

Nanabush

Basil Johnston

There are as many misconceptions about the stories concerning him as there are misrepresentations about Nanabush himself, a deity in the mythology of many Algonquian tribes.

It is clear from the accounts written of Nanabush that the authors did not have at their disposal the stories in either the original language or in their entirety, but that they derived their information from secondary sources fleeced of a great part of their essential substance. Without a basic understanding of the depth and range of themes and insights inherent in Nanabush stories, the writers could offer no more than juvenile interpretations.

But in all likelihood Indian stories including Nanabush tales suffered greater disservice from the general regard that more civilized and sophisticated people entertained of less advanced peoples. Indians were taken to be pagan, primitive, and illiterate; and, being pagan, primitive, and illiterate, were incapable of addressing or articulating abstract themes or ideas other than those relating to taboos, superstitions, spirits, and the immediate, concrete world. According to this opinion Indian stories were fables, fairy tales bearing no more sense or substance than "The Three Little Pigs," or "Little Red Riding Hood," or "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

To continue to regard Nanabush in terms of past interpretations such as "a god" or "trickster" or "culture hero" and to look upon stories concerning him as no more than fairy tales intended solely for the amusement of children serves only to inhibit further inquiry into and an appreciation of Algonquian oral traditions and of the range and depth of Indian perceptions into life and human character. A fresh, unbiased look at Nanabush and Nanabush stories is needed.

In Algonquian terminology and nomenclature, terms and names predicated of a being or object often yield clues as to function and character. It was by such analysis that Manitou, Kitchi-Manitou, Pauguk, Cheebi and other names have come to be understood. In the case of Nanabush analysis has so far yielded nothing.

It is only within the context of Ojibway perception of the world and of the individual, and of tribal customs as commemorated in oral traditions and in ritual that Nanabush may be more fully understood.

According to that tradition Epingishimook, a deity, took as his consort Winonah, a human being, who bore four sons, Mudjeekawiss, Papeekawiss

(Pukawiss), Cheebiabos, and Nanabush. By the time that Nanabush was born, his father had deserted Winonah and his brothers had gone elsewhere, though they did return to their ancestral home from time to time. Shortly after Nanabush was born, his mother died, leaving him an orphan to be weaned and brought up under the care of his grandmother, known only as "Noko" or "Nokomiss."

Old Nokomiss looked after her grandson from his infancy, through his youth into manhood, teaching and tutoring him as best as she could. When she at last grew frail and infirm, Nanabush looked after Nokomiss, though not always with the same solicitude that she had extended to him.

Like other youth Nanabush slowly came to know the world with plants and creatures through his grandmother and Daebaudjimoot, the story-teller friend of Nokomiss. At first that world terrified Nanabush. When he first heard an owl in a tree just above him, Nanabush ran in terror to his grandmother for protection. Cradling her grandson in her arms, Nokomiss explained that it was only an owl making owl talk in the night, and she taught her trembling grandson what the owl was saying. It was in this manner that Nanabush got to know the wolf, the bear, the crane — all the animals and their calls.

From Daebaudjimoot, a frequent visitor to the lodge, Nanabush learned the practical arts of hunting and fishing and about the world outside of mankind.

When Nokomiss deemed her grandson old enough to undertake the Vision Quest, she instructed him in the manner of preparation already long established by custom and tradition. But instead of fasting or yielding to his spirit and those above, Nanabush hunted; he feasted; in his idleness, he entertained the basest of thoughts about his grandmother as to her motives in sending him into seclusion. During the night he stole back to the lodge to spy upon Nokomiss. On his pretended return the next day Nanabush lied about a vision.

As he grew older and stronger, Nanabush hunted and fished in the vicinity of his ancestral home somewhere around Lake Superior, to look after his grandmother.

As long as Nanabush hunted according to certain practices and procedures long established by experience and with due regard for the sacredness of game, so long did he kill game and keep the foodracks full. But Nanabush was too impulsive, too impatient, too vain to follow direction or proven ways. Not even the best of hunters, those as skilled, patient, resolute as wolves, mallards, or elk, could persuade Nanabush to abide by the common sense advice of others or to follow simple instructions in the pursuit of game. Instead of using the tried methods of stalking quarry, Nanabush resorted to cunning and trickery and subterfuge, but in every instance he fell victim to his own deception. On at least one occasion Nanabush, admonished to take no more than one trout from a lake, in contempt of the warning and of the tribal code, speared an enormous number of trout far beyond his needs. During the night the fish disintegrated. All that remained was one mocking handful of withered roe. In

retribution Nanabush had to forage for shrivelled berries for the rest of the winter. Seldom in all his living days did Nanabush have a full belly.

At the outset of his hunting career Nanabush was tutored in hunting by one of the best hunters in his part of the world, Wolf. But so inept and so obdurate was Nanabush that Wolf had, on their parting, to entrust his son not only to accompany Nanabush in his travels but also to provide food for him.

Owing to the treachery of Nanabush, the young wolf drowned while crossing a lake during break-up and was seized by the Great Lynx who pulled the victim into the underworld depths of Lake Superior. Nanabush wept in remorse and in revenge slew the Great Lynx in his own lair. With the death of the Foremost Spirit of the Underworld, the waters rose to flood the world.

