MIDEWIWIN MEDICINE BAGS
OF THE OJIBWA

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bí mĩmadwéwe
nimídé wayán

There comes a sound
From my medicine bag
(Densmore 1910:47)

According to Frances Densmore the genesis for the use of medicine bags among the Mide is suggested in this origin story:

A little before noon they heard a peculiar sound in the sky. It was from the east. Some one was calling Wa, hi hi, hi, as they call in the Mide ceremony. They watched the sky and saw four Indians walking toward them in the sky, giving this call. Each Indian had a living otter in his hand...

The four manido held the otters with the right hand near the head and the left hand below. These otters were their medicine bags. (Densmore 1910:23).

An essential ceremonial item for each member of the Midewiwin was a medicine bag. The bags were made from the skins of animals and birds. The type of bag varied with the degree of the Grand Medicine Society to which the member belonged. One of Norval Morriseau's legends illustrates the song which was quoted at the beginning of this paper and indicates the inherent life or power which the bags were believed to hold:

Each member had some kind of hide such as otter, weasel, bear, marten, fisher, mink or fox. During the Midaywewin ceremonies these hides were seen to come alive. The bearskin began to growl and the fox skins began to bark, for these were the medicine bags of the members. The new member would do his best to join the society and a medicine bag was given to him to help him in these tests. He would be asked to point this bag at another new member. Out of the medicine
The Indian would fall to the ground, spitting and dying from the effects of the powerful medicine bag, but would be revived again as if nothing had happened. (Morriseau 1965:43).

One listing (Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler 1970:90) of the bags associated with each degree is as follows: first—mink, otter, muskrat, or beaver; second—owl or hawk; third—snake, fox, or wildcat claw; fourth—bear paw or cub bear. An elaborate chart of degree bags from the first through the eighth degree through three dating periods: archaic to 1890; transitional 1890-1926; and contemporary 1925-1968, is given by Blessing (1977:110, 111).

The medicine bags served a number of functions. They were the symbol of the degree to which the member belonged. They were used to store the sacred migis or cowrie shells and various medicines. And the bags were used as weapons in the ceremonies as shells were “shot” from them at the initiates of the society.

A search of the literature reveals an interesting, though limited, pictorial record of the use of medicine bags. Mnemonic drawings on birch song records show medicine bags. Song pictures of figures holding Mide otter and weasel medicine bags are depicted in Frances Densmore’s study of Ojibwa music (Densmore 1910:71, 76, 79, 80). W.J. Hoffman’s work on the Ojibwa Midewiwin records additional depictions of songs. He shows figures holding the medicine bag or reaching into it. (Hoffman 1891:185, 193).

Other drawings of ceremonial usage of medicine bags from Midewiwin sources are found in the incised markings on birch bark scrolls. One such scroll shows eight separate figures grasping their bags (Hoffman 1891: Pl.111, 166, 171, 172). In his study of sacred scrolls Dewdney (1975:86) reproduces drawings of three different Mide officials with such bags. A four lodge master scroll which is in my collection depicts Mide figures holding bags in three of the four lodges (Nelson 1983:233).

To date one rock painting of a shaman holding an otterskin bag has been discovered. Because it is so similar to the drawings which are shown on the master birch bark scrolls, Dewdney
(1973:61-62) believed that it was of Mide origin.

In addition to birch bark scrolls or rock paintings one discovers a number of drawings depicting the use of medicine bags. Henry R. Schoolcraft’s monumental work on the *Indian Tribes of the United States* (1854(3):286) contains two engravings from drawings by Capt. Seth Eastman showing the use of medicine bags. One, “Medicine Dance of the Winnebagoes”, shows a covered Midewiwin lodge with two prominent figures dancing around the lodge grasping their otter (?) bags as they “shoot” other seated participants in the ceremony. Several other figures may be seen participating in the dance procession. One of the bags appears to be decorated on the paws and tail. J.C.H. King in *Thunderbird and Lightning* (1982:61) describes this as “an imaginative mid-nineteenth century drawing”. In the second engraving, “A Seer Attempting to Destroy an Indian Girl by a Pencil of Sunlight”, a figure is shown holding an otter (?) bag as it is used to focus a ray of the sun through a crack in a conical bark lodge onto a slumbering victim (Schoolcraft 1854 (5):323). I would judge this to be a more imaginative drawing of an event which was reported to Schoolcraft than the scene of the dance procession.

