

MICMAC MAGIC AND MEDICINE.<sup>1</sup>Hager,  
Stansbury

MICMAC natural history — or, rather, unnatural history — contains many extraordinary species, all of which are credited with equally extraordinary powers. Even the ordinary varieties can accomplish hitherto unsuspected things. For instance, all animals can think and talk, and even transform themselves to men, whenever occasion requires. The birds used to talk in the same language as men; they still understand what we say, and communicate with those men who have learned their tongue. Amongst ordinary animals the bear is perhaps the most powerful *boöin*, *i. e.*, possesses the greatest magic power. When he lies upon his back, this *boöin* is so strong that he can almost always prevent hunters from finding him. It is probable that this attribute is partly due to his resemblance to man, especially when he walks erect; but he owes it chiefly to his annual power of resurrection, and the life in death which characterizes his winter sleep. The *chepichcaam* is a horned dragon, sometimes no larger than a worm, sometimes larger than the largest serpent. In one Micmac legend he coils around a man like a constrictor, and seeks to crush him to death. He inhabits lakes, and is still sometimes seen. The *kookwes* is a hairy giant, half animal, half man, a cannibal by nature. He carries his children in a kind of pouch upon his back. Some Micmacs tell me they think he must have been a species of monkey, but his pouch at least suggests the opossum. Another remarkable animal is the *abläumooägit*, or "omen of ill-luck." This is described as long, thin, black, and supported upon hundreds of short legs, suggesting, therefore, the centipede. When it follows after hunters, everything goes wrong with them; their provisions run short, their guns get out of order, and no game can be found. Fire will not injure it. The only method of escaping it is by leaving behind an abundance of food and other camping material when you move camp. The animal, seeing this, concludes that it is useless to try to annoy hunters who are so well equipped. Turning to birds, a very singular power is attributed to *kopkech*, the saw-whet, or Canadian owl. Whoso imitates the rasping cry of this bird of evil omen will have his clothing burned before morning, for *kopkech* carries a torch, with which he always manages to avenge his outraged dignity.

When we consider beings supposed to be human, we come to the *wigguladumooch-k*, or little people, whose footsteps may sometimes be heard in the forest on a still day, though they themselves are

<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the Seventh Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society, Philadelphia, December 28, 1895.

rarely seen. They are especially strong in magic power, and will sometimes impart this to the Micmac who wins their friendship. Once in a while, in the woods, one will observe stones piled together so as to make a little house. If you move them and go away, when you return you will find them placed just where they were before you touched them. You will also see numerous little footprints, which, if you follow them, will lead you to some hole in a rock, where they will terminate. If you see these little people and associate with them, they will make you small like themselves, but you will not notice the change. You will resume your proper size as soon as you leave them.

One Micmac *atookwokun*, or old story, relates how, one day long ago, a girl was bathing in a stream, when she perceived a curious object drifting down on the current. It turned out to be a tiny canoe containing an equally tiny man. Much interested in her discovery, she took the canoe and its passenger in her hand and carried them home with her. When her parents saw what she had brought they were frightened, and told her to take her little captive back where she had found him and let him go at once. But she was loathe to part with her discovery, and wept at the thought of it. She took the little man out of the wigwam and spent some time playing with him. Finally, however, she obeyed her parents' command and set him again adrift at the very spot where she had picked him up. Soon the tiny canoe came to a rapid, and seemed in great danger of being swamped. The girl was very much alarmed, and followed after as fast as she could, but the little man guided it skilfully through the dangerous spot into the smooth water beyond. Before he passed out of sight he promised the girl that he would come back again, so every day she went down to the river to look for him. Once she was picking berries with several companions, when she observed a dozen little canoes coming up the river. The foremost canoe was occupied by her former captive, the head chief. The little people quickly landed, and cooked a meal there. Then they told the girls that they would take them across the stream in their canoes, if they wished to go. But the girls only laughed at the little people, for how could they cross in canoes that they could carry in the palms of their hands? The little people coaxed, but the girls only laughed again. At length the chief asked his former captor to step in his canoe. Willing to humor him, she did so. Lo and behold, the instant she put foot in it, both canoe and chief grew as large as any ordinary canoe and chief. But to her companions she seemed to have grown small. Presently she persuaded them to enter the other canoes, and when they did so their experience was the same as hers. The

little people then paddled the whole party across the stream, and as soon as the girls stepped ashore the canoes and their occupants seemed to shrink back to their former size. So much for the wig-guladumooch.

