A Womb with a View:
Cree Moss Bags and Cradleboards

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THE TIC-A-NOGAN
Gentle hands surround them,
warm and strong and brown.
Quiet voices soothe them,
Hushed with a magic sound.
Lift them up and kiss them,
lay them in their nest,
of wood and cloth and laces,
a special place to rest.
Baby's tic-a-nogan,
Safe and sound they'll be.
A loving place to peek from,
for babies of the Cree.

This poem appears in a children's book addressed to young Euro-Canadian students and designed to provide an understanding of Cree culture and life in the northern Ontario community of Fort Albany. By means of photographs and text, an initial level of meaning for tikanagans (cradleboards) is introduced, a meaning readily comprehended through observation and which encompasses both the physical attributes of the cradleboard and the connotations of warmth, comfort and security. Cree infants, thus wrapped in the soft layers of fetal caribou skin (or more recently cloth) stuffed with sphagnum moss, and laced into decorated bags attached to the wooden frame of the tikanagans, observe the world from this secure position. However, just as the infant's body is wrapped in layers of cloth, so too are the meanings associated with tikanagans and moss bags layered.

THE CREE TIKANAGAN

Structurally, the tikanagan or cradleboard is formed from one or two boards with a foot rest and a hoop attached. Fabric or hide is fastened to

1 Poem by Diane Collins Harpe (Monture and McSweeney 1976:20).
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the foot rest and laced up the centre to form a bag (see Figure 1). The hoop serves to protect the infant’s face and head should the board topple, and also provides support for a sunshade, insect netting or extra protection against the cold. Hanging from this hoop are such “trinkets” as net charms, covered umbilical cords, leg bones from fetal caribou and so on, intended to both amuse the infant and provide symbolical protection. A strap attached to the frame back and worn across the mother’s upper chest secures the baby-laden tikanagan in place (see Figure 4). From a utilitarian standpoint, the tikanagan functions in transporting the baby from place to place, gently soothed by the mother’s rhythmic pace. Or, when in camp, the board is propped against a tent pole or tree, or hung from a nearby branch ensuring the infant’s safety while the mother is involved with various chores (see Figure 3). On a metaphorical level, the tikanagan becomes a “portable shelter” or “mobile home” (Bird 1996).

Reflecting the complementary skills of Cree men and women, the construction of the cradleboard and its cover follow a traditional course in which the father or grandfather produces the wooden frame with its steam-bent footrest and hoop, while the mother or grandmother prepares the covering. The preferred wood, according to Cree elder Louis Bird, was tamarack with its desirable qualities of strength, lightness, and pliancy. While cedar is also light, only an expert can bend it (Bird 1996). Either a man or woman might carve appropriate motifs on the back. Prior to the availability of paint from the Hudson’s Bay Company, the wood was “smeared” with natural stains prepared from local sources. To prepare these stains indigenous pigments were added to parsley oil or the “glue” from fish sacs, preferably from Catostomidae (“suckers”) (Bird 1996). Once the frame was completed, the fine hide, beaded cloth or tartan cover was attached, ready for the infant to be laced into it. During each of these creative processes, ancient songs were sung, songs which in some areas have been replaced by Christian hymns. These combined and complementary labours provide both physical and spiritual security and support for the growing infant.

Consideration of the materials establishes a reliance on wood for the backboard which must take into account the impact that the nature of forest

2 Occasionally the bag was lined with birch bark (as illustrated in Macfie and Johnston 1991:76).

3 Louis Bird (1996) notes that women were also capable of making and/or carving the wooden frame.
growth exerts on both the presence and size of the frame. For, as A. A. Chesterfield noted at the turn of the century, “the Cree in the vicinity of Great Whale [an area of dwarf trees] did not use the tikanagan” (James 1985:54). And, as Louis Bird of Peawanuk commented (1996), tikanagans in that region can be made only for small babies because the trees are not
large enough to make a frame for a two-year-old. Bird further specified that the wood for the frame had to be well-seasoned — that is, the tree is felled and aged at least a year before the tikanagan can be fabricated. Further probing concerning this implied necessity to plan in advance elicited an adamant response from Bird, confirming the use of seasoned wood which, in turn, evokes further questions as to the actual sequence of steps. Certainly the use of well-seasoned wood challenges an earlier understanding that Algonquian cradleboards were made from the wood of living trees while those made from cut or seasoned wood, or “white-man’s boards”, were deemed unlucky (cf. Feder 1978:45; Skinner 1923–25:137). Nevertheless, when the meticulously painted hide or beaded cloth cover is attached, the finished tikanagan publicly heralds the skills of its makers, and attests to the love and affection families hold for their children (cf. Hays 1995:22).

