

Veganism and Mi'kmaw Legends

Margaret Robinson

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This text proposes a postcolonial ecofeminist reading of Mi'kmaw legends as the basis for a vegan diet rooted in Indigenous culture. I refer primarily to veganism throughout this work because unlike vegetarianism, it is not only a diet but a lifestyle that, for ethical reasons, eschews the use of animal products. Constructing an Indigenous veganism faces two significant barriers—the first being the association of veganism with whiteness.

In a joke at the beginning of his documentary, *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew*, Ojibwa playwright Drew Hayden Taylor asks, “What do you call a Native vegetarian?” His answer is: “A very bad hunter.” The implication is that for an Indigenous person, choosing a non-meat diet is a kind of failure. In *Stuff White People Like*, satirical author Christian Lander 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.”¹ Ecologist Robert Hunter depicts vegans as “Eco-Jesuits” and “veggie fundamentalists,” who “force Natives to do things the white man’s way.”² By projecting white imperialism onto vegans, Hunter enables white omnivores, such as himself, to bond with Indigenous people over meat-eating. When veganism is constructed as white, Indigenous people who eschew the use of animal products are depicted as sacrificing our cultural authenticity. This presents a challenge for those of us who view our veganism as ethically, spiritually, and culturally compatible with our Indigeneity.

A second barrier to Indigenous veganism is the portrayal of veganism as a product of class privilege. Opponents claim that a vegan diet is an indulgence since the poor (among whom Indigenous people are disproportionately represented) must eat whatever is available, and cannot afford to be so picky. This argument assumes that highly processed specialty products make up the bulk of a vegan diet. Such an argument also overlooks the economic and environmental 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 privileged white culture. The eating habits of the majority of the Mi'kmaq have already been colonized, and are further 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.”³ Lack of access to nutrient-rich foods is a problem Indigenous people have in common with other racialized and economically oppressed

¹ Christian Lander, *Stuff White People Like: The Definitive Guide to the Unique Taste of Millions* (New York: Random House, 2008), 38.

² R. Hunter Red, *Blood: One (Mostly) White Guy’s Encounters with the Native World* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1999), 100–113. Veganism and Mi'kmaq legends 113

³ Bonita Lawrence, “Real” Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 235.

groups. Konju Briggs Jr. 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.”⁴ Several researchers (e.g., Johnson, Travers, and the Mi’kmaq Health Research Group) have noted that the reserve system has begotten a diet high in sugar and carbohydrates and low in protein and fibre. As a result, Mi’kmaw people have seen a serious increase in obesity, diabetes mellitus, and gallstones.

Professor of human ecology, Kim Travers, cites three causes of nutrient-poor diet among the Mi’kmaq: low income; lack of access to transportation; and reserve land unsuitable for agriculture, fishing, or hunting. Travers notes that Mi’kmaw people living on reserve are often limited to eating highly processed protein such as peanut butter, wieners, or bologna.

Traditionally, the Mi’kmaw diet was meat-heavy, consisting of beaver, fish, eel, birds, porcupine, and sometimes larger animals such as whales, moose, or caribou, supplemented by vegetables, roots, nuts, and berries. The use of animals as food also figures prominently in our Mi’kmaw legends. Food production is gendered in Mi’kmaw culture. While women were trained in food gathering, cleaning, and preparation, hunting was a traditionally male activity connected with the maintenance of virility. The killing of a moose acted as a symbol of a boy’s entry into manhood.[5 To reject such practices undercuts methods of male Mi’kmaw identity construction. Yet the context in which this identity develops has changed significantly since the arrival of the European colonialists. Meat, as a symbol of patriarchy shared with colonizing forces, arguably binds us with white colonial culture to a greater degree than practices such as veganism, which, although overwhelmingly white itself, is far from hegemonic.

Carol J. Adams 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 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.⁵

⁴ Konju Briggs Jr. “Veganism Is a Revolutionary Force in the Class War.” *The Scavenger*, September 12, 2010, 28. www.thescavenger.net/animals/veganism-is-a-revolutionaryforce-in-the-class-war-32867.html.

⁵ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (10th Anniversary Ed.) (New York: Continuum, 1990), 14–15.

