Ethnographic Reconstruction of Witigo

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Following on my last year's satirical assessment of studies of the "Witigo psychosis" and of the structural analysis of Witigo symbolisms (Preston 1977), I would like to initiate a more constructive treatment of the notion. Some fresh Witigo data will be interpreted with the goal of surveying some Indian opinions, so that we may try to understand Witigo from within his cultural milieu before we proceed to explain his abstract relations to psychology, symbolism, structuralism, or other intellectual domains.

Narratives of Witigo's appearances and actions as well as particularist interpretations of the meaning of Witigo, are very numerous, and although we have one lengthy paper (Teicher 1960) that compiles and interprets many of these accounts, further comprehensive studies are surely overdue. My intention is much more modest, however, and I will be quite selective in my use of data.

Edward Ahenakew (ms) records an explanation by an old man named Weipust, in which the extraordinary aspects are deliberately omitted and dismissed as untrue reports. Weipust's stark and spare image deserves full detail, and so I quote Ahenakew's manuscript.

Ahenakew speaking:

THE-WE-TI-KOO or He-who-is-alone

Wetikoo (Windigo in Salteaux) is a being which is of nebulous character in the minds of most people. Short story writers have fantastic ideas about him. Some think it is a kind of Indian devil, one describes it as being of prodigious size.

The white man, who has not grown up with the Indians, cannot be blamed for his mistaken ideas, for most Indians he can converse with, are not capable of giving an elaborate explanation in English. Besides this, the Indians who can speak English, are usually the younger people and they themselves have a very hazy idea of the creature.

Wetikoo is not a devil not a demon; he is not a spirit disembodied, nor is he of prodigious size. At one time in his life he was a human being born of human beings and perhaps quite normal for some years of his life.

The reasons for a human being turning into a cannibal, i.e., Wetikoo, as given by the saner and more intelligent Indian men are these. I can do no better than to quote Old Weipust (Dirty-skin) a fine mannerly old man despite his name. I had asked him how Wetikoos came to be.

"There is no doubt that Wetikoos existed in the old days. Frequently, specially in the forest
parts of the country there may be a family living in a teepee, the man hunting for fur and incidentally killing moose, deer and such for food. He might have an enemy somewhere. This man or woman--mahokusu-mik, i.e. curses him so that his luck leaves him, everything goes wrong, he can kill nothing, maybe the animals migrate to some other region.

He goes out to hunt every day, trying to feed his starving family and himself. Their plight becomes desperate. They are hungry and yet there is not a track, even of a rabbit anywhere within reach. Pangs of hunger cry aloud for food--a person will do almost anything to secure food.

As days of fasting go by; hope dies and despair takes its place. A time comes when one of the party begins to look longingly though slyly at another. This person is being sorely tempted to kill, so as to eat. It becomes an obsession with him or her. At last--chance offering, it happens. The person kills and soon he (or she) is eating. He has passed from being a human being to beastliness.

The rest of the family realizes that they have a Wetikoo to cope with. All that they have heard about such monsters comes into their minds. A great dread overwhelms them, the marrow inside the bones seems to melt and they have no power to move or fight. While they might have met ordinary dangers bravely, they were as frightened children in the presence of a powerful inhuman monster. They give in and very soon share the fate of the first victim.

Another reason why a person becomes a Wetikoo is due to his having in some way offended a spirit which may have befriended him in a dream and given him some powers; (as mentioned in another article). This would bring a curse on him. This would not take away from him the gifts he had received but they would only be a curse to him and others instead of a blessing.

Then again an evil spirit may come to him in his dream. Probably nothing about the spirit would appear in his looks and actions to show that he was another, but what he pretends to be is a benevolent spirit. The Indian accepts the gifts accorded him only to find later on, that he was living under a curse and that nothing good would come out of his life. Such an Indian may also turn into a Wetikoo. Such
were the reasons why this monster appeared amongst people—fortunately, very rarely did the Wetikoo actually exist. I should say, that, in my opinion, the majority of the reports spread around that he had been seen were untrue—many such reports are brought about by some mischievous minded Indian trying to frighten someone else."

Such was the reply Weipust gave me. He had been a pagan till he attained middle-age, then he had adopted Christianity. He was learned in the things that pertained to old time Indian life. Knowledge handed down from the past was his. I accepted his words as of great value.

