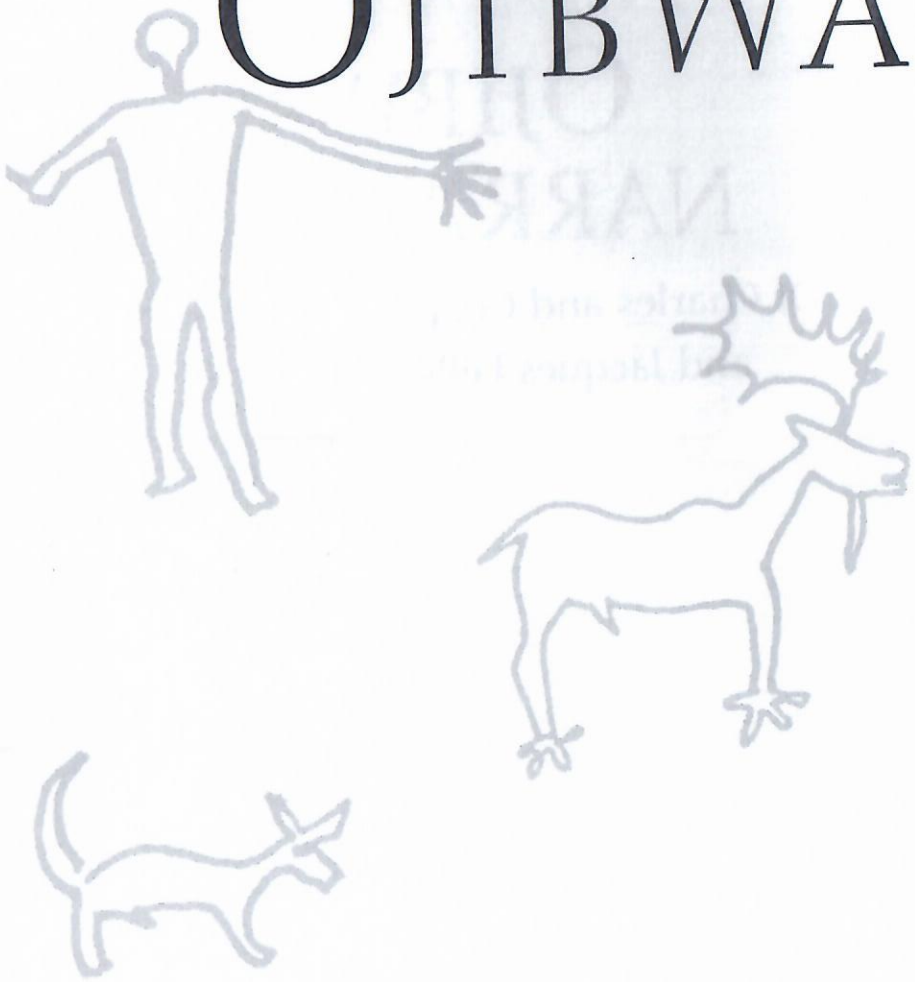
OJIBWA NARRATIVES

Of Charles and Charlotte Kawbawgam and Jacques LePique, 1893–1895



Recorded with Notes by Homer H. Kidder

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Nanabozho

Kawbawgam

Nanabozho had a young wolf whom he called his nephew.[4] They lived on the shore of a lake and, when it froze over, he told the wolf that he must never cross it on the ice.

"Early or late," said he, "always go around this lake, for at the bottom are spirits who are my enemies and, if they should catch you on the ice, they would kill you."

But once, coming home late from hunting, the wolf struck across the lake. In the middle, the ice went to pieces beneath him, broken by the spirits, and the wolf was drowned.

Then Nanabozho gave a long cry and mourned aloud. All through the winter and the spring, he would go about the lake moaning for his nephew, seeking in his mind a plan to be revenged. He could not rest till revenged.

He knew that in the summer, on the hottest days, the spirits rose from the bottom of the lake to the surface, and he found a beach where they used to sleep in the sun. There, on a hot day, he changed himself into a pine stub, with the stoutest roots, and there he waited.

By and by, as the sun got higher, the spirits began to look out from the water, one after another, frogs, toads, lizards, and snakes, also bears, skunks, beavers and others, for although they were spirits, they came to the top in the shapes of animals. The last to come was in the form of a snow white panther, Mishi Bizi, the chief of the water spirits. He looked all about and, seeing the pine stub, said to the others: "Look at that stub. What do you think of it?"

