

Pierre Déléage

Inventing Writing

Prophets, Shamans, and the
Transmission of Ritual Discourse
in North American Indigenous
Cultures, 1600–1900



Translated by
Matthew H. Evans and
Victoria Bergstrom

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A Note on Terminology

I have opted in this book to use the terms Montagnais (instead of Innu), Delaware (instead of Lenape or any of the names referring to the subdivisions of the Lenape family), and Ojibwe (instead of Chippewa or Anishinaabe), in order to respect the historical distance between our present moment and the literature of past epochs with which this work is most concerned, where the complex and mobile boundaries between different social and cultural identities are so poorly represented.

INTRODUCTION

Writing Systems and Ritual Discourses

A June Sunday in 1863: the inhabitants of a Kickapoo and Potawatomi village are gathered in a large house on the banks of the Missouri River. An elegant man in the prime of life stands at one end of the building. His name is Kenekuk, and he is preaching once again to his followers. He tells the story of his death, of how he ascended to heaven and spoke with the Great Spirit, a vision narrative he has been repeating every week for over six years now, each time adapting the contents in response to local events. But the basic framework remains the same: a path leads from earth to heaven and, to reach this celestial realm, otherwise referred to as the House of the Father, one must resist the temptations that corrupt mankind: theft, quarreling, lying, murder, and witchcraft. To support the basic thread of the story, unchanged from one recitation to the next, the prophet traces a map on the ground as he preaches: a long straight line leads to a celestial circle, while another, starting from the same point, quickly branches off and wanders eastwards, toward the Prairie of the Damned. Several cross-strokes cut perpendicularly across the long principal axis and end up joining the eastbound divergent line; each one represents a specific sin, and all lead similarly in the direction of hell.

When the sermon is over, and the prophet Kenekuk has once again described the spatial and moral coordinates of the world to come, the assembly starts to sing in unison and begins a circle dance. The song is repeated word for word each Sunday. All call on the Great Spirit, begging him to

bless them, and to redeem their hearts, flesh, lives, names, and all humanity. The hymn is sung several times over, and with each repetition the singers advance along the path that leads to heaven: they begin on earth, then progress toward the door of the Father's House; they enter, cross its floor, and finally reach the Great Spirit. Each member of the assembly reads this long litany from a small wooden board that he holds in his hands and upon which the prophet himself has engraved an ordered series of signs.

That same summer, in the Great Lakes region much further north, several Ojibwe groups gather as they do every year, and a small minority among them, known as the Midewiwin Grand Medicine Society, decides to accept the candidacy of a young man who wishes to join their "College." The initiation takes place over several days, in a lodge built expressly for the occasion; the rite alternates between offerings, sweat baths, dancing, singing, and meals. The ceremony reaches its climax when each of the initiated shamans takes up his medicine bag and strikes the novice, who dies and is reborn with each blow: this marks his entry into the secret society. Hidden from uninitiated eyes, he then begins his long apprenticeship, under the tutelage of any initiated members who wish to take part. To be recognized as a true shaman, he must know, on the one hand, an esoteric version of the Midewiwin origin myth and, on the other, a wide variety of healing techniques consisting of a sizable pharmacopeia and a multitude of liturgical incantations. In order to memorize such a complex and abundant body of knowledge, the apprentice will make use of an equally secret inscription technique: his masters will share with him a number of birchbark books that he will need to scrupulously copy, carefully engraving each one of their signs in precise order.

Selective Writing Systems and Total Writing Systems

In this first half of the nineteenth century, at the heart of the North American continent, the prophet Kenekuk and the members of the Midewiwin shamanic society had one thing in common: they had both invented and then disseminated a system of writing. Its function was to stabilize discourses and songs delivered in a ritual context, and it brought them an incontestable form of prestige. Of course, neither case concerns *writing* in the way we most commonly understand this term, and so we will begin our inquiry by proposing a series of definitions.

While human societies have frequently felt the need to develop a wide variety of sign systems—ornamental repertoires, heraldry, signal

codes, or various forms of mathematical notation, for example¹—none of these repertoires was designed to inscribe and stabilize discourse. In this book, we will consider the word *writing* (along with the associated terms *writing system* and *script*) to designate *techniques—and these techniques alone—used for the inscription of discourse*. In everyday speech the term “writing” denotes a closed system of signs used to notate any kind of discourse composed in a given language. This book, for example, makes use of one variant of the Latin alphabet to transcribe discourse produced in the English language. Each of its letters corresponds to one or more sounds of the target language, and, by combining these conventional signs, it is possible to inscribe English discourse in a manner that can then be decoded, or in other words read, by anyone with mastery of the English language and the Latin alphabet. Insofar as signs in these systems refer to sounds, we refer to them as phonographic.

There are, however, numerous writing systems whose repertory of signs is not limited to letters of this kind: Chinese writing, for example, comprises numerous signs that, instead of referring only to sounds, correspond to words—this is why the Chinese writing system contains somewhere between three and five thousand signs that are in common use today. But if we pursue the analysis of these writing systems further, it becomes clear that they never rest solely on the simple notation of words: they always integrate “a level of language analysis designed to designate phonic units alongside morphological ones” (Glassner 2009: 13). Chinese writing is predominantly composed of complex characters that combine several discrete signs, certain of which have clear phonetic values; in this way, every syllable in the Chinese language has at least one graphic transcription. The semiotics of Chinese writing are thus more complicated than those of the Latin alphabet: it is at the same time logographic (it notates words) and phonographic (it notates syllables), and thus is often characterized as a logo-syllabic script (Alleton 2008).

Despite these semiotic differences, Chinese writing and the Latin alphabet should both be considered *total* scripts, which is to say that they allow for the total graphic transcription of any discourse produced in a given language. In the course of human history, total writing systems have been invented only four times: by the Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Chinese, and the Maya, each of whom—apparently independent of each other’s influence—developed limited repertoires of graphic signs that encoded all of the syllables or consonants of their respective languages.

1. Some of which we will be examined over the course of this book.

To these limited repertoires of phonograms, varying numbers of other signs were added to designate certain semantic units (logograms in other words). But the essential innovation had already been made: the virtual means of inscribing any piece of discourse with a finite number of signs. Each of the world's total scripts derives from one of these four original writing systems, including the alphabetic one. All are cases of robust techniques, often extremely stable, which enabled the inscription of discourses that the populations in question wished to transmit or display (DeFrancis and Marshall Unger 1995; Houston 2004c; Trigger 2004; Glassner 2009).

For comparative reasons, in this book I will adopt a concept of writing that extends beyond the limits of these total scripts. My intention is not to treat any and every system of graphic signs as a writing system, but to propose that we consider as writing any repertory of signs that stabilizes the contents of discourse. Among such repertoires, the writing systems studied here can all be classified as *selective* scripts, which is to say that they encode only certain parts of a given discourse. The texts that Kenekuk engraved onto the wooden boards of his followers, in other words, as well as those in the birchbark books of the Midewiwin shamans, were each composed using a selective writing system.

Contrary to the assertions of most historians and linguists who have examined the problem, the difference between total and selective scripts should not be thought of primarily in terms of the relationship between the signs they employ and the sounds of the languages they represent. According to the most common definition of selective writing systems (which are often incorrectly characterized as pictographic), these are scripts that cannot be read without the information they contain having been previously memorized. This remains a negative definition, however, qualifying a selective writing system as a failed total one; it would be more productive to identify the positive principles that govern this kind of scriptural technique. It is certainly true that, while a total writing system can be defined as a limited repertory of graphic signs encoding all of the sound units that comprise its target language, selective writing systems are only marginally concerned with the transcription of these sounds.² But that is not what matters most here. If we wish to understand the functions served by these writing systems, rather than ranking

2. The classic counterexample, which we will return to in this book's conclusion, is the Mixtec selective writing system, which uses the (phonographic) principle of a rebus to encode a number of proper names and toponyms (Smith 1973; Boone 2000).

them, we need to reverse this perspective: to no longer think of selective scripts in relation to total scripts (as vague forerunners, imperfect and incomplete), but to think of total scripts in relation to selective ones.³

The semiotic criterion that we will use in this book to distinguish these two forms of writing is simple: for any given discourse, a total writing system is one that is intended to transcribe it in its totality, while a selective writing system is designed to transcribe only certain parts which have been both rigorously selected and logically ordered. Writing systems that have long been designated as pictographic must therefore be thought of first and foremost as selective writing systems.⁴

What exactly was the relationship between the selective scripts examined in this book and the discourses they transcribed? It should be made clear from the outset that in no case were they intended to inscribe just any act of speech. They targeted only clearly specified types of discourse whose transmission and memorization were considered important. These discourses had to be learned by heart and recited in

-
3. In Chapter 6, we will revisit Edwin James and Henry Schoolcraft's conceptions of what we are calling selective writing systems. Among the earliest authors to take an interest in indigenous North American writing practices from a theoretical point of view, Edward Tylor (1865) and Garrick Mallery (1881, 1893) understood pictographic writing as a primitive and iconic forerunner to phonographic writing systems in which signs were understood to be conventional (arbitrarily associated with sounds). Such theories did little more than elaborate on the traditional opposition between the writing of things and the writing of words (Déléage 2011; Severi 2015: Chapter 2). They did, however, contribute the idea of a progressive evolution of these "means of communication," leading from figurative iconism to pure convention—which allowed them to establish a parallel between pictographic writing and gestural language. The latter, comprised of highly figurative signs, were to spoken language (highly conventional) what pictographic writing was to phonographic writing (Baynton 1996: Chapter 2; Kendon 2004: Chapter 4). While linguists and semioticians since the 1960s have reconceived the study of sign languages from top to bottom, historians of writing systems both before and after Gelb ([1952] 1973) have done little to modify this approach.
 4. Of course no system of writing, not even the International Phonetic Alphabet, is capable of encoding the absolute entirety of a discourse's sound system; but this is not the problem. What matters is that total writing systems do not select the parts of the discourse they are designed to transcribe and that just by reading them, one is easily able to reconstitute the entirety of their target discourses.

specific ceremonial contexts: the dances led by the prophet Kenekuk, for example, or the healing rituals of the Midewiwin. They were therefore already quite carefully structured: having to withstand repeated processes of transmission—from generation to generation in the case of the Midewiwin shamanic society, or from convert to convert in the case of Kenekuk's rite—they took on standardized stylistic forms that facilitated their memorization and acquisition. The most widespread among these stylistic procedures were the ordered sequencing of narrative episodes derived from a common spatial logic, and parallelism, a more complex form of sequencing in which variable terms were inserted into long and tirelessly repeated formulas.⁵ In this book, we will consider several different uses of this type of procedure in the ritual discourses of indigenous North American prophets and shamans.

The selective writing systems developed in these contexts were used to further reinforce the fixity of these kinds of formalized discourses. To this end, they graphically represented (sometimes figuratively, sometimes not) certain key elements of their target discourses: either the names of successive narrative episodes or the names of the variable elements of a parallelist poetic structure. They thus effected a *regulated selection* of the specific parts of the target discourse that were to be inscribed; they inscribed at one and the same time the name of each variable (generally in a logographic, though sometimes phonographic, form) as well as the position of each one in the discursive sequence. As for the parts of the discourse that were not transcribed, they were entrusted to oral memory. Therefore, these selective scripts did indeed constitute a technique for the inscription and stabilization of the contents of a discourse. Unlike total writing systems, they did not encode the totality of their target discourses, but only certain selected parts, together with their sequential order. Furthermore, they were designed to stabilize only a limited number of ritual discourses that were supposed to be learned by heart so as to be recited as precisely as possible. Finally, once this framework was established, they could be quite freely enriched, when necessary, in order to encode other information, absent from the target discourses.⁶

5. These are the most widespread procedures and those most pertinent to the analysis here at hand: other stylistic procedures, likely even more effective ones in terms of stabilization, also organized the contents of these ritual discourses (see, e.g., Rubin 1995).

6. This approach to the semiotics of selective writing systems owes much to the pioneering work of Carlo Severi (1994, [1993] 1996); see also Déléage

Bound Writing Systems

Having established the semiotic distinction between selective and total writing systems, we can further remark that all selective scripts should also be thought of as *bound* writing systems. If we shift our attention from the semiotic foundations of these scripts and toward the modalities of use in which they functioned, it is clear that they were each inseparable from the discourses they were intended to transcribe and, thus it follows, from the ritual institutions that gave these discourses a practical purpose. In this way, bound writing systems are distinct from total scripts, which can be used to transcribe any kind of discourse, ritual or otherwise, and can thus be characterized as *unbound*. This distinction, we should remark, only concerns a writing system's modality of use: the difference between a bound script and an unbound one is not necessarily intrinsic and, as we will see in this book's conclusion, certain total scripts which have the potential to become unbound remain bound for a long period of time, while others remain bound for the entire course of their history.⁷ This criterion, derived from a pragmatic approach to writing systems, thus rests on a necessary or constitutive relationship between a script, a particular discursive genre, and an institution. Each of the bound writing systems described and deciphered in this book belonged to specific, either prophetic or shamanic, ritual institutions.

(2011). A similar definition was suggested by Kramer (1970: 67): "the basic principle of Cuna writing is the renunciation of the notation of irrelevant or redundant text components" (*sic*). His formulation has the shortcoming of only framing the problem in the negative, in contrast to Barthel's (1977: 27): "[partial writing systems] attempted in various ways to graphically set down segments of a richer oral transmission." The notion of "partial writing" developed by DeFrancis (1989) differs profoundly insofar as it concerns the "notation of thought" and not of discourse.

7. To be sure, this distinction between bound and unbound writing systems need not be thought of as any kind of unilinear evolution: bound writing systems have no innate drive to become unbound ones (such an attitude would be one consequence of too quickly assimilating this concept with Goody's notion of *restricted literacy* [1968]). We should note, furthermore, that certain unbound writing systems have become bound ones in the course of their histories, the Batak script (Kozok 2000), for example, or the Cherokee one (Bender 2002); such cases tend to arise in cultural situations where at least two writing systems are in circulation (Cole and Scribner 1981; Unseth 2008).

Selective writing systems fully satisfied the function they were designed for: to stabilize as much as possible certain kinds of discourse that were, in each and every case, also subject to oral transmission. From this point of view, some selective scripts, under specific institutional circumstances that must be accounted for, acquired an indisputable degree of stability comparable to that of many total writing systems. But this does not mean that selective scripts ever became total ones: just as the graphic repertoires of heraldic traditions have no intrinsic tendency to become techniques for stabilizing discourse, selective writing systems were not stages on a path leading to the transcription of a language's entire sound set. Contrary to the more or less tacit presuppositions of most historians and linguists who have recognized the scholarly interest of selective writing systems,⁸ there is no unilinear evolution from selective scripts to total ones. At the very most it might be remarked that certain total scripts took some of their graphic elements from selective scripts, in the same way that sometimes the latter borrowed from the iconographies of preexisting graphic traditions. This does not mean, however, that the only way to conceive of the relation between selective and total writing systems is through any such discredited evolutionary schema. To the contrary, as we will see in the conclusion to this book, which elaborates on the concept of bound writing systems at greater length, a comparison between the modes of use of selective and total scripts may well shed new light on the problem of the origin of all writing systems.

Five Indigenous American Rituals

The first four chapters of this book focus on a series of prophetic movements that each gave rise to the invention of a form of selective writing. These movements each emerged between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries among indigenous populations inhabiting territories that would today correspond to the northeastern United States, the Great Lakes region (on both sides of the US–Canadian border), and the southern part of the Hudson Bay in Canada.⁹ All of the peoples with whom this book is concerned belonged to the Algonquian linguistic

8. The most famous of them being Ignace Gelb ([1952] 1973).

9. From the large number of recent works touching on the history of this region, I have relied most often on White (1991), Dowd (1992), and Havard (2003).

family. But this common linguistic heritage should not mask the fact that the history and cultures of each of these societies—the Montagnais, the Delaware, the Kickapoo, and the Cree—differ on many points. For example, the Montagnais, in 1639, and the Cree, in 1842, formed semi-nomadic hunter societies, while the Delaware, in 1762, and the Kickapoo, in 1872, also practiced agriculture and were more sedentary. What each of these societies had in common, at the time their respective prophetic movements appeared, was their position in relation to the shifting frontier of Euro-American colonial expansion: following the frontier's westward advance, each of the movements studied here will take us one step farther from the Atlantic coast. All of these indigenous societies endured fraught relations with the pioneer front, ranging from violent conflicts to tenuous forms of agreement that would allow for various kinds of commercial and cultural exchange. Still, each of the prophetic movements studied in this book—those of the Montagnais, the Delaware, the Kickapoo, and the Cree alike—were situated on the *other side* of the colonial frontier.¹⁰ From this point of view, while the colonizers' culture may have had some influence on the new rituals developed by the prophets of these movements, the colonizers themselves were never considered participants in them. It is for this reason that the surviving accounts of these ritual institutions are rare and, in most cases, extremely fragmentary.

Generally speaking, all of these Algonquian prophetic movements were failures, in that not one of them succeeded in durably stabilizing the new ceremonial apparatus their founders produced. Most of them lasted no more than a few years, for a multitude of reasons that can only be briefly touched upon in this study. This is why the selective writing systems invented by these prophets disappeared: while there's no doubt that these scripts provided incontestably effective techniques for propagating the discourses they were bound up with, the movements themselves were not to endure.

In the second half of this book, a longer chapter is dedicated to the selective writing systems invented by the shamanic society of another Algonquian people, the Ojibwe. Unlike those of the Algonquian

10. It is for this reason that they remain somewhat beyond the purview of the contemporary historiographical framework of the *middle ground*, which is to say the fragile common ground that conditioned interactions between indigenous peoples and colonizers to some extent until the end of the eighteenth century (White 1991).

prophets, these scripts did acquire an undeniable degree of stability, circulating for at least a century. The ritual traditions of the Ojibwe are fairly well known, having attracted the attention of a number of foreign observers beginning in the early nineteenth century. Another way in which the secret society of Ojibwe shamans differed from the prophetic movements discussed in earlier chapters was that it developed with relatively little influence from the proselytizing of Christian missionaries, who for much of the eighteenth century were largely absent from the region inhabited by the Ojibwe. But the Algonquian prophetic movements did have one thing in common with the shamanic society: a historical point of origin that is more or less clear to us. We know that it was around the close of the seventeenth century that the Ojibwe shamanic society, called the Midewiwin, took on the form that anthropologists would describe in the nineteenth century. Because the origin of these ritual ceremonies is not lost to “ancestral times,” it is possible to think of them together as an ensemble of distinct cultural innovations that were propagated and stabilized in a variety of different ways.

All of the institutions studied in this book—shamanic societies as well as prophetic movements—developed their own rituals. Just as we have done for the writing systems, it will thus be useful at this point to lay out a series of conceptual tools concerning the relevant institutions and their discursive practices. It should be established first of all that, as with any human institution, the practices comprising these rituals (discursive or otherwise) were transmitted at the same time as the rules that stipulated how and why these practices should be transmitted.¹¹ In other words, the Algonquian prophets did not only teach their disciples a series of new ritual practices, they also explained the origin of these practices and why it was necessary to transmit them to others. Furthermore, they had to determine when and where the rituals would take place, who would have access to which liturgical practices, and finally, how exactly they would be transmitted (with what degree of precision)—within the framework of a specialized apprenticeship or, more commonly, in the process of the ceremony itself. The same problem fell upon the Ojibwe shamans of the

11. For anthropologists, the modes of transmission of said rules constitute an extremely complex object of study: it is by no means the case that they are always taught in a dogmatic fashion by accredited specialists. While certain rules are very explicitly transmitted, others are more tacitly apprehended in a variety of different contexts, ranging from informal discussions to simple participation in ceremonies.

Midewiwin, who at the time of a novice's initiation, would have to explain the whys and the hows of the extraordinary practices the newcomer would gradually learn and commit to memory.

When these kinds of institutional rules appear in certain familiar combinations, it becomes possible to recognize the traditional analytic categories that anthropologists call "prophetism" and "shamanism," for both of which it is somewhat futile to establish overly strict definitions. From this point of view, the Algonquian prophetic movements and the Ojibwe shamanic society have as many rules in common as they do that differ. For example, all of their ritual ceremonies invoked at least one supernatural entity they associated with the origin of their specific liturgy and to which they referred when it came to explaining the necessity of a faithful transmission or when dealing with the truth or efficacy of their knowledge or practices. Furthermore, all of the rituals that concern us were organized with some kind of temporal regularity known by all and took place at a well-established place of worship. That said, it was only the prophets who wished to disseminate their new liturgies to the greatest possible number of disciples; the Midewiwin shamans, for their part, closely controlled the recruitment of novices by demanding ever more costly offerings from them. While the prophets would speak to anyone and everyone in an effort to maximize the propagation of their new rituals, the shamans of the Midewiwin secret society constituted a small elite of experts, distinguished from ordinary persons by way of a costly body of esoteric knowledge.

This resulted, as one might predict, in diametrically opposed patterns of distribution: extensive for the prophetic liturgy, restrictive for the shamanic one. The modes of transmission proper to each type of institution were likewise distinct: schooling in the ritual practices taught by the prophets took place in the context of ceremonies that were open to all, while the novice's acquisition of Midewiwin practices unfolded in secret, hidden from ordinary folk, over the course of an initiation ceremony for the eyes of specialists alone. But with all that said, the objectives of the prophets and the shamans converged on some points: they all intended the practices and discourses that they transmitted to be memorized, and for this to be done with great precision, gesture for gesture, word for word. With some historical hindsight, it is clear that only the Midewiwin shamans fully succeeded in making this rule a distinctive characteristic of their institution.

What selective scripts enabled first and foremost was the stabilization of the different ritual discourses associated with these indigenous

American ceremonies. These were discourses that needed to be faithfully memorized and regularly repeated by the appropriate participants—the prophets’ disciples and the novices of the shamanic society. They can be classed according to two genres that were very clearly distinct for all those who took it upon themselves to learn or teach them. First were the *liturgical songs* of salvation, whose purpose was either to hasten the coming of a new world—as in some prophetic movements—or to promote healing or success in hunting—as was the case for most of the rituals studied here. The recitation of these songs thus fulfilled the rituals’ practical purpose. In this discursive genre, the rules for the transmission and distribution of each ritual were quite clear: because each song had been transmitted to humankind by a supernatural entity, it had to be recited by certain people, under specific circumstances, and as accurately as possible.

The other kind of discourse in need of transmission was an *epistemological* one: a discourse explaining in narrative form at least some of the rules that characterized the ceremony in question. It may have taken the form of a vision narrative, as was the case for the prophetic movements studied here, or a mythic one, in the case of the Midewiwin. These discourses contained the explicit epistemology of the ritual, particularly of the songs, as elaborated by those who transmitted them. Typically, discourses of this type would explain the origin of the ritual, why it was necessary for humans to perform it, as well as how, where, and when it should be transmitted going forward. The genre supplies, in short, a normative definition of the ritual’s transmission process.¹² If liturgical songs fulfilled the purpose of the rite, the epistemological discourse explained the underlying conditions that would make such a fulfillment possible.¹³ As we will see, the institutional rules of the rituals studied in this book corresponded quite closely to the epistemological discourses that elucidated them. To be sure, however, this is not always the case: it is possible for an epistemological discourse to contradict certain implicit rules for a ritual’s transmission—when, for example, specialists explicitly deny

12. On the concept of the epistemology of traditional discourses, see Déléage (2009a, 2009b).

13. The duality between liturgical songs and epistemological discourses allows us first and foremost to circumscribe two discursive genres that are quite clearly distinct for those who transmit them. But this distinction should not be essentialized: we will see over the course of this book that liturgical songs always contain some epistemological elements.

having received their expertise from a human master, instead claiming direct acquisition from a supernatural entity. In such cases, they neglect to mention an unspoken rule of transmission for their expertise, generally one that does involve a master and a recognized disciple.¹⁴ In the second half of this book, we will encounter another Ojibwe shamanic institution—rivals of the Midewiwin known as the Jaasakids—whose practices were largely defined by just such a contradiction between their rules of transmission and the stated epistemology of their ritual knowledge.

Nevertheless, the particular characteristics of ritual discourses are highly correlated with the institutional rules that make their transmission possible. With both the liturgical songs and the epistemological discourses, it is thus precisely because they came directly from supernatural entities that it was necessary to memorize them as faithfully as possible, ideally word for word; and it is to a certain extent because of this pressure to memorize them that the ritual songs “mechanically” came to exhibit a number of classic procedures for stabilizing discourse: order transfer, repetition, parallelism, and intersemioticity.¹⁵ As we will also see, because the ritual songs of the prophetic movements discussed here were supposed to be diffused to as many followers as possible, they were necessarily limited in length and strictly obeyed certain formal constraints that would favor their word-for-word memorization. Conversely, it is because the ritual songs of the Midewiwin shamanic society were subject to a long and costly learning process, accessible only to a small circle of experts, that they multiplied to comprise quite vast repertoires, the recitation of which might require whole nights. The epistemological discourses, furthermore, distinguished themselves from one another by the kind of authority in whose name they were transmitted. The prophets acquired their vision narratives from direct experiences of communication with supernatural entities; their disciples, for their part, transmitted the vision narratives between one another by repeating the words of the prophet, and deriving the authority of their epistemological

14. Excellent examples of contradictions between rules for transmission and epistemological discourses can be found in the revelation narratives of numerous Mesoamerican ritual traditions: for example, those of the Totonacs (Ichon 1969: 250), the Nahuas of the Sierra Norte de Puebla (Lupo and Signorini 1989: 178–79; Lupo 1995: 60–71), the Tepehuas (Heiras Rodríguez 2015), or the Tzotzil (Holland 1963: 133–34, 172) and Yucatec Maya (Hanks 2000: 197–217).

15. On these cognitive techniques, see Déléage (2020).

discourse from both the supernatural entity and his human spokesperson, the prophet. The Midewiwin shamans, on the other hand, called upon an ancestral supernatural entity—the Otter or *Minabozho*—whose ancient words they claimed to repeat in narratives that could generally be qualified as myths. In each case, however, these ritual discourses gained in both prestige and authority when they became associated with a form of writing.

Prophetic Writing Systems and Shamanic Writing Systems

Without venturing too far ahead into the coming analyses, it will be useful at this point to sketch out the principal characteristics of the selective writing systems invented by the Algonquian prophets and the Ojibwe shamans of the Midewiwin. They each have one thing in common: they encompass techniques for the inscription of epistemological discourses, on the one hand, and techniques for the inscription of liturgical songs, on the other. In fact, the vision narratives of the prophets and the origin myth of the Midewiwin—in other words, the epistemological discourses associated with each ritual—were inscribed in the form of cosmograms: maps whose different zones corresponded to particular narrative episodes and whose spatial organization coincided with the sequential order given to these episodes in the oral recitation. As for the inscription techniques used for the ritual songs, they were based on the parallelistic structures of their oral targets.

These prophetic and shamanic writing systems nevertheless differed in their degree of complexity, a phenomenon that can be quite easily explained by the particularities of each ritual institution. Insofar as the prophets wished to circulate their new ritual discourses to the greatest possible number of followers, they had to make do with disseminating a restricted number of relatively brief pieces of discourse. The selective writing systems used to transcribe these discourses had to meet this same requirement for ease of transmission (a necessity largely facilitated by the formal characteristics of the target discourses); these scripts were therefore quite rudimentary. The Midewiwin shamans, by contrast, because of their small number and their status as specialists, had enough time at their disposal to transmit much longer and richer repertoires of ritual discourses. The selective writing systems they elaborated were correspondingly disposed to high degrees of complexity, and this distinguished them a great deal from those of the prophets.

Thanks to the wealth of available sources, a close analysis of the institutional conditions within which the Algonquian prophets and the Midewiwin shamans elaborated their writing systems will also provide us an opportunity, first, to bring into view two different contexts in which the invention of a writing system became pertinent and, second, to identify the general characteristics of the particular mode of use that was common to all of these new scripts.

We will see then that the indigenous American prophets invented selective writing systems only when they found themselves in competition with a rival ritual institution, that of the Christian missionaries. In fact, in each of the situations we will examine here, missionaries were leading an evangelical colonial enterprise that, from the indigenous point of view, consisted in propagating ritual discourses to the greatest possible number of people, including the catechism and a variety of prayers of obedience. To this end they relied on the authority of a text, the Bible, that at least in principle engendered the stabilization and propagation of these new discourses. The Algonquian prophets consciously borrowed a number of different elements from Christian rituals, each taking inspiration from the liturgical practices and institutional rules that seemed most pertinent to the composition of his new ceremonial apparatus. They each understood that the proselytic war would be waged on level ground only if they could appropriate both the prestige of the Christian Bible and the capacity of its writing system to stabilize and disseminate discourses. It is in the context of this institutional conflict that the invention of these prophetic writing systems, through mimicry or emulation, must be understood.

Midewiwin shamanism provides us with a second institutional context within which the invention of a writing system could become pertinent. Here, too, it was the differences between two ritual institutions that produced a dynamic conducive to innovation. The Midewiwin developed in parallel with another ritual institution, one that represented a long-standing tradition in Ojibwe society, that of visionary shamanism. The rules governing the transmission of this latter shamanism, whose practitioners were known as the Jaasakid, differ from those of the Midewiwin on numerous essential points. The gradual differentiation between these two institutions, arising over several successive generations, is due solely to the fact of their coexistence. The Jaasakid shamans acquired their ritual knowledge, which was essentially divinatory in nature, from visionary experiences that they freely communicated to the uninitiated public. During these visions, they established special relationships

with supernatural entities who would directly impart their knowledge. In terms of the rules for transmission of their ritual knowledge, the Jaasakid shamans and the Midewiwin were opposed in almost every way. The latter, who never entered into direct contact with supernatural entities, shared with one another reported speech that had been passed down through a long chain of human transmissions and which they had to memorize as precisely as possible. The more the Jaasakid shaman improvised, the more the Midewiwin shaman faithfully repeated long pieces of memorized discourse; even in a social context where oral memory was a highly cultivated faculty, this opposition would eventually pose a real challenge to the mnemonic capacity of the Midewiwin shamans. This endogenous institutional complementarity thus produced a set of dynamic conditions that made the invention of a selective writing system extremely useful to the initiates of the secret society. The considerable effort it would have taken to develop and then disseminate this new writing system was not then spent in vain. As we will see in the conclusion of this book, this kind of institutional configuration is found at the origin of a number of other cases where selective writing systems have been invented.

The institutional conditions that favored the invention of the selective scripts studied in this book thus differ considerably from one another: while the Algonquian prophets responded to the influence of Christian missionaries by imitating their techniques, the Midewiwin shamans accentuated the internal characteristics of their society that distinguished them from visionary shamans. Still, it appears that the writing systems of the Algonquian prophets had an important feature in common with those of the Midewiwin: they were all bound scripts. They were useful only insofar as they enabled the stabilization of specific ritual discourses (and not just any type of discourse) and augmented the prestige and authority of the ritual institutions that ensured their transmission. The Algonquian prophets wished to propagate as faithfully as possible the new ritual discourses they received from their visionary experiences; the Midewiwin shamans needed to standardize a large repertory of ritual songs that had become increasingly difficult to commit to memory. And so, all other things being equal, these prophets and shamans invented their writing systems with a particular purpose in mind, one that was bound up with specific discourses and rituals. This mode of use thus constitutes a sufficient reason to invent a writing system.

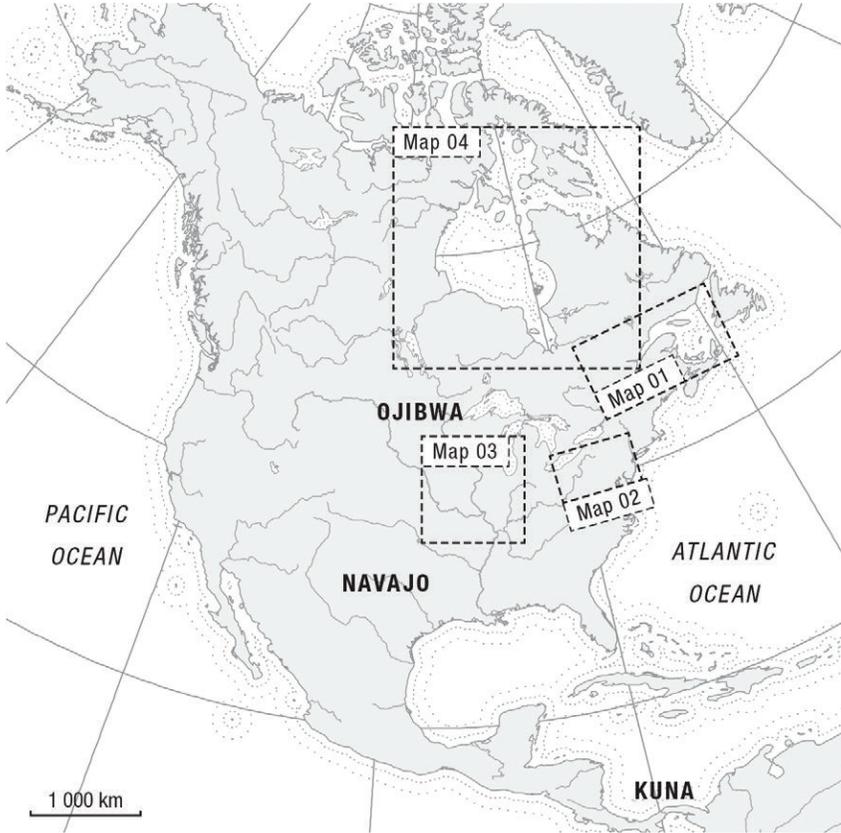
But there is no reason that this particular mode of use should only apply to selective writing systems. Historians of the first total

scripts—Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Chinese, or Maya—have often tended, more or less implicitly, to take for granted the mode of use for which these writing systems were originally intended, as well as the institutional contexts in which this mode of use became pertinent. As a result, the problem of the origin of these systems tends to be handled either by identifying the social conditions in which they appeared, at a particular moment in human history, or looking for graphic precursors that would represent less-evolved forms of the scripts themselves.¹⁶ And yet the amount of effort required to invent a total writing system begs the question of what could motivate such a considerable expenditure. In other words, what specific needs does the invention of a writing system satisfy? For what mode of use was writing originally intended?

We will thus try to show, in the conclusion to this book, that the bound mode of use may have been relevant to a multitude of inscription techniques designed to canonize discourses, whether they were selective, secondary,¹⁷ or even total. From this point of view, it is not inconceivable that studying the invention of selective scripts by the indigenous peoples of North America could significantly reconfigure our understanding of the origin and rise of all major writing systems.

16. Much ink has been spilled over the problem of the origin of total writing systems and a number of more or less complementary perspectives have been explored: inquiries, for example, into the cognitive and linguistic constraints on the graphic and written forms of these systems (see Dehaene 2007 for an overview); interrogations into the iconographic forerunners of written signs (see Glassner 2000, for a brilliant study of the origin of Sumerian writing); as well as attempts to identify the different kinds of social and political formations in which writing first appeared (see Houston 2004a for the current state of this field). All of these factors, cognitive and environmental, are clearly fundamental if what we are trying to understand are the causes of the invention of writing. Nevertheless, for the obvious reason of archival gaps, it is difficult to reconstruct in any great detail the contexts in which the four original total writing systems were invented; we will revisit these problems in this book's conclusion.

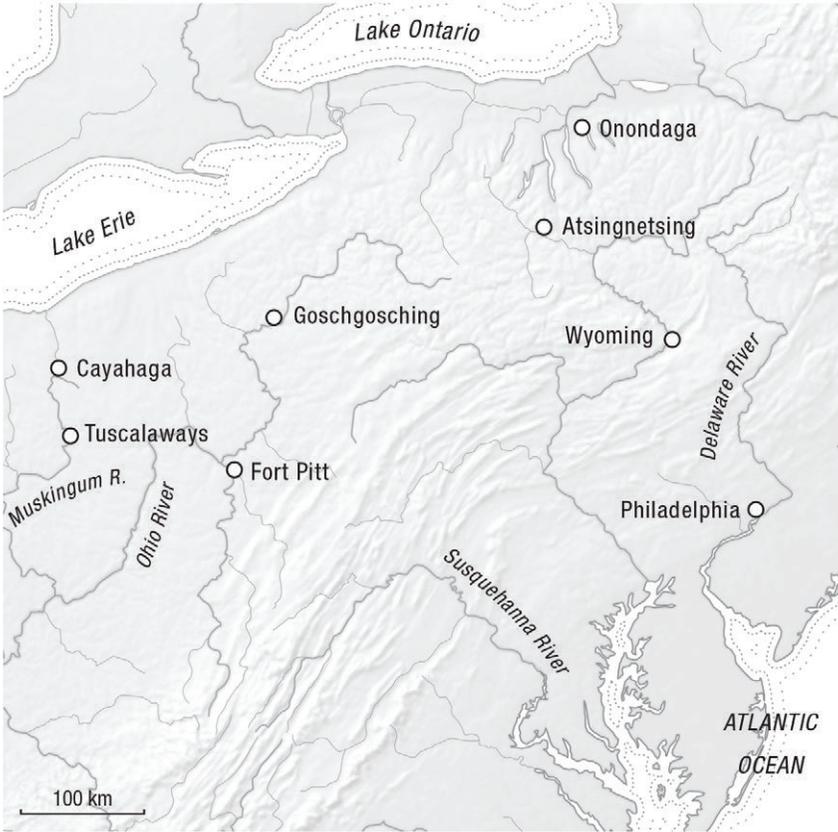
17. For a cursory introduction to secondary writing systems, see Déleage (2009c: 82 ff).



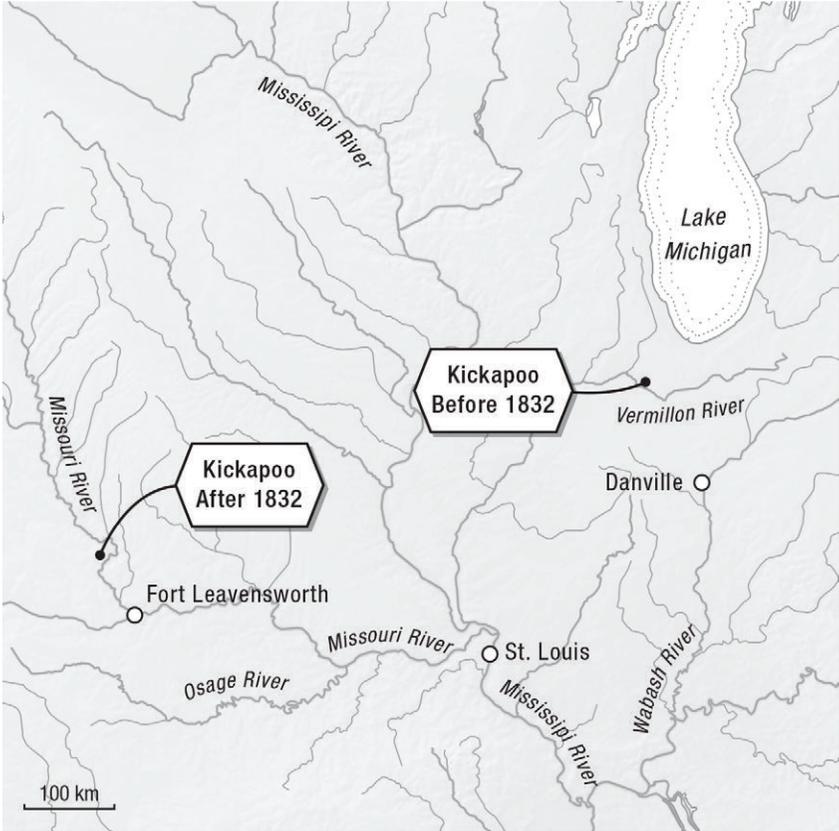
Master map of North America showing areas of maps 1–4.



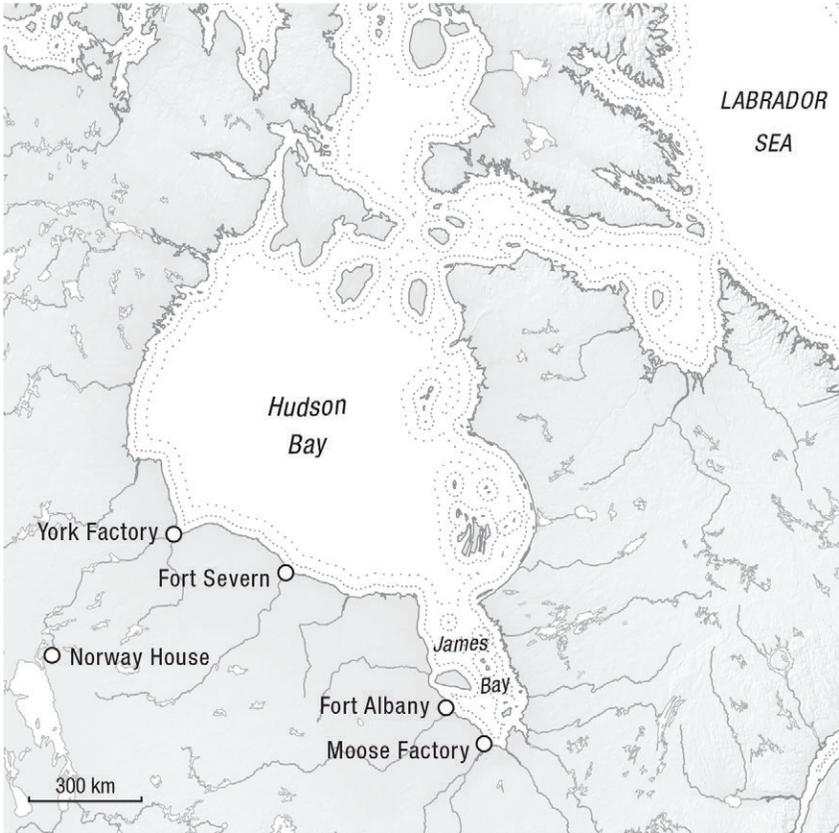
Map 1. The Writing System of Charles Meiaskaouat, Montagnais Preacher.



Map 2. The Great Book of Neolin, Delaware Visionary.



Map 3. Bible of Kenekuk, the Kickapoo Prophet.



Map 4. The Charts of Abishabis and Wasitek, Cree Prophets.

CHAPTER I

The Writing System of Charles Meiaskaouat, Montagnais Preacher

Meiaskaouat's Vision

Sometime around 1640, Charles Meiaskaouat, a humble Montagnais man from the village of Tadoussac, visited the Jesuit mission at Sillery so as to be baptized and then move himself into “one of the houses built on the French plan” (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 24: 55).¹

The Montagnais—or the Innu as they are known today—were at this time a nomadic people belonging to the Algonquian language family and living north of the St. Lawrence River. During the first half of the seventeenth century, their relations with the French colonial authorities had been tense. The latter had taken control of the fur trade, in which the Montagnais had long been involved: they had expelled Protestant traders, were refusing smugglers access to their territory (at least when possible), and were imposing a fixed price on the goods. Furthermore, the French had strengthened their relations with the neighboring Huron, wealthy suppliers of the most difficult-to-obtain furs, which limited the free movement of both the Algonquin and the Montagnais across the region. As a result, it appears that the Montagnais received the English

1. On the topic of Meiaskaouat's marriage a few years later, see Anderson (1991).

quite favorably whenever the latter would advance on the New French territory.

It was this nomadic group's resistance to sedentarization that led the Jesuits to revise their strategy of reduction—limited in this case to the summer months, when the Montagnais would return to the banks of the St. Lawrence—and develop the so-called “flying missions” that would dispatch representatives to various seasonal encampments. But from the 1640s on, the Montagnais seem to have taken a renewed interest in the Catholic missions: some adopted a sedentary way of life, and the number of baptisms increased significantly. The reasons for this shift were, for the most part, unsurprising: selective epidemics, threats from the Iroquois, a growing dependence on French manufactured products, and no doubt certain economic incentives (the baptized enjoyed a better price for furs and were allowed to acquire firearms) (Beaulieu 1990, 2008; Gardette 2008).

It is in this context that the actions taken by Charles Measkaouat should be interpreted. In 1639, “God had touched him mightily”:

He related to us that, being one day in the woods, he saw a man clothed like us, and he heard a voice which said to him: “Forsake thine old ways: lend an ear to these people, and do as they do; and, when thou shalt be instructed, teach thy Countrymen.” “I do not know,” said he, “if it were the voice of the great Captain of heaven, but I saw and conceived great things.” In the beginning, I took all this talk for the reverie of a Savage; and I passed more than a year without giving any other thought to it than that which I would have given to a dream. But, at length—seeing that this artless man exerted himself to imitate us, as nearly as was possible for him according to his nature, and seeing his ardor in espousing and proclaiming the faith, whatever it might be, of that vision or dream—I believed that these good effects could only proceed from the grace of Jesus Christ. As soon as he had heard that voice, he abandoned of his own accord—without speaking to us, for he was far distant from us—all the follies of his Nation, the eat-all feasts, and the superstitious chants; he even gave up indifferent things, like painting his visage, anointing his body, hair, and face, after the manner of other Savages; he left off tobacco, to which the Savages are devoted beyond all that can be said. He began to preach to his own people, saying that they must believe in God, that they must give ear to us, and must make the sign of the Cross—“This,” said he, “is all that I know.” He did this at every turn, without pronouncing another word, not having yet been instructed. He spoke

so well to the savages of Tadoussac and to some of the Sagné region, that they commissioned him to come to Kebec for some Father of our Society, “that he might teach them the prayers”—it is thus that they spoke. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 20: 185–87)

To begin with, then, Charles Meiaskaouat received a revelation in the form of a “vision” or “dream.” The details of this experience are largely unknown to us, only that it involved a direct interaction between Meiaskaouat and the Captain of Heaven, and that the Black Robes (the Jesuits) played an important role in it. The vision provided Meiaskaouat with both the narrative and the principles he would then go on to circulate among his own people. And while on the whole these principles appeared to be in perfect continuity with those of the Catholic missionaries, they were subject to a thoroughly Montagnais process of selection. It is also very likely that Meiaskaouat communicated other principles with no obvious relation to Catholicism, and that the Jesuit cited above preferred to omit from his *Relation*.

Meiaskaouat’s insistence on certain aspects of the missionaries’ practices above others is revealing in this regard: he would make the sign of the cross on any occasion without saying a word and he demonstrated a particular interest in learning Catholic prayers (which the Jesuits had translated into Montagnais). In both cases, the preacher was trying to appropriate the ritual techniques of the missionaries, whom he no doubt thought of as something like French shamans (Beaulieu 1990: 89–94). He even managed to bring some of his fellow Montagnais around to his reasons for learning these new, foreign songs; the missionaries’ prayers were in fact often regarded as something akin to shamanic chants and, like the latter, were thought to bring good luck in hunting and promote healing.

An anecdote pertaining to the neighboring Algonquin population, recorded in 1639, provides us with a telling example of this last point:

One of the petite Nation of the Algonquins—having been present at the prayers, and heard the singing of the Litanies of the attributes of God—impressed these so fully on his mind that he asked for them in writing. When this was granted to him, he highly valued the paper containing them. [...] Having returned to his own country, he assembled his neighbors every day in a large cabin, hung this paper to a pole, and all stood around it, singing what they knew of these Litanies, all crying out to God: “Chawerindamawinan, have pity on

us.” God took pleasure in their entreaty, for the disease that afflicted them entirely disappeared. When this poor man came back to see our Fathers, he brought the paper with him; and, as he had to spend the winter in the woods to procure his supply of Elk meat, he asked for another, which he regarded with the same veneration. [...] Afterward, when he came back to our Fathers, he told them that nothing had failed him, and that God had given him abundance. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 16: 43–45)

This anecdote very clearly demonstrates how this anonymous Algonquin man could recognize a perfect continuity between the translated Catholic prayers and the shamanic songs of his own tradition—both for healing purposes, as in the first instance, and for securing success in hunting, as in the second. The role of the paper on which the prayer was written should by no means be underestimated. The Algonquin would have almost certainly considered it an equivalent to the pieces of selective script used by their own shamans (Beaulieu 1990: 92–93; Déléage 2009c: 65) and it would have provided a precedent for Meiaskaouat to expand on over the following years. Indeed, the Montagnais preacher was quick to understand the importance of associating the diffusion of his new beliefs with an effective technology of transmission. As we will see, his two favorite techniques were calendars and selective writing systems.

The Ritual Calendar

By 1640, Meiaskaouat had already begun his career as a preacher, yet the *Jesuit Relations* of that year make no reference to him. They do include, however, the earliest mention of a calendar used by the Montagnais, only here it is the missionaries themselves who take credit for it:

The snow being rather deep, our Savages went into the woods to provide themselves with Elk meat; as they were to be gone a long time, we gave the Christians a calendar, that they might know the Sundays, so that they could make their prayers somewhat longer on those days. Now as they can neither read nor write, we had distinguished the days and the months and the Feasts by different Marks. Giving them this paper at random as it were to see if they could use it, I assure you that we were greatly astonished upon their return; for when they

came to see us, after having thanked God in the Chapel, they brought us their paper, and said, “See if have counted wrongly; there is the day where we think we are,” they continued. They were not mistaken by a single day. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 18: 167)

While this might seem like a relatively anodyne passage from the Relation, it takes on a very particular significance when read alongside a series of further excerpts. In an entry from the following year, we learn that it was in fact Charles Meiaskaouat who first requested these calendars.

He came to us to ask for a paper, begging us to mark all the days upon it. “Mark,” said he, “the feast days, the working days, the days when meat is not eaten, the fast days; the days when you yourselves fast, and not the Companions”—it is thus they call the workmen; “for I wish to do exactly as you do.” Having given him this paper, he observed very well the difference of the days. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 20: 189)

What mattered most to the Montagnais preacher was the use of the calendar to determine the days on which he was supposed to fast and pray: to him, the violation of these prescriptions seemed to represent the gravest of sins (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 22: 43–47; vol. 24: 57–59). Three years later, the Montagnais calendars² had become a “habit”:

They are in the habit of asking for a paper, or a Calendar to distinguish the days that are honored—thus they call the Sundays and Festivals. They therefore said that it was their custom on those days to spread out and expose to view a fine, large picture in the best cabin; to light two tapers, as we do in our Chapels; to meet all together, and to sing Hymns and Canticles; to say their prayers aloud; to recite their rosary, and to listen to those who sometime spoke to them of prayer—that is, of the doctrine of Jesus Christ. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 26: 130–33)³

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2. The Montagnais called them *massinabigan*, which is to say “book” (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 24: 75), while the missionaries, in addition to “calendar,” used the terms “catalogs” (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 29: 110) and “almanacs” (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 31: 232).
 3. See also, from the same year, 111–15.

There are a few keys to fully understanding this passage. “Those who sometime spoke to them of prayer” are without doubt Meiaskaouat and the two headmen who became his disciples⁴; these “three heads of families,” as the Jesuit described them, were “so zealous to be instructed that they wearied us” (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 20: 193). Also of note is the coordinated use of these paper calendars with rosaries; it may be that during this initial period the use of the former was reserved for the preacher, while the latter were distributed among the rest of the population. The Jesuits did in fact distribute a great number of rosaries during this period among the Huron, to whom they introduced “the custom of wearing their rosaries around their necks as a sign of their Faith” (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 26: 287), as well as to the Algonquin and the nomadic Montagnais, who would surely have noted the resemblance between these rosaries and the porcelain necklaces, or *wampum*, worn by the Huron and Iroquois (Déléage 2009c: 35–37, 56–61), a useful contextual clue when it comes to interpreting Charles Meiaskaouat’s first attempt at proselytizing to an Algonquian group that neighbored his own:

He was not infrequently heard exhorting the Savages to follow our customs: “Cast your eyes,” he said to them, “on the principal Frenchmen, on the Captains, on the Fathers—they are the ones we must imitate. If there is any Companion who does not walk straight, we must beware of him; they do not all know the Massinahigan,” that is, the Book which teaches how one must conduct himself properly. As soon as he was touched by God, seeing the Savages of the Sagné come to Tadoussac, he went to visit them, and exhorted them to embrace the faith, of which he had scarcely any knowledge; and since presents are the language of this country, he offered them a great porcelain collar, that he might win them to believe in our Lord. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 20: 191–93; vol. 21: 102)

The Book of Superstitions

Thus, in the space of a few years, the calendars that Meiaskaouat requested from the Jesuits each summer were fully assimilated into the ritual life of the Montagnais. But this was not all: as early as 1641, it seems the

4. One of whom was almost certainly his own brother, Eustache Koukinapou (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 22: 95–99).

preacher was no longer satisfied with the use of calendars and rosaries as techniques for memorizing and transmitting his new beliefs.

