Cree Midwifery: Linguistic and Literary Observations

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The ancient art of midwifery, the maieutikē tekhnē of Socratic metaphor, is held in low esteem among the general population of North America, and its practice in the indigenous societies seems by and large to have escaped the notice of ethnographers. Whether this sad state of affairs results ultimately from a male chauvinist plot or merely a capitalist conspiracy on the part of medical men,¹ or whether it is simply a long-lasting echo of the late mediaeval witch-hunts, in which midwives received special attention, being singled out in the celebrated phrase from the Malleus Maleficarum: "Nemo fidei catholice amplius nocet quam obstetrices . . ." (Institoris and Sprenger 1494, pt. 1, qu. 11) — these irrational attitudes persist. A mere decade ago, for instance, I was consulted by a prominent Winnipeg obstetrician, seeking advice (on behalf of the Manitoba Medical Association) on a fresh term for a new brand of handmaiden — since, after all, the term midwife evoked the image (and I quote) of "an elderly witch with dirty fingernails."

Although no terminological agreement was reached on that occasion, there has clearly been a general resurgence of interest in alternative models of childbirth. In particular, new approaches are being explored for the remote regions of Canada, where few obstetricians want to practise. It is there, above all, at the boundaries of the ecumene (as defined and mapped, for example, in Matthews 1985, plate 1) and beyond, that various marginal

¹Cf. the by now classic pamphlet of Ehrenreich and English (1973) — largely incorporated into Ehrenreich and English (1979) — the more critical studies of Donnison (1977) and Smith (1976) and, for some historical detail concerning the situation in the United States, also Kobrin (1966:351, 355), who blithely refers to the "customers" of midwives while at the same time reporting that in the period before World War I, "The level of obstetric training received by most German midwives was recognized as superior to that of most United States doctors". For the history of midwifery in Quebec, cf. now Laforce 1987.
populations find themselves caught between the haphazard inroads of high-tech medicine and the headlong decline of their traditional way of life.

This is the context in which one might well ask, And what is known of traditional midwifery as practised among the Cree? The tribal elders, the guardians of this knowledge, seem to have few apprentices. As for students from without their society, could it be that the scant attention which the indigenous practice of midwifery has been attracting is merely a reflexion of the general attitude? Or might it be due to the paucity of female ethnographers?

With the exception of Quebec, where work has been going on at a steady pace (cf., for example, Cooper 1981; Routhier 1984; and also the Inuit studies of Dufour 1987, 1988) and where a major book, Accoucher autrement (Saillant and O’Neill 1987), has just appeared which actually treats the urban majority and the indigenous minority side by side, a survey of Cree ethnography is a chastening experience.2

Very little appears to have been done since Mandelbaum’s dissertation on the Plains Cree, written more than half a century ago (and paralleled by studies of related groups such as The Ojibwa Woman of Landes 1938, Hilger’s 1951 and 1952 Ojibwa and Arapaho monographs and Flannery’s article on the East Cree which, though published in 1962, is based on fieldwork carried out in 1937 and 1938). Mandelbaum produced a remarkable record, especially when one considers the short time he spent in the field, but of the 153 pages of the published version (1940), only two are devoted to the twin topics of “Birth” and of “Puberty and Women’s Observances.”

A worthy addition to this select company is Sarah Preston’s life history of Alice Jacobs (1986b). Unlike an earlier paper (1982), this book does not specifically focus on childbirth, but the narrator’s experiences as a midwife and a mother, sensitively presented and commented upon, offer a personal record of unusual power and depth. For the most part, however, our scholarly ignorance of Cree culture is abysmal, and nowhere have ethnologists been more negligent than in their failure to study and analyze the Cree view of the facts of life.

2In particular, the casual claim of Brown and Brightman (1988:178) that “much is known about Ojibwa and Cree medicines” seems unfounded with respect to Cree. Aside from Leighton’s survey of materia medica (1985), the Cree titles they cite (such as Holmes 1884; Strath 1903; Beardsley 1942; Corrigan 1946) are mere snippets (to which one might well add such as Flexon 1897 or Fieber 1979); with the exception of Boteler (1971), there appear to be few, if any, ethnographic reports on Cree medicine in general.