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[4] How Nanabozho came to have a wolf is told in a version of this story related to my father in the [eighteen] sixties by Jacques LePique [see p. 32].

The spirits answered: "We have never seen it before. It may be Nanabozho."[5]

The chief sent a *Mishi Ginabig,* the great serpent, on shore to try the stub. He was one of the strongest among them. He had immense antlers and he was as big as the largest pines. He coiled himself around the stub and hugged it with all his might, but Nanabozho did not make a sound.

The Mishi Ginabig said: "This is not Nanabozho." But the chief sent a still more powerful spirit, a yellow bear, who went at the stub and tore it with his claws till Nanabozho had to hold his breath to keep from howling. He would not cry out because his heart was set on revenge. He had a terrible will for revenge.

The yellow bear said: "No, no! This is not Nanabozho." Still the chief was not satisfied. He sent the most powerful spirit of them all, a monstrous red bear. Nothing could stand before him, rocks or trees. He rushed at the stub again and again, being sure that if it was Nanabozho he could knock it down but the roots were so strong that he could not budge it. So the red bear gave up too. He said: "This cannot be Nanabozho."

All this time the spirits had been floating in the water, but now they believed they were safe and came out on the beach. There they lay in a ring around the white panther and one by one, they fell asleep. Then Nanabozho took his own shape and strung his bow. Jumping over the spirits, he shot an arrow into the body of Mishi Bizi, near the heart. The panther roared and Nanabozho leaped over the others into the woods, while the spirits dove into the lake.

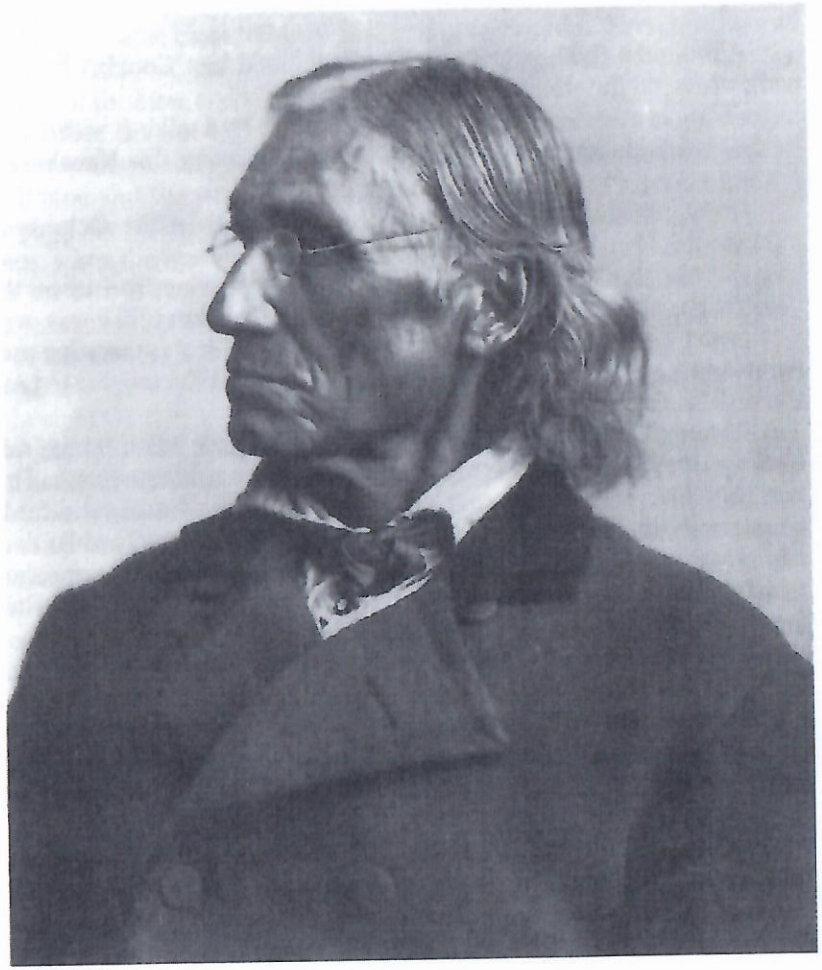
Nanabozho believed that he had killed his enemy and avenged the wolf. His heart was glad.

