Older Persons in Cree and Ojibwe Stories: 
Gender, Power, and Survival

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The legends and histories gathered by the Omushkego (Swampy Cree) historian and storyteller Louis Bird, and by anthropologists like Regina Flannery or A. Irving Hallowell, often focus on interactions of older men and women with each other and with junior relatives, and on their roles and the conditions of their lives. There are benign and sometimes humorous elements in the stories, but also strong tensions, sometimes between spouses or generations, and often between in-laws. Survival and the overcoming of adversity and threats from various sources are prominent themes. The stories discussed here serve to teach and reinforce values; they also warn about risks and consequences of actions and behaviour, particularly with reference to powerful older men. They offer valuable historical perspectives on the roles and situations of older people in these communities in past times.

This paper is presented in honour of Regina Flannery Herzfeld, a distinguished woman who lived for almost a century and who lived well and productively throughout. She, in turn, honoured and respected through her scholarship and hard work, the lives and stories of the older people she knew in James Bay in the 1930s. In 1995, she published a modestly titled book, Ellen Smallboy: Glimpses of a Cree woman’s life. That book gives us more than glimpses of Ellen Smallboy; it takes us deep into the life of a woman whose memories extended from the 1930s to the 1850s. Reading it now, we are carried back for a century and a half, through stories shared and recorded together by Ellen and Regina. They both walked this world for a long time. Their life-years, added together, amounted to almost two centuries; Ellen died in 1941 at the age of about 88.

Reflecting on long lives well lived, I found myself thinking about the range and complexities of older people’s roles in Cree and Ojibwe families and communities. Whether we work inside our own cultures or across boundaries, whether we are Aboriginal or not, we ethnohistorians, or whatever we call ourselves, are bound to be seeking out these old people as did Regina Flannery, A. Irving Hallowell, and so many others of us,
because they have so much to share, and we have so much to learn. We learn great respect for them, and often have in common with them a sense of urgency; too many lives are cut short too early, before all the stories can be passed on, and time is always scarce and fleeting.

In the last generation or so, since the 1970s, such sentiments have found more explicit formulation in certain widely shared rituals of respect in working with elderly Aboriginal people. The use, in English, of the term, “elder,” often capitalized, and the elaboration of formal protocols for interaction, the giving of gifts, notably tobacco, along with honoraria, ethics reviews, and consent forms, are very much a feature of the last three decades; so too are recent debates over who is an “Elder” – how to validate that term and, as it were, control entry and set limits to that status. Sometimes the newer protocols still surprise older “consultants” (that vocabulary, too, has changed) in northern communities remote from urban Aboriginal ceremonies; when I offered tobacco to an old man on the upper Berens River, he accepted it politely with some puzzlement and the comment, “but I don’t smoke.” I was reminded that in A. Irving Hal- lowell’s Berens River field notes on the 1930s and among older people’s recollections of him in the 1990s, the offering of tobacco was never mentioned; people remembered Hallowell’s bringing gifts of clothing, canned food, and other such items. So protocols of respect and gift giving have shifted and also vary among communities in the forms that they take, although there is continuity in the underlying values placed upon respect and generosity.

Many Cree and Ojibwe stories also reinforce these values. In doing so, they often express diverse perspectives on older people’s roles, characteristics, and interactions with others, and in particular, critiques and cautions about powerful older males. Old people are not all “elders,” and some of them may be highly problematic figures. Of course, older Aboriginal people have lived out their lives in many diverse ways not subject to stereotype or generalization. On looking through and listening

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1. Hallowell’s photographs of Fair Wind (Naamiwan), the elderly medicine man whom he met at Pauingassi, Manitoba, in the early 1930s, show him wearing a new-looking checked shirt. When his descendants looked at the picture in the 1990s, they recalled that the shirt was a present from Hallowell. Hallowell also later gave Fair Wind a copy of the photograph, which was passed down to his grandson, Charlie George Owen, at Pauingassi, Manitoba, and was hanging on his living room wall in the 1990s.
to the Omushkego (Swampy) Cree stories collected by Louis Bird, Omushkego Cree historian, however, I have been struck by some images of older men, and of older women too, that seem deeply rooted. The stories raise some interesting questions about their roles and characters and also about gender relationships in past times.