Historians, one might add (with reference to the recent summary in Peterson and Brown 1985:3–6), rarely tire of debating the status of “mixed-bloods” — but have they ever paused to enquire into non-European notions of paternity or descent?
Methodological Preliminaries

Having delivered myself of this introductory diatribe — intended above all as a plea to ethnologists — let us now turn to some highly preliminary observations on the domain of midwifery and childbirth.

The foremost obstacle should be obvious: there cannot be many societies where bodily functions, especially in the realm of sex and procreation, are as openly referred to and discussed as among North American university graduates of the past generation.

In Cree, or at least in the bilingual Cree-English discussion of such matters, the canons of decency — of respectfulness, in the English usage of Cree speakers — frequently get in the way of scholarly enquiry. As a specific example, consider the cautious remarks occasioned by nothing more than the terms for the sexual organs (Wolfart and Ahenakew 1987:218): “The sexual taboo words of Cree apparently have much the same value as the ‘Anglo-Saxon four-letter words’ of English; these words, it seems, are avoided in polite contexts in either language.” In the medical glossary recently published by the Saskatchewan Indian Languages Institute (Ahenakew 1987b), these terms were omitted or replaced by circumlocutions, as potentially offensive to the intended audience. In the realm of childbirth, for instance, the working group which prepared the initial lists of terms found it necessary to devise a periphrastic entry for ‘vagina’: ita awāsis k-ōhci-nihtāwikit, literally, ‘where the child is born from’. Since a male fieldworker would expect such difficulties as a matter of course, it deserves to be emphasized that the working group in question was comprised entirely of females. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to hope that the growing number of female ethnologists and linguists (and physicians) will one day find it easier to study the subject of childbirth.

Another methodological hurdle is the decline in anatomical knowledge and in terminological sophistication which has accompanied the shift from a hunting society to reserve life. When meat is bought at a store instead of animals being butchered, and once deliveries take place in hospitals rather than in the home setting, it appears that the technical terminologies, too, are soon replaced by their English counterparts (or a reduced selection thereof).

A problem of a very different kind, but none the less troubling to the analyst, is posed by polysemy. In Cree, a surprising number of technical terms do double duty as ordinary words, e.g.: áhkosi- vai (1) ‘be sick’, (2) ‘menstruate, have menstrual pains’, (3) ‘be in labour, have contractions’; pamih- vta (1) ‘tend s.o., look after s.o.’, (2) ‘serve as midwife to s.o.’. Such terms are not only awkward to elicit; even when they occur in a text, it is often difficult to interpret them consistently.

Despite the many problems facing the outside observer, my work on the
classical triad of grammar, texts and lexicon has over the years afforded me the opportunity to collect a substantial body of linguistic data bearing on the domain of midwifery and childbirth. The present study is intended merely as a first instalment, preparing the ground and exploring a few selected terms which are peculiar to this domain — and under the umbrella of a deliberately general title, we will here concentrate on the midwives' knowledge rather than on their rôle.

While some of the forms cited in this paper were obtained by direct elicitation, the vast majority are excerpted from running text, in both formal and casual discourse; some are spontaneous paraphrases of textual passages, and yet others arise from the discussion of a text. The only forms specially marked in this paper are those attested exclusively in the lexicographical sources.

Language and Culture

A Plains Cree myth provides the primary text for this study, yielding linguistic and cultural data at once. At least since the days of Boas and Lowie, indirect observation by means of texts — or on the basis of myths (cf. Preston 1975) — has been recognized among North American ethnologists as a most valuable supplement to direct participant observation. In some circumstances, this may be the only avenue available (cf. notably Sweet 1969), in others it may be preferred as a matter of choice (cf. Lowie 1954); in either case, once the primary evidence consists of texts, the ethnologist's approach has to emulate that of the historian.

Although the texts of a society are clearly one of the major routes to its values and beliefs, it is important to keep in mind that the members of the society know perfectly well to distinguish between mythical and everyday events: practitioners of transubstantiation, for example, are not

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3 While the noun *otawāmmisiwin*- na 'childbirth, child-bearing' is common enough, in the case of 'midwifery' the verb *pamih*-vta is preferred over the corresponding noun.