I have seen, among others, Charles, of whom I am now speaking, struggle so hard to remember his prayers, that it caused him great drops of sweat, in rather cold weather. [...] He wrote, or rather he made marks upon bark, to impress upon his mind what he had been taught. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 20: 193)

It was in this manner that the preacher transcribed the *Pater Noster*, the *Ave Maria*, and the *Credo* at the time of his baptism (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 20: 193). If Meiaskaouat thought of this rite as a kind of shamanic initiation, it is not surprising that he would have expected it to involve learning a series of prayers by heart, on the one hand, and their selective transcription on a roll of bark, on the other. This is, in any case, the first known example of the use of a selective writing system—most likely derived from a traditional practice conceived in a shamanic context—to encode Catholic religious discourses. At the time then, this innovation must have been understood both as an equivalent to the written texts of the missionaries (and hence its name, *Massinahigan*, which can also mean “Book”) and as an adaptation, for the transcription of new discourses, of an iconographic or selective technique previously used in Montagnais shamanic practices.⁵ Though the principles of this form of writing remain largely unknown to us, it would attain a great deal of success among several of the region’s indigenous populations—a development that took shape quite independently of any influence from the missionaries, who showed little to no interest in it.

Until this point, the Jesuits’ contact with the Montagnais had been limited to the group’s yearly visits to the residence at Sillery; any knowledge they had of what went on at the group’s winter encampments would have necessarily come from Meiaskaouat and those close to him. The situation changed significantly when a flying mission, led by Father Jacques Buteux, was dispatched to Tadoussac. There, Buteux became more familiar with Montagnais customs, both old and new, and from this more frequent point of contact emerged a new technique for transmitting the catechism. Though much more detailed than many of the descriptions we have reviewed thus far, Buteux’s account is once again

5. On the use of writing and books by missionaries in New France, see Déléage (2009c: 50–54); and for a more general scope, Gardette (2008).

entirely decontextualized, to such an extent that is difficult to determine the origin—native or missionary—of the technology in question.

The Father, when obliged to separate from these good Neophytes, left them five Books, or five Chapters of a Book, composed after their manner; these Books were no Other than five sticks variously fashioned, in which they are to read what the Father has earnestly inculcated upon them.

The first is a black stick, which is to remind them of the horror that they must have for their innovations and their former superstitions.

The second is a white stick, which marks for them the devotions and the prayers which they shall say every day, and the manner of offering and of presenting to God their minor actions.

The third is a red stick on which is written that which they are to do on Sundays and on Feasts—how they are to assemble in a great cabin, hold public prayers, sing spiritual Songs, and above all, listen to the one who shall keep these Books or these Sticks, and who will give the explanation of them to the whole assembly.

The fourth is the Book or the stick of punishment, therefore it is wound with little ropes. This book prescribes the manner of correcting the delinquents with love and charity: to their fervor must be granted what is reasonable, and the excesses to which they are easily inclined must be cut off.

The fifth book is a stick notched with various marks, which signifies how they are to behave in dearth and in plenty—the recourse which they must have to God, the thanks givings that they must render him, and the hope which they must always have in his goodness, especially as regards eternity.

These poor people, withdrawing into their forests, usually separate themselves into three bands; the Father has given to the chief of each squad these five Books, or these five Chapters, which contain all that they must do. It is a truly innocent pleasure to see these new Preachers hold these Books or these sticks in one hand, draw forth a stick with the other, and present it to their audience with these words “Behold the stick or the Massinahigan”—that is to say “the book of the superstitions,” “our father has written it himself. He tells you that it is only the Priests who can say Mass and hear Confessions; that our drums, our sweatings, and our throbbings of the breast are inventions of the manitou or of the evil spirit, who wishes to deceive us;” and so of all those other Books of wood, which serve them as well as the most gilded volumes of a Royal Library. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 29: 139–43)

Father Buteux gave himself credit for inventing these “Books of wood”—“that is to say, tokens which were to serve as topical memorandums for the Principal persons” (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 31: 233)—acknowledging, all the same, that they had been composed “after their manner.” Though it is indeed quite likely that he exerted some influence over their fabrication, it is certain that the origin of these sticks lay, on the one hand, in a traditional Montagnais technique that also involved notched (or “marked”) sticks and, on the other, in the selective writing system that Meiaskaouat derived from various shamanic practices. Indeed, one of these sticks (the red one) performed the same function as the paper calendar that the Jesuits had previously distributed to the Montagnais; in this light, the enthusiasm Meiaskaouat and his followers showed for this particular Catholic artifact may well have been inspired by the existence of a similar kind of time-counting technology that was already familiar to them. Furthermore, since some of the sticks were covered with “tokens” (or *marques* in Buteux’s French) and given that, as we shall see, Buteux had some knowledge of Meiaskaouat’s new selective script, it is highly probable that these “Books of wood” had their real origins in the Montagnais preacher’s own efforts—whether they represent exact copies of Meiaskaouat’s work or the Jesuit father’s attempt to systematize it.

The Propagation of Charles Meiaskaouat’s Selective Writing System

Charles Meiaskaouat was a talented proselytizer for his version of the Catholic religion. Not long after his initial vision, around 1639, he left to preach among other nomadic Algonquian groups (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 20: 193), who would gradually draw closer to the Jesuit missions and pay them frequent visits. It was during one of these stays at Sillery, in 1642, that Father Buteux first discovered the new Catholic writing system. The Montagnais preacher had not been satisfied with the kind of religious oratory a missionary would have performed and had instead transmitted to his followers what he considered the most salient features of this Catholic shamanism: the prayers and the technique of selectively transcribing them.

When the Father was explaining some point, each one would note it on his fingers, as soon as he opened his lips. It was a pleasure to see them all raise their hands in the air, and bend their fingers, according

to the number of the propositions that he made; and as that was not quite sufficient to aid the memory, most of them would paint or draw marks on pieces of bark, with red paint. At last, they persuaded the Father himself to represent on a paper what he had to explain to them. He would therefore make certain marks or characters, which signified the meaning of these things; each one, seeing the paper fastened aloft in the cabin, devoured it with his eyes; the Father, with a stick, would show them what each character or figure meant. After he had spoken, those who thought they had understood would take the stick; and, repeating, would do like those who explain enigmas. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 24: 95–97)⁶

It is easy to recognize here Meiaskaouat's selective writing system and the particular way he used it in the services he delivered among the region's indigenous populations. Without necessarily knowing it, Father Buteux adopted a technology which the Montagnais preacher had developed two years earlier. And just like the Montagnais of Tadoussac, this Algonquian group visiting the mission in 1642 also demanded paper calendars from the Jesuits (at the urging of their "captain," Paul Oueta-mourat) and used them in the same manner (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 29: 110; vol. 31: 232).

When in 1651, almost ten years later, Father Buteux left his residence to pay his first visit to this group's territory, he found a multitude of techniques for memorizing religious discourses in use there, and these appeared already quite stable:

In order to remember their sins, they brought various tokens, which served them instead of writing: some had small sticks of various lengths, according to the number and grievousness of their sins; others marked them upon bark, with longer or shorter lines, according as they considered them more or less serious; others on some white and well-dressed Moose or Caribou skin, as they would have done on

6. The same scene is outlined a few pages earlier, where the selective writing system is presented as a properly indigenous technique: "When the father began to instruct them, they would count the points and the questions on their fingers; but, the number coming to exceed that of the fingers, they would mark them on a piece of bark, making certain figures which represented for them the sense of some clause; they would apply themselves with great intensity to understand it and retain it, and then to teach it to the others" (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 24: 83).

paper; others still made use of the beads of their rosaries. But those who marked down their sins every day on their calendars, and who confessed themselves by thus running over these for a year, caused me much surprise. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 37: 41)

As we can see, a whole battery of technologies had been pressed into service to count and classify their sins: small sticks, marks made on bark or skin, rosary beads, and paper calendars. This is the only example we know that sheds some light on the way the Montagnais used their calendars for counting sins: as we see here, the technique was in full continuity with traditional forms of computation.

But this was not the only Algonquian group to adopt the rules, discourses, and technologies that Meiaskaouat was circulating. In 1643, four years after he received his initial vision, the preacher visited the Abenaki, on the other side of the St. Lawrence River, and spent the entire winter “efficaciously preach[ing] the law of God” (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 24: 61). The following year, an Abenaki delegation paid a visit to the Jesuits at Sillery, who were surprised to see that the members of this group, who had never before met a Catholic missionary, “already knew the Prayers and the Catechism, having learned them from Charles Meiaskaouat” (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 25: 119).

Two years later, the Jesuit Gabriel Druillettes was sent on a new mission to the Abenaki, a group to which he would regularly return and eventually remark, in 1652, that they had adopted Meiaskaouat’s catechetical writing system.

Some would write their lessons after a fashion of their own, using a bit of charcoal for a pen, and a piece of bark instead of paper. Their characters were new, and so peculiar that one could not recognize or understand the writing of another—that is to say, they used certain signs corresponding to their ideas: as it were, a local reminder, for recalling points and articles and maxims which they had retained. They carried away these papers with them, to study their lessons in the quiet of the night. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 26: 27)

And when, twenty years later, the same Abenaki came to seek refuge at the Sillery mission—driven north by the Iroquois and the English—the Jesuit Jacques Vaultier could not help but notice the relative stability of their technique, without their receiving any instruction from the missionaries.

... on account of [Chief Pirouakki's] advanced age and of his being unable to remember the prayers as easily as he would have wished, he had invented a kind of writing to assist his memory. For he made on paper a sort of figure, known to him alone, which represented to him, for instance, the 1st Request of the *Pater noster*; another, the 2nd; and so On. He held that paper constantly, night and day; and repeated in a loving manner, and as if he were Diverting himself, the prayer that he had written down, the better to Impress it upon his memory. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 60: 241–43)

The story of the propagation of Charles Meiaskaouat's selective writing system was thus recorded in the missionaries' accounts without their knowing it. On each of their encounters with this technique, they saw little more than an idiosyncratic innovation. And yet it remains possible to reconstitute its principal lines of diffusion. The selective writing system's adaptation to the catechism and the Jesuits' prayers quite clearly seems to have been an invention of Meiaskaouat's that took shape between 1639 and 1641. He taught it to a neighboring Algonquian group in this same period—either along the Saguenay River, at Tadoussac, or at Sillery—such that they themselves were using it as early as 1642. Finally, during his own mission of 1643, Meiaskaouat also transmitted his new technique to the Abenaki, who were still using it in 1652 when it came to the attention of Druillettes. This catechetical script—along with the calendars marked on paper and wood—is the earliest known example of a writing system invented by an indigenous person of North America.⁷ And as the following chapters will show, it was by no means an isolated case.

7. The *Jesuit Relations* make no reference to Charles Meiaskaouat after 1644 (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 25: 175–76), at which time he attempted to return to the Abenaki, amidst an ongoing war with the Iroquois and the English.

CHAPTER 2

The Great Book of Neolin, Delaware Visionary

July 5, 1754—The Susquehanna River—An Indian Book

Early in the summer of 1754, the Moravian missionary John Martin Mack set out from the Gnaddenhütten Mission to visit the native villages of the Wyoming Valley, on the banks of the Susquehanna River.¹ In the course of his brief expedition, Mack learned that the Mohican and Delaware members of his flock had just received a message from the Iroquois, directing them to send an embassy to the village of Onondaga to settle territorial questions and obtain authorization for receiving religious instructors.² He also met an “Indian” who convinced him of the avid interest of the region’s indigenous peoples in the word of what this man called the “true God” (Johnson 1894: 53)³:

He had with him an Indian Book, which he claimed contained everything: everything that they should know about God, about the world, about Men, about deer, about hunting and about other things.

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1. On the Moravian missions in North America, see Loskiel (1794), Gray (1956), Merritt (2003), and Wheeler (2008: 84–93).
 2. On the relations between the Iroquois and the indigenous peoples of the Delaware, Susquehanna, and Ohio river valleys, see Miller (1974), White (1991), Dowd (1992, 2002), and Schutt (2007).
 3. See also Loskiel (1794, vol. 2: 153–54).

This book was probably written by an Indian who had learnt to read and write from missionaries and had then turned back to paganism.⁴

Here, then, is the first mention of an “Indian book” encountered by a European in this part of the American Northeast. Which group this man belonged to—the Delaware? the Mohicans? the Nanticoke?⁵—we will never know. What form did this book take? What did it contain? Did it use Latin script, as the second part of Mack’s account would suggest, or was it comprised exclusively of drawn figures, as the first part seems to imply? Was it the native man himself or the missionary who referred to this document as a “book”? What was it used for? None of these questions will ever be answered. But these few lines from Mack do at least provide a point of departure—though an admittedly enigmatic one—for the project of this chapter: to assemble from a few fragmentary accounts a chronology of the books produced by this region’s indigenous peoples.

July 24, 1754—Onondaga—A Nanticoke Letter

It was only three days earlier that two other Moravian missionaries, Frederick Post and David Zeisberger, had arrived at the Iroquois village of Onondaga, already well known to them. On July 23, when the chiefs had inquired as to their reason for being there, the missionaries explained to them that they had not come to steal their land and that they only wished to learn their language, so as to introduce them to the words of the Creator. The chiefs accepted the porcelain belt, or *wampum*, that Zeisberger offered as a token of sincerity.

On July 24, Frederick Post described the following event in his journal:

The chiefs met in our house, and held long consultations over many belts and strings of wampum, especially on one which had been sent by the Nanticoke, about excessive drinking among the Indians, and representations, both verbal and in writing were made,

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4. Cited in German in Merritt (2003: 125–26); translation slightly altered by present translators. See also Loskiel (1794, vol. 2: 154).
 5. On the complex ethnonymy of the region, its historicity, and the importance of not essentializing it, see Dowd (2002: 22–53).

praying them to take measures tending to stem this tide of evil. Thereupon council was dismissed. Toward evening they again met, and brought with them eight or nine women. The women usually bring in the supplies of rum, therefore they should be interested listeners also.

The arguments of the Nanticokes were as follows: It is quite evident that there are now so few Indians, where there had been so numerous formerly. The cause of this falling off is their use of too much rum. Let the Indians try to do without rum but four years even, and they will be astonished at the increase of population, and at the decrease of diseases and early death. All this is the result of rum drinking, which is also the primary cause of famine among them, caused by their not planting their crops at the proper time.

Their arguments were also accentuated by a letter, written on wood with black paint, in which one stroke represents God; a second a city; a third the Devil; a fourth hell, etc., etc., showing that it is of no use for a man to do his drinking in secret, hiding his liquor in the woods or some such place, and to say to some good friend: "Come with me to such or such a place; there I have some rum and we will have a spree." (Beauchamp 1916: 199–200)⁶

It is possible that this wooden letter from the Nanticoke was the same "Indian book" that John Martin Mack had encountered two weeks earlier in the Wyoming Valley, a region historically controlled by the Iroquois and thus naturally tied to the village of Onondaga. While the missionaries in both cases spoke of "writing," their descriptions are vague enough to suggest that the term is only being used in the most general sense. It seems that these two series of figures—God, world, men, game, in the first case; and God, city, devil, hell, in the second—could only be said to constitute a form of writing insofar as they were systematically related to a visionary and moralistic piece of discourse that they transcribed, or rather "accentuated." It is just as plausible to imagine, in slight anticipation of the arguments to come, that it was the indigenous persons themselves who used the terms "writing," "book," and "letter" when referring to these inscriptions.

The Iroquois council convening that day at Onondaga failed to reach a consensus on the matter: the message, as well as its remarkable material support, were set aside. A few weeks later, the war between the English

6. See also Loskiel (1794, vol. 2: 155–56).

and the French, among others, raged through the entire region,⁷ posing a major obstacle to the missionary endeavors of the Moravians and putting a halt to their accounts of these early books of the region's native peoples.

June 2, 1760—The Susquehanna River—An Old Delaware Priest's Book of Images

During the summer of 1760, Teedyuscung, "King" of the Delawares, along with the Moravian missionary Frederick Post and the militia lieutenant John Hays, embarked on a new diplomatic mission to the Ohio Valley to rally the peoples of the region behind the governor of Pennsylvania.⁸ The three of them had been staying in the Delaware village of Atsingnetsing, one of several stops on their itinerary, for just over a week when John Hays wrote the following in his journal:

[...] the old Preast Goes Round the houses Every Morning and Eveng Sayes Sum Sort of Prayers and he hase A Book of Pickters whish he Maid him Self and there is Heaven and Hell and Rum and Swan hak and Indiens and Ride Strokes for Rum and he would Read Like Mad of it in the Morning and Sing to the Sune Rising. (Grumet 1999: 73)

Its rudimentary syntax aside, Hays's description brings a degree of precision that was absent from our previous accounts: while the artifact in the old priest's possession is again spontaneously referred to as a "book" that one could "read," Hays immediately adds that it is comprised entirely of images. Some of them seem to sketch out a kind of map, situating objects in relation to one another: heaven and hell, natives and whites (which, in this context, is how the term "swan" should be understood). Others are apparently no more than simple strokes: was their exact number significant? Did they represent the "sins" of Indians, rum being the foremost example? What matters most in this account is perhaps the relationship it presumes between this "book" and the priest's "songs": a ritual discourse that appears to be inscribed in a document, a

7. Among the best treatments of this war are White (1991) and Dowd (2002).

8. On Teedyuscung, see Wallace (1949).

phenomenon remarkable enough among the indigenous peoples of this region for the militiaman to bother making a note of it. The description of this character continues in Hays's entry for the next day:

The Preast of the Town he keepes count of the Week for the Hole Town and he Workes 5 Days and Keepes the 6 Day and they way That he ceepes count he has A Litel Stick with 12 holes in it and He Putis it up A hol Every Morning and he Reades his Picter Book till Noon and then Gose to his Work A Gain. (Grumet 1999: 77)

The Delaware ritual expert thus rounded out his collection of mnemonic devices with a calendar, in much the same way that Charles Meiaskaouat, the Montagnais preacher, coupled the use of calendars with the selective transcription of prayers. In both cases there is the desire to identify the day of the week on which a ceremony should take place: while Meiaskaouat adopted both the written calendars and the seven-day week of the Jesuit missionaries, the "old Delaware priest," more than a century later, used a local technique (a stick with a series of holes in it) to measure either a six- or twelve-day week. Each day, moreover, was marked by a hole in the calendar that corresponded to a recitation of the ritual discourse "contained" in the "book of images." It was most likely on the sixth or twelfth day of this calendrical system that the great collective ceremony took place under the priest's direction.⁹

9. This Delaware calendar was more or less just as likely derived from local traditions (see in Grumet 2001: 29–30; note William Penn's 1638 account of the importance of the number twelve for the Delaware—which contradicts the hypothesis posed in Kinietz 1940a) as from missionary influences, principally Catholic (Darlington 1893: 39; note the excerpt from the *Journal* of Christopher Gist, 1751: "one of Them went and brought Me his Book (which was a Kind contrived for Them by the French in which the Days of the Week were so marked that by moving a Pin every Morning they kept a pretty exact Account of the Time) to shew Me that He understood Me"; Butler Hulbert and Schwarze 1912: 56, see account by David Zeisberger: "The Indian visited me again on the 29th and I made him an Indian calendar, so that he might know when it was Sunday, for he was baptized at Gachnawage, in Canada, by a Frenchman"). Generally speaking, many of the native peoples of North America developed calendar technologies and their relationship to various systems of European origin remain difficult to pin down. One of the earliest accounts of these techniques comes from the Algonquians of Virginia, published in 1681 by

For in fact, a few days prior to June 2, the village of Atsingnetsing had hosted a large assembly of indigenous peoples from the region who, in the words of Frederick Post, wished to “revive an Old quarterly Meeting which had been many Years laid aside, in which they related to each other their Dreams and Revelations every one had from his Infancy, and what Strength and Power they had received thereby” (Grumet 1999: 56). The ceremony had been conducted by the “old priest” over May 24–25, through day and night; in their hostile descriptions, Post and Hays speak of body paintings, dances around the ceremonial house, chanting, howling, recitations of visionary experiences, sun salutations, ceremonious handshakes, and collective meals.¹⁰ In fact, the ceremony was quite

John Lederer, in which he described “certain hieroglyphic wheels which they call in their language *Sag Ko Ko K. Ouejacasong*, which means the memory of the gods. These wheels consist of 60 sections, each of which represents one year, as if they had wished to mark the age of sixty years which is ordinarily the span of a man’s life. These wheels are painted on skins which their principal priests keep in their temples. They mark in each section the memorable things which have happened during one year by a hieroglyphic figure. Thus, in a village called Pommæomek, Mr. Lederer has seen one which had nothing savage about it, because on the section which marked the year of the first arrival of the Europeans in this country there was depicted a swan which expelled smoke and fire from its beak. The whiteness of the plumage of this bird and the water on which it always was, denoted the whiteness of the face of the Europeans and their arrival in Virginia from the sea, and they had made the smoke and fire in the beak of that bird to signify the firearms used by the Europeans” (Feest 1975: 150–59).

10. Both Post and Hays left descriptions of the event. Post’s account: “24th. It was a very fine Day, & about 9 o’Clock they began their grand Festival, which afforded us an opportunity of seeing their Stupid & Tragical way of Worship. Their Priests or Conjurers, with about 10 Women, went first into the Woods to paint themselves according to their different Characters, their whole Bodies were painted all over with various Colours, some with the Addition of Rattle Snakes, some with Squirrils, others with Tree Birds & Thus adorned, or rather disfigured, they came all in a Row into the Town singing as they went e.g. One of them began singing : “I saw two English Birds flying together in Love”, which all the others repeated again 4 Times, after which they went in Procession 4 Times round the Meeting House & then turning their Faces toward Sun rise; hollowing; all together as long as they had any Breath; Then they shook Hands with one another & call’d all the People to enter the House with them, where they

continuous with the *canticos*¹¹ or *kentekey* traditions (Butler Hulbert and Schwarze 1912: 29), Delaware ritual actions that have since been well documented, with the possible addition of a few new elements (handshakes, for example)—though clear-cut distinctions of this kind are not really possible, nor necessarily that interesting, to draw in such cases.

Six years separate the Nanticoke “writings” representing God and hell from this Delaware book, in which heaven and hell return, but are now overlaid by an opposition between native peoples and whites (the “swans”). The question of alcohol figured in both cases, and both provided a platform for moralizing discourses, which seem clearly to have had some kind of eschatological tenor. In the Delaware priest’s case, these discourses took on a marked ceremonial dimension: “prayers” needed to be recited, or “read,” every morning, as he made the rounds of the village houses. While the priest led a ceremony that was on the whole rather traditional in the Delaware context, the fact that his vision narrative took

continued Walking, Singing & hollowing the whole Day & Night untill 6 oClock in the Morning, when a Certain Spirit came over them & many Wept Bitterly. 25th. In the Morning the whole Company came out & stood in a Row towards Sun-rise lifting up their Hands towards Heaven & hollow’d Six Times with all their Force, shook Hands with one another and then went to every House to wish them a joyful good Morning” (Grumet 1999: 58–60).

Hays’s account: “24 Seterdy the Were all in Gaged in A kind of worship and had Provided three vineson and Two Beares ans the went out Fill the wodes and A Bout 10 Cl and came home A bout 11 or 12 Cloce and were Dressed Lik Pilgin [pagan] times and there wase 3 men and Two Wemen and 2 men & 2 Wemen and Two Men and they had Grat Bunches of Flours on there heades and was Striped and pinte Beyond Neater [nature] Sume Had Grene Rodes in thir hands and Snaks and Birdes & Wonder full things Pented on them All colers One mane was Rid & one Womean Black they came in A String and they were All Naked from the Belt up and Went Round the hou[se] and went in and Dansed on and they Went out Sum times and Looked Towards the Sun Rising Very oftens and tinued Night and Day and ther Wase A Grat Dell of Strengers Indings that Never Saw the Lik be fore [...] 25 Sundy & they Sang [illegible] out of their Mouth & A Bout one A cloce We were All invited in to Diner & we Sat till he Shaked his Shell and Sung & Looked up and Danced A Great While and in his on way asked a Blesing and at Last he Give the chief A Porshion in his hand and A Dish Full to our king [Teedyuscung]” (Grumet 1999: 59).

11. See Daniel Denton’s account from 1670, cited in Grumet (2001: 29).

the form of a moralizing discourse based on an eschatological cartography that was materially supported by a book of images was, for its part, quite remarkable. Insofar as we can rely on Frederick Post's assertion that the ceremony had been "many Years laid aside," it is possible that priest's actions represented a fundamental innovation by giving a new purpose to a traditional ritual, albeit without substantially changing its basic liturgical elements: by this logic, the renewed ceremony would be carried out according to a new eschatological worldview, one that established a clear distinction between heaven and hell, as well as the kinds of conduct that would lead to one or the other. The priest then, most likely in the form of a vision narrative, integrated certain Christian elements into the ceremony, which could have come to him via colonial, missionary, or other indigenous intermediaries, such as the Nanticoke we encountered above.

The importance of the "book of images" thus starts to come into focus: it was the iconographic materialization of a new kind of vision with a new kind of status. It encapsulated an eschatological worldview that took the form of a proselytizing discourse meant to be broadcast as widely as possible. Associating it with a graphic material support was both a means of facilitating its memorization in a systematized poetic form ("sung," as Hays tells us) and conferring on it the prestigious status that at this time the region's indigenous peoples granted to the books of whites.¹²

October 15, 1762—the Ohio River—the Great Book of Neolin, Delaware Prophet

For about a year already, the Quaker James Kenny had been looking after the trading post established by the Commissioners of Indian Affairs at Fort Pitt, which had recently been retaken from the French. It was from this strategically placed commercial and military station in the Ohio Valley that Kenny observed the comings and goings of the region's indigenous peoples, in particular the Delaware, whose language he was trying to learn. On October 15 he made the following entry in his journal:

12. On the prestige of books for the Delaware that same year, see Klett (1962: 67–69), and for indigenous peoples of the region more generally, see Rice (2010).

I have I think made mention before of the Imposter which is raised amongst the Delawares, in order to shew them the right way to Heaven. This plan is Portrayed on a Dress'd Leather Skin and some on paper, fixes the Earth at the Bottom and heaven at the top, having a straight Line from One to the Other, by which their forefathers use'd to assend to Hapiness. About the middle is like a Long Square cuting thire way to Hapiness, at right Angles, and stoping them representing the White people, the outside is a Long Squair like black Stroke Circomscribing the Whole within it, and joyning on the left Hand Issuing from the White peoples place is cut many Strokes parallel to thire Squair or Situation, all these Strokes represents all the Sins and Vices which the Indians have learned from the White people, through which now they must go, the Good Road being Stopt. Hell being fixed not far off, there they are Led irrevocibly. The Doctrine Issued on this and the way to help it, is said to be, to learn to live whitouth any Trade or Connections with the White people, Clothing and Supporting themselves as their forefathers did; its also said that the Imposter Prognosticates that there will be Two or Three Good Talks and then War; this Gains amongst them so much, that mostly they have quit Hunting any more then for to suply Nature in that way. (Jordan 1913: 171–72)¹³

It was not for another month, however, that he would see the “plan” in use:

Indian Simon came here with his Son from Cuscuskies, lodged in our House, he shewed me his Book containing their new Religion, being a faviou, I think that no White man has received here beside me; he told me he was become a Minister now to the Indians at Cuscuskies, he also said his Prayers by his book, which I look upon as Great Idolatry as he seemed to Adore the Image of the Son or Little God at the top of it, it shewes no Image of the Great being, but he says he is higher. (Jordan 1913: 173)

As in the Atsingnetsing case of 1760, a Delaware man—“the impostor” as Kenny calls him—has received a new vision and in recounting its contents, is seeking to disseminate this “new religion” among his people. The vision’s basic contents seem identical to those of the episode

13. Though the text suggests otherwise, Kenny’s journal contains no earlier mention of this “impostor.”

reported two years earlier: a topographical description of the native population's post-mortem destiny, as it was revealed to the visionary, along with details of their sins and their fraught relations with whites.¹⁴ This new religion was intriguing enough to the Quaker merchant for him to reach out to his friend, Frederick Post, the Moravian missionary of the Atsingnetsing episode, who now resided in the Ohio Valley: "Rec'd a Letter from Frederick Post giving me his opinion of the Imposters new Religion raised amongst the Indians, which he says the Imposter tells them he had a Vission of Heaven where there was no White People but all Indians, and wants a total Seperation from us, and for that purpose advisses the Indians to Impose upon the Traders" (Jordan 1973: 175). The name of this great Delaware prophet was Neolin.¹⁵

The story of this vision of paradise is in fact fairly well known to us¹⁶: an exceptionally detailed version was put down on paper by a notary from Detroit, based on the words of the Ottawa war chief, Pontiac (Burton 1912: 21–23). Neolin, here referred to as "an Indian of the Wolf nation,"¹⁷ had taken it upon himself to travel to Paradise, seeking out the "Master of Life"—"as all Indians call the good God," the notary informs us. At the end of a long trek, he comes to "a mountain of marvelous whiteness," which he laboriously climbs, following the advice of "a woman whose beauty dazzle[s] him." At the mountain's summit, he meets "the Master of Life, who [takes] him by the hand and [gives] him a hat trimmed all around in gold, to sit down upon." The good God then lectures him at length, telling him to drive out the whites from the region, to abandon their dangerous and sinful customs, and to return to a "traditional" way of life—albeit a somewhat idealized version of it. Finally, he shares a new ritual prayer with the sojourner, instructing him to spread it among his people so that they might recover their ability to address the Master of Life.

14. Or at least with certain whites; really the English, according to Dowd (2002: 96–97).

15. On Neolin, see Hunter (1971), White (1991: 279–85), Dowd (1992, 2002: 94–105), Sayre (2005: 139–52), Cave (2006: 22–43), and Irwin (2008: Chapter 4). Other notable studies on this prophet's movement include Mooney ([1896] 1973: 662–69), Wallace (1956), and Champagne (1988).

16. On the role of visions in Delaware life, see Jordan (1913: 176); Heckewelder ([1818] 1822: 245–47); Newcomb (1956: 35); Gavaler (1994).

17. The "Wolves" were a Delaware clan.

Neolin's vision seems then to have played the same role as that of the old priest in 1760: it conferred a new purpose onto the traditional ritual actions of the Delaware. We know in fact that Neolin's "new religion" included a complex ritual practice that the Quaker James Kenny, having caught wind of it, also described in his journal: "The Indians at their Towns make feasts its said now every Day and perform their new devotions by Dancing, Singing and sometimes all Kneeling and praying (its said) to a little God who carries the petitions and presents them to the Great Being, which is too High and mighty to be Spoke to by them; this little God lives in some place near them" (Jordan 1913: 173). Certain ceremonies also involved an emetic, with which participants purified themselves of their sins (Loudon 1808: 272).

And here again, what matters most for our purposes is the fact that the ritual discourse of the prophet was inscribed in a "book." But in this case the description is far more precise: we learn that the book is a "plan," a map representing the Road to Paradise. The straight line leading from Earth to the sky is obstructed by the whites, forcing the Delaware to take the paths of sin and vice, all of which may lead them to Hell, here situated to the left of Paradise. From an iconographic point of view, there is a great deal of continuity between this new map and the various other books we've encountered from the preceding years: a similar eschatological topography and the use of a series of strokes to indicate "sins." The artifact also seems to share some of its practical functions with the earlier examples: the use of a plan in the memorization of "prayers" and the conferral of a bookish authority onto a new body of visionary knowledge.

But the Detroit notary's transcription of Neolin's vision narrative introduces an original element: the prophet does not retrospectively produce his book in the aftermath of his conference with God, the Master of life; the divine teaching is presented to the human interlocutor already in book form—"Here is a prayer which I give thee in writing to learn by heart and to teach to the Indians and their children" (Burton 1912: 33). Not only, then, did Neolin himself think of his map as a "written book," as we can deduce from this passage; it is also clear that this "writing" was itself bestowed with a divine origin: the prophet had simply copied a "book" that had been handed down to him by God.

Finally, James Kenny's account introduces a major discontinuity in the ways the Delaware "books" of 1760 and 1762 were put to use. While in *Atsingnetsing* it was the old priest alone who "read" from his book and sang its prayers, Neolin wished, apparently following the injunctions of his God, to circulate his prayers and the book containing them as widely

as possible—a proselytizing activity that, in this context, appears entirely novel. This is why there existed multiple copies of his plan, on paper or animal skins, and explains how a Delaware man like Simon could have considered himself a minister of the prophet. This proselytism, however, was oriented exclusively toward an indigenous public: when he took the opportunity to examine the Delaware book, Kenny was under the strong impression that this was “a favour, I think that no White man has received here beside me” (Jordan 1913: 173).

That said, another record of these “written” instructions can be found in John M’Cullough’s account of the period he spent in captivity among the Delaware. At the time these events transpired, he would have been around thirteen years old; it was not until 1806, about twenty-four years after the fact, that he put his memories on paper.

My [adoptive] brother was gone to *Tus-ca-la-ways*, about forty or fifty miles off, to see and hear a prophet that had just made his appearance amongst them; he was of the Delaware nation; I never saw or heard him. It was said, by those who went to see him, that he had certain hieroglyphics marked on a piece of parchment, denoting the probation that human beings were subjected to whilst they were living on earth, and also, denoting something of a future state. They informed me, that he was almost constantly crying whilst he was exhorting them. (Loudon 1808: 272)

Here again we see the consistent association between the prophet Neolin’s ceremonial declamations and the “hieroglyphics marked on a piece of parchment” to form an eschatological map.

I saw a copy of his hieroglyphics, as numbers of them had got them copyed and undertook to preach, or instruct others. The first, (or principal doctrine,) they taught them, was to purify themselves from sin, which they taught they could do by the use of emetics, and abstinence from carnal knowledge of the different sexes; to quit the use of fire arms, and to live entirely in the original state that they were in before the white people found out their country, nay, they taught that fire was not pure that was made by steele and flint, but that they should make it by rubbing two sticks together. [...] It was said, that their prophet taught them, or made them believe, that he had his instructions immediately from Keesh-shé-la-mil’-lang-up, or a being that thought us into being, and that by following his instructions, they would, in a few years, be able to drive the white people out of

their country. [...] I might here insert many other principles, which they said, were taught them by their prophet; but I shall pass over them, and mark down a copy of their hieroglyphics, without explaining them, or at least but briefly. (Loudon 1808: 272–73)

The illustration reproduced in Figure 1, as well as the description that follows, were inserted into M'Cullough's memoir in an 1808 edition published by Archibald Loudon. They are not to be found, however, in M'Cullough's original manuscript, now housed in the Pennsylvania State Archives, and their real author remains unknown to us.¹⁸ But the remarkable similarity these documents bear to James Kenny's unpublished account underscores their relevance to our own trajectory. Though the illustration and its commentary clearly represent an outsider's point of view—showing little concern for accuracy and making the implicitly polemical suggestion that the prophet had come under the influence of French Catholics—their value is no less significant.

They taught that all those on the right hand of the square surface, or the world (represented in the plate opposite,) went immediatly after death to heaven—and part of those on the uppermost square, to the left; those on the lowest square to the left, are those who are abandonedly wicked; they go immediatly on the road that leads to hell.—The place marked A, B, C are where the wicked have to undergo a certain degree of punishment, before they are admitted into heaven—and that each of those places are a flame of fire—the place on the right hand line, or road to heaven, marked D, denotes a pure spring of water, where those who have been punished at the aforesaid places, stop to quench their thirsts, after they had undergone a purgation by fire (It would appear, by the above recital, as if they had some idea of the Popish tenet of purgatory). It must be observed, that the places marked A, B, C, differed, (as they taught) in degree of heat, still as the mark, or hieroglyphic decreases in size, it increases about one third more in heat—the first is not as hot as the second by one-third, nor the second as the third, in the same Proportion. (Loudon 1808: 275–76)

Another document published much after the fact, in 1818, is the description by Moravian missionary John Gottlieb Ernest Heckewelder of

18. Thanks to Aaron McWilliams of the Pennsylvania State Archives for this information.

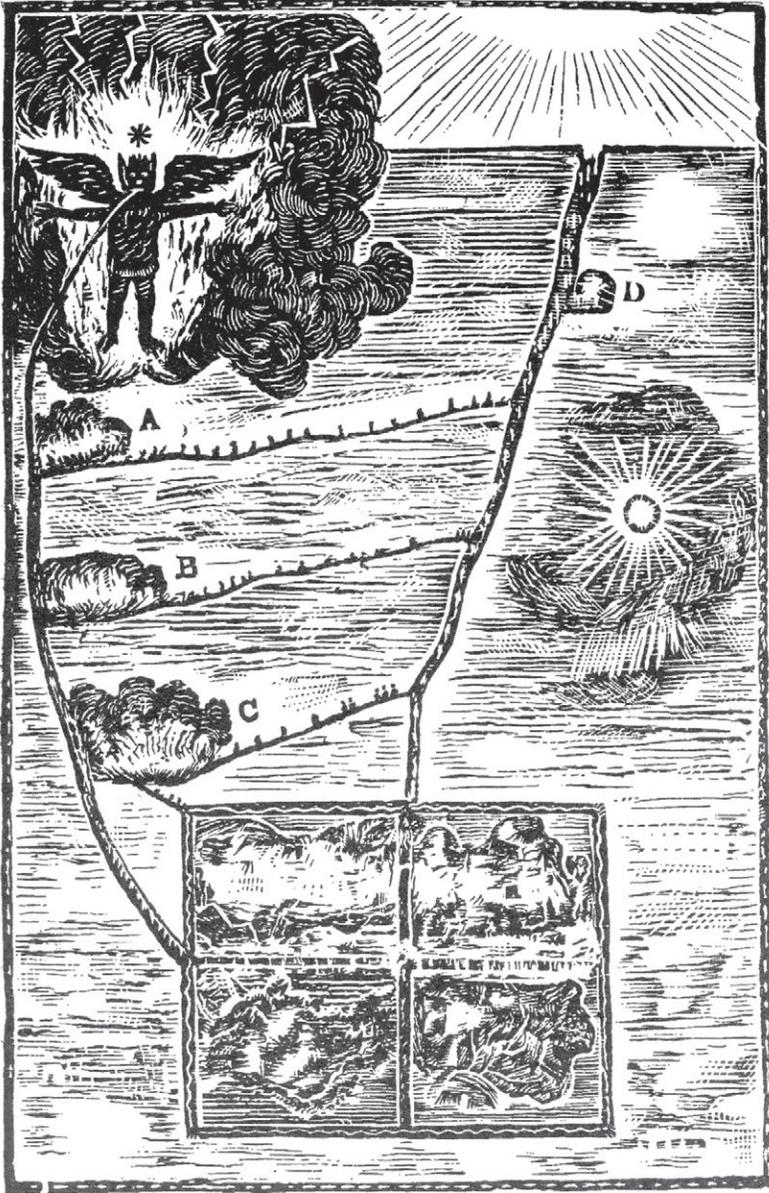


Figure 1. The Great Book of Neolin, Delaware prophet (Loudon 1808, vol. 1: 274).

what he called the Delawares' "map." His text draws on what would have already been distant memories and, in all likelihood, the handwritten notes of his colleagues:

In the year 1762, there was a famous preacher of the Delaware nation, who resided at *Cayahaga*, near Lake Erie, and travelled about the country, among the Indians, endeavouring to persuade them that he had been appointed by the great Spirit to instruct them in those things that were agreeable to him and to point out to them the offences by which they had drawn his displeasure on themselves, and the means by which they might recover his favour for the future. He had drawn, as he pretended, by the direction of the great Spirit, a kind of map on a piece of deer skin, somewhat dressed like parchment, which he called "the great Book or Writing." This, he said, he had been ordered to shew to the Indians, that they might see the situation in which the Mannitto had originally placed them, the misery which they had brought upon themselves by neglecting their duty, and the only way that was now left them to regain what they had lost. This map he held before him while preaching, frequently pointing to particular marks and spots upon it, and giving explanations as he went along. (Heckewelder [1818] 1822: 291)

Comparatively speaking, Heckewelder's description is strikingly clear and replete with pertinent details. For the Moravian missionary, most remarkable were the parallels with the Christian Bible: hence his insistence on the names that Neolin had given his cosmographic maps, "the Great Book" or "the Writing"; hence as well his remark that the map had been drawn out "by the direction of the great Spirit" and that it therefore had a supernatural origin; and hence, finally, his description of the prophet preaching with an index finger sliding across his manuscript. Now as the Quaker James Kenny had noted, few whites had the opportunity to examine these books; and fewer still were able to obtain any explanation of the figures they contained. Indeed, reading the following comments, it seems clear that the Delaware never had any intention of sharing this side of their knowledge with Heckewelder.

The size of this map was about fifteen inches square, or, perhaps, something more. An inside square was formed by lines drawn within it, of about eight inches each way, two of those lines, however, were not closed by about half an inch at the corners. Across these inside lines, others of about an inch in length were drawn with sundry other

lines and marks, all which was intended to represent a strong inaccessible barrier, to prevent those without from entering the space within, otherwise than at the place appointed for that purpose. When the map was held as he directed, the corners which were not closed lay at the left hand side, directly opposite to each other, the one being at the south-east by south, and the nearest at the north-east by north.

In explaining or describing the particular points on this map, with his fingers always pointing to the place he was describing, he called the space within the inside lines "the heavenly regions," or the place destined by the great Spirit for the habitation of the Indians in future life; the space left open at the south-east corner, he called the "avenue," which had been intended for the Indians to enter into this heaven, but which was now in the possession of the white people, wherefore the great Spirit had since caused another "avenue" to be made on the opposite side, at which, however, it was both difficult and dangerous for them to enter, there being many impediments in their way, besides a large ditch leading to a gulf below, over which they had to leap; but the evil spirit kept at this very spot a continual watch for Indians, and whoever he laid hold of, never could get away from him again, but was carried to his regions, where there was nothing but extreme poverty; where the ground was parched up by the heat for want of rain, no fruit came to perfection, the game was almost starved for want of pasture, and where the evil spirit, at his pleasure, transformed men into horses and dogs, to be ridden by him and follow him in his hunts and wherever he went.

The space on the outside of this interior square, was intended to represent the country given to the Indians to hunt, fish, and dwell in while in this world; the east side of it was called the ocean or "great salt water Lake." Then the preacher drawing the attention of his hearers particularly to the south-east avenue, would say to them: "Look here! See what we have lost by neglect and disobedience; by being remiss in the expression of our gratitude to the great Spirit, for what he has bestowed upon us; by neglecting to make to him sufficient sacrifices; by looking upon a people of a different colour from our own, who had come across a great lake, as if they were a part of ourselves; by suffering them to sit down by our side, and looking at them with indifference, while they were not only taking our country from us, but this (pointing to the spot), this, our own avenue, leading into those beautiful regions which were destined for us. Such is the sad condition to which we are reduced. What is now to be done, and what remedy is to be applied? I will tell you, my friends. Hear what

the great Spirit has ordered me to tell you! You are to make sacrifices, in the manner that I shall direct; to put off entirely from yourselves the customs which you have adopted since the white people came among us; you are to return to that former happy state, in which we lived in peace and plenty, before these strangers came to disturb us, and above all, you must abstain from drinking their deadly *beson*, which they have forced upon us, for the sake of increasing their gains and diminishing our numbers. Then will the great Spirit give success to our arms; then he will give us strength to conquer our enemies, to drive them from hence, and recover the passage to the heavenly regions which they have taken from us.”

[...] he commonly concluded in this manner: “And now, my friends, in order that what I have told you may remain firmly impressed on your minds, and to refresh your memories from time to time, I advise you to preserve, in every family, at least, such a book or writing as this, which I will finish off for you, provided you bring me the price, which is only one buckskin or two doe-skins a piece.” The price was of course bought, and the book purchased. In some of those maps, the figure of a deer or turkey, or both, was placed in the heavenly regions, and also in the dreary region of the evil spirit; the former, however, appeared fat and plump, while the latter seemed to have nothing but skin and bones. (Heckewelder [1818] 1822: 291–93)

Regardless of the significant variations in their respective accounts, it clearly appears that James Kenny, John M’Cullough, the anonymous author of the engraving and commentary from Loudon’s volume (the pseudo M’Cullough, as we might call him), and John Heckewelder were each describing the same “book,” produced and distributed by the same Delaware prophet, Neolin. The first three reports are closest to one another, but there’s no doubt that the Moravian missionary had seen a similar document, even if his interpretation strikes us as fanciful. It would serve us then to examine a bit more systemically the common features of these descriptions.

First of all, what exactly is the object at hand? A “book” or a “plan,” in the words of the Quaker merchant; a series of “hieroglyphs,” according to the onetime captive of the Delaware. As for Heckewelder, though he prefers the term “geographical map,” he alone presents us with a translation of the name the Delaware themselves gave to these inscriptions: the “Great Book” or the “Writings.” This is the same terminology found in Pontiac’s account, where it is further specified that these “writings” came directly from God, the Master of Life, and thus that these books

had a supernatural origin—as is reiterated by Heckewelder, according to whom the prophet had drawn these maps “by the direction of the great Spirit.”

What did these books look like? They took the form of a large sheet of paper or a square of parchment, and in the center of this quadrilateral frame was drawn another square; the whole was oriented along a vertical axis, and the left-hand side contained a series of different figures. These, in fact, are the only elements on which all of our sources agree; beyond that the interpretations diverge. James Kenny’s seems clearest and, because it so closely resembles that of the pseudo M’Cullough, can be taken as a point of reference. The vertical axis joins Earth and Paradise by way of a vertical eschatological path (“the right way to Paradise”); this path is obstructed by a square, a symbol associated with the white world, from which a multitude of more tortuous paths emerge, some of which disappear toward the left of the map, toward Hell in other words (we might recall here the “strokes” of the Nanticoke letter and the “straight lines” in the old Delaware priest’s book of 1760). Unique to Kenny’s account is the detail that Paradise featured the figure of a “little God,” most likely the Master of Life, whose depiction could possibly bear some relation to Heckewelder’s mention of deer and turkey figures, plump in paradise and famished in hell, and perhaps also to the demonic figure of the “*Mahtan’toob*” (Heckewelder’s *mannitto*) shown by the pseudo M’Cullough. Generally speaking, the latter’s anonymously penned description fits well within this overarching framework, the only major variation being that the paths leading to hell are not named for “vices,” but are instead considered “punishments” by fire, apparently organized according to a logic of gradation. On the other hand, the much longer commentary by John Heckewelder differs from the other interpretations in numerous aspects, even if the book’s material appearance, as he describes it, is largely consistent.¹⁹

What were these books used for? Here too, a consensus quickly emerges from the sources: they were to be “read” aloud—an activity that could be described as the recitation of prayers (Kenny, Pontiac), preaching and instruction (M’Cullough), or explanatory glosses pertaining to each individual figure in turn, as the reader points to each one

19. Hunter’s reconstruction of what he names the *Delaware Indian Bible* (1971: 45) takes Heckewelder’s description as its point of departure, which, in our opinion, places too much confidence in the missionary’s memory.

(Heckewelder). The “book” in these instances is thus used in the same ways as those of the Nanticoke and the old Delaware priest.

And finally, how were these books circulated? According to John M’Cullough, a number of people made copies or had copies made for them, a suggestion that can also be inferred from Kenny’s journal. The remarks of the Moravian missionary are consistent in this regard, but should be handled prudently: he is the only one of our commentators to mention a price paid for these copies, a skin, though it is possible that this was only to provide a surface on which a copy of the book could be drawn.

October 22, 1767—the Ohio River—the Preachers’ Bible

After the decisive historical episode known as Pontiac’s rebellion, David Zeisberger returned to the western frontier where, during his first week in the village of Goschgosching, he met the Delaware shaman Wangomend.²⁰ At the close of a sermon delivered by the Moravian missionaries, the “Indian preacher” took the floor:

He stated that there were two ways of salvation, one for the white people and one for the Indians. He symbolized his statement by means of a design, inscribed on the ground, showing the way for the Indians to be much more direct. [...] He said, further, that he knew that the Saviour was the way of salvation, that he had known Him many years and had had spiritual communication with Him. (Butler Hulbert and Schwarze 1912: 27–28)²¹

Two days earlier, somewhat exasperated by this unexpected rival, Zeisberger had written a lengthy digression in his journal, summarizing his already long experience with these native preachers.

The preachers among the Indians, who have appeared only within recent years, and the doctors and the sorcerers are the apostles of Satan, who are desirous that the Indians shall be kept in their darkness

20. Hunter (1971) proposes that Wangomend and Hays’s “old priest” are one and the same person.

21. The identification of the man in this passage as Wangomend is Heckewelder’s ([1818] 1822: 293–94).

and conducted deeper into it. I will mention a few things about these preachers, the one who is here with us as well as the rest, for they are all men of the same stamp. They employ every means to augment their authority and invent all manner of lies, asserting, for example, that they had had a vision of God or, indeed, had seen him, spoken with him and received from him. [...]

[...] They have made themselves a bible, consisting of a sheet of paper, on which there is a representation of God, of the Whites, the Indians and the Blacks, of the scale upon which the skins they obtain from deer, bear and all manner of land and water animals are weighed, of various plants, such as corn, beans, pumpkins, watermelons, trees and the like, out of which they always find subjects to preach upon. They constantly use the name of God in connection with their most revolting heathenish abominations. (Butler Hulbert and Schwarze 1912: 24–26)

A little more than twelve years later, having in the meantime retired to the Muskingum River, Zeisberger briefly returned to the subject.

About thirty years ago preachers appeared among the Indians. They pretended to have received revelations from above, to have traveled into heaven and conversed with God. They gave different accounts of their journey, but all agreed in this: that no one could enter heaven without great danger, for the road, say they, runs close by the gates of hell. Here the devil lies in ambush and snatches at every one who is going to God.

They came first to the Son of God and through him to God himself, with whom they pretend to have conversed concerning the Indians and by whom they were commanded to instruct their people. Thus the Indians were for the first time informed that there was a heaven where was the dwelling of God and a hell that of the devil. Presumably they got this knowledge from the whites. Some of the preachers confessed that they had not reached the dwelling of God but had approached near enough to hear the cocks crow and see the smoke of the chimneys in heaven. Others that they had approached the Son of God and then returned.

These teachers marked off on a piece of parchment made of deer-skin two roads, both leading to heaven, one designated by God for the Indians, the other for the white people. They claim that the latter had to go a great way round about and the road for the Indians was at that time the shortest, but now, since the white people had blocked

up the road for the Indians, they were obliged to make a long circuit to come to God. Further, there were paintings of heaven and hell upon the parchment as also the figure of a balance to represent the deceitful traffic carried on by the white people with the Indians. This rude parchment is, as it were, their Bible and lies spread before them when they preach for the Indians. They then explain every mark and figure to their hearers and it is very evident that their chief aim is to influence the minds of the Indians against the white people. (Butler Hulbert and Schwarze 1910: 132–33)

It is fairly unlikely that Zeisberger was referring to Wangomend in these passages, both of which describe indigenous American “bibles” used in a similar manner to the other books in this story. Evidently the quick scrawlings Wangomend made on the ground stirred up some old memories for the Moravian, and thus it is almost certain that the “bibles” in these passages correspond to one or another of the documents studied above—if not a variant that may have appeared in the intervening decades. Furthermore, the basic framework of Neolin’s great book is plainly visible in this last account: the vertical orientation of a path leading from Earth to Paradise; a path that’s more direct for indigenous people than it is for whites; and a representation of hell. The only new element in Zeisberger’s notes is his reference to the representation of a scale, though it is difficult to determine how to interpret this object—dishonesty in commerce, perhaps, or final judgment.

