

Culture



June HELM, *Prophecy and Power Among the Dogrib Indians*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994; xiv + 172 pages, \$30.00 (cloth)

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Les récits ne répondaient pas à des conventions particulières. De longueurs inégales, ils étaient flexibles et adaptés à leur sujet. Les Aînés les racontaient seulement durant les longues nuits d'hiver.

Les informateurs s'accordent tous à dire que la «règle» était de ne pas raconter de récits pendant l'été. Le dicton populaire voulait qu'autrement «des crapauds ou des serpents se glisseraient dans votre lit» (p. 4.)

Le conteur devait également faire preuve de retenue, ne jamais laisser voir ses émotions, même dans les moments les plus pathétiques. Quant à la fonction de ces histoires, elle était variée.

Alors que les contes d'hiver servaient simplement à divertir, les mythes cosmogoniques ou étiologiques transmettaient les idées traditionnelles de la tribu en matière de religion ou de philosophie. Quant aux récits ethnohistoriques, surtout ceux concernant les guerres passées, ils fournissaient une ligne de conduite pour la direction des affaires domestiques et internationales (p. 5).

Bref, l'étude de la mythologie wendate aura marqué les débuts de la carrière de Barbeau qui s'intéressa également à la mythologie iroquoise, au folklore canadien-français et à la production culturelle des Amérindiens de la côte Pacifique, comme l'illustre la bibliographie préparée par Roland Viau. La publication de *Mythologie huronne et wyandotte* est plus que la réédition d'un ouvrage de référence important sur cette nation amérindienne, c'est également la «redécouverte» d'un grand ethnographe, «un homme d'extrêmes capacité et intégrité intellectuelles» comme le dit Sioui (p. xxix). Et bien que les récits recueillis et colligés par Barbeau ne constituent qu'une «petite partie» (p. 30) de ce que devait être la mythologie wendate, leur lecture laisse facilement entrevoir toute la richesse de cette ancienne civilisation.

June HELM, *Prophecy and Power Among the Dogrib Indians*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994; xiv + 172 pages, \$30.00 (cloth).

By Kathleen Mooney

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June Helm has previously provided us with some of the most meticulous and detailed ethnographic and ethnohistorical accounts of the Dené or Athapaskans of the Mackenzie River drainage, Northwest Territories, including the Dogrib with whom she has worked repeatedly from 1959 to 1976. While her previous works have dealt primarily with such problems as band organizations, kinship systems, and contemporary Native settlements, her published treatment of prophecy and traditional "medicine power" has been relatively limited prior to the present work.

The book is divided into two major parts, each written in different styles, from different angles and originally with different intentions, but which taken together permit an appreciation of Dogrib personal cultural style and dynamics (p.xii). Part One deals with "Three Styles in the Practice of Prophecy." Although North American Native prophets and prophet movements have long received anthropological attention, many researchers have had to rely on salvage ethnography relating to long-past events and persons. Among Dené such as Dogrib, Beaver and Slavey, on the other hand, there are both recent and continuing prophetic developments. Helm notes, "The emphasis in this study is not on 'culture' nor is the subject 'religion,' although the activities of the prophets and the attention of the Dogrib people were certainly on topics that are usually subsumed under those rubrics" (p.2). Moreover, "This study is not about causalities – what caused the Dogrib prophet movement..." (p.19). Instead, Helm focuses on the public careers of three Dogrib prophets – not what caused them to assume prophecy, but the distinctive character and personal style that each brought to his role. This entails an examination of how each became a prophet in the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as the message, public performance and prophetic persona of each. The examination of the authority and authenticity accorded to the three prophets in part deals with the opinions that individual Dogrib held of each, as well as the prophets' opinions of one other. Finally in Part One, Helm considers the components of prophecy,

and the relationship of prophecy with *ink'on* or "medicine power."

Throughout Part One Helm emphasizes classic anthropological generalizations that have been made for both Eastern and Western Subarctic populations. The themes of personal autonomy and individuality come into play repeatedly, both in the prophets' backgrounds and actions, and in Dogrib's responses to these. Helm does not choose to probe the traditional or post-contact background to these facets of personality. Some points of commonality emerge, of course. In particular, the three prophets as well as earlier prophets came to their prophecies through revealed knowledge of and experience in the Christian supernatural world (p.67). One might suppose that successful prophets at least sometimes are able to reconcile conflict between different religious frameworks, as suggested by Dené studies elsewhere. Helm rejects Dogrib prophets' messages as being syncretic of Christian and autochthonous beliefs, however, since in the Dogrib prophets' theologies "the world of *ink'on* and the Christian cosmos do not merge" (p.70).

Helm finds that the nature of Dogrib prophecy, revelation and preaching come more sharply into focus through comparison with *ink'on*. Accordingly, Part Two of the book deals with *ink'on* at length, illustrating the concept through numerous stories told by Helm's long term Dogrib consultant Vital Thomas as well as six other Dogrib. Prophecy and *ink'on* are not opposed as good/evil or true/false; *ink'on* is not false as a power, only as a source of Christian prophecy; those who would be prophets therefore have to cease having or using *ink'on*. But both *ink'on* and prophecy emphasize personal, individual, experiential dealings with non-human beings (pp. 68-9). On the other hand, "...*ink'on* adepts come to know something that *empowers* them to *compel* change in human beings or in circumstances that affect human beings" (p.69; emphasis original). The prophets' experiences with the Christian heaven and its divine beings "...*authorizes* them to *impel* change in others' *volition*, to bring others to *choose* to alter their thoughts and actions" (p.70; emphasis original). While *ink'on* is not inherently either good or evil, prophetic messages are inherently moral.

Helm's presentation of *ink'on* not only illuminates the nature of prophecy, but preserves as well a rich body of personal stories and perspectives

concerning the differing sources and uses of power which might otherwise have remained inaccessible to most. In the same spirit of preserving data which might otherwise disappear, Helm includes a chapter on Vital Thomas' autobiography, and finally an Appendix on Dogrib leadership. As a whole, Helm's meticulous presentation of Dogrib personal perspectives and first-hand texts provide the sort of rich ethnographic base that allows others to consider comparisons and causalities from a number of theoretical perspectives, if they choose.

Chris KNIGHT, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. x + 581 pages.

By Jason R. MacLean

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Models concerning the evolution of proto-hominids into that of modern *Homo sapien sapiens* have a long and enduring history within the discipline of anthropology. Rooted firmly in this tradition, Chris Knight's *Blood Relations* proposes a radically new explanation of this phylogeny. Explicitly political, Knight forwards a social-historical reinterpretation of those events implicated in the process of hominidisation via, in a word, a social scientific "myth."

The time is circa four million years before present. The place is the East African Rift Valley, a "savannah-mosaic" ecosystem of woodlands, grasslands, lakes, estuaries, sea-inlets, islands, and rivers stretching from the Gulf of Aden to the southern Cape. Herein lies the earliest hominid fossils not to be found anywhere else in the world at sites such as Koobi Foro and Olduvai Gorge. Geoclimatically, the end of the Miocene epoch is drawing near, the Pliocene approaching rapidly. Proto-hominids had selected a lush biome yielding a veritable plethora of foodstuffs in which to evolve towards anatomical modernity. To that end, several evolutionary trajectories were traversed. Only one, however, realised its final destination.

The process of hominidisation during the Pliocene was anything but smooth. Social groups were constituted by some number of proto-hominids engaging in a restricted wandering foraging system not yet distinct from that of the rest of the extant primate order. Social life, while