4 Since this work has been in progress for 21 years, I am indebted to a number of Cree speakers from Alberta and Saskatchewan, both men and women, who set aside their inhibitions and instructed me in Cree anatomical and physiological terminology.

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5 A = Ahenakew 1987b; B = Bloomfield, [Cree lexicon], ms.; F = Faries 1938; H = Howse 1844; L = Lacombe 1874; W = Watkins 1865.
normally thought of as cannibals, and a study of Western concepts of conception (cf. Leach 1967 and Spiro 1968) would not rely exclusively on the ubiquitous symbolism of the virgin birth. Similarly, it would be simplistic in the extreme to identify Cree notions of conception with their literary-mythological representation. To ignore the latter, on the other hand, would leave the observer with a greatly impoverished perspective on Cree culture.

The Text

In one of the myth texts (WG 02) which William Greyeyes told Freda Ahenakew over the past six years (and which Freda Ahenakew and I have been preparing for publication), there is a young woman who, despite her lowly station in society, is determined to marry a handsome young man who has already declined many other offers of marriage. When her suit is rebuffed, she defiantly follows him as he leaves his abode, and observes where he has gone to urinate:

\[ \text{ikota es ekwa kå-nahapit, wist è-tåpisåsot, “ä, èkosi, nika-witosëmåw,” itwëw, “nika-wawiyasihåw awa,” itwëw.} \]

‘There she now sat down, urinating on the same spot herself, “Well, then, I shall have a child with him,” she said, “I shall get the better of this one,” she said.’

When her pregnancy becomes noticeable and she is questioned about it by her grandmother, she responds with the same term, witosëm-:

\[ \text{“iwakw anfaj ana è-witosëmak,” itwëw.} \]

‘“That one is the one with whom I am having a child,” she said.’

The paternity is vigorously denied by the young man, but his parents ask to see the child and acknowledge the similarity in looks. They call upon the elders for advice and are told to bring together all the young men so that the child can be handed around from one to the other:

\[ \text{“ohtåwiy[a] ánhi ka-sikitëw,” kå-itwët èsa.} \]

‘“He will urinate on the one who is his father,” he said.’

And so it is:

\[ \text{wiy ékw åwa kå-pë-miyiht, mayaw ès omis è-itinät, öta kå-sikitikot èsa wåskikanihk.} \]

‘For now when he [i.e., the child] was given to this one, as soon as he held him like that [gesture], here on his chest the other urinated on him.’

The father angrily throws down the child and runs off; mother and child follow. During a long flight, in a series of encounters, he continues to deny paternity; although the mother always refers to the child by the inclusive plural, kikosisinaw ‘your-and-my son’, the young man keeps insisting on his
point, e.g., “namōy āna niy,” ētēw ‘He is not mine, that one,’ he said to her’; finally, however, the reversal:

‘Our son and I are two [i.e., we belong together],” he said, “I believe it now,” he said, . . .’

—and that concludes the passages bearing on conception and paternity.

The Motifs

In terms of motifs, these passages seem to contain two crucial elements: 1) conception without the consent of the male by means of the mingling of urine; and 2) determination of paternity by means of a urine test. Both these elements recur among the Cree of the East Coast of James Bay. In a paper on the truth value of traditional literature which Sarah Preston gave at the 17th Algonquian Conference in Montreal, she quite incidentally summarised an atiukan told to her by Malcolm Diamond of Washkahiganish (Fort Rupert). The paternity test which is described in her report is identical in all respects (except that this time there is also a false claimant), and Preston further reports (1986a:256) her discussions with the interpreter (George Diamond, the narrator’s son), who elaborated on the technique by which this “miraculous conception” (1986a:253) had been achieved: “The baby had not been conceived in the usual manner; instead, when the girl had urinated on the ground, the boy had urinated in the same place.” In view of the remarkable coincidence of the two crucial elements — the non-invasive impregnation and the paternity test, both by means of urine — it is worth recalling the physical distance between the Saskatchewan and the East Coast of James Bay; and the fact that this complex occurs in two entirely different stories (although they are both origin myths). Note further that the administration of a substance via a woman’s urine is reported as actual practice by George Nelson, writing at Lac la Ronge in 1823; his account (Brown and Brightman 1988:67) tells of a rejected suitor sprinkling a pulverized root on the spot where the woman had urinated, thereby inducing repeated hemorrhage and leaving the victim bewitched.⁷

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⁶ Regina Flannery kindly drew my attention to a different but related myth, told to John M. Cooper by Edward Nemegus at Rupert’s House in 1934 (cf. Flannery and Chambers 1985:9), in which “A woman picked up a piece of rock and kept it with her. She bore a son although she had never had sexual relations with any man.” (This myth was still widely told on the East Coast of James Bay two generations later; cf. Tanner 1979:175n.)

