still occasionally used today, also served to heal illnesses and ward off spells.⁷⁰ From time to time, the community was threatened by demonic creatures who caused great damage. One such monster was the universally feared *wendigo*. This spirit being could take possession of a person and drive them so mad that they turned cannibal. The person possessed by the *wendigo* would have to be killed and his or her heart was burnt.⁷¹

Indigenous culture has continuously changed and adapted over the centuries, and yet certain core features, which have characterized Indigenous peoples since time immemorial, have survived. One of these, as will have become clear in this chapter, is their attachment to their land and ancestors, spirituality and a conception of hospitality based on the principle of sharing. I experienced all of these things when I had the pleasure of being the guest of the Cree and Ojibwe in northern Ontario.

One time, I was travelling with Mike Metatawabin from Fort Albany on a sunny summer day and said, ‘We’re lucky the weather’s so splendid.’

Calmly, he answered, ‘The weather may be good for us, but it is too hot for the animals and they are suffering. So in fact, to us Cree, it is bad weather because we empathize with the animals.’

Another time, I was able to taste smoked moose meat in a reserve. It was delicious, and I asked my host, ‘Why can’t you buy this wonderful meat in shops?’

His answer was: ‘The Creator gave us moose so we wouldn’t go hungry, not to sell.’

I also learned that there’s a thing called ‘Indian time’. I was planning to go to a Sunday Anglican service in Muskrat Dam to see what a church service on a reserve was like. I’d read somewhere that it started at 10 o’clock, so, as an over-punctual Swiss person, I arrived at the church at ten to and was astonished I couldn’t open the door. Shortly after ten, Roy Morris, who is both the community’s headmaster and the vicar, turned up.

I asked him if church didn’t start at ten, and he replied, ‘Yeah, yeah, ten o’clock’s right.’

‘But it’s already five past.’

‘That may be. You know, in our culture no one wants to push in, it’s not the done thing, so nobody wants to be first. People will come along together soon, you’ll see.’

He was to be proved right, and the service could begin at quarter past ten — on the dot, by Indian time.

⁷⁰ This information is based on statements by elders such as Louis Bird from Peawanuck with whom I talked about the ‘shaking tent’ in 2017 and 2018.

⁷¹ www.legendsofamerica.com/mn-wendigo/ (12.03.2020).

I had a similar experience in Fort Severn. I was planning to interview a teenager called Ian Kakekaspan at eleven o'clock in the morning at the Band Office. We'd made our appointment the evening before. When I arrived at the agreed time, to my surprise I found the door locked. I tried the chief's door, but it was also locked. This was strange because there was usually someone there at all times. After waiting for a good hour out on the wooden steps, a councillor came by.

'Do you know where Ian is?' I asked. 'I was supposed to do an interview with him at eleven.'

'I know.'

'So, where is he?'

'He and a few others are out hunting.'

'What? He's out hunting? He didn't say anything about that yesterday.'

The councillor gave a mischievous laugh and explained: 'He didn't, no, because he didn't know yesterday that today would be a good day for hunting.'

When Joe Wheesk from Attawapiskat took me out by boat to Akimiski Island in James Bay in August 2018 to show me where he was born, Canada seemed a very long way away. It reminded me of the time Roy Morris had told me during one of our conversations: 'I was born out on the land and I grew up there too. I saw the trees, the lakes, the rivers and the rocks. That was my world, and so I come from the land. I had no idea Canada existed at the time. All I saw was the land I lived on. I saw the fish and all the other animals, and we did the same things my ancestors had done thousands of years ago. It was only in residential school that this Canada hit me out of the blue. But Canada remained just a background story. I was never attached to it, even though I knew what it was from textbooks. But my real attachment is to the land itself.'⁷²

[END OF SAMPLE]

⁷² Roy A. Morris, interview 2, school, Muskrat Dam, 30.10.2017.