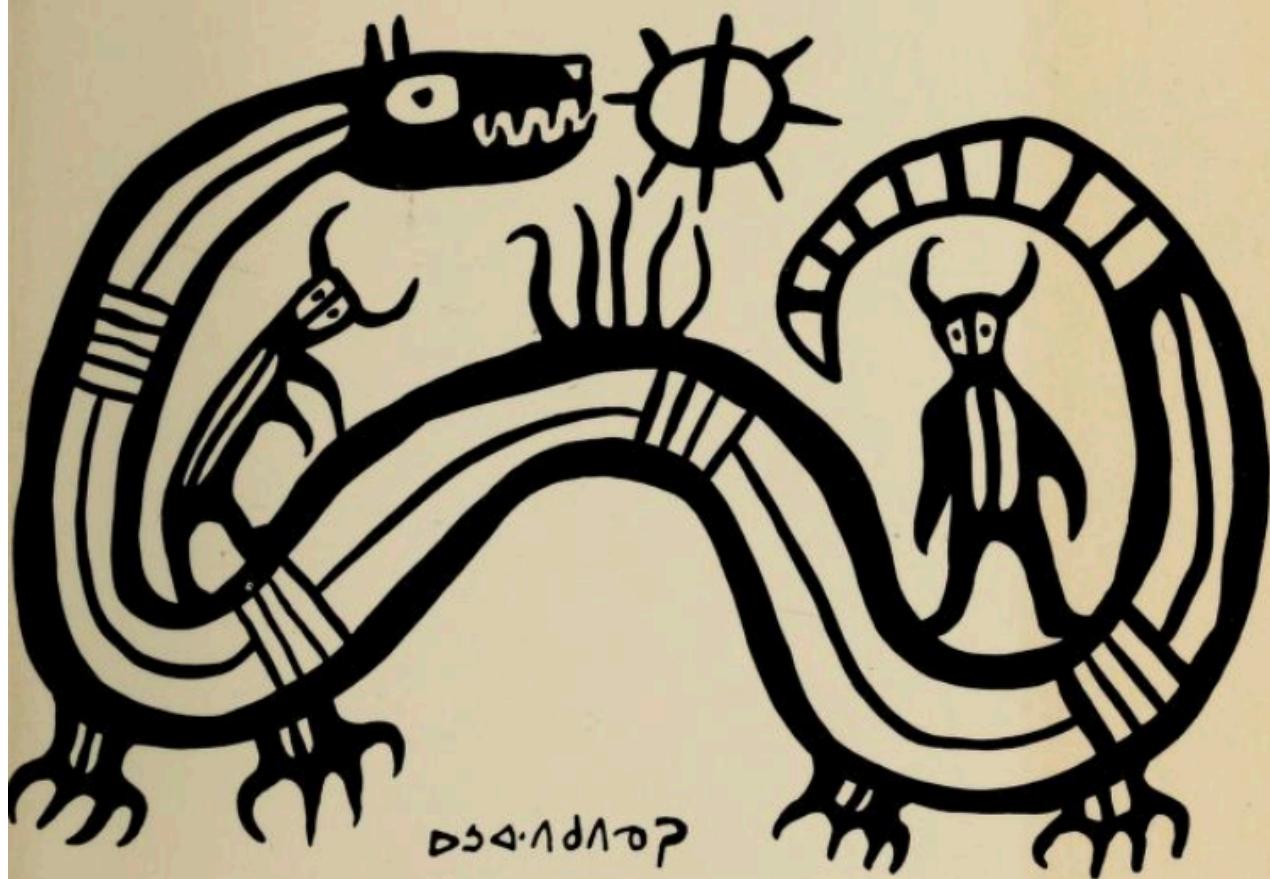


Legends of my People



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The Great Ojibway

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THE SACRED BEAR BELIEFS OF THE MIDAYWEWIN