⁷ The editors also cite (1988:179) Brightman’s field notes from the “Rock Cree” of northwestern Manitoba for “mythological references to impregnation when men urinate at sites earlier used by women.” Note that Brightman’s report speaks only of men originating such pregnancies.
The two myths differ in one significant detail: in the story related by Sarah Preston, the pregnancy — which is accomplished non-invasively in both cases — is the work of the male, whereas in the Plains Cree myth it is the female who takes the initiative. Taken together, the two myths thus indicate that the process of impregnation itself is evidently seen as entirely symmetrical.

This is not the place to pursue the mythological implications of involuntary parenthood (and bilateral but alternate virgin birth), or the extent of sexual symmetry in Cree psychology, or the power of urine and its significance in the Cree scheme of things medical. These are matters which — reminiscent as they are of paternity tests among the Trobrianders and the doctrine of body fluids among the Hua — I will leave to the acolytes of Malinowski or Meigs.

Let me return to a much more mundane matter: the words. (In this regard, unfortunately, we are restricted to the Plains Cree text since the East Cree myth is only available in the form of an English summary.)

**The Terms**

Even the few brief passages which I have cited contain a wealth of linguistic data which are almost as tantalizing as the literary, psychological and medical questions I have had to dismiss.8

The key word here is *witôsêm-* , which occurs twice:

"ā, ēkosi, nika-witôsêmâw," . . .
'Well, then, I shall have a child with him," . . .'.

"ēwakw ān[a] āna ē-witôsêmak," . . .
'That one is the one with whom I am having a child," . . .'.

By way of amplification, let me cite another instance of the same stem, found in the Plains Cree texts which Nāh-Namiskwēkapâw told to Leonard Bloomfield in 1925 (1930:62):

ēyakoni wâkayôsah êsah owitôsêmâ[h].
'She was having offspring with that bear.' [translation supplied].

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8 A quick survey will suffice for the incidental terms, interesting as some may be in their own right: *tāpisâso-* vai 'urinate upon the same place', cf. *tāpisin-* vai 'lie fitted in', *winisâso-* vai 'dirty oneself with urine'; *sikit-* väi 'urinate upon s.o.', cf. *siki-* vai 'urinate', *nisi-* vai 'be two; belong together as two'. A comment on the syntax of the last sentence cited above, where the plural verb ē-*nīsiyahk* is construed with a singular noun denoting one of its referents, may also be appropriate; this construction is especially common with the first/second person plural inclusive and exclusive.
This sentence, to which the h-preterit seems to give a durative aspect, is preceded by the briefest of statements about the birth of twin boys, and followed by a remark that they were raised by their mother’s husband ‘even though they were not his children.’ Clearly, the term witōsēm- belongs squarely into the lexical domain of conception and paternity.

The Transitive Verb Stem witōsēm-

In analyzing the transitive verb stem witōsēm-, we find first of all the well-known root -it- (cf., for example, Bloomfield 1941) in conjunction with a vta final -im-. Verbs containing these two morphemes, which generally mean ‘to do something together with s.o.’, come in two types. In the first, the initial morpheme wit- is followed directly by another verbal morpheme, e.g., witapim- vta ‘sit with s.o.; sit by s.o. in a marriage ceremony’, witapihē- vti ‘sit by s.t.; hatch one’s eggs (bird)’; cf. api- vai ‘sit’. This is the pattern exhibited by the stem under scrutiny, which consists of the discontinuous constituent wit- -im- and the non-initial morpheme -ōsē-.