MOSS BAGS AND MOSS

The moss bag, a well-made and attractively decorated cloth or hide pouch filled with absorbent and deodorant sphagnum moss and laced up the front, lacks the wooden frame of the tikanagan. Although it is often stated that the moss bag is used for travel in canoes or when the baby is being held — or, as Chesterfield suggests, in areas where tikanagans are not used — it may have been, at one time, the primary article. Certainly, when I first examined a well-made and thoroughly-detailed model tikanagan dating from the 1870s (McCord Museum M18538; see Figure 1), which includes both an elaborately beaded cover attached to the frame AND a plaid moss bag tucked inside, I began to speculate whether or not the moss bag might have been used most of the time and then placed in the tikanagan when circumstances required it. Hudson’s Bay Company factor Andrew Graham attests to this practice at York Factory in the 18th century, noting: “They have a kind of bag made of cloth, or leather, in which the child is laced... In the day time, or when travelling, this is put into the back-board or cradle” (Graham 1969:178). However, as far as I have been able to ascertain from a survey of the literature, Regina Flannery (1936:477) makes the only other reference to the practice of placing the securely

4 As the child grows a larger tikanagan is made for him or her (Rogers 1962:B38).
wrapped infant “on the cradleboard for carrying on the mother’s back when travelling or in the swing when at home.” Further confirmation can be garnered from Louis Bird’s comment (1996) that “the moss bag is placed inside the cover of the tikanagan.” As well, a Cree youngster photographed at Waskaganish by Richard Preston appears to be laced into a moss bag.
Figure 3. Tikanagan with baby propped against tent post, James Bay, ca. 1937. Photograph by Ben East, courtesy of Cranbrook Institute of Science.

while sitting in his hammock suspended from poles inside the *michuap*. Scant evidence, perhaps, but evocative nonetheless.

Packed into the moss bag, the soft, absorbent and "environmentally friendly" sphagnum moss keeps the infant’s bottom comfortably dry and free of diaper rash.⁵ According to Minnie Gilpin of Eastmain (Oberholtzer 1991), once the baby was prepared for the day with clean moss packed around and between its legs (see Smith 1981:277 for comparative photographs), the family could travel up to 12 hours, the mother stopping only to nurse the baby. Soiled moss, left to decompose or burned in the fire, causes little, if any, detrimental effect on the environment. Collected from the marshes (Anonymous 1927:61), the “light beige-coloured species of sphagnum moss” or, alternatively, “the kind that grows on trees, the kind the caribou graze” (Flannery 1995:31) was gathered during the summer months and hung up or spread out to dry and be bleached by the sun until

⁵ For the occasional incidence of rash, powdered dried cedarwood was applied (cf. catalogue documentation pertaining to CMC-III-D-533).
Figure 4. Mother carrying baby in tikinagan, James Bay, ca. 1937. Photograph by Ben East, courtesy of Cranbrook Institute of Science.
almost white (Anonymous 1927:61, Beardy and Coutts 1996:47, Hallowell 1974:123). In this way a supply of moss was available for the coming winter.\(^{6}\)

These beneficial characteristics were offset occasionally by other less pleasant experiences. For example, when travelling in the winter, the moss would be heated on warm stones prior to changing the baby. Unhappily, sometimes a stone became caught up in the moss and the infant suffered a burn on the buttocks (Regina Flannery, personal communication, 1996).

Or, as Jane Willis notes in her autobiography, *Geniesh* (1973:18):

> On the day of my birth a bag of moss was taken out of storage and taken inside the cabin to warm up. A small piece of it was placed on top of the old cast-iron stove briefly to soften... I was bundled up in layers of [moss and] covers and laced tightly into my papoose carrier with my legs straightened and my arms placed rigidly against my sides... I continued crying shrilly and hysterically for hours, despite all the love and attention that was lavished on me... When my grandmother unlaced me... she found my bottom full of red bumps and crawling with tiny black ants. Apparently a colony of them had made a nest for themselves in the moss. The warmth of my body had awakened them...

Despite such hazards, moss for diapering remains advantageous.