Let us conclude this chapter with a few comparative remarks on this series of Delaware books. First of all, it seems very likely that it was the indigenous peoples themselves who referred to these inscriptions as “books,” “writings,” or “bibles” (the exact Algonquian word unfortunately remains unknown to us). The use of these terms reflects the undeniable prestige that writing and books had acquired for this region’s indigenous societies,²² in light of which one cannot help but recall the Montagnais Charles Meiaskaouat’s use of the term *massinahigan* to designate both the printed books of the Jesuits and the documents produced in his own selective writing system. Secondly, these books may well have drawn inspiration quite freely (and interchangeably) from traditional

22. Specific examples can be found in Jordan (1913: 178) and Klett (1962: 67–69). For syntheses of the phenomenon in this region, see Merrell (1999: Chapter 5) and Round (2010).

cartographic practices,²³ eschatological images used (and sometimes distributed) by Catholic missionaries (Gagnon 1975), traditional Delaware vision narratives,²⁴ as well as the preaching of Protestant missionaries (Dowd 2002: 99–100; Hultkrantz 1981: 187–211). Lastly, it is clear that these books, particularly those by Neolin, were used as techniques to stabilize new ritual discourses—prayers or exhortations of some kind—that were received through visionary experiences and which, by borrowing terms from a variety of possible sources, gave new purpose to previously established ceremonial traditions. Perhaps differing in this respect from their Nanticoke and Delaware predecessors, Neolin’s books also appear to have been genuine propaganda tools, a practical technique used to disseminate a ritual innovation as widely as possible.

23. The following account of an interaction with an Algonquian interlocutor is from 1679: “He was silent for a little while, either as if unable to climb up at once so high with his thoughts, or to express them without help, and then took a piece of coal out of the fire to write upon the floor. He first drew a circle, a little oval, to which he made four paws or feet, a head and a tail. ‘This’ said he ‘is a tortoise, lying in the water around it,’ and he moved his hand round the figure continuing ‘this was or is all water, and so at first was the world or the earth, when the tortoise gradually raised its round back up high’” (Danckaerts and Sluyter 1867: 150–51). See also Warhus (1997) and Malcom Lewis (1998).

24. See Gavalier (1994) for an overview.

CHAPTER 3

Kenekuk's Bible: The Kickapoo Prophet

An Eschatological Map

The Kickapoo prophet Kenekuk often spoke with God.¹ He was also known to travel to heaven, bringing back edifying descriptions of a moral tenor, which addressed the new living conditions of his people. He was born sometime around 1790, south of the Great Lakes. What little we know of his youth is summed up in a brief narrative of almost mythical allure, one that took shape very early (Catlin 1841, vol. 2: 98) and whose contents remained essentially unchanged until 1964, when this version was recorded, more than a century after the prophet's death. As the story goes, Kenekuk had been banished from his community for his violent outbursts and was taken in by a priest who employed him as a domestic servant. "One day the priest happened to come upon Kenekuk while the latter was looking through some religious books in the priest's library. The priest asked Kenekuk what he was doing, and Kenekuk replied he wished to know what was in these books. The priest replied that the books contained the teachings of the White man's religion, and that the Whites put great store in them. Impressed, Kenekuk asked if he might learn the teachings. The priest consented and instruction began."² On

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1. On Kenekuk, see Mooney ([1896] 1973: 692–700), Howard (1965a), Herring (1988), Cave (2006: Chapter 6), and Irwin (2008: 219–29). For an introduction to Kickapoo history, see Gibson (1963).
 2. As told by Minnie M'Jessepe (Howard 1965a: 3).

the subject of Kenekuk's youth, the Kickapoo tradition thus seems to have retained no more than the probably quite fragmented transmission of Christian doctrine (though with no way to tell whether it was Catholic or Protestant) and an early fascination with the written word.

On February 10, 1827, in Saint Louis, Kenekuk described the content of his (possibly quite recent—Hubbard 1831: 473) visions to the famous explorer William Clark, who was at that time superintendent of Indian Affairs. Taken down by Clark's secretary, this discourse is the earliest surviving account of the prophetic movement with which this chapter is concerned. The Great Spirit had appeared to Kenekuk and entrusted him with a long series of moral standards: the rules of conduct, in other words, that the prophet would henceforth be charged with teaching to his disciples. To these precepts was added a precise description, in narrative form, of the world to come, and in reciting it to William Clark (whom he refers to as "father," as had become standard usage in indigenous American diplomatic rhetoric—White 1991), the prophet referred to a map that he traced on the ground (see Figure 2):

My father, I will explain to you what the Great Spirit said to me—to do so, I must make some marks. The Great Spirit says: My father, we started from this point (A). We are here now (B). When we got here (C), the Great Spirit will appear to me again. Here (B) the Great Spirit gave his blessings to the Indians and told them to tell his people to throw away their medicine bags and not to steal, not to tell lies, not to murder, not to quarrel, and to burn their medicine bags.³ If they did not, they could not get on the straight way, but would have to go the crooked path of the bad here (D); that when we got to this place (the curved line, E), we would not be able to cross it unless we

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3. In organizing the burning of medicine bags (also known as "sacred pouches" or "bundles" in the ethnographic literature), Kenekuk was clearly taking a stand in opposition to the traditional ceremonies of the Kickapoo and Potawatomi. While little to nothing is known about Kickapoo ritual traditions, it is reasonable to assume that they were similar to those of the Potawatomi. The latter included both shamanic rituals, using medicine bags filled with medicinal plants and various artifacts (see Landes 1970: Chapter 2, who refers to practices from the early twentieth century) and complex clan ceremonies during which the opening of a bundle in a specific lodge was accompanied by the narration of the clan's origin myth, as well as dances, and songs (see Skinner 1924, also in reference to the early twentieth century).

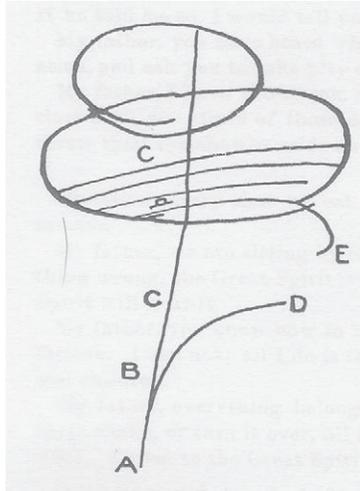


Figure 2. Eschatological Map of the Prophet Kenekuk.

were all good. It was fire. That we should go to this place (E), where there would be collected all the red chiefs and there would be a great preaching. That if we had not thrown away all our bad doings, these two points would meet (D and E), and then the Great Spirit would destroy everything and the world would be turned over. That if we would be good and throw away all our bad doings, we would cross the fire, when we would come to water (second line), which we would cross. There we would come to a country where there was nothing but a prairie and nothing grew upon it. There the sun would be hid from us by four black clouds. When we get here (C), the Great Spirit will explain these round marks. (Mooney [1896] 1973: 695)

The analogy between this prophet's map and the "books" of the previous century's Delaware visionaries is plain to see: leaving aside the fact that (like Wangomend's) it was traced in the sand, we again encounter the straight path linking earth to a solar paradise exclusive to indigenous people, as well as the deviating path engendered by sin, and hell (the "prairie" upon which "nothing grew") sitting at the end of this alternative route.⁴ Though the notes and map copied down by General Clark's secretary are not especially precise, it is easy enough to approximate the points

4. It is not impossible that this map is related to those of other prophets of the time period, from the Ottawa (Aiskawbawis, for example, according to

of connection between the prophet's vision narrative and his cosmogram: in addition to the vertical and dualistic structuring of both the narration and the map, the latter contains a series of horizontal lines—associated with fire, as they had been in the Book of Neolin—that most likely represent the sins listed in the prophet's narrative description.⁵ Half a century separates Kenekuk's map from Neolin's, but the resemblance is striking: the individual elements and their arrangement are the same, as are their modes of use, both of them integrated into the ceremonial recitation of a vision narrative.

It was only a few years later that a translation of one of Kenekuk's sermons appeared in a regional periodical, the *Illinois Monthly Magazine*.⁶ The sermon was delivered in Danville on July 17, 1831, with the Frenchman G. S. Hubbard, who lived not far from the prophet's village (Badin 1833 [letter dated January 14, 1831]: 155–56), acting as interpreter and Solomon Banta as secretary documenting the “Kickapoo sermon.” The published text provides yet another description of this prophet's visionary cartography:

You will one day have to go down into the earth; what will you do then, if you have not followed your great Father's advice, and kept his commands? He has given us a small path; it is hard to be followed; he tells you it leads to happiness. Some of you are discouraged from following this path, because it is difficult to find. You take the broad road that leads to misery. But you ought not to be discouraged; mind the book he has given for your instruction, attend to its command, and obey them, and each step you take in this narrow path will be easier; the way will become smoother, and at the end great will be the reward. (Hubbard 1831: 474)

In this version, a new element is introduced: a “book,” entrusted by God to the Kickapoo of the Vermillion Valley. What exactly is the object referred to here? The Christian Bible, as readers of the *Illinois Monthly*

Tanner [1830] 1956: 189–90) or Ojibwe peoples (see Kohl [1855] 1985: 215–20).

5. From the vantage point of rhetorical strategy, it is possible that Kenekuk's cosmogram was drawn in opposition to a map of the reservation where Clark wished the Kickapoo to settle.
6. For an overview of the reasons why examples of “Indian oratory” appeared quite regularly in the nineteenth-century American press, see Dennis (2006). For a more general approach, see Coward (1999).

Magazine would almost certainly have imagined? Or something else entirely, given that at this point in time neither Kenekuk, nor the vast majority of the Kickapoo, knew how to read? The “book” is mentioned again a bit later in the sermon:

What will become of those wicked men who slight the commands of their great Father? He gave them a book containing instructions to enlighten them. Who made that book? The great Father made it for their good—long ago he made it, that their and our hearts might be strong, and that by reading it you might see him, that you may not lose yourselves. (Hubbard 1831: 475)

Kenekuk's Selective Writing System

More can be learned about this mysterious book from the writings of travel painter George Catlin, who passed through Illinois that same year. Catlin produced several portraits of the prophet and his disciples (see Figures 3–6) and wrote the first description of these Kickapoo “books” (Figure 7):

He commenced preaching and instituted a prayer, which he ingeniously carved on a maple-stick of an inch and a half in breadth, in characters somewhat resembling Chinese letters. These sticks, with the prayers on them, he has introduced into every family of the tribe, and into the hands of every individual; and as he has necessarily the manufacturing of them all, he sells them at his own price; and has thus added lucre to fame, and in two essential and effective ways, augmented his influence on his tribe.

Every man, woman and child in the tribe, so far as I saw them, were in the habit of saying their prayer from this stick when going to bed at night, and also when rising in the morning; which was invariably done by placing the fore-finger of the right hand under the upper character, until they repeat a sentence or two, which it suggests to them; and then slipping it under the next, and the next, and so on, to the bottom of the stick, which altogether required about ten minutes, as it was sung over in a sort of chant, to the end. (Catlin 1841, vol. 2: 99; cited in Tylor 1865: 88)

The prophet's book was thus a stick covered with “characters somewhat resembling Chinese letters.” Many observers asked Kenekuk what



Figure 3. Kenekuk, the Prophet. George Catlin, oil on canvas, 1830 (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC).

these “letters” represented, and all agreed that they were not figurative symbols. These “arbitrary” signs were nonetheless highly systematized. They presented as a series of small graphic variations that looked something like the printed characters of the Latin alphabet, with which the prophet was most certainly familiar and may have wished to imitate. Catlin’s description also contains several elements that we have already encountered elsewhere regarding the use of indigenous American books:



Figure 4. Ahtónwetuck, Disciple of Kenekuk, Reciting His Prayer. George Catlin, oil on canvas, 1830 (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC).

the practice of pointing to each successive sign as the script is read, the so-called *sale* of these sticks by the prophet himself (a dubious accusation we saw leveled at Neolin by John Heckewelder), and, above all, the association of this written “text” with a ceremonial prayer.

George Catlin was the last traveler to visit the Kickapoo in the Vermillion Valley. It was during this period, marked by the Black Hawk War (named for the leader of the neighboring Sauk), that the Kickapoo



Figure 5. Mashéena, Disciple of Kenekut. George Catlin, oil on canvas, 1830 (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC).

resigned themselves to migrating west of the Mississippi, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 leaving them no other option (Herring 1988: Chapter 5). In October 1832, they set up camp on the River des Peres, not far from the residence of Indian Agent Thomas Forsyth, who, on visiting them, observed the following: “In every camp or lodge of every individual, a piece of flat wood hung up about three inches broad and twelve or fifteen inches long on which were burned with a hot iron (apparently)

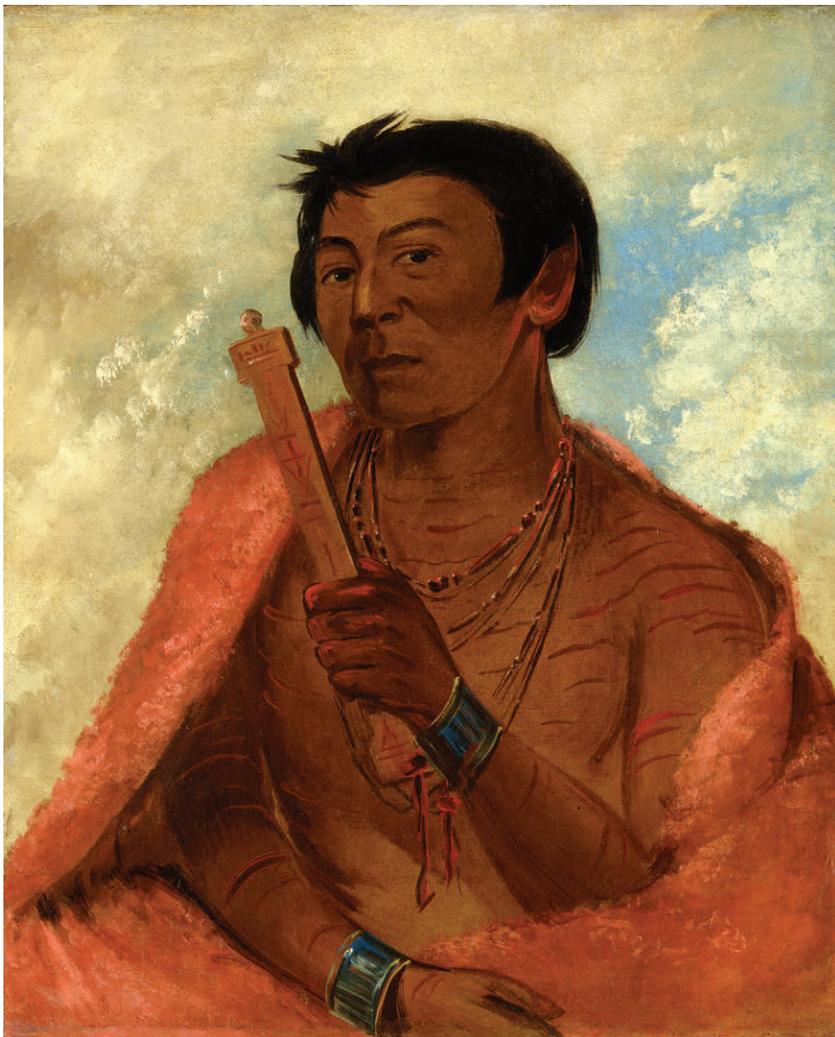


Figure 6. Onsáwkie, Potawatomi Disciple of Kenekuk. George Catlin, oil on canvas, 1830 (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC).

a number of straight and crooked marks, this stick or board so marked they called their Bible” (Blair 1911, vol. 2: 280).⁷ These were of course

7. Another account from the time, by the Methodist James Armstrong, confirms that the Kickapoo referred to their prayer sticks as “Bibles” (Mooney [1896] 1973: 699–700).

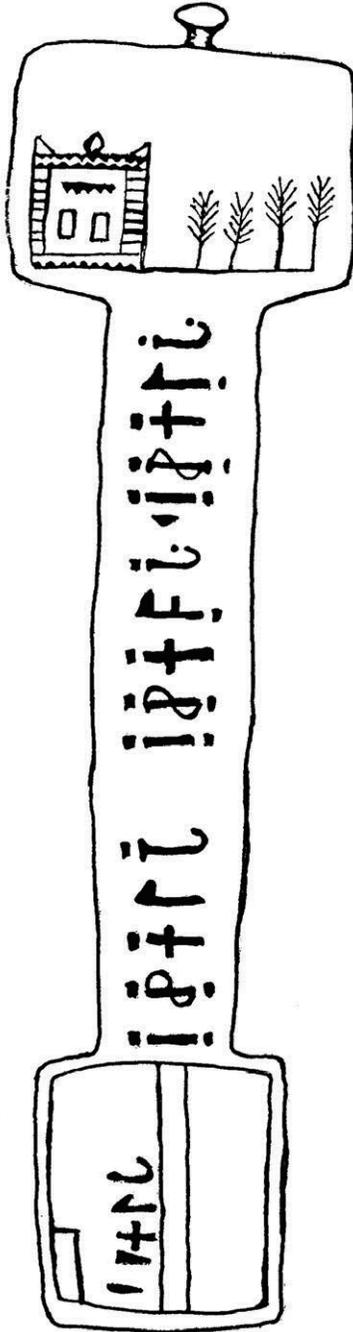


Figure 7. The Kickapoo Bible (Howard 1965a: 47).

the same artifacts that Catlin had described two years earlier, but from Forsyth we learn that the Kickapoo called them "Bibles," here again adopting a designation now familiar to us.

At the time of their arrival on the Missouri River, the community of Kenekuk and his disciples had grown to comprise a hundred Kickapoo and around a hundred Potawatomi. Once there—owing to a provision of the Indian Removal Act that initiated a federal budget for the Christian edification of the displaced populations—they were visited by a multitude of missionaries from a wide variety of denominations. And so, in the summer of 1833, during a ceremony led by Kenekuk, the Presbyterian William Smith took note of the "hieroglyphic characters used in prayer like Roman beads" (Herring 1988: 33). A pair of concurring accounts were composed by Samuel Allis and John Dunbar the following summer during a visit to their fellow Methodist Jerome Berryman, who had recently established a short-lived school in Kenekuk's community:

The prophet's band had a sort of catholic form of worship. They would meet on Sabbath for worship, and the prophet would preach in their language. When they broke up, they would form in a line and commence marching in single file three or four times around, saying or singing their prayers, which consisted of characters cut on a paddle, at the same time shaking hands with the audience as they passed by. The characters represented words. As they left they would repeat those prayers till they got to their Father's house or heaven. Their house was marked at the top of the paddle. I had it on paper, but lost it. (Allis 1887: 135)

The paddle, as it is called, is a piece of wood, wrought in a peculiar shape. In this piece of wood are cut certain hieroglyphics which are to be learned by all followers of the prophet, and the prayers for which they stand to be repeated at their seasons devotion. These paddles are held as peculiarly sacred by them. (Allis and Dunbar 1915–1916: 586)

While Dunbar insists on the "sacred" character of these paddles, no doubt derived from the supernatural origin ascribed to them in Kenekuk's vision narrative (they were given to him by God), Allis's is the first account to explain the meaning of the small quadrilateral engraved at the top of the sticks: it is the House of God, which is to say the paradise where the prophet had gone during his visions. It seems, then, that these Kickapoo "Bibles" also functioned as cosmograms, with

the bottom representing Earth and the top Paradise. What stands out most in Allis's observations is the suggestion that the act of reciting the prayers would actually transport the faithful to the House of God.

In observing a Kickapoo ceremony the following year, the British travel writer Charles Augustus Murray made a passing remark on these same objects: "Each [participant] was supplied with a flat board, on which were carved symbols, which answered the purpose of letters, and enabled them to chime in with the prayer or hymn of the preacher" (Murray 1839: 77). We start to get a clearer idea of the significance of these boards for those using them in a letter from the Jesuit missionary Pierre Verhaegen, dated January 20, 1838:

The prophet spares nothing in maintaining the prestige of his authority. A few weeks ago, at his own instigation, one of his confidants recounted that, during the night, a voice announced to him that he was going to die and that he did indeed die shortly afterwards and ascended to heaven: "There," he went on, "I discovered four floors; on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, I saw black robes, and a great number of boards with symbols written by the prophet; I tried to ascend to the 4th, but because it was here that the palace of the Great Spirit stood, I was forbidden to enter, and all of a sudden I was restored to life." This fabulous tale was a great success; the Savages were convinced that if the prophet had been deceiving them, the boards carrying his symbol would not have been found in heaven. (Verhaegen 1839: 471)⁸

Difficult to interpret as these lines may be, it is possible to identify in them a description of the prophet's map (supposing that the "four floors" correspond to the horizontal lines of the map reproduced by Clark's secretary, and thus to the list of temptations), as well as the supernatural origin of the engraved sticks. A more precise description of these Kickapoo "Bibles" and their function in the ritual context wouldn't be published until 1840, by Baptist missionary Isaac McCoy—who was, it should be noted, a major advocate of the Indian Removal Act.⁹ Though it is not impossible that McCoy himself observed the books in use during the summer of 1833, it is likely that the real author of this account

8. See also the remark made by Nicolas Point on the subject of Kenekuk in 1840: "The authority for his divine mission is a piece of wood about two inches wide and eight inches long" (Point 1967: 24).

9. On the political involvements of Isaac McCoy, see Schultz (1972) and Myrhe (1998).

was one of his assistants, Daniel French, who had tried, unsuccessfully, to set up a Baptist school among the Kickapoo when they arrived in Kansas that same summer. In any case, this is by far the best description we have.

The formula of the Prophet had evidently not been framed from ideas purely Indian, and they more nearly resembled those of the Catholics than any other sect. Congregational worship was performed among them, and the exercises lasted from one to three hours. They heard speeches from the Prophet, and all united in articulating a kind of prayer, expressed in broken sentences often repeated, in a monotonous sing-song tone, equalling in length about two measures of a common psalm tune. All in unison engaged in this; and, in order to preserve harmony in words, each held in his or her hand a small board, about an inch and a half broad and about ten inches long, upon which was engraved arbitrary characters, which they followed up with their finger until the last character admonished them that they had completed the prayer. (McCoy 1840: 457)

McCoy draws a neat distinction between the two successive parts of Kenekuk's newly instituted ceremony: first, a monological sermon by the prophet, during which it is quite possible that he traced his eschatological map on the ground, and then the long collective songs that appear to have been read from the sticks. We know from Allis's account that these songs were also accompanied by circle dances during which men and women were strictly separated—"they would form in a line and commence marching in single file three or four times around"—and with this in mind, it is possible that the number of times the songs were repeated corresponded to the number of circles walked. At the end of these dances, participants shook hands.¹⁰

As McCoy's description continues, he turns his attention to the inscriptions made on the participants' boards:

These characters were five in number. The first represented the heart; the second, the heart, affections, and flesh; the third, the life; the fourth, names; the fifth, kindred. During the service these characters were gone over several times; the first time, the person spoke as if he

10. Another ceremony, that usually took place on Fridays, incorporated confessions and public flagellation.

supposed himself on earth; the second as if he were approaching the door of the house of God; then at the door, etc. (McCoy 1840: 457)

McCoy thus gives us the essential key to Kenekuk's selective script. Allis had already observed that "the characters represented words," but McCoy is first to offer a translation of the five specific "words" in question. He also provides yet another valuable piece of information: the repetitions of these five words were not equivalent to one another, as at each reprise the spatial context of their enunciation changed, following a path that strongly resembled the ascent to the House of God encoded in the prophet's eschatological map. The Baptist missionary then goes one step further in translating a number of excerpts from the ritual song, albeit quite imprecisely:

Putting their finger on the lowest character, they would say:

O, our Father, think of our hearts as thou dost think about the door of the house, etc.

O, our Father, bless our heart and its clothing (the body), make it like thine, as strong as thine, etc.

Make it like thy house, like the door of thy house, like the ground about thy house, like thy staff, etc.

O, our Father, put our name with thy name, think of it as thou dost of thy house, the door, the ground about the house, thy staff, etc.

The repetitions were exceedingly frequent, almost the same words of a short sentence being repeated many times, and all apparently unmeaning. (McCoy 1840: 457–58)¹¹

Before returning to this ritual song in greater detail, it is interesting to juxtapose McCoy's account with that of the Methodist William W. Redman, published in the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, after another visit to Jerome Berryman in June 1837.

11. The same description, in the same terms, can be found in a letter by Jesuit Pierre-Jean De Smet (De Smet 1905, vol. 3: 1085–86). Smet had visited the Kickapoo in 1838; but his editors make it clear that the volume quite liberally incorporates Smet's reading notes—the original publication is thus Isaac McCoy's. Smet is also known to have substantially modified Blanchet's Catholic ladder with the introduction of a "double path," one leading to paradise, the other to hell (Thiel 2009: 56–57; Furtwangler 2005); it is not impossible that idea first came to him when he encountered Kenekuk's dualist cosmograms five years earlier.

When he [Kenekuk] concluded, they all rose up and sung; some of them looking upward, and a few looking steadfastly on small boards which they held in their hands. On these boards there are five characters. The first represents the heart, the second the flesh, i.e. the passions and appetites; the third their life, i.e. all their acts and doings; the fourth their names, i.e. their Christian character; the fifth their kindred, i.e. all mankind. I asked the interpreter what they said when they sung with such a solemn air. He replied, "O Jesus, come into my heart;" or "Come and possess my heart." (Redman 1837: 198)

Between them, these two synoptic descriptions provide enough evidence to suggest that Kenekuk's Bibles functioned according to the basic principles of selective writing systems set out in this book's introduction. But what was the meaning of these songs? It is admittedly difficult to deduce from these fragments, which were knowingly left very incomplete—both McCoy and Redman merely followed the approximate translations provided by the interpreters in their service. But the narrative schema of the ritual song is easy enough to piece together. The five successive "words" each correspond to a dimension of the human person: first the "heart," which in this context can be taken to mean the "soul"; then the "body," encapsulated by the terms "affections," "passions," "appetites," "flesh," and "garments"; then the "life" of the person, which is to say "all their acts and doings"; then the "name," which is here identified as the Christian aspect; and finally the person's "kindred," which extends to all humanity. The person of the locutor thus expanded, as the recitation progressed, to encompass all human beings.

The prayer is directly addressed to God, "our Father," and explicitly asks him to "bless," to "possess", or to "think of" each successive element of the locutor's person. These formulaic pleas for redemption were repeated many times over and, according to McCoy, with each iteration identical to the last.

Finally, all five components of the locutor's person "shifted" with each repetition. From McCoy's indication that the series of five characters were "gone over several times," we start to see why this series was engraved in several positions on the inscribed boards, from the bottom end, which corresponded to the Earth (the locutor's starting place) to the top, that is, the House of God. With each repetition, as McCoy has it, the locutor's spatial position changes: first he stands on the Earth, then he approaches the door of the House, he enters the House, walks its grounds, and then it seems, reaches the staff of God. Each repetition

thus advances the locutor's five components along a path leading to paradise, the House of God. As Allis observes, "they would repeat those prayers till they got to their Father's house or heaven." It is highly likely, then, that the choreography accompanying these continually recited songs (the series of repeated circle dances) was a gestural embodiment of this ascension toward God.

The logic behind the reading of this selective writing system is thus easy enough to reconstruct. The ritual song propagated by Kenekuk employed a relatively complex form of poetic parallelism: at its core was a series of five variable terms (heart, body, life, name, kindred) which were attached to a series of constant predicate phrases (bless, possess, think about, come into, etc.). The selective script Kenekuk developed to transcribe the song used a series of arbitrary signs to notate the five variable terms in their fixed order, but left it to the readers of the text to memorize the consistently repeated predicates ("almost the same words of a short sentence being repeated many times"). The series of five characters was reproduced multiple times along the board's vertical axis, indicating a different status for each repetition of the five variable terms. The vertical orientation of the board functioned as a call-back to that of the cosmogram traced on the ground by the prophet during his sermon, and the representation of the House of God at the top clearly indicated the song's ending. Still, the different stages of the locutor's eschatological journey—each constituted by the repetition of the fixed predicates for each of the five variable terms—depended on the singers' memory. Kenekuk's selective writing system thus obeyed a rather complex logic with a considerable economy of means: using a set of arbitrary characters whose iconographic sources remain unknown to us, his script inscribed the fixed order of the song's variable terms and the direction, perhaps even the stages, of the eschatological trajectory embodied by the singers; the constant formulas, for their part, remained dependent on the oral memory of his disciples.

Setting this semiotic complexity aside, the inscribed boards distributed by Kenekuk exhibited all of the most significant characteristics of the Delaware maps: they had been directly transmitted by God, they were called "books" or "Bibles," and it was the prophet himself who made and distributed them. They served, on the one hand, to stabilize the main prayer of Kenekuk's new ritual apparatus and, on the other, to further disseminate this prayer among his community of followers, whether Kickapoo or Potawatomi. They also functioned as a complement to another artefact: the eschatological map drawn on the ground, an element

of the ritual definitively bound up with the prophet's sermon—the account given, in other words, of his initial vision.¹²

Kenekuk's new religion achieved an undeniable degree of success: the frequent attempts of Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Jesuit missionaries to normalize the doctrine and ritual life of this community long met with failure (Herring 1988: Chapter 7)¹³—an astounding outcome given the context in which neighboring indigenous groups, the large majority of those displaced, were converting en masse to one form of Christianity or another.¹⁴

After the Death of the Prophet

What became of the cult founded by Kenekuk after his death sometime around 1852? As we have seen, Kenekuk's passion for books in general

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12. Like the calendar of the Delaware "old priest," Kenekuk's prayer boards also resemble the stick of another Algonquian prophet, this one Potawatomi. A contemporary of Kenekuk, known as Menominee, he met several times with Isaac McCoy, who wrote that "[he] at one time showed me a square stick, on which he had made a mark for every sermon he had preached" (McCoy 1840: 104). The prophet and the missionary then compared the number of sermons they had respectively delivered, one to his stick, the other to his book. Among these sermons was Menominee's very singular rendition of the Potawatomi origin myth, one worth citing at length, here from George A. Schultz's book on McCoy: "On a later visit to Menominee's village, McCoy heard 'The Prophet' expound on his version of the Virgin Birth. According to this interpretation, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity visited the Virgin Mary and told her she would have a son. She thought it impossible, whereupon the Second Person made a statue for her, out of clay and iron, of a boy about four feet tall. Mary forgot about the statue and it stood outside where the rains washed away the clay. She finally discarded it. The Third Person of the Trinity then appeared with a book in his hand and made two more statues and they became living persons. One of the boys was white and he was placed on one side of the sea, and the other was red, and he was placed on the opposite side of the sea" (Schultz 1972: 52).
 13. This period, referred to in one current of American historiography as the "Second Great Awakening," saw the numbers of Methodist and Baptist congregations skyrocket, along with their missionary zeal.
 14. For example, see Clark (1979), Murphy (1988), Myrhe (1998), and Schurr (2010).

was kept alive in the Kickapoo oral tradition. Not long before his death, as the Kickapoo John Mas-que-qua related to historian Milo Custer in 1906, the prophet even “told his people that he had left a written history of himself in Illinois and that it would some day be discovered” (Custer 1918: 50). This fascination was not without ambivalence, however: while he wanted the Kickapoo to take up writing and even portrayed himself as a purveyor of “books,” he refused for a long time to let missionaries set up permanent schools within his community (Herring 1988: Chapter 7).¹⁵

It seems that Kenekuk put off choosing a successor till relatively late in his life: as the Kickapoo tradition has it, a year before his death, in 1851, he dictated his “doctrine” and “prayers” to Wansuk, a Potawatomi disciple:

The Prophet’s successors as pastors of his “Church” were as follows: Wansuk, a Pottawatomie, who reduced the Prophet’s doctrines to writing at the latter’s direction, in 1851. Some years afterward he gave place to Mas-que-qua, Sr. (father of John Mas-que-qua), who died in 1877, and was succeeded by Nahkukum, who died in 1886 (?) after which the office was again taken by Wansuk, who died April 18, 1900, aged 85 years. The place was then taken by John Mas-que-qua, who died May 7, 1907. (Custer 1918: 50)

By 1906, more than fifty years after his death, the singularities of Kenekuk’s visionary message and his ceremonial rituals had disappeared: the religious practices of the Kickapoo and Potawatomi seemed to have been thoroughly Christianized. But while they no longer read from inscribed boards, they seemed to have replaced these objects with small notebooks that apparently contained both Kenekuk’s sermon and the prayers around which his ceremony had been structured:

The services of Kannekuk’s Church have been much abbreviated since his time. The prayer-sticks are no longer used by the remnants of his followers, and “whipping with a rod” is no longer submitted to. Services are now held only on Sundays and the sermon that is preached—or, rather, recited—as well as the few songs and the prayers that are used, are those composed by the Prophet himself and written by Wansuk. (Custer 1918: 51)

15. On the Baptist and Catholic schools among the neighboring Potawatomi, see Murphy (1988: Chapter 8) and Myrhe (1998: Chapter 5).

In 1964 the anthropologist James Howard was then able to attend a ceremony held by practitioners of Kenekuk's religion:

The congregation was singing hymns, reading the words from ordinary loose-leaf notebooks in which the Potawatomi syllables had been written using the English alphabet. I borrowed one such book for examination later and noticed that in addition to several hymns and prayers it also contained a list of the Indian names which had been bestowed in the church at naming ceremonies. (Howard 1965a: 31)¹⁶

What are we to make of Milo Custer's description of "several small volumes of the Kickapoo dialect in English script" (Custer 1918: 53) and what James Howard identified as notebooks written in the Potawatomi language? In 1906, Custer was allowed to copy two short passages, which John Mas-que-qua translated for him. The first was part of Kenekuk's sermon:

Now, then, my brethren, this is that which created us explained to us who are here in this world. We are poor: three-colored. (?) Now, then, this is how it was. Our Father, when he worked and made this world where we are now, afterwards made us. After a while, our father began to have compassion for us. (?) (Before that) there was nobody right here where we now live. After a while we began to wander (away from the Father?) "If I can not have them to be my children," he thought (then what shall I do?) His heart was filled with good knowledge. After a while "I will bring it down" (to men?) he thought. "It will stay with them and I will have them to be my children," he thought. He gave a part of His heart and put it here, and then He took off His coat. It was a black one. "This is from your Father, my children; worship me." He said to His heart (and to His coat) which He took off. It was His heart, a part of His own self, which He talked to. (Custer 1918: 54-55)

The second passage was excerpted from the hymn that all of the participants would sing in chorus:

Give us strength now! Give us strength father! (Custer 1918: 55)

16. The author further relates that "[though] no longer in general use such sticks are still owned by some of the older members of the church. I observed one at the Easter service I attended in 1964, and saw others in the homes of older members of the church" (Howard 1965a: 23).

The translations are approximate and in many places difficult to interpret, but they are close enough to what we know of Kenekuk's words and thematic preoccupations for us to consider them authentic. If we consider the original Potawatomi text, it is worth noting that it was not written using the Meeker alphabet with which the Baptist missionary Robert Simerwell had translated select passages from the Book of Genesis as early as 1834.¹⁷ It is therefore reasonable to assume that the script used in these ceremonial notebooks drew its inspiration from the system developed by the Jesuit Christian Hoecken and taught in successive Potawatomi schools. It was with this writing system that Hoecken composed the prayer books and reading manuals he published between 1844 and 1846¹⁸ and from which the Potawatomi syllabic script was later derived.¹⁹

Should we accept as true that Kenekuk dictated sermons and hymns to Wansuk, as the Kickapoo tradition would have it? It may not matter. The complexity of the phenomenon reveals some of the most important features of Kenekuk's new religion. It shows how his Kickapoo and Potawatomi followers appropriated the Christian religion by deriving it from their own prophet's vision, and how, throughout this period, their ceremonial life continued to be based on two forms of discourse—preaching and prayer—as well as their graphic transcription. In the process, a new ritual script, developed independently of its mixed Catholic and Protestant origins, came to take the place that had been occupied, during Kenekuk's lifetime, by eschatological maps and prayer

17. On Meeker's alphabet, see McCoy (1840: 471–80), Allen and McMurtrie (1930), McMurtie (1931, 1933), Walker (1981, 1996), and Grant (2003). On Simerwell, see Myrhe (1998: 178–83); on his translations, see Pilling (1891: 463–66).

18. On Christian Hoecken, see Myrhe (1998: 202–14); on his writing system and translations, see Pilling (1891: 232). His work was completed by Maurice Galliard, who translated a prayer book, which was published in 1868 (Clifton 1998: 445–46).

19. On the Potawatomi writing system, see Hamilton (1885: 72) (“The Chipeways invented a system of writing and taught some Kickapoos, and a few Sacs learned it from them, but it must have been formed from the English, as the letters resemble the English considerably though the sounds are different, using sixteen letters, four of which are vowels”), Walker (1981, 1996), Justeson and Stephens (1993), and Goddard (1997).

sticks.²⁰ Throughout this period, all these forms of writing were regarded as no more than close avatars of the one-and-only Kickapoo Bible. In Chapter 5, where we will take a comparative look at all of the Algonquian prophetic movements discussed here, we will examine in more detail the consequences of the relative stability of the ritual apparatus that Kenekuk invented.

20. Between 1832 and 1867, the Jesuits appropriated Kenekuk's prayer stick technique for their own evangelizing efforts among the Potawatomi: see the reproduction of the mysterious "Drawing Using Indian Signs and Symbols to Show the Concept of Heaven" in Myrhe (1998: 300). Thanks to Lin Fredericksen of the Kansas Historical Society for this information.

CHAPTER 4

The Charts of Abishabis and Wasiteck, Cree Prophets

Two Cree Prophets

In 1840, in the settlement of Norway House, the Methodist missionary James Evans laid out the foundational principles of a new writing system intended for transcribing the Cree language. The originality of this phonographic script lay in the use of its characters, very different from those of the Latin alphabet. While each individual sign corresponded to a consonant, its syllabic value came from its rotational position: each of the sign's four possible orientations (right, down, left, or up) was associated with a vowel. To this basic semiotic structure was added a series of diacritics derived from contemporary shorthand conventions. Before long, Reverend Evans had translated a number of Christian hymns into Cree and transcribed them using his new script. He then handcrafted a small typographic press and a set of movable type pieces for the signs of his syllabary. By the autumn of 1840, he was able to print two of these hymns on two thousand loose sheets of paper, and possibly even on birchbark. The following year, he used his syllabary to produce a sixteen-page hymnal, printing some five thousand new pages.¹

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1. On James Evans and his total writing system, see McLean (1890), Pilling (1891: 186–89), Young (1899), Peel (1974), Dorais and Lewis (2003), and Hengstler (2003). Evans took inspiration for his script from another system, with similar semiotic principles, that he thought particularly

These printed sheets spread among the Cree at an astonishing rate.² During the winter of 1841–1842, they traveled all the way from Norway House to York Factory, then from York Factory to Fort Severn (Murdoch 1981: 3–5). In the autumn of 1842, these documents reached Moose Factory, where on first seeing them, another Methodist missionary, George Barnley, noted with some astonishment that the Cree “method of remembering is very curious: a number of hiroglyphics being marked with the finger nail on a piece of birch bark” (cited by Long 1986: 318). The actual origin of these signs was clear to him later that autumn, when he wrote in his diary that he had spent a whole day “endeavouring to decypher a piece of writing the work of an Indian who has not seen a Missionary till his interview with me on Monday last. The subject was a hymn and the characters employed those of the Rev. J. Evans’ invention. Some of the York Indians had obtained the original document of which this was a copy from Norway House, and by them it had been communicated to the Severn Indians. [...] I was not successful in my attempt at understanding the system” (cited by Brown 1982: 58).³

The strikingly swift diffusion of the Cree syllabary is noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, during the initial period of its dissemination, the script was indissociable from the discourses it transcribed: the Christian

successful in transcribing the Ojibwe language. The creation of this earlier writing system owed much to the contributions of Ojibwe-born translators Peter Jacobs and Henry Bird Steinhauer.

2. The unregulated circulation of loose, printed sheets of translated Christian hymns and prayers was a particular strategy of certain Protestant missionaries (see Harper 1983: 15–16; Edwards 2005: 38–62). On several occasions, in very different cultural settings, this approach provided a perfect environment for the development of prophetic movements: for example, in British Guyana (Déléage 2010) or among the Inuit (Laugrand 2002: 209–11, 365–403). The phenomenon exasperated Catholic clerics to no end (Laugrand 2002: 392), but it made a lasting impression on Anglican missionary Robert Hunt, who at the end of the nineteenth century developed a “universal syllabic alphabet,” derived from Evans’s, so that the “seven hundred million illiterate pagans” around the world could teach each other the basic elements of the Gospel without any help from missionaries (Hunt 1872, 1873); over time, Hunt even came to believe that his universal writing system was identical to Adam’s natural script, lost in the flood.
3. See also Long (1986: 318).

hymns translated by James Evans.⁴ Because in this context the writing system was “bound,” inextricable from the specific piece of discourse it was intended to transcribe, learning to write also meant learning to sing. It seems that the Cree approached this with enthusiasm, teaching one another of their own accord—in familial rather than school settings—the art of deciphering and copying these texts and then reciting them aloud.⁵ They sometimes wrote on birchbark, a material support traditionally used for other, cartographic forms of inscription (Harmon 1820: 370–71; Murdoch 1981: 54). The Cree thus took to the art of writing very quickly, at least insofar as it supplanted traditional inscription practices, on the one hand, and, on the other, was transmitted at the same time, and in the same way, as the other subsistence techniques that made up the fabric of their day-to-day existence.⁶

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4. The Cree Bible was not printed until 1861, in London (Peel 1974).
 5. See Suzanne McCarthy (1995); for a comparison with the Inuit, see Harper (1983), and Kakkik, Laugrand, and Oosten (2003: 8). Another case involving a writing system invented by a missionary for evangelical purposes, and which then spread beyond his control, occurred among the Micmacs of the late seventeenth century (Délégé 2009c: 82 ff.). The transmission of syllabic writing in a familial context continued for a long time among both the Cree and the Inuit: the syllabary was learned by heart while singing. The mnemonic devices developed by Robert Hunt to facilitate its acquisition, based on finger or limb configurations analogous to the shape of letters, in the manner of Aleut dactylogy or semaphores, do not seem to have been used in mission schools (Harper 1985: 156–57).
 6. This process of taking up of the art of writing could be considered complete when certain Cree groups passed on other stories, considered traditional, in which syllabic writing appeared as a distinctly native element: see, for example, Bloomfield (1934: 19–21), Mandelbaum ([1940] 1979: 180), or Dusenberry (1962: 267–71). It is true that in all three cases, these were very eccentric groups, assimilated to Plains cultures; for other groups, documentation is lacking. It is interesting to compare this innovation in Cree mythology with one of the effects of the Cherokee Sequoyah’s invention of a syllabic script to transcribe the language of his people (Walker and Sarbaugh 1993; Cushman 2010): the propagation of this script, from the 1820s onwards, rendered obsolete the mythical narrative that associated the bow and arrow with the Cherokee on the one hand, and writing with the white man on the other (Bender 2002: 26–27). The story, whose narrative pattern can be found in numerous indigenous American mythical traditions (Délégé 2010: 234), had disappeared by the end of the century. While the Cherokees abandoned a narrative describing the

It is in this context that we must place the prophetic movement that, beginning in the winter of 1842, spread among the Cree living to the west of James Bay. “[They] have been a pest to me [...],” wrote John Cromartie, the trader in charge of the Severn House post, as early as September 4, “with their psalm singing and painting Books that has been all their occupation this three weeks Back” (cited in Brown 1982: 53). To what exactly was he referring here? We know the Cree at this time were copying the hymns transcribed in James Evans’s syllabary, as well as reading the texts aloud, singing them in fact; but the somewhat obsessive nature of this ritual activity, as Cromartie records it, is already intriguing. Perhaps the term “book” does not here refer to the written hymns alone.

It was only a few months later, on June 8, 1843, that George Barnston, the Hudson’s Bay Company officer in charge of Fort Albany, observed with considerable panic the spread of this ceremonial enthusiasm to his own station. He had encountered a man who “depended on the Charts that he had in his possession, of the roads leading to Heaven and to hell for all his wants. On these unmeaning scratches—traced on wood or paper—[...] he did not cease to look from the moment he pitched his tent in the fall to the hour of his death” (Brown 1982: 54). Alarmed by the potential danger he saw in this new religion, Barnston organized an auto-da-fé for as many of these Cree inscriptions as he could gather. It was in these circumstances that a “priestess” from York Factory was forced to hand over “a paper whereon there were lines drawn, some straight, and many Crooked or waved, which they conceived to be the Track to Heaven” (Brown 1982: 59). Clearly the text in this incident was no longer the sheet of Christian hymns transcribed in James Evans’s syllabary, but an eschatological map similar to those of the Delaware visionaries and the Kickapoo prophet. What could have happened then over the course of that winter? The answer, as we will see, lies in a long letter that George Barnley, the Methodist missionary at Moose Factory, penned for the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* on September 23 that same year.

Two Printed Hymns and an Eschatological Chart

The missionary begins his report describing the enthusiastic spread of fellow Methodist James Evans’s printed flyers.

exogenous origin of writing, the Cree adopted one explaining its endogenous origin.

Two hymns (printed probably by Mr. Evans, but certainly by some person familiar with evangelical truth and poetic numbers) were in circulation among the Indians at York Factory, and thence found their way to Severn House. The natives there laboured earnestly to obtain a knowledge of them; and the truths thus communicated so engrossed their attention, that the mysteries of the Indian Magi rapidly sank in public estimation, and the conjurors saw that the hope of their gains was gone. (Barnley et al. 1845: 202)

Barnley was thus alert to a rather unexpected consequence of the unregulated diffusion of Evans's hymn pages: the Cree were excited about this new writing system and the songs it transcribed; and it seems that from the outset they perceived a certain antagonism between these written songs and those of their shamans.⁷

One, however, more subtle than the rest, like Mahomet, conceived the idea of amalgamating those portions of revelation which had come to his knowledge, with the crafty fabrications of his own mind, aided by an efficient confederate, that the declining dominion of darkness might be not only saved from irretrievable ruin, but even exalted on the fragments of truth. These two individuals consequently withdrew from the society of others, for the purpose of maturing their plans; and, after being absent some length of time, presented themselves before their countrymen as extraordinary messengers from heaven. The first of the two hymns referred to above commenced with an allusion to light; the second, to our blessed Saviour. Of these circumstances the impostors availed themselves, to augment their influence; one calling himself Wasetek, "Light"; the other assuming the sacred name of "Jesus Christ." (Barnley et al. 1845: 202)

The two prophets mentioned in this letter are known through other sources as well.⁸ It seems that the more charismatic of the two was known as Abishabis, he who in the above passage calls himself Jesus Christ; of his companion we know only the name he assumed after their visionary experience, *Wasiteck*, which indeed means "Light" in Cree. Barnley's hypothesis was correct: both prophets had found their names

7. For a synthetic overview of Cree shamanism before the nineteenth century, see Morantz (1978).

8. For more on this prophetic movement, see Williamson (1980), Brown (1982, 2004), and Long (1989).

in the texts printed by James Evans—they must therefore have studied the art of ritual reading.

Here is the beginning of the first song in the *Cree Syllabic Hymn Book*, printed and distributed by Evans in 1841 (see Figure 8):

Jesus my hope
Who has gone on high
I see He went
Where I too shall go.

Those who were good
In this life
The way of life
There I will walk. (Evans 1954: 13)

The first verse of the second song can be translated as follows:

Now all of you
Be very glad
To hear this
Throughout the world:
Light comes to you
Be very, very glad. (Evans 1954: 14)⁹

Abishabis clearly seems to have taken his name from the first hymn, while his companion took inspiration from the second song. Abishabis's claim that he was an "extraordinary messenger from heaven" ought to be somewhat familiar to us: as Jesus, he had "gone on high" to meet God, following the "way of life." This was, in fact, the vision narrative that, upon their return to their community, the prophets began to recite.

Their recent absence was accounted for by the announcement of certain visits having been made both to the regions of future blessedness, and to those of future woe. A chart was produced, exhibiting representations of a path which branched off in two directions, passing by the sun, moon, etc; the one leading to heaven, and the other to hell.

9. Nichols (1984), analyzing the orthographic evolution of the texts in the 1841 collection, shows that the two songs we have singled out here are in fact the same texts that were disseminated on flyers in 1840.

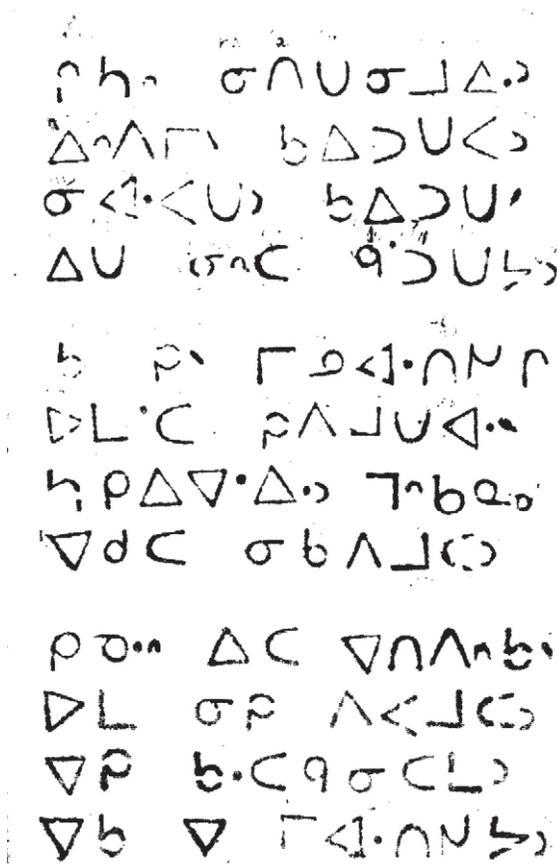


Figure 8. First Hymn in James Evans's Cree Syllabic Hymn Book, printed in 1841 (1954: 13).

A sensual Paradise was described, dressed up in all the furniture likely to be produced by, and to fascinate, an Indian imagination: deer were innumerable, amazingly fat, gigantic, and delicious beyond description. They proceeded so far as to describe the person of that God who is a Spirit, "whom no man hath seen, or can see, and live." A splendid mansion, extensive enough to contain all the Indians, but designed for them alone, and abundantly supplied with every source of enjoyment, was stated to be in course of preparation, and to be let down from heaven in a few years. (Barnley et al. 1845: 202–3)

Within the context, then, of ongoing ceremonial innovation in which new songs were circulating accompanied by the first written transcription of the Cree language, the two prophets set about disseminating the story of their eschatological vision with the help of a “chart” representing the path that led from earth to paradise, as well as its detour into hell. The correspondence between John Cromartie and George Barnston’s accounts thus comes down to a fairly basic point: in the Cree prophetic movement, the copying of books transcribing new ritual songs was entirely continuous with the copying of eschatological charts representing “The Track to Heaven.” The prophets preached their visions with the help of their maps and, in unison, their followers repeated the songs, whose authority the prophets claimed for themselves:

The credit of the false prophets was firmly established; and the people were so enraptured with their new heaven, that day and night their tongues were employed in chanting the praises of those fertile regions, with their exhaustless abundance of berries and animals, as set forth in the attempted poesy of their great “Light.” (Barnley et al. 1845: 203)

The movement was fundamentally a proselytizing one: the written hymns and eschatological charts could travel faster and farther than the prophets. It was with these techniques, through the efforts of two more preachers, that by the spring of 1843 it had spread as far as Fort Albany:

A missionary zeal was awakened in the bosoms of an old woman and a youth, who took up their residence among the Albany Indians, and soon introduced their chart, with all the enchanting revelations of the new system; and the poor people were almost universally carried away with the delusion; children and parents, having laid aside the appropriate appellations, addressed each other as brother and sister; and other extravagancies were generally prevalent. To the Chief-Trader, G. Barnston, Esq., the Mission is deeply indebted for a prompt and earnest exposure of this wicked device, which resulted in the old sybil’s consenting to the demolition of her valued book, and in the discontinuance of many of the prevailing follies. (Barnley et al. 1845: 203)

Here, then, we come back to George Barnston’s book-burning and the apparent capitulation of the York Factory priestess. To what “valued

book” does that letter refer? The eschatological chart? or Evans’s hymnal? The impossibility of definitively deciding one way or another seems telling enough.

