

Maasu Re-creates the World

Narrated by Job Kawapit
Transcribed and Translated by Luci Bobbish-Salt

Commentary by Marguerite MacKenzie

These two traditional East Cree tales present complementary explanations of how the present-day world came to be. The first episode about the trickster Maasu contains the well-known story of the flood and the creation of the world in general, while the second episode focuses more specifically on the origin of Cree place names in northern Quebec. There are many more episodes to the Maasu cycle, including the Lichen and the Fart Man, the Bear, as well as the Ducks and the Geese (Brittain and MacKenzie 2005), but these are not included here. Job Kawapit of Whapmagoostui related this story to Isaac Masty, who tape-recorded it at the request of Luci Bobbish-Salt. Luci then transcribed the tape in Cree syllabics, adapted it to written language and prepared a translation. Job clearly identifies these stories as *tipâchimuwin*, a genre including historical narrative and recent news, and not as *âtiyûhkin*, traditional tales, often referred to as myth or legend. The parameters of this important division of narratives are explained in Ellis (1995).

The stories recounted here by Job Kawapit provide explanations for a number of aspects of the present-day world: the absence of giant beaver, the short tail of the lynx, why the mink can no longer stay underwater for long, why there are twelve months in the year, why certain rocks have red spots, the existence of names for islands, sand bars and other locations. Maasu has the ability to create life, as he knowingly instigates the destruction of the world by flood, then re-creates it and brings animals back to life with his breath.

The Storyteller

Job Kawapit, who was in his mid-sixties when the story was recorded, is known as a master story teller, as the details he includes in his versions of the well-known flood myth attest. Job was raised in the traditional Cree way, described in Tanner (1979), on the land, traveling over vast distances for up to eleven months of the year, providing for the family group through hunting primarily caribou and beaver, as well as fishing, pulling a minimum of belongings on toboggans from camp to camp, where dwellings were constructed on site from readily available materials.

Job now lives in Whapmagoostui, formerly known as Great Whale River, the most northerly of the east Cree villages. Whapmagoostui is located on the east coast Hudson Bay, side-by-side with the Inuit village of Kujjuarapik.

Job speaks the northern dialect of East Cree, also spoken in the communities of Chisasibi and Wemindji. The East Cree people are closely related to the Naskapi of Kawawachikamach, near Schefferville to the east, and more distantly to the Naskapi (Innu) of Natuashish (formerly of Davis Inlet) on the Atlantic coast of Labrador.

In more recent years Job has had an opportunity to share and pass on his encyclopedic knowledge of the old ways to new generations as the Cree Culture teacher in the school system. Exposure to traditional language, and the cultural concepts it encodes, is important, for although young people still speak fluently, the language is changing under the influence of bilingualism in the two second languages.

The Trickster Maasu

Maasu is the trickster figure whose stories are familiar to those who know the tales of Wolverine among the Innu and Naskapi, Wisakechahk among the Swampy Cree, Nanibozho among the Ojibwe and Coyote among other North American Aboriginal groups¹. Although the trickster is generally called Kuekuatsheu ‘wolverine’ among the Innu of today, the term Mesh occurs in stories from Innu communities on the Lower North Shore of the St. Lawrence River². The northern East Cree pronunciation Maasu is the result of historical sound change whereby the vowel ‘e’ is now pronounced as ‘â’ so that words such as *iskweu* ‘woman’ and *nâpeu* ‘man’ are pronounced *iskwâu* and *nâpâu*.

The character of the Trickster is well known, and Maasu follows the stereotype: a wanderer, greedy about food, sneaky, vengeful and self-important but able to perform great feats of creation and transformation. In these stories he displays all these traits: tricking the evil ‘Cut-off back of fish’ people to avenge his younger brother while declaring “they will not be able to harm me as I am really an important person”, hunting hostile giant beaver to extinction, accounting for the modern appearance and habits of animals, predicting the future flood, reviving dead animals. On the other hand, he himself is tricked by the beaver on two occasions.

Only two animals, Frog and Waterdog, are older than Maasu, and he is addressed as ‘older brother’ by all other animals, who listen to him. He often talks to himself, often using the pronoun *chiyaanuu* ‘we’, which is reminiscent of the fact that, in other episodes not recounted here, he holds discussions with his ass.