To continue it is said that once a person has tasted human flesh he loses all human instincts he turns into a fierce carnivorous beast yearning to prey on his kind. He is gifted with supernatural powers and no one is able to withstand him except some person who is himself gifted with superior 'spirit help' and therefore more powerful. Such a person knows that he is so gifted and is willing to champion the cause of the band even at great personal risk.

End of Ahenakew's account.

Weipust has described for us in his example of starvation, the ordinary reality of Witigo, from the point of view of one wise old man; many oral tradition and archival accounts confirm this pattern. Perhaps Weipust's skeptical attitude towards the more marvelous accounts is a result of his conversion to Christianity, but probably we should assume that he was also more critical than suggestible, aware of wrong-ness and wrong-headed-ness on the part of Indians as well as whitemen when they are wondering about such terror-inspiring topics.

But for many people there must be more to Witigo than this, and it is from this point on that our problems gather momentum. To be brief, I will jump to an extreme case. In one narrative I collected, a younger brother marries a beaver, and in the process of becoming transformed he is forced to begin to eat the meat of his killed and cooked wife. He becomes the "Great Beaver" and at the same time becomes atoosh or Witigo, although there is no implication that he subsequently craved for the meat of beaver (or humans). I have cited this case to show that when the gap is spanned between mundane cannibalism and mythic persons, we are faced with a large and diffuse spread of evidence for beliefs, most of it encapsulated in the intuitions and actions of narratives.

I suggest that for many Algonquian Indians, the notion of Witigo is very uncertain in both appearance and essence—that the possibility of Witigo's presence is accompanied by a wide variability in what Witigo may appear to be, or the possibility that it is some other monster. Witigo is more certainly terrifying than he is a known figure with specifiable characteristics; in this regard he is roughly similar to our notion of the Christian
Devil (a common English gloss for Witigo). As evidence for this hypothesis of ambiguity, I cite Ahenakew's paper again, choosing a case where people are convinced they see Witigo, are terrified, and then discover that they were completely wrong.

Ahenakew speaking:

It was in spring time that the Indians expected a visit from Wetikoo. Belief in him persists. It seems to be, that while the enlightened mind of the Indian does not accept the existence of this being, his body continues to shrink from the thought of him. Where Christianity has taken hold of the people the superstitition, if such it be, is gradually dying down.

When a young man, 1907, I was teaching school at an Indian Reserve, Sturgeon Lake. The Indians were almost all pagan then at that place.

When spring time came I had much trouble with the children being absent from school. Rumours were going around that He-who-is-alone, i.e. Ka-pa-ya-koot (Wetikoo) was lurking around. The parents living at some distance from the school refused to let their children take the risk of going through a bushy part of the road. I was obliged to go for the children every morning and take them home after school.

One Christian Indian lived on the Reserve. He had a little store. His name was Me-ywa-chi-mo-we-yi-mew (i.e. Good News Man). He said to me,

This is not half as bad as it was some years ago. My brother the chief, as you know is manly. He was ploughing a small field just south of his house. Rumours that Wetikoo was around began to circulate. He believed this so thoroughly that he had a rifle slung in a slant across his back as he ploughed.

People barred their windows; in fact after a few nights had passed they all came to spend the night with me here. They slept all over the floor and the lamp never went out at night. If it happened that one had to go outside, they would all go out together.

One night, well on towards morning a man reported that they had seen the Wetikoo standing on a high manure pile, near the stables. After a hurried consultation old Na-cha-wi-ka-pow (Good Stander) started to sing what was supposed to be a song taught him by his familiar spirit. Word went around that he was evoking the wind to blow the Wetikoo up to the skies.

I noticed the dawn appearing. I went out. By this time I was able to recognize the
figure on top of the manure pile. I invited them to come out and look at the monster. They came out quietly one by one, not wanting to disturb the old man who was singing away. A general laugh was the result, the Wetikoo was one of my calves.

The old man being told what it was, stopped his singing looking very embarrassed. I asked him not to have my calf blown away.

The next night the Indians stayed in their own homes and we were able to spend a more restful night. I confess, however, that I, even with my Christian beliefs, was not altogether free from fear.

End of Ahenakew's account.