Where there are dwarfs there are giants, also, as a matter of course. Such is the *chicoo*, a terrible frost giant, with heart of ice; and there are other less objectionable varieties. Spirits, too, are numerous. Some dwell on large rocks in the forest, and must be propitiated by offerings of food, etc., when you pass. Some busy themselves chopping down trees, and you can often hear the sound of their invisible axes and see the tree fall, but very seldom see them. This variety is called the *wegooaskunoogwagit*. It also will grant any request to one who sees it or even to one who merely jumps over the tree immediately after it falls! Others, again, surround the solitary traveller, and play all kinds of pranks upon him, such as frightening the moose he is hunting, or driving away the fish. These spirits sometimes reveal themselves to men, and can be controlled by *boöin*. One pretty legend relates how such a being appeared to a hunter in the woods and became his wife, but disappeared again when he quitted the forest. Being once propitiated and brought under control, these beings will perform for their master many feats beyond human ability.

So far as I have heard, magic power may be obtained in three ways: It may be imparted by the little people, as already mentioned, or by the discovery of a certain mystic herb, of which more hereafter. But generally, when a Micmac wishes to gain this power, he must, while keeping his object a secret, go into the woods alone and dwell there. His camp must be constructed to shelter two, and in all his equipments he must likewise provide for two. Even at his meals he must set apart an equal share for an expected visitor. At length he will find his food already cooked, upon his return to camp, and soon after he will begin to observe a faint and shadowy being flitting in and out of his wigwam. Gradually he will see this being more and more clearly, until it grows as plainly visible as any man. Then the two will become friends and companions, and the Micmac will receive the gift of magic power. Thenceforth he can understand the language of animals and birds, and converse with them; he can assume any shape of beast, bird, or fish; he can walk through fire without being burned, through water without being drowned, through the earth without being suffocated; or he can translate himself through the air with the quickness of thought. Moreover, he can control the elements, to say nothing of walking upon the surface of the water, or sitting upon it with his legs crossed. Indeed, the power of these magicians is thought to be almost limitless.

*Boöin* appears to be a general name for magic power and all possessors of it; but the master therein is known as a *megumoowésoo*, while a less powerful magician is a *bisanàkwetch*. These magicians are said to be much less numerous and powerful now than of old, but there are still, according to my Micmac informants, several megumoowésos dwelling on the summits of high hills and mountains in the almost unexplored region around Cape North, Island of Cape Breton. For these beings, it seems, are equally fond of solitude and of high places. Even ordinary magicians can discover lost articles, and cause almost anything to disappear. By taking any household article in their hands they can describe its owner, and discover both his present whereabouts and what he is doing. But only the megumoowésoo knows the future. His prophetic powers extend forward seven years. The original megumoowésoo was distinguished by the single red feather, *jégoon*, which he wore on his head. The earliest Micmac magicians are said to have received their power from him, hence the name of the tribe, Megumawaach. Snakes were his only food. He had seven sons, and, according to one tradition, Glooscap, the youngest of these, inherited his magic power. Individual feats of magic are related in great variety, some ascribed to men still living, some even as witnessed by the speaker. Many were attributed to James Paul, who died recently.<sup>1</sup> When Wobik, or White-Eyes, a very reprehensible old heathen Micmac, pretended to be converted, the priests took away his medicine bag and threw it into the sea. But the next morning, they say, it was under his head as usual, and it returned to its place as often as they removed it. Another magician made an iron rail float upon the water; another changed gulls which he had shot with his arrow to salmon, and when he bared his leg, and his companions hacked at it with knives, they could not injure it in the least. Another marvel is said to have occurred many years ago near the pretty shore of Greenpoint, opposite Digby. Here, before a group of his companions, a Micmac, suddenly giving a terrible shout, danced in a most astonishing way, for at each step he drove his leg into the solid earth up to his knees. The prints of his steps remained until a few years ago in earth on which oxen make no impression, so Abram Glode, a very reliable Micmac, tells me. This dance seems to have occurred in several localities; it is mentioned by Leland.

