

## Veganism And Mi'kmaq Legends: Feminist Natives Do Eat Tofu

This paper proposes a postcolonial ecofeminist reading of Mi'kmaq legends as the basis for a vegan diet rooted in indigenous culture.<sup>1</sup> Such a project faces two significant barriers. The first is the association of veganism with whiteness.

Drew Hayden Taylor has portrayed abstaining from meat as a white practice (Taylor 2000a, 2000b). In a joke at the beginning of his documentary, *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew* he asks, "What do you call a Native vegetarian? A very bad hunter." Ecologist Robert Hunter (1999) depicts vegans as "eco-Jesuits" and "veggie fundamentalists," who "force Natives to do things the white man's way" (p. 100-113). By projecting white imperialism onto vegans Hunter enables white omnivores to bond with Natives over meat-eating. In *Stuff White People Like*, satirical author Christian Lander (2008) portrays veganism as a tactic for maintaining white supremacy. He writes, "As with many white-people activities, being vegan/vegetarian enables them to feel as though they are helping the environment and it gives them a sweet way to feel superior to others" (p. 38).

When veganism is constructed as white, First Nations people who choose a meatless diet are portrayed as sacrificing cultural authenticity. This presents a challenge for those of us who see our vegan diets as ethically, spiritually and culturally compatible with our indigenous traditions.

A second barrier to Native veganism is its portrayal as the product of class privilege. Opponents claim that a vegan diet is an indulgence since the poor must eat whatever is available, and cannot afford to be so picky. By a similar logic the poor cannot afford to abstain from caviar or truffles. Class based arguments assume that highly processed specialty foods or imported fruit and vegetables make up the bulk of a vegan diet. It also overlooks the cost of meat, and assumes that the subsidized meat and dairy industries in North America are representative of the world.

My proposal is not that we replace a vibrant traditional food culture with one associated with white privileged culture. The current eating model of the majority of the Mi'kmaq is already white, and is complicated by poverty. As a participant in Bonita Lawrence's study of mixed-blood urban Native identity explained, "people have been habituated to think that poverty is Native—and so your macaroni soup and your poor diet is Native" (2004, p. 235). Lack of access to nutrient-rich foods is a problem Natives have in common with other racialized and economically oppressed groups. As Konju Briggs Jr. (2010), of the Africana Institute at Essex County College argues, "In the US, poor communities of color are often bereft of access to fresh healthy foods, and disproportionately find themselves afflicted with the diseases of Western diets and lifestyles." He identifies this as a tactic of class warfare, aimed at "keeping the most chronically impoverished from being able to be healthy, long-lived and highly functioning, and from excelling as human beings" (para. 28).

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term vegan throughout this piece because it is not simply a diet, but is a lifestyle that eschews the use of all animal products for ethical reasons. The issue is not about meat, eggs and dairy, but about the use of animal products in everyday life. An ethics-based vegetarianism would function similarly for the purposes of my argument, so feel free to read vegan as veg\*n where applicable.

Several researchers (Johnson 1977; Travers 1995; Mi'kmaq Health Research Group 2007) have noted that the reservation system has begotten a diet that is high in sugar and carbohydrates and low in protein and fibre. As a result, the Mi'kmaq have seen a serious increase in obesity, diabetes mellitus, and gallstones. Professor of human ecology, Kim Travers (1995) cited three causes of nutrient poor diet among the Mi'kmaq: low income, lack of access to transportation and reservations unsuitable for agriculture, fishing or hunting. Travers notes that reservation inhabitants are often limited to eating highly processed protein such as peanut butter, wieners or bologna.

Traditionally, the Mi'kmaq diet was meat-heavy, consisting of beaver, fish, eels, birds, porcupine, and sometimes, larger animals such as whales, moose, or caribou, supplemented by vegetables, roots, nuts and berries. In the Mi'kmaq language the word for food is the same as the word for beaver, establishing meat as the archetype of the edible. The use of animals as food also figures prominently in Mi'kmaq legends.

