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Calling the Thunder, Part One: *Animikeek*, the Thunderstorm as Speech Event in the Anishinaabe Lifeworld[1]

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Like most native North Americans, the Ojibwa people of Ontario —or the Anishinaabeg, as they prefer to be addressed—have a complex system of belief and ritual associated with thunderstorms. Included in this system are a number of names by which storms, or Thunderers, are not only invoked and propitiated but, at the most basic level, by which they are known. This paper establishes the importance of the name as symbol in the Anishinaabe context and explores the meaning of the most common thunder name—*animikeek*. *Animikeek* designates not just the storm, not just the Thunderbird *manitouk*,[2] but the very sound of the thunder—its voice, if you will. Living, as they do, in a personalistic lifeworld, the Anishinaabeg—both traditional and contemporary—experience the action of the *animikeek* as speech events. These events signal the arrival of powerful visitors and initiate a kind of dialogue. Through verbal and ritual responses, the Anishinaabeg demonstrate their attention to, respect for, and relationship with highly powerful and individualistic *manitouk*.

In order to meet these Thunder beings, or Thunderbirds, one must understand their names; one must learn how to call them. While *animikeek* is the most common and inclusive name given to the Thunder *manitouk*, they are also known as *pinesiwak*,

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pawaganak and *atisokanak*, depending upon both the area and the circumstances. In the Anishinaabeg lifeworld, one's name is no arbitrary moniker. Among the traditional Anishinaabeg, a name was given to a child by a relative or tribal elder who had dreamed the name. This name had tremendous spiritual significance for its holder inasmuch as it partook of the power realm of dreams and signaled a close relationship between child and namesake. While each person might collect a number of names and nicknames over the course of her life, only this birth name and a name received during the vision quest were considered to describe the essential person. These names were always guarded, especially from real or potential enemies, for to know and speak a name was, in effect, to establish ownership, or at least influence over the one named.[3]

Further, the traditional proscription against telling stories in the summer months was founded upon the belief that in articulating the names of the *manitouk*, one was actually conjuring them. The name partakes of the essence of that which it names, for it is not a sign, but a symbol.[4] Thus the various names may all tell us something about the nature of these *manitouk*: how they appear, how they act, and how they relate to human beings. By analyzing their names, we are, in effect, analyzing these symbols through their own symbolic forms.

This method is not really so oblique as it may sound. Paul Ricoeur has said that it is in language that one discovers an entry into the labyrinthine complex of multivalent symbolism. While the symbols reach far beneath the semantic level, they remain opaque so long as they remain unarticulated.[5] To speak the symbol, especially in the narrative structure of the myth, is to crack a door to "the shadowy experience of power,"[6] to begin to make intelligible that which is apprehended in immediate experience and that which resides in our memories and our dreams. In speaking the names of the Thunder *manitouk*, we not only make them present, then; we begin to interpret them as *animikeek* (Thunderers), *pinesiwak* (birds), *pawaganak* (dream visitors), and *atisokanak* (grandfathers or tales of the grandfathers). This is a first step into the world that the symbols present and the world in which they reside. As Samuel Makidemawabe said, "To say the name is to begin the story."[7]

The most common and comprehensive name given to the Thunder *manitouk* is *animikeek*, the plural form of *animiki* (*nimkii*

on Manitoulin), meaning "Thunders, Thunderers, or Thunderbirds." If one wishes to say that there is an electrical storm in progress, one uses the verb form of the name, *animikika* or *nimkiigog*: "It is thundering, there is thunder, there are Thunderers or Thunderbirds." There also is a word in Ojibwa for lightning, *wassmowin,* derived from *waskoneg* (to give off light), but it is almost never used to describe a storm.[8] This is because *wassmowin* describes only a piece of the thunderstorm, a product or effect of the *animikeek.*[9] While the relationship between *animikeek* and *wassmowin* appears to reverse the cause and effect sequence that is readily observable during an electrical storm, the reversal is not unusual. In English, we usually speak of thunderstorms, not lightning storms, even though we know full well that the thunder is but an echo of the electrical charge that precedes it. Knowing, scientifically, that lightning is the active member of the team does not seem to affect the way in which we describe the natural phenomenon that is a storm.