**TIKANAGAN ATTRIBUTION AND IDENTITY**

Initially, my research on tikanagans was formulated to determine if local or regional expressions of style, techniques and use of materials were recognizable. Ideally this information could then be used to identify unattributed examples in museums and historic photographs.\(^{7}\) Research thus focused on examining, measuring and photographing the details of innumerable cradleboards in major museum collections.\(^{8}\) For example, the height and width of the backboard was measured, as was the height of the hoop projecting at right angles from the backboard (see Figure 4). Variations were noted in the shape and length of the foot rests; the

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\(^{6}\) In a recent telephone conversation with Dominic Hunter of Peawanuk, he noted that the Cree use the lighter coloured moss, as the darker reddish species was too acidic and often caused a skin rash.

\(^{7}\) For example, I was able to identify a miniature cradleboard as likely originating from the York Factory region based on the form of the backboard. This specimen, included with a pair of Cree dolls in the Rosalie Whyel Museum of Doll Art, is illustrated in Hedrick (1997:17, 18); unfortunately, the identification was made after publication.

\(^{8}\) Very few European museums hold examples of subarctic cradleboards.
presence or absence of a brace; the presence or absence of a mortised hoop; the depth to which the hoop (when present) extends beyond the rear side of the backboard; and the types of materials used for the cover and the carrying strap. The most variable feature — and the one which proved to be the most definitive for purposes of attribution — is the shape of the hoop.⁹ And indeed, there does appear to be some correlation between hoop shape and specific communities, even over time. For example, the hoop shape of the miniature tikanagan held by the McCord Museum of Canadian History (see Figure 1), made at Moose Factory in the late 1870s for the young daughter of Dr. William Bell Malloch, displays a shape similar to an unidentified one in the Manchester Museum (no. 0.8627; see Figure 2), possibly from the same time period. As well, both the one held by the Nor'Westers and Loyalist Museum in Williamstown, Ontario, and the hastily produced miniature presented to Regina Flannery in the 1930s by Ellen Smallboy of Moose Factory (illustrated in Flannery 1995:6) repeat the form. Photographic evidence, such as the two photographs taken by journalist Ben Wheat circa 1937 (Figures 3 and 4) illustrate very similar features. All but the Smallboy example possess a heart-shaped cut-out just below the upper edge of the backboard, as does the model tikanagan collected by Alanson Skinner at Moose Factory in 1908 (American Museum of Natural History 50/6943, illustrated in Skinner 1911:46).

Even with the potential implicit in this approach, I was not satisfied with the practical application alone but wished to pursue other aspects in an attempt to uncover other layers of meaning. Certainly there were innumerable questions to be considered: the practical and social aspects of both production and use; the continued usage into the present; the changes in the cover from painted hide to beaded cloth to tartan fabric and back to beaded cloth; the significance of lacing an infant into the bag; the cultural and social aspects, particularly the effects on cognition and behaviour; and so on. As much as I would like to use another term, I have ended up discussing these physical, cognitive, social and cultural layers under the inadequate rubric of “child development”.

⁹ According to Louis Bird (1996), the central concave indentation of the hoop was shaped to allow the mother’s breast and shoulder to fit comfortably while breast-feeding the infant. A number of other forms, some of which have a centrally convex shape, contradict this explanation.
From the moment of birth — as soon as the umbilical cord had been cut, and the infant’s head and underarms washed — the baby was placed in the moss bag (Flannery 1962:476). Essentially an external womb, the moss bag and its tikanagan counterpart allow for direct physical intervention. Cultural emphasis on erect posture with straight legs, feet and arms could be realized by intentionally placing the infant on the rigid tikanagan with arms positioned by its sides and with “a bit of rag [placed] between the baby’s feet to prevent them from ‘growing crooked’” (Flannery 1962:477; see also Densmore 1929:48 n.32, 49, Ringland 1933:199, Ritzenthaler 1967). Nestled snugly in their bags of moss, infants learn through experience the meaning of security. And, according to Richard Preston’s findings,

The theme of infant learning is security [and] security is learned through experiencing the caring acts of those who are close... by caressing, talking, and singing... The home world should be secure, warm, nurturant, small, and controlled... [R. Preston 1982:299–300]

Coupled with Janice Boddy’s metaphor of “womb as oasis” with its inherent understanding of nurturing and supporting life, an appreciation of the physical role of moss bags and tikanagans in providing security and protection from harm comprises an important element in the cognitive development of the infant (Boddy 1982:691–6; see also Jones and Whitmore-Ostlund 1980:37).