There are a few articles possessing magic power in themselves. Such is the divining pipe, in which blood will appear whenever any of its owner's friends or relatives are murdered; the *woltes*, or dish filled with water and used for divination; the wand or stick which Coolpijote, ruler of the seasons, gives to those who turn him over.

<sup>1</sup> Vide *Illustrated American*, vol. xviii. p. 150.

Gloosecap also had a magic bell, *spesoon*, to which tiny tinkling shells or bits of metal were attached. This, when loaned to men, made them irresistible as lovers.

Perhaps the most interesting part of Micmac magic is connected with the mystic and medicinal herbs. Seven of these boiled together in water constitute a magical healing potion of great potency. The ingredients of this are: Alum bark (*wikpē*), hornbeam (*owēlkch*), beeches (*soōmooscel*), wild willow (*elcmajceelmokse*), wild black-cherry (*wāgwōñūminokse*), ground hemlock (*kastuk*), red spruce<sup>1</sup> (*koowotmonokse*). All these ingredients must be gathered in autumn, otherwise the mixture will be worthless. Moreover, they must be gathered in the order given. The bark of the first five is used, and the roots of the last two. The trunk of every tree is divided into four sections supposed to face the sun between sunrise, at dawn, noon, sunset, and midnight. In the forenoon one should cut the bark from the direction of sunrise as far as the direction of the sun at noon, but no farther. This is the most propitious quarter, hence medicine gathered from it will yield the best results. In the afternoon cut from the noon point to the sunset point. This quarter is propitious, though less so. Bark gathered from the other two quarters or from the right quarter at the wrong time is at least useless, often poisonous. For the sunlight purifies the sides it touches, but the shadow is hostile to life. The roots should extend from the trunk towards the propitious side. This medicine is used both externally and internally. There is another, the most powerful of all known in Micmac materia medica. This consists of a mixture of seven such compounds as the one just described. It therefore contains forty-nine ingredients. I will omit them at present.<sup>2</sup> The association of the ubiquitous Micmac number seven with healing power, light and shadow, the seasons and the cardinal points, brings us into contact with mythology of world-wide distribution, in which terrestrial health, order, harmony are dependent on like ideas associated symbolically with the sun and other heavenly bodies. The Micmacs also repeat the very general belief about the seventh son. He is a powerful healer and magician by virtue of his birth. Some say, however, that he must also be the seventh child. But to return to the seven herbs. A like potion is found among the Creeks, as Mr. Gatschet tells us. They assert that their ancestors were taught to use it by the four rulers of the cardinal points. One plant belonged to each of the seven tribes, into which, like the Micmacs, the Creeks believe that they were originally divided. The two peoples, however, use not a single plant in common in their potions.

<sup>1</sup> One reliable informant said "juniper," but this was apparently a mistake.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Rand mentions these compounds without details.

At the annual busk or festival of the Creeks, the new fire is kindled at the converging point of four logs in the shape of a cross pointing to the cardinal points, and over this on the eighth day two mixtures of seven plants each are boiled in two kettles. To the mixture of these fourteen herbs is added a fifteenth, the "rattlesnake root," and some of this decoction is administered to applicants for initiation at the time of each new moon. The whole celebration, Mr. Gatschet thinks, is connected with the five intercalary days of the Aztecs and Mayas. If so, it would seem to have been brought from Mexico by the Creeks.

Magic herbs associated with like ideas appear amongst several southern tribes, but, so far, I have not been able to find them farther north. In the Navajo Mountain Chant, the Great Spirit commands man to take four sprays from different parts of a tree. These form a magic potion. The Hopis of Tusayan, according to Dr. Fewkes, used in a charm six plants of the colors of the cardinal points. Amongst the Zuñi, the "seven-hued lilies of Te-net-sa-li" were held in high esteem for medicinal virtues, but it was necessary to gather them at a certain time. Like ideas existed in the Old World. In Ireland, healing herbs must be gathered at the proper time of the moon. The British Druids, or their successors, are said to have exalted the virtues of a magic potion made by boiling together five plants gathered "with due observation of planetary hours." A few drops were administered to those seeking initiation, and enabled them to see all futurity. In the Chaldean Deluge Legends the herbs are cut by sevens; Izdubar is purified seven times; one herb is held sacred to Nusku, the noonday sun, and the shadow of another is called unpropitious.