While evident in the fur trade, the fishing industry, and factory farming, the detachment that Adams describes is not foundational to the Mi'kmaw oral tradition. In our stories, the othering of animal life that makes meat-eating psychologically comfortable is replaced by a model of creation in which animals are portrayed as our siblings. Mi'kmaw legends view humanity and animal life as being on a continuum, spiritually and physically. Animals speak, are able to change into humans, and some humans marry these shapeshifting creatures and raise animal children.⁶ Human magicians may take animal form, some people may transform into their *teomul*, or totem animal, and still others are changed into animals against their wishes.⁷ An ecofeminist exegesis of Mi'kmaw legends enables us to frame veganism as a spiritual practice that recognizes that humans and other animals possess a shared personhood.

Mi'kmaw legends portray human beings as intimately connected with the natural world, not as entities distinct from it. Glooscap is formed from the red clay of the soil and initially lacks mobility, remaining on his back in the dirt.⁸ His grandmother was originally a rock, his nephew sea foam, and his mother a leaf. In "Nukumi and Fire," the Creator makes an old woman from a dew-covered rock. Glooscap meets her and she agrees to become his grand-mother, providing wisdom for him if he will provide food for her.

Nukumi explains that as an old woman meat is necessary for her because she cannot live on plants and berries alone. Glooscap calls to Marten, and asks him to give his life so Glooscap's grandmother may live. Marten agrees because of his friendship with Glooscap. For this sacrifice, Glooscap makes Marten his brother. Based on this story, Glooscap, the archetype of the human being, would appear to have not been a hunter prior to the arrival of his grand-mother. This story also represents, through the characters of Glooscap and Martin, the basic relation of the Mi'kmaw people 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.

⁶ See, for example, "The Magical Coat, Shoes and Sword," and "The History of Usitebulajoo," in Silas Rand's *Legends of the Micmacs*. Volume I (West Orange: Invisible Books, 1893/2005), www.invisiblebooks.com/Rand.pdf.

⁷ For the transformation of magicians, see "Robbery and Murder Revenged," "Glooscap and Megumooesoo," "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," in Rand's *Legends of the Micmacs*. Volume I, and "Glooscap, Kuhkw, and Coolpujot," in *Legends of the Micmacs*. Volume II (West Orange: Invisible Books, 1893/2004), www.invisiblebooks.com/Rand2.pdf. For *teomul* transformations, see "The Magical Dancing Doll," "The History of Usitebulajoo," "The Invisible Boy," "The Adventures of Ababejit, an Indian Chief and Magician of the Micmac Tribe," and "The Two Weasels," in *Legends of the Micmacs*. Volume I. For unwilling transformations, see "The Boy That Was Transformed into a Horse," and "Two Weasels," in that same volume.

⁸ See Burke, "Native American Legends: Muin, The Bear's Child." *First People: The Legends*, 2005, www.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Legends/Legends-MO.html and Stephen Augustine, "Mi'kmaq Transcript." *Four Directions Teaching*, 2006–2012, www.fourdirectionsteachings.com/transcripts/mikmaq.html.

A Mi'kmaw creation story tells of the birth of Glooscap's nephew from seafoam caught in sweetgrass.⁹ To celebrate the nephew's arrival, Glooscap and his family have a feast of fish. Glooscap called upon the salmon of the rivers and seas to come to shore and give up their lives. Although not unproblematic, this dynamic is at least 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. Glooscap 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 Glooscap'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 colonial 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 Wabanaki story of "Glooscap and His People," which blames the animals themselves for man's aggression toward them. In this tale Malsum, an evil counterpart to Glooscap, turns the animals against Glooscap. Glooscap 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."¹⁰ 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 Genesis story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Glooscap shows the men how to make bows, arrows, and spears, and shows the women how to scrape hides and make clothing.¹¹

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."¹¹ Even in this story, which attempts to justify dominion, the proper relation to the animals is only for food and clothing. Exceptions to this principle appear in stories where a malevolent human magician has taken the form of an animal. In these cases the protagonists often kill the animal without purpose other than defeating their human enemy. 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 such consent may be revoked.

Overfishing, overhunting, and the wholesale destruction of their natural habitat could certainly give the animals cause to rethink the bargain.

Another feature of Mi'kmaw stories is the regret that comes with animal death. In "The Legend of the Wild Goose," Glooscap is concerned for the safety of the small

⁹ Augustine, "Mi'kmaq Transcript."