Food production and consumption is gendered in Mi'kmaq culture. Hunting was a male activity connected with the maintenance of virility. A boy's first hunting kill acted as a symbol of his entry into manhood. To reject hunting also rejects a traditional method of male identity construction. Yet the context in which this identity is constructed has changed significantly since the arrival of the European colonialists. Meat, as a symbol of patriarchy shared with colonizing forces, is arguably more assimilating than practices such as vegetarianism.

Vegan feminist theologian Carol J. Adams (1990) argues that the creation of meat as a concept requires the removal from our consciousness of the animal whose dead body we are redefining as food. Adams writes:

“The function of the absent referent is to keep our “meat” separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal, to keep the “moo” or “cluck” or “baa” away from the meat, to keep something from being seen as someone. Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that “meat,” meat becomes unanchored by its original referent (the animal) becoming instead a free-floating image, used often to reflect women's status as well as animals” (p. 14-15).

While evident in the fur trade, the fishing industry, and factory farming, the detachment Adams describes is not foundational to Mi'kmaq myths. In these stories the othering of animal life, which makes meat eating psychologically comfortable, is replaced by a model of creation in which animals are portrayed as our siblings. In Mi'kmaq legends human and animal life is on a continuum, spiritually and physically. Animals speak, are able to change into humans, and some humans marry these shape-shifting creatures and raise animal children.<sup>2</sup> Human magicians may take the form of an animal, some people transform into their totem animal, and still others are transformed into animals against their wishes.<sup>3</sup> An ecofeminist exegesis of Mi'kmaq legends

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *The Magical Coat, Shoes and Sword*, and *The History of Usitebulajoo* (Rand 1893/2005).

<sup>3</sup> For the transformation of magicians, see *Robbery and Murder Revenged*, *Glooscap and Megumoowesoo*, *The Small Baby and The Big Bird*, *The Adventures of Katoogwasees*, *The Adventures of Ababejit, an Indian Chief and Magician of the Micmac Tribe*, and *The Liver-Colored Giants And Magicians* (Rand 1893/2005), *Glooscap, Kuhkw, And Coolpujot* (Rand 1893/2004). For transformations into totem animals see *The Magical Dancing Doll*, *The History*

enables us to frame veganism as a spiritual practice that recognizes humans and other animals as having a shared personhood.

Mi'kmaq legends portray human beings as intimately connected with the natural world, not as entities distinct from it. The Micmac Creation Story recounts the creation of Glooskap, his grandmother, and often his nephew and his mother. Glooskap is formed from the red clay of the soil and initially lacks mobility, remaining on his back in the dirt (Burke, 2005b; ). His grandmother was originally a rock, his nephew sea foam, and his mother a leaf. In the story of Nukumi, the grandmother, the Creator makes an old woman, from a dew covered rock. Glooskap meets her and she agrees to become his grandmother, providing wisdom in exchange for food. Nukumi explains that as an old woman meat is necessary for her because she cannot live on plants and berries alone. Glooskap calls to Marten, and asks if he would give his life so that Glooskap's grandmother could live. Marten agrees because of their friendship. For this sacrifice, Glooskap makes Marten his brother. This story represents, through the characters of Glooskap and Martin, the basic relation of the Mi'kmaq with the creatures around them. The animals are willing to provide food and clothing, shelter and tools, but always they must be treated with the respect given a brother and friend.

A Micmac Creation Story tells of the birth of Glooskap's nephew from seafoam caught in sweetgrass. To celebrate the nephew's arrival, Glooskap and his family have a feast of fish. Glooskap called upon the salmon of the rivers and seas to come to shore and give up their lives. Although not unproblematic, this dynamic is open to the possibility of refusal on the part of the animal. As well, the story undermines the widespread view that humans have an innate right to use animal flesh as food. Glooskap and his family do not want to kill all the animals for their survival, indicating moderation in their fishing practices. The theme is one of dependence, not dominion.

Human survival is the justification for the death of Glooskap's animal friends. The animals have independent life, their own purpose and their own relationships with the creator. They are not made for food, but willingly become food as a sacrifice for their friends. This is a far cry from the perspective of the white hunter, in which animals are constructed as requiring population control, turning slaughter into a service performed, rather than one received.