The second type is of interest here mainly because it is highly productive and thus affords us a good opportunity to study the semantic range of these verbs. In this type, the preverb wici serves as the initial part of the discontinuous constituent, and the other constituent is typically a common vai stem, e.g., wici-pihtwām- vta ‘smoke with s.o.’, cf. pihtwā- vai ‘smoke’. In Bloomfield’s words (1941:297), “These compounds seem to be freely formed.”

Before we move on to the other morpheme found in this stem, it remains to consider the question of grammatical and pragmatic symmetry — this is, after all, a transitive verb, capable of specifying both an agent and a patient. (The question of semantic symmetry will be discussed later.)

Asymmetry is suggested by Lacombe’s gloss (for he uses the feminine pronoun where a female agent is pragmatically appropriate): witōjemew ‘il a des enfants avec elle’, and the same male perspective is echoed, a

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9 Note that the final vowel of the underlying vai stem is normally lengthened in contemporary Saskatchewan Plains Cree, e.g., wici-nōnim- vta ‘suck at the breast with s.o.’, or wici-nicisōm- vta ‘eat with s.o.’, while Bloomfield in 1925 recorded a short -o- for the latter; for “East Cree”, the entries of MacKenzie et al 1987 show both long and short vowels, e.g., wiichimiichisumeu vta ‘he eats with him’, wiichiniiumumeu vta ‘he dances with him’, wiichinikamuumeu vta ‘he sings with him’.

10 Stems of the second, productive type were already common during the early part of the 19th century, when Joseph Howse recorded wici-miňkwēm- vta ‘drink with s.o.’, wici-piponisim- vta ‘winter with s.o.’, wici-papāwohteem- vta ‘walk about with s.o.;’ in addition to wici-pihtwām- and wici-nicisom-; cf. also the numerous missionary terms in Watkins (1865) and Faries (1938).
century later, in the parallel “East Cree” gloss of MacKenzie et al 1987: 'he commits adultery with her’. Bloomfield’s gloss, on the other hand, is explicitly symmetrical, ‘he (she) has offspring with her (him)’, as is that in the medical glossary edited by Freda Ahenakew (1987b). This is in full accord with the textual usage: in Bloomfield’s text, cited earlier, the woman is the agent and the noun phrase cyakoni wakayosah ‘that bear [obviative]’ is marked as the grammatical object. No noun phrases appear with the stem witoses- in our primary text, but in both instances the pragmatic situation is completely unambiguous: it is the girl who chooses a father for her child.

The Intransitive Verb Final -oses-.

Turning to the morpheme -oses-, let us begin with the most transparent of the stems built on this verb final:

nisoses-vai ‘have two children’
mihcetoses-vai ‘have many children’
itahtoses-vai ‘have so many children’
takahkoses-vai ‘have beautiful children’.

These four verbs have the same derivational structure, and they all refer to a state which is specified by the initial morpheme:

nis(w)- ‘two’
mihcet(w)- ‘many’
itaht(w)- ‘so many, as many’
takah- ‘beautiful’.

This state, once attained, continues to exist long after the birth of the child.11

The meaning of the next two verbs, whose derivational structure is exactly parallel to those of the previous set, is much more restricted:

11Verbs with the final -oses- are not restricted to use with female referents. Although textual attestations have not yet come to my attention, informant responses indicate that a verb form like nimihcetosesan ‘I have many children’ might also be used by a male speaker; an obvious model for such an extension (whether it be considered metaphoric or not) is illustrated in the following passage from another text told by William Greyeyes (WG 13):

..., ekote e-oskiskwewet awa, osk-ayak oki, kâ-aya-~, kâ-pehtâkwahk nâpesis[a] ē-ayawâcik.

... then this one had a new wife, these young people, when it was heard that they had a boy.

The use of the plural form of the verb ayaw-vta (here corroborated by the plural noun of the immediately preceding phrase) in collocation with the nouns nâpesis- ‘little boy, male infant’ or iskwesis- ‘little girl, female infant’ is very common.
mahkôsé- vai ‘give birth to a large child’
apiscôsési- vai ‘give birth to a small child’ [diminutive]
pikwatôsé- vai ‘give birth to an illegitimate child’ (WLF)

Guidelines for behaviour during pregnancy provide a typical context for these terms:

“kásakéyani, . . . kik-áyimihikon . . . ta-mahkôsán,” é-itwécik mâna.
‘If you are immodest in your diet, . . . it will cause you trouble [sc: during delivery] . . . for you to give birth to a big baby,” they used to say.’