One day, meeting Mishi Bizi's grandmother, the Frog Woman, he saw that she had been crying. He said: "What's the matter?" He supposed it was the death of Mishi Bizi that made her cry. She answered: "My grandson was shot by Nanabozho and the arrow is still in him. I am doctoring him. If it hadn't been for me, he would have died." So Nanabozho knew that Mishi Bizi was still alive.

The old woman was packing a load of basswood bark and Nanabozho asked her what she was going to do with it.

She answered: "I am going to make a string and run it through the woods, tied on the trees, so that we can see if Nanabozho touches it somewhere."

[5] At this point Kawbawgam says: "Nanabozho must have had more power than the spirits for they could not tell whether it was Nanabozho or not."



Charles Kawbawgam, ca. 1880.

"But don't you suppose," said he, "that Nanabozho would see your string and would keep from touching it?"

"Maybe you are Nanabozho yourself," said the Frog Woman.

"Oh, no! I'm not Nanabozho," said he. "I am only telling you what I would do if I were Nanabozho. But what happens if Nanabozho does touch the string?"

"Why then, perhaps I could tell where he is," said the Frog Woman.

"We are going to send a shower of rocks, so that Nanabozho will be killed."

"You must think Nanabozho is a fool," said he. "Couldn't he hide somewhere till the stones stopped falling?"

The old woman then felt pretty sure she was talking with Nanabozho, but he laughed and said: "No, no. I never saw this Nanabozho. I'm just saying what I'd do if I were Nanabozho."

Next day he met her again and asked her when the rocks were going to fall. She answered: "Tomorrow."

So Nanabozho piled trees across a narrow ravine, and when the shower of rocks began, he went underneath and sat there till it was over. Before that, there were no great rocks on the earth. It was then that they fell where we see them today, such as the Pictured Rocks, Sugar Loaf, the Gull Rock, and the rest.

When the spirits found that Nanabozho was not killed by the rain of rocks, they sent a terrible winter, hoping to freeze him to death. This was the first winter. Snow covered all the earth. But Nanabozho made snow shoes, the first ever made. He could run on the snow, while deer and other animals were stuck in drifts. So he had plenty of game, and when the spirits sent chickadees to see if he was still alive, he pelted them with balls of fat.

When the winter was over, Nanabozho met the Frog Woman once more and asked her what was going to happen. She said: "The spirits are going to flood the world, and Nanabozho will be drowned."

The old woman was on her way to a cave where the spirits lived under the lake. She told him that she went there to doctor her grandson every evening when the door of the cave opened. Nanabozho asked her where she kept her medicine rattle in the cave, and when she had told him, he said he would like to hear the song that she sang when she doctored her grandson. So she sang her medicine song, and when Nanabozho had learned it, he killed her and flayed her. Then he put on the Frog Woman's skin, dove into the lake, and swam down to the cave of the spirits.

In the cave, the spirits were in human form, but when they went out they put on animal form, because in that form they had more power. The door of the cave opened only between daylight and dark, when the Frog Woman used to come to doctor Mishi Bizi. Nanabozho was at the door when it opened, and he walked in, dressed in the skin of the Frog Woman.

Two frogs were on guard inside the door. They said: "Our grandmother looks like Nanabozho."

He struck them with the old woman's staff to make them keep still. He said: "It is crying all day that makes my skin so wrinkled."

He called for the medicine rattle, and singing the song of the Frog Woman, he came close to Mishi Bizi as if to doctor him. Then seizing the arrow, he drove it into the heart of the panther and killed him. Then he ran out of the cave and escaped.

When the flood came, Nanabozho climbed the highest mountain. But the water rose to the top of the mountain. Then Nanabozho climbed a tall pine, but the water rose to the top of the tree. Nanabozho said to the pine: "Brother, stretch." And the tree stretched his own length. Three times, when the water rose to the top, the pine stretched his own length. But the fourth time, the tree said that he could stretch no more. Soon the water reached Nanabozho's waist, then his neck. When it was almost up to his mouth, Nanabozho saw a blue heron and said: "Brother, drink up all the water you can hold." Then the heron took his fill and sank from sight.