Early sketchbook drawings from the mission school at Arbre Croche show medicine bags being carried in dances. These drawings from this Ottawa site are dated in the mid 1840s (Feest and Feest 1978:784; Feest 1980:44). It appears that both drawings were made by the same individual.

In Hoffman’s study of the Ojibwa Midewiwin there is a drawing of a group of Mide members gathered around a kneeling candidate. It is titled “Shooting the migis”. One member of the group who is performing the shooting holds his medicine bag as the weapon. (Hoffman 1891:192).

There are a variety of pictures and illustrations on the use of medical pouches in Hoffman’s 1896 work on the Menominee Indians. A photograph of an interior of a ceremonial structure shows a candidate receiving a bag. Around the lodge may be seen other bags hung behind their owners over branches which are part of
the framework of the lodge (73). A similar manner of storage for four elaborately decorated bags is seen in the drawing "Infant on Cradleboard" (259). Another drawing, "Candidate after being shot", shows the prostrate figure face down on the ground surrounded by priests. One of the figures holds his medicine pouch in his left hand. There are other bags draped over the fallen form (101).

Another photograph of the interior of a medicine dance lodge is in Paul Radin's work on the Winnebago (Radin 1923:351). In this picture many medicine bags may be seen draped over the branches used in the construction of the sidewalls of the lodge. Members of the lodge are seated on the ground along the wall below the stored bags. Although it is difficult to determine from the photograph if the bags are decorated, Radin himself observes that the otter skin bags are always beaded.

Close scrutiny of an 1889 photograph of a medicine lodge at Lac Court Oreilles reveals medicine bags held by three members. Both a hawk and an otter bag are held by one woman while others hold otter and mink skins (Venum 1982:115).

A post card photograph in my collection of a Midewiwin ceremony (ca. 1920) near Cass Lake, Minnesota shows a processional in a lodge. Several of the participants are carrying bags.

As art objects the decorated medicine bags are some of the most striking items used in Midewiwin ceremonials. While many must have been buried with their owners upon their deaths, many bags are pictured in the literature and remain in museum collections and private hands. Ornately decorated bags may be viewed on exhibit in the collections of many museums and historical societies.

Major exhibitions in recent years have included medicine bags. Sacred Circles shows a 1800 badger skin Ojibwa (?) bag which was highly decorated with quills, ribbons, beads, bells and eagle claws (Nelson 1977:99). The same bag is shown in full color in Pleasing the Spirits where it is identified as Eastern Sioux (?) (Ewing 1982:88). The confusion on tribal identification of this particular bag points towards their widespread use. Already we
have seen that they were used by the Ojibwa, the Winnebago, the Menominee and the Ottawa. Other bags which are pictured are attributed to the Iowa, the Sauk and Fox (?), the Potawatomi (Ritzenthaler 1962:154) and the Omaha (Conn 1979:126).

Bags are usually decorated with tabs attached to the four paws and a larger piece attached to the inside of the tail. In some instances another decorated piece of material is attached to the belly. An illustration of an elaborately decorated beaver skin bag may be seen in *Ojibwa Crafts* (Lyford 1943:102). In addition to the loomed and spot stitched beadwork this bag has many quill wrapped bits of hair attached to the beaded pieces.

Hawk bells and thimbles were often attached to the paws and tail as seen in a Winnebago otter bag in *The Native American Heritage* (Maurer 1977:122, 123) and an Iowa otter skin bag in "*Bo jour, Neejee!*" (Brasser 1976:97). Brass buttons could be fastened in the eye sockets as shown in a brown otter bag of the Ojibwa in *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada* (Paris 1969:Item 164). In the nostrils one might find natural or dyed feathers and silk ribbons (Honolulu 1981:59).

Early bags were decorated with porcupine-quill ornaments. A three piece Menomini set of two panels for paws and one for the tail is dyed in a variety of colours, the brightest of which are red and yellow (Conn 1979:98). The Omaha bag noted earlier has the quills dyed in more subdued colours of soft gold and light brown (Conn 1979:126).