The Cree prophetic movement’s process of dissemination thus followed the same itinerary as Evans’s syllabic script a year earlier. From York Factory to Severn House, from Severn House to Fort Albany, the vision narrative and ritual songs of Abishabis and Wasiteck eventually came to the attention of Barnley at his own mission: “At Moose, most of the natives had fallen into the same snare” (Barnley et al. 1845: 203). But like Barnston, the Methodist missionary had little tolerance for these ceremonial innovations, on which he had clearly had no direct influence; with the satisfaction of a job well done, he would soon thereafter write that at Moose Factory, “the use of those songs, which were evidently the production of an Indian mind in its heathen state, has been discontinued” (1845: 203).

CHAPTER 5

Prophetic Scripts

All of the movements we have thus far encountered originated from the intense and often dramatic upheavals brought about by the arrival or advances of Euro-American settlers. The natural and social environment of indigenous Americans was being radically transformed: epidemics struck regularly but selectively, game became scarce, populations were displaced into little-known territories that were difficult to exploit, and alcoholism ran rampant. Relations with colonizers took shape against a backdrop of constant conflict. The mutual and relatively long-lasting agreements that were sometimes established always correlated with rivalries pitting one group of settlers against another. The innovations in ritual practices and writing systems described thus far must therefore be understood in relation to this context of acute dissension between indigenous peoples and Euro-Americans. That said, the particular characteristics of these innovations developed out of the more specific conflict between indigenous ritual traditions and Christian proselytism. Generally speaking, the movements of these prophets and preachers presented themselves as alternatives to Christian institutions. In each case, the intent was to bypass and dispense with foreign missionaries, while integrating certain aspects of their messages, ceremonies, and tools. As we will see in this chapter, this specific institutional conflict was just as central to some of the ritual innovations of the Algonquian prophets as it was to the writing systems they invented.

Two Aspects of Ritual Invention

Two types of ritual discourse stand out among the innovations introduced by the Algonquian prophets: one epistemological, the other liturgical. The first includes all representations that explain the origin of the ritual, describe the supernatural authorities that legitimize its propagation, and define the ritual's purpose. Liturgical discourses, on the other hand, provide a performative means of fulfilling the ritual's hunting, healing, or messianic purpose.

One obvious trait was common to all of these movements: each of them originated in the visionary experience of an innovator, described in some instances as a preacher and in others as a prophet. Meiaskaouat's preaching was founded on a vision he'd had of the Captain of Heaven, Neolin's on a conversation with the Master of Life, Kenekuk received his instructions from the Great Spirit and, finally, Abishabis and Wasiteck were able to contemplate the essence of God. The visions of these innovators should be understood in contrast to the personal visionary experiences that were widely sought after in each of these groups, as well as in relation to the importance that each of them placed on dreams and their potential predictive value.¹ Having a vision and attributing it with a certain truth value was nothing new for these populations.

Still, these prophetic visions differed from the divinatory dreams and personal visions that organized these societies' traditional ceremonial lives. Firstly, they were not only of concern to the individuals who received them; they were meant to be disseminated, in narrative form, to an entire population, or even to as many native peoples as possible. While visions of a proselytizing nature must certainly have occurred in the past, in this particular historical context, these instances were most likely a response to the conversion strategies employed by Christian missionaries. Indeed, each of the vision narratives discussed here borrowed several elements from Christian discursive traditions. Some of the prophets, like Abishabis, identified with Jesus; all of them met with God; and all of them announced a world—either post-mortem or

1. On the cultural complex of visions, see Benedict (1923) and Blumensohn (1933). Some of the earliest descriptions of predictive dreams (see, e.g., Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 10: 168–72 or 204–8) and vision quests (see, e.g., Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 14: 140–42, or vol. 67: 158–60) in the indigenous cultures of Northeastern America can be found in the *Jesuit Relations*. For the indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes Region, see Raudot (1904: 77–79), or Baraga (1837); for the Delaware, see Jordan (1913: 176).

soon-to-come—split by a moral dualism that was unheard of in indigenous traditions.² Heaven on the one hand and hell on the other: the prophets supplanted the missionaries, first by appropriating this eschatological dualism from them, then by describing a new path to follow in one's quest for paradise. Within this general framework, the Algonquian prophets' vision narratives each took the form of an epistemological discourse delivered in preface to a ceremonial ritual: they explained the ritual's origin (the vision), they described the supernatural authority that legitimized its transmission and dissemination (God), and they gave it a purpose (access to an earthly or sometimes heavenly paradise). These stories explaining the need to propagate the prophets' ritual innovations also had to be disseminated, sometimes as part of the ceremony itself.

While the visions were a constant in each of these prophetic movements, the same cannot be said of the liturgical elements that formed the substance of the ceremonies used to transmit them. Depending on the particular case, these were either a continuation of local traditions, borrowed from Christian practices, or unambiguously novel. The *ratio* between these three aspects varied in each of the movements studied here. It seems that Neolin, for example, did little more than recycle the traditional liturgy of the Big House ceremony, which was in a state of relative neglect at the time. The public recitation of personal vision narratives had been central to this ritual (Heckewelder [1818] 1822: 390–91; Grumet 2001), and it is likely that Neolin's own vision was first shared as one example in this series of recitations. But this vision soon acquired a value that went far beyond the person of the prophet himself, and its accurate repetition became an integral part of the new collective ritual. It is not known whether the prophet introduced any new songs in addition to his vision narrative; but it is in any case clear that Neolin's vision endowed the old ceremony with a new, non-traditional epistemology, one that was inextricably associated with the instructions he received from the Master of Life.

In terms of their liturgical elements, there's a strong resemblance between the cases of Meiaskaouat and the Cree prophets, Abishabis and Wasiteck: both of them integrated Christian ritual songs into a shamanic context belonging to their own native traditions. The ceremony propagated by Meiaskaouat essentially boiled down to the recitation of Catholic songs. There's no way of knowing whether the recitation of his

2. For more on the borrowing of this particular aspect of Christian theology, see Hultkrantz (1981), White (1991: 280–84), and Dowd (2002: 99–105).

own vision was an integral part of these ceremonies; at best we can say that, in this quite clearly shamanic context, these Catholic songs were given a new epistemological foundation: they were now used to bless the hunt and perhaps to cure illnesses. No doubt it was the story of the preacher's singular vision that allowed his disciples to recognize both the authority of the new songs (which drew at once on the relative prestige of the Jesuit missionaries, the exoticism of their God, and the charisma of the preacher himself), and the point of singing them (which would have been in continuity with the most traditional shamanic practices). Two hundred years later, the Cree prophets proceeded more or less in the same way with Wesleyan Methodist songs, except that they also borrowed the syllabic script in which they had been transcribed and printed; it also seems quite possible that their ritual incorporated the ceremonial repetition of their own prophets' vision narrative.

The liturgical innovations of the Kickapoo prophet Kenekuk are more difficult to pin down. Protestant missionaries saw his ritual as a variant of the Catholic mass, which is not impossible, but only at a very high level of abstraction. In the absence of more precise historical information, it is difficult to know whether Kenekuk's ceremony maintained any kind of continuity with Kickapoo traditions. In all events, it would probably be impossible to trace the origins of all its ritual elements. What matters most for our purposes is that the ceremony was divided into two separate phases: first, Kenekuk recited and commented on his initial visionary experience by means of a sermon adapted to the contingencies of the moment; then, in unison, the faithful would recite the ritual songs the Great Spirit had dictated to the prophet in the course of his vision. Once again, the vision narrative acted as an epistemological preface to the liturgical songs.

In each case, then, the ritual innovations introduced by the Algonquian prophets included both a new vision narrative and a series of ritual actions whose origins, legitimacy, meaning, and purpose were made explicit by the former. From this common foundational framework, each movement developed in line with its own unique configuration. For some, the recitation of the prophet's initial vision was an integral part of the ritual, but not for others. Some recycled hymns and other liturgical elements from foreign traditions; others simply repurposed an old ceremony. These small innovations were adapted, each in their own way, to fit a particular cultural context and historical moment; it was in the unique configuration of these adaptations that each movement formed and disseminated its own specific ritual apparatus.

Mapping Vision Narratives and Transcribing Songs

I have singled out these four Algonquian prophetic movements—to the exclusion of many others from the region³—because each made use of a particular inscription technique to disseminate and stabilize their new discourses. Each of these prophets invented a notation technique for the ceremonial discourses they propagated—a form of writing in other words. These techniques shared two pragmatic features that allow us to characterize them specifically as *bound* writing systems: they were used, on the one hand, exclusively in a ceremonial context and, on the other, to accompany the oral memorization of a given ritual discourse. They can be divided into two main categories: maps and transcriptions of songs.

The map was a technique common to the Delaware, Kickapoo, and Cree prophets. In each of these cases, the prophet's vision narrative was supported by a map that traced both the theoretical topography of the world-to-come and the paths linking its different topographical zones. The maps clearly did not transcribe the discursive scope of the vision narrative in its entirety: they only provided the vision's principal points of reference. The map was only a summary, in other words, sometimes topographical (when the discourse described one distinct zone after another) and sometimes sequential (when the discourse reiterated a list of

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3. Dowd (1992) provides an excellent description of the profusion of prophetic movements seen in the eighteenth century. A reader familiar with the historiography of prophetic movements in this part of North America will have noted the absence from our discussion of Tenskwatawa, the Shawnee prophet of the early nineteenth century. According to the sources we have, although he referred in his visions to the Great Spirit's "book of accounts" (recalling *Exodus* 32:31–33), he did not consider inscription techniques (apart from the traditional *wampum*) a useful resource for the stabilization and dissemination of his own ritual innovations (Lambert 1810, vol. 1: 395–96). There is no valid reason to believe that the prayer stick described in Galloway (1943) (then in Howard 1981: 204–7) originated with this prophet. If the Seneca prophet Ganioda'yo (Handsome Lake) is also absent here, it is because the movement that associated itself with his visionary experiences emerged from an entirely different context, that of Iroquois literacy over a fairly long period of time and about which I am preparing another study (see, however, what appears to be a prayer stick associated with his revelations in Fenton 1950: plate 8). As for the Tshizunhaukau Winnebago calendar, it does not seem to have been related to any new ritual activity (Merrill 1945).

sins that corresponded to series of strokes). Each of these cosmograms exhibited a clear division between the zones of Earth, Heaven and Hell; a network of paths leading from one zone to another; and a few idiosyncratic details in the form of a series of strokes or simple iconographic figures. The geographical representations displayed in these maps thus functioned in relation to the sequential ordering of the discursive recitation of the prophets' vision narratives.⁴ What the Algonquian prophets ultimately accomplished with the invention of these maps or cosmograms was a means of disseminating and stabilizing the basic narrative schema of their visionary discourses.

It may seem like somewhat of a stretch to describe these cosmograms as writing systems. But insofar as these inscription techniques were systematically linked to ritual discourses, they cannot be solely thought of as simple geographical maps or representations of spaces (whether real or imaginary). On the contrary, these cosmograms are a perfect illustration of one of the general characteristics unique to selective writing systems: unlike total systems, selective systems can be augmented (Severi [1993] 1996). It is thus quite likely that the maps of the Algonquian prophets

4. Eschatological maps were also used by a number of "prophets" from Athapaskan groups, west of the Cree. For example, toward the end of the nineteenth century, a Kaska prophet named Gusais received a "piece of skin on which was drawn a picture of people following in a line to heaven"; this preacher, who was very sympathetic to Catholicism, called his map a "book" (Honigmann 1949: 47–48). In the 1920s, a Beaver prophet named Old Matoit used a "large map" in his preachings "with many trails. One trail was good and along it there were many moose and bear. Going off from this trail were many bad trails with few animals. The prophet pointed to the good trail and urged his audience to continue following it" (Honigmann 1946: 132–35). These instances of Athabaskan "prophetism," using cosmograms to represent visions or dreams of a more cynegetic paradise, took inspiration, at some point, from the Catholic ladders designed by Père Lacombe and distributed by Oblate missionaries (Duchaussois 1928: 328–29; see also Martha McCarthy 1995: 142). The practice seems to have been remarkably stable and "dreaming" shamans, called "prophets," were known to use maps of the path to paradise well into the second half of the twentieth century (Brody 1982: 44–48; Ridington 1988). This prophetic complex is largely autochthonous and shares few elements with the movements studied in this book. Importantly, these maps do not depict hell (Janes and Kelley 1977; Ridington 1988), which is the case with some of the cosmological maps used by the Plains Cree (Cadzow 1926a: 26).

not only represented the structural backbone of the vision narratives they were designed to stabilize, but also provided additional information that was absent from their target discourses.

Meiaskaouat, perhaps, and Kenekuk, certainly, were the only of our prophets to consistently use a selective script to facilitate the memorization of ritual songs. Selective writing, it should be recalled, is an inscription method that fixes the least stable elements of a formalized discourse into a strict successive order. This implies two things. In the first place, these selective writing systems were not intended to notate just any kind of discourse; their purpose was to transcribe a clearly delimited discursive domain: that of formalized discourses. In the second, they were premised on the formal division of a discourse into repeated elements, on the one hand, and variable elements, on the other: for economy's sake, selective writing systems recorded only the variable elements. Each formalized discourse defined its own *ratio* of repetition to variation within this general framework. Among the ritual traditions discussed here, one of the most widespread forms these *ratios* took, for reasons most likely having to do with the nature of human memory, was that of parallelism. Songs employing this poetic procedure lent themselves particularly well to selective transcription: they alternated long, endlessly repeated formulas (which were therefore not difficult to memorize), with short variations whose discursive form (a given word or phrase) and order of enunciation (one word, then another, then another, etc.) had to be retained. Though we often refer to writing systems like these as pictographic, with these characteristics in mind, they would be more meaningfully described as bound and selective.

The fragmentary details we have regarding the ritual songs inscribed on Kenekuk's prayer sticks clearly suggest that his discourses employed parallelism. The five variables (heart, body, life, name, kindred) were notated, one after the other, by a fixed series of signs which was then inscribed onto a vertically oriented cosmogram, itself derived from the one the prophet traced in the sand while reciting his vision narrative—with Earth represented at the bottom and Paradise at the top. With this simple structure at their disposal, the participants had no need to notate the long formulas in which these variables were embedded—formulas that were tirelessly repeated and entrusted to oral memory. It had the further advantage of giving a visible, figurative form to the relationship between the prophet's map and the selective writing system, in other words, the epistemological discourses and the liturgical songs: just as the vision narratives acted as epistemological prefaces to ritual actions, the

figurative cosmogram provided a spatial framework for this succession of selectively transcribed variables (whose iconography, though highly systematic, appears to have been arbitrary).

Meiaskaouat and Kenekuk both invented their writing systems as a means of stabilizing ritual songs by selectively transcribing their variable elements. It is in relation to this process of invention that we should understand the appropriation of total writing systems within both the Kickapoo and Cree movements. In both of these cases, the appropriation of a total script took place in a very similar context to those which saw the invention of the selective systems: the aim was to transcribe ritual songs that were intended to be recited aloud on a regular basis and therefore memorized. Though the semiotics of total scripts differ greatly from those of selective writing systems (as we saw in this book's introduction), the pragmatic frameworks governing their usage were identical for these movements: both were bound writing systems. In these cases, then, the total writing systems were confined, for a time, to a particular institutional context in which they were simply read and copied, just as maps and texts written in selective scripts were read and copied.⁵ But despite this pragmatic continuity, the total scripts bore within them the potential for other uses, not connected to any ritual institution, as the Kickapoo and Cree were quick to discover.

One point to be retained from this analysis is the strange recurrence of similar techniques used to transcribe similar types of discourse, corresponding to the two central components of these ritual innovations that we have distinguished. Vision narratives, on the one hand, were transcribed as cosmograms (the old Delaware priest, Neolin, Kenekuk, Abishabis and Wasiteck); on the other hand, ritual songs were notated with two different kinds of writing systems; selective scripts (Meiaskaouat and Kenekuk) and total scripts (Kenekuk's successors and Abishabis

5. A very similar phenomenon can be observed among the Inuit of the East Canadian Arctic from the early twentieth century onward (Blaisel, Laugrand, and Oosten 1999; Laugrand 2002: 365–403). As with the Cree, Christian hymns translated and transcribed in a variant of Evans's syllabary spread at lightning speed, independently, at least at first, of any missionary schooling. The art of reading aloud was thus transmitted in a pragmatic context similar to the one we have described; and, again as with the Cree, these texts were taken up by a series of prophetic movements—the collective Tasiujaq movement, for example, but also those initiated by the prophets Alik Kiktuvialuk and Gisiasi.

and Wasiteck). These techniques were each therefore either invented or borrowed in order to stabilize and propagate the two new genres of ritual discourse; it is on this basis that we can draw a clear distinction between epistemological *maps* and liturgical *scripts*.

The Prophetic Invention of Writing

The Algonquian prophets each presented their followers with an alternative to Christianity. And it is in its relation to this basic institutional conflict that we should interpret the logic and dynamics of the new ceremonies they tried to establish. One form of proselytizing was in competition with another, and that is why the prophets found themselves in need of effective dissemination techniques. Like their evangelical rivals, the indigenous prophets sought to disseminate ceremonial discourses that needed to be memorized, faithfully transmitted, and recited or sung in a ritual context. The prophets were all aware that they were borrowing certain epistemological and liturgical elements from Christianity. But this was in no way a matter of conversion: on the contrary, they were proposing a new ritual apparatus as an alternative institution that was intended to supplant the evangelizing efforts of foreign missionaries.

It is in relation to this same institutional conflict that we should interpret the new techniques for inscribing discourse that the prophets invented. Cosmograms and liturgical scripts were no doubt useful for propagating and stabilizing their discursive innovations (their vision narratives and new songs). But it is quite clear that, in inventing these forms of writing, the prophets were emulating the Christian use of the Bible. At some point in their lives, all indigenous people would have heard Euro-Americans citing their illiteracy and the absence of a sacred book in their “religion” as a way of denigrating native cultures and rituals.⁶ The prophets each offered them a book they could claim as their own Bible. Not only did this reinforce the value of the new rituals, it also enabled their followers to appropriate a prestigious technology that was unambiguously opposed to that of the foreigners.⁷ Thus it should not

6. The literacy rate of settlers, at least men, was considerably higher than it was in Europe (Kaestle et al. 1991: 20) and underwent an unprecedented explosion after the revolution (Round 2010).

7. Very similar observations can be made about several other indigenous North American ritual innovations. In the second half of the nineteenth

surprise us that all of these ritual writing systems were born of prophetic movements that united indigenous Americans, albeit momentarily, in an “imagined community” (Anderson 1996)⁸—one which, in the Delaware case, came into violent conflict with the colonial forces of the British Empire; or which, in the Kickapoo prophetic movement, represented a form of resistance to the forced displacement of indigenous peoples by the American government.

For the Algonquian prophets themselves, however, it was probably a question of positioning themselves less in relation to colonial society at large than to that society’s missionary vanguard. It was only in their confrontation with these rival proselytizers that the arms race could take on real significance; and the adoption of an efficient and imposing technology was a clear tactical advance. That is probably why Charles Meiaskaouat called the texts written in his selective script *Massinabigan*, a term at that time used to designate European writing, and which Buteux translated as “Book,” with an upper-case B; it was clear that Meiaskaouat needed to find a substitute for the alphabetical script that the Jesuit missionaries reserved for their exclusive use, but which they also used to translate and transcribe the ritual chants that interested him—the *Credo*, the *Pater Noster*, and the *Ave Maria*. The observers of the Delaware movements consistently used the term “Book” as well, though unfortunately failed to record the word used in their own language; instead we find a series

century, among the Wanapams of the Columbia River, the prophet Smohalla used a “book containing mysterious characters, some of which resembled letters of the alphabet, and which he said were records of events and prophecies” (Mooney [1896] 1973: 720; Brown and Ruby 1989: 34). Mention was also made of ancient prophets using ritual books further north, in Stó:lo-Coast Salish oral traditions collected in the early twentieth century: the first, Twaqpa’met, was known to have introduced writing to his people around 1840, as he preached from a book that gave him knowledge of European technologies; the second, Quitzkanum, toward the end of the nineteenth century, possessed a parchment covered with “hieroglyphs,” which an Oblate missionary hastened to burn—perhaps this latter prophet was the author of a strange document, most probably produced with a selective writing system, known as the *Dreambook of a Stolo Chief* (Thor Carlson 2001).

8. Most studies of the Delaware (Wallace 1956; Champagne 1988; White 1991; Dowd 1992, 2002; Cave 2006) and Kickapoo (Herring 1988; Cave 2006) prophetic movements insist on their political and identitarian dimension, which was clearly fundamental to each case.

of variants: “Indian Book,” “Letter,” “Book of Images,” “Great Book,” “Scripture,” or “Bible.” These prophets’ eschatological cosmograms were thus not only used to propagate their vision narratives; they were also presented as substitutes for the Euro-American Bible. We find the same phenomenon in Kenekuk’s movement: his Kickapoo and Potawatomi disciples referred to their selectively transcribed texts—whose arbitrary characters strongly resembled Latin letters in their systematicity—with the terms “Book” and “Bible.” Finally, it seems that the Cree prophets also used the term “Book” to refer to their chart, at least if we go by Cromartie’s admittedly terse account.

In all of these cases, the prophetic invention of a form of writing can be explained only if we take into account the forms of emulation engendered by the rivalry between two institutions, Christian and prophetic: both were addressing the same audience, and in taking up the missionaries’ tools,⁹ the prophets not only appropriated the stabilizing function of writing, but also the prestige and authority of the rivals’ Book. Through this comparative approach to the Algonquian prophetic movements, we are thus able to formulate a more precise idea of the basic institutional configuration underlying the invention of writing systems.

9. Kroeber (1958: 15) believed that the selective writing systems invented in northern Mexico were products of a similar process of emulation; as we will see in the following chapter, this assertion is most likely incorrect.

CHAPTER 6

The Midewiwin: The Writing System and Charts of an Ojibwe Shamanic Society

Two Accounts Separated by More Than a Century

In a letter from 1710, the intendant of New France, Antoine-Denis Raudot, wrote of a group of people that he called the “jugglers,” belonging to the “Saulteur” society, by which he meant the Ojibwe. His information was no doubt second-hand, though it is difficult to say if he had simply heard speak of this type of ritual performance, or culled it from an unpublished manuscript by someone else.

Because of the abundance of fish, the place at the fall, which the French have named Sault Sainte Marie, where the Saulteurs live, of whom I told you in my last letter, is inhabited during the summer by a number of wandering tribes, which come there to live. That is where they practice their witchcraft to excess. Besides the dreams, dances, sacrifices, and other superstitious notions which these Saulteurs have, like the other tribes of whom I have already spoken, they go further and act like our charlatans in France who travel through the towns. They distribute medicine and, so they say, they cause people who are not friends of theirs to die by their spells; this is believed by the other Indians, for, among all these tribes, there is not a single old Indian man or woman who does not have some secret of medicine, real or pretended.

The *Saulteurs* learn how to make people fear them by their talk, and, to convince still others more easily, they arrange with one or more persons to play the part of a dying man, a dead man, and a living man, according to what may be necessary to prove their powers.

Then they make known to the public, by a harangue, that they will dance the medicine dance in the hut of such and such a person and that the jugglers will show the amazing effects of their knowledge and powers. Long before the time and to the sound of the drum and with invocations to demons, they prepare the remedies or magic arts which they pretend to employ. Then, on the appointed night, they get ready their paraphernalia, consisting of a number of small bags or packets made of bark, in which there are powders and the bones of animals, and the skin of an otter, which they cause to move or jump in accordance with the movements of their bodies and their *chichigoues* [rattles].

When all the people are assembled, one of the jugglers begins a great speech in their praise, boasting of their knowledge and their power over the life and death of men. The others applaud him; and to begin to prove what he has said they cast some of their powder on the persons who are devoted to their interests, who immediately fall and throw themselves about like men possessed, foaming at the mouth and uttering cries. The jugglers, for their part, augment their own cries and throw more powder upon them. The dying man pretends to be dead; they carry him, they turn him over, but he seems unconscious and motionless. Then it is that the jugglers, triumphing in the surprise they see on the faces of everybody, shout that that is nothing; that life and death lie in their hands; that although they have taken his life, they are about to give it back to him with their remedies. During this time a dead silence is observed by all, and they watch intently. To effect this, they blow upon him with another medicine, and, invoking their *Manito*, they call upon the dead man, who is only dead because he is willing to be, and who, to finish the performance, gradually revives as well as he was before all this trickery. He raises himself and then sits down and tells the assembly tales and fables about the other world, which he says he has seen. (Cited in Kinietz 1940b: 372–74)¹

1. The real author of these observations was probably Louis-Thomas Chabert de Joncaire.

A century later, on February 5, 1837, the French explorer Joseph-Nicolas Nicollet witnessed a remarkably similar ceremony among the same people, somewhere around the source of the Mississippi. The following account is taken from his handwritten notes:

On the day of the initiation the whole village is in a trance and beginning at dawn natives arrive from all directions. The *mizbinaweg*, the two who received the colored feathers, proceed with the building of a large enclosure with two doors, or entrances, one facing east, the other facing the setting sun. Meanwhile, the faculty and the candidate are gathered before the lodge in which they spent part of the night, prolonging the instructions of the candidate. *Okagikimawân*—they give him advice. The gifts offered by the candidate are composed of blankets, fabric, kettles, rifles, traps, etc. in quantities large enough to make eight packages for the eight members of the faculty. Furthermore, there is a dish containing eight mouthfuls of something to eat called the *mideonagôn*—the dish of the medicine ceremony. The gifts are called *pâgijigônun*.

When the large enclosure or *midewigomik* is completed, all the *midé*, men and women, gather within it and occupy their appointed seats. [...]

When all is ready, the *mizbinaweg* notify the faculty, and its members make an exit, walking solemnly one at a time. The first to come out is the candidate. He carries a stick on which the gifts are suspended. (The presents that are not edible are called in the singular, *sasagiwijigôn*, in the plural, *sasagiwijigônun*.) The last to come out carries the *mideonagôn*. All are singing. The candidate says: “*Wâbâmishin, wâbâmishin, wâbâmishin*, etc.—Look at me, look at me, look at me, etc.; *ezbinawiôyân*, etc.—behold the state I am in, etc.”

They enter the lodge by the east entrance, the side of the rising sun, go around by the south, west, and north, and place themselves along the east side of the lodge, facing the center. The *mizbinaweg* take the gifts from the hands of the candidate and hang them up on two cords at a certain height. The faculty makes another revolution, following the same direction, singing another tune to the following words: “*Anendayânine, anendayânine*” (repeated). “*Wemittigoshiwug omadindaganîwan nînday amoowan*—I have them, the goods from the whites.”

When the song is finished after their round, the candidate and the eight pronounce loudly so that all can hear, “*Kanagakana*,” and the audience answers in chorus, “*Na*.”

[...]

[There] are two hearths where fires are kindled for no reason other than to light pipes during the intervals, or to have a source of heat should these events take place during a cold season.

[There is] a post called *midewatig*. It has a base of several inches and a height of three to four feet. It is painted to suit the fancy of the *mizhinaweg*.

Looking south and vis-à-vis the faculty are the singers with the drum *mittigwâkik*, and the *shishigwân* for accompaniment, and a little mallet called *pagaâkookwân*. One of the eight delivers an oration on the power of the manitos, their power to heal or to weaken, power passed down to the *midé* after having been transmitted from generation to generation.

After the address, the candidate rises and walks around the lodge, making a stop in front of each member of the faculty. To each one he addresses a word of greeting, emphasizing this by a gesture of the hand as if he were counting them, or giving them his blessing. [...]

The faculty rises, moves over to [another position] and sings a song: "*Nabek ôwibian manito nindanissa*—I could kill a spirit with my medicine bag made out of the skin of the male bear." [...]

The candidate kneels down on a spread-out blanket. The eight rotate around the lodge passing south and saying, "*Nikanug, nikanug*—my colleagues, my colleagues," hailing with their hands until they settle on the west side. Then they turn around and face the candidate. From this point, the eight start a series of eight revolutions around the lodge, passing south, west, etc. They follow each other in line, but the eight revolutions are performed especially to demonstrate the power of the medicine to kill through testing it on the candidate. The leader, as he starts the first round, holds his medicine bag like a rifle, marches forward threatening the candidate with a shot he is about to fire with his bag shouting, "*Hohohoho! Hohohoho—hoho! hoho!—ho!*" The candidate trembles, but he is only wounded by this blow.

[Each member then fires at the candidate, turn by turn.]

[...]

Now he must be killed! And this is the task of the last of the members of the faculty who is holding the medicine bag made out of a bear's skin, the power of which has been praised in the preceding song. This song would have been different had they used a different kind of bag.

The one who is to kill the candidate makes an oration before starting the eighth round: “Here is a medicine bag handed down to me from my grandfather by my father. My father said unto me that I could never miss my mark when using it. But I am old, my colleagues, help me that I may find the strength to blow, to fire upon this man over there on his knees! There is a red mark upon his heart. I shall strike there and my medicine bag shall not fail me.” And he begins to threaten, “*Hohohoho! Hohohoho!*” He moves gradually toward the candidate, followed by the other seven members. As soon as he is within reach, he fires saying, “*Ho!*” and the candidate falls dead.

Now has come the time to prove by the candidate, that if the medicine has the power to weaken and kill, it can also heal and resuscitate. When the candidate collapses, a frenzy seizes the assembly and the people. The singers move over to the pole and dance around it playing the *shishigwânun* and the drum. Every assistant of the *midé* rises to beat the rhythm, and the members of the faculty stand around the dead one covering his body with their medicine bags. A few moments later, they try to lift his body carefully, hoisting it on its feet, punctuating its gradual return to life with shouts, “*Y a-ha! Y a-ha!*” The candidate is now up on his feet—revived! So they give him some medicine to drink, and there he stands, in perfect health. He is now initiated. He has the power of medicine, a fact the remainder of the ceremony is about to prove.

His first act consists in acknowledging every member of the *midéwiwin* as his colleague. Thus far he called them father, brother, cousin, son, mother, aunt, sister, etc. Now he will greet them with the title *nikanug* (my colleagues). He walks around the lodge pronouncing this title, and moves closer to the faculty where his diploma is handed to him by the member who gave him the *coup de grâce*. The diploma is in the form of a medicine bag that confers the power of medicine practice and a granule of ceramics, symbol of disease that one can either communicate or heal. (Bray [1970] 2004: 201–4)²

More than a century separates Nicollet’s account from Raudot’s, yet the similarities between the two ceremonies are striking. The rite described in both of these passages was none other than the initiation ritual of the Ojibwe shamanic society known as the “Midewiwin.” Several key aspects are presented from the outset: the collective and hierarchical

2. Translation modified by current translators.



Figure 9. “Shooting the *Mi’gis*” (Hoffman 1891: 192).

character of the ceremony, the ritual lodge (the “hut” or “enclosure” in these excerpts) where a portion of the proceedings takes place, as well as the orations, dances, music, songs and, above all, the ritual murder and resurrection of the candidate, which the initiated members carry out using zoomorphic medicine bags (see Figure 9). Nicollet also describes the steam bath in which the candidate was required to cleanse himself, the gifts he had to offer the already-initiated members, and the collective feast that took place afterwards. But these were only the public and most spectacular of the society’s ritual activities. After the initiation, the aspirant would begin a long apprenticeship during which a great number of remedies and shamanic songs would be passed down to him. As Nicollet writes, “for the savages, a newly initiated Mide is no more than a newly graduated medical student for us. They need to acquire much more experience, to learn thousands and thousands of songs and all of the plants watched over by the *manitos* [spirits]” (Lind 1979: 116).³ It was in the context of this apprenticeship that the “members of the medical body”

3. Translation by current translators.

made use of a “hieroglyphic script” specific to their own purposes (Bray [1970] 2004: 207). The initiate would then put all this esoteric knowledge into action in ritual performances meant to treat the illnesses of uninitiated clients.⁴

An Ojibwe Shamanic Society

The apparent stability of the institution may be misleading: most scholars today recognize the historical character of this shamanic society, which probably did not exist in the same form in the seventeenth century (Hickerson 1963; Vecsey 1983a; Schlesier 1990; Angel 2002).⁵ It seems clear, in other words, that the Midewiwin is a ritual innovation specific to the indigenous American world of the eighteenth century. Traditional practices related to the supernatural were quite varied among the Algonquian societies west of the Great Lakes. These often included vision quests, during which a lone adolescent—their face blackened with charcoal after a more or less strict period of fasting—would meet a supernatural entity who would take “pity” on them and become their life-long “protector.”⁶ Just as widespread was the shaking tent ceremony, a shamanic ritual in which the officiant, hidden from view, would incarnate different supernatural entities endowed with divinatory powers (the turtle spirit, in particular), and with whom human participants could dialogue.⁷ Shamans in the region also led collective propitiatory rituals to ensure successful hunting expeditions, in which chanted exhortations would be accompanied by offerings (tobacco, etc.) to the master spirits

4. For a description of these healing ceremonies, see Lind 1979: 126–29; Densmore 1907; and Casagrande 1960. It is worth noting that the healing ceremonies performed by members of the Midewiwin did not differ much from those performed by other shamans in the region.

5. The argument made in Hickerson (1970) 1988 is much less convincing.

6. See, e.g., Thwaites (1896–1900, vol. 54: 140–42 or vol. 117: 158–60). See also the more recent accounts of Densmore (1929: 83–86) and Radin (1914). For an overview of these sources, see Vecsey (1983a: 121–43).

7. For the earliest accounts, see Thwaites (1896–1900, vol. 6: 162–72 and vol. 12: 16–22) (Montagnais, 1634–1637); for Nicolle’s description, see Lind (1979: 118–21); for a historical and regional overview, see Hallowell (1942). We will discuss the Jaasakid shamans at greater length toward the end of this chapter.

of game animals.⁸ But Raudot's second-hand account from 1710 is the earliest mention in the Euro-American archives of anything that could be accurately described as a shamanic society. And while the ceremony described in Raudot's text incorporates certain elements from these earlier traditions (possibly visions, if we can trust Raudot, but certainly the medicine bags and the ceremonial pole erected in the lodge, similar to those used elsewhere in hunting rituals⁹), it was nonetheless highly original.

As Nicollet and all who subsequently described the ritual make clear, the entire Midewiwin initiation ceremony, which was held at regular intervals, was organized around the transmission of a medicine bag (Kohl [1855] 1985; Hoffman 1891; Densmore 1929; Landes 1968).¹⁰ It was with this bag—the opening and closing of which was highly ritualized—that the initiated members “shot” the novice; it also contained the mysterious shamanic seashell known as *migis*, the source of the shamans' powers, and its physical appearance conveyed the hierarchical rank of its owner (Kohl [1855] 1985: 44; Densmore 1929: 93;

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8. “I also asked them what was meant by a picture of the sun that one of them had painted upon a piece of board. This picture was tied to the end of a pole, which was also painted in the brightest colors; and on this pole, at the height of a man, was suspended a sheaf of small cedar sticks, cut so as to serve as floats for the nets that are used in catching sturgeon, like the pieces of cork that are fastened to all kinds of nets in France. I therefore asked for what purpose they had set up this sort of votive offering. They replied that it was a sacrifice—or rather, to use the proper expression in their language, ‘an exhortation’—which they had made to the sun, to entreat it to have pity upon them. As they believed that the sun was the master of life and of fishing, the dispenser of all things, they begged it to send the sturgeon into the river, and to make their fishing prosperous” (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 58: 273–75). Marquette also saw a cross tied to a similar pole (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 59: 102) and Hennepin saw *wampum* in the same place; recall that the Algonquin placed the text of a Catholic prayer at the end of one such pole. Nicollet likewise saw a selectively transcribed prayer attached to another (Lind 1979: 138–44). As a general rule, the skin and bones of desired game animals were placed atop these ceremonial posts (see Perrot 1968: 20; or Raudot 1904: 106–7)—as could still be observed much later (Skinner 1911: 162–64).
9. The shamanic “shot,” or sometimes “breath,” was another element no doubt borrowed from an older tradition (Havard 2003: 716–17).
10. Three years before Nicollet, the Reverend James Evans composed a quite thorough description of the ceremony (Graham 1975: 101–4).

Blessing 1977: 81). The conferral of these medicine bags was accompanied by the transmission of a long mythical narrative and a number of shamanic songs. Unlike certain ceremonial practices of other Algonquian groups, in which a sacred bundle was associated with a specific clan (and its origin myth),¹¹ the transmission of the Midewiwin bag emphasized a vertical dimension: the horizontal relationality between different clans was replaced by that of the explicitly hierarchical levels (either four or eight) attained by each individual initiate. In both cases, however, the object of attaining new personal visions (and the songs they inspired) gave way to the transmission of long mythological narratives describing the origin of the ceremony and its songs, which were learned through repetition as precisely as possible. The canonization of ritual, mythic, and sung discourses thus went hand in hand with the eradication of visions and their “inspired” songs; with the commodification of esoteric shamanic knowledge (all observers noted the significant and constant inflation of payments required by Midewiwin aspirants); with the development of a scholastic pedagogical strategy (as is reflected in Nicollet’s account, for example, by the use of terms like “faculty,” “doctor,” “diploma,” etc.); and with the use of particular inscription techniques.

In more general terms, the institutional configuration of the Midewiwin shamanic society can be summed up in three main points. First, it formed a kind of complementary dynamic, sometimes conflictual, with an older shamanic institution, a rivalry that varied in intensity as circumstances changed. The Midewiwin did not oust the visionary shamans (or Jaasakids) who practiced the shaking tent ritual; though their practical objectives sometimes overlapped, the two Ojibwe shamanic institutions coexisted without any real problems. Second, because their initiation process was long and costly, the dissemination of Midewiwin knowledge was extremely limited from the outset: only a tiny fraction of each Ojibwe generation had access to the society’s secrets, songs, and remedies. Finally there is the group’s undeniable stability as a ritual institution; despite the novelty and singularity of its practices, the

11. As was common among the Algonquian groups that lived south of the Ojibwe, in ritual practices that perhaps appeared around the end of the seventeenth century (Callender 1978; White 1991). Though of excellent quality, most of the sources we have on the ceremonial lives of these groups were written much later.

Midewiwin continued to exist in some regions for at least two hundred years, from the early eighteenth to the mid twentieth century.

Ojibwe Graphic Repertories

The earliest surviving account of an Ojibwe shamanic writing system is most likely that found in the diary of the fur trader George Nelson. Though written down much later, the passage describes a memory from Nelson's childhood in northern Wisconsin, an encounter that took place sometime between 1802 and 1804.

Their songs are delivered in *Notes*, impressed or drawn on bark, in the form of hieroglyphics and thus taught, and being hieroglyphics (and not very dissimilar to those anciently used by the Egyptians; nay indeed, I have reason to think from what I have seen of both, that any *Learned* man being perfectly acquainted with the one could trace a great deal in the other; but this opinion I hazard from my own ignorance) no two are alike, it therefore requires time to learn them; that is any *one* of them: for those notes are not like ours, *marked* with regular bars etc., so that one Gamut serves for all; but with them, each one may be said to be itself a Gamut.

However, I have reason to think that they are regular and uniform; for many years ago, when I was still scarcely more than a boy, I remember throwing away the contents of one of these medicine bags in which there were several strips of Bark covered with these Notes. An indian happened to be by—he took one up and with the Point of his knife placing it on one of these began to sing, moving the knife regularly as children do when they begin to learn their a, b, c. This surprised me a little at the time, for the indian was a stranger and had but lately arrived from his own lands that were several hundred miles off. After laughing at and ridiculing him as is the custom with us, I asked how he could make them out?

“The same,” said he, “as you do to *reckon* (i.e., read) your *papers*. See, this one is (meant for) the *Thunder*; that, the Earth, etc., etc.; but I only know a few of these songs: the possessor of this bag knew a great deal—he was a great Medecine man, i.e., Doctor” etc. (Brown and Brightman 1988: 58–59)

This was indeed the same “hieroglyphic writing” very briefly mentioned by Nicollet: a technique for “noting down” shamanic songs. While

this selective script was almost certainly a recent innovation in Algonquian shamanic practices, its iconographic sources and calligraphic techniques were in fact much older.¹²

The indigenous peoples of the region had long made use of “hieroglyphs” in various other contexts, that of heraldry first and foremost. The practice of painting the emblem of the group one belonged to (one’s “totem,” in other words¹³) on the body (preferably in red and white), or sometimes engraving it onto the head of one’s club, was particularly widespread. We still have an elaborate list of the coats of arms worn by peoples of the Pays d’en Haut territory (Anonymous [1736] 1928)¹⁴; they generally took the form of animals—bears, squirrels, cranes, hares, partridges, eagles, sturgeons, moose, foxes, otters, turtles, etc. With their standardized iconography, these heraldic signs were passed down patrilineally and were sometimes engraved or painted on wooden posts marking the graves of warriors (see Figure 10).¹⁵ They were also used to sign a number of treaties with successive colonial administrations, as well as the various censuses ordered by these same authorities (see Figure 11) (Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 1: 411–21; vol. 2: 222–29; D’Avignon, Delâge, and Guillaud 2001; Bohaker 2006, 2010). We see them used in a wide range of other contexts as well, in hunting or war reports for example,¹⁶ or account books (Mallery 1893: 259–62; Fulford 1992; Beal 2007).

These populations were also known for their cartographic skills (see Figure 12), of which the trader and interpreter John Long gave the following description toward the end of the eighteenth century:

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12. On the petroglyphs of the region and their iconographic relationship with the selective writing system developed over the nineteenth century, see Rajnovich (1994) and Lenik (2009).
 13. In fact, the term “totem” itself comes from the languages and cultures of this region. On the history and polemics surrounding this concept, see Brightman and Fogelson (2002).
 14. See also Lahontan ([1704] 1990: 728–32), Keating (1824: 119), Kohl ([1855] 1985: 149), and Landes (1968: 86).
 15. According to Black Hawk, it was customary to refresh the paint on a heraldic sign at every passing ([1833] 2008: 46). See also Schoolcraft (1851–1857, vol. 1: 335, 355–57), Kohl ([1855] 1985: 159), Mallery (1893: 521–22), Hoffman (1896: 74), Skinner (1913: 67), and Densmore (1929: plate 29).
 16. See, e.g., Feest and Kasprzycki (1999: 210–11, 228–29), Nelson (2002: 120–21), and Harmon (1820: 370–71) (on the Cree).

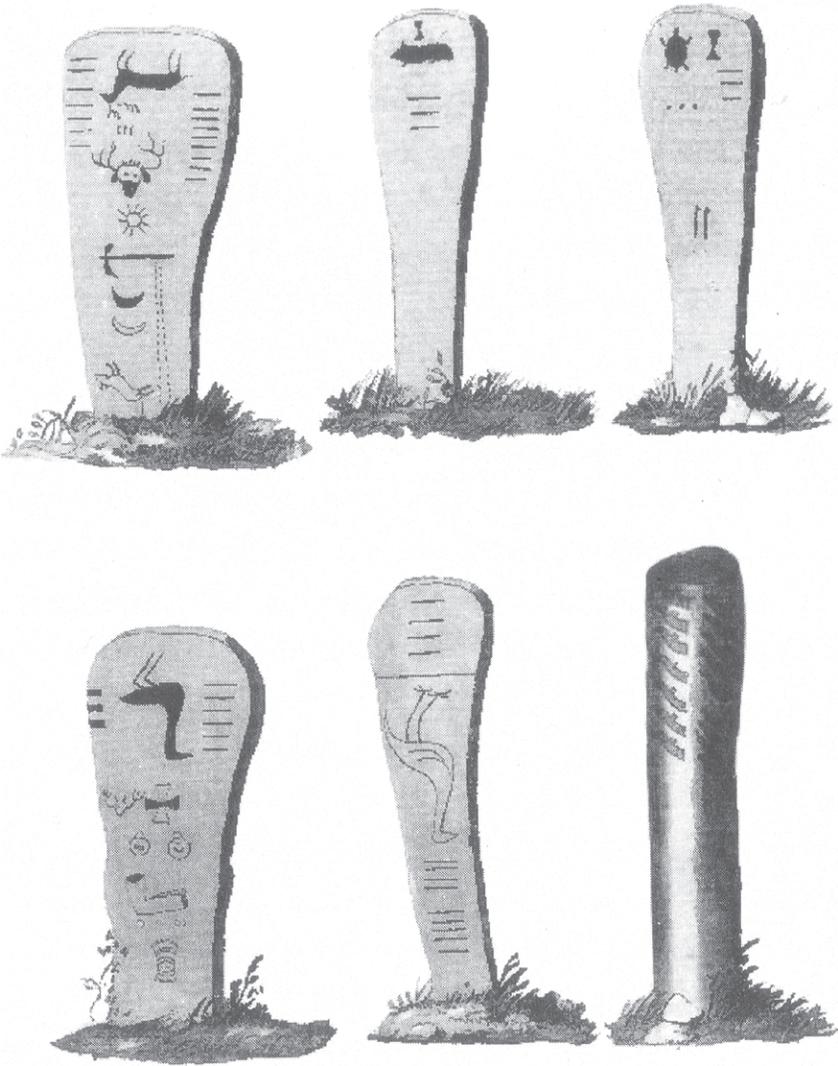


Figure 10. Grave Posts with Heraldic Signs (Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 1: 355).

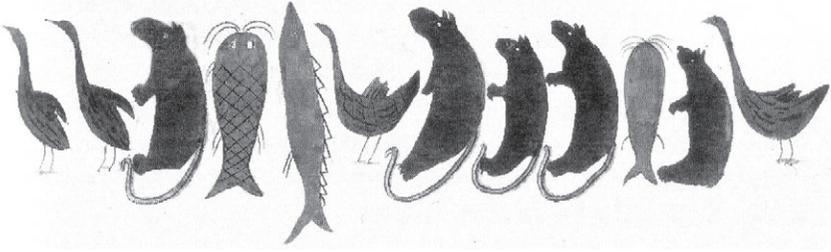


Figure 11. Ojibwe Census (Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 1: plate 61).

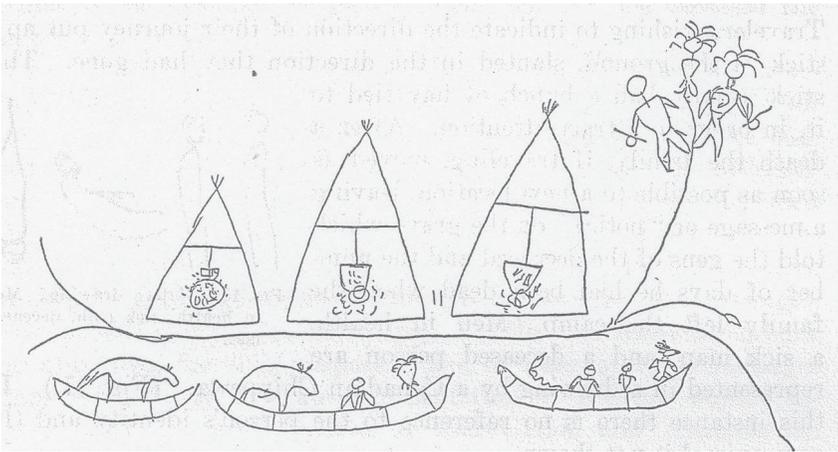


Figure 12. Ojibwe Map. This map is organized around the river and its tributaries. Its author is depicted among the people in the three canoes. The figure at the front of first canoe, on the right, belonged to the Woodpecker clan and the figure at the stern of the vessel, the Snake clan. The two figures at either end of the middle canoe belonged to the Catfish and Bear clans, respectively. The last canoe, on the left, is occupied by a member of the Wolf clan. These three groups of travelers have paused for two nights at the intersection of the river and one of its tributaries (shown by three tents with cooking pots and two vertical strokes), and have seen, at the mouth of another tributary (where they've left a slanted stick), three Sioux men, two of whom are armed with rifles. (Densmore 1929: 178, figure 19).

It is necessary to observe, that though the Indians are very expert in delineating countries upon bark, with wood coal mixed with bears' grease, and which even the women do with great precision, the length of a day's march is very uncertain, and consequently cannot afford any geographical information. This remark, I trust, will be found to

want no farther proof than the consideration that their drafts consist principally of lakes and rivers, as they seldom travel much by land; and when their track over land is described, it is perhaps only a short portage which they cross, in order again to pursue their journey on their favourite element. (Long [1794] 1904: 120)¹⁷

Among their other components, these maps sometimes featured emblems from the heraldic system just mentioned. As Nicollet also observed, a related system of signs was also used to mark the landscape itself, communicating the comings and goings of various groups by planting notched sticks into the ground. More elaborate details could often be read on strips of engraved birchbark, fixed to these sticks with dried grass:

They use this figurative language strictly for their needs as they travel or hunt or wage war in order to make known their whereabouts and the events they witnessed, to show where they came from, where they are heading, and what they plan to do, and to tell of the things they saw, etc. They mark all these things at the confluence of rivers, on lake shores, on portage trails, always in the most conspicuous places, along the paths traveled most by passersby who are carriers of these dispatches. The system consists in informing of one's position or where one may be overtaken. [...]

When they wish to indicate who the people are they draw their totem that can be an animal or some other object. Often, when they are making haste, they do not draw the persons but simply inscribe their totems. (Bray [1970] 2004: 266–74)

But heraldic signs and cartography were not the only contexts in which iconographic practices had achieved some degree of stability. In one of the earliest Euro-American accounts concerning the Ojibwe's northern neighbors, the Ottawa, the Jesuit Claude Dalbon identified, in his 1670 Relation, a clear relationship between the supernatural entities encountered on vision quests and their figural representation in the form of tattoos.

It consists in each one's making for himself, in his early years, a God which [he] reverences then for the rest of his days, with superstitious

17. See also Carver (1781: 418–19); Hoffman (1888: 223–29); and Densmore (1929: 176–81).

and ridiculous venerations. It is this which they believe to be the sole author of their good fortune in all their enterprises of war, fishing, and hunting; and so they wear its ineffaceable hieroglyphic,—marking on their skin, as with the graver, the representations of the Divinities that they have chosen. (Thwaites 1896–1900, vol. 54: 139–41)

The inscription of symbols received in dreams or visions was extremely popular, not only in the form of tattoos, but also charcoal drawings on birchbark and a variety of other materials. Though this practice meant that the identity of the being encountered during the vision was public knowledge (by the simple fact of its being displayed), the specific narrative details of the interaction were kept secret (see Figure 13) (Densmore 1929: 80–82).¹⁸ Wearing these emblems was supposed to provide their owner with supernatural protection, and indeed descriptions of them always insist on the “magical” character of these representations of entities encountered in visions or dreams. As we will see, these practices eventually provided a model for the figurations Jaasakid shamans made of the wide array of supernatural entities with whom they were able to make contact—though this may have been a late development and pertained only to individual (and not collective) shamanic practices. While the iconography of this supernatural “heraldry” sometimes resembled that of the emblems of social groups discussed earlier, it was nonetheless very different in origin, use, and status.