In this paper, I focus mainly on the elderly personages who appear in the stories published by Louis Bird in his book, *Telling our stories: Omushkego legends and histories from Hudson Bay* (2005a). These stories were not selected for the book because they spoke of old people but for other reasons. When the book came together as a whole, however, the prominence of older men and a few older women, and the roles that they played, were conspicuous features in many of them. The Omushkego stories discussed here all appear in that book unless otherwise noted; some of them (along with many others by Louis Bird) may also be found on the web site www.ourvoices.ca. This discussion follows them in the order in which they occur in the book and notes some patterns and questions arising, referring also to some comparable Cree stories from other sources and to a few Berens River Ojibwe stories offering some similar themes.

At the end of chapter 1 in *Telling our stories*, Louis Bird provides a brief example of what he calls a “quotation story” – one with an embedded phrase that, like a biblical quote, expresses the whole tale to those who already know it. The quotation, “It is your Thigh Bone that You Hear,” serves as the title. The story tells of a woman waiting for her husband to return from a winter hunting trip while she looks after her old father-in-law in their lodge. The old man complains of how she lets in the cold night air every time she goes out to listen for her husband and to bring in firewood. She tells him of her fears that cracking noises she hears in the distance are wihi-ti-go-ma-hi-ka-nak,² cannibalistic wolves that are gnawing on bones. He dismisses her and her warning with the rude and implicitly sexual comment (“very nasty,” says Louis): “it is your thigh bone that you hear.” She concludes from the sounds that indeed the wolves have killed her husband and climbs a tree as one of them approaches. The wolf enters the lodge, and devours the old man (Bird 2005a:55-57). This story, like others, does not conclude by preaching les-

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² The orthography of Omushkego Cree names and terms here follows Louis Bird’s usage; as he writes Cree using syllabics, he inserts hyphens to demarcate syllables when using the Roman alphabet.
sons to be learned. However, listeners could draw the implicit conclusion that his fate is related to his disrespect and crossing the bounds of proper in-law behaviour, as well as his ignoring her concerns.

The next old man in these stories (chapter 4) is We-mis-shoosh, a personage known through various versions. In Louis Bird’s telling, We-mis-shoosh is a father who has dreamed he can extend his life by taking the lives of others; he renews his power and life force by systematically killing the young sons-in-law his daughters bring home (Bird 2005a:108). The rest of the community keep their distance and are glad when a young man with extraordinary powers appears to deal with the situation. Presenting himself as a baby boy to the old mi-tew, or shaman as Louis would say in English, he is taken into the family and grows up to marry one of the daughters, setting off a series of contests with his father-in-law who tries to kill him by various means. Ultimately the young man triumphs, sending the old shaman out on the water in a magical canoe. The old man ignores instructions for handling the canoe and is drowned in a terrible storm. He ends up as a bug, a we-mis-shoosh or caddis fly larva on the beach. The distinctive feature of these larvae is the portable case that protects them as they mature; the image is of a shrunken we-mis-shoosh wrapped in his canoe “because of the mistake he has made” (Bird 2005a:123-124; see also 123 n. 5 for Mark Ruml’s discussion of this aquatic insect and its identity).

A second story of a mi-tew contest appears in the same chapter. It has a similar theme, but also a historical location; it is more history than legend. At the mouth of the Ekwan River on western James Bay, in the old days, the Omushkego people used to have large spring gatherings with

3. In the mid-1950s, Simeon Scott at Fort Albany told C. Douglas Ellis the story of Memishoosh (Ellis 1995: xviii, 68-77); it has many elements in common with Louis Bird’s telling. Jeremiah Michel (one of the Asinîskâwînîwik or Rock Cree of northwestern Manitoba) told Robert Brightman a story about Wîmisôsiw with some interesting variants; in this telling, the powerful young son-in-law was identified as Wisâhkîcâh (Brightman 1989:23-26). See Brightman 1989:73-74 for a broader comparative discussion of the distribution of stories of Wîmisôsiw or cognates across the Algonquian subarctic. Brightman cautions that his malignant character should not be read as stereotypic of fathers-in-law as such: “most such relationships appear to be characterized by reciprocal respect and often affection” (1989:74).

