

Fleshing Out the Evidence: From Archaic Dog Burials to Historic Dog Feasts

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Archaeological evidence derived from, and associated with, dog burials dating from the Archaic and Woodland periods suggests that this precontact rite of sacrificing dogs represents a continuum that culminates in the dog feasts observed in the post-contact period. By fleshing out the archaeological and ethnographic records with the eye-witness accounts of nineteenth-century missionaries serving amongst the northern Algonquians of Ontario and Manitoba, it can be confirmed that dog feasts became incorporated as a rite within the Midewiwin complex of ceremonies. From this conclusion it can be inferred that the increased complexities of the Midewiwin or Medicine Society are elaborations of substantive indigenous practices and thus pre-date any European influences.

The first song was sung as the Messenger of the dog feast brought in the kettle containing the cooked dog. He placed this kettle near the entrance of the circle and danced during the song; later, after dancing around the drum, he presented the owner of the drum with a piece of meat from the dog's head; then the dog's head was taken from the kettle and one by one the men ate a piece... (Vennum 1982:251-252).

Introduction

In their 1983 co-authored paper, "Dog Sacrifices Among the Algonkian Indians: An Example from the Frank Bay Site," Morris Brizinski and Howard Savage suggest that the canine skeletons unearthed at Frank Bay had been ritually sacrificed during some social occasion about 600 to 1,000 years ago. Based on their analysis of these burials as evidence of ritualized sacrifice, the authors raise further questions about the development of dog ceremonies among the indigenous Great Lakes cultures. It is my intent here to flesh out this evidence with the first hand accounts of nineteenth century missionaries.

The scant archaeological evidence of deliberate dog burials ranging from the Archaic period at Port au Choix in Newfoundland through the Late Woodland periods in Ontario certainly implies a long-term, widespread, and therefore

significant, practice. That prehistoric dog images may be identified on the teaching rock of the Peterborough Petroglyphs, underscores their importance (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973:112-113). While the majority of ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources document dog sacrifices primarily among the Algonquian-speakers around the Great Lakes (e.g., Balicki 1956:169; Densmore 1910:37; Hilger 1960:67; Jenness 1932:281, 301; 1935:106; Jones 1939:68; Kohl 1985:39; Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler 1983:49; Skinner 1920) there are sufficient records from the Mi'kmaq on the Atlantic coast (Hornborg 2001:56), from tribes across the Plains (e.g., Catlin 1973:229; Grant 1882:336; Ray 1996:33; Trenton and Houlihan 1989:86), from as far north as York Factory on Hudson's Bay (Williams 1969:164-165), and from the Pacific coast (Kroeber 1941:9; Swanton 1909:133,134) where special necklaces were worn to identify those who had eaten dog. Indeed, these sources establish that this rite of dog sacrifice was performed by Iroquoian, Siouan, and various other linguistic groups in addition to the Algonquians. Through consideration of this widespread historic period distribution of dog sacrifices in conjunction with the archaeological evidence, we can propose that the prehistoric ritualized burials of dogs and the more recent ritualized sacrifices of dogs represent a continuum. Such a continuum allows us to draw upon the ethnographic and

ethnohistoric records, particularly those recorded by English missionaries in Rupert's Land, to better understand these ceremonial practices. In turn, the continuity of these practices gives credence to the notion that the Midewiwin had strong precontact roots in aboriginal North America.

Archaeological Evidence

Subsequent to Brizinski and Savage's recognition of a patterned procedure in the death and burial of dogs at the Frank Bay site on Lake Nipissing, the faunal evidence from several Great Lakes sites was re-evaluated (Smith 2000:3). As a result, the recognition of dog burials increased in number significantly, to the point that archaeologists began to anticipate locating dog burials on Late Woodland and early contact sites (Smith 2000:4). Distribution patterns derived from this new analysis appear to trace the Ojibwa migration westward along the north shore of Lakes Huron and Superior. In a similar manner, deliberately interred dog remains delineate an Odawa presence in what are now the Bruce Peninsula and Manitoulin Island areas (Fox 1990). Earlier evidence of dogs as a food source among the Huron (e.g., Knight 1978:61; Savage 1971:168) and the Neutral (e.g., Fitzgerald 1982:22; Lennox 1981:343) has been broadened by more recent archaeological excavations. The evidence from the multi-component Peace Bridge site on the Niagara River shoreline north of Lake Erie, the Iroquoian Grandview site¹ in Oshawa on the north shore of Lake Ontario, and the Late Iroquoian Dunsmore site in Simcoe County, thus extends and supports the geographical and ethnic² distribution (Thomas 1996; 1997; 1999).