Nanabush survived the disaster by boarding a raft which he had the foresight to construct. By means of a morsel of soil delivered by a muskrat from the depths Nanabush re-created the earth.

As the world and earth grew larger, Nanabush restored the plants, and the animals and mankind to life. To each member he gave a name. Upon his brother and, by virtue of the act, upon all men and women and other beings, Nanabush pronounced death to keep the earth from being over-run. And he created the Land of Souls.

But in instituting death Nanabush also initiated disease. So that men and women would not die too soon, Nanabush founded for the well-being of body and spirit, the Midaewaewin, a society of medicine men and women endowed with the knowledge of the healing properties of plants. And even after the flood there were still evil spirits and beings, Weendigoes and Mermen and Mermaids, Sorcerers and Firemakers who dwelt in arcane places. To watch over these evil spirits, Nanabush set the Thunder-Bird in the skies and deities at the four cardinal points.

Following the re-creation and re-construction of the earth, Nanabush resumed his hunting and his life. But he now roamed further abroad not only in search of game but also in pursuit of Weendigoes and Sorcerers. From north and south of Lake Superior, transforming the land as he went, to the Nipissing land and west to the very ends of the earth beyond which he might have gone had his passage not been blocked by a sea of ice, Nanabush roamed often taking his grandmother.

In his wanderings Nanabush met a woman whom he wooed, then wed. It is said that he fathered several children by her. But not even love nor marriage altered his character or way of life. He continued as before, driven by wanderlust, afflicted by irresolution, and subverted by bungling.

While Nanabush could transform pebbles into butterflies for the delight of children, overcome Weendigoes who destroyed entire villages, or destroy Shell Feather who had captured scores of warriors through deception rather than courage, he could not feed his wife and family. By what twist of destiny was Nanabush able to serve the tribe and fail to provide for his own?

At last Nanabush grew old and weary from time and work. On a canoe constructed from the rainbow and from the stars, Nanabush, taking his grandmother with him, left the land of his people to join his father, his wife, his children and his brothers who had preceded him. When last seen he was headed toward the Land of the Setting Sun.

But even after he had gone, Nanabush continued to serve his people.

Four men, wishing for an increase in their courage, generosity love and life went to Nanabush with their petitions. To the petitioners he granted the requests freely. While Nanabush could not confer immortality upon any man or woman, he bestowed it in the form of an abiding rock.

What is to be made of Nanabush? How is he to be understood? How are the stories about him to be best interpreted?

Considered in terms of themes and topics, the Nanabush stories represent and reflect the Anishinaubaeg's conception of what constitutes human nature and human character.

In his representation of man in the image of Nanabush, the Anishinaubaeg caricatured human conduct and character. As a composite being, corporeal and incorporeal, man or woman is an incongruity. His acts as well as hers are often incongruous. At one time his aspirations and his deeds are noble, heroic, principled and worthy of the deities; at another time they are contemptible, cowardly, and unscrupulous, reflecting the worst aspects of human nature. What the figure of Nanabush and his deeds represent is that though ideal and fulfillment are as far apart as are virtue and vice in the abstract, they are but a fraction apart in human experience.

As an incorporeal being, Nanabush possesses supernatural powers. It is from this substance that Nanabush derives his noblest aspirations and performs the greatest benefits for mankind and womankind. For his predilection for good he is loved.

But Nanabush is also a corporeal being, subject to and governed by the physical laws of the world, human needs and passions, tribal laws and customs. It is these constraints, human and physical in origin and in nature, that prevent even a spirit such as Nanabush from attaining his aspirations. He bumbles, he forgets, he flags, he digresses. And though he ever blunders, he is ever ready to aspire for loftier principles.

Nanabush was dreamed into being, into the world of myth and into the world of reality.

But Nanabush is myth only insofar as he performed the fantastic and the unbelievable; otherwise he is real to the extent that he symbolizes mankind and womankind in all their aspirations and accomplishments, or in all their foibles and misadventures. More than anything else Nanabush is man, the "all man" as Gerry Kakegamie described him in an essay. He resides in every man, every woman.

As Nanabush was dreamed into being to exemplify something, either about

human nature or character, he was nurtured from infancy into old age to teach young and old that they create their own world and their own circumstances according as they abide by the knowledge and wisdom of human experience or flout them.

Mankind, womankind came into existence long before Nanabush came into being. As they were cast alone upon the earth and unaided to create their world, so Nanabush was born and orphaned. With only his grandmother to guide him, Nanabush discovered the earth, then shaped it to give it meaning. In re-creating the world from a morsel of soil delivered by a muskrat from the depths following the Great Flood, Nanabush symbolizes the act of mankind, womankind who, according to a friend, Alex McKay, find the meaning and purpose of being and direction to life from the substance derived from the spirit through vision.

It was from the depths of soul transfigured in vision that the Anishinaubaeg dreamed Nanabush into being. It is said that he dwells somewhere in the west ever ready to receive petitioners, and should they come, to grant their requests.

***Basil Johnston** is an ethnologist at the Royal Ontario Museum and has written three books on Ojibway culture.*