An interesting exception to this thread is the Story of Glooskap And His People, which blames the animals themselves for man's aggression toward them. In this tale Malsum, an evil counterpart to Glooskap, turns the animals against the hero. Glooskap announces, "I made the animals to be man's friends, but they have acted with selfishness and treachery. Hereafter, they shall be your servants and provide you with food and clothing" (Hill, 1963, p. 24). Here Glooskap, not the Creator, is the source of animal life, and has power over them. The original vision of harmony is lost and inequality takes its place as the punishment for listening to Malsum. In this way, the story is similar to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, with the animals taking the place of Eve. Glooskap shows the men how to make bows, arrows and spears. He also shows the women how to scrape hides and make clothing.

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of Usitebulajoo, The Invisible Boy, The Adventures of Ababejit, an Indian Chief and Magician of the Micmac Tribe, The Two Weasels (Rand 1893/2005). For unwilling transformations, see The Boy That Was Transformed Into A Horse, and Two Weasels (Rand 1893/2005).

"Now you have power over even the largest wild creatures," he said. "Yet I charge you to use this power gently. If you take more game than you need for food and clothing, or kill for the pleasure of killing, then you will be visited by a pitiless giant named Famine." Even in this story, which attempts to justify dominion, the proper relation to the animals is only for food and clothing. Animals retain a right to their lives, and their rights cannot be lightly put aside.<sup>4</sup>

These stories characterize animals as independent people with rights, wills, and freedom. If animal consent is required to justify their consumption, then it opens the possibility that consent might be revoked. Overfishing, overhunting, and the wholesale destruction of their natural habitat could certainly give the animals pause to rethink the bargain.

Another feature of some Mi'kmaq stories is the regret that comes with animal death. In the Story of Wolverine and His Little Brother (Rand 1893/2005) the birds have been invited into a wigwam and instructed to close their eyes.<sup>5</sup> Wolverine begins to kill the birds. His brother, feeling guilt at having killed more than they need to eat, warns the birds and helps them escape. Another feature of Mi'kmaq stories is the regret that comes with animal death.

In the story of Nukumi and Fire (Burke, 2005), Nukumi snaps Marten's neck and places him on the ground but Glooskap immediately regrets their actions. Nukumi speaks to the Creator and Marten is brought back to life and returns to his home in the river. On the ground now lays the body of another marten. This aspect of the story is far from a straightforward tale of why we eat animals. Marten is both dead and alive – dead as a marten available for consumption by the grandmother, but alive as Marten, the friend of Glooskap and his people. The Adventures of Katoogwasees (Rand, 1893; 2005, 200-211) tells of how Glooskap's grandmother used magic to obtain unlimited amounts of beaver meat from a single bone, reflecting a wish for abundance disconnected from the need to hunt.<sup>6</sup>

Regret and kinship also feature in the story of Muin, The Bear's Child (Burke, 2005a). In one version of this tale a young boy, Siko, is trapped in a cave by his evil stepfather and left to die. The animals hear him crying and attempt to save him but only the mother bear, Muiniskw, can move the rocks that block the cave entrance. Siko is raised as a bear. Later Siko's bear family is attacked by hunters and his mother is killed. He addresses the hunters "I am a human, like you. Spare the she-cub, my adopted sister." The amazed Indians put down their weapons and gladly spare the bear cub. They are sorry they had killed the mother bear, who had been so good to Siko. Here we see that the regret at animal death is contextualized in the kinship relation between humans and animals. At the end of the story, Siko declares, "I shall be called Muin, the bear's son, from this day forwards. And when I am grown, and a hunter, never will I kill a mother bear, or bear children!" Other versions of the story feature Muin revealing himself before the bears are killed, and show the Mi'kmaq sparing all mother bears and cubs from then on out of gratitude to Muiniskw for her protection of the boy.

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<sup>4</sup> Exceptions to this appear in cases where a malevolent human magician has taken the form of an animal. In these cases the protagonist often kills the animals without purpose other than defeating their human enemy.

<sup>5</sup> Notes that Rand has mistranslated this story as Badger and his Little Brother.

<sup>6</sup> See also Glooskap and the Megumwesoo, and The Magical Food, Belt, and Flute (Rand, 1893/2005).