Two significant features derived from the archaeological evidence can be compared with (and hopefully verified) through post-contact sources. The first feature, based on Stephen Cox Thomas' excellent age evaluations of the canine remains at these and other sites (cf. Johnston 1984:71; Pearce 1989:15), suggests a preference for very young dogs as sacrificial gifts (Thomas 1996; 1997; 1999; cf. Smith 2000:6). However, other archaeological reports yield only minor evidence for the age of the

dogs. For example, Tuck (1988:77) notes that of the two dogs from Burial 50, one was "smaller and older"; Brizinski and Savage (1983) provide no ages for the Frank Bay remains; nor does J.V. Wright (1968:8) for the Michipicoten site. More definitive cranial evidence establishes that the dogs met their deaths by either a blow to the head (which may have merely stunned them) and/or by having their throats cut (Figure 1).

The discovery of Genesee cremation burials at the multi-component Peace Bridge site serves to confirm the antiquity of dog burials and broaden the distribution. While considered to be "comparable with the Late Archaic "Susquehanna" mortuary complex of the Mid-Atlantic coastal region" (Robertson et al. 1997:499), the presence of both red ochre and canine remains in these Genesee burials mirrors similar elements found in the Archaic Port au Choix burials (Tuck 1988:18). As well, the inclusion of a white tubular glass bead dated as A.D.1610 in association with a dog burial at Providence Bay on Manitoulin Island (Smith 2000:5) may represent a later ideological analogue for the quartz crystals (Hammell 1983; 1987) found with the Frank Bay and Port au Choix burials (Brizinski and Savage 1983:35; Tuck 1988:18).

Critical evidence for inferring that dogs were consumed in ceremonial feasting rests, however, upon the calcined and commingled skeletal remains of at least three (but probably four) dogs uncovered in a single feature within a Late Iroquoian longhouse at the Dunsmore site. As Stephen Cox Thomas states in his zooarchaeological analysis of this site, "evidence of fresh bone fracturing" in the long bones likely represents marrow extraction prior to calcination, suggesting that the dogs had been eaten (Thomas 1996:179). As well, the deposition of intentionally cremated dogs "may represent a single event or a group of events closely spaced in time" (Thomas 1996:177). He, in fact, posits that the presence of a single species within a large sample "represents more than ordinary subsistence debris...[and]...if it may be assumed that the feature contents reflect a single event, then the meal could be described as a feast of some importance" (Thomas 1996:179).



Figure 1. “The Feast of the White Dog.” Illustration by W.T. Smedley for Picturesque Canada (*Grant 1882:340*). Note the pool of blood emanating from the dog after its throat has been cut.

Ethnographic Evidence

Through examination of post-contact texts we can determine that the sacrifice of dogs occurred under a number of circumstances, but often with a similar under-lying purpose of propitiation. Sacrifices were undertaken on an ad hoc basis to propitiate the Great Spirit—sometimes referred to as the sun—for success in proposed endeavours: hunting (Honigmann 1982:220), raiding (Schmalz 1991:48), war (Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler 1983:49), the transference of power (Ray 1996:33), preventing illness or effecting a cure (Densmore 1979:90-92; Skinner 1911:152-157; Vanesse 1907:63). A dog might also be sacrificed to the Spirit of the Corn to ensure a good harvest (Kohl 1985:268); or to fulfil an obligation for shooting a warrior eagle (Kohl 1985:295); or to quell a storm upon a lake by appeasing the evil spirits (Henry 1969:107; MacLean 1896:176).³

These same sources establish that subsistence levels varied from the caribou hunters of Port au Choix through the seasonal round of Ojibwa and Cree hunters and trappers to the more sedentary

Iroquoian horticulturalists as well as the fishermen of the North West Coast. Furthermore, the composition of the practitioners was known to vary from single individuals to formalized groups. So, too, did religious expression within these groups vary from shamanism to organized calendric ceremonies with their attendant rites and spiritual specialists.