This usage shows that a verb like mahkôsé- refers to the size of the child at birth rather than during its later life.

All of the stems belonging to this first set are built on an initial constituent which commonly occurs with noun finals:

nisôtêw- na ‘twin’
takahkatimw- na ‘beautiful horse’ ([sic]; cf. Ahenakew 1987a:88)
mahkápitân- ni ‘big tooth’ (A)
pikwataskiy- ni ‘wilderness, desert’ (WLF),

or in construction with medials derived from noun stems:

nisôskwêwê- vai ‘have two wives’
mihcêtastimwê- vai ‘have many horses’
itahktopîǹwê- vai ‘be so old, have so many winters’.

Although the same morpheme also occurs in verb stems without derived medials:

nisosin- vai ‘lie as two, lie together’
takahkipê- vai ‘feel well with drink’
takahkêyim- vta ‘think well of s.o., like s.o.’,

their meaning in the -ôsê- stems seems to focus on a presupposed semantic unit ‘child’.

A second major set of -ôsê- verbs focus on the mother rather than the child, and more specifically on her child-bearing. The initial morphemes in

pônôsé- vai ‘cease to give birth, be no longer of child-bearing age’
nihtâwôsê- vai ‘be fruitful, be prolific’ (LF [but contra W])
mamîyôsê- vai ‘be a good breeder (cow)’ (B)

do not modify a nominal element, whether demonstrated or postulated. The same is true of the following three verbs,12 which are conventionally used in the negative:

12The following entries from Lacombe also seem to belong here: ayenosew ‘stérile, elle est stérile’, kawiyosânew, kâwiyosanew ‘stérile’
In all of the above stems, the state of the woman is the common semantic element.

Finally, some verbs with -öse- do not fit into either of the two major sets. The stem kimotöse- vai ‘bear an illegitimate child’, for example, contains the initial morpheme kimot- ‘steal’ which is commonly found either in the stem kimoti- vai ‘steal (s.t.)’ or as the initial constituent of an incorporate stem, e.g., kimotastotinë- vai ‘steal a headgear’. There is no compelling argument for interpreting this stem either as ‘steal a child’, appealing vaguely to the pattern of the first type; or as ‘give birth as a thief, stealthily’, with oblique reference to the second. As I argued exactly 20 years ago — in my first attempt to deal with the complex semantic structure of Cree stems (cf. especially Wolfart 1971:514) — such gropings are nothing but English paraphrases.

The Noun Final -ösän

Several of the verbs we have been discussing are matched by nouns based on the regularly formed noun final -ösän-:

- kimotösän- na ‘illegitimate child’
- pikwatosän- na ‘illegitimate child’ (WLF)

and the same morpheme also occurs quite freely with other initials:

- nistamösän- na ‘first-born child’
- pëyakösän- na ‘single child, lone child’
- iskwëyösän- na ‘last-born child’ (WF)

For this set, English glosses like ‘first-born’ nicely replicate the semantic structure of the Cree stems: that these are indeed passive nouns, entirely parallel to the -a kan- nouns for which this term has been introduced previously (Wolfart 1979; cf. Wolfart 1980).

The Meaning of -öse-

Although the above is by no means an exhaustive survey of the stems containing this morpheme, there can be little doubt that the lexical meaning

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13 There are also apparent nonce-forms like taköse- vai ‘have more and more children’, which may owe its existence to the special context of word-play.

14 Cf. also the diminutive, niscamösänis- na ‘first-born little child’, and the verbs of being which may be further derived from such noun stems, e.g., nistamösänïwi- vai ‘be a/the first-born child’, pëyakösänïwi- vai ‘be a single child, be a lone child’, pikwatosänïwi- vai ‘be an illegitimate child’ (WF).
of -ösé- is above all that of giving birth, of child-bearing. This quintessentially female trait is also reflected in the use of the corresponding initial morpheme nösé-, which appears both in unit nouns like\(^{15}\) nösésip- na ‘female duck’ (WLF); and in nominal compounds such as nösé-maskw- na ‘female bear’ or, especially, nösé-ay- na ‘female of the species’; and even, augmented only by the diminutive suffix, as a noun in its own right: nösés-na ‘female of the species’.