What is most interesting about the relationship between *animikeek* and *wassmowin* is the fact that the Anishinaabe language gives a different ontological status to each. *Animikeek* is an animate noun, and *wassmowin* is inanimate; i.e., Thunders are persons in the Anishinaabe cosmos, lightning is not. Further, the word *animikeek* has something of a double status in that it names both the storm and the maker of the storm. *Animikeek* are often said to cause the sound of thunder by moving their huge wings, and the flash of lightning by opening and closing their eyes. Alternately, they produce the thunder when they speak, the lightning when they hurl bolts and/or stones to the ground.

For the Anishinaabeg, the thunderstorm is not just an auditory phenomenon; it is the act of a *manitou* person, a speech event. Whether the thunder is caused by the Thunderbird's wings or by his mouth is relatively unimportant. What matters is that the storm is experienced as a communication from *manitou* to human being. A. I. Hallowell recalls an experience of such a speech event:

> An informant told me that many years before he was sitting in a tent one summer afternoon during a storm, together with an old man and his wife. There was one clap of thunder after another. Suddenly the old man turned to his wife and asked, "Did you hear what was

> said?" "No," she replied, "I didn't catch it." My informant, an acculturated Indian, told me he did not at first know what the old man and his wife referred to. It was, of course, the thunder. The old man thought that one of the Thunder Birds had said something to him. He was reacting to this sound in the same way as he would respond to a human being, whose words he did not understand.[10]

The point here is that while the speech of *animikeek* is not always clear, it is intelligible or, at the very least, potentially intelligible. Humans may exhibit their own powers by their ability to translate what is said. This was certainly the case with the traditional *jessakid*, or conjuring shaman. While the *manitouk* who visited the shaking tent of the conjurer sometimes spoke in ways that were understandable to observers outside the tent, often they conversed in unknown languages or with a volume that was too low for observers to catch. It was the responsibility of the *jessakid* to translate in such circumstances. Interestingly enough, his powers of prophecy, conjuring, and translation were said to be a gift bestowed upon him by the *animikeek*.[11]

I did not meet any Anishinaabeg on Manitoulin who claimed to understand what the *animikeek* said during the course of a storm, but most agreed that something, usually a warning of some kind, was communicated by the Thunder. Since the *animikeek* are hunters in search of underground or underwater *manitouk*, Thunder tells humans, who are not the objects of the hunt, to head for cover lest they be struck by stray shots.[12] People do not normally engage in a dialogue with the *animikeek*, except of course when they meet them as *pawaganak*, or dream visitors. Instead, contemporary Anishinaabeg, like their ancestors, continue to make offerings of tobacco to the Thunderers as a sign of respect and as a form of entreaty. Virtually every tribal member with whom I spoke was familiar with this practice, and most engaged in it themselves.

Normally tobacco is placed directly in the fire of a wood stove or burned on top of the oven or in an ashtray. Steve McGraw told me of his mother's rather unusual and casual practice which he witnessed as a child: Whenever a storm would come by, especially at night, she would sit up and smoke cigarettes, always lighting one first for the Thunderers and placing it in the ashtray as an offering.[13]

Raymond Armstrong told me that this sort of offering was really no good at all, as it did not show proper respect for the *animikeek*. He instructed me in the details of tobacco offerings when I expressed some uneasiness about thunderstorms. While on Manitoulin, I lived in an old two-story farmhouse near Lake Manitou, which sat in the middle of a field. Often the storms, which seemed to travel along the lakeshore, would shake the house severely, and since it was the tallest structure in the vicinity, it was not entirely unlikely that it could be struck by lightning. I told Armstrong that this vulnerable position sometimes made me a bit nervous. He said I should not worry, but told me that as soon as I "heard them [the *animikeek*] coming," I should get some tobacco for this purpose. If I had no loose tobacco, it was all right to use one of my cigarettes, but I had to open a new pack and remove the tobacco from the paper before burning it. Then I should ask the Thunderers to move on and not stop over my house. If they showed signs of stopping, I should burn more tobacco and ask again. It was also not a bad idea, Armstrong advised, to bury some tobacco in the yard for extra insurance. He had some buried in his own garden, partly to prevent lightning strikes and partly to attract the attention of eagles, whose presence as guides and guardians was essential to his family's well-being.[14]