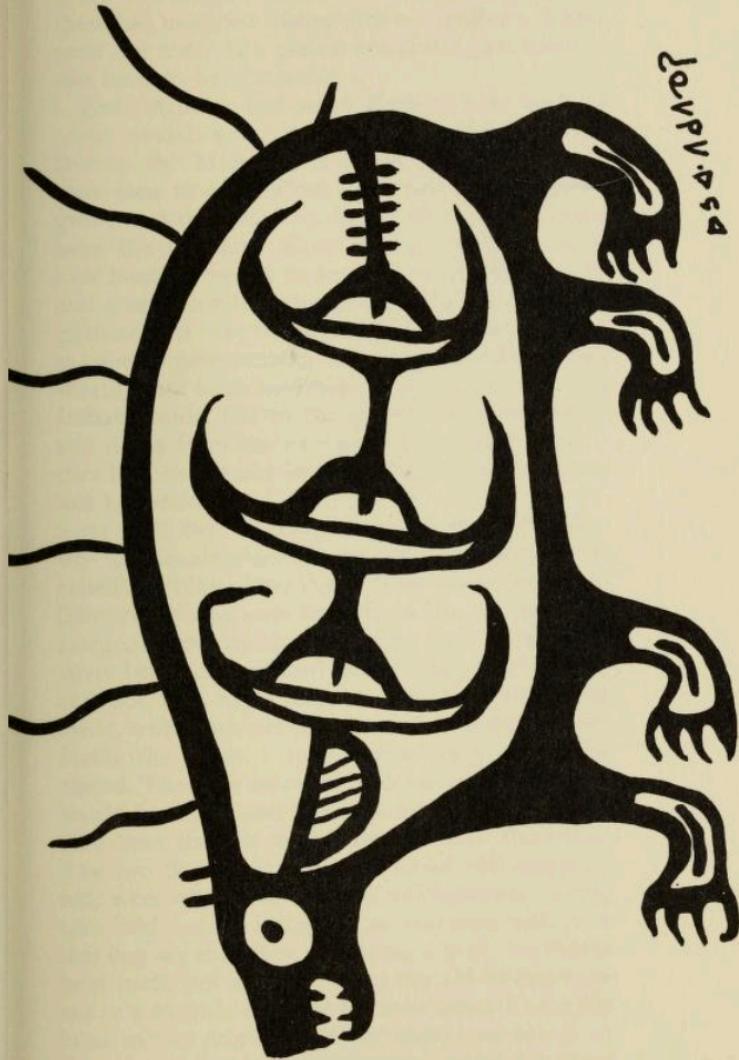
The Midaywewin Society of the Ojibway held this animal to be sacred. Legend states that the bear was at one time in the early history of the Ojibway a human, or had human form. Then it turned into an animal. It is indeed strange to say that a bear understands Indian, but if Indians meet a bear, in fear they address it as "Our grandfather to all of us, the Ojibway," and start to talk to it. It is a great sight to see a bear's ears and head moving as you speak to it. Those Indians whom the bear wanted to fight had been told the bear would release its hold and stop being angry if addressed properly. Its meat has to be smoked, as it cannot be eaten fresh for fear of diarrhoea, or shits. To the Indian way of thinking, a person gets shits not through the meat itself but because the bear is sacred, and one cannot eat too much of the meat of a demigod.

So powerful is the sacred bear that all the bear's bones were used for charms and relics for sucking rites. One sees a whole string full of bear's bones from all parts of the body in two-inch lengths. During these rites the medicine man starts to suck and rattle with these bones. A hollow bone from a leg or arm cut to a certain size is used for sucking out disease or sickness brought on by sorcery. Claws are kept, also. Teeth, especially the two front teeth, are made into whistles as charms. For a bear is so powerful over other animals and demigods that to blow its tooth puts fear into the spirits. Fur, meat and oil are used, and poisons as

well as medicine are made from the gall. Clothing and tobacco are tied with one claw in bright-coloured cloth and ribbon and placed in the forest in its honour. The bear's shoulders are painted and used as a charm for long life. Say an Indian is fifty years old today, he would take a shoulder-blade and would then start putting marks on it, say five. Each mark told how many years he wished to live. When that time was up more marks were added, and so forth.

According to Ojibway custom, bear skulls are sacred. I have four in my home, carefully decorated and painted with oils in red, blue, yellow and white that really make these charms colourful. The Indians used to paint in those colours when they could be obtained. Before paint, red matter or earth colours replaced the paint we use today. According to a medicine dream, the sacred bear is white in colour, has red feet with yellow spots, and two horns. To possess the white skin of an albino bear meant honour to the Ojibway. The owner would be respected by all and the fur divided up for charm pipes and bags or kept just as a whole skin. In the same way the Plains Indians held sacred the albino buffalo.