Without digressing into etymology,\(^ {16}\) we should at least note in passing that in a number of Algonquian languages (e.g., Fox, Kickapoo, Menomini) the ordinary verb ‘to give birth’ is built on the morpheme corresponding to Cree nösé-. No primary verb built on the initial nösé- has thus far been recorded in Cree.

What, then, is the meaning of the crucial term witösém-? Can we say with any confidence and precision what is being shared?

The father’s rôle in the act of parturition itself is necessarily limited, and it seems likely that the occurrence of a male referent with the verbs of the first major set is a case of semantic extension. The focal reference of the morpheme -ösé- in witösém-, therefore, appears to be conception and parenthood. While it might, of course, be argued that this term designates the common social rôle of the parents, the texts — which provide the firmest kind of evidence — strongly suggest the biological.

Towards a Phrase-Book of Cree Midwifery

There are, to be sure, many other topics besides insemination, conception and parenthood that will need to be explored if we are to sketch even the outlines of the loosely defined domain of Cree midwifery.

One of the most pressing linguistic questions is the polysemy of many ordinary words which are also used as technical terms. For an authentic illustration, we turn once more to our text, just after the protagonist succeeds in getting pregnant:

\[kētahtawē k-áti-misikitit ēso, tāpwē awa miton áti-misikitīw.\]

‘Then she began to grow big with child, truly she began to grow really big with child.’

\(^{15}\)Cf. also, in dialects other than Plains Cree, nöséstimw- na ‘bitch, mare’ (WF) (and “East Cree” nuusheshtim ‘female dog’).

\(^{16}\)The distribution (and meaning) of the Ojibwa cognate is much more restricted, despite Baraga’s nin nitōnje ‘I am often delivered’.

Nor can we here enter into the complex matter of the relation between the stems ‘to give birth’ and ‘to suckle’ (cf. Goddard 1974:111, where Moose Cree onósāniw is cited with its Faries gloss ‘suckling’ but without semantic comment and without any indication that it only occurs in Moose Cree, as is evident from the entries in Faries 1938:368.)
The verb stem *misikiti*-vai ‘be big’ is by no means restricted to the sense ‘big with child’ but — especially in conjunction with the preverb *ati* ‘progressively’ — this is a standard use of the term.

Among the heuristic problems — and quite independent of the twin hurdles of propriety and prudishness — there is the vexing issue of usage. Another polysemous word, *aspiskwésimon*-ni, which means both ‘pillow’ and ‘placenta, afterbirth’, is the technical term which Plains Cree speakers will provide in translating the English terms (and this is also the entry which appears in Ahenakew 1987b). But normal usage seems to avoid the technical term in favour of phrases such as the following:

\[\text{anim étwa náway ká-pahkihtik} \]
\[
\text{‘that which comes behind’} 
\]

— or might it simply be the nominal expression that is being avoided?

Any strategy for further work in this area thus has to rely on a variety of approaches. While direct elicitation is evidently unavoidable, it is most fruitful in the context of thematic sets, and it needs to be complemented by the analysis of individual morphemes and cognate sets. The least direct strategy, finally, seems especially promising — the intensive study of texts. Texts offer an added advantage: since much of the non-linguistic information they contain is incidental to the main theme of the story, it is for that very reason relatively immune to conscious distortion. Above all, however, texts are the most reliable source of grammatically and idiomatically representative samples of speech (cf. Ahenakew 1987). The final example from our primary text is the concerned question of the grandmother as the young woman begins to grow big with child:

\[\text{“á, táníš,” itéw, “táníš ôm é-itahkamikisiyan,” itéw, ...} \]
\[
\text{‘Well, what is it,” she said to her, “what have you been doing,” she said to her, ...’} 
\]

While none of the individual words is as pregnant with meaning as the morpheme *-ôsé-*, the sentence as a whole is a typical instance of the quasi-medical discourse which might usefully be collected in a phrase-book of Cree midwifery.

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