4. A Cree story with some similar themes, in this instance conflict between father and son, is the tale of the young man, I-yes or Ayâs, whose exploits begin when his father abandons him on an island. See Simeon Scott in Ellis 1995:45-59.
games and ceremonies. The story tells how a much-feared shaman decides to enter a young people’s ball game, show his powers, and skew the results. A young orphan (and orphans may possess unheralded powers) tackles and overcomes the old man and recovers the ball, but everyone is alarmed for the boy, for “that shaman has been totally insulted” (Bird 2005a: 127). The boy’s guardian aunt and uncle are sure he will die. Indeed, that night, the boy is attacked from a distance by sharp quills and other bad medicine, but he retaliates by throwing from a distance his aunt’s beading needles and awl, which he has asked her for, and the shaman is struck dead in his canoe. The lesson, as Louis says, is that the old man was so proud and thought himself so powerful that he forgot that power could come to an orphan boy, “the most humbled person” (Bird 2005a:130).

A fourth powerful story in the book, “Grand Sophia’s Near-Death Experience” (chapter 8) tells of a conflict not quite so deadly, but nonetheless dangerous. This story is personal to Louis Bird’s family, telling of an event that happened three generations earlier; it was passed down to him by his mother and grandmother. Louis Bird’s great-grandmother, Grand Sophia, and her husband, an Oji-Cree speaker, were both Catholics, of the first generation converted by the Roman Catholic Oblate missionaries who arrived in the area in the late 19th century (Fulford & Bird 2003). Late one winter they went inland to look for caribou, and lived for a time with an old man and his wife, sons, and daughters. The old man decided to celebrate a successful hunt with a shaking tent ceremony, but as Grand Sophia was singing hymns and praying, the tent would not work. He became very angry and threw her prayer book into the fire, threatening to kill her if she interfered again. He then told his wife he was going to kill Sophia and have her husband (a great hunter whose help he wanted) marry one of their daughters. However the old lady was a kind person, fond of Sophia and her family. She warned them of the danger so they could escape, which they did. The Grand Sophia story draws attention to a quiet but salient theme in some of the stories, the roles and actions of older women. Here the old wife rescues the young family from her husband’s murderous intent. In the we-mis-shoosh story, in contrast, at least in Louis Bird’s version, the wife and mother had died, so there was no older woman around to moderate the husband’s violence.
Another story, "The Wailing Clouds" (chapter 6), portrays an old woman in a similar role, in a powerful way. At the Ekwan River gathering place, the site of one of the mi-tew stories just mentioned, a spring celebration got out of hand one time, as people got exceedingly caught up in a tug of war. A blind old woman who was the scorekeeper could no longer control the game; the rope was lengthened, more people joined in, the fire in the teepee where the game had started was knocked aside and the teepee itself fell down. The old lady crawled into a corner and called to them to stop, that they were committing what Louis calls "a blaspheme act" but they were so excited and having so much fun that they replied, "Let us paa-sta-ho," that is, sin against nature, lose control (Bird 2005a: 182). The story goes on to detail a great sickness that followed upon their actions. What stands out here is the old lady's effort to advise and control the younger people and to warn them of the consequences of their behaviour, and her foreshadowing of those consequences.

A legend with an element of time travel that foreshadows coming events features a woman as an older sister, unnamed, who acts as advisor and guide to her younger brother, Cha-ka-pesh, a personage who figures in Cree and Ojibwe stories told from Quebec to Manitoba. He is described as very small, a midget, yet a man nonetheless, with strong mi-tew powers. In all the Cha-ka-pesh stories, his sister warns him, usually in vain, about the risks he is taking in his adventures (see also Simeon Scott’s stories in Ellis 1995:14-33). In Telling our stories, chapter 5, "Omens, mysteries, and first encounters," Louis Bird tells of Cha-ka-pesh hunting along the shore of Hudson Bay and hearing strange sounds out on the water – voices saying something like "ho-hee, ho-hee." He travels home and tells his sister, who cautions him that he could be traveling into the future and how dangerous this could be. That night she has a dream about a sailing ship and what the sounds signify, and the next morning she warns him strongly not to go there again.