But perhaps the most interesting of Micmac magical herbs is that known as *medcdeskooi*, or, as the Micmacs translate it, "rattling plant," because its three leaves strike each other constantly with a sound like that of the rattlesnake. I have not been able to identify the plant, nor can I positively assert that it really exists. I have met but one Micmac who claimed to have seen it, and generally the Micmacs are reluctant to talk about it, because of its highly mystical associations. But it is certainly strongly suggestive of the *pásara*, or rattlesnake root, of the Creeks, already referred to, which occupies the same preëminence, and gives its name to the whole magic decoction used at initiations.<sup>1</sup> The Micmacs describe the plant as resembling the wild turnip. It stands about knee high, with leaves about eight inches long, like those of the poplar. Its root is the size of one's fist, and the stalk is surrounded

<sup>1</sup> Is it a mere verbal coincidence which connects this plant with the Piasa (pronounced piasaw), the winged serpent of Illinois described by McAdams?

by numerous brownish yellow balls as large as buckshot. Others describe the plant as being much smaller. Stephen Bartlett, who thinks he saw the plant, buried some of the yellow balls, but next morning they and the plant had disappeared. As Stephen admits, however, that he did not go through any of the ceremonies necessary in approaching the plant, he is considered a doubtful authority, even by himself. To find the plant, one must first hear the bird called *coasoonech* ("dwelling in old logs") singing in an interval in the forest, otherwise the plant is invisible. This bird is brown and very small, but is chosen chief of all the birds because he is quickest and can hide in the smallest holes. He is sometimes called *booin*, "the magician," from his aptitude for quick disappearance, and his ability to fly through fire without being injured. When he sings, one should follow him at once, although, like the mystic songster known in Yucatan, he often leads one on and on through the forest depths, leaving him at last lost and forlorn. But the fortunate one will at length hear the rattling leaves of the magic plant as he approaches it, and then the plant itself will soon be seen. He must now gather thirty sticks and lay them in a pile near the plant. Next he must induce a girl, the more beautiful the better, to accompany him to the plant. Under circumstances of the greatest temptation, both must have no wish save to obtain the medicine or the plant will disappear. They must approach it crawling on hands and knees. Now the plant is inhabited by the spirit of a rattlesnake, which comes forth as they near the plant, and circles around it.<sup>1</sup> The man must pick up the serpent, which will then disappear without harming him. These tests of perseverance, self-control, and courage are all I have heard, but there may be others. The plant must be divided in four portions, of which three may be taken, but one must be left standing. The three parts are scraped and steeped and a portion worn about the person. Some say that, divided in seven parts, this medicine will cure seven diseases, but the great majority believe that it will cure any disease and gratify any wish. It is held to be especially potent as a love-compeller. No woman can resist it. If the possessor wills it, she will follow him until he breaks the spell by touching her. This attribute is held also by the "seven-hued lilies of Te-net-sa-li," already referred to, and by the flowers of the goddess Xochiquetzal in Mexico, the touch of which produced everlasting love. It may be worthy of notice that the *mededskooi* is a trefoil plant. Many instances of its power

<sup>1</sup> Hernandez, physician of Philip II., quoted by Brasseur, states that the Mexicans used an herb called *ololiuhqui* or serpent plant when they wished to consult with their gods. By means of it they were enabled to behold a thousand visions and the forms of hovering demons.

over women are related as occurring recently, and for this and other reasons I am told the Micmacs strongly deprecate the knowledge and use of it. If the circumstances of these stories suggest some knowledge of hypnotism amongst them, I simply state the fact. Personally I have not yet seen any evidence of such power there.

The rattlesnake which accompanies the plant brings it at once into touch with the mysteries in all parts of the globe. The same species is associated by the Micmacs with a dance which they used to perform only at night. This dance was mystical in a marked degree, and was connected with the Pleiades.

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