At the same time, seeing a beaver, Nanabozho said to him, "Dive and fetch me up some earth, so that I can make a new world." The beaver dove but the water was so deep that he could not reach the bottom. He came up dead, and Nanabozho blew on him and brought him to life. Then an otter swam by and Nanabozho sent him down also to get some earth. But the otter, too, came up dead and Nanabozho blew on him and brought him to life. At last Nanabozho saw a muskrat and said to him: "Brother, dive quickly and bring me up some earth, so that I may make a new world. Otherwise we must all die." The muskrat came up dead, but his paws were closed tight, holding a little earth. Nanabozho blew on him and brought him to life. Then he took the earth brought up by the muskrat and, holding it out on his hand prayed to the Great Spirit for the hottest day that ever came. So the earth dried on his hand and Nanabozho blew it out on the water, and made a new world.

This was the world where we live today. By the flood, the people of the old earth were drowned and the Great Spirit put upon the new earth the father and mother of the people of this earth.

When Nanabozho stepped on the new land, he saw the blue heron lying on the shore with his belly swelled to immense size by the water he had swallowed. Nanabozho kicked him in the belly and the water poured out in such a stream that Nanabozho had to run away to keep from being drowned.

Nanabozho lived many years on the new earth and at last disappeared. Nobody knows where he went, but the Indians do not believe that he is dead, for when they are without food, they can get what they need by praying to Nanabozho. So he must be living somewhere in the spirit world.

Kawbawgam's Remarks on Nanabozho

Before beginning the story, Kawbawgam said: "Nobody knows where Nanabozho came from. If the Indian had been as wise as the Chinese or the French or the Germans, our people would have made books so that we should remember what happened in ancient times. But all that the Indian knows is that there is a creator above, who made the world with everything in it and gave the Indian a heart to know the Great Spirit."

"As for Nanabozho, we only know that he was a man like ourselves. Yet he had more power than any other Indian; he could speak to the water and make it stop and to the wind and make it talk. He called the animals his brothers; men he called his uncles; women and trees and all that grows and all that flies he called his brothers and sisters. So Nanabozho must have been one of the oldest of them all.[6] That is why we can't tell where he came from, any more than we can tell the beginnings of things in the world, because these things were so long ago."

"Once in a while amongst the people there is a very strong man or a good fighter or a wise man; you don't know how he came to be so; you only know that he was the son of a father and a mother. So it was with Nanabozho; he was born of human parents. But no matter where you look amongst any tribe of Indians, there was no one else like Nanabozho. He had some great power; he could do wonders that no other Indian could do. Yet he lived like others; he had a family and camped through the woods, and when there was famine, he went hungry with the rest."

On finishing the tale of Nanabozho, Kawbawgam said: "This Nanabozho had tremendous power. The evil spirits had terrible power too; but they were afraid of him because he was even more powerful. The spirits

[6] Because he called the birds, who are spirits, his brothers. Remark by Jacques LePique.

feared him because he could command the rain, water, and fog. As for the story of the flood, I do not understand it.[7] Nevertheless, it shows Nanabozho's power[,] for during the flood the Great Spirit sent a hot day to dry the earth on his hand so that he could make a new world."

"Whether the new world touched the bottom of the flood or not, the old world is below. I do not know whether the water drew off after the flood. That is not in the history."

"Before the flood, there were three gigantic animals in the world, the bear, the skunk, and the mole. They were wicked—destroyed everything they saw. When the skunk went along, it was like a whirlwind. But these gigantic animals came to an end in the flood."

"However, there is a spirit in everything—everything that moves and grows: beasts, plants, clouds, stars, the sun, water, rivers, and rocks. The Great Spirit is the ruler of all spirits. Other spirits have great power but the Great Spirit overmasters all. He made the world and all things."

On another occasion, when I asked Kawbawgam some questions about Nanabozho, he made the following remarks, which complement the foregoing in touching on the droll, tricky, less dignified side of the character.

"Nanabozho was feared on account of his tremendous power but he did not understand how to control his power. He could make a new earth, yet sometimes he acted like a fool, making jokes and playing tricks, though his pranks were harmless. He was able to kill Mishi Bizi, the chief of all the water spirits, yet he was a common Indian. Afterwards he disappeared and became a pure spirit.[8]

[7] I think Kawbawgam means that he does not understand, since Nanabozho could command the elements, why he did not stop the flood.