Of course, this only fuels his curiosity. Having promised his sister he would not risk time-traveling again, he enters the body of a seagull on the shore and flies out to discover a ship where the sailors are chanting, "heave ho, heave ho," as they raise the sails – the sound he had heard.

5. See Brightman (1989: 140-142 and Table 4) for an overview and tabulation of sources for and themes found in this cycle of stories.
They throw some hardtack or ship’s biscuit to the “seagull” who flies off with it. When Cha-ka-pesh returns to his own body and goes home, his sister finds the strange food in his bag with the rabbits he has caught for her, and she knows he has disobeyed. She is distressed: sometime, she says, “you will lose your life and I will never find you.” He apologizes as he always does, and that’s the end (Bird 2005a:157). The story more largely foreshadows the coming of strangers to Hudson Bay and the great changes that are to come. But the sister’s role, as an older woman who tries to advise, control, and moderate male actions and behavioural excesses, finds parallels in the other stories mentioned.

These stories suggest that it is a good idea to listen to older women: the blind old lady who tried to stop the tug-of-war game, and the old wife who warned Grand Sophia and her family to escape her husband’s evil designs knew the dangers that people were in. Also, these women may have special powers of their own. The sister of Cha-ka-pesh has a vision dream about the sounds her younger brother has heard but does not understand, and she is the one who provides an explanation as well as a warning, even though the story is about him because he is a much more interesting character. Whatever their powers or insights, a common thread of the stories is that the women are not listened to, or are not in a good position to change the course of events except by avoidance or circumnavigation, as in the instance of Grand Sophia’s rescuer.

The roles and behaviours exhibited in these stories point to patterns that appear worthy of further attention. The wi-sa-kay-jak stories told by Louis Bird (Bird 2007) and many others repeat the theme of a male figure whose excesses make trouble for himself and for others; and wi-sa-kay-jak has no mother, wife, or older sister to keep him in line. The stories are of course cautionary tales; they teach listeners in general how they should behave by providing examples of how not to behave but they also seem to be directed at powerful older males as a particular set of people in need of attention. They warn other people about the possible excesses of feared mi-te-wak or shamans, for example, but they also warn these men themselves about the dangers of pride, meanness, showing off, and making assumptions about how much power they have. These men may be powerful but they are not idealized; it is younger men such as the one who defeats, we-mis-shoosh or an-way, the cannibal exterminator (see Bird 2005b) who may acquire heroic dimensions.
The stories further remind everyone that power may lie in unexpected places (see also Black-Rogers 1977). The humble orphan or baby boy may be much more than he appears. And old men themselves may appear ordinary, yet may prove dangerous later on if they have been provoked. A couple of autobiographical stories that Ojibwe Chief William Berens told to A. Irving Hallowell illustrate this point. One incident happened when William was a young man working in the Hudson’s Bay Company store at Berens River. He refused an old man’s request for a pipe and tobacco, and talked back to him. Everyone in the store got quiet. “One old fellow told me I had made a mistake ... But I did not give a damn. I did not think he could hurt me.” Shortly after, William and his wife were camping on an island near Poplar River when he began to feel great fear – “even my body was quivering.” At sunset, a horrific thunderstorm arose, with lightning striking the rocks – “running all over like snakes – fearful.” Finally the storm passed, and Berens recalled, “I jumped up and walked out then.... I said, ‘This old fellow did not kill us yet’” (Brown 1989: 216).

In another instance of an old man’s powers, revealed after a seemingly innocuous event, William Berens told Hallowell of a powerful dream he had as a youth, in which he was taken to a huge “conjuring tent” and was told he could not leave. Then he saw his own head rolling about and people trying to catch it. Finally he caught it: “As soon as I got hold of it I could see my way and I left. Then I woke up.” Both Berens and his father, Jacob Berens, believed that a medicine man whose humpback son had been insulted by William in a game had tried but failed to kill him (Hallowell 1992: 87, 98 n.1).