The “hieroglyphs” of this iconographic tradition had another supernatural use, one that received a particularly thorough description by the surgeon Edwin James in an important edition from 1830:

Muz-zin-ne-neen, muz-zin-ne-neen-sug—singular and plural. *Mesbe-nin-ne-shah, Mesbe-nin-ne-shuk*—Menomonie dialect. These little images, or drawings, for they are called by the same names, whether of carved wood, or rags, or only rudely sketched on birch bark, or even traced in sand, are much in use among several, and probably all the Algonkin tribes. Their use is not confined to hunting, but extends to the making of love, and the gratification of hatred, revenge, and all malignant passions.

It is a prevailing belief, to which the influence of established superstition has given an astonishing power, that the necromancers,

18. See also Tanner ([1830] 1956: 164, 315), Kohl ([1855] 1985: 58, 296–97, 400–404), Landes (1968: 38), and Phillips (1986).



Figure 13. Vision Symbol Painted on a Blanket (Densmore 1929: plate 32b).

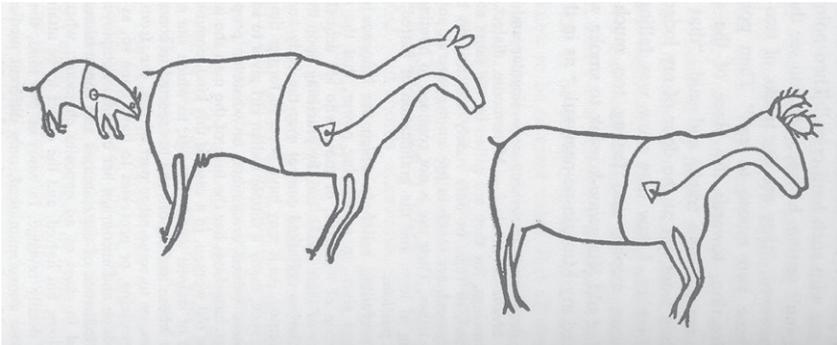


Figure 14. Figures of Game Animals (Tanner [1830] 1956: 182).

men and women of medicine, or those who are acquainted with the hidden powers of their *wusks*, can, by practising upon the Muz-zinne-neence, exercise an unlimited control over the body and mind of the person represented. As it may have been, in former times, among the people of our race, many a simple Indian girl gives to some crafty old squaw her most valued ornaments, or whatever property she may

possess, to purchase from her the love of the man she is most anxious to please. The old woman, in a case of this kind, commonly makes up a little image of stained wood and rags, to which she gives the name of the person whose inclinations she is expected to control; and to the heart, the eyes, or to some other part of this, she, from time to time, applies her medicine, or professes to have done so, as she may find necessary to dupe and encourage her credulous employer.

But the influence of these images and conjurations, is more frequently tested in cases of an opposite character; where the inciting cause is not love, but hatred, and the object to be attained, the gratification of a deadly revenge. In cases of this kind, the practices are similar to those above mentioned, only different medicines are used. Sometimes the Muz-zin-ne-neence is pricked with a pin, or needle, in various parts, and pain or disease is supposed to be produced in the corresponding part of the person practiced upon. Sometimes they blacken the hands and mouth of the image, and the effect expected, is the change which marks the near approach of death (Tanner [1830] 1956: 183 n.27).¹⁹

Either cut out of or painted on birchbark, these figures were anthropomorphic when representing a victim to be bewitched, and zoomorphic when representing a game animal to be lured (see Figure 14). With a needle or pin standing in for an arrow, a shaman would then lead a small private ceremony, combining a symbolic action performed on the figurine with a shamanic song promising success in either hunting, warfare, or love (Lind 1979: 118–21 [Nicollet]; Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 1: 382–83; Hoffman 1883: 138–39; Skinner 1913: 42–43; Coleman 1937: 39; Speck and Heye 1921 [Montagnais]; Vastokas 1984: 435). In sum, then, while Nelson and Nicollet’s references to “hieroglyphs” used for transcribing shamanic songs may have registered an innovative, recent development,²⁰ they belong to a context in which a variety of traditional iconographic practices—many of which were already related to the supernatural world—were in widespread use.

19. Schoolcraft chose the term *Muzzeniegun*, meaning “a printed document or book” according to him, as the subtitle of the weekly paper he published at Sault Sainte Marie during the winter of 1826–1827, the *Literary Voyager* (Mason 1997: xviii). The same Algonquian term also referred to graphic repertoires, and, as we will see, selective writing systems. We have already encountered its Montagnais equivalent with Charles Meiaskaouat.

20. See, however, the testimonies collected in Déléage (2009c: 65–66).

The Origin of the Midewiwin Selective Script

The volume published by Edwin James in 1830 was the first publication to contain reproductions of Midewiwin shamanic writing. The edition was presented as the autobiography of a man named John Tanner, who had been captured by the Ojibwe as a child and lived among them for some thirty years, though the text was transcribed and prepared by James after Tanner's oral account—most likely given in a mix of English and Ottawa dialect (Tanner [1830] 1956: 338–81).²¹ The work's second volume contains several annexes by James on different aspects of Ojibwe culture that had not found their way into the autobiographical narrative. The second of Tanner's adoptive mothers, an Ottawa woman who became Ojibwe by marriage, had been an active member of the Midewiwin and, although Tanner himself was disdainful of this kind of shamanic practice, he had not escaped acquiring some rudimentary knowledge of the tradition while in her company. James, for his part, was extremely interested in what he saw as “the earliest steps towards a written language” (Tanner [1830] 1956: 338). This volume remained the only source of information on the selective writing system of Midewiwin songs for over twenty years.²² It was not until 1851 that Henry Rowe Schoolcraft—a rather bold plagiarist of the Nicollet texts cited above (Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 5: 415–41)—published another collection of songs transcribed in the shamanic selective script, which he had collected during his three-decade tenure as Indian agent at Sault Sainte Marie (Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 1: 351–404).²³ It is clear from these early examples of Ojibwe shamanic writing—all that remain from the first half of the nineteenth century—that the Midewiwin had only quite recently felt the need to develop a technique for inscribing its songs,

21. Nicollet was familiar with this book (Lind 1979: 47); on Edwin James, see Benson (1970) and Kasprzycki (1990).

22. They were reproduced—with no mention of the original publication—in Catlin (1841, vol. 2: figures 310–11), and in Schoolcraft (1851–1857, vol. 1: plates 53 and 58) (as Tylor had already remarked, 1865: 82–83). Constantine Samuel Rafinesque took inspiration from them for his *Walam Olum* (Brinton 1885; Oestreicher 1995, 2002; Boewe 2003) that in turn became the source for the tenth chapter of Copway (1850). Among the reproductions that popularized the texts in the selective writing system published by James in the nineteenth century, we should also mention Domenech (1861) and Mallery (1893).

23. On Schoolcraft, see Freeman (1965).

and that during this period, furthermore, the use of these songs was not exclusive to them.

It seems in all likelihood that the Midewiwin selective writing system appeared at some point around the turn of the nineteenth century. According to all of the shamans who have shared the stories of how these texts or scrolls were passed down to them, the script dates back to the first decades of the 1800s (Hoffman 1891: 288, for example). They were then either passed on from master to disciple (Hoffman 1891: 165; Densmore 1929: 90; Landes 1968: 86), or copied by the latter during their apprenticeship (see Figure 15) (Hoffman 1891: 174). In some cases, a master's scrolls would be destroyed shortly before his death (Kohl [1855] 1985: 384). Both James and Schoolcraft explicitly state that some of the selective texts reproduced in their volumes were not used by members of



Figure 15. Midewiwin Initiate Copying a Selectively Transcribed Text (Hoffman 1895: frontispiece).

the Midewiwin only (Tanner [1830] 1956: 351)²⁴; it seems that certain of them, in fact, were exclusive to members of another group of shamans known as the Wabeno (Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 1: 366–81).

Unfortunately very little is known about the Wabeno cult, only that it was a relatively new shamanic movement, active among the Ojibwe and some of their neighbors around the close of the eighteenth century.²⁵ We also know there was a very strong rivalry between the Wabeno and the Midewiwin, which by this time would have already been considered an ancestral tradition, and that members of the younger group sometimes used “flat [sticks], about three feet or more in length, with rude figures carved or painted” (Thompson 1916: 256).²⁶ It is therefore not impossible that the Wabeno movement was the first to use a selective writing system to record its own shamanic songs and that, much as in an arms race, the Midewiwin equipped themselves in response. This would at least explain why the first accounts to mention the Midewiwin script did not appear until a century after Raudot’s description of their initiation ceremony in 1710.

How then did James and Schoolcraft view the Ojibwe ritual writing system? According to the surgeon, it was comprised of “rude pictures [...] carved on a flat piece of wood, [that] serve to suggest to the minds of those who have learned the songs, the ideas, and their order of succession; the words are not variable, but a man must be taught them [orally], otherwise, though from an inspection of the figure he might comprehend the idea, he would not know what to sing” (Tanner [1830] 1956: 341) (see Figure 16). It is clear from this account that the Midewiwin script was a bound one—a writing system used to transcribe specific ritual songs—and selective—it encoded only certain words, as well as the sequence in which they were to be recited. Schoolcraft was more forthcoming: he returned to the subject of indigenous peoples’ selective writing systems on numerous occasions in his works, inaugurating a whole new field of research. But his general attitude was not far removed from James’s: in his view, these selective transcriptions were of interest only insofar as they represented a first step in the direction of alphabetic writing. Though his phrasing is complicated, it seems that his aim was to mark a clear distinction between selective scripts and alphabetical ones:

24. See also Lind (1979: 205–7).

25. For an overview of the sources and a discussion of the rivalry between the Midewiwin and the Wabeno, see Krusche (1981).

26. See also Burton (1909: 243–46) for a later account.



Figure 16. Selectively Transcribed Text On Birchbark (initiation song), acquired by Walter Hoffman (National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, Anthropology Collection, Catalogue no. E153151-1. Photograph by Pat Henkle).

the “symbolic pictures” of the Ojibwe “are merely suggestive to the memory, of the words of the particular song or chant, of which each figure is the type. The words of these songs are fixed, and not variable, as well as the notes to which they are sung. But these words, to be repeated, must have been previously learned by, and known to, the singer. Otherwise, although their ideographic character and value would be apparent, and would not be mistaken, he would not be able to sing the words of the song.”²⁷

James and Schoolcraft’s assessments are more or less equivalent: both understand the Ojibwe selective script as a succession of symbolic figures or images that each correspond to a specific part of a discourse, to a “word” from a ritual song. Both authors vehemently stressed that this selective writing system functioned differently from an alphabetical one: it only served as an aid to memory once the discourse had already been learned by heart—Champollion couldn’t have made any sense of it. Both

27. Schoolcraft (1851–1857, vol. 1: 361). In a 1849 letter addressed to E. G. Squier, in which he expresses his doubts on the authenticity of the *Walam Olum*, Schoolcraft defines selective writing systems in the following terms: “In the system of the north tribes, to which I have given attention, the objects of inscriptive art are; to bear testimony to a single exploit—a battle,—something like biographical jottings, as numbers of scalps, fierce animals killed, spirit-craft in the priesthood [the Midewiwin], etc. More commonly this art is applied to record *medicine*, *hunting* and *war* songs. The system is purely ideographic and mnemonic. It is a system of substantives, action being always inferential. Verses of songs are noted by pictures, but it is, so to say, only the key-notes, which are designed to awaken the memory. The words must have been previously committed to memory, in order to be certainly recited” (Weslager 1972: 471). This is one of the better definitions proposed in the nineteenth century: Schoolcraft goes beyond the basic premises that these writing systems are bound up with or specific to the ritual discourses that had to be learned by heart and that, semiotically speaking, they are logographic (they inscribed words and not vague ideas). He goes on to say, and this is the important part, that these writing systems were selective (they did not inscribe all of the words of the relevant discourse) and that this selection did not happen by chance: “It is a system of substantives, action being always inferential.” We can thus assume, correctly as we will see, that these writing systems only transcribed certain specific syntagms, entrusting all that was predicated on them to oral memory. Schoolcraft’s French translator, for his part, compared the “secret pictography” of the Midewiwin to the artificial memory techniques described by Quintilien (Mondot 1858: 229).

authors also emphasized that the “words” in the songs, and therefore the figures associated with them, followed a fixed sequential order. To better understand the Midewiwin ritual writing system, it thus helps to first know how the shamanic songs themselves were structured; from there it may be possible to examine, on the one hand, the systematic relationship between the selective inscriptions and the songs they transmitted and, on the other, the processes of iconographic standardization that characterized the development of this technique.

Midewiwin Shamanic Songs

Let us begin, then, by assembling the various descriptions of Midewiwin songs that we have available to us. Ojibwe songs, according to Edwin James, “whether of war or devotion, consist, for the most, of a few words or short phrases many times repeated” (Tanner [1830] 1956: 334). A few pages later, he describes “a measured and monotonous chant, in which the ear of the stranger distinguishes principally the frequent repetition of the same word” ([1830] 1956: 337). These basic characterizations are echoed by all of the nineteenth-century observers: though there are many of them, Midewiwin shamanic songs are short and extremely repetitive. Considering their merit as poetry, James adds on the following page that “If any thing among them deserves this name, we must search for it among those traditionary songs which descend from father to son, and are transferred from man to man by purchase, to be used in their feasts, in the administration of remedies to the sick, and above all, in medicine hunting. That some of the songs thus preserved have considerable antiquity, we do not doubt; that they have much merit as poetical compositions, we are not disposed to assert” ([1830] 1956: 338). There are several points to bear in mind here. First is the apparent formal homogeneity of Ojibwe shamanic songs, whether they are used in healing, hunting, or initiation ceremonies. Second is their mode of transmission, expressed quite clearly in this last passage from James: the songs are most often handed down in the paternal line or else passed on in exchange for payment—their standardization or canonization (“the words are not variable,” “the words of these songs are fixed”) having gone far enough for them to take on a commodity form.

Finally, James provides us with a valuable piece of information regarding the conditions in which the appendix to his book—including his “translations” of Ojibwe songs—was produced: “The poetry of the

Indians, like their eloquence, requires the assistance of able translators, and those not too scrupulous to draw only from the materials of the original" ([1830] 1956: 338). Indeed, this first publication of texts in the Ojibwe selective writing system is marked by paradox: James was well aware that this script was used for "noting down" songs and, since he considered these "rude pictures" a first step toward alphabetical writing, it was difficult not to provide a vernacular version of the songs represented. This is why, in his appendix to Tanner's narrative, James presents each of the texts in three steps: first reproducing it and numbering its component signs; then providing a phonetic transcription of the corresponding "song" in Ojibwe, with one sentence per numbered sign; and then finally his own English "translation" of each sentence. This method set a precedent: the majority of authors who published texts in the Midewiwin selective script after James similarly provided a gloss for each character consisting of a single complete sentence in Ojibwe. But as we shall see, it would be a mistake to confuse these Ojibwe sentences—or *glosses* as I will refer to them—with the actual lines of the shamanic songs, most of which remain unknown to us. We thus see why James needed a translator who would not just sing the texts for him, but also gloss them (albeit imperfectly, as John Tanner's knowledge was far from adequate) and then provide a translation that was "by no means literal" ([1830] 1956: 341). James took on the task of filling in the gaps in Tanner's glosses himself, relying largely on intuition, and then interjected his own commentaries, for the most part personal interpretations, often fanciful and frequently hedged in the conditional mood. Why was it that James proved so incapable of faithfully transcribing and translating the language of Ojibwe shamanic songs? To understand this, we turn to the works of his successors.

According to Nicollet, the songs of the Mide priests "are composed of a single idea, with few meaningful words, and long refrains of meaningless filler" (Lind 1979: 190).²⁸ Schoolcraft is similarly quick to characterize the words used in these songs as "cabalistic" or "esoteric" in nature (Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 1: 368 ff.). He too, like James (whom he also sometimes plagiarized²⁹), provided Ojibwe glosses to go with the texts he published in the selective shamanic script and presented them as transcriptions of the actual songs. He described his method in the following terms:

28. Translation by current translators.

29. As Tylor (1865: 82–83) had already remarked in the American edition of 1878.

I had observed the exhibitions of the Medawin, and the exactness and studious ceremony with which its rites were performed in 1820 in the region of Lake Superior; and determined to avail myself of the advantages of my official position, in 1822, when I returned as a Government agent for the tribes, to make further inquiries into its principles and mode of proceeding. And for this purpose I had its ceremonies repeated in my office, under the secrecy of closed doors, with every means of both correct interpretation and of recording the result. Prior to this transaction I had observed in the hands of an Indian of the Odjibwa tribe one of those symbolic tablets of pictorial notation which have been sometimes called “music boards,” from the fact of their devices being sung off by the initiated of the Meda Society. This constituted the object of the explanations, which, in accordance with the positive requisitions of the leader of the society and three other initiates, was thus ceremoniously made. (Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 1: 361)

The historian William Whipple Warren, on the other hand, was an exceptional witness, as he had a good command of Ojibwe himself, it being the native tongue of his maternal grandmother. Warren had studied at the Oneida Institute and was a member of the Minnesota legislature when, in 1852, he set about writing a *History of the Ojibways based upon traditions and oral statements*, which remained unpublished until 1885. His observations of Midewiwin ceremonies, albeit brief, cast considerable doubt on the accuracy of Schoolcraft’s information; it seemed unlikely to him that the Midewiwin “priests,” usually so fastidious about the secrecy of their rituals, would have opened up so freely to the arrogant Indian agent (Warren [1885] 1984: 65–66). Even though his own experience of this kind of Ojibwe ceremony was extremely limited, Warren remarked: “In the Me-da-we rite is incorporated most that is ancient amongst them—songs and traditions that have descended not orally, but in hieroglyphs, for at least a long time of generations. This rite has perpetuated the purest and most ancient idioms of their language, which differs somewhat from that of common everyday use” ([1885] 1984: 67).³⁰ Here again an emphasis is placed on the fundamental obscurity of the songs.

Another interesting account is that of German traveler Johann Georg Kohl, who visited the Minnesota Ojibwe in 1855, and seemed to have

30. See also Warren ([1885] 1984: 78).

taken some pleasure in detailing the circumstances in which he obtained his information. Thus, when he came to the subject of the Ojibwe's "chansons magicales" (Kohl [1855] 1985: 156; French in the original), he confided that:

Any critical description of all that took place I am unable to give, as I could not understand all that was said, and even my interpreters broke down now and then. A high degree of initiation is necessary to understand the whole how and why of Indian mysteries. And though these ceremonies may all possess their history, origin, and meaning, they are only performed by the majority as something got by heart, and they understand as little of them as our choristers and singing men of the history and meaning of the various parts of the mass. ([1855] 1985: 43)

Though Kohl also provided numerous glosses "explaining" the pieces of selective script that he gathered, he did not trouble himself with transcriptions of the spoken Ojibwe—incidentally, the language he used to communicate in the region was French. Another passage from Kohl's text gives us a strong idea of the difficulties he encountered in obtaining even the vague explanations he was able to provide.

I heard in Agabe-gijik's wigwam that the Spotted Feather [Kitagiguan] had several birch-bark books and songs, and, after some argumentation, we formed a contract, to the effect that he would show me his songs, not only explain, but also sing them to me, and also permit me to copy them, in return for which I promised to give him a certain quantity of tobacco. I was to return the next day for the purpose.

When I came, and reminded the Spotted Feather of his promise, he was quite ready to fulfill it. Still he hesitated, and at length said:

"It cannot be done in the wigwam. The others will hear it."

"Good," I replied; "let us go and sit outside."

We took our seats on a stone near the wigwam. Kitagiguan then produced his bark books, and showed me the picture-writing on the opposite page.

He then proceeded to an explanation of the symbols, with the aid of my Canadian boatman, and the interpreter of the Protestant mission, who was also present. This explanation was as barbarous as the drawings themselves. I will, however, attempt to repeat it here as accurately as possible, as I believe that the reader will be able to derive from it some further information about the Indians.

[The explanation follows]

Up to this time my Indian had only spoken. Now I asked him to fulfil his part of the bargain and sing the song. He could only make up his mind to this with great difficulty [...]

[...] he commenced in a trembling voice. But he could not go on.

He told me that, if he were quite alone with me, he would do it. I, therefore, seated myself with him, far away from the others, on the edge of the cliff, where the graves lay in front of me, and the scalps fluttered in the breeze.

When we sat there alone, he began once more to sing, or rather to mutter. His voice trembled, and he seemed to be very frightened. I almost fancied his forehead was bathed in perspiration. He placed his mouth close to my ear, so that his hot breath blew on my cheek. His eye was every now and then turned timidly and wandering towards the gloomy forest, behind which the sun had already descended. It almost seemed as if the savage child of the forest were seeking protection in my breast. All this while, however, his finger pointed to the notes, and he raised and lowered his finger, and in accord with it his muttering voice. ([1855] 1985: 285–90)

Kohl presents the circumstances in which he collected and interpreted texts in the selective script with a commendable transparency, one that gives us, by extension, some idea of the conditions in which James and Schoolcraft must have written their glosses. While members of the Midewiwin were relatively comfortable explaining the different signs of their writing system, they were infinitely more reluctant to communicate the songs themselves to these outsiders who prided themselves on their interest in native folklore; for one thing, these initiated members of the society had no doubt paid a high price themselves for each of their songs, and for another, their transmission was surrounded by a number of ritual prohibitions. And, in any case, in the unlikely event that one of them would have agreed to perform for an outsider, the observer would have come up against the “cabalistic,” “esoteric,” and, in short, almost unintelligible nature of the songs’ vocabulary. As the physician and folklorist Walter James Hoffman wrote in 1888: “The songs used during the entire ceremonial of initiation into the four degrees of the Medewin appear mere repetitions on account of the obscure words and phrases employed. [...] The language employed is no doubt an archaic form of the Ojibwe as it has been handed down from generation to generation, and it is more than probable that some of the words are unintelligible, even to

the persons using them” (Hoffman 1888: 220). On the limits of his own research methods, he added: “Referring to the idiom employed by the Mede` when chanting any of the Mede`ewin` songs, I would say that in the short period of time at my disposal I found it impossible to obtain satisfactory translations of many of the words, even with the assistance of the best educated mixed bloods and interpreters at my command. One of the greatest obstacles encountered in the study of any single record arises from the fact that the Mede` will not give the name of a figure or the idea represented by any individual character, but he will invariably begin the chant and go over the whole chant, thus affording a very slight chance of detecting which of the strange words or phrases applies to any particular object” (1888: 214). Even the Reverend James A. Gilfillan, an assistant to Hoffman and one of the few foreigners to speak Ojibwe, was unable to translate these songs with much accuracy.³¹

One key to this semantic opacity was later discovered by anthropologist Alanson Skinner, who conducted fieldwork in the early twentieth century with the Midewiwin of a population neighboring the Ojibwe, the Menomini. Like his predecessors, Skinner found that “many of the songs and formulae are sung in either what is said to be archaic Menomini, in Ojibwe, or Potawatomi, or at least in an imitation of these tongues” (Skinner 1925: 292).³² But, he added, the songs were encumbered by a “priestly jumble of nonsense syllables added for euphony, and also to make them harder for non-members to comprehend.” The text continues:

In addition to this insertion of nonsense syllables to make the songs more difficult, the shamans belonging to the society also use inverted meanings—that is the true meaning of the songs often reverses what the words say. They employ also euphemisms and ceremonial titles for the objects to which they allude. For example, trees (*mbtigwan*) are not called by their proper ordinary name but *Métigwopa`iwinini-wúg*, or “Bowmen,” since, it is said, bows are made of wood from trees. (1925: 291)

31. The same observations were made by Densmore (1910: 15) and Landes (1968: 119).

32. On the Menomini Midewiwin, see Skinner (1913, 1920); on the esoteric language of the ceremonial songs, see Skinner (1922: 69); and for a discussion of this last text, see Darnell (2001: 210–24).

Similarly, Skinner continued, the common terms for “bear,” “turtle,” and “roots and herbs” are replaced, respectively, with “the Scratcher,” “the Hairy (or Mossy) one,” and “the Joyful ones” (1925: 291–92). The songs’ opacity was thus at least partly the effect of an intelligible and transmissible mode of linguistic encryption; if foreign observers proved unable to crack or even intuit this code, it was because their interlocutors, for obvious reasons, never wished to give away the secrets acquired during their own costly initiation.

An Example

The first authentic transcription of a Midewiwin shamanic song can be found in Walter James Hoffman’s 1891 monograph on the Grand Medicine society. In 1879 Hoffman, who was a physician by training, became assistant to Colonel Garrick Mallery at the Bureau of American Ethnology, where he was commissioned to carry out a series of studies of North American selective writing systems. A talented draftsman, Hoffman provided most of the figures in Mallery’s monumental works on indigenous American “picture-writing.” His own work, *The Midewiwin or Grand Medicine Society of the Ojibwa*, followed the method of his predecessors—Schoolcraft most closely³³—providing a gloss in Ojibwe for each sign in the selective texts he collected. However, for one of the volume’s twenty-three texts in the Midewiwin selective script, Hoffman was also able to provide a complete transcription of both the words and music of the associated song: “it will be observed,” as Hoffman pointed out earlier in the book, “that the words as spoken vary to some extent when chanted or sung” (Hoffman 1891: 207).³⁴ Though there is much to cast doubt on the relationship between this song and the corresponding

33. Hoffman first visited the Ojibwe with Mallery in order to verify Schoolcraft’s findings, which had by that point come to be viewed with a good deal of suspicion by the learned public (Mallery 1882, 1886: 17). Mallery was only able to obtain three scrolls, along with some vague explanations in exchange for whiskey (Mallery 1893: 202–3). Hoffman was more persistent, returning regularly to Minnesota and Wisconsin between 1887 and 1890; its problems aside, his monograph remains the best source we have on the nineteenth-century Midewiwin.

34. See Severi (2015: 190–94) for another discussion of the difference between Hoffman’s glosses of texts in the selective script and the songs.

piece of selective writing,³⁵ Hoffman's transcription might still give us a close idea of what a Midewiwin shamanic song really was in form and in performance. Here then is a reconstruction of the song:

Donagani Donagani

Donagani Donagani

Donagani Donagani

NakwaꞤwe Indoshiton

Donagani Donagani

Donagani Donagani

Donagani Donagani

Manidoiyani Manidoiyani

Manidoiyani Manidoiyani

*Manidoiyani **Eshkote nidowe yo Ꞥwe***

Manidoiyani Manidoiyani

Manidoiyani Manidoiyani

Kotshibaioni Kotshibaioni

Kotshibaioni Kotshibaioni

Kotshibaioni Kotshibaioni

Kotshibaioni Kotshibaioni

Eshkote Ꞥaniyo Kotshibaioni

Kotshibaioni Kotshibaioni

Nimegasi ManidoꞤwe Ꞥe he

Nimegasi ManidoꞤwe Ꞥe he

Shagodzhibina

Nimegasi ManidoꞤwe Ꞥe he

Nimegasi ManidoꞤwe Ꞥe he

Nigane nin ManidoꞤwe ya

Nigane nin ManidoꞤwe ya ya Ꞥe ya

ManidoꞤwe nidowe ya

Nigane ManidoꞤwe ya Ꞥe

Ekotshinaha Ekotshinaha

Ekotshinaha Ekotshinaha

Ekotshinaha Ekitshi ManidoꞤwe doꞤwe

35. As Angel (2002: 141) points out, the texts written in the Midewiwin selective script that Hoffman obtained did not belong to the informants he asked to sing them (Little Frenchman and Lead Feather), and it is thus clear that their interpretations would have been far from perfect.

Ekotsbinaba Ekotsbinaba

Ekotsbinaba hea

Heawinondamani he Heawinondamani he

Heawinondamani he Heawinondamani he

Manido Midewi he Nemadawidzbig

Heawinondamani he he he

Heawena newedo ho Heawena newedo ho

Heawena newedo ho Heawena newedo ho

Manido weani nikana nikana ho ho

Manidoweani he Manidoweani he

Manidoweani he Manidoweani he

*Manidoweani he **Eshkatoweani he***

Manidoweani he Manidoweani he

Heasiwikitte he Heasiwikitte he

Heasiwikitte he Heasiwikitte he

Nasimagot ninde he Heasiwikitte he

Heasiwikitte he Heasiwikitte he

Heasiwikitte he

Nikani Kotshiba Nikani ha

Nikani Kotshiba Nikani ha

Nikani Kotshiba Nikani ha

Henenawa nibeidon Henenawa nibeidon

Henenawa nibeidon Henenawa nibeidon

Yeweni mide hwa da Kewashi mide hwa hwe

Yeweni mide hwa da Kewashi mide hwa hwe

*Yeweni mide **Yeweni mide hwa da***

Naianawi nama ha Naianawi nama ha

Naianawi nama ha Naianawi nama ha

Wanaheneniwa ha Otabeweni me ha

Aiya hanawi nama Aiya hanawi nama

Aiya hanawi nama Aiya hanawi nama heo heo heo (Hoffman 1891: 266 ff.)

I have attempted to reconstruct the exact words of the song here only to show its basic poetic structure. According to Hoffman, each verse could be extended *ad libitum* simply by repeating the utterances not in bold type; thus this transcription represents only the minimal skeleton of a

song whose performance could go on for a fairly long time. The difference between the song's vocabulary and the language of everyday life is clear throughout, as Hoffman indicates at several points, providing the relevant vernacular term. But the differences are often only in pronunciation: one consonant systematically replaced by another (which could, moreover, indicate phonetic borrowings from neighboring languages or dialects). Sometimes the singer introduces additional, meaningless syllables within the words. Performers may also have added another layer of complexity to the song using various semantic devices, though these remain largely inaccessible to us for want of a reliable translation. It is possible, for example, that the term "spirit" (*manido*) in the sixth stanza refers to a medicine bag in the shape of an animal "spirit," or that the term "fire" (*eshkote*) in the second and third stanzas is a substitute comparable to those identified by Skinner in Menomini songs; but if this is the case, Hoffman does not provide us with a key. The best we can say is that the term "friend" (*nikani*) here refers to initiated members of the shamanic society.

On a strictly formal level, we note two overarching elements: first, the use of euphonious syllables and partial repetitions to "fill out" the song's rhythmic structure (Densmore 1910: 14–15); and second, the use of parallelism in its basic organization. It is difficult to say with certainty that the "filler" sound units are entirely devoid of meaning, since it is always possible to confer semantic value with postposed, echo-like syllables, especially in a language like Ojibwe, whose morphology is largely based on suffixes. But it is clear that echoes such as *Manidowe nidowe ya* are formed by eliding a syllable—in this case the *ma* of *manidowe*. Such embellishments and ellipses in the song's oral presentation almost certainly constituted what Skinner described as "schemes for making the rituals unintelligible to onlookers" (Skinner 1925: 292). Finally, the general structure of each stanza seems to be quite consistent:

A	A
A	A
A	B
A	A

ad lib.

In each one, a single variable term (*B*) is framed by a series of repetitions of a constant (*A*), which continue *ad libitum*. I have tried to show this parallelism in the above transcription by indicating the terms standing in for the **B** variable in bold.

But what is this shamanic song saying? My own efforts to retranslate the words using dictionaries of the time have been largely in vain.³⁶ To give just one example, Hoffman translates the first line, *Donagani*, as “My dish” (which in this instance would metonymically refer to the offerings the Mide must make to various supernatural entities). The lexeme *Donagani*, however, clearly includes the root “to sing.” The “translation” provided below is thus derived solely from the glosses obtained by Hoffman. If it still merits a place in our account, it is both because it is *in fine* a document provided by initiated members of the Midewiwin and because it also has much in common with the other songs translated, though all very approximately, in Hoffman’s work and the rest of the literature. If we keep all of these caveats in mind, an analysis that focuses not on linguistic details, but on the songs’ most schematic features becomes legitimate. Here, then, is my slightly reworked version of Hoffman’s translation; the parallelistic style of the original has been deliberately removed to make it clear that what I am reproducing here is no more than a philological artifact.

My dish
At noon I make it
I am such a spirit
I am such a spirit, My spirit of fire
I have tried it
On fire, I have tried it
My Migis spirit
I overpower death with
That is the way with me, spirit that I am.
Spirit that I am
I hang it
I hang up the Spirit sack
Let them wear it,
Spirits, Midē’ who are sitting around
He who is sleeping
The Spirit, I bring him, a kinsman
I am a spirit,
I am a spirit, I am fire.
It is leaning,
My heart breathes, it is leaning

36. The retranslation proposed by Fulford (1988: 189 ff.) has unfortunately proved just as unreliable.

Midē´ friends, I am trying
 I hold that which I brought
 Who is this grand Midē´? You have not much grand medicine.
 Who is this grand Midē´, this grand Midē´?
 I can not reach it,
 Only when I go round the Midē´wigân;
 I can not reach it from where I sit.
 I can not strike him, I can not strike him.³⁷

If we accept that a “translation” of this sort has a certain value, and if we bear in mind the similarities between these words and those of other Midewiwin songs, it is possible to divide these utterances into three groups. The first group comprises the stanzas (or lines in this reconstruction) declaring the identity of the song’s locutor: they define the supernatural author of the song—the *manido* or “spirit” in Hoffman’s translation. The stanzas declaring “I am a spirit” clearly belong to this group.³⁸ The second group is comprised of stanzas that provide further characterizations of this locutor, either describing his appearance or listing his ritual instruments. According to Hoffman’s explanations, it seems clear that the verses referring to “my spirit” are allusions to “my supernatural medicine bag”: the same bag, to be sure, that was conferred during the initiation ritual. It also seems that “my heart” refers to the *migis* shell (or “Migis spirit”), a powerful magical object contained in the medicine bag and which was transmitted by “shot” or “breath” (“strike” in Hoffman’s translation) at the ceremony’s most climactic moment (Kohl [1855] 1985: 44).³⁹ The esoteric expressions “He who is sleeping” or “You have not much grand medicine” could probably be decoded in a similar way. Finally, the third group contains reflexive descriptions of actions as they are performed in the ritual context by both the ideal locutor, the *manido*, and the initiated singer. Here we have a set of verbs which, while often very allusive, seem for the most part to refer to a series of uses of the medicine bag and the *migis* shell inside: “I hang it,” “let them wear it,” “it is leaning,” “I hold that which I brought,” “I can not reach it,” “I can not strike him” (the last two statements perhaps being examples of the semantic inversions described by Skinner). With adequate analytical

37. For the original translation, see Hoffman (1891: 266–73).

38. This indicates that the songs “belong” to the *Manido* (Kohl [1855] 1985: 160).

39. In Kohl’s text the terms are given in French: *tir* and *souffle*.

distance, it is therefore possible to identify three fundamental sequences comprising Midewiwin songs: the identification of the song's supernatural locutor, a list of this locutor's characteristic features, and the reflexive description of the locutor's ritual actions as they are performed. These three main groupings can be identified in most shamanic songs from the region.

The Selective Script of the Songs

How exactly was this song genre inscribed by a selective writing system? For reasons already discussed, we cannot place too much trust in the glosses obtained by James, Schoolcraft, Kohl, Mallery, and Hoffman when it comes to answering this question.⁴⁰ All seem to agree, however, that each stanza corresponded to one or two figures, and therefore that the selective script primarily recorded the invariable order in which the stanzas were performed. It is possible then, according to the classic model of selective writing systems outlined in the introduction to this book, that the images were based on the poetic structure of the songs, selectively representing only the variable B we identified previously. A comprehensive study of the iconography used in the selective texts available to us reveals the consistency of the pattern we defined above: the figures can be divided into three groups (those identifying the supernatural locutor, those identifying certain attributes of this locutor, and those identifying the locutor's actions). In the case of healing and hunting songs, we must add a fourth group designating the entities on which the actions are performed (the patient to be cured, the desired game in the case of propitiatory hunting rituals). We will demonstrate

40. Even the fidelity of the reproductions of these selective texts should not be taken for granted: it is clear that those published by Schoolcraft have been considerably reworked; as Fulford (1988: 85) has shown, Hoffman's are also very often problematic. A word should be added about the corpus collected by Frances Densmore at the beginning of the twentieth century: she first phonographically recorded what she considered to be a song (though in the terms of our own analysis, it was more accurately a stanza), then asked the singer to draw a corresponding picture (Densmore 1910: 16). While the singer clearly drew on traditional iconography, this kind of request could only obscure the selective, sequential logic that governed how these discourses were usually notated.

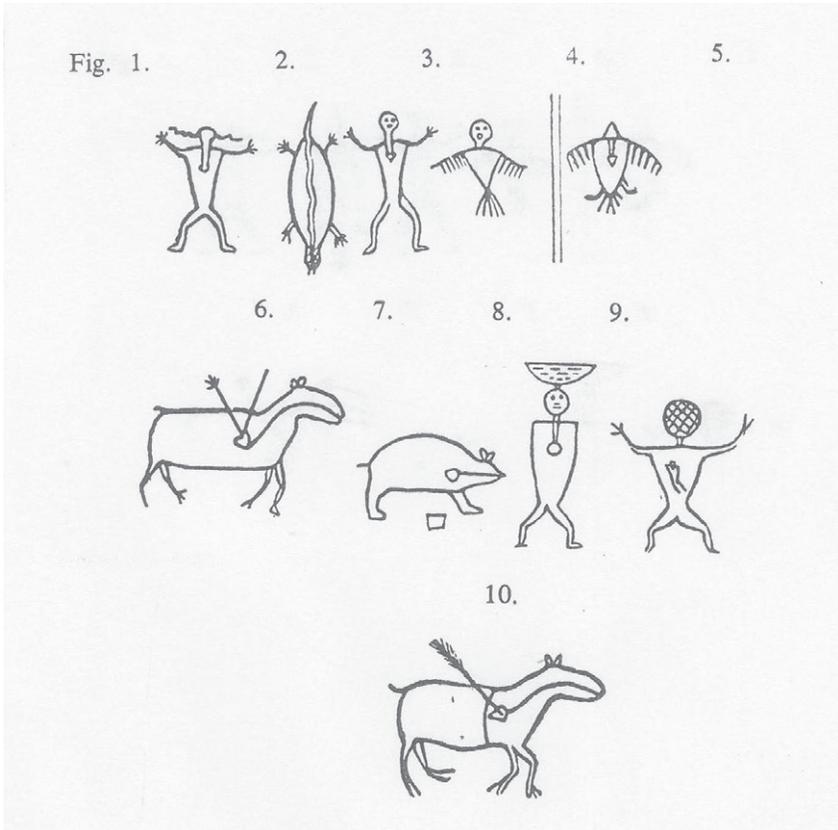


Figure 17a. Midewiwin Hunting Song, from the selectively transcribed texts published by Edwin James (Tanner [1830] 1956: 341–44).

this schematic homology between the songs and the shamanic writing system by analyzing the corpus published by Edwin James and glossed by John Tanner (Figure 17a–i).⁴¹

41. While this analysis is based solely on the corpus published by James, the groupings were inferred from a study of all Ojibwe writings published in the nineteenth century. Between 1827 and 1830, Edwin James published nine glosses of songs (in Ojibwe and English) accompanied by their selective notation which he also annotated. Schoolcraft’s massive work contains only five glosses of unpublished songs (in Ojibwe and English) accompanied by their selective transcriptions; the latter, moreover, have been heavily reworked, such that we can now only speculate as to their original appearance. Schoolcraft claims to have been acquainted with

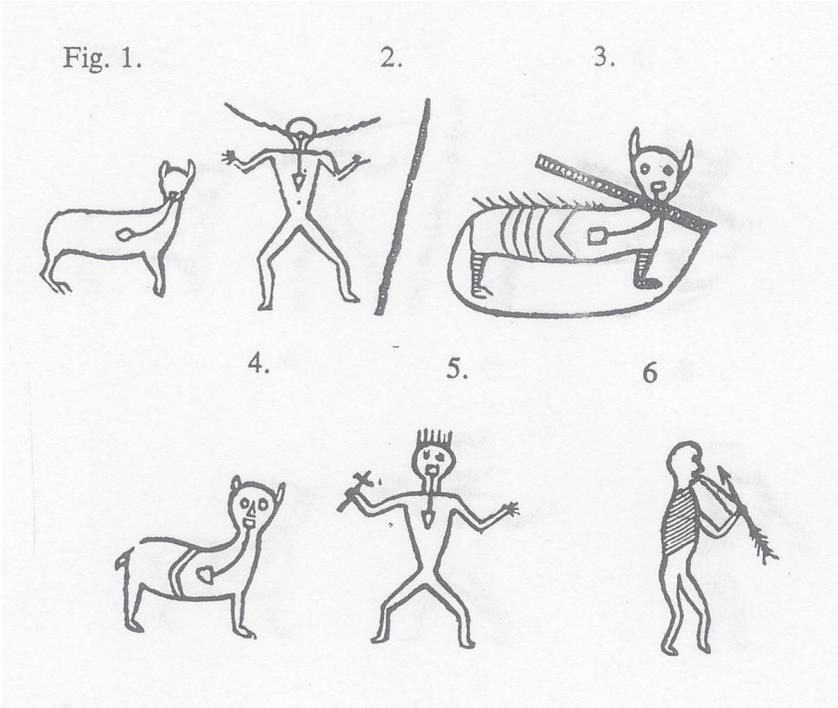


Figure 17b. Midewiwin Song, from the selectively transcribed texts published by Edwin James (Tanner [1830] 1956: 345–47).

We can observe, first of all, that these selective texts contain only two types of representations: anthropomorphic figures and zoomorphic ones. Their highly stylized iconography derives from the previously established graphic repertoires discussed earlier. Each song is transcribed

these writings as early as 1822, so we must assume that his information was gathered over a period ranging from the 1820s to 1851. In 1855, Kohl acquired a further five selective texts, accompanied by glosses of their figures (in English or French); his book was published in 1859, translated into English a few years later, but seems to have had little impact on international scholarly circles (despite Hoffman 1896: 106–8). Hoffman published glosses of twenty-three songs (all in Ojibwe and English) with their selective transcriptions in his 1891 work, and Mallery did the same, in his 1893 synthesis, for seven unpublished songs and six that had already appeared in Hoffman's book. These are the only published examples considered to be more or less reliable.

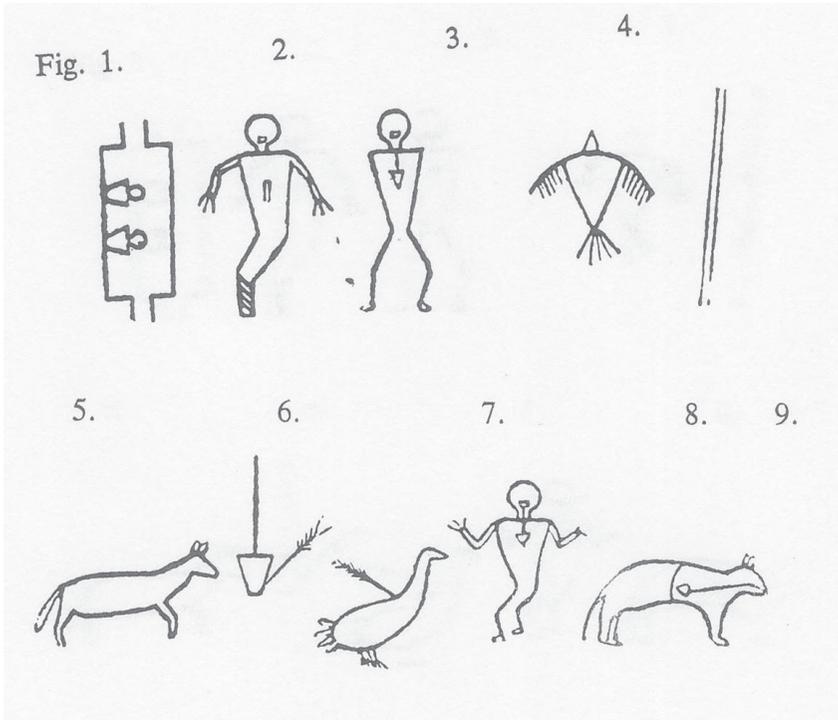


Figure 17c. Midewiwin Hunting Song, from the selectively transcribed texts published by Edwin James (Tanner [1830] 1956: 348–50).

by a series of signs (between six and twenty-seven) lined up one after the other and apparently “read” from left to right. Each is divided into two parts, indicated in the transcription by a simple vertical bar. This division suggests that the order of the signs followed some kind of formal regularity, though this is very difficult to deduce from the glosses provided by Tanner and James. It seems, however, that these songs typically consisted first of a preface—in which the singer declares the supernatural identity he or she will assume during the ritual (this corresponding to the first and second groups of utterances)—followed by a text describing the singer’s supernatural actions (the third and fourth groups).

A recurrent feature of the prefaces is the juxtaposition of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures. In most cases, one of the first human figures is depicted with rays coming out of his mouth⁴²: this is either a

42. Fig. 17a [1]; Fig. 17b [2]; Fig. 17f [3]; Fig. 17g [1] and [3]; Fig. 17h [2]; Fig. 17i [4].

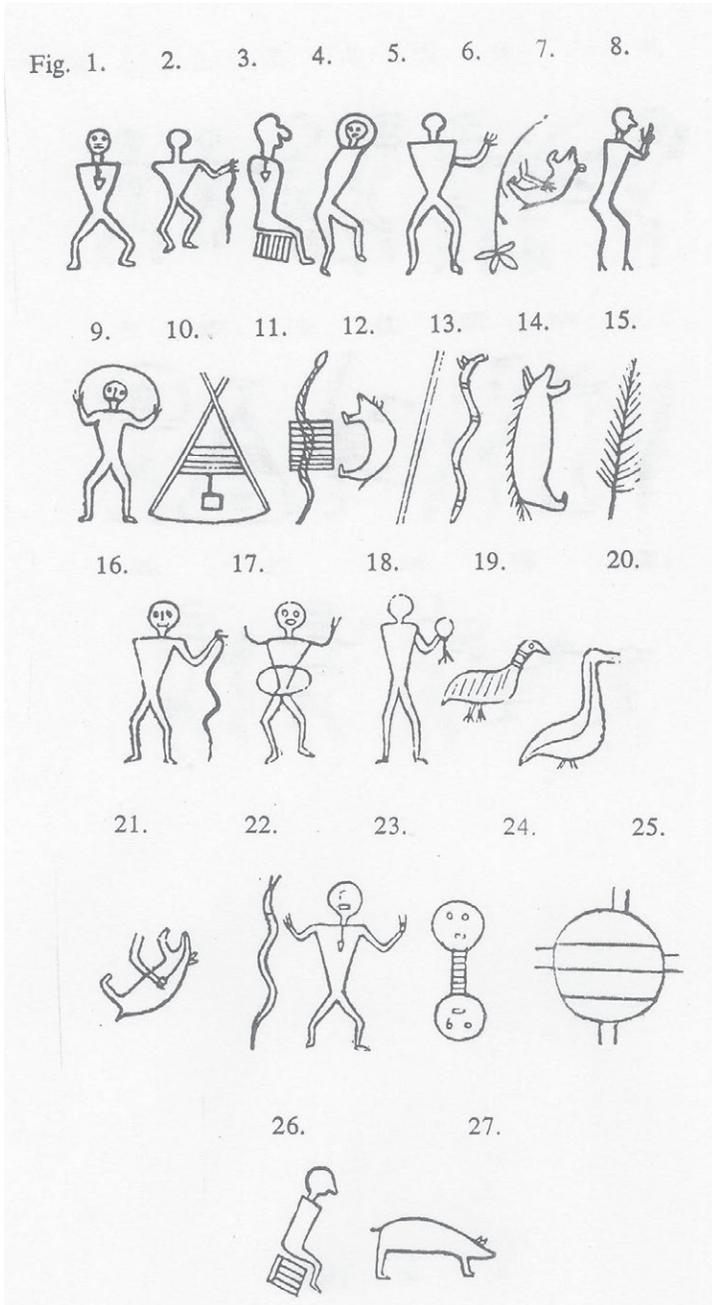


Figure 17d. Hunting Song, from the selectively transcribed texts published by Edwin James (Tanner [1830] 1956: 351–56).

Inventing Writing

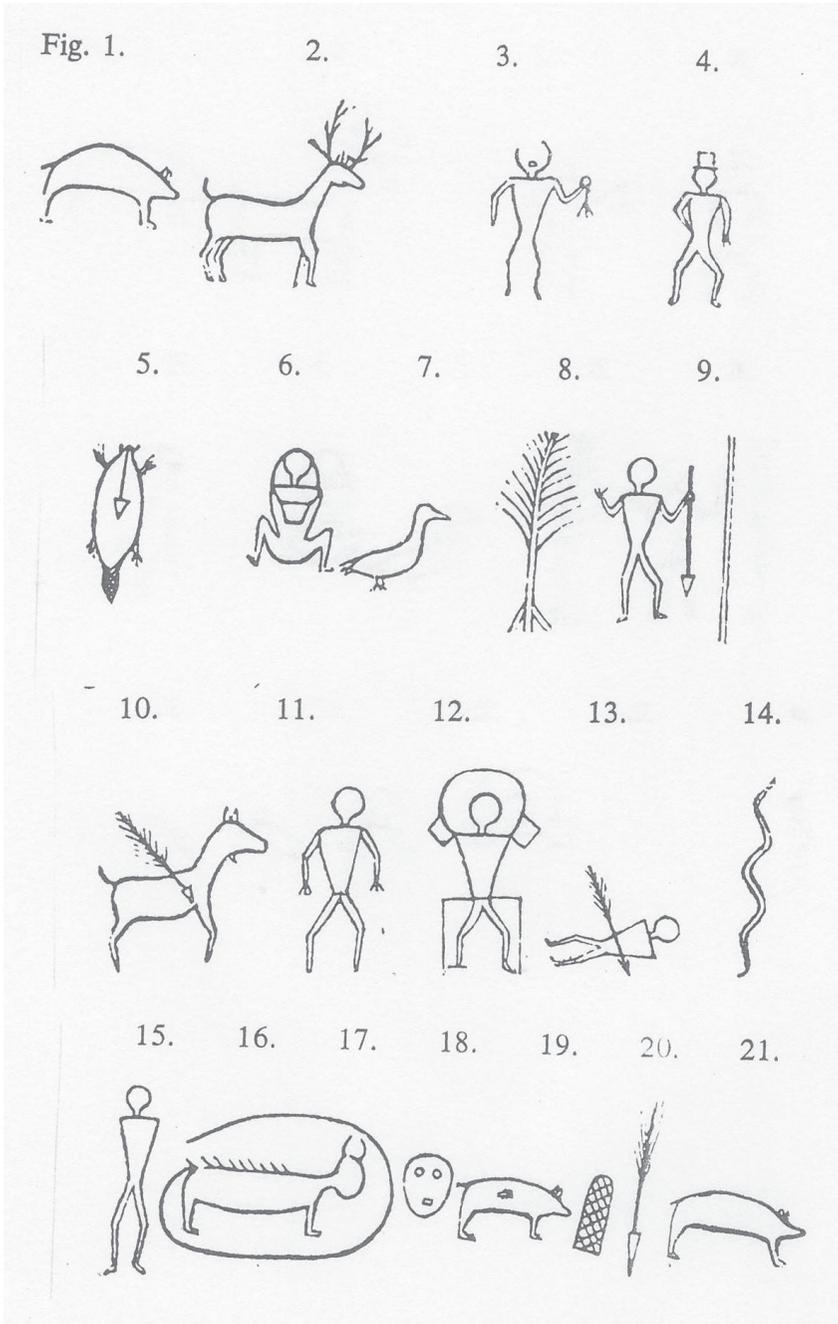


Figure 17e. Hunting Song, from the selectively transcribed texts published by Edwin James (Tanner [1830] 1956: 363–68).



Figure 17f. Hunting Song, from the selectively transcribed texts published by Edwin James (Tanner [1830] 1956: 369–72).