Ojibway Indians of Lake Nipigon had what is known as the Midaywewin Society. An Ojibway, or his family, had to pay a great quantity of goods to be a member of this society. In addition, the new member would have to pass some test. At the Midaywewin Lodge would be a great table and on the table would be all kinds of good food to eat. On another table would be pots full of partly cooked dog meat and broth. In order to pass the test a person would be required to eat great amounts of dog soup and meat. Also live snakes were brought into the ceremony and their tails cut off and swallowed down while still wriggling. Some Indians who were full members were known to have swallowed six tails, but a lot of people started to throw up. Certain food that was con-



sidered bad medicine was also placed on the table. Some full-fledged members were known to eat these bad medicine dishes with no ill effects. These were the tests. If a person could not pass them it was hard to be a member.

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 hides 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 bag would shoot forth medicine, or magic powers. The Indian would fall to the ground, spitting blood and dying from the effects of the powerful medicine bag, but would be revived again as if nothing had happened.

At Gull Bay, Ontario, long ago, the early Ojibway who made a settlement used to hold what is called the White Dog Feast. Two white dogs were fattened up and were brought to the Midaywewin Lodge, killed, and had all their hair burned off. After being cleaned and scraped they were cut up and put into huge pots. A big circle would be made, with a fish net put around it for decoration. Inside the circle a long row of bark would be placed. Then the elders of Midaywewin knowledge would be seated and one appointed Indian would take from the pot some partly cooked white dog. The two dog heads, with the blood still dripping red, were offered to the two Midaywewin elders, who said before eating, "Let everyone who eats this dog say that they are eating a bear, for this is bear itself, not a dog." Then the elders began to eat in a manner that would make anyone turn his head in the other direction; there was blood in their mouths and on their hands. After this large bowls of dog soup were offered. They ate just as we would eat a T-bone steak and black coffee. But,

as I said, there were no side effects. I understand the elders took medicine in order not to be affected.

Later each member would bring out Midayewin bags of powerful medicine, each with its otter skin. An Ojibway woman would then take up the big bearskin that was tied to some poles and her husband, through his power, commanded the skin to come alive and it would crawl and try to get itself loose from the buckskin strings that tied it. All the otter skins that were running around would jump into the medicine bags in fear of the bear.

There were half-breeds there who had no faith in the ceremony. One happened to be a pugilist boxer, a big-set fellow who knew his trade. A Midayewin member got up to add a new member to the society. The half-breeds looked in amazement at what was about to take place. The Midayewin member brought out a bag and opened it before a new member. The power of great medicine shot forth from the bag. The new member fell back on the ground, blood running out of his nose and mouth, in a death-like trance. Then another new member was given another bag and revived him. This was the test he had to pass.

The half-breed who was a pugilist boxer spoke to the full-fledged Midayewin member and said, "I could do the same, only it takes time to revive a fallen person."

Then the Midayewin member said, "Show me your power. Who gave you this power, when you do not believe in anything?"

That was it. Bang went the half-breed's fist across the mouth of the Midayewin member and coolly knocked him out. His movements were too fast to follow. He asked for water. Down it went upon the Midayewin member. Slowly he revived.

The Ojibway being good-natured, everyone began to laugh, including the Midayewin member, who slowly said, "Although a half-breed, your power is greater than ours, nevertheless for our

ancestors' sake let us continue to use the power we were taught by them."

The Thunderbird Midayewin Society was the Lake Superior branch of the Midayewin Society. All these societies study all kinds of medicine.

My grandfather on my father's side at the time of his fasting year had a great medicine dream of a bear. The bear said to him in his medicine dream, "My son, I will be a guardian to you and give you some special power. Although you will not be a conjurer or a medicine-man, still you shall have power to do good. I will also give you good luck, but you must respect me in my earthly form and never kill me. Now I will go into your body." According to that medicine dream my grandfather believed that there was a bear inside his body. He felt its presence at his back, or hip.

One day he met some Ojibway Indians who were known to be great conjurers. They drank some firewater — whisky — and got drunk. Some hours later a fight started among them as to who was powerful in the Ojibway magic arts. My grandfather said to the conjurers, "I am not good at conjuring and I will not boast, but I am good with my fists," and gave the conjurers a good licking. Then one of the conjurers said to my grandfather, "Some day I will get the better of you yet," and this he did in the matter of a year.

Through the bad medicine of evil conjuring, the bear inside my grandfather was poisoned and my grandfather fell sick about one week later. A medicine-man who was my grandfather's relation was called from Fort Frances and tried his best to cure him, but it was too late. The medicine-man had all kinds of bones of animals and bears, for he was a member of the Midayewin Society. He rubbed and also sucked with a big Ojibway medicine sucking bone about twelve inches long, but was unable to cure my grandfather.

He did what was to be done, however, and sucked out the affected part at the back. As he did