Bead work on bags was done by appliqué or spot stitch and loomed techniques. Patterns and designs and use of beads reflect cultural traditions. This may be seen in a Winnebago bag (Flint 1973:107) or a Potawatomi bag (Conn 1979:102).

A second style of decoration was done on otter skin bags. Metal jingles with red dyed hair run up and down the body and tail in a series of parallel lines. Further decorations on these mid-19th century Iowa bags include hawk bells, ribbons and feathers (Ewing 1982:88, 89). A similar decorative technique is observed in a 19th century Ojibwa bag (Paris 1969:No.164) and a bag attributed to Ojibwa, Ottawa or eastern Sioux (Vennum 1982:194).
It would be interesting to do a further study of this style of decoration to discover more about its use and distribution.

The bags which are most frequently illustrated in articles and catalogues are otter. The traditions which developed for decorating otter, mink and beaver bags made them into attractive examples of the artist's work. Many other types of skins did not receive such spectacular treatment. However, some are illustrated. A photograph of a bear-paw Mide bag decorated with trade cloth and bead is in Densmore (1929:132). A pine snakeskin Mide bag is shown in Of Pride and Spirit (Honolulu 1981:60). A Potowatomi rattlesnake skin bag is pictured in a Sotheby's auction catalogue (Sotheby 1981:Sale 4586Y, No. 253). Like many of the snakeskin bags this one is lined with cotton cloth, decorated with ribbons and the tail edged with white beads. A hawk bag is shown in Radin (1923:363). It is undecorated except for a cord around the neck. In Blessing (1977:89-99) there are drawings of many bags. Most were in his collection. They include otter, weasel, mink, hawk, owl, bear cub, black bear paw, bald eagle, wolverine, lynx paw and pine snake skin.

An unusual early 19th century bag is in the Berne Historical Museum. It is made from a dark dyed skin which has been cut into the shape of an otter. The provenance is Ottawa and it is decorated with an intricate pattern of dyed quill work (Thompson 1977:123). Ted J. Brasser suggests that this style of bag was used by a Black Dance cult whose practices were similar to the Midewiwin (Brasser 1976:27).

I would question the information describing a beaver skin bag pictured in an article on the Ottawa by Johanna E. Feest and Christian F. Feest in the Handbook of North American Indians. The description says, "The bag kept arrows dry and was frequently used for traveling" (Feest and Feest 1978:781). In my judgement this is a medicine bag. It has material inserted in the nostril, a vertical slit in the body under the head for insertion of medicine materials and the four paws and tail are covered with tabs of silk ribbon work with beaded overlay. This is the only bag of this type which I have seen described as being other than
a medicine bag.

With this background review of medicine bags, I would now like to give an inventory of bags which my wife and I have in our collection. This collection has been formed in recent years in an attempt to have a representative group of bags used in Midewiwin degrees. Many of the bags still contain medicine items. In examining bags which have been stripped of medicine material one may sometimes find secreted in an upper paw in an otter bag, for example, a small megis shell. The pouches frequently retain the impression or outline of the packets of medicines which they held.

First degree skins in the collection include: weasel, mink, martin and otter. Of the three weasel bags, one is undecorated, one has a single red ribbon sewn to the middle of the belly and the third has a red ribbon tied to the only paw remaining on the hide, a red ribbon fastened through the nostrils and an insert of purple ribbon showing through the eye sockets. The martin bag is completely lined with cloth. The opening to the bag has been edged with dark blue pieces of cloth tape and a piece of the same material is attached to the inside of the tail.