The stories teach many things about how to behave and how not to behave. More specifically, to what extent do they tell something about observations of and experience with the roles and character tendencies of older men and women? A cluster of messages appears to be conveyed in the stories, considered together. The two William Berens stories, and some of Louis Bird’s stories as well, point to themes of foreshadowing and hindsight. People need to be alert to events and the omens leading up to them, and sensitive to the consequences of events and actions that may seem innocent enough at the time, for example the joyous game at the Ekwan River. Respect and restraint are highly advisable, particularly when a powerful medicine man is involved. However, some of the stories
could also be taken as warnings to older men themselves, especially pow­erful ones, about the risks of pride in, and over-display or abuse of, their power, the costs and dangers of their anti-social behaviour to themselves and others, and the pain or risks they may bring to themselves and others through anger, carelessness, excessive competitiveness, and hasty and ill­considered action (compare also Johnny Bighetty's story of Manicôw in Brightman 1989:152-153). The historical example of Abishabis, an Omushkego prophet who in 1842-43 acquired a considerable following as a spiritual figure, and then overstepped his bounds with violent, anti­social actions, speaks to this theme; he was ultimately defined as wih-ti­go or as a being with dangerous, possibly cannibalistic tendencies. In August 1843, at Severn on Hudson Bay, he was executed with an axe and his body burned in the manner reserved for such beings, as their hearts (which had turned to ice) had to be completely destroyed in order to elim­inate them (Brown 2004:111).

The stories serve to warn listeners that the powers that individuals possess vary and are unevenly distributed. Serious consequences may result from challenging or causing offence to persons (medicine men, “shamans” in Louis Bird’s English usage, or “conjurors” in the older liter­ature) whose superior powers were either not respected or not recognized in the first place. Of course, the powers of such men are not absolute either, and they may fail or be destroyed when they go on the offensive; they may meet their match in younger challengers whom they underesti­mated.

The stories also caution that younger male protagonists who defeat powerful older “shamans” may themselves need to be careful and exer­cise restraint later in their lives, as they grow older and more confident or even arrogant about their powers. Cha-ka-pesh is a somewhat younger male compared to the others; he has no family of his own and still lives with his older sister. Mostly he gets away with testing the limits, and his stories are not as dark. But finally, ignoring his sister’s advice, he gets caught up into the moon (Simeon Scott in Ellis 1995: 28-33), and can never return. For him too, the advice and cautions of an older woman have a place and convey qualities of her personal role and character. The stories also show, however, how often these women are ignored and over­looked despite their knowledge and prophetic powers. The older sister, like the blind old woman in the Wailing Clouds story, has little real influ­
ence on men and their actions. She tries to guide, but does not control, and eventually loses her younger brother. In other stories, women are not in a position to exert control but must simply take evasive action, escaping from insults, threats, or violence as did Grand Sophia, or going quietly behind the back of a mi-tew husband with dark intentions, as did Sophia’s rescuer. Women have their own values and means of coping and solving problems, but there is no trace of matriarchy in these stories.

Overall, the stories suggest some lines of, in Frederic Gleach’s words, “controlled speculation” (2003) as a means of exploring older men’s and women’s social and gender roles in northern Algonquian families and communities. I use “community” and not “society” advisedly as Louis Bird has cautioned us about the small scale of traditional social life in the North and about how the construction of a larger society is a recent phenomenon (Bird 2005a: 235). The stories provide windows onto face-to-face social life and interactions in these small-scale settings. They are an implicit index of people’s observations, values, and experience, and storytellers offered them as subtle means to guide, critique, or sanction interactions and behaviour. They may tell us quite a lot about generational and gender relations and roles, and tensions too, that have been deeply embedded in people’s lives for a long time. As ever, they repay further and deeper listening and reading – by whatever medium we are able to experience them.

Regina Flannery knew something about listening to older women’s stories when she spent all those hours with Ellen Smallboy, and in a quiet way she gathered a wealth of history and insights that she treasured and brought forward sixty years later. That little book probably resonates much more with current generations than it would have in the 1930s; for many reasons, we are more ready to appreciate such works now for the voices that speak through them so directly and personally. What pays off in the long run (as Louis Bird and his works have demonstrated) is the faithful gathering of stories at first hand. Then we need the means to hold dear and bring forward the voices of the tellers in the best possible way, and good listening and deep study to understand their messages. We are much in debt to Regina Flannery Herzfeld for her remarkable work on that front, and for a great deal more.
REFERENCES