It seems quite likely that these people thought that there really was a Witigo-person threatening them. The old man probably thought that the best way to cope with real and imminent danger was with his own access to power, through the vehicle of his singing. Superficially, this action is comparable to the Christian invocation, through prayer, of a saint's help in time of crisis, perhaps in confrontation with the devil. But the comparison has little depth; the parallel is only that people may, in the face of perceived threat, respond with symbolic sounds in hopes of a spiritual person's assistance. I have confidence in the accuracy of my interpretation of Eastern Cree songs and spiritual power (1975) but the Witigo threat, and other monstrous persons, seem more diffuse and difficult to grasp. One reason may be that this is a subject on which people are more likely to be fearful than contemplative, and different categories of people may be quite differently fearful. For example, the narratives are used in various contexts to:

(1) scare children into staying close to the camp or house.
(2) scare children into being quiet at night, to go to sleep.
(3) excite children when they go to play the game of witigo.
(4) inform people about the contingent nature of the world.
(5) used to scare adults into deference to some sorcerers.
(6) used to accept the disappearance of individuals.
(7) used to assert the appearance of monstrous persons.
(8) deliberately imaginative contributions.

And beyond narratives, actual Windigo scares are a part of the experience of many Northern Algonquians of middle age or older. These are often related to the mystery and great concern over lost persons, or may be a more complicated matter of group terror. But it is not only the Witigo that may be the threatening agency; it may be "white trappers" or other strangers or monsters. From one recorded version to another, some narratives replace Witigo
with other creatures, without altering many other aspects. Witigo is, when looked at in this synthetic fashion, more a matter of attitudes than he is a definable person.

The attitudes would be from the Indian's point of view, and from Witigo's (presumed) point of view. People's attitude would include the horror of being food for some monstrous person who has lost control of himself and become confused or transformed, irresponsibly powerful and damaging, sometimes sent by the malign power of a sorcerer. People also have the attitude of confusion and paralytic fear of being beaten in this most horrible of life's contingencies. As Weipust describes it, some of Windigo's power is in the weakness of his victims.

Witigo's presumed attitude is one of low cunning in his desire to attack, kill, and eat those persons from whom he has become estranged, ostracized and solitary, exposed to the elements and at once fearsome and fearful. He embodies despair, the awful confusion of family and society for food, and the consequent loss of humanity.

But these attitudes do not necessarily circumscribe a category of persons; there are other monstrous persons, who share to some degree the motives and actions of Witigo, and are regarded by people as being to some degree similar to him. Further, there are occasions when Windigo is not a transformed human, or not a cannibal, or not solitary, or not aggressive towards humans. There is more possibility and flexibility in this word than we have acknowledged.

Yet many Algonquians and Algonquianists prefer to simplify this variance down to concrete kinds of person (monstrous, symbolic, or other) and condition. It is also manifestly clear that in either culture, the experts don't agree. Apparently, while some Algonquians are prepared to accept the possibility of the monstrous, some Algonquianists prefer to tacitly assert the necessity of fantasy, and then to exaggerate with false concreteness some aspects of symbolic implication that they have culled for this purpose from a variety of narratives.

And in this context we have generalized a monster, not from a calf on a manure pile, but from similarly overwhelming our facts, in a different direction. Evans-Pritchard, a judicious interpreter of topics such as belief and symbolism (among many others) reminds us that

...any event has the characters of uniqueness and generality, and...in an interpretation of it both have to be given consideration. If the specificity of a fact is lost, the generalization about it becomes so general as to be valueless (this is what has happened to several of our categories, for example, 'tabu', 'totemism' and more recently 'lineage'; the general statements about phenomena of a certain type, or supposed type, have become so general as to have lost all significance). (Evans-Pritchard, 1962.175).

I am arguing that the category of 'Witigo' fits his
description.

To conclude then, the Algonquian notion is a variable identification of separable attributes of attitude, appearance, and actions, located on an event-specific basis in men, women, infants, cannibal monsters, solitary wild-men, and a variety of less human-like creatures. We have overgeneralized from some of these data, a logically distinct category of persons or a distinct psychological condition. I do not think that, on the evidence, Witigo can realistically be accepted as a psychosis, (Honigmann 1954.279-82; 1967.399-403) although particular aspects of Witigo may be components of some individuals' psychological dysfunction. Nor can he be realistically accepted as a category of persons, unless we can specify a category with boundaries allowing frequent realignment, and with a content allowing great variance and little apparent form. Finally, from the Algonquian view, there may be a category of madness that is identified as Witigo, a breakdown-transformation following despair, deprivation, and an enemy's curse.

NOTES

1 The Word 'Atoosh' refers to the Witigo in the vocabulary of the Crees of the east coast of James Bay, Québec.

2 The 'Atoosh' quality of the Great Beaver was recorded at Rupert House, James Bay, by Brian Craik, from John Blackned (personal communication).