[8] *Editor's note:* Kawbawgam's version of the central episodes of the Nanabozho cycle is closest to that recorded by William H. Ellis in 1888 originally published in the *Varsity* and recently republished by A. Helbig in an anthology entitled *Nanabozhoo, Giver of Life.* Versions recorded by Kohl (1860:432–438) and Schoolcraft (1985:40–45) bear close affinity and likely reflect a sub area of Ojibwa narrative distinctive of the southeastern shore stretching from L'Anse to Sault Ste. Marie.

The Great Turtle

Kawbawgam

Mi-shi-kan is the spirit messenger, The Great Turtle. This spirit speaks a language that is not understood by human beings. In any operation, he will go to a spirit to interpret for him—in Ojibwa, Menominee, or English. His talk sounds something like the noise of pulling the fingers over a strip of birch bark. He seems to be under the lodge. He brings the spirit of anybody that you want, so that you can talk to the spirit of a friend. If he is not there at first, he will always come. You can hear him tumble into the lodge. You hear his voice as soon as he comes. He must have greater power than the other spirits. The lodge shakes when he comes. He makes a good deal of fun and jokes and plays with the other spirits [who] sometimes try to push him out.[33]

[33] *Editor's Note:* Within the shaking tent ritual the nearly unintelligible voice of various spirits is enacted through use of ventriloquism and interpreted by the Great Turtle and the conjuror. The possibilities for general entertainment in this context appear to be limitless. Kawbawgam uses the name Mi-shi-kan, a different turtle according to John D. Nichols, rather than the more widespread usage of Misi-mikinák.

The Robin[73]

Jacques LePique

In autumn, a boy was fasting for power from the spirit world. Through the spirit that came to him, he knew that he had fasted long enough and told his mother that it was time to stop. But she urged him to keep on and would not let him out of the lodge.

The next day he said: "Mother, I have fasted too long. I can no longer be a man. I shall become a bird and must leave you."

His face and throat were painted black, with a few white specks, his breast was painted red, and on his back he had a covering of grey. All these marks he kept when he became a bird. He flew out, and perching on the lodge, gave the beautiful call of the robin.

He said: "Whenever you hear me at the top of a tree, you will know spring is coming and will come always to the end of the world. Farewell, mother. I am going to spread throughout the earth."

This was the first robin. His descendants are seen everywhere.[74]

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[73] This is, of course, the American robin.

[74] Recorded by my brother, Howard White Kidder. *Editor's Note:* The origin of the robin (***pitchi***), associated with the over-bearing influence of a parent or grandparent interfering with a vision quest, is likewise recorded by H. R. Schoolcraft (M. L. Williams 1957:106–107), by H. Gerald Turner in A. K. Helbig (1987: 210), and in its most elaborated form by Basil Johnston (1976:128–131). According to Morriseau, the robin's call is understood to say in Ojibwa language ***neeshewukjeebeyuk,*** "two dead persons," thereby linked to a narrative where it finds the bodies of two youths lost in the forest (1965:84). In the Kidder manuscript, the song of a robin is given as wash-ka-ka-ka-ka (p. 149).

The Beast Men

Jacques LePique

In old times, when game was so scarce that people had to make a long move, if an old man or old woman or some old couple gave out on the way and could not go on, they had to be left to die, with any food that could be given them.

But one old man who was thus deserted made up his mind that he was not going to sit there and starve. When he had eaten what food was left, he got up and started away. He had nothing to carry but his staff. He went along slowly but kept on for three days, and the third day he came out of the woods on the Grand Sable above Lake Superior.

From the look of the place, he saw that it had been a big campground, but there was then only one wigwam. He went to the door and looked in. A voice said, "Come in, Grandfather, and sit down." This voice came from behind a partition in the lodge. It said: "Rest yourself and eat. There's meat hanging by the fire. I can't come out, but my brothers will soon be home."

So the old man sat down and ate. After a while six young men came in from different directions. The oldest brother, Machikiwis, who came in from the north said: "Boju[76] Grandfather. Has our youngest brother asked you to eat? He is behind that partition, fasting for power to help us."

"You see, Grandfather, that there are not many of us. Once, hundreds of wigwams stood on the Grand Sable and all along the lake shore. But every so often we have to run a race, and now there are only seven of us left."

This puzzled the old man. He said: "I don't understand what you mean about racing."

[76] Boju i.e. bonjour.

The oldest brother, Machikiwis, said: "Well, I will tell you about it. There are beings around us here in the woods who are able to take the form of either beasts or men. Every so often they dare us to choose one of us to race with one of them and to bet so many lives on the race. We have lost every time. Here are all of us that are left."