Inventing Writing

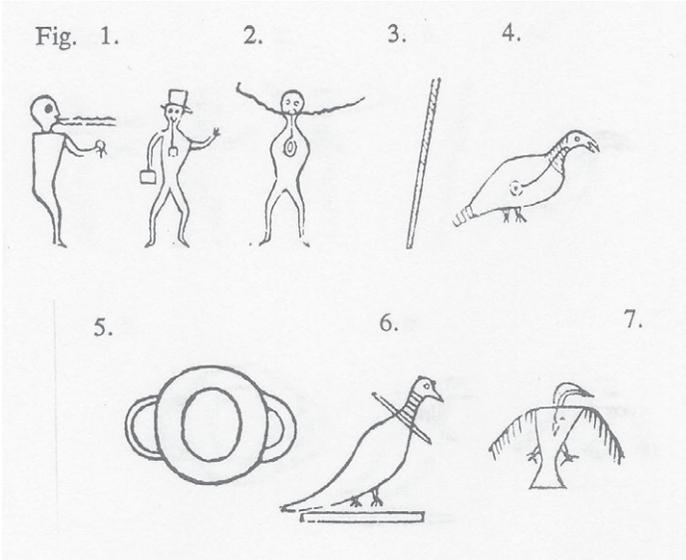


Figure 17g. Healing Song, from the selectively transcribed texts published by Edwin James (Tanner [1830] 1956: 373–76).

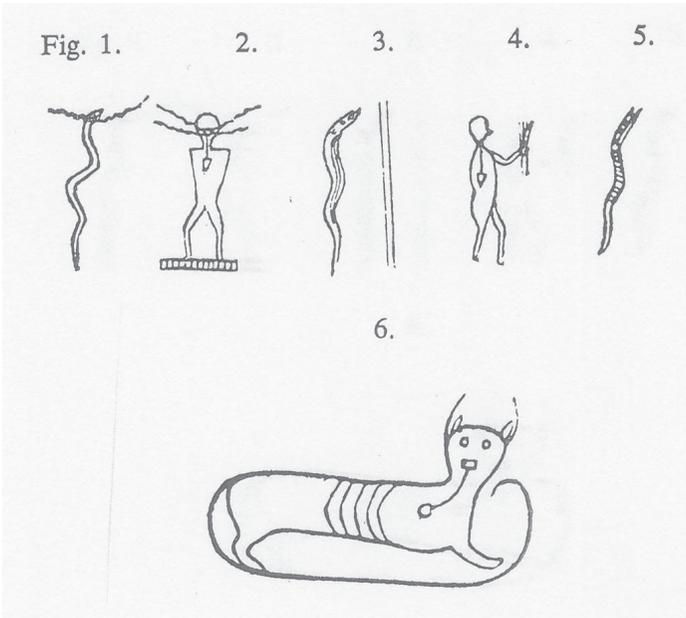


Figure 17h. Healing Song, from the selectively transcribed texts published by Edwin James (Tanner [1830] 1956: 376–78).

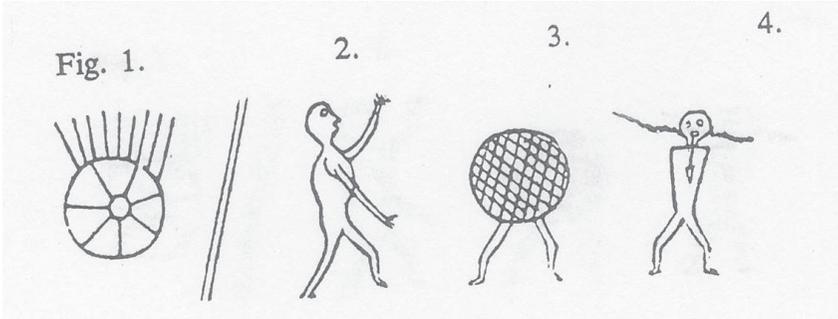


Figure 17i. War Song, from the selectively transcribed texts published by Edwin James (Tanner [1830] 1956: 379–80).

supernatural entity singing (“I hear your voice, manitou”⁴³), or the shaman himself (“I am singing”⁴⁴). When a human silhouette appears without a ray, the image specifies the singer’s supernatural identity: “I am this or that manitou”⁴⁵ or “I am Nanabush.”⁴⁶ These human figures are typically set alongside various animals.⁴⁷ These are supernatural entities (the thunderbird,⁴⁸ the eagle or hawk,⁴⁹ the lynx,⁵⁰ or the bear⁵¹) or medicine-bags (snake,⁵² bear,⁵³ wolf⁵⁴) with which the singer identifies himself in the

-
43. “Now I hear it, my friends, of the Metai [Midewiwin], who are sitting about me” (Tanner [1830] 1956: 341); “I hear your mouth, you are an ill (or evil) spirit” (Tanner [1830] 1956: 345).
44. Fig. 17g [1]; Fig. 17h [2] (“I myself speak, standing here on the ground,” Tanner [1830] 1956: 376).
45. Fig. 17b [5]; (“I am a spirit,” Tanner [1830] 1956: 346); Fig. 17c [2], [3], and [8]; Fig. 17d. [4], [5], and [23]; Fig. 17e [15]; Fig. 17f [2] (“My painting, that makes me a Manito,” Tanner [1830] 1956: 369).
46. Fig. 17d [1], [2], [3], and [26].
47. On the iconography and frequency of these animal figures, see Fulford (1989).
48. Fig. 17d [20]; Fig. 17g [4] and [7].
49. Fig. 17a [4]; “By the bird, the medicine man means himself” (James’s commentary, in Tanner [1830] 1956: 342); Fig. 17c [4].
50. Fig. 17b [1], [3], and [4]; Fig. 17e [16]; Fig. 17h [6].
51. Fig. 17e [1].
52. Fig. 17d [11], [13], [16], and [22]; Fig. 17e [14]; Fig. 17h [1], [3], and [5].
53. Fig. 17d [7] and [21].
54. Fig. 17c [9]; Fig. 17d [12].

performance: he would sing *as* this or that entity.⁵⁵ In these instances, the animals are often “cut” in half by a line,⁵⁶ perhaps a way of showing that what is represented is only the animal’s skin, the material from which the medicine bag is made, but also the skin which the singer metaphorically slips into in order to take the place of the supernatural entity.⁵⁷ This first group of figures thus establishes the complex identity of the ritual locutor.

Another recurrent feature of the prefaces is the juxtaposition of different variations of the humanoid figure, each representing “attributes” of the ritual locutor and thus corresponding to the second group of utterances. The figure might be shown with a hat on his head⁵⁸; a medicine-bag,⁵⁹ arrow,⁶⁰ or medicinal plant⁶¹ in his hand; or with the stick used to play a drum during the ritual action⁶²: all tools (sometimes depicted by themselves⁶³) that display the singer’s powers and technical abilities.

The third and fourth groups of utterances describe the actual shamanic action as it unfolds on the ritual stage: using the *paraphernalia* described in the second group, the shaman either “kills” a designated animal with an arrow through the heart⁶⁴ or cures a patient. Included in the corpus of animal figures representing different types of desired game, we see the beaver,⁶⁵ the elk,⁶⁶ the loon,⁶⁷ the bear,⁶⁸ and the deer.⁶⁹

55. “I fly about” (like an eagle or hawk, Tanner [1830] 1956: 342); “I walk about in the night time” (like a lynx, Tanner [1830] 1956: 344); “I walk like a bear” (Tanner [1830] 1956: 363); “I am beaver” (Tanner [1830] 1956: 365); “I make myself black snake” (Tanner [1830] 1956: 376).

56. Fig. 17a [2] and [10]; Fig. 17b [4]; Fig. 17c [9]; Fig. 17d [13].

57. Fig. 17a [7], bear figure: “The medicine man here speaks in his disguise of a bear skin” (James’s commentary, in Tanner [1830] 1956: 343).

58. Fig. 17e [4]; Fig. 17f [4]; Fig. 17g [2]. Probably a way for appropriating power from whites.

59. Fig. 17d [8], [16], and [18]; Fig. 17e [3]; Fig. 17g [1].

60. Fig. 17b [6]; Fig. 17e [9].

61. Fig. 17d [6]; Fig. 17h [4].

62. Fig. 17b [5]; Fig. 17f [3].

63. Fig. 17d [15]; Fig. 17e [8] and [20].

64. “I shoot your heart; I hit your heart, oh animal, your heart, I hit your heart” (Tanner [1830] 1956: 342); Fig. 17c [6]; Fig. 17e [10]; Fig. 17f [6].

65. Fig. 17e [5].

66. Fig. 17a [6] and [10].

67. Fig. 17c [7]; Fig. 17e [7].

68. Fig. 17a [7]; Fig. 17d [14] and [27]; Fig. 17e [18] and [21].

69. Fig. 17e [2].

Some of the anthropomorphic figures represent the victim of an illness to be treated, the shaman's client in other words.⁷⁰ The lines on these figures (human or animal) seem to signify wounds or infections.⁷¹ This general homology between the organization of the songs and that of the selectively transcribed texts suggests that the latter did indeed record the exact order of the stanzas comprising each song.

What conclusions can we draw, then, from this attempt to decipher the selective script of the Midewiwin, a writing system that remained bound to the transcription of specific ritual songs? Firstly, there is a consensus that this was a logographic script, in the sense that it encoded not mere ideas, but actual "words" of the Ojibwe language, or more precisely, since Ojibwe is a morphologically polysynthetic language, specific syntagmatic sequences. We can also observe that each sign encoded only a specific part of the stanza that the script was intended to transcribe. The precise logic behind this selection process cannot be clearly inferred from the sources we have available to us, but it is quite probable, given the parallelist structure of these ritual songs, that each sign corresponded to the variable component of each stanza, indicated above with the letter **B**. Finally, the linear succession of signs in this writing system corresponded to the chronological sequencing of the songs' stanzas. It would be difficult to go much further in decoding this script; but there is enough here to conclude that it was a similar writing system to that of the Kickapoo prophet Kenekuk.

The Charts

It was during his 1855 expedition that Johann Georg Kohl became the first person to describe and reproduce a second type of inscription

70. Fig. 17a [9]; Fig. 17e [11] and [13]; Fig. 17f [8] and [9].

71. This is of course a hypothetical speculation. It allows us neither to understand the exact semiotic relationship between the songs and the texts written in the selective script, nor to analyze the iconography in its full complexity. For example, it seems that some of the figures have a double significance: the feather and the plant look like arrows (Fig. 17d [15]), the serpent looks like the pole in the shamanic lodge (Fig. 17d [22]), the drumstick resembles a crucifix (Fig. 17f [3]) and the animal's heart a cauldron (Fig. 17d [10]; Fig. 17f [10]; Tanner [1830] 1956: 380), a remarkably abridged version of the shamanic song that translates its practical objective.

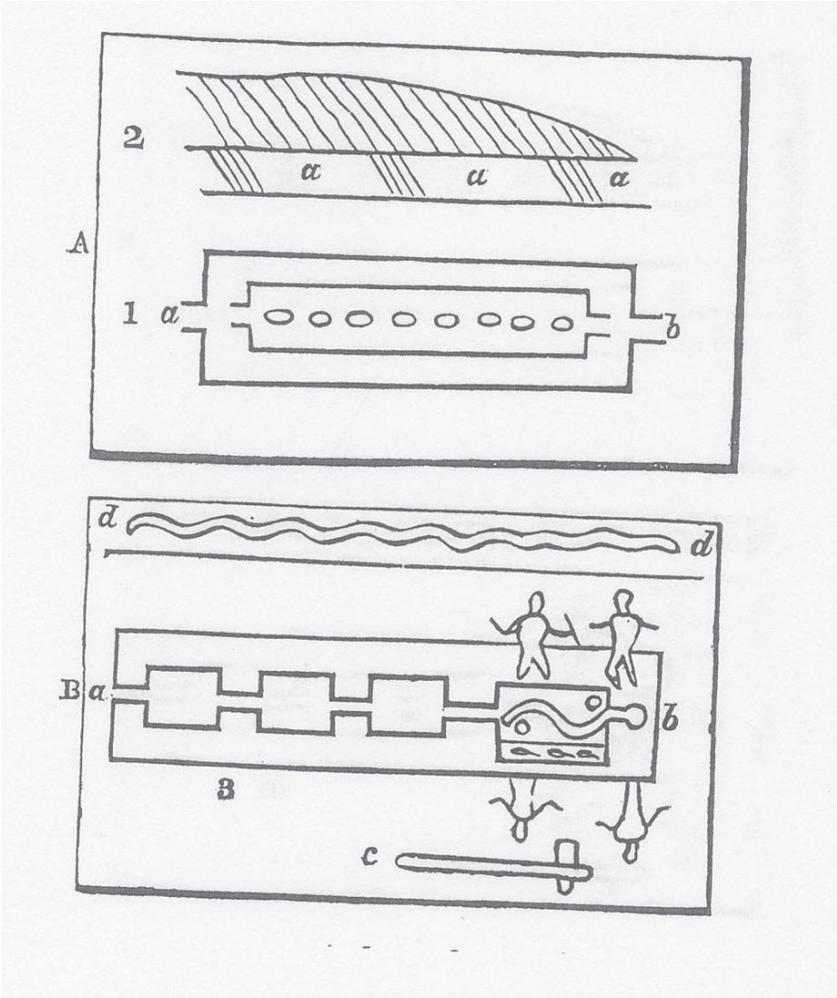


Figure 18. Midewiwin Chart published by Johann Georg Kohl ([1855] 1985: 150).

technique that was exclusive to the Midewiwin shamanic society. Mangusid, the chief of the Fond du Lac band, showed him a chart engraved on both sides of a piece of birchbark. The commentary that Kohl provided with the reproduction of this chart (Figure 18) is significant: “I did not understand it all, partly through the laconic manner of my Mentor, who had no desire to reveal all the mysteries, and partly because the affair cannot be rendered perfectly clear” (Kohl [1855] 1985: 150). Further on, he adds: “On asking Loon-foot [Mangusid] what No. 1 was [part

of the front of the chart], he naturally first told me the history of the creation of the world, and when I brought him back to the real point, he then explained: [then follows a series of glosses of the figures]" ([1855] 1985: 150–51). Kohl's misunderstanding here, which led him to doubt the "clarity" of the "affair," was rooted in his basic presumptions about the semiotic nature of the Ojibwe "drawings." And yet Mangusid was probably using the chart in a very traditional manner: to recite the origin myth of the Midewiwin society.⁷² From Mangusid's glosses, Kohl was able to deduce that the chart represented Lake Superior on one side, and a Midewiwin "temple" on the other, in which the four degrees of initiation conferred by their ceremony were represented by four squares.⁷³

Some thirty years later, Walter Hoffman believed he was the first outsider to encounter one of these charts. "At Red Lake, I discovered the existence of an ancient chart⁷⁴ which, according to the assurances of the chief and assistant of the Mede' priests, had never before been shown to a white man nor to any Indians, except those entitled to behold it or those who, after necessary preparation by preliminary fasting, were to receive instruction for the several degrees of the Mede'win" (Hoffman 1888: 217; 1891: 165). This was a "cosmogony chart," used in the initial lessons given to candidates for initiation: "The main object is to present to the candidate a pictorial résumé of the traditions and history of the Ojibwe cosmogony" (Hoffman 1888: 218). In the description of this chart published in 1891, Hoffman was able to avoid making the same mistake as Kohl: he remained relatively faithful to his instructor's discursive practices by beginning his exegesis with an account of the Midewiwin origin myth; only then did he take up the analysis of the document, one figure at time (Hoffman 1891: 166–71). He repeated the process with another chart, obtained from Sikas'sige, a Midewiwin priest who then lived at White Earth: this time, Hoffman inserted Sikas'sige's version of the origin myth and the glosses he had expressly requested from his interlocutor, using two distinct font sizes to clearly differentiate the two genres of discourse (1891: 175–79). The mythic narratives that

72. The same misunderstanding is reiterated a bit later in Kohl's book ([1855] 1985: 163).

73. Another early reference to this kind of chart can be found in Warren ([1885] 1984: 25), in a discussion concerning hieroglyphs describing the Earth in the wake of the flood.

74. In a late text (1897: 168), Hoffman goes as far as to claim that this tradition is four or five centuries old.

corresponded to these charts were esoteric, more complex and detailed versions of the myths known to everyone among the Ojibwe. Before he could learn any other Midewiwin songs, the novice was required to listen to and memorize these versions in the context of his initiation (Warren [1885] 1984: 78; Landes 1968: 95, 103).

Because of its complexity, the Red Lake example (see Figure 19) can be treated as a kind of template for all different types of charts passed down by Ojibwe shamans, and will therefore serve as the main thread of our analysis here. The “reading” of the chart, which is done from right to left, begins with the recitation of the Midewiwin origin myth; here then is the version provided by Hoffman.

When Mi'nabō'zho [Great Rabbit], the servant of Dzhe Man'idō, looked down upon the earth he beheld human beings, the Ani'shinā'bēg, the ancestors of the Ojibwa. They occupied the four quarters of the earth—the northeast, the southeast, the southwest, and the northwest. He saw how helpless they were, and desiring to give them the means of warding off the diseases with which they were constantly afflicted, and to provide them with animals and plants to serve as food and with other comforts, Mi'nabō'zho remained thoughtfully hovering over the center of the earth, endeavoring to devise some means of communicating with them, when he heard something laugh, and perceived a dark object appear upon the surface of the water to the west. He could not recognize its form, and while watching it closely it slowly disappeared from view. It next appeared in the north, and after a short lapse of time again disappeared. Mi'nabō'zho hoped it would again show itself upon the surface of the water, which it did in the east. Then Mi'nabō'zho wished that it might approach him, so as to permit him to communicate with it. When it disappeared from view in the east and made its reappearance in the south, Mi'nabō'zho asked it to come to the center of the earth that he might behold it. Again it disappeared from view, and after reappearing in the west Mi'nabō'zho observed it slowly approaching the center of the earth (i.e., the center of the circle), when he descended and saw it was the Otter, now one of the sacred man'idōs of the Midē'wiwin. Then Mi'nabō'zho instructed the Otter in the mysteries of the Midē'wiwin, and gave him at the same time the sacred rattle to be used at the side of the sick; the sacred Midē' drum to be used during the ceremonial of initiation and at sacred feasts, and tobacco, to be employed in invocations and in making peace. (Hoffman 1891: 166)

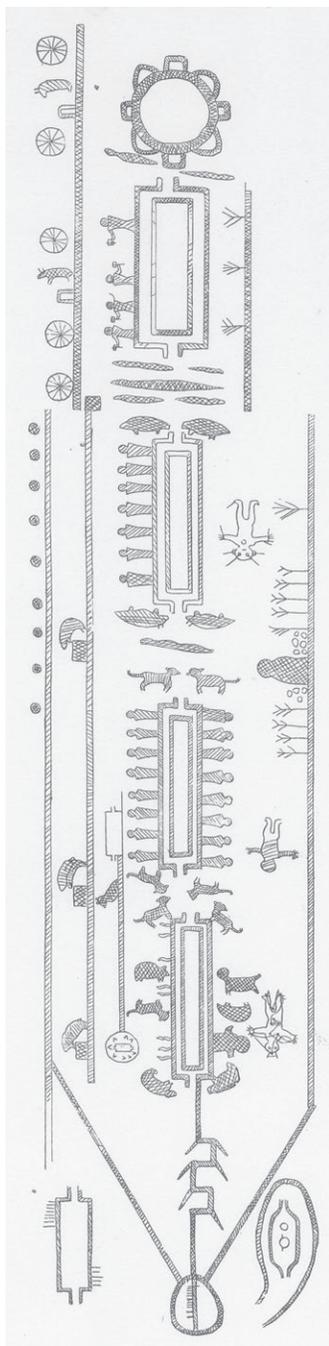


Figure 19. Red Lake Chart (Hoffman 1891: plate 3).

The figure that corresponds to this story in the Red Lake chart is a circle, the Earth, with the four cardinal points indicated on it. Neither Dzhe Manido nor Mi'nabō'zho is represented, and though we can identify a figure representing the Otter, it only appears on the following section of the chart, as guardian of the first lodge. This simple circle is thus an extremely condensed notation of the Midewiwin origin myth: we should remark, on the one hand, that it reveals only a minimal selection of the narrative's content and, on the other, that in its formal simplicity, the figure evokes a cosmographic configuration that could be subject to a variety of different developments.

In fact, other Ojibwe charts dedicated to the representation of this origin myth elaborate it in much more detail. For example, one of the partial charts belonging to the White Earth shaman, Siskas'sige, develops this circle figure by making it the starting point of a narrative recounting how Dzhe Manido created, not only other supernatural beings, but also all of humankind, which he then brought to Earth (see Figure 20) (Hoffman 1891: 172). As in a number of versions of the Midewiwin origin myth, the narrative exhibits a truly cosmogonic character (Vecsey 1983b⁷⁵), and in this instance, the corresponding chart includes figures of the creator beings. Siskas'sige also gave Hoffman a very clear demonstration of how to visualize the relationship between these two different types of charts: the chart retracing the cosmogonic myth was to be placed at a perpendicular angle to the larger chart at the level of the latter's initial circle (which represented only a condensed synthesis of the myth) (see Figure 21) (Hoffman 1891: 174). That the second chart was a mere outgrowth of the first, which was its source, could hardly be more explicit.⁷⁶ In fact, a number of different versions of these specialized charts, each of a purely cosmogonic nature, are known to us (see Figure 22).

But returning to our reading of the Red Lake example, we see that it goes on to describe the rituals corresponding to the four initiatory degrees to which the Midewiwin shamans were subject. Here the oral narration takes the form of direct discourse from Mi'nabō'zho himself, who

75. This article examines and classifies the twenty-six known variants of the Midewiwin origin myth.

76. Dewdney calls these specifically cosmogonic charts "origin scrolls" (1975: Chapter 4), as does Nelson (1983: 221–22). Other examples, with alternate developments, can be found in Jones (1919: 322), Cadzow (1926b: 125), and Nelson (1983: 231).

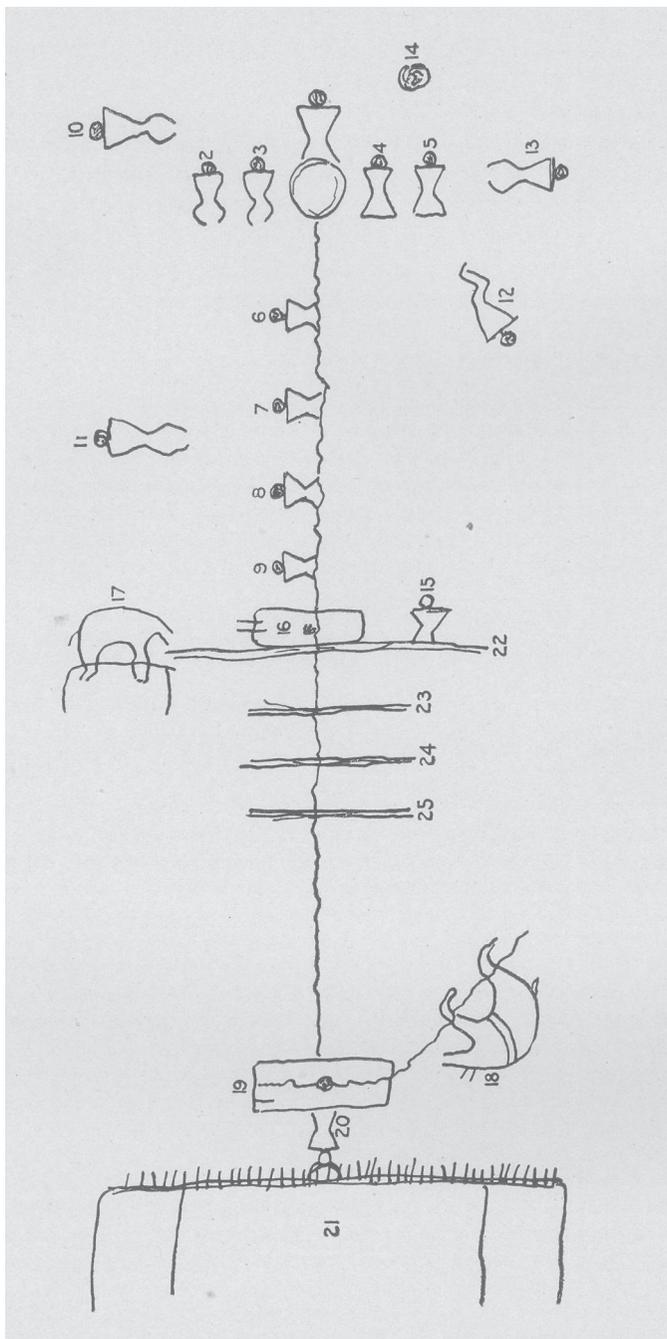


Figure 20. Sikas'sige's Origin Chart (Hoffman 1891: plate 5).

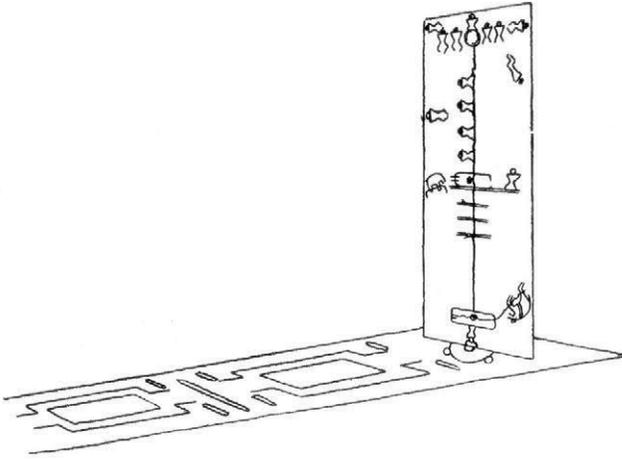


Figure 21. Combination of an Origin Chart with a chart representing the four initiatory degrees (Hoffman 1891: 174).

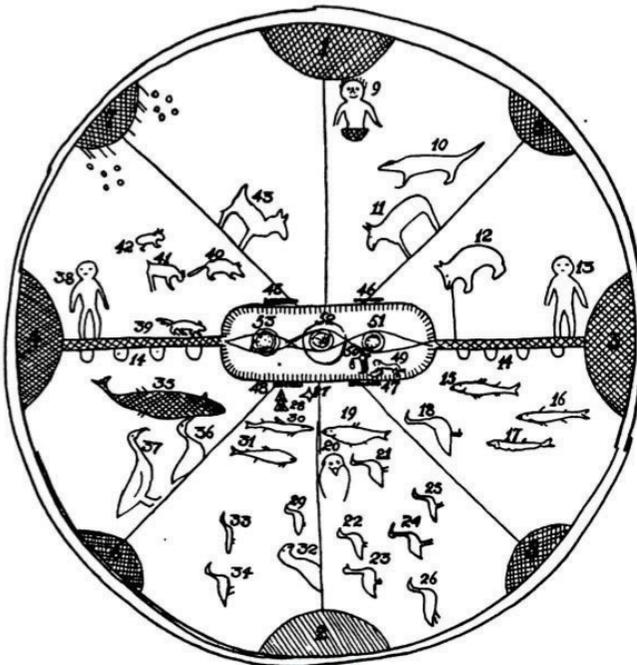


Figure 22. Origin Chart published by William Jones (1919: 322).

teaches the Otter all of the procedures comprising the liturgy of the initiation ceremony (Hoffman 1891: 166–67, and more explicitly 176–77, in Sikas´ sige’s narration)—a narrative technique often found in the oral traditions of the region, among the Menominis (Skinner 1920: 24–83), for example, or the Meskwakis.⁷⁷ The four hierarchical degrees are represented on the chart by four successive lodges, each oriented from east to west and guarded by a supernatural being, in most cases zoomorphic (a *manido*). We also see a number of anthropomorphic figures representing the participants required for the ceremony and, where applicable, the ritual tools specific to each degree of initiation, or the list of powers acquired at each stage (in the form of strokes attached to a human figure representing the initiate). All of these graphic details are taken up in the recitation of the myth—that is, in the quoted speech of Mí nabó´zho—in a narrative form that provides them with an underlying temporal continuity. The chart is thus at once the representation of a ceremonial space (the lodge with its central post, etc.); of the path the candidate must follow as he dances his way through each initiatory stage of the Midewiwin hierarchy (a process that may go on for several years); of the chronological order of the ceremony; and of the hierarchy of initiatory degrees. It thus superimposes three logics: spatial, temporal, and institutional.⁷⁸

What is unique about the Red Lake example is that it also includes two more elements that could be the subject of other specialized charts, and which, thanks to information provided by Kohl in the 1850s, we are able to put into some historical perspective. The four initiatory lodges are followed by a representation of the tortuous “path of life,” a straight and narrow trail marked with several offshoots standing for the different “temptations” the candidate must resist as he heads toward the end of the world, which is to say, death (Hoffman 1891: 170).⁷⁹ Another

77. See, for example, several of the Meskwakis texts published by Truman Michelson that transcribed, in the middle of the origin myth describing the transmission of a sacred bundle, a complete description of the ritual liturgy. See *Bulletins of the Bureau of American Ethnography* 72, 85, 87, 89, 95, or 105.

78. These are the most frequently reproduced charts in the literature: see, for example, Densmore (1929: 91) or Landes (1968: 82–83). Dewdney refers to them as “master scrolls” (1975: Chapter 6). See also Nelson (1983: 222–25). They were sometimes divided into four separate charts, one for each degree of initiation.

79. This same pathway is represented differently in Sikas´ sige’s chart (Hoffman 1891: plate 4) and on its own in Densmore (1910: 24). See also Tanner ([1830] 1956: 189).

figurative device that is sometimes the subject of specialized charts can be seen above the third and fourth of the initiatory lodges: this is a “Ghost Lodge.” It consists in fact of two lodges linked by a path: the first is a human, terrestrial lodge, while the second is that of supernatural beings and the deceased (see Figure 23).⁸⁰ The Midewiwin dedicated a separate, specialized ritual to the Ghost Lodge; what matters most regarding its figural representation, however, both on the Red Lake example and on specialized charts dedicated to it, is that it visualizes the vertical superposition of two levels, whereas the structural logic of the other charts is horizontal. While the four degrees of initiation follow one after the other—with the initial circle preceding them—the Ghost Lodge is always situated above the human lodge to which it is linked.⁸¹ We should therefore understand the Ghost Lodge in the Red Lake chart as sitting above the other lodges.

Neither the “path of life” nor the “Ghost Lodge” gave rise to corresponding discursive traditions—at least as far as we can tell from the sources available to us. But it is possible to glean something of their “archeology” from one of the drawings reproduced by Kohl. The German traveler had asked an Ojibwe interlocutor how he imagined the fate of the soul after death; the man asked him for a pencil and paper, and set to work (see Figure 24). He then furnished the following explanation:

“Listen, now,” he said, “and see. This is the earth (A, a rectangular parallelogram). On the earth God has planted his law, like a tree straight upwards, or like a path straight forward. Some wander the right path (B), but many get on to the side-paths of the lane (*a a a a*). These run into the desert.

“When men die, they all go, after death, along the path of souls (C). On the centre of this path (at D) thou seest the strawberry lying on one side. It is extraordinarily large, and is said to taste very sweet. A man stands by it, who invites all passers-by to taste it. But they must not accept it, for whatever soul does so is lost at once. Those that resist continue their journey prosperously till they come near paradise. It is altogether a journey of from three to four days. Then a large broad river bars the way. Over it there is no regular bridge.

80. Dewdney calls these “Ghost Lodge scrolls” (1975: Chapter 7), as does Nelson (1983: 225). The first known reproduction can be found in Hoffman (1891: 279). See also Landes (1968: 200).

81. As is very clear in the chart of a shaman named Ojibwa (Hoffman 1891: plate 8).

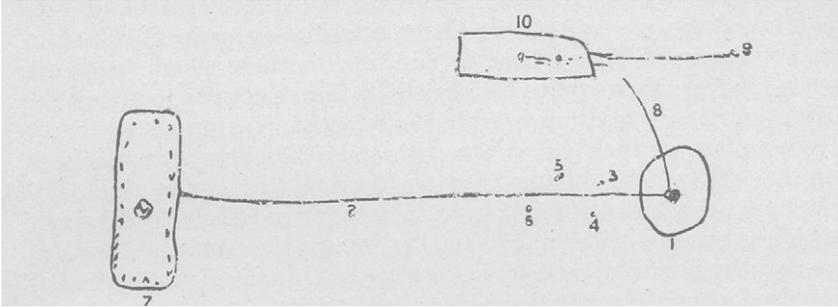


Figure 23a. Chart of a Ghost Lodge published by Walter Hoffman (1891: 279).

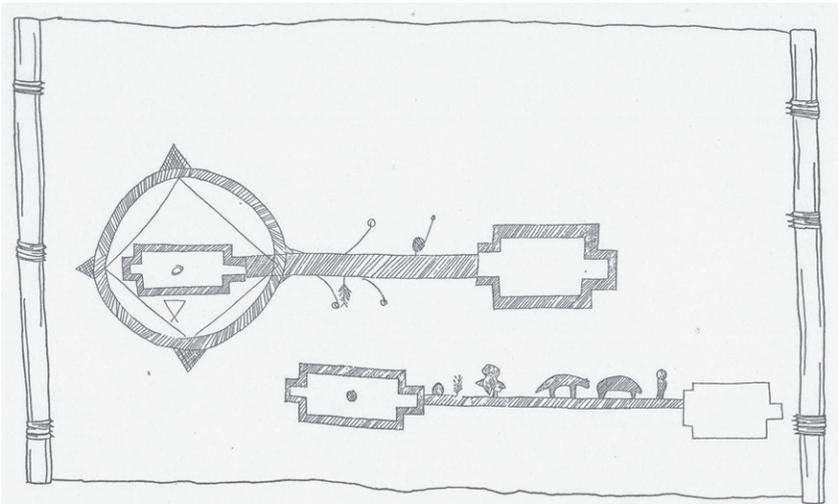


Figure 23b. Chart of a Ghost Lodge published by Ruth Landes (1968: 200).

Something that looks like a great tree-stump lies across it. Its roots are firmly fastened on the opposite shore. On this side it raises its head, but it does not reach quite to the land. There is a small gap, over which the souls must hop. The log, too, is constantly shaking. Most of the souls spring across, balance themselves properly, and save themselves. Those, however, that jump short, or slip off the bridge, fall into the water, and are converted into toads or fishes. [...]"

I. "But what are that path and quadrangle which thou hast drawn to the right (at X and Z)?"

With that the Indian told me he wished to designate the paradise of the Christians. They, he said, had also a paradise, into which no

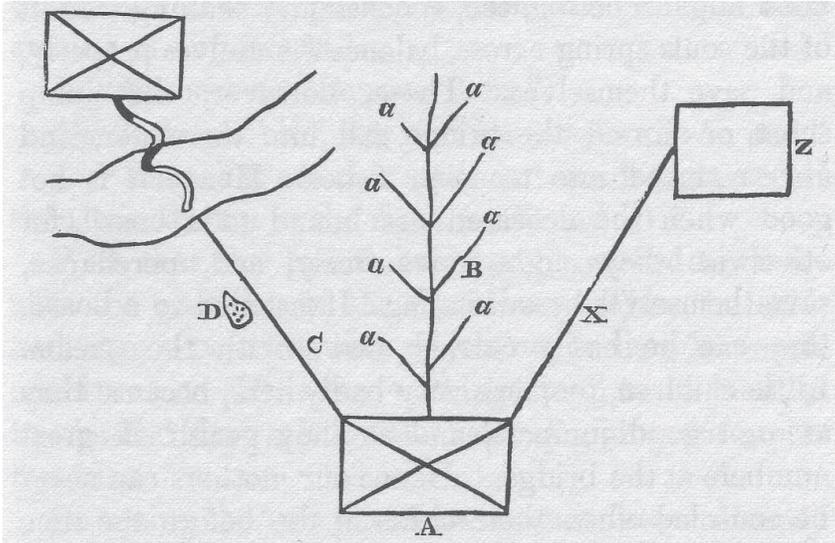


Figure 24. The Postmortem Fate of the Soul (Kohl [1855] 1985: 387).

Indian, however, could enter. He knew nothing at all of its nature, but he had drawn it for the sake of giving me a perfect idea.

On seeing the two paradises, I remember directly the double cemeteries so frequently seen at the mission villages on Lake Superior, one for the Christian, the other for the pagan, inhabitants of the village. I fancied my Indian had drawn the plan of such a village [...]. (Kohl [1855] 1985: 215–17)

We will return very shortly to what such an image implies about the Ojibwe relationship to Christianity. For now, it suffices to note that, in this apparently improvised drawing, we see the representation both of the “path of life” and of the vertical superposition of Earth and Paradise—graphic elements which, on the one hand, inevitably evoke the eschatological maps of the Delaware, Kickapoo, and Cree prophets and, on the other, clearly resemble the two salient features found in the Red Lake chart, as well as in all the specialized Ghost Lodge and “path of life” charts. This is a strong indication of the continuity that runs between all of these graphic traditions, whatever the historical relationship between them may be.

Our analysis of the Red Lake chart ends here. But Siskas’ sige, the shaman from White Earth, showed Hoffman another partial chart that presented an alternative development of the Red Lake example (Figure 25).

This was a “migration chart” that corresponded to an Ojibwe narrative tradition that picked up the thread of the Midewiwin origin story. After the birth of humankind, after Mi’ nabō’zho’s encounter with the Otter, and the transmission of the ritual knowledge concerning the four initiatory degrees, the myth was extended with the story of the Otter’s migration from east to west and his founding, along the way, of an Ojibwe village in each place he surfaced, where he would pass on the knowledge of the Midewiwin. The point of connection between this narrative and the master chart can be located at the initial circle; the Otter is at the center of the Earth when he begins his journey, a path represented on the migration chart by a straight line. Shortly after emerging from the circle, this line is intersected by another line “separating the history of the Midewiwin from that of the migration” (Hoffman 1891: 179). Then, after crossing what Jan Vansina would call the tradition’s “floating gap” (Vansina 1985: 23–24), the line of the Otter’s trajectory is marked by a series of dots, which corresponds to a list of toponyms, tracing a geographical map of the protagonist’s journey, and leading, *in fine*, to the place where this list is spoken aloud (Vennum 1978: 761–62). The discourse corresponding to this migration chart was most likely sung, and it almost certainly would have been structured by parallelisms: after or before each place name, the speaker would have uttered something like “in the middle he stood” or “he sat on the other side” (the pronoun referring to the Otter) (1978: 768 ff.). This chart represented the last of the discursive traditions that initiates were required to familiarize themselves with before they could go on to learn other shamanic songs: as Thomas Vennum writes, “the origin–migration legend formed the basis of the *mite* initiate’s catechism” (1978: 756).⁸²

The Institutional Context of the Midewiwin Charts and Writing System

The Ojibwe shamanic society is thus an example of a ritual innovation that probably appeared in its canonical form toward the end of the seventeenth century and gave rise to an enduring ceremony reserved for a small minority of the population. It was within this particular institutional configuration that a complex selective writing system developed and stabilized itself for at least a century. Having carried out our study of its features, uses, and semiotic foundations, we can start to form a better

82. Other reproductions of “migration charts” can be found in Dewdney (1975: Chapter 5).

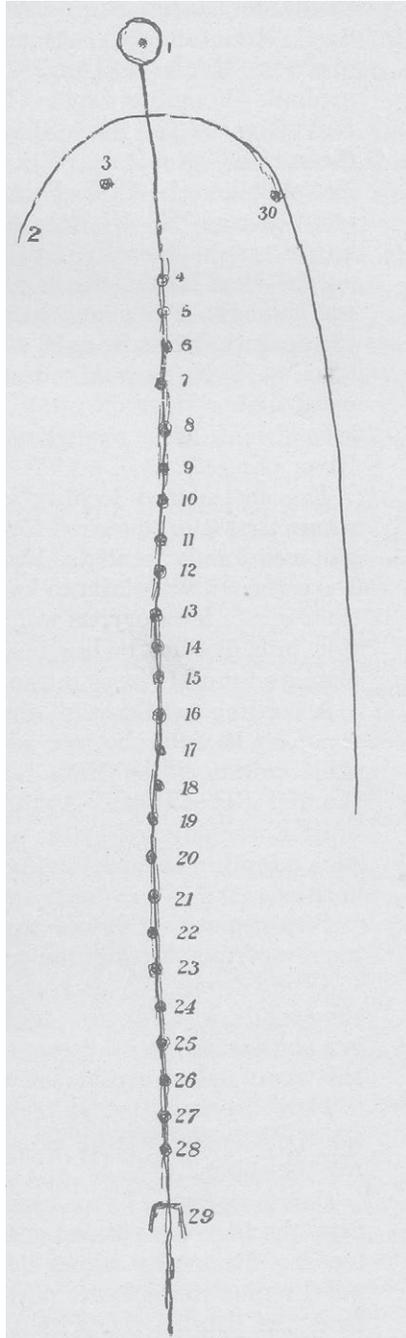


Figure 25. Migration Chart (Hoffman 1891: 179).

understanding of the relationship between this inscriptive technology and the institutional conflicts from which it emerged.

The Midewiwin and Christianity

Ojibwe shamans referred to the texts written in their selective script by a number of names: according to Schoolcraft, “they are called *Nugamoon-un* by the natives, that is to say, songs” (Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 1: 361); further on, he notes that they are sometimes called “*cartes*” (in French in Schoolcraft’s text) (1851–1857, vol. 1: 384). According to Kohl, “The Indians call a piece of birch bark to be employed for writing “*masinaigan*.” The word is derived from the verb “*nin masinaige*” (I make signs) and means a thing on which signs are made. They also give our paper and books the same name” (Kohl [1855] 1985: 145).⁸³ Taken together, these terms evoke a semantic field that is by now quite familiar to us: while the denomination “song” is no more than a metonym, we have repeatedly encountered the terms “map” and “books” (*masinaigan*) among Algonquian preachers and prophets of the preceding centuries. If we are to take this continuity seriously, we need to look more closely at the Midewiwin’s relationship with Christianity and the books that this tradition employed.

Much has been written about the potential influence of the Christian Church on the hierarchical ritual society of the Ojibwe. It is not impossible, for example, that the Jesuit presence in the Great Lakes region during the late seventeenth century played an indirect role in shaping the ritual configuration of the Midewiwin society. But Christian missionaries were virtually absent from the region during the eighteenth century, the period in which the shamanic institution consolidated itself, canonized its ritual discourses, and invented its scriptural techniques. It is clear, though, that throughout the nineteenth century, when the missionaries returned and, perhaps following the Wabeno’s decline, the antagonism between the Midewiwin and the Christian Church became very pronounced (Vecsey 1983a: 187–90; Peers 1994: 168–69). Ojibwe shamans opposed the spread of Christianity head-on, even while incorporating certain aspects of it into their discourses and possibly their ceremonial practices.

On this topic, Warren remarked: “I have sometimes interpreted to their old men, portions of Bible history, and their expression is invariably: ‘The book must be true, for our ancestors have told us similar stories, generation

83. See also Mason (1997: xviii).

after generation, since the earth was new” ([1885] 1984: 71). A few years later, when Kohl once again demanded an explanation for a text written in selective script, his interlocutor “began with Adam and Eve and the creation of the world, and then told me, circumstantially, how the Great Spirit founded their Midé order, and that their religion had come to them from the far East” (Kohl [1855] 1985: 163).⁸⁴ It was later still, on hearing this story a second time, that Kohl decided to make a record of it. A constant interweaving of Ojibwe and Christian themes runs throughout the narrative: *Kitchi-Manitou* created the world and mankind; at first, men were covered in glittering silver scales; out of compassion, the Great Spirit offered to make man a companion, and her name was Mary; *Kitchi-Manitou* then gave them domesticated plants, but forbade them from eating the fruits of one of the trees; naturally, the woman first and then the man tasted them, at which point they lost their glittering scales (except on their fingernails) and were expelled from paradise; from then on, they had to hunt to survive. For our purposes, the next episode is worth quoting in full:

One day when he went a hunting again, the man found a book lying under a tree. He stopped, and looked at it. The book began speaking to him, and told him what he was to do, and what to leave undone. It gave him a whole series of orders and prohibitions. He found this curious, did not much like it, but he took it home to his squaw.

“I found this book under a tree,” he said to her, “which tells me to do all sorts of things, and forbids me doing others. I find this hard, and I will carry it back to where I found it.” And this he did too, although the squaw begged him to keep it. “No,” he said, “it is too thick; how could I drag it about with me in my medicine bag?” And he laid the book again the next day under the tree where he had taken it up, and so as he laid it down, it disappeared. The earth swallowed it up. (Kohl [1855] 1985: 200–201)

At this point in the narration, Kohl inserts a footnote: “It is easy to see that by this book the Bible, or the Christian teaching, is meant.” The story continues:

Instead of it, however, another book appeared in the grass. That was easy and light, and only written on a couple of pieces of birch bark. It also spoke to him in the clear and pure Ojibbeway language, forbade

84. See also, from much later, Densmore (1938: 175).

him nothing and ordered him nothing, and only taught him the use and advantage of the plants in the forest and on the prairie.

This pleased him much, and he put the book at once in his hunting bag, and went into the forest and collected all the plants, roots, flowers, and herbs which it pointed out to him. ([1855] 1985: 201)⁸⁵

Thus the Bible and the texts produced in the selective script came to be thought of in comparable terms.⁸⁶ But this juxtaposition was probably made only after the selective script had been well established: though the Midewiwin ritual society may have been vaguely inspired, through emulation, by what it would have learned about the Catholic Church in the eighteenth century, it is rather unlikely that the development of the selective writing system and charts would have been thought of in relation to the example set by the Christian use of the Bible. As we have seen, not only were the iconographic origins of these techniques local to the Ojibwe, but the development of the selective writing system took place toward the end of the eighteenth century, a period of very little missionary activity in the region (Graham 1975; Vecsey 1983a: 26–58; MacLean 2005; Servais 2005). It is much more likely that this form of shamanic writing developed, on the one hand, out of the circumstantial rivalry that existed for a time between the Midewiwin and the Wabeno and, on the other, out of the need for memorization and stabilization that lay at the heart of the Midewiwin's own institutional configuration.

The Midewiwin and the Jaasakids

“In the old days our people had no education. They could not learn from books nor from teachers. All their wisdom and knowledge came to them in dreams.”
—Ojibwe woman, early twentieth century. (Cited in Densmore 1929: 78)

While the Wabeno disappeared with time, and the Christian missionaries didn't regain any real influence in the region until the second half of

85. A later variant on this episode can be found in Landes (1968: 91–92).

86. In his list of the possible influences of Christianity on Ojibwe religion, Vecsey (1983a: 179–82) includes the idea that shamanic texts written in the selective script were emulations of the Bible. While it would be impossible to prove the contrary (the Ojibwe had maintained relationships with Jesuit missionaries for a long time already), it nevertheless still seems that the analogy between the Bible and the selective script was an *a posteriori* phenomenon.

the nineteenth century, the Midewiwin society was not the only Ojibwe institution to position itself on the market for transactions with the supernatural. In fact, the Midewiwin had always coexisted with an older, more individualized form of shamanism: these specialists, or “Jaasakids” as they were known, were also healers, and their knowledge as herbalists almost certainly rivalled that of the Mide.⁸⁷ While it is difficult to reconstruct the forms that this type of shamanism may have taken at earlier moments in time, its long period of coexistence with another, collective institution, like the Midewiwin, clearly must have had an effect on the delimitation of its field of activity. In the nineteenth century, the Jaasakids were essentially known for the divination sessions they performed under the shaking tent; in so doing, they maintained a monopoly over a certain kind of shamanic technique for which the Midewiwin had no equivalent.

In fact, the Jaasakids and the Mide differed as much in the nature of their ceremonial devices as they did in their modes of transmission. In the shaking tent ritual, the Jaasakids would invoke supernatural entities who would speak through them and answer questions from members of the audience. These ceremonies, which began at dusk, involved a multitude of “auxiliary spirits,” each of whom would introduce itself by pronouncing its name in a specific voice; the shaking of the tent was thought to be caused by the movements of these entities as they came into and went out from the enclosure. Each seance was introduced by the Turtle spirit, who played the role of intermediary between humans and other supernatural entities, often with a sarcastic sense of humor. The spirits would then inform the human participants about things going on elsewhere in the world (the relative position of an enemy group, for example), future events (such as the precise location of game for an upcoming hunt), or the etiology of diseases.

Unlike those of the Midewiwin, the transmission of Jaasakid techniques was not subject to an institutionalized process. While some informal apprenticeship, based on the observation of other Jaasakid practitioners, was no doubt necessary, it was not considered fundamental to

87. We know from the different sources available to us that some individuals were both Mide and Jaasakid at the same time—though this is not exactly the point. What I wish to emphasize in the following paragraphs (which for the most part take up the findings of Hallowell 1942), is the difference between and complementarity of these two institutional configurations. On the rivalry between the Mide and the Jaasakid, see Bourgeois (1994: 57–58).

the tradition, and there were no explicitly stipulated interactions between masters and disciples. For the Jaasakids rather, the transmission of knowledge took the form of a “revelation,” a visionary experience that often took place during the fast that all Ojibwe men had to undergo at the time of puberty. It was in the course of this vision that the real apprenticeship took place, when the supernatural entities encountered would pass on their powers and knowledge to the faster. The result was, on the one hand, a great variability between the techniques employed by different Jaasakid practitioners, which could be adapted to the constant changes in the Ojibwe’s natural and social environments,⁸⁸ and, on the other, a state of constant rivalry and “jealousy” between individual shamans, who would often accuse one another of witchcraft or charlatan-ism. From the point of view of their differing modes of transmission, the Ojibwe shamanic institutions thus constituted two opposing poles⁸⁹: the Jaasakids acquired their knowledge in a “charismatic” manner, through visionary experiences whose content was highly variable, personal, and syncretic; whereas the Mide schooled themselves in an extremely stable, doctrinal body of knowledge within the framework of a distinctly pedagogical institution and employing inscription techniques.⁹⁰ This institutional opposition was a historical phenomenon: the development of doctrinal shamanism within the Midewiwin gradually sidelined the visionary experiences that, according to Raudot, members of the society still employed at the beginning of the eighteenth century; at the same time, Jaasakid shamans focused more and more exclusively on the visionary etiology of illnesses and left the delivery of healing liturgies to the Mide. This historical dynamic also explains, at least in part, why,

88. Some of these innovations brought certain Jaasakids a degree of renown; for example, Shagwawkosink and Aiskawbawis (Tanner [1830] 1956: 180–90) or Akiwenski and Akojah (Servais 2005: 523).

89. The opposition is quite close to that between the Guru and the Conjuror described by Barth (1990). But while this distinction draws its consequences at the level of the internal dynamics of each pole, my intention here, following the anthropology of knowledge formulated by Whitehouse (2000), is to emphasize the interactional dynamic that develops between the opposing poles when they coexist within a single society.

90. It is worth noting that some versions of the Midewiwin origin myth stipulate that the society was founded after a vision experienced by a prophet who some sources name Cutfoot—a foundational vision that can henceforth only be recounted and never experienced anew (Landes 1968: 109–11; Vecsey 1983b: 453–54).

over the course of the eighteenth century, the Midewiwin became more and more committed to increasing the amount of ritual knowledge they transmitted, to the complexification of this esoteric knowledge, and, above all, to the canonization of ritual discourses which had to be recited with the utmost accuracy. The discursive practices of Jaasakid shamans, to the contrary, were always “inspired” or improvised.

This institutional relationship—defined by complementarity as much as it was by opposition—also affords us a more precise understanding of the nature of the Midewiwin’s discourse-inscription techniques. For the Jaasakids sometimes also produced images; as Schoolcraft put it, “Signs of the *médawin* [...] are more or less known to all, and are accessible to all who are admitted to the secret societies. But the prophetic [Jaasakid] art exists by itself. It is exclusive, peculiar, and personally experimental” (Schoolcraft 1851–1857, vol. 1: 390). Thus, Jaasakids sometimes drew the entities that populated their visions, those with whom they interacted during their divination seances—in so doing, they were operating within the established iconographic tradition of vision and dream symbols (Figures 26 and 27).⁹¹ But these drawings, whose function is somewhat mysterious, remained personal, often secret, and were neither passed on to other shamans nor used pedagogically. Their status thus stood in stark contrast to the inscribed songs and charts of the Midewiwin, which existed solely to support the memorization of complex discursive traditions that needed to be preserved in canonical form and transmitted to initiates as precisely as possible.