There are four mink bags. Two of these have lost all of the fur. They have been sewn with thread across the bottom so the materials stored in them would not fall through. On both of these bags there are remnants of materials in the nostrils. The third bag has a string of blue and gold beads wrapped around each of the four paws. A piece of black cloth edged with blue beads and decorated in an Ojibwa style with two interrupted lines of pink seed beads is attached to the tail. The slit in the pouch has been edged with a piece of cloth tape. The head contains a black cloth medicine bag. The fourth mink bag is one of the more elaborately decorated bags in the collection. Each of the four paws is covered with a similar tab made of loomed faceted plain glass and blue coloured beads. The tabs terminate in four strips of the same loomed beads ending with a large faceted bead, greenish-blue wool tuft and a hawk bell. These four strips on each tab are an echo of the four legs of the animal
in the same way in which the four tabs on the familiar octopus bag point towards the origin of these pouches in the skins of animals. These tabs are mounted on a piece of black trade cloth which is edged in green silk ribbon. The tabs on the two hind feet have handmade sequins attached to the green ribbon with a single green bead. A red, white and blue seed bead loomed panel is mounted on the tail. It is on the same dark trade cloth as the paw tabs and edged with green silk ribbon and sequins. Twenty-five brass hawk bells surround the tail. An additional decoration of two hawk bells and four orange and yellow pony beads has been pinned to the tail. The beadwork pattern is the conventionalized Ojibwa rose design (Lyford 1943:142).

The remaining first degree bags in the collection are two otter skin pouches. One of these bags is pictured and described by Blessing (1977:88, 89). He states that it is from the Lac Court Oreilles reservation in Wisconsin. The bag is unusual in that the four paws and tail are decorated with ribbon appliqué work. The green, red, yellow and black ribbon work is sewn to a piece of red trade cloth. Mounted between the hind legs is a white seed beaded rosette. Two brass buttons are in the eyes of this otter skin. Most of the fur is gone from the skin. While the bag is attributed to the Ojibwa one reference states, "while north of these two groups (Menomini and Winnebago) the Chippewa, Ottawa and Forest Potawatomi had only rudimentary ribbon-work." (Flint 1973:xxvii). In a list of items decorated with ribbon work on the same article no mention is made of ribbon-work being found on medicine bags. There is a hint of the Ojibwa ottertail pattern in the design.

The second otter bag is highly decorated with beadwork, ribbons, sequins, hawk bells and thimbles. On the basis of the style of beadwork I would identify this bag as Winnebago. The appliqué beadwork design of leaves on the front paws is different from that on the hind paws. The beadwork is done on black trade cloth which is edged with red ribbon. The tail, done in the same manner, has 14 hawk bells down the sides and terminates with 14 thimbles attached to strings of dark blue pony beads.
There are many colours in the beads that are used—yellow, red, pink, green, light blue, dark blue, white and orange. This bag has no decorations on the head.

Second degree bags in the Ritzenthaler list are owl or hawk skins. In the Blessing list hawk is a second degree bag and the owl is a third degree bag. Ritzenthaler lists snake and fox or wildcat claw as a third degree bag.

Fourth degree bags are either a bear paw or cub bear. The collection contains one of each as well as two wooden batons of cedar which Blessing describes as being used as substitutes for the bear in the fourth degree (Blessing 1977:100, 101, 111). The bear paw is wrapped in a red and brown ribbon. Tucked into the ribbon is a migis shell. The bear cub came wrapped in a cloth tied up by the four corners. The only decorations are a pair of brass buttons embossed with an eagle which are set in the eyes. The pouch is full of many types of medicine and shells. The two cedar batons are 10 3/4 inches and 12 1/2 inches long. They are tapered at the ends. Each is split down the middle and when separated show small carved sections or cavities. One shell was in each baton in one of the cavities. When the halves are together they are wrapped around the centres with a piece of cloth and tied with buckskin laces.

The Ritzenthaler list places the snake in the third degree listing of bags. Blessing states that it could be given to the candidate at the discretion of the teacher in any degree above the first, or that the pine or bull snake skin could serve as the prototype of the rattlesnake in the eighth degree. The pine snake skin in the collection is mounted on a buff cotton cloth edged with black ribbon. In the nostrils are lime green and red ribbons. Six strands of tubular brass, green glass and bone beads ending with brass thimbles are fastened to the tail. There is a small pocket for medicine sewn in the lining near the head.

An enigmatic wooden object discovered in a cache in northern Minnesota is believed to be a talisman for a snake degree. It is similar to one of the legs of a north African stool or the legs used to hold a round brass tray from the Indian sub-continent.
The medicine bags in this collection are part of a heritage which is centuries old. Some of the bags may date back to the late 19th century. May the sounds which they carry to this century issue in respect for the religious tradition which they served and admiration for the beauty of these ceremonial objects.

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