An excellent, and familiar, example of a calendric ceremony in which a sacrificial dog plays a key role is the White Dog Ceremony of the Iroquois⁴. On the fifth day of the multiple-day Midwinter Ceremony, a white dog, decorated with white feathers, daubs of red paint, beads and ribbons was burnt as a sacrifice to the Great Spirit. The dog’s significance is rendered tangibly on an Iroquoian sun disc wand⁵ bearing the white dog incised on the reverse (Figure 2), its numinosity recognized as such by the wash of blue paint symbolizing the dog’s skyward journey to the Great Spirit (Chief Jacob Thomas, personal communication 1984). While the Iroquois, and other groups as well, stressed a specific preference for white dogs, eye-witness accounts do not always substantiate this (e.g., Cooper

1936:10). Similarly, while the archaeological evidence also points to a preference for dogs just reaching maturity, neither is this criterion conscientiously maintained. An important aspect – common to all the organized ceremonies—is to remember that although the dog or dogs are seen as the ultimate sacrifice, it is the entire ceremony that holds significance. The ritual slaying and consumption of the dog(s) is just one—albeit a significant one—in a complex of rites within a ceremony, a fact which must be kept in mind when considering the descriptions of other ceremonies of similar complexity recorded by mid-nineteenth century missionaries and ethnographers.

Prior to considering these eye-witness accounts, the one facet of the rituals recorded in the ethnographic and ethnohistoric literature that has not been mentioned thus far is the eating of the dog. Certainly, not all rituals involve this aspect, as dogs sacrificed on an ad hoc basis were often mounted on poles or left to decay in some manner (e.g., Mason 1967:57; Thwaites 1896-1901:51:59). Nor were the dogs eaten that had been consumed instead by fire; however, earlier Jesuit accounts state that the sacrificial dogs were clubbed, roasted and eaten (cf. Grant 1882:336). In all other instances, the dog or dogs were eaten as the principal constituent of the ceremonial feast. The literature is replete with specific instances and particular details for each of the various practising groups. In all instances, the sacrifice was intended for the benefit of the Great Spirit.

Eye-witness Accounts

We turn now to the first hand accounts, each of which share some common characteristics. The first is extracted from a lengthy letter, written in 1848 by the Rev. Abraham Cowley, an Anglican missionary with the Church Missionary Society (CMS C C1/019/24). In this letter to the Lay Secretary, Cowley explains that the spring and summer ceremonies of the Cree in the vicinity of the Fairford Station in Rupert's Land (in what is now Manitoba) as being the primary impediment in his efforts to Christianize them. In great detail he describes the "Mitta" or Long Tent in which these activities took place as being some 45 to 60



Figure 2. *White Dog. Detail from the reverse of Iroquoian sun disc wand (CMC III-1-401). Photographed by author.*

feet [14-18 m] in length and 12 to 18 feet [3.7-5.5 m] in width. According to Cowley, this Long Tent was:

made of stakes fixed in the ground and transverse pieces supporting smaller branches covered with grass, leaning from the ground inward and entirely open at the top and always stretching from east to west. There is a doorway at each end which is usually closed by a large skin during the performances.

In the middle was a transverse pole reaching nearly from end to end of the tent on which were suspended the inanimate sacrifices so that they might be exposed to the rays of the sun. In front of the stakes supporting this pole were "crudely carved and painted idols and a large stone" (Cowley 1848). The animate sacrifice was, of course, a dog, killed with a blow to its head, and laid in front of the stake. After drumming, singing, and dancing, the person who was to be subjected to the effects of the Medicine bag sat or kneeled, as a number of the young men stood prepared with their medicine bags, ready to "shoot" the initiate. Based on Cowley's notes, once the pretended discharge had taken place, the recipient pretended to be wounded, and then experienced a miraculous recovery. The goods "sacrificed" to the sun were then distributed by the newly "mittaed" person. Following this, the dog was thrown over the western tent door to the women who then prepared it for the feast.