The constant flow of innovation characterizing the Jaasakids’ iconographic practices was matched only by the potentially infinite variations produced by a “scribe” that Kohl encountered in 1855 (Figure 28). Here is his account of the meeting:

As I was continually asking at our little mission about pictorial writing, the Indians at length told me that they had a man among them of the name of Ojibiwas, who was very clever in drawing and writing. He could make me as many books as I might wish to have. He could write down anything told him, and had already written much for other persons.

91. Reproductions of Jaasakid drawings can be found in Schoolcraft (1851–1857, vol 1: 390–95), Kohl ([1855] 1985: 400–404), and Hoffman (1891: 252).

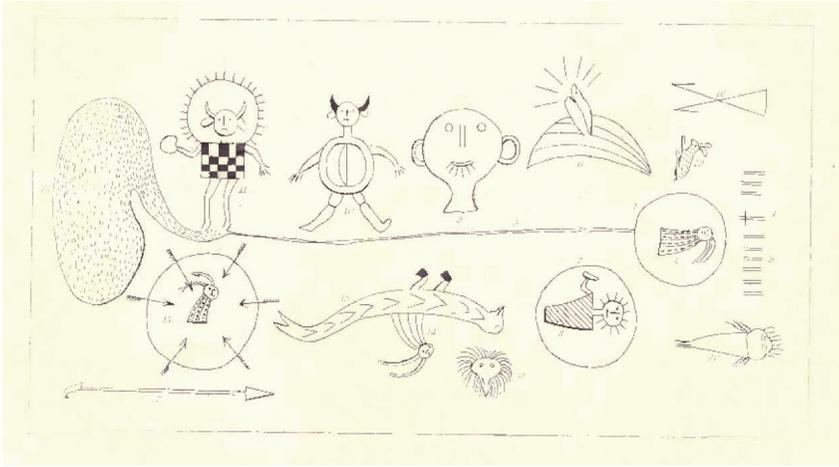


Figure 26. Jaasakid Vision published by Henry Schoolcraft (1851–1857, vol. 1, 390).



Figure 27. Jaasakid Visions published by Walter Hoffman (1891: 252).

I at once made the acquaintance of this Indian “scrittore,” and begged him to call on me with birch barks and the other requisite writing materials. The next morning he made his appearance in my little harbour. It seemed as if he had peeled an entire birch tree, for he had at least half a quire of Indian paper under his arm, as well as a large knife and a bone pencil in his hand.

I first asked him to write down or paint something after the manner of his people. He asked me what? And I told him it was all one, he could follow his own imagination; it might be a story about

Menaboju, or any other pleasant narrative which he could describe in picture and writing.

“Good!” he said. He would do so.

I gave him a good English pencil, but he said his sharp bone was much better for drawing. Nor would he take a seat in the shady arbour, where I arranged a convenient table for him. He assured me that he must sit in the sunshine outside. And so he went out into the weeds and scrub, and worked away busily in his hiding-place for several hours, during which I did not hear a sound from him.

I do not know how many chapters of Morgan’s excellent work on the Iroquois I had read through, when my little scrittore crawled in again, and told me he had drawn me some anecdotes of Menaboju, the great demi-god of the Ojibbeways. (Kohl [1855] 1985: 385–86)⁹²

It is clear that for this scribe, just like the Jaasakids, the point is neither the stabilization of a specific discursive tradition, nor the canonization of the standardized forms of a graphic technique. These cases allow us to form a clearer picture of the principal characteristics of the Midewiwin selective script: namely, its inherent function of stabilizing a ceremonial discourse, in contradistinction to the exuberant, semi-improvised graphic output of the Jaasakids or of self-proclaimed scribes such as the one described by Kohl.

It is thus easy to understand how and why some Ojibwe shamans at the beginning of the twentieth century found it quite natural to substitute their selective scripts with various forms of phonographic writing that they acquired from different sources. Indian agent Albert B. Reagan was thus able to lay his hands on the notebooks of a Midewiwin member named George Farmer, or Nebadaykeshigokay, in which the latter had inscribed his repertoire of shamanic songs using the alphabetical script of the Great Lakes.⁹³ Between 1946 and 1968, Fred K. Blessing acquired two corpuses of phonographically transcribed Ojibwe texts written in at least a dozen different hands, and which contained numerous shamanic songs and a variety of other “ritual instructions, including diagrams

92. Note that the drawing’s final figure represents the scribe himself giving Kohl a drawing to represent the contract established between them so the drawing could be made.

93. As Reagan writes, “These were written in Roman script but with phonetic values similar to French” (1922: 332). On the history of Ojibwe uses of phonetic writing, see Corbière (2003), MacLean (2005), and Servais (2005: 36–38).

p o < 1 1 4 7 0
 p r l c b . 6 7 d

A

▽ . ▽ . n 9 . 1 ▽ . 9 ▽
 0 e > ~ ▽ ▽ n n 0

B

Figure 29. Alphabetic Transcription of a Midewiwin Song.

of the participants' ceremonial movements within the medicine lodge, pictographic representations of the various degrees of initiation and of 'paths of life,' [and] listings of place-names along the migration route" (Vennum 1978: 757).⁹⁴ We also know that the Bungi (Plains Ojibwe) used a writing system derived from the Cree syllabary to notate some of the songs used in their version of the Midewiwin (Figure 29) (Howard 1965b: 143). In adopting these practices, the Mide were simply substituting one inscription technique for another, without fundamentally changing the function of canonizing discourse and the pragmatics of reading and teaching typical of an elitist, hierarchical ritual institution.

94. See Blessing (1977: 38, 42).

CHAPTER 7

The Writing Systems of Shamans and Prophets

From an institutional point view, insofar as it maintained a remarkable degree of stability for more than two centuries, it would be fair to consider the Midewiwin society a successful ritual innovation. As such, it is in large part because the birth of this institution was not lost to “time immemorial” that it is possible to draw a meaningful comparison between the rituals and scriptural inventions of the Algonquian prophets and those of the Ojibwe shamanic society.

Epistemology and Liturgy

The Midewiwin society presents us with the same two dimensions of ritual discourse that we identified among the Algonquian prophets. Whereas the latter transmitted epistemological representations of their ritual practices through vision narratives, the Midewiwin shamans transmitted these representations through the learning and recitation of an origin myth. In this way, the myth came to substitute for the vision: a discourse attributed to the ancestors and other entities who had founded the ceremony came to replace, for the disciples, a discourse attributed to a living prophet. And indeed, the Midewiwin origin myth contains all the relevant epistemological information: it describes the genesis and sequences of the ritual, the supernatural authorities that legitimize its transmission, and the healing function of the institution.

From this point of view, the Midewiwin charts seem to be in continuity with the maps of the prophets: both serve to stabilize the narrative framework of the ritual's epistemological discourse. In performing this function, they situate their rituals in a spatial representation comprising multiple dimensions: chronological, cartographic, institutional, and cosmological. And indeed, it is entirely possible that prophetic maps and shamanic charts had a reciprocal influence on one another, as these Algonquian peoples were all in contact with each other during the historical period in question.

Parallel to this analogy between the prophets' and Midewiwin shamans' modes of notating their epistemological discourses, we also find a similar use of ritual writing systems, whether selective or total. In both configurations, the aim was to canonize and stabilize a fundamental element of their ceremonial liturgies: their songs. So, like Meiaskaouat and Kenekuk, the members of the Midewiwin invented a selective script to stabilize their ritual songs to whatever extent possible. And like Kenekuk's disciples, the members of the Midewiwin ended up replacing their selective script with a total one, borrowed from Christian missionaries, in order to ensure the continued transmission of these same liturgical songs.

In the Algonquian prophetic movements and the Ojibwe shamanic society, then, we find the same two types of ritual discourse transcribed, in similar ways, and by the same two types of inscription techniques. However, we should not let this homology conceal a fundamental difference: while the prophets invented their writing systems contemporaneously with their efforts to propagate their ritual innovations, the members of the Midewiwin felt the need to equip themselves with these scriptural techniques only once their ceremony had already been well stabilized, around a century after its initial appearance. This difference can be better understood by comparing the institutional conditions behind each of these inventions.

Stability and Distribution

The Algonquian prophetic movements were all short-term successes. Each of them spread rapidly in a short span of time, a sign that they had found a cultural niche already primed for them. Meiaskaouat had no qualms about crossing linguistic and natural boundaries in order to bring his sermons to different Montagnais and Abenaki groups. Neolin, while

excluding whites from his target population, seems to have addressed all of the indigenous groups in his region, appointing “ministers” like Simon to optimize this dissemination such that, over the years, his message spread as far as the Ottawa living south of the Great Lakes. Although Kenekuk won over only a fraction of the Kickapoo, he did manage to extend his circle of disciples to the Potawatomi, and never ceased trying to convert his neighbors. Even though the Cree prophets had very little time at their disposal, they also inspired proselytizing figures, such as the “priestess” who set off to faraway places to preach their new vision. In all these cases, proselytism was based on a strategy for maximum distribution and dissemination of ritual discourses—vision narratives and liturgical songs.

But in the long term, all of these movements were also failures. It may seem questionable to speak of “failure” in a context where ritual innovations often took the form of borrowings from Christianity, which themselves became long lasting when reabsorbed within Christian institutions at a later date (e.g., the eschatological dualism of a heaven and a hell). Nevertheless, as a fully fledged ceremonial apparatus, with its associated epistemological and liturgical discourses, none of these movements survived more than a few years: four, at most, for Meiaskaouat and Neolin; less than a year for Abishabis and Wasiteck. To be sure, Kenekuk’s movement lasted longer—thirty years, perhaps more—and as a result acquired some unique characteristics to which we will return shortly. But the passage of time rendered most of these religious innovations indistinguishable from the long, slow process of Christianization that all of these societies underwent. Kenekuk (Howard 1965a) and perhaps Abishabis (Long 1989) certainly left a vivid memory, which persisted several generations after their deaths—but their visions, ceremonial apparatus, and paraphernalia ceased very quickly to play any role at all in the ritual life of their people.

By contrast, the Ojibwe shamanic society remained stable from the early eighteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century. In this sense it was a long-term institutional success. But this longevity entailed a very different mode of distributing its ritual knowledge: for each generation, only a small minority of the Ojibwe population could gain access to its techniques and discourses. Thus, the prophetic movements and the shamanic society were radically opposed in terms of their respective institutional configurations: the former aimed for maximum propagation of their knowledge but failed to stabilize it for any length of time, while the latter limited itself to a restricted distribution base

and succeeded in perpetuating itself over the long term. These institutional properties resulted from two very different modes of transmitting ritual discourses, the consequences of which are also clearly visible in the nature and complexity of the respective discourses themselves and, consequently, the different inscription techniques used to record them.

The rules of distribution for both of these institutional configurations were thus closely bound up with the different degrees of complexity observed in their discourses. The ritual discourses of the prophets were disseminated horizontally, among large populations of converts, whereas those of the Midewiwin were transmitted vertically, from initiate to novice, within a small elite of experts. The prophets, insofar as they aimed for maximum propagation in the short term, could only attempt to disseminate short, easy-to-memorize pieces of discourse (simple vision narratives or short songs), whereas the Midewiwin specialists, owing to the stability of their institution, were gradually able to devote a considerable amount of time to learning and transmitting long, extremely detailed mythic narratives and numerous esoteric songs whose vocabulary presented a degree of opacity not found in the prophetic movements. The differing levels of complexity of the bodies of knowledge transmitted undoubtedly had an effect on the respective inscription techniques each group employed. The Midewiwin charts and their offshoots, for example, are of a semiotic richness that has no equivalent among the eschatological maps of the Algonquian prophets. Similarly in quantitative terms: the small number of selectively transcribed texts from Meiaskaouat and Kenekuk, and even the pages of Cree texts we have in syllabic script, come nowhere near the extraordinary quantity of Ojibwe texts written in the Midewiwin selective system, not to mention the hundreds of pages it took, in the twentieth century, to transcribe these shamanic songs in alphabetic script. Each institutional configuration thus defined a context that could either favor or inhibit the relative complexity of the discourses transmitted.

From this point of view, Kenekuk's movement occupies an intermediate position: though not quite as restricted as that of the Midewiwin, the movement stayed within a limited fraction of the Kickapoo and Potawatomi population, and it survived for several decades after the death of the prophet, albeit in a form that was much diluted by Christianity. These institutional conditions were less constraining than those of the other prophetic movements, and Kenekuk was thus able to invent a singularly complex form of writing, blending cosmographic and liturgical elements, in order to ensure the stability of highly structured and relatively

long ceremonial discourses. Later, according to legend, he even tried to canonize his discourse with the help of a total script, bringing him yet another step closer to the Midewiwin.

Institutional Conditions for the Invention of Writing

Ultimately, these two opposing institutional configurations must be understood in relation to the conflicts shaping either their origin or their persistence. As we saw in Chapter 5, the specific characteristics of the Algonquian prophetic movements could be explained on the basis of the conflict that pitted them, from the very start, against Christian strategies of conversion and evangelization. In these instances, the institutional conflict remained exogenous: a confrontation between institutions from cultures and traditions that were foreign to each other.

In the case of the Midewiwin, the situation is more complex: it would be necessary to distinguish between the conflicts that gave rise to the institution (though for lack of reliable documentation, it is difficult to identify them¹) and those that explain, albeit only partially, its stability. As we have seen, the coexistence of two distinct shamanic institutions within Ojibwe society allows us to understand certain differential dynamics. While Jaasakid shamanism increasingly took the form of a revelatory knowledge that was visionary, innovative, and charismatic (almost to the point of seeming like a paradoxical kind of perpetual prophetism), the Midewiwin society continually moved in the opposite direction, emphasizing the doctrinal and scholastic aspects of an inherited and canonized body of knowledge, and excluding visionary experiences entirely from their pedagogical practices. Unlike the prophetic movements, the process here was endogenous: the dynamics of a complementary differentiation between ritual institutions remained internal to Ojibwe society.

It is very likely the case that the Midewiwin grew more and more complex over the course of the eighteenth century, increasing the quantity and opacity of the canonical discourse transmitted with each generation. It seems to follow, then, that the impetus for the development of scriptural techniques came from the institution's internal properties,

1. See, however, Hickerson's hypotheses (1963, [1970] 1988) that describe the feast of the dead introduced by the Hurons and the Catholic liturgy imported by the Jesuits as two direct rivals to the Midewiwin at the time of its constitution.

from its own requirements, as it felt the need to better stabilize a mode of discourse that was becoming increasingly difficult to memorize with precision. Certainly, competition from the Wabeno, possibly a heretical schism within the Midewiwin itself, may have been a triggering factor—but, in any event, there is no question in this case of an effort to emulate the missionaries' Bible. Rather, it was the Midewiwin society's internal needs—related to the doctrinal specialization of the institution and the increasing quantity of ceremonial discourses that this specialization made possible—that lay at the origin of the invention of writing among the Ojibwe. They needed a writing system to stabilize the discourses they wished to continue transmitting.²

While the Algonquian prophets invented their writing systems at the dawn of their movements (to put themselves on an equal footing in the conflict with their Christian competitors), it took the Midewiwin a century to invent one, in response to new problems that emerged from the increasingly doctrinal development of their institution. While the prophets were inspired by the Bible from the very beginnings of their movements, the Midewiwin shamans, for their part, noticed only belatedly, in the mid nineteenth century, that their arsenal of selective writings could be compared and contrasted with the Bible. While conflict with Christianity is at the root of the invention of writing for each of the Algonquian prophets, the conflicts with the Wabeno and then with Christianity can, at best, only partially explain the stability of the Ojibwe's shamanic inscription techniques. It is only by taking into account the mechanical process of complementarity and gradual differentiation that pitted them against the Jaasakid shamans that we can adequately explain the invention of writing by the Midewiwin shamans.

2. This obviously does not mean that the invention of a writing system was a necessary consequence of this institutional configuration; rather, the institutional configuration proper to the Midewiwin constituted a necessary (and for the Ojibwe, possibly sufficient) condition for the invention of a writing system.

CONCLUSION

Bound Writing Systems

In this conclusion, we will put to the test a series of conceptual distinctions that have come to light in our comparison of the writing systems of the Algonquian prophets and the Midewiwin shamans.¹ All of these distinctions concern the relationship between writing systems and ritual institutions, with two in particular having the potential to expand our understanding of the initial uses of all scripts.

First, we identified a specific institutional context that allowed us to understand how the need to invent a writing system could arise within a given society, independently of any conscious desire to imitate or borrow a foreign technology. Central to the Ojibwe case was the relationship between the specific internal characteristics of two distinct shamanic institutions. It was this dynamic that led the Jaasakid shamans, on the one hand, to ceaselessly accentuate the adaptability and inspired origin of their knowledge, and the Midewiwin ritual society, on the other, to progressively increase the number and complexity of its canonical discourses, as well as the demand for accuracy governing its mode of transmission.

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1. It should be noted at the outset that the bipartition between the inscription of epistemological discourses and of liturgical songs seems to be exclusive to the indigenous North American rituals whose history we have reconstructed in this book: it does not reappear in any obvious way in the other inventions of writing systems that we know of, with the exception of the prophetism of the Kapon and Pemon peoples of the Guianas (Déléage 2020).

Here, the invention of a scriptural technique became, if not necessary, at least extremely useful, and it is easy to see why the Midewiwin's liturgical scripts and epistemological charts remained stable for quite a long time within the secret society's framework for ritual transmission. We may therefore legitimately wonder whether such a dual institutional dynamic might not play a role in explaining other instances in which writing systems, especially selective ones, have been invented.

We have also seen that each of these prophetic and shamanic scripts shared a common trait: both were bound writing systems. Their inventors were primarily seeking to stabilize not just any kind of discourse, but those used in specific ritual contexts, and to bolster the prestige and authority of the ritual institution that ensured the transmission of these discourses. As a result, these writing systems invariably accompanied the oral transmission of their target discourses and, as a matter of course, survived neither the disappearance of their ritual context, nor the waning of the oral traditions they were bound up with. This particular regime of use, strongly correlated with the desire to canonize a discourse (to both perpetuate it and augment its authority), may indicate an underexplored dimension of any writing system invented in the absence of a model to imitate or borrow from. For while it is true that, by virtue of their semiotics, selective writings systems are necessarily also bound ones, it is not impossible that other kinds of writing systems, with other semiotic properties, might also be bound up with specific modes of use, at least in historical contexts when the effort required to invent and propagate them cannot be justified without good reason. The aim of this conclusion will therefore be to test the validity of this hypothesis by examining the history of use of a few different kinds of scripts: selective, secondary, and total.

Selective Writing Systems

The invention of a complex selective script by the Midewiwin ritual specialists is not an isolated case among the indigenous peoples of the Americas. At least two other societies on the continent underwent a similar process, and under similar institutional conditions: the Navajo of the southwestern United States and the Kuna of Panama. Navajo shamanism arose from the encounter, around the sixteenth century, between Athabaskan-speaking peoples from the north and the ancestors of the region's Pueblo populations. Over the centuries, the Navajo developed a

dual ceremonial system. The first was a form of shamanism specialized in divination and diagnostic procedures to identify the origin of illnesses. These shamans employed various visionary techniques to determine the causes of misfortune: they observed the sun, moon, and stars; their hands trembled when they visualized relevant images; and they would perceive certain auditory clues that were imperceptible to everyone else. These techniques were not transmitted from master to disciple: they were innate and typically revealed in a dream or vision. A second form of shamanism most likely emerged from a series of borrowings from local Pueblo populations, but also in the process of a gradual differentiation from the visionary practices of the first form. This second shamanism was devoted above all else to healing practices, and excluded all forms of visionary revelation. It was transmitted through a long apprenticeship, during which the disciple, after making a payment to his master, had to memorize a large body of very long ritual songs with painstaking precision. These liturgical songs were intricately interwoven with the mythic narratives that explained their origin, as well as with various ceremonial procedures that were also transmitted during the shamanic initiation process. The corpus of songs was so vast that no one shaman could memorize them all: most specialized in one or two particular ceremonies or “ways,” as they were called. This second shamanic institution thus gradually witnessed an accentuated division of labor pertaining to the memorization of medicinal knowledge.

While the Navajo acquired the technique and iconography of sand painting from the Pueblo initiation societies, their healing shamans made singular use of it: probably during the nineteenth century, they started to incorporate more and more of these sand paintings into their ceremonies, systematizing the relationship between their ritual songs and their graphic representations. At the same time, as part of the initiation process, they developed a number of genuinely selective scripts to canonize the form in which their songs were memorized (Figure 30). These writing systems, whose iconography was largely inspired by the sand paintings, functioned similarly to those of the Kickapoo and Ojibwe: they selectively transcribed the variable elements of songs with an extremely rigid parallelist structure, and their use was bound exclusively to the ritual context. The invention of writing in this instance most likely owed nothing to the example and challenge posed by the very small number of Christian missionaries in the region; rather it constituted an appropriate response to problems that emerged from the specific configuration of their shamanic institution. By differentiating themselves from

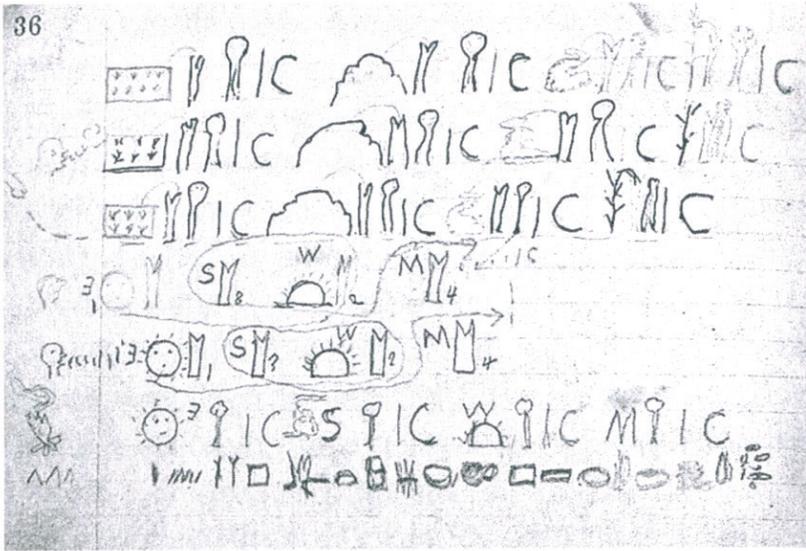


Figure 30. Navajo Selective Writing System (The Schoyen Collection, Ms 4606: 36).

the visionary shamans—and thus forming a complementary relationship to them in the Navajo social context—the healing shamans transmitted an increasingly long and complex body of discourse. Despite dividing the labor of memorization according to distinct fields of specialization, the burden on the performers' memories became excessive, and the invention of a selective writing system that could stabilize these canonical discourses represented a perfectly suited solution.²

The history of the shamanic institutions of the Kuna of Panama is less well known: when first described in detail at the beginning of the twentieth century, they presented a very marked dual configuration that was probably quite ancient. Certain shamans, called *nele*, specialized in

2. On Navajo shamanisms, see Morgan (1931), Wyman (1936), Leighton and Leighton (1949), and Reichard (1950), and, for a more contemporary perspective, Begay and Feltes-Strigler (2010); on their sand paintings, see Wyman (1983), Reichard (1939), Newcomb and Reichard (1937), and Parezo (1991); on their selective writing systems, see Newcomb, Fishler, and Wheelwright (1956) and Déléage (2011); on their attitude toward total writing systems, which they long associated exclusively with the English language, see Young (1977) and Lockard (1995).

the diagnostic etiology of illnesses: their ability was innate and they went on long visionary journeys as part of their divination rituals. Other shamans, known as *igar wisid*, devoted themselves exclusively to healing ceremonies, never resorting to visions and, like their Ojibwe and Navajo counterparts, passed down large bodies of ritual songs in an opaque language. Here, too, a form of selective writing was invented in order to stabilize to whatever extent possible a corpus of liturgical songs that tested the limits of human memory (Figure 31). Once again, this script obeyed principles very similar to those of the Kickapoo, Ojibwe, and Navajo ritual writing systems: the selective inscription of variable parts of songs with a parallelist structure that were exclusively bound to ceremonial use. The exact moment of the Kuna script's invention is still a matter of debate, but it is unlikely to have taken place before the second half of the nineteenth century. It is also clear that this invention met internal needs derived from a dynamic of endogenous institutional specialization; it seems very unlikely that the emulation of the missionary Bible played any role. The Kuna's highly complex selective writing system thus made it possible to increase the stability of healing songs and the process of their transmission.³

In each of the Ojibwe, Navajo, and Kuna cases, the invention of writing thus grew out of the same set of conditions: an entrenched institutional duality pitting charismatic, visionary shamans against scholastic, doctrinal ones. The relevant ritual discourses were accessible only to a small minority of each society, who passed them on from generation to generation over a long period of time. And as a result of the dynamics generated by this institutional duality, the quantity of ritual discourses to be transmitted gradually increased, while their content and structure became more and more complex. In the process, through an almost mechanical alignment of circumstances, a situation emerged in which the invention of a writing system responded to a concrete need. It is entirely possible that similar conditions could explain the origin and spread of many other selective writing systems. Unfortunately, apart from the examples considered here, there are precious few cases where we have sufficient documentation to test that hypothesis.

3. On the shamanisms and writing systems of the Kuna, see Nordenskiöld (1928–1930, 1931); Holmer and Wassen (1953, 1963); Chapin (1983); Severi (1994, [1993] 1996, 1997); and Howe (2009). Their selective script may have also been used by the Bribri, neighbors of the Kuna (Guevara-Berger 1993: 383–84).

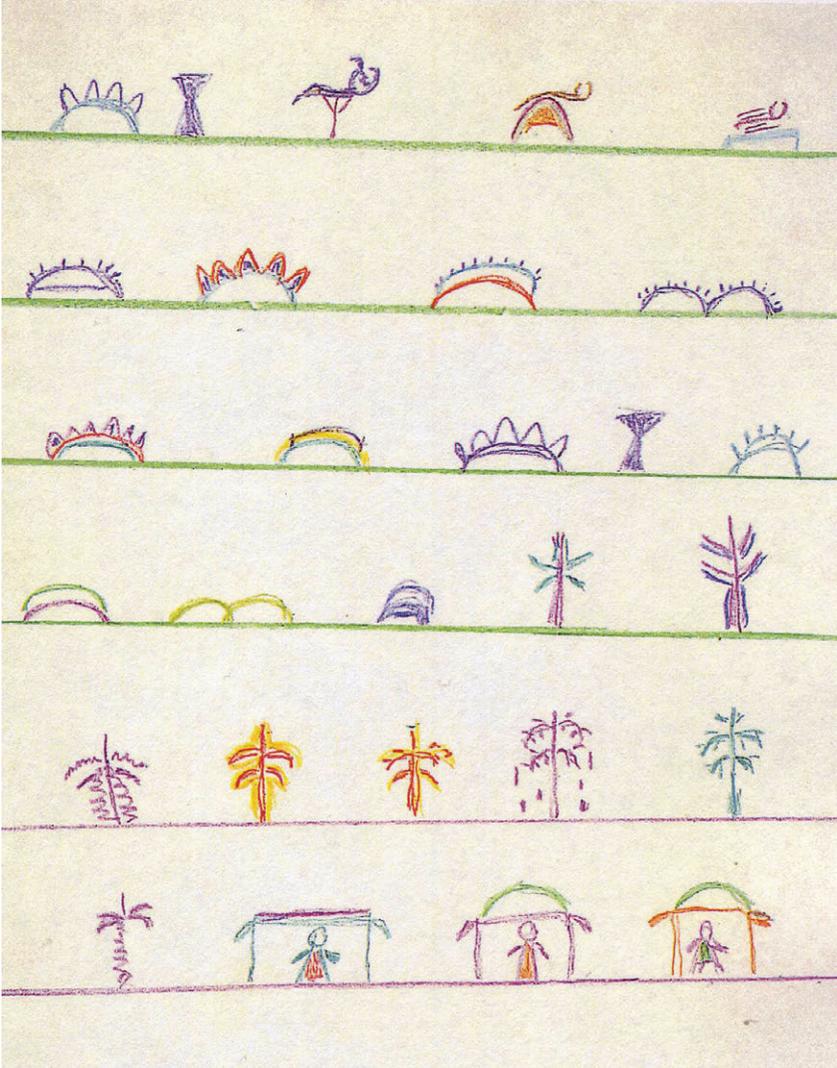


Figure 31. Kuna Selective Writing System (personal collection of Carlo Severi).

Nevertheless, it remains possible to highlight a similar mode of use consistent across all of the selective writing systems that are even remotely known to us. The analysis and comparison of these scripts shows that they are invariably bound writing systems, necessarily associated with specific ritual institutions and with the canonical discourses whose

transmission they ensured. The well-known Mixtec and Mexica selective writing systems thus shared a number of characteristics with those we have studied. While they were, on the whole, much more complex and certainly older, and were coordinated with a calendar system that was also very ancient, they were nonetheless bound to limited discursive fields. There seem to be only two text genres among the precolonial examples that have come down to us⁴: on the one hand, panegyric writings describing the deeds and dynastic successions of important figures, and on the other, writings linked to religious rituals, in the form of lists of ceremonies coordinated with a calendar⁵ or inscriptions of the relevant elements of complex liturgical discourses (Figure 32). We also know that these texts accompanied an oral transmission in the context of specialized schools, where an elite class of novices would learn both how to read the books and to memorize by heart the ceremonial discourses they contained. Some of the most in-depth studies of these texts, based on their collation with transcriptions in Latin script of corresponding parallel oral narratives, show that this selective writing system obeyed the same logic as the Ojibwe, Navajo, and Kuna examples.⁶ While it is difficult to reconstruct the context in which this Mesoamerican selective script was invented,⁷ it is nevertheless interesting to note that, in an institutional context very similar to that of the Midewiwin, it was able to perpetuate itself over a very long period, satisfying the canonization and stabilization functions it was intended for.⁸

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4. Boone (2000, 2007) (the only text we know of concerning a religious ritual discourse is included in the *Borgia Codex*).
 5. The “reading” of these lists probably differed from the linear reading required for other ritual, panegyric, or religious texts; indeed, we know they were used to determine, from a given date, a series of ritual procedures including offerings and sacrifices (Nowotny [1961] 2005). The logic of this combinatorial reading was therefore much more comparable to that of the hexagrams in the Chinese I Ching or the cowrie configurations in Yoruba ifa divination.
 6. This is particularly clear in the case of the reading of the *Boturini Codex* presented in Johansson (2004).
 7. See, however, Marcus (1992) or Taube (2000, 2011).
 8. We know that, from very early on, the Mixtec selective writing system used phonographic principles such as the rebus to mark out the variable elements (the names of people and places) of the target discourse (Smith 1973). In light of this fact, we must note that the difference between selective and total writing systems is not fundamentally tied to the presence or

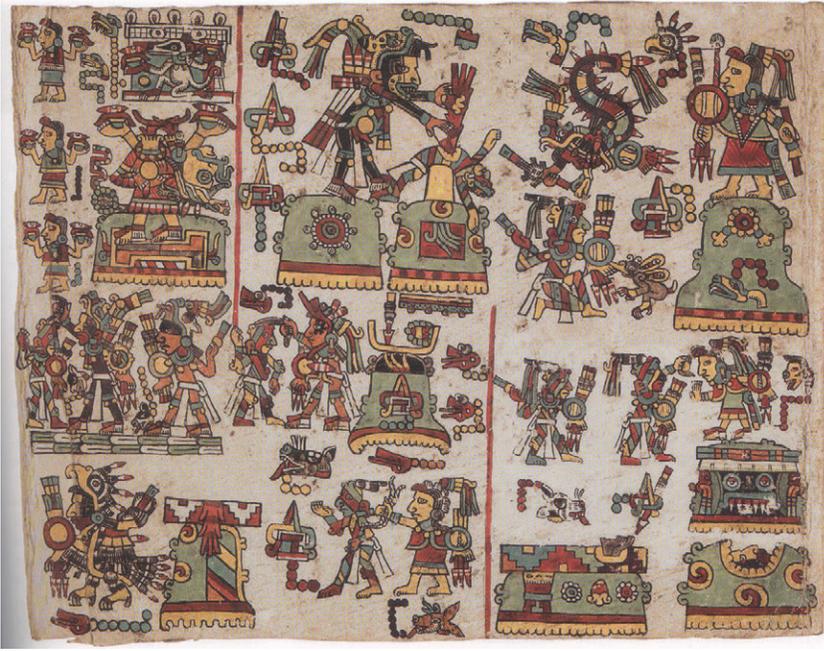


Figure 32. Mixtec Selective Writing System (Codex Zouche-Nuttall, plate 3 recto, British Museum).

A similar analysis can be applied to the well-known Easter Island texts written in the *rongo-rongo* script (Figure 33). These writings, engraved on wooden tablets, were accessible only to a small elite of expert priests who, as part of their scholastic apprenticeship, had to both learn to read them and memorize the ritual discourses they inscribed. These discourses were then recited in various ceremonial contexts. All recent studies of this

absence of phonetic notation. It is selectivity in relation to a prior formal structure that defines selective logic, not the relationship, mediated or not by an acoustic form, established between a sign and its referent. It is thus possible to imagine a selective writing system in which each sign is a word coded in a phonographic script. All other things being equal, this is in fact the case with many war memorials erected in Europe following the First World War: they appear as a list of proper names transcribed in Latin script and engraved on a stele. These names, in the context of an annual ritual, were to be recited aloud by children, one after the other, framed by a constant formula (such as “died for France” or “died on the battlefield”) that was recorded only by oral memory (Prost 1984).



Figure 33. Secondary Writing System from Easter Island (Fischer 1997: 451).

Pascuan script agree on its selective nature: either it selectively noted the variable parts of songs with a parallelist structure (Fischer 1997; see also Guy 1998), or it inscribed ordered lists of lunations associated with regular ceremonies (Guy 1990). Here too, while the context surrounding the origin of this ritual writing system remains unknown, the similarity between the institutional conditions of its transmission and stabilization and those at work in the Midewiwin case enable us to place *rongorongo* in a new comparative field, that of selective scripts bound to discourses belonging to a specific ritual context.⁹

These stabilized selective writing systems—those of the Ojibwe, Navajo, and Kuna shamans, and the Mixtec, Mexica, and Pascuan priests—share a common trait with the unstable selective writing systems of the Algonquian prophets: all were invented to perpetuate and canonize certain genres of discourse. In the case of the former, it was a question of ensuring the correct transmission of discourses whose complexity and length were constantly growing and thus exceeded the capacities of human memory; for the latter, it was necessary to propagate simple discourses as widely as possible in order to present a prestigious and effective alternative to the ritual procedures of Christian proselytism. These institutional conditions can account for the origins of all these selective writing systems, but they do not explain their stability. If certain

9. Among the other inscription techniques belonging to this comparative field, we should mention the Andean *kipus* (Brokaw 2003; Déléage 2007), Emerillon beads (Déléage 2010), and Iatmul knotted cords (Severi 2015: Chapter 1). In some ceremonial contexts, we also note that heraldic systems could become selective writing systems, for instance in the case of the likely recitation, by heralds, of armorial signs during medieval tournaments (Van den Neste 1996: 117) or the roll call of chiefs in the Iroquois Condolence Ceremony (Fenton 1950).

selective scripts remained more stable than others, this is likely because the ritual institution regulating their transmission, as well as the transmission of the discourses to which they were bound, comprised a small number of experts. As we have seen, this was the institutional condition behind both the origin and the stability of the writing system developed by the Ojibwe Midewiwin shamans. Given the scarcity of documentary sources, it is difficult to venture a precise explanation of the origins of the Navajo, Kuna, Mixtec, Mexica, or Pascuan selective scripts; it is clear, however, that this common institutional feature is behind the stability of these writing systems. The selective scripts of the Algonquian prophets, on the other hand, rapidly disappeared, along with the ritual institutions that ensured their transmission and propagation. This is likely a general property of selective writing systems: their stability over generations is correlated with their restricted distribution within a given population. For a writing system to be both stable and widely distributed, as the Algonquian prophets hoped, it must undergo a change in its semiotic nature. And this was probably one of the reasons for the chronic instability of the prophets' selective scripts: their model, the Bible, employed a very different kind of writing system.

Secondary Writing Systems

In the introduction to this book, we limited our discussion to selective and total writing systems. There is, however, a third and final kind—which qualifies, at least within the definition we have proposed, as writing: all techniques for inscribing and stabilizing discourse. This third genre includes scriptural techniques used to transcribe a discourse by recoding a preexisting text written in a total script. These writing systems are *secondary* insofar as they presuppose the existence of a total script, at least during the encoding process. This type of technique encompasses a large number of codes, cryptographic or otherwise, which require a key for both encoding and decoding the written message.¹⁰

10. For an introduction to the history of cryptographic scripts, see Singh (1999). During the European Renaissance, multiple treatises explaining the rules governing new universal writing systems were based on a principle similar to that of cryptography; indeed, some scholars—such as Athanasius Kircher—became famous for inventing both universal scripts and various forms of cryptography (Wilding 2001; Godwin 2009). It should

But secondary scripts are not limited to cryptographic practices: many Christian missionaries used scriptural techniques of this kind to teach a series of prayers and ritual discourses to the populations they wished to convert. Unlike cryptographic codes, the use of these catechetical scripts was asymmetrical: while those who created them were aware that they were recoding a total script, those who read them had no knowledge of the logic of this other scriptural technique. For the readers in this situation, the relationship between the secondary script and its target discourse was not mediated by the total script.

Thus, at various stages in the long process of evangelizing the indigenous populations of the Americas, Christian missionaries made use of secondary scripts to transmit to their flocks the main ritual discourses they would need to know by heart in order to receive baptism (Déléage 2009c: 86–90, 111). In Mexico, Peru, and Canada, the work of these missionaries followed the same series of steps: first, they transcribed or “reduced” the language of their indigenous catechumens using their own total writing system in Latin script. This was, if you like, the work of a linguist. They then used this new tool to translate ritual discourses like the *Pater Noster* or the *Ave Maria*, and recoded these alphabetical texts using a cryptographic system which, for a variety of reasons, they judged to be more in line with the needs and expectations of the indigenous populations. The semiotics of these secondary scripts were often complex: the Mi’kmaq script invented by the Recollect Chrestien Leclercq employed arbitrary symbols that were each correlated to one or more words of a prayer translated into Mi’kmaq, thus recoding the entire source text (Figure 34) (Schmidt 1997; Déléage 2013a); the Tertiary writing system used in central Mexico—elaborated by Catholic clerics whose identity has remained virtually unknown—was comprised of much more figurative symbols with a high degree of semiotic complexity, often flirting with phonography and carrying out a systematized selection of the parts of the prayers that had to be written down (Figure 35) (Gaillemain 2011). Despite their semiotic diversity, halfway between the principles of selective and total writing systems, what each of these scripts had in common was that they were secondary: they recoded a text that had been previously encoded in the Latin alphabet. The missionaries then taught their flocks to decipher these secondary scripts directly,

be noted, however, that, apart from their inventors, no one ever made use of these universal writing systems and they were therefore never able to stabilize.

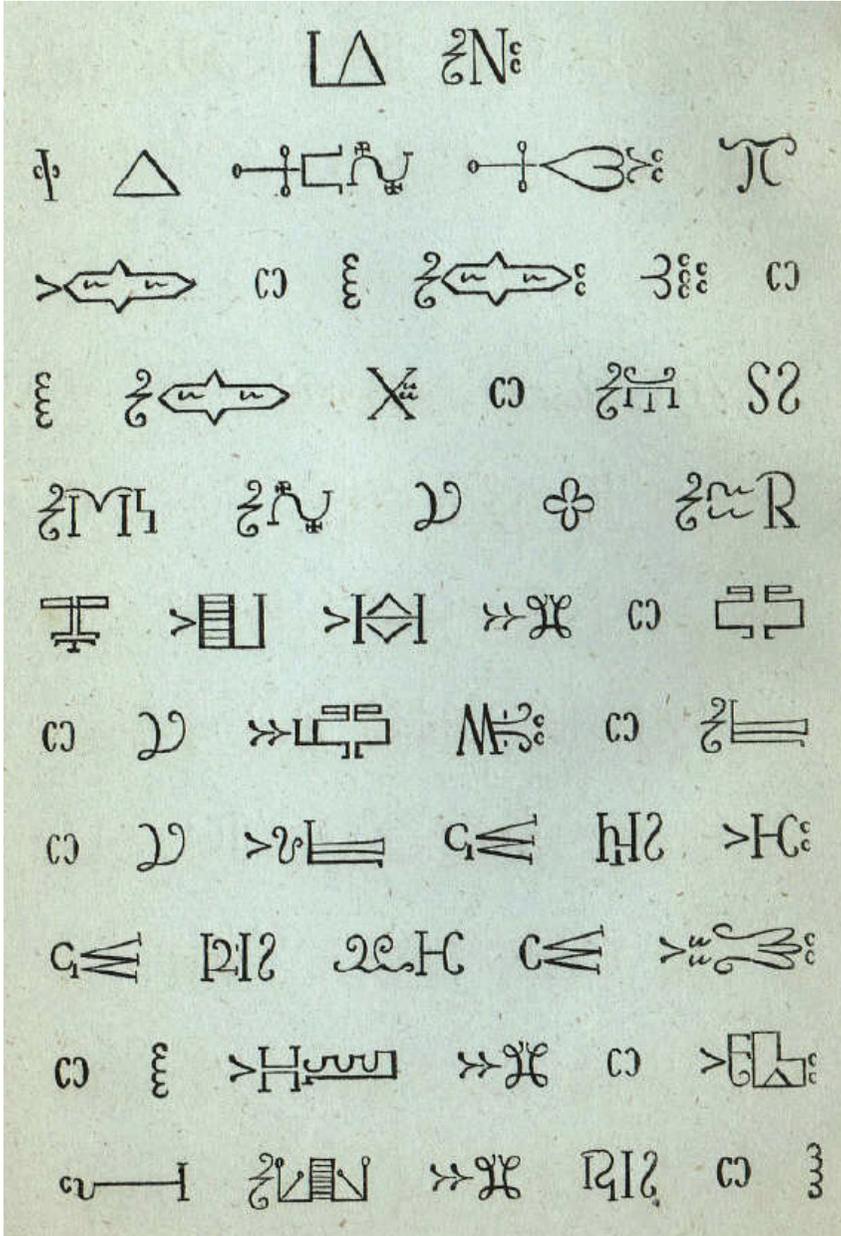


Figure 34. Mi'kmaq Secondary Writing System (Kauder [1866] 1921: 76).



Figure 35. Secondary Writing System Used in Mexico (Bernard 2009: n.p.).

with no recourse to the Latin alphabet, which they often made a point of not teaching them. So, while for the missionaries these scripts were indeed recordings of phonographic texts, for their indigenous readers they were direct inscriptions of oral discourse. These techniques sometimes stabilized over long periods.

Secondary evangelistic scripts were, of course, bound scripts.¹¹ They were limited to a specific discursive corpus (a few prayers, the catechism) and were only fit for use within the context of a single ritual institution, that which the Christian missionaries were trying to implant among the indigenous populations. In effect, the texts were used to force catechumens to memorize prayers as accurately as possible, so that they could then recite them in the context of the mass. Selective and secondary

11. In contrast with secondary writing systems on the model of stenography, dactylography, morse, braille, etc. (cryptographic techniques and codes of communication based on phonetic segmentation of phonographic scripts) which are not characterized by a bound mode of use, since they are capable of recoding any and all text (Kendon 1988: 430).

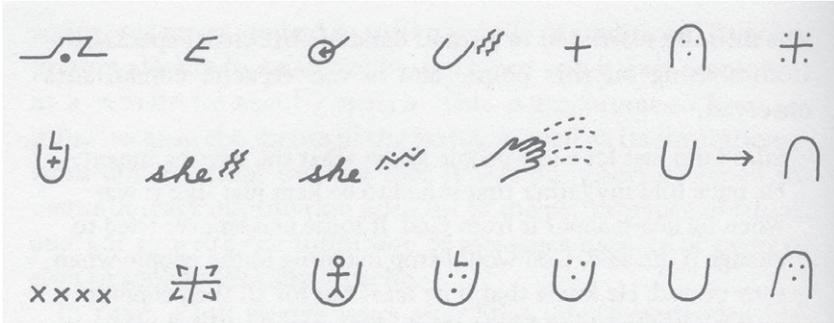


Figure 36. Selective Writing System of Silas John (Basso and Anderson 1973: 1014).

scripts were therefore used within a similar pragmatic framework: both were bound writing systems.¹²

On the basis of this analysis of secondary evangelistic scripts, we are able to significantly refine our understanding of a few selective writing systems that we have not yet addressed.¹³ For instance, among the Navajo's neighbors, the Apache, a prophet named Silas John had a vision in 1904 in which God transmitted sixty-two prayers to him, along with a selective script that was meant to durably stabilize them (Figure 36)

12. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Inuit Christian preacher Lily Ekak Savok (Ray 1996: 47–52) also created a bound writing system (further developed by Edna Kenick; see Hammerich 1977, and Griffin 2010) which was quite comparable to these secondary evangelistic writing systems.

13. This analysis also allows us to take stock of the main characteristics of the three major techniques for inscribing discourse—selective scripts, total scripts, and secondary scripts: work which was begun in Déleage (2009c). Selective scripts are always bound; they are generally logographic, although some make use of a range of phonographic principles. Total scripts are always phonographic, although many (if not all) also make use of some logographic principles; they are sometimes bound, but are always potentially detachable from their original intended uses. Secondary catechetical scripts are always bound; they are sometimes selective and sometimes total, and there are historical circumstances in which some selective secondary scripts have become total and vice versa (Gaillemain 2011); they are generally logographic but quite often make use of phonographic principles.

(Basso and Anderson 1973).¹⁴ The prophet did not want his new ritual songs to be disseminated too widely: in the 1920s, he limited their circulation to a dozen assistants to whom he taught the new script and gave the mission of propagating the new ritual apparatus among the Apache. Unlike the Algonquian prophetic movements we have studied, this new ceremony remained stable throughout the twentieth century, in this regard resembling a shamanic institution such as the Midewiwin, characterized by limited distribution and considerable longevity. What brings the Apache prophet's script closer to a secondary writing system, however, is that its inventor was well versed in reading and writing: not only was Silas John fascinated by the concept of the Bible from an early age, he had also acquired a high level of English and alphabetical writing skills through his education with the Lutherans and then at the local Indian school. During a very long stay in prison, he regularly used alphabetical writing to correspond with some of his followers (Kessel 1976: 155–77). The invention of the Apache selective script thus took place in an asymmetrical context typical of secondary evangelistic scripts: while Silas John had mastered two scripts and was thus able to read both his own prayers and Biblical texts, most of his initial followers would only have been able to read the selective script of their prophet. Over the course of several decades, literacy among the Apache gradually increased, but even so Silas John's selective writing system did not become obsolete: it retained its value as a bound writing system, bound both to the prayers of the prophet and to the ritual institution he had created.¹⁵

Total Writing Systems

As we can see then, the mode of use specific to bound writing systems does not only apply to autonomous selective scripts: it can also adequately

14. In this writing system, each symbol designated a line of the song, so the encoding was partly that of a linear succession and partly that of some element pertinent to the line, which could (though not necessarily) function as a variable within a short series of parallel utterances.

15. Other bound and selective writing systems, which were developed and used in contexts where one or more total scripts were already rather widely disseminated, may be analyzable in similar terms, for instance the script of the Naxi shamans of Yunnan (Jackson 1979; Hsu and Oppitz 1998) or that of certain Iban ritual specialists in Borneo (Harrisson 1966; Masing 1997).



Figure 37. Bound Writing System of the Nipa Shamans (ritual text from the Lava Mizhi).

characterize the uses of secondary scripts invented and used in social contexts where total writing systems are already circulating, even if they remain the prerogative of a small minority. Shifting our attention now to total writing systems, we find that these too have sometimes been characterized by a bound mode of use, which in certain examples has remained the case throughout their history. One of the better-known examples is the secret and exclusively ritual writing system of the Bimo shamans among the Nipa of Yunnan, China (Figure 37). This 1,200-character syllabic script, very different from the Chinese writing system, was intended to inscribe only very specific types of ritual discourse, and its use was limited to two types of contexts: the transmission of these discourses, from master to disciple, and ritual performances in which specialists chanted their handwritten texts. The conditions in which this script was invented, however, remain rather mysterious (Nénot 2001, 2008).¹⁶

16. Since the 1980s, the status of this script has shifted significantly, on the initiative of local leaders, and it is moving toward becoming detached, or unbound, from its original ritual uses.

We do know of several institutional situations in recent history, though, where total writing systems have been invented and remained, by design, bound.¹⁷ In 1927, for example, a dissident Christian sect emerged in Nigeria, in direct opposition to the country's Protestant missionaries. The Ibibio ministers of this new Church, the Oberi Okaiame Christian Mission, were generally literate and drawn from a small elite of local clerics. Their congregation, however, was for the most part unfamiliar with the alphabet. Certain specialists felt the need to adopt a specific ritual script very early on in the history of this religion, noting down their glossolalia with indecipherable symbols. But it was in 1933 that one of the cult's leaders, Michael Ukpong, invented a new alphabetical writing system to transcribe the Church's liturgical discourses. Ukpong was a literate man, and his script was clearly derived from the Latin alphabet. What he created, however, was a bound writing system: it was intended only for the inscription of liturgical discourses pronounced exclusively within the framework of the new institution (Figure 38). Over the second half of the century, a whole body of exegetical literature associated with this new religion was developed, but using the standard alphabetical script of the Efik; the bound writing system of the Oberi Okaiame, for its part, was still in use at the end of the last century (Abasiattai 1989).¹⁸

Another writing system that was both total and bound was produced by a recent prophetic movement that emerged in 1965 in the Sayaboury province of Laos. This movement arose from the revelation, to the Hmong prophet Her Nga Va, of eight or nine sacred books, together comprising a handwritten corpus of three thousand pages composed in a new alphabetical script. Both the script and the texts, which describe the political "constitution" of a future Hmong nation, were proffered by a deity named Yia Bi Mi Nou. Like the Apache prophet Silas John, Nga Va chose to transmit this knowledge, as well as its associated ceremonial practices, to only a small, rigorously selected elite of ritual specialists—with numerous prohibitions restricting further transmission to the faithful at large (Culas 2005; Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990: 157). Little is known about this movement, which to this day, strives to remain largely

17. On the social conditions of recently invented total scripts (bound or unbound), see Kroeber (1940), Dalby (1970), Harbsmeier (1988), and Monaghan (2008).

18. A bit earlier, in the same country, the Yoruba prophet Josiah Oshitelu also invented a bound writing system but it seems that he made no attempt to propagate it among his followers (Probst 1989).