It is from this position on the cradleboard and in the moss bag that infants develop an awareness of self, and, from this awareness, learn about the world around them. Earlier cross-cultural studies have suggested that “infants who spend more time in an upright position are more alert, more aware of what is going on around them, and hence cognitively precocious” (Whiting 1981:174; cf. Super 1981:184). Certainly, as a “captive audience” young infants internalize not only the visual, aural and olfactory facets of their world, but also the Cree method of learning, that is, through observation. By observing the actions, interactions and reactions of family members, and by listening to the songs and stories, the infant continually learns (cf. Hjartarson 1994). Furthermore, from this position on the

10 The prevalence of infant hip dislocation has been attributed to the extension and adduction of the hips through the practice of swaddling the infant in this position on the cradleboard (Salter 1968:936–7).
mother’s back (albeit from a rear-facing position) knowledge of the natural environment, particularly the topography of the land, is acquired.

Thus, learning through observation forms the basis for the enculturation and socialization of Cree infants. As physical and moral “straightness” reflects an individual’s competence within society, confinement in moss bags, tikanagans or hammocks reinforces cultural values and social mores. A most telling example of intentional social restraint is revealed by a photograph taken at Mistassini of twin girls about three years of age (Tardif 1991, plate 14). One of the twins is shown with her legs and feet wrapped in a moss bag “because”, the caption states, “she misbehaved more often than her sister and otherwise, her parents would have had to continually chase after her.” It is the social lessons learned during this formative period that ensure the responsible autonomy of later years (cf. Rogers 1962: B38).

Interleaved with the socialization of the infant are the cultural layers of meaning. As noted above, observable features in the production of the cradleboard reflect the complementary skills of men and women, appropriate cultural knowledge for the acquisition, preparation and use of specific materials, and recognition of the need to protect, nurture, and teach infants in a warm, loving and secure environment. But what of the symbolic aspects?

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WRAPPINGS

Earlier I questioned the meaning of the historically documented changes from painted hide to beaded cloth to tartan and back to beaded cloth. Most evidence for the use of hide is deductive and should probably be expanded to include fur pelts. Paintings, ethnohistoric references and a few museum examples, dating primarily from the early 1800s until the late 1870s, document an early incorporation of trade cloth and embellishment with beads. However, the majority of archival photographs and museum holdings from that period onward illustrate moss bags and tikanagan covers made with tartan fabrics. Curious about the introduction and use of these fabrics with their Scottish roots, I have been attempting to determine whether this use was a deliberate native choice or one imposed through traders’ inventories (Oberholtzer 1995). More recently there has been a minor revival of floral beadwork and patterned cloth for these covers.
A partial explanation takes us back to the very earliest period of the fur trade between Europeans and natives. One of the first and most coveted items of the fur trade was cloth, for cloth was perceived to hold an intrinsic spiritual power. Indeed, in several Algonquian languages the term for ‘cloth’ incorporates the word *manitu*, a word with condensed meanings of spirituality and other worldly power (Smith 1991:108, White 1994:380). Treated in a ceremonial manner, cloth was often torn into small pieces and distributed so that all might have a share; it was tied to trees and sacred poles; and eventually it replaced hide for clothing and wrapping the human body. Hence, the wrapping of babies into an external womb constitutes an important cultural procedure ensuring protection and spiritual nourishing. While the desirability of cloth for wrappings and containers is understandable, it gives reason only for the use of cloth in general, not for plaid in particular.

Again, Louis Bird (1996) provides a more positive answer stating that the Cree prefer plaid as they consider it “very fancy” and they “love to use that”. Embedded within this overt aesthetic preference, however, is an unarticulated — and perhaps forgotten — awareness of the protective qualities of tartan (or plaid). Comparable to the protective powers inherent in netted fabrics, it is the interwoven colours of the tartan which now perform in the metaphoric protection of the infant. The recent return to beaded floral designs suggests to me that the cultural meaning of tartan has been lost and that floral beadwork, signifying the “traditional”, serves to re-establish political and tribal identity.

Consideration of the all-important lacing of the moss bag and tikanagan cover leads us back into the atemporal past of mythic origins. For, in the episode describing the peopling of the earth, Spider lowers the founding couple in “a bag-like container” he has woven from his never-ending line of silk. Ignoring Spider’s advice that only one of them at a time may look down, the curious couple land in an eagle’s nest. Eventually rescued by the bear and the wolverine, “The bear then acted as their mentor, teaching them everything they needed to know in order to live” (Ellis 1989:7–8; see also Jones 1976:9–10).

