


Windigo Psychosis

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Vivian J. Rohrl (1970) has recently suggested that there exists a nutritional factor in the windigo psychosis. She stresses the consumption of animal fats in the cure of the condition. Jennifer Brown (1971) has adequately demonstrated that this nutritional cure was not emically recognized and that if fats were ingested to cure the patient it was part of a mechanistic, behavioral cure. I should like to reiterate her opposition by bringing to attention descriptions of the seventeenth century Micmac. Although the Micmac relished “moose butter” (rendered fat) and drank large quantities of grease, the consumption of fat is never mentioned by the early writers as being a cure for the windigo psychosis, or other states of melancholy (LeClerq 1910:118; Denys 1908:402-403, 422-423). LeClerq provides us with what is perhaps the earliest and most complete description of a windigo case. He mentions a behavioral cure for this particular case and indicates that immoderate singing and dancing as a prophylaxis for such behavior (LeClerq 1910:112-116). The mark that seems to have been missed by Rohrl, and Brown, is that one should be attempting to explain the presence of the windigo psychosis, not just psychosis, among the Northern Algonkians—and its absence elsewhere.

Admittedly, there is a nutritional factor—a factor which all investigators have recognized—people become windigos during periods of food deprivation. That the resultant melancholy may be caused by the absence of this enzyme or that vitamin is accepted. But why do these black-Irish fits manifest themselves as the windigo psychosis among the Northern Algonkians and not among their Déné, Siouan, Iroquoian, and Eskimo neighbors when the latter undergo similar nutritional deprivation?

I believe it is time to review the methods and theoretical orientations of investigators of this problem. It would seem that in order to explain the presence of any phenomenon that is unique to a particular group of people it is imperative to explain its absence among historically related peoples and those living under similar circumstances. Until recently this has not been done for the study of the windigo phenomenon, rather, investigators have sought internal explanations.

Although I prefer non-psychoanalytic explanations Thomas Hay (1971) has initiated this programme with a methodologically sound study. The Micmac prove troublesome again, however. Hay suggests that the presence of institutionalized cannibalism among the Iroquois and Déné peoples allowed for the displacement of the desire to eat one’s own group members (1971:9). The Micmac, at time of contact, possessed the Iroquois war-complex (see Flannery 1946). Although
the consumption of prisoners is not specifically mentioned, Maillard (cited in Meehling 1958:59:122) reports the torture and devouring of a “live beast” in a pre-battle festivity indicating that captives could expect “no better treatment.” Another example of the institutionalization of cannibalism among the early Micmac is found in the custom of eating the heart of prominent men after they have died of natural causes (LeClerq 1910:219-220). The heart is consumed because it contains the enemy spirits that might harm the dead man’s soul in the after life; if they are ingested by the living they cannot harm the dead. Yet the windigo psychosis was present despite these forms of “institutionalized cannibalism.”

Concerning psychoanalytic explanations which stress the fact that near relatives are consumed, I can only suggest that those who favor such explanations ask themselves: “Who else is available?” During the period when the windigo is most active people are dispersed in small extended family or nuclear family camps. Who would be eaten if there existed a choice between a kinsmen and non-kinsmen? One harsh winter the Micmac near Miscou consumed a Basque boy left among them to learn their language (Thwaites 1896-1901; viii:29). Although I have not examined all cases of early cannibalism for the sub-arctic it would appear likely that the victim was chosen on the basis of whose relatives offered the least threat and who offered the most meat.

I am also not entirely convinced that the windigo phenomenon is absent from the adjacent areas. Robert MacKennon’s discussion of the “ice-bear,” the two “ice-bear” stories, and the legend of Kaishenjik among the Chandalar Kutchin all bring to mind the windigo phenomenon (1965:77, 152-153, 149-152; see also Osgood 1936:164-166; Honigmann 1946:47, 48, and 1954:101).

In conclusion, I should like to suggest the following guidelines for future discussions of the windigo psychosis:

1. At what time during the yearly cycle do the cases occur? Is this a period of fatty acid deprivation? Do other forms of melancholy exist at this time? Philip Bock’s (1966) concept of “social time” and Frederick Gearing’s (1958) “structural poses” may provide a significant framework for these types of considerations.

2. What is the distribution of the windigo complex, including the myth and psychosis? I mean here more than the distribution of melancholy accompanied by cannibalism, or fears of cannibalism. The entire complex should be present to justify as a case—the icy-hearted, people-eating, giant into which one may transform.

3. What significance does the windigo myth, exclusive of the psychosis, have for the societies which possess it? Yehudi Cohen’s (1968:56-60) distinction between “adaptive” and “adjustive” institutions may be of some use here. It seems as though an inordinate amount of time has been spent on the aberrant behavior associated with this belief. Perhaps some effort should be expended to determine how the mentally balanced Northern Algonkian behaved with reference to the windigo myth.

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Marvin Harris has in his remarkable book, The Rise of Anthropological Theory (1970:500), credited Lévi-Strauss with the "discovery" that the generalized exchange of women is logically associated with cross-cousin marriage of the mother's brother's daughter variety. He has thus failed to mention the name of a Dutch anthropologist, F. A. E. van Wouden, who, in 1935, prior to the publication of Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté in 1949 made the same remark in his book Sociale Structuurtypen in de Groote Oost (1935:94).

Another rather serious error appears in the bibliography of the book (Harris 1970:720). An article called A New Approach to Kinship Studies is included under the name of J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong. That article is in fact written by P. E. de Josselin de Jong, who is a totally different person.