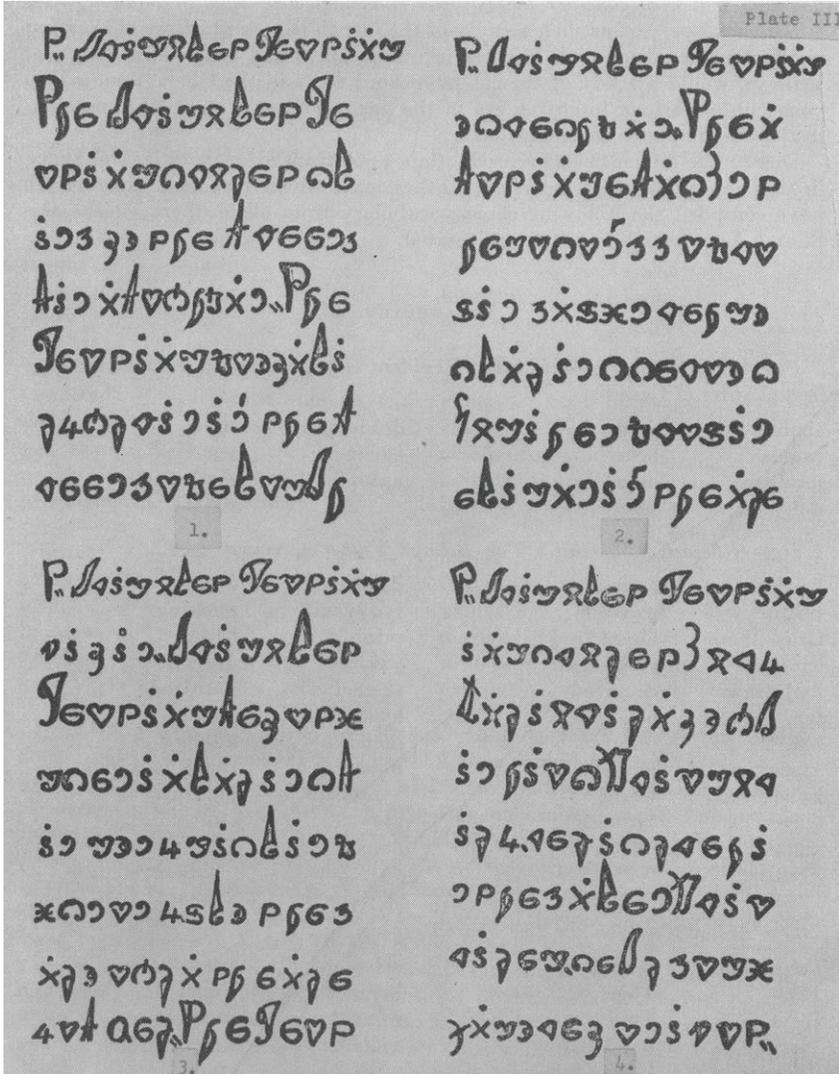


Figure 38. Bound Writing System of the Oberi Okaime, invented by Michael Ukpong (Hau 1961: 305).

secret. Both of these inventions of alphabetic scripts, one in Nigeria and the other in Laos, took place in a context where total writing systems were already widely used in certain sectors of society. Yet both remained bound writing systems in the manner of selective ritual scripts and secondary evangelistic ones. They were, and remain, inseparable from the

specific genre of discourse they were designed to inscribe and from the ritual institution that defines their rules of transmission.¹⁹

Total writing systems are often characterized by their spatio-temporal properties: they enable the discourses they transcribe to break away from the local conditions of oral transmission, stabilizing them both in space (the principle of epistolary correspondence) and over long periods of time (the principle of the archive).²⁰ Indeed, unlike selective writing systems, total scripts can transcribe the entirety of a targeted discourse: once their logic has been mastered, recourse to oral memory and oral transmission is no longer necessary. Furthermore, because they can be used to transcribe any kind of discourse, total writing systems have no need to be bound to a specific ritual institution in order to be transmitted. At most, depending on their degree of semiotic complexity, they may need some kind of pedagogical institution to facilitate their acquisition. This means that total scripts can be infinitely more stable than the institutions used to transmit them: indeed, over the course of its history, a very stable writing system might be transmitted by means of a number of quite unstable institutions. The stability of total writing systems is thus not necessarily correlated with that of the institutions that govern their transmission. On the other hand, these scripts preserve the discourses they are designed to transmit (as well as the language of these discourses) in an extraordinary way, transforming them into de-contextualized archives when the institutions that once used and valued them disappear. This is where the work of the exegete or historian begins. The results of our investigation into the selective scripts of the native populations of North America support the hypothesis that the potential for a total writing system to detach itself, on the one hand, from the discourses it was designed to canonize and, on the other, from the

19. It is worth noting that the syllabaries of the Cree, Athabaskans (Morice 1902; Mulhall 1986), and Inuit (Harper 1983, 1985), elaborated by Christian missionaries following James Evans, were used, at least at first, as bound writing systems (for prayers and institutional Christian rituals). The same may be said of the total script invented in Alaska by the Yupik Uyaquk, insofar as it was only intended to transcribe Christian discourses (Schmitt 1951; Senft 1955). It could even be argued that the worldwide translation of the Bible by missionary linguists trained at the Summer Institute of Linguistics, into languages whose script they also created (using Latin characters), belonged, at least initially, to this regime of bound writing systems.

20. See, for example, Goody (1968) or Houston (2004c).

institutions used to organize its transmission, is a simple historical consequence of its particular semiotics, and has little to do with the original motivations of those who invented it.

In the history of humankind, total writing systems have only been independently invented four times: by the Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Chinese, and the Maya.²¹ If scholars speak so often today of the “invention” of writing, it is because a great deal of evidence suggests that, rather than developing gradually, these scripts would have appeared in “rapid bursts,” at the “scale [...] of a single human life,” as Stephen D. Houston writes (Houston 2004a: 6; see also Houston 2004c: 238–39). The systematic nature of phonographic notation—in which each unit exists only by virtue of its contrast with others—would have required a concerted and fairly brief intellectual effort that, in each case, drew on and repurposed a relatively stable repertoire of traditional iconographic representations. These repertoires must have been well known to the inventors of total scripts, even though they had not previously been intended to transcribe a language.²² From this point of view, it is plausible that, all else being equal, certain languages may have possessed morphological properties that made them more likely than others to receive a written form. It has been suggested, for instance, that the generally monosyllabic morphology of Sumerian and Chinese was a factor that facilitated their phonographic transcription (Daniels 1996: 585; Boltz 2000).²³

Rather than evoking linguistic properties, however, it has generally seemed more judicious to explain the invention of total writing systems in relation to the social conditions that surrounded their appearance. It has often been said, for example, that the emergence of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian writing systems was linked to the increasing urbanization of these societies; they were responses to managerial and administrative imperatives that also met certain economic needs in

21. I should clarify from the outset that my own thoughts on these four writing systems are based on what we know of the texts that we currently have available to us. The biases induced by the haphazard way in which they have been preserved are innumerable, which is why the use of the conditional mode is *de rigueur*.

22. On these iconographic “precursors” of writing systems, see Glassner (2000) and the contributions collected in Houston (2004a) and Vernus (2011).

23. However, neither Egyptian—whose phonographic transcription is consonantal—nor Maya—with its affixial and largely polysyllabic morphology—correspond to this criterion.

contexts of expanding commercial activity, and not the fruit of any “literary” need.²⁴ Such hypotheses are difficult to refute. There are, however, a number of converging arguments casting some doubt on them: the Chinese and Maya writing systems, for one, were clearly not a response to any economic or administrative necessities (Houston 1994)²⁵; we also find, among the oldest Sumerian texts, a number of private contracts that probably transcribed discourses that were already highly formalized and belonged to a specific oral tradition (Glassner 2011: 16–18); finally, it seems somewhat contradictory that a technology intended to facilitate economic transactions would be reserved for a small class of scribes. The principal flaw in this thesis, however, is that it is far too general to furnish any substantial explanation for why a small number of individuals, over a very short period of time, would be driven to put in the intellectual effort required to invent a writing system. And in any case, the paucity of data, coupled with the fact that each new archeological discovery has the potential to overturn our basic understanding of the problem, means that the basis for any of these conclusions is extremely fragile (Postgate, Wang, and Wilkinson 1995: 475; Glassner 2000: 18; Houston 2004a: 12; 2004c: 234–37).

For this reason, a number of historians have sought a more reliable touchstone in more recent instances involving the invention of total scripts. Throughout the colonial world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for instance, numerous total writing systems were invented by members of colonized populations, constituting a series of examples whose contextual elements, in some cases, could be studied much more precisely. Among others, these include the scripts used to transcribe Cherokee in North America, Vai in Liberia, and Bamum in Cameroon— invented by Sequoyah (1821), Momolu Duwalu (1832), and King Njoya (1905), respectively.²⁶

24. See, for example, Goody (1994: 46), which synthesizes numerous works on the origins of these writing systems.

25. See also Postgate, Wang, and Wilkinson (1995), whose empirical data could easily be turned around to counter their thesis; see also the contributions collected in Houston (2004a) and Vernus (2011).

26. On the Cherokee writing system, see Walker and Sarbaugh (1993) and Cushman (2010). On the Vai writing system, see Dalby (1970), Kotei (1977), and Tuchscherer and Hair (2002). On the Bamum writing system, see Dugast and Jeffreys (1950) and Tardits (1980). Benedict Anderson (1983) offers a good theoretical framework for interpreting these inventions.

Initially, the histories of these writing systems were used to illustrate more general theories concerning the evolution or diffusion of culture. Thus, early studies attempted to show that these inventions “recapitulated” on a microcosmic scale the evolutionary process thought to characterize all writing systems, as they supposedly passed through the successive stages of pictography, logography, and phonography (Friedrich 1938; Schmitt 1951, 1963). This hypothesis was refuted by the simple consideration of the empirical data (Harbsmeier 1988). Later on, these same scripts formed the basis for Alfred Kroeber’s conceptualization of “stimulus-” or “idea-diffusion.” Indeed, we know that, despite being illiterate, the Cherokee Sequoyah and the Vai Momolu Duwalu were inspired by the idea of writing they gleaned from observing Christian missionaries, colonial administrators, or Muslim scholars. What was being diffused was thus the idea of writing, not the semiotic principles of a particular writing system, which is why Sequoyah, Momolu Duwalu, and King Njoya developed syllabic scripts, even though their models were generally alphabetic (Kroeber 1940; Tuchscherer 2007). While the concept of stimulus-diffusion was interesting, its application required extreme caution, as it was potentially open to all kinds of excesses; indeed, Kroeber himself formulated an excessively overreaching generalization with the hypothesis that the invention of all the world’s writing systems, including Chinese, had been “stimulated” by the idea of Sumerian script. The deciphering of the Maya writing system over the last thirty years has dealt a fatal blow to this theory.

Today, rather than as “contemporary ancestors,” the inventors of these more recent total writing systems are more often considered in the context of their resistance to colonial domination. Indeed, in many cases, the origins of these scripts can be traced back both to the need for an alternative to the sacred documents of colonial religious authorities (the Bible or the Koran), and to the desire to appropriate a technology thought to advertise, with maximum visibility, the apparent dominance of a people and a language. The first point is reflected in the fact that the inventions of these writing systems were often understood as revelations from dreams or visions, and that their inventors were first and foremost viewed as prophets. The second point becomes clear when we consider that these inventors were initially less concerned with transcribing texts whose preservation they considered important, than with putting in place the appropriate conditions for their writing to be widely disseminated among their people through printing infrastructure, schools, and libraries (Dalby 1970; Kotei 1977; Harbsmeier 1988; Cooper 1991;

Walker and Sarbaugh 1993; Anderson 1983; Tuchscherer and Hair 2002; Cushman 2010).²⁷ Given that these two points are specific to colonial contexts, taking them fully into account makes it very difficult to transpose the basic characteristics of these moments of invention to other situations: in particular, to any that did not involve the circulation of a preexisting writing system belonging to a dominant society.

It is for this reason that the analysis of bound, selective writing systems might have some important consequences for the way we understand the conditions under which total writing systems are invented. The problem that the inventors of the former faced is much easier to generalize: it presupposes only the preexistence of a discursive tradition, and not necessarily that of an already established writing system—nor even really the idea of one. We have seen why the Algonquian prophets and the Midewiwin shamans invented their scripts: they wanted to facilitate the precise memorization of standardized ritual discourses. In other words, they wanted to develop a means of enhancing the stability of discourses so that they could be propagated to the greatest number of people in a single canonical form. Rather than resistance to a situation of cultural or political domination, here we see a motivation that can be easily generalized to a number of other cases of the invention of writing. This motivation is also strongly correlated to the specific mode of use that characterized their writing systems. As we have seen, all of these selective scripts were also bound ones: they were only ever transmitted as inscription techniques for a limited corpus of texts recited in specific institutional contexts. This desire to stabilize ritual discourse and this delimited mode of use can be easily transposed, albeit with caution, to the earliest total scripts.

Of this group, the Mesopotamian and Egyptian writing systems exhibit broadly similar chronologies: both first appeared toward the end of the fourth millennium BCE, but it was not until the middle of the third millennium that these scripts were used to transcribe long continuous texts in a manner that would undoubtedly characterize them as total writing systems (Trigger 2004). Prior to this, as Peter Damerow writes, “the information represented is essentially incomplete.” The scribes of this script “apparently assumed that the readers of their texts, much like discussion partners in oral communication, knew the context of the information they wanted to transmit.” This first—selective—form of

27. Note as well that the first texts disseminated in these scripts were primers for learning to read.

writing should therefore not be thought of as “a deficient representation of language but rather as a successful means of representing knowledge and transmitting it from one individual to another, and eventually from one generation to the next” (Damerow 1999: 2–3; see also Glassner 2000 and Cooper 2004). This first half-millennium of Mesopotamian and Egyptian writing remains rather enigmatic for historians: information is piecemeal and the texts are difficult to decipher. Several common traits nevertheless emerge: the reading of these “incomplete” and “selective” texts must have relied in some way on the workings of oral memory; their writing systems transcribed highly formalized and systematized discourses; and they could be read and written only by a small class of scribes trained in schools where they were taught both to master these scripts and to memorize canonical discourses.

Were these writing systems invented with the express purpose of stabilizing ritual discourses (contractual, religious, or political)? In the absence of any convincing evidence, it is difficult to say. While it is true that the earliest known uses of the Egyptian writing system were restricted to the transcription of ceremonial discourses composed in a rigid metrical system and probably recited on the occasion of a king’s enthronement or to celebrate his deeds (Baines 1983, 2004; Vernus 2011), most of the earliest Mesopotamian texts appear to be lists used to administer and control the production and distribution of agricultural products, livestock, and other goods, probably within a contractual framework. However, it is unlikely that these basic administrative needs would have provided a strong enough impetus for such a highly standardized system of signs to become a total writing system; such needs would have been perfectly satisfied by the “technical success” represented by the initial system of notation. This new invention would have had to respond to demands for precision that could only be linked to the most faithful possible repetition of ceremonial discourses (contractual, religious, or panegyric) or the exact transmission of the canonical memory of a ruling elite (Assman [2002] 2010). And indeed, it is invariably discourses of this sort—in both Mesopotamia and Egypt—that we find in the earliest known examples of monumental pieces of writing, as well as the earliest transcriptions of long continuous texts. As such, one might think about the inventions of these first two forms of total writing within a similar framework to that of the invention of selective scripts by the Ojibwe shamans of the Mide-wiwin. This means that they would have been elaborated, in all their phonetic and non-selective complexity, in order to stabilize with the utmost precision a set of highly formalized genres of discourse, destined to

be learned by heart or recited, and reserved for a small elite of specialists belonging to a school-type ritual institution.²⁸

A third total writing system appeared in the middle of the second millennium BCE, with no apparent influence from the Mesopotamian or Egyptian examples; this was Chinese script. Unlike the earlier systems, this script is immediately decipherable: from the earliest accounts, it appears to be a linear and complete transcription of its target discourses.²⁹ These oldest examples consist exclusively of oracular inscriptions on bone or tortoise shell, all divinatory texts that were highly formalized, structured by strict parallelism, and composed of stereotyped, sequenced formulas (Vandermeersch 1994; Venture 2002; Bagley 2004). While we know that this script was mastered by only a very limited class of royal fortunetellers, it is unclear whether or not these texts systematically corresponded to oral enunciations or transmissions. It is therefore not impossible, once again, that the origin and development of the Chinese writing system could be understood in relation to the same kind of institutional conditions and initial motivations that inspired the Ojibwe, Navajo, and Kuna shamans.

The most recent autonomous invention of a total writing system took place among the Maya, a few centuries before the start of the Common Era.³⁰ We know that some of its iconography was borrowed from writing systems—possibly selective—used by the so-called Olmec societies of the Isthmus region of Mexico (Houston 2004b). The iconographic traditions and calendar of the Olmec were also borrowed by peoples living to the north of this region, and it was on the basis of these diverse traditions that the Mixtec would systematize one of the most complex and stable selective writing systems that we know of (Taube 2000). The Maya and Mixtec thus drew from a common source to create scripts with very different semiotics, the first total and the second selective. Yet in both cases, these writing systems were used to transcribe the *same* types of ceremonial discourse: panegyric speeches relating to coronations or the deeds of ruling dynasties, and religious discourses organized

28. On the Egyptian “house of life,” see Baines (1983); on Mesopotamian schools, see Glassner (2005).

29. Which obviously poses a missing-link problem; some have sought the iconographic origins of the Chinese writing system in certain decorative and emblematic traditions.

30. The San Bartolo texts (Guatemala) date back to 400 BCE (Beltrán, Saturno, and Stuart 2006).

around a calendar system. Although the phonographic semiotics of their writing system would have enabled the Maya to transcribe any kind of speech, they apparently only used this script to stabilize and transmit the two canonical types of ritual discourse, as is also the case among the Mixtec and Mexica.

Stephen Houston has spoken, furthermore, of the “recitation literacy” of Maya scribes and priests: it seems that monumental inscriptions, formulaic dedications painted upon offerings or their vessels, and divinatory books only contained texts intended to be recited in various kinds of ritual ceremonies (Figure 39) (Houston 1994, 2000; Grube 1998). Last of all, mastery of this total script was reserved for a small elite of scribes entrenched in initiatory schools, the “houses of writing,” which were attached to the temples of the official religion (Houston 2000).³¹ The pertinent question then becomes: how did the writing system used by Maya priests differ from those of Mixtec and Pascuan priests, or Ojibwe and Kuna shamans? Insofar as we can tell, given the limits of the obviously incomplete accounts that have come down to us, the only difference was semiotic in nature: because it was a total writing system, the Maya script was able to perform its function of stabilizing ritual discourse even more effectively than its selective counterparts. As an inscription technique, the Maya total system was thus able to remain stable for a much longer period of time than any selective script.³² This is merely a consequence of its phonographic semiotics, and unlikely to have anything to do with the motivations surrounding its invention.

In addition to their selective semiotics, all of the selective scripts reviewed in this conclusion share one essential characteristic: they were all bound, as a matter of course, to specific discourses and institutions. The use of these writing systems disappeared at the same time as their ritual institutions; when the discourses were forgotten, the script became indecipherable. Because of this boundedness, selective writing was used only to stabilize a fairly limited corpus of ritual discourses that were intended to be orally transmitted and recited on ceremonial occasions. These two scriptural functions—to facilitate the learning of discourses and, possibly, to assist in their recitation—could be implemented only

31. See also the concept of a “script community” developed in Houston (2008).

32. Of course, the stability of the Maya writing system should not be exaggerated; like all other total scripts, it underwent a number of modifications over the course of its history (Houston 2000, 2011).

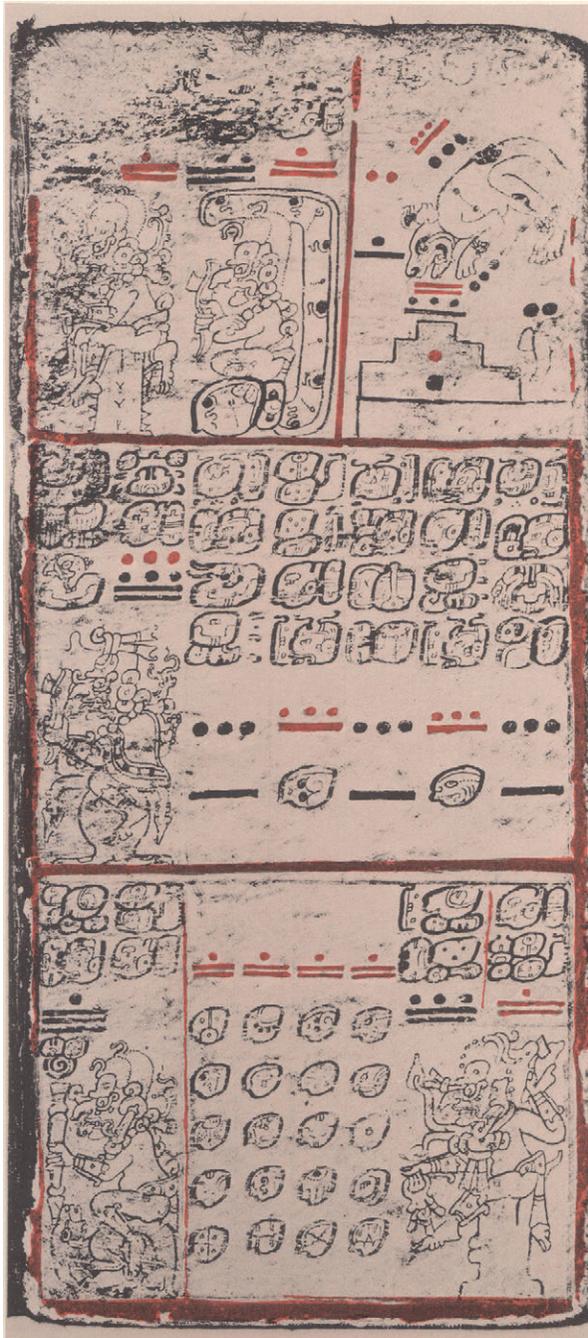


Figure 39. Maya Logo-Syllabic Writing System (Thompson 1972: plate 30).

in the context of the specific ritual institutions that defined the rules for the transmission and enunciation of these discourses. From this point of view, that is if we take into account only their mode of use, selective writing systems and secondary ones are entirely identical.

This analysis of the first uses of the four great independently invented total writing systems—Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Chinese, and Maya—has attempted to show that, at least at the time of their invention and development, they too were probably bound scripts, like those of the Nipa shamans, the Oberi Okaimé ministers, or the Her Nga Va movement. The concept of a bound writing system must therefore be understood as a regime of use of discourse-inscribing techniques, and not as any kind of semiotic principle. It becomes clear then, that while selective scripts could only be bound, total scripts—and this was their great distinction—could become unbound. Indeed, of the first four total scripts, only that of the Maya, as far as we know, remained a bound script for over a millennium—transcribing specific types of ritual discourse whose memorization and recitation were reserved for a small institution of scribal priests. The other three systems all detached themselves, at different paces, from the types of discourse they were perhaps originally intended to transcribe, from the institutions that first ensured their transmission, from the languages for which they had been created and, therefore, from the societies that had invented them. All of these scripts, by the very nature of their phonographic semiotics, became unbound from the institutional and then social conditions that surrounded their invention, and that first worked to stabilize them. The history of the consequences of this unbinding, however, goes far beyond the limits of this conclusion. Our aim here is only to show that taking into account the institutional conditions of the invention and stabilization of the selective scripts of the Ojibwe Midewiwin shamans could shed new light on the problem of the origin of these four independently invented writing systems and their appearance over the course of human history.

Afterword to the English Edition

Today, there are only four writing systems that we know for certain were invented independently of any other. Sumerian script, in southern Mesopotamia, and Egyptian script appeared at roughly the same time, in the last centuries of the fourth millennium BCE. The debate among specialists over the anteriority of one or the other is ongoing and regularly rekindled by archeological discoveries and new theoretical approaches. According to current consensus, the oldest known traces of Chinese script date back to the thirteenth century BCE, and those of Maya script to the fourth century BCE. All of the other writing systems that we know of derive, in one way or another, from these four points of origin (Houston 2004a).

Each of these scripts is a mixed system for transcribing language: their graphic signs are either logographic (inscribing units of meaning) or phonographic (inscribing units of sound). Though it is clear that phonographic signs depend on the specific phonology of a given language, it should not be assumed that the referents of logographic signs are somehow independent of any language. On the contrary, insofar as every language comprises its own semantic distribution, through the particularities of its lexical divisions, logographic signs are also bound up with the specific characteristics of the languages they transcribe. In this sense, logography appears richer than phonography: it codes the association of a sound and a meaning, and not just the sound. We could say then, however imprecisely, that logographic signs notate the words of a language (strictly speaking, a logogram codes a single morphological unit).

The semiotic dichotomy between logography and phonography should not be essentialized, however. No writing system can be reduced to the

simple transcription of the sounds of a language, not even the International Phonetic Alphabet. In highly phonographic alphabets, the mere spacing of words introduces a logographic dimension that establishes a systematic correspondence between a sound and a letter and a letter and a sound—which is not the case, incidentally, for either the French or the English alphabet (Marshall Unger and DeFrancis 1995; Déléage 2018). Nor can any writing system be reduced to the simple transcription of the words of a language. It is certainly the case, for instance, that the Chinese script is overwhelmingly logographic, with each character encoding a word; however, over ninety percent of its signs are composite, containing some graphic element related to the word's pronunciation, helped, in this respect, by the fact that the vast majority of Chinese words consist of a single syllable. From a semiotic point of view, therefore, it would be safer to speak of a spectrum of writing systems, with the pure notation of meaning at one end and the pure notation of sound at the other. Most writing systems fall clearly on either the phonographic side, primarily encoding sounds, as with an alphabet, or the logographic side, primarily encoding words, as is the case with Chinese script.

The Problem of the Origin of Writing

With these basic elements established, scholars today approach the problem of the origin of writing from several different vantage points. The first is psychological: studying the constraints that our common neuronal heritage places on the graphical form and semiotic framework of writing systems. Stanislas Dehaene, for example, has shown that the act of reading is associated primarily with an area of the brain—part of the ventral occipitotemporal cortex—whose main function in primates appears to be related to the recognition of basic geometric shapes. This cognitive constraint, which may be what allows us to recognize visual objects despite the varied aspects they can present to the perceptual system, may be retrained in the process of inventing and selecting the graphic elements of a script. Such a constraint would explain the stability of certain forms, the ease with which they can be recognized despite their relative variability, and provide an empirical basis for the family resemblance observed between all of the world's writing systems (Dehaene 2007; see also Morin, Kelly, and Winters 2018).

The second approach, that of historians, is the most common: it proceeds by associating the birth of writing systems with the growth of

trade and the correlated processes of sedentarization, urbanization, and the emergence of state-like forms of social organization. That the invention and transmission of writing were conditioned by a high degree of complexity in the social division of labor is not in dispute. We now know that writing systems, or at least their essential semiotic properties, appeared in sudden bursts, unfolding on the scale of a human lifetime (Glassner 2000; Houston 2004a). The systematic nature of phonographic notation, in which each unit exists only through its contrast with others, would require a concerted but fairly brief intellectual effort on the part of its inventors. In each case, the process depends on the inventors' familiarity with a relatively stable traditional repertory of iconographic representations, not originally intended to transcribe a language, and the repurposing of this repertory for this use. This major cognitive effort—the inventors of writing were also the first linguists—was clearly favored by a social organization that freed certain individuals, and not others, from the most elementary productive tasks. Sedentarization, urbanization, and the social division of labor were therefore necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for the invention of writing.

The tendency to associate the origins of writing with the imperatives of administrative accounting is far more problematic, however. Apart from the fact that it applies neither to the Chinese (Boltz 2000) nor the Maya cases (Houston 2000), this association is premised on patchy archeological data and somewhat speculative reasoning. It would seem that no one thought to ask why traditional counting techniques were insufficient to satisfy these administrative needs, or why a technique as costly and cumbersome as the coding of spoken language would be developed to meet such objectives. The hypothesis remains difficult to refute, however, in the current state of what is known. In any case, if the social division of labor was advanced enough for certain individuals to spend their time developing—in the space of a single generation—a technology as refined as a writing system, the theories put forward by these historians fail to account for the precise institutional conditions underlying these inventions and offer a plausible explanation for why such a major intellectual effort seemed worthwhile.

A third approach to the problem of the origins of writing consists in identifying the graphic antecedents for the characters of scripts and looking for continuities in the ways these materials and techniques are used. This is the path most favored by historians of writing, as it is by far the most likely to yield convincing results in the short term. With the systematic consideration of ornamental repertoires, numerical

systems, calendrical inscriptions, and seals—all of which preexisted writing systems—and the numerous continuities that have been identified, it now seems possible to imagine the procedures that allowed the inventors of scripts to repurpose the graphic systems that were already familiar to them (Graff and Jimenez Serrano 2015; Déleage and Morin 2018).

This approach nevertheless poses, with striking acuity, the problem of how we define writing: the difference, in other words, between writing and so-called “proto-writing.” Despite the incredible diversity of technologies gathered within the residual category of “graphic systems that are not writing systems,” a closer look at these cases will allow us not only to clarify some conceptual categories, including that of writing, but also to discover an alternate approach to the problem of the origin of writing. This is the core of the present project.

Standardized Graphic Systems

Long before the invention of writing, it is more than likely that many human societies developed and made use of standardized graphic systems to convey information. These graphic systems would have functioned independently of any language, and would have been elaborated without any intention of transcribing words or sounds. They could nevertheless have been decoded by a community which, while not defined by a common language, maintained a set of similar cultural representations. The war chronicles produced by the North American Iroquois, over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are a good example (see Figure 40). Sometimes they would be engraved on an individual’s war club or, at other times, on trees stripped of their bark that were located near the site of a battle—in full view of all, they would become veritable public monuments (Le Jeune 1898: 214–16; Radisson 1999: 108–9; Chaumonot 1996: 5–10; Lahontan [1704] 1990: 728–32; Westra 1993; Raudot 1904: 76–77; Colden 1922: xxv–xxvi; Hubley 1909: 293; Jameson 1969: 134; Seaver 1824: 176–77; Meachum 2007).

These chronicles used a limited number of standardized characters inscribed according to a rigorous syntax. The first sign was a “self-portrait” designating the leader of the war party by representing part of his identifying tattoo and/or the supernatural entity to which he was linked (and more rarely the emblem of his clan). This was followed by a series of stylized representations of *wampum*, bead necklaces, each of which

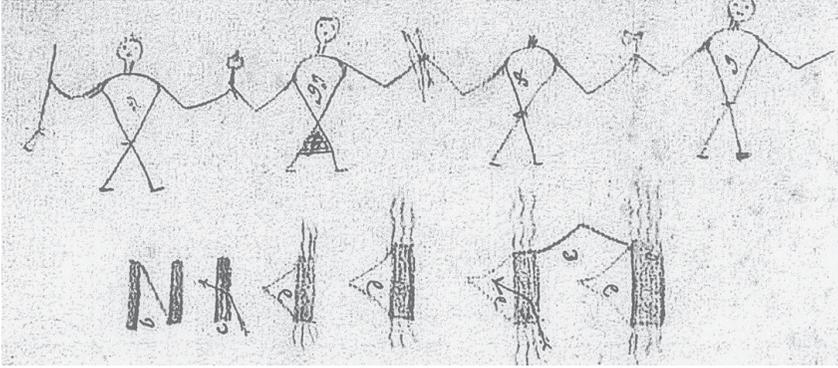


Figure 40. Iroquois War Chronicle (Chaumonot 1996: 9).

symbolized a different war party. If a *wampum* was represented with an arrow piercing it, this meant that the party's chief had been wounded during the confrontation. Next came stylized figures of the prisoners and those killed, including an indication of their sex. Other elements could be added: a simple row of lines to record the number of warriors, a map representing the battle's geographical context, or the weapons stolen from the vanquished.

These war chronicles thus used a highly standardized graphic system, not to inscribe the elements of a language, but to display a certain amount of codified information. This means that they were not attached to the transmission or memorization of a piece of discourse, nor did they involve any particular learning process. Engraved on trees, they could be “read” just as easily by enemies of the Iroquois who did not speak their language, such as the Algonquians (Bray 1782: 159–62; Loskiel 1794: 25; Heckewelder [1818] 1822: 192–93), the Choctaw (Catesby 1754: xiii; Le Page du Pratz 1775: 432–33), the Creek (Romans 1776: 102), and so on. Similar war chronicles—pure instances of standardized graphic systems conveying codified information independently of a given language or discourse—can also be found among the indigenous peoples of the Great Plains, who painted them on buffalo hides (McCoy 1994; Keyser 2000; Dempsey 2007) before inscribing them, in the nineteenth century, in notebooks that they carried on their person (White Bull [1968] 1998). The notation system of the Gourmantché seers in West Africa (Cartry 1963) and the message sticks of indigenous Australians (Kelly 2020) also belong to this category of graphic system, of which there are many other examples from around the world.

Selective Writing Systems

Much more pertinent to our purposes are the standardized graphic systems that were used to inscribe discourses in a given language. Systems of this type are also fairly common, and I have chosen to refer to them in this book as “writing systems.” They differ, however, from the writing systems we previously mentioned—Sumerian, Egyptian, Chinese, and Maya—in that their repertoire of characters is not designed to transcribe all of the elements of a discourse (morphological and/or phonetic), but only a certain set of elements that are rigorously selected according to precise rules. Selectivity, then, is the most characteristic feature of these graphic systems.

For instance, in North America, among the indigenous peoples of the Great Plains, it was customary for a man to keep a register of the names given to each passing winter. This was a means of recording a historical chronicle that the man would know by heart and could recite on demand. Each name in the chronologically ordered series was associated with a brief story explaining the name’s origin, an anecdote from the corresponding year, or a striking or incongruous fact. In the Lakota register of Swift Dog (Sunka Luzahan), for example, the winter of 1863 is named “They killed a fox hunter,” and the story of this murder is associated with the name (see Figure 41). While the memorization of its basic narrative structure suffices for the story, the name must be retained word for word (Howard 1960: 388).

Though many Plains societies, such as the Blackfeet, were satisfied with a purely oral memorization of these lists of proper names (Wissler 1911: 45), some groups employed a variety of notational techniques to “read” them—sometimes long notched sticks, a series of knots in a rope, bundles of sticks, and so on. It is in the nineteenth century that we begin to see what the anthropological literature calls the “winter counts,” graphic transcriptions of these recitations on paper employing a new logographic system of inscription (Clark 1885: 211–12). This was a selective graphic system: it inscribed only the precisely ordered series of proper names but not the stories that were told as the chronicler went through the annals of his society, and which continued to be preserved in oral memory alone. Beyond the Plains, other historical chronicles with similar semiotic foundations can be found among the Pima, the Papago, the Salish, and the Flathead peoples.

In the nineteenth century, the Iroquois Confederacy reorganized and instituted a complex ceremony that became the core of its ritual

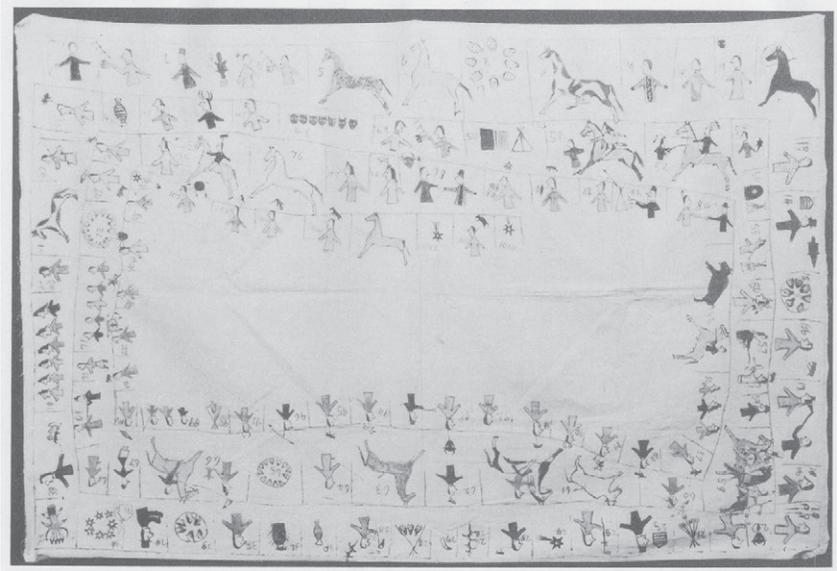


Figure 41. Lakota Historical Chronicle of Swift Dog (Howard 1960: plate 46).

tradition: the “Condolence Council,” during which recently deceased chiefs were mourned and their successors appointed (Fenton 1985; Woodbury 1992). It comprised a series of five rituals to be performed one after the other, each featuring long chants that had to be recited as precisely as possible. The preliminary ceremony, called “Walking the Path” or “Eulogy of the Founders of the Great League,” consisted of the ordered recitation of the names of the fifty chiefs of the Great League of the Iroquois. Here are the opening lines:

TEHKARIHHOKEN!

Continue to listen!

Thou who wert ruler,

HAYENWATHA!

Continue to listen!

Thou who wert ruler,

SHADEKARIHWADE!

That was the roll of you,

You who were joined in the work,

You who completed the work,

The Great League.

Continue to listen!

Thou who wert ruler,
SHARENHHOWANE!

Continue to listen!

Thou who wert ruler,
TEHYONHEGHKWEN!

Continue to listen!

Thou who wert ruler (Hale [1883] 1963: 129)

Because the accuracy of the recitation was of special concern to the Iroquois ritualists, they began to develop selective graphic transcriptions of this eulogy, as well as some other ceremonial songs. It seems that at first a large fifty-strand *wampum* necklace was used for this purpose (Jenness 1933). This was later replaced by a series of characters engraved on wooden canes (Fenton 1950) or traced on sheets of paper (Hewitt and Fenton 1945) (see Figure 42). Only the variable part of the chant, the proper name of each chief, was inscribed, while the constant part, “Continue to listen! / Thou who wert ruler,” was left to oral memory. This was thus a standardized graphic system which functioned to selectively transcribe a specific discourse. Unlike the winter counts of the Plains societies, the remaining part of the discourse, that which was not inscribed, also had to be memorized word for word; however, the frequency with which this part was repeated, each time identical to the last, made this relatively easy.

In the southwestern United States, the Navajo practice a highly complex form of shamanism involving lengthy healing ceremonies that can last anywhere between two and nine nights, and for which the officiant must memorize long chants, multiple gestural sequences incorporating a large number of ritual objects, as well as iconographically complex sand paintings. During their apprenticeship, some shamans also use graphic transcriptions of the chants in their repertoires (Newcomb, Fishler, and Wheelwright 1956; Déléage 2011, 2016). The graphic system used by the shaman Son of Bead Chant Singer to transcribe a chant addressed to the Talking God was published by musicologist David McAllester in 1950. Here is Harry Hojier’s translation of the first section:

I, now I wander about; I, now I wander about;
 I, now I wander about;

I, I am the Talking God, now I wander about;
 From under the East I wander about, now I wander about;

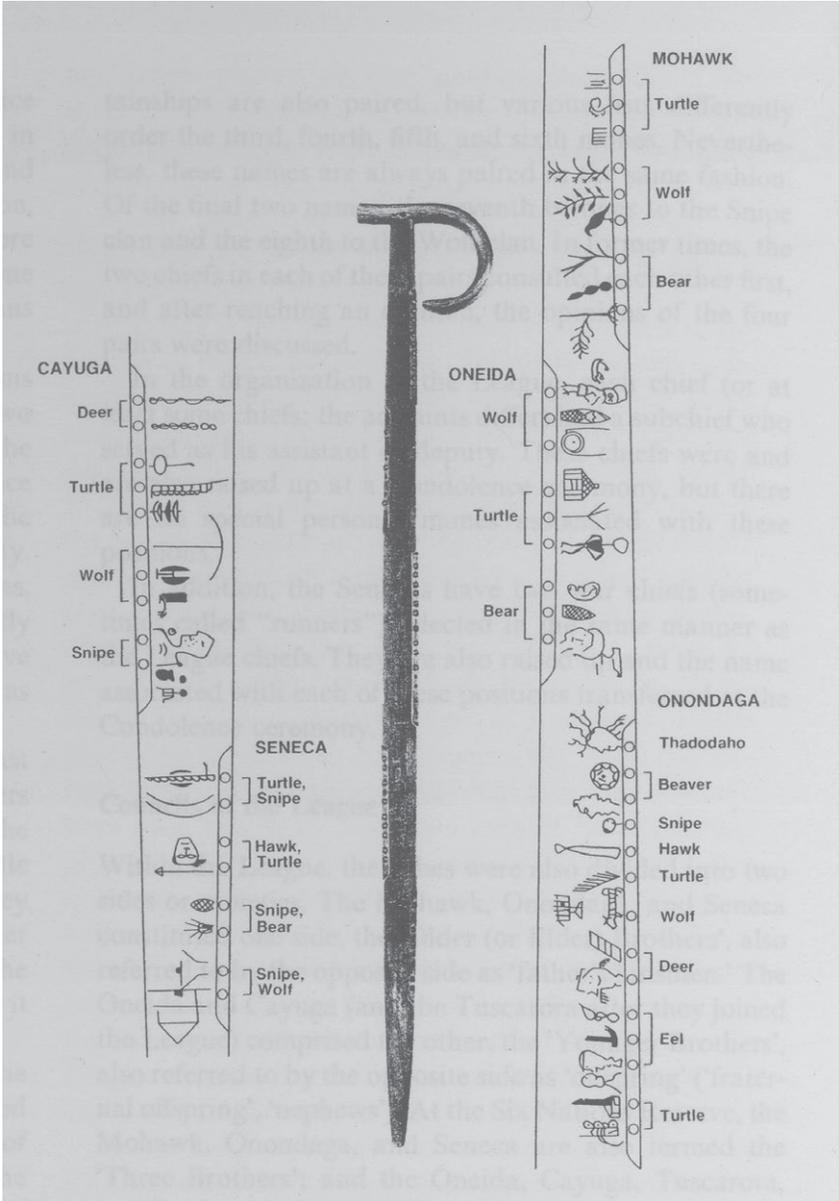


Figure 42. Condolence Cane of the Iroquois Confederacy (Fenton 1950: n.p.).

The dawn lies towards me, now I wander about;
The white corn lies towards me, now I wander about;
All sorts of soft stuffs lie towards me, now I wander about;
All sorts of waters lie towards me, now I wander about;
Corn pollen lies towards me, now I wander about;
On top of the Talking God's head, obsidian and all sorts of soft stuffs
lie together, now I wander about;
An ear of corn whose end is completely covered by kernels teaches
me, now I wander about;
I, I wander about on it, now I wander about;
I, I am the Sahanahray Bekay Hozhon, now I wander about;
Before me, it is beautiful, now I wander about;
Behind me, it is beautiful, now I wander about;

I, now I wander about; I, now I wander about;
I, now I wander about; I, now I wander about (McAllester 1950: n.p.)

The song is composed in a classic parallelist structure found in all Navajo chants, and in fact in most of the world's oral traditions. There is a variable part, "I am the Talking God", etc., and a constant part, "now I wander about," repeated after each of the variables—a procedure we already observed in the eulogy of the Iroquois. The second section of the song exhibits the same poetic structure (with the same constant), but introduces a new, higher-order form of parallelism, duplicating the exact same succession of variable–constant sequences while substituting a new series of variables. Here is the translation:

I, now I wander about;

I, I am the Hogahn God, now I wander about;
From under the West, I wander about, now I wander about;
The yellow afterglow lies towards me, now I wander about;
The yellow corn lies towards me, now I wander about;
All sorts of hard things lies towards me, now I wander about;
The little one of the waters lies towards me, now I wander about;
The corn pollen lies towards me, now I wander about;
On the crown of the Hogahn God's head, the rainbow and all sorts of
hard things lie together, I wander about with it, now I wander about;
A round kernel of corn speaks to me, now I wander about;
I, I wander about on it, now I wander about;
I, I am the Sahanahray Bekay Hozhon, now I wander about;

Before me, it is beautiful, now I wander about;
 Behind me, it is beautiful, now I wander about;

I, now I wander about; I, now I wander about;
 I, now I wander about; I, now I wander about;
 I, now I wander about.

The structure of this second section is exactly the same as that of the first, except that the sequence of variables is replaced by new variables for a second deity name. Each section can thus be seen as a single statement of a higher-order parallel structure. How did Son of Bead Chant Singer create his graphic transcription of this chant? (Figure 43). First, he chose to inscribe only the variable terms of the parallelist structure. Though one sign in his transcription does correspond to the constant “now I wander about,” it is only drawn once (in the third position); for the rest of the transcription, it remains implicit. The singer then transcribed the second section in the same way, selecting only the variables. But he also registered the higher-order parallelism by establishing a graphic and spatial correspondence between the two “parallel” series of characters.

The Navajo example shows that graphic systems used for the selective transcription of discourse are not limited to lists of names, but can also be used for complex ritual chants as well. More generally speaking, the selective semiotics of these graphic systems is often joined with iconographic embellishments (Severi 1994), and in this way they resemble writing systems proper, which have long maintained complex relations

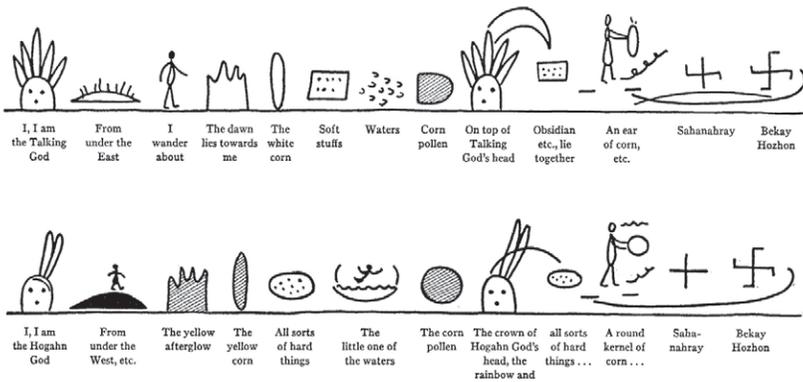


Figure 43. Transcription of the “Song of the Talking God” by the Navajo Son of Bead Chant Singer (McAllester 1950: n.p.).

with images (Bolzoni [1995] 2005). It should also be noted that, while the parts of the discourse selected for transcription are most often notated with logograms, there are examples among the Apache (Basso and Anderson 1973) and Mexica (Boone 2000) that also include phonographic signs among others.

Furthermore, from a comparative standpoint, we see that graphic systems used to convey simple information show a higher degree of graphic standardization than graphic systems used to transcribe discourses. This can be explained by the simple fact that the latter serve only to assist in the recitation of a discourse. Secondly, it appears that, while the war chronicles of the Iroquois and Plains societies engendered only glosses, like captions explaining the meaning of images, selective graphic systems were in a number of cases able to be transliterated into the Latin alphabet. The Lakota winter counts (McCoy 1983) and Iroquois ritual songs (Hewitt 1928), for example, were transliterated alphabetically by the very people who were responsible for their transmission.

Bound Writing Systems

In addition to their selective semiotics, the graphic systems used to transcribe the historical chronicles of the Plains societies, the eulogies of the Iroquois, and the songs of the Navajo share one other fundamental characteristic: all these graphic systems were subject to a bound mode of use (Déléage 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2016). This means that they were constitutively bound to specific discourses, and not just any discourse, as is generally the case with writing systems. Their function was not to stand in for these discourses, but to assist in their memorization: it follows that these selective graphic systems—once again in a way that sets them apart from our conventional understanding of writing—could not replace oral transmission, their sole purpose being to increase the fidelity of a discourse from one recitation to the next. Finally, that these graphic systems were bound to specific pieces of discourses meant that they were equally bound to the institutions whose task it was to ensure the transmission of these discourses: the chronicler in the case of the Plains societies, the Condolence Council for the Iroquois, and the shamans for the Navajo. It was clearly within the micro-sociological framework of these institutions that the invention of these graphic systems for the selective transcription of discourse took place. For this reason, the mode of use that characterizes bound writing systems might

be a conceptually fertile foundation for thinking about the origin of the four great writing systems which were developed independently of any others.

The bound mode of use thus allows us to appreciate a much wider field of variation in the semiotics of writing systems, that is, in the relationship between their graphic features and the elements of the discourses they transcribe. As such, this mode of use can be applied both to writing systems with selective semiotics and those characterized by more typical, logo-phonographic (or just phonographic) principles. In an article I published in 2017, I was thus able to show that the syllabic writing systems used by missionaries in the nineteenth-century American Northwest to convert the Dene to Christianity had been subjected to a bound mode of use in the decades following their invention and initial propagation (Déléage 2017) (see Figure 44). It was only later that these scripts broke away from this constraint—being exclusively used in the recitation of Catholic prayers—to take on a range of functions: epistolary correspondence, autobiographical narrative, and so on. It is possible to deduce from this example that, while a bound mode of use can stabilize just about any type of semiotic system, only those scripts whose semiotics are relatively easy to learn and transmit will be able to undergo real renewal, freeing themselves first from the institution that enabled their invention, and then from the types of discourse they were initially intended to transcribe. It is only these writing systems that enter into history.

Bound graphic systems could thus play an essential role in the way we understand the conditions underlying the invention of all writing systems. For in these cases, we know very well for what purpose these inscription systems were developed: their inventors wanted to facilitate the precise memorization of standardized ritual discourses. In other words, they wanted to develop a means of further increasing the stability of sacred discourses so that they could be propagated, in a single canonical form, to the greatest number of followers. This bound mode of use appears to be transposable, albeit with caution, to the four original writing systems. Stephen Houston has argued, for example, that the Maya writing system functioned, throughout its history, according to a mode of “recitation literacy”: it was intended to transcribe highly formalized texts meant to be read or recited aloud on various ceremonial occasions (Houston 1994). The transmission of the knowledge necessary to read or “recite” this script may have even been decoupled from the scribes’ knowledge of how to write it.

▷ a	▽ e	△ i	▷ o	" 卍 " Δ
▷ an	▽ en	△ in	▷ on	∩ 卍
< ba	▽ be	△ bi	> bo	∩ 卍
∩ da	∩ de	∩ di	∩ do	∩ 卍
∩ ka	∩ ke	∩ ki	∩ ko	∩ 卍
∩ la	∩ le	∩ li	∩ lo	∩ 卍
∩ ma	∩ me	∩ mi	∩ mo	∩ 卍
∩ na	∩ ne	∩ ni	∩ no	∩ 卍
∩ ra	∩ re	∩ ri	∩ ro	∩ 卍
∩ sa	∩ se	∩ si	∩ so	∩ 卍
∩ ya	∩ ye	∩ yi	∩ yo	∩ 卍
∩ za	∩ ze	∩ zi	∩ zo	∩ 卍
∩ cha	∩ che	∩ chi	∩ cho	∩ 卍
∩ tha	∩ the	∩ thi	∩ tho	∩ 卍
∩ dha	∩ dhe	∩ dhi	∩ dho	∩ 卍
∩ tta	∩ tte	∩ tti	∩ tto	∩ 卍
∩ ttha	∩ tthe	∩ tthi	∩ ttho	∩ 卍
∩ tca	∩ tce	∩ tci	∩ tco	∩ 卍

Figure 44. The Dene Writing System (Déléage 2017: 409).

More recently, Léon Vandermeersch has summed up in a single sentence the fact that the Chinese writing system was in its earliest iteration inseparable from standardized texts and discourses: "The particularity of the genesis of writing in China is that what was first invented was not a system for notating ordinary oral discourse expressed spontaneously in natural language, but a system for notating divinatory operations

expressed in an extremely formalized way” (Vandermeersch 2011: 119).¹ At the time of their appearance, both the Maya and Chinese scripts were therefore very likely bound writing systems, and it was to satisfy this limited mode of use that they were invented.

This raises the question of whether the Mesopotamian and Egyptian scripts were not also initially bound writing systems, invented to increase the stability of canonical discursive traditions whose precise repetition was deemed of the utmost importance by a small class of experts. Even if it is unlikely that all four original writing systems were invented for the very same reasons, such an explanation would indeed posit a plausible motivation for the extraordinary intellectual effort these experts in oral traditions would have had to make in order to invent both a writing system and a written tradition. What is most important is that this argument forces us to think of the invention of writing in the context of a rich, thoughtful, highly formalized, and extremely persistent oral tradition (most often transmitted in very well-defined institutional circumstances).

Writing, we can then say, does not emerge *ex nihilo*, but inherits formal techniques elaborated to facilitate oral memorization. Writing is not opposed to orality from the outset, as most theorists, ever since Plato, have been tempted to think *a posteriori*. At the moment of its invention, writing operates in conjunction with orality. “Proto-writing,” a clumsily constructed category given the diversity of these techniques, is not marginal to semiotic reflection. When these systems’ semiotics and modes of use are taken properly into account, they may well contribute to an expansion of research and theorization concerning the origins of writing.

1. Translated by current translators.

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