

Métis Story Tellers

Module Objective: To inform the students about the rich story-telling tradition of the Métis.

The Oral Tradition is a constant in the rich folk cultures of non-literate societies. Métis Oral Tradition embodied a mixture of Algonquian and French-Canadian folklore. Trickster spirits, such as Nanabush and Wisahkecahk, inhabited a world with Rougarous (known as "Loup Garous" or "werewolves" to French Canadians), the Wendigo (a cannibal spirit) and the Devil, incarnated as a black dog or a handsome stranger. These stories were often sacred, profane, or humorous. They were meant to keep people from neglecting their obligations to the Creator, pass on information about the environment, and transmit beliefs and values or to teach children life lessons. As Agnes Pelletier, a Métis Elder from Regina, Saskatchewan, relates: "Years ago if you didn't do any praying of any kind, the Devil or a demon would come and live in your home".

Traditional stories were told at wakes, when men and women worked, around campfires, at social gatherings, and in homes. For instance, men at parties entertained one another with stories while smoking their pipes. Their humorous tales often drew gales of laughter, making the raconteurs the life of the party. When men were on long and arduous freighting trips, they told humorous stories or stories about ghosts or past hunts to pass time, keep their spirits from sagging and to celebrate life. Similarly, women told stories while picking berries, collecting sap, processing pemmican or fish or making moccasins. On cold winter nights, people often gathered in a circle and made up the most outrageous tales possible. The winner sometimes received a prize for their story. Other times, a bag might be passed around and people would place items in it. To the amusement of the listeners, the storyteller would then have to make up a

story based on items pulled from the bag! Storytellers were respected for their ability to challenge people's imaginations.

Storytelling was most often intergenerational. Elders and parents told stories to the young in order to reinforce their identity and prepare them for adulthood. Indeed, storytelling was the basis of a traditional education for most young Métis. For instance, telling stories was a means to teach youth about the history of their families and communities, as well as to provide biographies of ancestors and important leaders. Through the Oral Tradition, the Métis honed their long-term memory skills. For instance, storytellers would have a young person participate in an activity where they acted out the principle of the story. In this way, through experiential learning, the story's lesson was made real and could be more easily remembered.

Some Métis stories are sacred and are only told to certain people. These stories can only be told if the teller has permission from the story's original owner, and if the procession of people to whom the story was told is recounted. These special stories are seen as the "intellectual" property of a specific individual or a family lineage through time. It is sometimes possible, therefore, to trace a story directly back to the original raconteur. An Elder might say "I am going to tell you a story about hunting ducks that I got from my father Antoine which he heard from his father Keewaypash...." It is always important to remember the proper protocol when telling traditional Métis stories.

Supernatural elements are always present in traditional Métis stories. Stories about black dogs appearing out of nowhere and doing things out of the ordinary

are quite common in the Métis Oral Tradition. Agnes Pelletier recounts a story told to her by her father about a mysterious black dog:

Then my father was telling us ...he went to a dance, and it was in wintertime, so he was travelling in what we call a "cutter". That was a form of a vehicle that was pulled by a horse. And then, when my father was coming home after the dance, he saw this black dog running beside the cutter. And the horse was running, but the dog wasn't. He was walking, and then all of a sudden this dog jumps in the cutter, and ... the horse just stopped like that. So then this dog, he jumped off the cutter. The horse went again. And what they said years ago was: "you have to draw blood from this dog. If you drew blood from the dog then you saved a soul". This is what they used to say, that's how you saved a person's soul, and then when you saved this person's soul, they'd tell you "thank you". They'd really appreciate it.

Shape shifters and werewolves were also very common elements in traditional Métis stories. The Métis shape shifter is the Rougarou, usually a person, whom in some way offended the Creator or was possessed by malevolent spirits. Rougarous had super human abilities that set them apart from ordinary humans. Agnes Pelletier recounts a traditional Rougarou story, told to her by her grandmother:

My grandmother was good at telling these stories or legends. They used to talk about these stories, they used to call them "li rougaroo", which are werewolves. My grandmother told us the story of this older lady. Her name was Rosalie. She was going to town and she was walking to town. This lady was going to Fort Qu'Appelle. She was going to go to town to buy some stew meat. She had twenty-five cents, and she looked in the window and there she saw this horse coming. This girl came in to my grandma's and said: "put the water on the stove and get it boiling and I'll, I'll bring you some meat". So then, she rode this horse to town, and before the water was boiling, there this girl came back. She had road this nice looking horse, and she came back home quickly and they didn't expect her to come in. There she was with the meat. They say that this girl that went to town for the meat used that white horse and came back so quickly. They said she was a werewolf, and when she was cutting wood, apparently she would give just one hit to the wood and it would just break in half with just one hit. And this girl she had a baby. She put that baby on the pile of wood and burnt her baby, but I guess she didn't know. It was because the Devil was helping her. You know these are the type of stories that Old People used to tell us and we don't know if these really happened, but we heard a lot of those kind of stories.

Storytelling remains an important tradition among the Métis. Elders are still a rich source of history and their stories provide much entertainment and insight

into Métis culture. They are a valuable connection to a lifestyle and belief system, which were almost lost. In addition, many Métis authors, playwrights and filmmakers such as Beatrice Culleton, Maria Campbell, Loretta Todd, Greg Coyes and Gil Cardinal have continued the Métis tradition of telling stories in many new and exciting mediums.

Questions and Activities:

- 1) What two traditions form the basis of Métis folklore?
- 2) Where did the concept of the werewolf first emerge? To find this answer, you'll have to conduct some research.
- 3) Read Maria Campbell's story "Rou Garous" from her book *Stories of the Road Allowance People*. Are rougarous similar to or different from other werewolves? Do you think that the Cree influence on the Métis would explain if there is a difference?
- 4) Write your own roogaroo or black dog story by reading the stories from the sources listed in this bibliography.
- 5) Do some research on Wisahkecahk. How prominent is he in Cree, Ojibwa and Métis folklore? What is his role? How is he different from a roogaroo? How is he similar to Nanabush? How is he different?
- 6) Draw a picture of how you think various Métis folk spirits would look like.

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