There rests some uncertainty as to the source and ethnicity of the originator of the undated,

unpublished and otherwise unidentified Native-drawn sketch reproduced here as Figure 3. The sketch was among the papers which Arabella Cowley, wife of the Rev. Cowley, had sent to the Church Missionary Society in 1879. On the face of the sketch, the faint caption identifies it as the *Wapannoowin* Medicine Dance⁶, while the numbered details—written in another hand—correlate with the numbers on the sketch: 1. Women preparing for the dog feast; 2. Persons being mit-taed dancing before the old men; 3. Old men singing to the dancers; 4. Skins used by Medicine men. On the reverse a note reveals that the sketch illustrates “a custom held by that noted conjuror Tapastanum and his brother Kasheasteninⁱⁿ”, which was performed every spring and fall.⁷ The apparent uniqueness of the aboriginal imagery of the sketch, when coupled with Rev. Cowley’s written description, provides some of the best evidence for connecting the dog feast with a ceremony closely resembling the Midewiwin.

A similar experience to Cowley’s was related by James Stewart (1905), a retired Hudson Bay Company employee, whose encounter took place at about the same time, or perhaps a little earlier.

Stewart tells how he was invited to the “Metawin” or “feast of long life” held in the typical rectangular enclosure with an east-west orientation. After depositing the requisite offerings in front of wooden images, Stewart was seated near the “chief men.” From this privileged position, he was able to observe the initiation rites of candidates in which they were “shot” with animal medicine bags, and subsequently revitalized. Stewart expressed great relief at being served boiled sturgeon to eat rather than having to feast upon the dog meat served to the others.

Located at the Cumberland Station in Manitoba, CMS Missionary James Hunter’s journal entry for May 29, 1848 duplicates much of the same information. The following has been extracted from this account:

The heathen Indians being about to hold a “Met’awin” at this place, in order to initiate a young woman into the Mysteries of their Medicine, and thereby procure a long life; I availed myself of the opportunity, in order to discover whether they possessed such incredible power to which

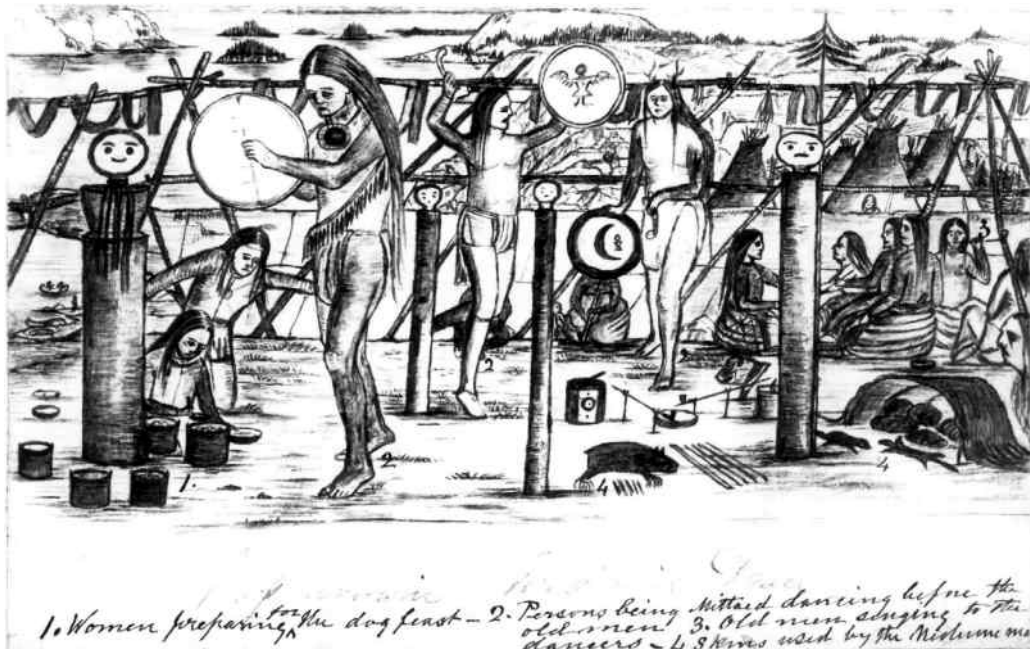


Figure 3. “Wapannoowin Medicine Dance.” Native-drawn sketch sent to the Church Missionary Society by Arabella Cowley, 1879. C C1/021/11. Photograph courtesy of the Church Missionary Society Archives.