¹⁰ Kay Hill, *Glooscap and His Magic: Legends of the Wabanaki Indians* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1963), 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

migrating birds and charges the Canada Goose with their protection. In “Nukumi and Fire,” Glooscap snaps Marten’s neck and placed him on the ground but immediately regrets his actions. Nukumi speaks to the

Creator and Marten comes back to life and returns to his home in the river.

On the ground now lays the body of another marten. This story is far from a straight-forward 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 Glooscap and his people. “The Adventures of Katoogwasees”¹² tells how Glooscap’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.¹³ Regret and kinship also feature in the story of “Muin, The Bear’s Child.” 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 bear is strong enough to move the rocks blocking the cave entrance. Siko is adopted and 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 hunters put down their weapons and gladly spare the cub. In addition, they are sorry for having killed the bear who had been so good to Siko. Here we see that 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!” And Muin never did.

This regret is also expressed in rituals surrounding the act of hunting. Mi’kmaw 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.”¹⁴ 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 also be said to be 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’kmaw food traditions centre upon meat. Glooscap’s mother was a leaf on a tree given life and human form by the sun.¹⁵ The feast celebrating her birth is entirely vegetarian, consisting of plants, roots, berries, nuts, and fruit, and the nephew, whose role is usually that of hunter, becomes the gather in this instance. If we recognize that activities traditionally performed by Mi’kmaw women, such as fruit, vegetable,

¹² Rand, *Legends*, Vol. II, 200–211.

¹³ See also “Glooscap and the Megumwesoo,” and “The Magical Food, Belt, and Flute,” in *Legends of the Micmacs*. Volume I.

¹⁴ Confederacy of Mainland Mi’kmaq, *Mikwíte’lmanej Mikmaqu’ k: Let Us Remember the Old Mi’kmaq* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2001), 80.

¹⁵ Augustine, “Mi’kmaq Transcript.”

and nut gathering, are also fully Indigenous traditions then we can form Indigenous counter- narratives to the promotion of meat.

The values obtained from an ecofeminist exegesis of Mi'kmaw 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 legitimately Indigenous option.

Since the consumption of animals for food, clothing, and shelter is no longer necessary, as vegan culture testifies, then the Mi'kmaw tradition, as manifested in our legends, suggests that hunting and killing our animal brothers is no longer authorized.

Because Indigenous people are the targets of genocide the cultural practices we adopt or reject are vitally important. Bonita Lawrence notes that daily life practices have historically been used to assess the authenticity of Native identity claims, and accord Indian status.¹⁶ Some may argue that the embodiment of Mi'kmaw values into new practices, such as veganism, is not a legitimate development, and may even threaten the ways our treaty rights are assessed by others. Yet those who value only the preservation of an unchanging tradition join with the colonial powers in seeing no place for a contemporary indigeneity. There is more to our 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 Indigenous communities, is actually further removed from our Mi'kmaw 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. Again, the theme is one of necessity, not pleasure. If women initiated the hunt, as in the story of Glooscap's grandmother, then surely changing circumstances can empower us to end it.

One must also be aware of changing circumstances and needs among the Mi'kmaw population. Few of us can sustain ourselves through traditional hunting, fishing, or gathering. As research shows, those Mi'kmaw people living on reserve are usually dependant on store-bought food. In addition, half of Canada's Indigenous population live in urban areas.¹⁷ When Indigeneity is defined 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 reserves, 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 vegan diet our meal preparation and consumption can become infused with transcendent significance, as we recall our connection

¹⁶ Lawrence, "Real," 4.

¹⁷ Andrew Siggner and Rosalinda Costa, *Aboriginal Conditions in Census Metropolitan Areas, 1981–2001*. Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-613-MIE-008. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2005, 8. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/89-613-M2005008>.

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 Indigenous people that help counteract the isolation and individualism of urban life. Veganism offers us a sense of belonging to a moral community, whose principles are made concrete through daily practices that are in keeping with the values of our ancestors, even if they may be at odds with their traditional practice.

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

About the author

Margaret Robinson (she/her) is a two-spirit scholar from the Eskikewa'kik district and a member of Lennox Island First Nation. She works as an associate professor at Dalhousie University, where she holds the Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Reconciliation, Gender, and Identity. Margaret has been vegan since 2008 and lives with her partner of 28 years and two kittens. Margaret is passionate about Indigenous self-government and vegan cooking.

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