The old man asked what the other party did with the people they won in these races. Machikiwis told him that they killed them and ate them.

"Behind that partition," said he, "our youngest brother is fasting for power hoping to win the next race."

By this time the oldest brother, the one who had come in from the north, had filled a pipe and putting fire to it, held it out to the old man. The others watched to see what the old man would do; for if he took the pipe, it meant that he had medicine power and was willing to help them.

He said: "I accept your pipe."

Taking it, he smoked, and said: "What if I race for you?"

The brother shouted: "Megwuk! We all thank you![77]

Machikiwis cried: "Our Grandfather is going to race for us." And he said to the old man: "How many of us will you bet?"

Before this each side had bet the same number of lives. But the old man said: "We will bet half,"—meaning that the other party numbering thousands, would also have to bet half. "If we win," said he, "there'll be plenty of meat. The deer and partridges and rabbits amongst those fellows would make a pretty good bouillon." He was laughing but when he [was] done joking, he asked Machikiwis if they had some red paint, and said: "I want you to make me a wooden ring, very strong. If we win, it will be by that wooden ring."

Machikiwis went to work and made the ring. And when the moon was so many days old, he said: "Grandfather, the race will be tomorrow."

He led him out to the bluff of the Grand Sable, over the lake, and showed him a point called Lonesome Point[78] about fifteen [five] miles beyond Grand Marais, as you go towards the Sault.

Machikiwis said: "The race is run from Lonesome Point to the Grand Sable. You walk down there and race back to this pole." He showed the old man a pole set up in the sand with a bunch of feathers hanging at the top.

[77] *Editor's Note: migwetch* (Baraga 1878: II, 235).

[78] Lonesome Point was called by the Ojibwas Ne-te-sage-wa-a-zingh, which Jacques translated "The point you never get around," i.e., in passing it, for six or seven miles, you still see the point curving beyond—an experience anyone will remember who has done much rowing along the coast of Lake Superior. The name would fit many other points.

Early the next morning, the old man painted the ring red. With six of the brothers he went out to the edge of the Grand Sable. The youngest brother, though counted in the bet, did not go because he was fasting. When they reached the bluff, the animal party, all in human form, were waiting for them in thousands; they stood in rows so long that you could not see the end of them. They had their "Oldest Brother," too. He is the one who generally does the talking for his side. He said: "Oho, here's our Grandfather. Is he going to race?" For they saw that the old man was painted and decorated. "Yes," said Machikiwis of the brothers. And the men of the beast party shouted: "Oho, Grandpa's going to run!" And all laughed and clapped their hands.

"Well," said the oldest brother of the animals, "here's our man." And he shoved out a young sparrow hawk in human form. The sparrow hawk, Ka-Ka-Ki[79] shook hands with the old man and said: "Let's go. It's a long way to the starting place."

The old man went along with his stick, carrying his red ring, and at last they reached Lonesome Point. Here was a deep pit, and the racers had to start from the bottom of it. When they got down into it, they took a rest and a smoke.

"Well," said Ka-Ka-Ki, "are you ready?"

"Yes," said the old man. "Go!"

He had no sooner spoken than he saw a sparrow hawk fly out of the pit and head for the Grand Sable. He climbed out of the pit and threw his ring into the air, saying to it: "Fall half way to the Grand Sable." With that he flew into the air, and afterwards told his friends the brothers that he had passed over the blue back of the sparrow hawk. When the ring came down on the shore, the old man landed beside it, and throwing it into the air again, said, "Fall by the pole where the feathers hang." There he landed before the sparrow hawk had passed Grand Marais. The older brother of the animals said: "You have won. You can begin to kill."

The brothers took knives and tomahawks, meaning to kill half of their enemies. But the old man said: "Wait, my sons. Let us race with them again, and we will bet all our lives against all of theirs."

So they had another race the next moon. This time the old man and his ring were painted blue. He raced against the winter hawk, and won again, flying through the air after his ring. The brothers had now won the lives of all their enemies, but the old man would not let them kill. He made all the animal party pass before him, one by one. He forbad them

[79] *Editor's Note: Kakake* (Schoolcraft in M. L. Williams 1956: 253); *kekeke* (Baraga 1878:II, 239).

ever again to take the form of man, and told each kind how they should live and what they should eat. And that is how the animals got the habits that they have to this day.