they make pretensions. On arriving at the tent, which was erected at a small distance from the site of the new church, I was invited by the Great Medicine Men, four in number, to enter, and a robe being placed for me, I took my seat near them.

Hunter describes this tent as being constructed of poles and covered with pine brush about waist high. In the centre of the tent was the figure of a goose and a large rock and before this, "lay a dog, which had been killed as a sacrifice to propitiate the Deity." According to Hunter, the chief object for performing the rites was to propitiate the "God of the Metawin" seeking favour, longevity and prosperity through the various ceremonies undertaken during the day. These ceremonies consisted principally in "Smoking, Drumming, Singing and Dancing round the Idol and the poor Dead Dog." The woman initiate in particular had to dance around the idol and dog every time the medicine men drummed or sang. Hunter notes:

The woman to be initiated was seated in the middle of the tent, and four Men from among the Medicine Men were selected to test the power of their Medicine; all was anxious suspense, every eye was fixed upon the woman; when after a great deal of singing and shouting the four Men pointed their Medicine bags toward the woman, and she instantly fell down apparently lifeless. Now all was bustle and confusion, the four chiefs drummed and sang heatedly, Medicine bags were applied to the back of the woman to reanimate her, which was apparently effected without much difficulty, for in a few minutes she woke up perfectly restored, exhibiting in her hand a large white bead.... (Hunter 1848)

Following this detailed account of the woman's initiation, he mentions that "the ceremony concluded with eating the dog which had been offered in a sacrifice to the Idol, it having been previously taken out of the tent and boiled." So ended the Met'awin.

During the course of his travels from Montreal to Red River and back in 1844, the Bishop of Montreal, George Jehosephat Mountain (1844) conversed with two converted Cree shamans who not only provided rather vague information about ceremonial practices, but also presented him with a rattle and an "idol" (Figure 4) used on these occasions. Upon certain high days the Cree held a feast for which a spacious tent was erected and "The images are then placed up at one end of it—some time such large leathern decorated things, but no act of worship or homage to them appears to be paid" (Mountain 1844). Once the images were set up, "two heaps were prepared upon the floor (or ground within the tent) of the down of wild swans: upon each of these is laid a bladder full of fat." These bladders of fat were passed so that each person could take a bite and a small portion of the fat was burnt as an offering. Although there are many features similar to the other accounts of the Metawin ceremony, Mountain did not actually witness this ceremony, relying instead on the information provided by these two Cree converts. However, he does note seeing the skeletons of medicine lodges left to be reclaimed by the elements.

A decade or so later, Major George Seton painted some watercolour sketches of a "Cree Dog Feast in Rupert's Land" (Figure 5) and the gambling (Figure 6) which went along with it on the 13th of September 1857, presumably near Red River where he was stationed with the British Army. On pages 15 and 16 of his sketchbook, Seton wrote a very brief description of the events depicted in these two paintings (National Archives C-001062). He notes that in the centre of the willow brush enclosure, a short pole was placed with an ochre-painted stone at its foot upon which the participants placed offerings. Dogs were strangled and laid out in the enclosure for some time before being thrown out at the entrance so that the women could boil and serve them. All the participants were "tricked out in red and green blankets, bright handkerchiefs and ribbons and in all the finery of the sort they can muster." Furthermore, "their faces were painted with red, green, yellow, white and black according



Figure 4. "Sorcerer's Image." Coloured sketch drawn by Bishop George J. Mountain in his letter of 1844. C C1/02C/18. Photograph courtesy of the Church Missionary Society Archives.

to fancy." Seton's description of the gambling scene illustrated in the second sketch documents that it is the moccasin game.