This regret is also expressed in rituals surrounding the act of hunting. Mi'kmaq Elder Murdena Marshall describes one such ritual, a dance "to thank the spirit of the animal for giving its life for food. In the dance, one displays hunting abilities and skills through a re-enactment of the hunt. People sing and share stories as the dance is performed." (Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq, 2001, 80)

In contrast to the enlightenment view of humans as distinguished from animals by speech and thought, here animals are not only capable of thought and speech, but can be said to be equal as persons. The value of the animal lies not in its utility to man, but in its very essence as a living being.

Not all Mi'kmaq food traditions centre upon meat. Glooskap's mother was a leaf on a tree given life and human form by the sun. The feast celebrating the birth of Glooskap's mother is entirely vegetarian, and the nephew, whose role is usually that of hunter, becomes the gatherer in this instance. If we recognize that activities traditionally performed by Mi'kmaq women, such as fruit, vegetable and nut gathering are also fully Native traditions then we can form indigenous counter-narratives to the promotion of meat.

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The values obtained from an ecofeminist exegesis of Mi'kmaq stories can serve as a starting point for an indigenous veganism. The personhood of animals, their self-determination and our regret at their death, all show that choosing not to ask for their sacrifice is a legitimate Mi'kmaq option. Since vegan culture testifies that the consumption of animals for food, clothing and shelter is no longer necessary, then Mi'kmaq tradition suggests that the hunting and killing of our animal brothers is no longer authorized. If women initiated the hunt, as in the story of Glooskap's grandmother, then surely we are empowered to end it.

Because Native people are the targets of genocide the cultural practices we adopt or reject are vitally important. Bonita Lawrence (2004) notes that daily life practices have historically been used to assess the authenticity of Native identity claims, and accord status as Indian. Some may argue that the embodiment of Mi'kmaq values into new practices, such as veganism, is not a legitimate development. Yet those who value only the preservation of an unchanging tradition join with the colonial powers in seeing no place for a contemporary indigenaity. There is more to my culture and to our relationship with the land, particularly as women, than hunting and killing animals.

The modern commercial fishery, often touted as offering economic security for Native communities, is actually further removed from our Mi'kmaq values than modern day vegan practices are. The former views fish as objects to be collected for exchange, with economic power taking the place of sustenance, while the latter is rooted in a relationship with the animals based upon respect and responsibility.

One must also be aware of changing circumstances and needs among the Mi'kmaq population. Few of us can sustain ourselves through traditional hunting, fishing or gathering. As

research shows, those Mi'kmaq on reserve property are usually dependant on store-bought food products. In addition, half of Canada's Native population live in urban areas (Siggner & Costa, 2005). When Native is defined exclusively as a primordial lifestyle it reflects our intentional extinction as a people.

The reinterpretation of tradition and the malleability of ritual enabled our ancestors to survive genocide, famine, disease, forced moves, isolation on reservations, residential schooling, and a host of other colonial ills. Similarly, we must find ways to adapt to the increasing individuality of urban life. One solution is to embody our traditional values in new rituals. With the adoption of a vegetarian or vegan diet our meal preparation and consumption can become infused with transcendent significance, as we recall our connection with other animals, our shared connection to the creator and prefigure a time when we can live in harmony with the animals, as Glooscap did before the invention of hunting.

Shared food practices, values, and daily life rituals can create ties between Native people that help counteract the isolation and individualism of urban life. Veganism offers us a sense of belonging to a moral community, whose values and worldview are made concrete through daily practices that are in keeping with the values of our ancestors, even if at odds with their traditional practice.

At stake in the creation of a Native veganism is the authority of Native people, especially Native women, to determine cultural authenticity for ourselves. Dominant white discourse portrays Native culture as focussed on preserving the pre-colonial past. This must be replaced with the recognition that Native culture is a living tradition, responsive to changing social and environmental circumstances. In bringing postcolonial and ecofeminist interpretations to our stories, in retelling traditional stories, or in creating new stories, Native women claim authority over our culture. In doing so we recognize that our oral traditions are not fixed in time and space, but are adaptable to the needs of our animal siblings, and of the land itself.

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