Plot summaries

There are many Maasu stories and only two episodes of the whole trickster cycle are presented here. We hope to add more in future. The first episode about the creation of the world is widespread but the second episode, about the Giant Beaver, is particular to the northern East Cree as it explains the origin of local place names.

Episode One: Maasu Re-creates the World

Maasu the trickster finds his little brother Kingfisher crying because he is hungry. The *Kâchâmishikunich* ‘Cut-off back of fish ones’ have prevented the *Chîhchîkwâyushishich*, ‘Young skinny-tailed ones’ from hunting food for him and the other animals. Maasu sends him to find spawning fish to eat after obtaining information about the bad people. They only come out at night to play a game, but can sense the presence of an intruder watching from a nearby hollow tree when the game does not resolve itself correctly. They then shake the tree to kill the observer. Maasu declares his intention to pack himself into the tree with conifer boughs and goes off to collect them, after expressing his good opinion of himself.

After successfully surviving the shaking tree, Maasu creeps up on the *Kâchâmishikunich* and stabs each of them with the three-barbed head of a harpoon, leaving them embedded in them. He does not kill them outright, as that would unleash a flood upon the world. He goes off to construct a raft which he loads with pairs of animals, as well as different kinds of vegetation. Walking away, he meets his elder sister Frog, singing that she is a healer, on her way to cure the *Kâchâmishikunich*. She does not recognize him,

¹ See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coyote_\(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coyote_(mythology))

² The Jesuits, who lived with the Innu, know then as Montagnais, in the 17th century, heard stories of Messou which they recorded in the Jesuit Relations (Thwaites 1853-1913, v5&6).

and mispronounces his name as Mísw. Taking offence, Maasu peels off her skin, dons it and approached the wicked ones, singing her song "I am a healer, I am a healer". Although the *Kâchâmishikunich* find Frog's voice different, they allow Maasu to approach them; he throws off the frog skin, kills them and the flood waters begin to rise.

Regaining his raft, he finds the ugly Waterdog, whom he tells to face away from all the other animals, as they are frightened. Noticing logs loosened by the Giant Beaver floating by, he instructs them to swim by with teeth bared and eyes closed, then hits and breaks their teeth. Next the Giant Lynx try to tip the raft but, instructing them to close their eyes, Masw cuts off their tails and they die from blood loss, explaining the short tail of the modern lynx.

Now Maasu decides to create land so that the animals will be able to find food. In succession he lowers the water animals, otter, beaver, muskrat and seal, who all drown. Finally little Mink, who stays down longer than the others, also drowns. But she is hauled back up clutching sand and moss in her tiny paws. Maasu blows on her to bring her back to life but explains to her that she will no longer be able to stay underwater for any length of time.

Blowing on the sand and moss, Maasu creates the world again. He enlarges it by continued blowing and sends Frog, Caribou and finally Loon to survey the extent of it.

Maasu now asks the animals to decide the length of the winter and summer seasons. Rejecting the number of spots on Loon's back and hairs between Caribou's toes, he chooses the six fingers and toes offered by Frog to comprise the twelve months and the animals return to their usual habitats.

Episode Two: Maasu and the Giant Beaver

As usual, Maasu is walking along when he sees a beaver in a stream and immediately thinks of food. The wary beaver send a three-year-old to play dead and Maasu drags it up from the shore and hangs it in a tree, along with his flint for making fire, while he goes off to fetch suitable sticks to skewer the internal organs for roasting. When the beaver gets down from the tree and escapes, Maasu dismisses the sound of a breaking branch as that of snow cracking in the cold (despite the fact that it is summer), returning only to find his meal swimming off. He calls to it to return his precious flint, which is tossed back to him. After anxiously unwrapping the flint, talking to himself all the time, he finds it dry, and vows to hunt the Giant Beaver to extinction (recall that Giant Beaver had already tried to sabotage his raft after the flood).

Seeing him stretch out on the dam to wait for them, the Beaver devise a plan to make him fall asleep and then escape. The female beaver tries unsuccessfully to catch him sleeping, but on her fourth visit to him he does not answer her call and all the beaver swim downstream over the dam in order of age. The eldest and last beaver blocks Maasu's ears with clay.

On awakening Maasu cries out, again addressing himself as 'we', that he has been tricked and chases after them out into Hudson Bay. Catching a young one by hand, he cooks and eats it. He then sharpens a white spruce tree and spears it into the lodge, forcing the beaver out into the bay again, where he skewers one to the bottom. The lodge and heaps of branches stored for winter food are now an island and sand dunes, while his footprints are visible near the present-day village of Whapamagoostui. Red-coloured rocks on the islands and the mainland have been left by blood spattered as he killed the beaver.