Moving into the twentieth century the evidence for dog feasts continues to occur in close association with the midewiwin. In discussing a birch bark scroll, Frances Densmore (1910) explained that the scroll represented the four degrees of the midewiwin society, and that in taking the first degree, the candidate was required to provide one dog, which was killed and laid at the entrance of the lodge. The candidate for initiation was obliged to step over this dog when entering. Subsequently, a candidate for the second degree was required to provide two dogs, three for the third, and four for the fourth degree. Numerous accounts similar to Densmore's are found throughout the ethnographic literature during this period and appear again in innumerable discussions focussing specifically on the midewiwin; a few examples include Jenness (1935), Lafleur (1940), Landes (1968), Macfie and Johnston (1991), Radin (1911), Reagan (1933), Skinner (1920), and Vecsey (1984).

Summary

In summary, we can attest to a widespread practice of dog veneration in the form of sacrifices and feasting. In simple rites, dogs were sacrificed to appease evil spirits and to honour the Supreme Being, which was referred to in the early accounts as the sun. In these instances it appears that the dog(s) were consumed by humans, by fire, or by the elements of nature. In more elaborate ceremonies, held in specially-constructed structures with a corpus of ritual specialists, the dog or dogs were slain in various manners: by strangling; by a blow to the head; or by having their throats slashed. While Iroquoians of the nineteenth-century stressed that there be no shedding of blood, Algonquians were not as concerned with this aspect. In all accounts, dogs were considered to be a sacrifice to the Great Spirit. The slain dog, while displayed on the ground in front of a stone and/or wooden effigy, was presented with offerings before, and during, rounds of singing, drumming, dancing, and speech-making. The dog was then removed through the western door, cooked—in most cases by the women—and then served; the head being considered the most sacred.



Figure 5. Watercolour painting of Indian dog feast, Rupert's Land 1857, by Major George Seton. National Archives of Canada C-001063.



Figure 6. Watercolour painting of Cree Indians gambling and celebrating a dog feast, 1857, by Major George Seton. National Archives of Canada C-001062.

Despite the lack of any ethnographic or ethno-historic mention of the manner in which the bones were handled after death, there is enough evidence to infer a continuity in practice through time from the dog burials of the Late Archaic and Woodland

periods into the late historic periods. I would then suggest that the increased complexities of the Midewiwin Society are elaborations of substantive indigenous practices and thus pre-date any European influences.

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Notes

¹ Feature 506, a small pit located within House 8, contained the skeleton of a single canid, in this instance, a red fox rather than a dog (Thomas 1999:142-146).

² Beverly Smith extrapolates from the archaeological evidence of bone disposal methods to distinguish between Iroquoian-speakers and Algonquians. Based on her findings, she posits that the disposal of "butchered dog elements in the same way as other food animals" is found only among the Iroquoian-speakers while the Algonquian-speakers tended towards bundle burials (Smith 2000:7-8).

³ Additional references are documented in the R.G. Thwaites (1896-1901) edition of the *Jesuit Relations*: 13:31; 17:195; 20:30; 23:9, 173; 42:197; 50:17,285, 287; 51:59; 53:79; 60:215, 219, 227; 66:219, 237, 241).

⁴ For further details, consult the following partial list of sources, Blau (1964); Beauchamp (1885); Converse (1908); Crowell (1877); Hewitt (1912); Tooker (1965).

⁵ Iroquoian sun disc wands are wooden discs encircled with down and/or feathers and surmounted on handles of varying lengths used in various ceremonies as representations of the sun. The illustrated detail is incised on the back of a "sacred sun emblem" (CMC-III-1-401) collected in April 1912 by Chief J.A. Gibson at the Six Nations Reserve, Ontario.

⁶ This caption appears to have been written by Arabella Cowley based on other examples of her hand writing; for example, a letter written to Mr. Wright, the Lay Secretary of the Church Missionary Society December 13, 1875 (C C1/021/3). The sketch is one of four sketches which were, according to the note on the back of C C1/021/8, made "for Mrs. Cowley by a Native."

⁷ David Pentland (personal communication 2001), an Algonquian linguist, has identified the names of the two men given on the back of the sketch as likely being Swampy Cree.

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