This arrival — or perhaps it is appropriate here to say, this symbolic “birth” — of humans on earth was facilitated by the spider’s woven

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11 As “the Cree people loved vivid colours” (Scanlon 1975:23), the lure of bright primary colours coupled with the warmth of the woollen fabric was most appealing (David McNab, personal communication, 1996).
container which enveloped and protected them during their descent. The spider’s protective weaving in the mythic episode becomes mirrored in the earth world through the lacing of the infant’s bag. And in a parallel manner, the role of earthly parents is to teach their children how to live in their new world just as the bear instructed the original couple. So, too, the ancient use of a bear skin mattress for the newly delivered mother (S. Preston 1982:13) introduces, on a material level, the metonymic presence of the bear as both healer and mentor.

DISCUSSION

Extrapolating from the symbolic significance of wrapping precious items and the mythic introduction of both protective weaving and the cultural birth of the first humans on earth, I would like to apply the implications of these concepts to Cree society in the following paragraphs. The sources affirm that the newborn is immediately placed in a moss bag and remains swaddled or tethered in some way until the child is at least a year old (Flannery 1962:478). At no time is the child permitted to set a foot on the ground outside the michuap or tent. Once the child can walk unassisted and the moss bag put aside, the highly significant Walking Out ceremony is held (Anonymous 1980). These first steps of the child which take him or her from inside the michuap across the threshold to the outside are publicly acknowledged and followed by a feast. By considering the moss bag as an external womb, which immediately replaces the human womb at birth, we can interpret the Walking Out ceremony as the child’s social birth. Viewed sequentially from conception, this develops in the following way. Having been “completed through intercourse” (Flannery 1962:476) and nurtured within the mother’s body until sufficiently developed, the foetus emerges into the world through the process of a physical birth. As a naïve neonate, with no knowledge of this new world, he or she must be swaddled in an artificial womb until sufficiently socialized and physically capable. Over the following year or so, this development is marked by increasing freedom within a larger womb-like

12 An Ojibwa example implies a deeply entrenched social significance which begs further examination in relation to Cree material. As the story is told, a widowed woman from another community came to see a particular man, bringing their child to him. Although covered with exquisitely beaded cloths, the child’s illegitimacy was signalled by the fact that “It was tied in a cradle, it wasn’t laced” (Landes 1971:85; emphasis added).
structure, the michuap or tent. The culmination of this social and physical
development proclaims the child’s social birth when it can then leave this
larger womb and enter the outside world.

Tied into this interpretation in some way is James Clouston’s 1820
journal account of a caribou feast in which he recorded that once every­
thing was ready:

Every person was then ordered to keep in the tent and all the holes on the
tent carefully closed up. A painted deerskin was then wrapped round a
small child who could crawl but not walk. The child thus wrapped was
laid outside the door, and its mother began to call it to her. The child was
so wrapped that it could only move like an earthworm and though it had
only about two feet to crawl [unassisted], about ten minutes elapsed
before it could move that distance... As soon as the child had got inside
the door the Indian began to beat the drum and sing for a little time.
[Davies 1963:36-37]

My first interpretation was that this child — after crawling across the
threshold from the profane outside to the sacred space within — is
unwrapped or “born”, and brings with it the properties of the robe within
which it had been encased — creation, life, the caribou spirit — which are
then transferred to all who are present.

However, a further consideration postulates that this undertaking also
constitutes a re-enactment of conception, the child representing the “force”,
or sperm, which enters the womb. Assurance that all the meat must be
consumed during the feast before leaving the tightly sealed enclosure
ensures the proper nurturing of the “foetus”; in this case, the resultant
“birth” is of the social group rather than the individual.

In summation, it is apparent that both tikanagans and moss bags — and
more recently, plastic infant seats13 — function not only as practical baby
carriers, but also as a means for the socialization and enculturation of the
infant. From the vantage point of the tikanagan, the child acquires his or
her identity as both an individual and as a responsible member of the Cree
culture. This sense of identity wraps around the infant like a security
blanket.

This must be left here, wrapped as it is in layers of cultural meaning,
and figuratively propped against a tree, while I continue to make observa­
tions.

13 An Ontario Archives photograph (RG 1, 448-1, 72-CvGr-11/25 [cont. 64])
illustrates a plastic infant seat suspended in a michuap. Occupying it is a doll laced
into a tartan moss bag while the human baby sits with her father.
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REFERENCES

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