The chase continues north along the shore of Hudson Bay, then inland to the Seal Lakes, where the beaver disappeared from sight. Maasu performs the Shaking Tent ceremony to discover that they have come up near Fort Chimo, at the top of the Ungava Peninsula, hundreds of miles to the north-east. Running cross-

country from Whapamagoostui to the territory of the Naskapi, he continues to hunt the giant Beaver to extinction, leaving in his wake the names of the places where he hunted and red blood-spattered rocks.

Translation

Luci Bobbish-Salt has chosen to arrange the translation in the more traditional paragraph structure used for books in the Cree language of instruction program. She has omitted a number of 'quotative' verbs such as 'he said' and 'it was told' which are in the original Cree but are rendered redundant by the use of quotation marks in the English version. In Algonquian oral narrative these quotative verbs serve to keep straight the many participants who are usually not named; when necessary for clarity, Luci has added the name of the speaker, although in the original Cree this is obvious from the verb endings alone. Asides by the narrator to the audience are enclosed in brackets in the English translation.

As there were a number of words and situations which were not clear, Luci traveled to Whapamagoostui to seek clarification from Job. In particular the names of two sets of characters mentioned at the beginning of the story are difficult to identify. The *Chîhchîkwâyushishich*³ 'Young skinny-tailed ones' may well be wolves, who are the main predator of caribou.

The name of the two evil people, *Kâchâmishikunich*⁴ 'Cut-off back of fish ones', is also obscure. In an Innu version of this story (Savard 1971) these beings are referred to as *manituaat* 'spirits'⁵ while the Naskapi version in the same volume does not give them a name. The use of descriptive phrases as names is very common, and in prior to conversion to Christianity, Cree, Naskapi and Innu people were known by a unique, single name, often bestowed because of a prominent characteristic. A number of people still carry these 'nicknames', which are used in addition to English or French Christian and family names (Mailhot 1997).

The use of the Naskapi word *piskutinâu* 'mountain, hill' instead of the more usual East Cree *wichî* marks the story as being told in a very northern dialect. In fact, Job's family is closely related to people in the Naskapi community of Kawawachikamach.

Prehistoric animals

The giant beaver of the second story actually existed and its skeletal remains, been found as far east as central Ontario, have been classified as *Castoriodes ohioensis* (Harrington, 1996). There do not seem to be records of giant lynx, *mishipishiu*, although the giant feline, the saber-toothed tiger, did exist. The Ojibwa tell of a horned underwater monster *mizhibizhî* which is not so clearly feline. Memory of another prehistoric animal, the woolly mammoth, may be referred to in the Chahkâpesh legends, where a monster with legs like tree trunks and ears which can be used as blankets kills the hero's parents. These references support speculation about the role of traditional narrative in preserving memories of the world as it was thousands of years ago.

Special Powers

Several sorts special powers are demonstrated in these stories: the use of blowing to create the world or to resuscitate dead animals; the use of singing, accompanied by a traditional rattle, to effect healing; the use

³ This term carries diminutive suffix *-shish-* indicating 'small' or 'young' as well as the plural suffix *-ich*.

⁴ The term carries the plural suffix *-ich*. the term can also be used for extra-uterine embryo found occasionally in animals

⁵ The Innu plural is *-at*.

of the Shaking Tent ceremony to find out what is happening hundreds of miles away; the use of a pointed missile to cause harm; changing size and taking on the appearance of Frog. Luci was not able to obtain a description of the game played by the evil beings but games are regularly mentioned in traditional tales.

Place names

In Episode Two there is reference to place names which are still used among the Cree and an explanation is provided for the origin of some of the names: *Wâshthikân* 'pile of beaver food', near Chisasibi, *Utâskihp* 'trapping place??', *Minitunikw* 'spirit island', *Iyâtiwâkimî* 'bay on a lake', *Kusaapihchikin* 'shaking tent', *Wîyâshâkimî* 'clear water', *Âhchikunipî* 'seal lake', *Michîmin* 'bad berry??', *Ushtikwânikin* 'skull', and *Fwart Chaimu* 'Fort Chimo'. Further discussion of Cree place names can be found in Denton (2005).

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