Another consultant, Sam Oswamick also related a story of a woman who buried tobacco for the Thunderers:

> I know one lady told a little story. Her grandmother used to put tobacco in the garden in the ground when the thunder comes. She would put tobacco in there and cover it up. That's it. And this time she forgot so the Thunders stop right there. They were there. They didn't move. So she remembered that. So she got this little girl to put tobacco there. So that little girl ran up there and put tobacco in there and come back. And they heard the thunder crack, the lightning just came up there, you know, and away, they're gone. I heard that it was a pretty old lady, the one that did that. That's the one that told me. It's a true story.[15]

The burning or burying of tobacco should not be understood as purely preventive medicine, however. When one burns tobacco for any reason, one demonstrates respect, because tobacco

is not only prized but, along with cedar and sweet grass, is considered a sacred plant. In all traditional ceremonies, tobacco, sweet grass, and cedar are placed on the central fire. Meeting lodges frequently are roofed with cedar boughs, and sweet grass is used in a preliminary purification ritual. Raymond Armstrong and I sometimes lit the sweet grass and passed the smoke over our hands and heads before embarking on a language lesson. This was supposed to increase our powers of concentration, although I fear that it was not always effective. Cedar is also a purifying plant. Both Angus Pontiac and Sam Oswamick told me of the traditional practice wherein a dreamer who had dreamt of unwanted *manitouk* (e.g., underwater creatures) would have his tongue scraped with a cedar knife to rid him of the dream. The traditional offering of tobacco to an elder is still appropriate, and I made a practice of giving gifts of cigarettes or chewing tobacco to consultants.

The method whereby one usually offers tobacco to the Thunderers (by burning) has, of course, a familiar ritual function: When tobacco smoke rises, one's words may rise with it. But unless one has the proper frame of mind, the proper attitude, the ritual is useless, and no communication takes place. No tribal member ever told me that she feared the Thunderers, but all told me that they respected them:

> My dad used to tell me that as soon as you get a storm in the spring, put tobacco in the fire and talk to them. Whatever you want to happen, just say that. That's what he used to tell me. They'll strike you if you don't respect them. I heard a story, I wonder if it's true or not. One of them said something about a thunderstorm. So he went outside and that lightning came around like this, around his head. That's what happened.[16]

While many Anishinaabeg with whom I spoke were quite obviously aware of and accepted scientific explanations for storms, they continued to experience them as essentially personal phenomena, as *animikeek*. The *animikeek* are real to them, because their experience of the storm is the experience of a *noema*, i.e., the intentionality of Anishinaabe consciousness constitutes the storm experience as a meaningful object, or in this particular case, a meaningful subject. It is not that traditional Anishinaabeg anthropomorphized the natural world; they did not somehow ar-

tificially attach meaning to their experience. The meaning was already there, inextricable from the experience. And contemporary Anishinaabeg, brought up with the experience of *animikeek*, would have to self-consciously extract this meaning, refigure the experience—in a sense, kill the Thunderbirds—before they could stop hearing their voices.[17]

I have discussed the pre-eminence of sound in the Anishinaabe experience of thunderstorms as *animikeek*, how that sound is understood as speech, and some ways in which humans can respond to that speech. It is important to note here that I have used the plural form, *animikeek*, almost exclusively, because each storm usually involves visits from several Thunderers. *Animikeek* rarely travel alone, and when one listens to a storm one can hear that each Thunderer has a different voice. Accordingly, they are sometimes given names that are descriptive of the sounds they make (their modes of speech) or the way in which they seem to move. Diamond Jenness gives the most complete roster of *animikeek*, twelve in number.[18] Raymond Armstrong was familiar with eight of these names, all of which, he told me, were "old words," seldom used today. Armstrong agreed generally with Jenness's translation, offering the following interpretations:

1. *ninamidabines*—The chief or boss of the Thunders who sits quietly above, "like an overseer."

2. *nigankwam*—First Thunder. This name was given to Armstrong at an Alcoholics Anonymous conference as a sign of his leadership.

3. *beskinekkwam*—Thunder that's going to hit.

4. *anjibnes*—Jenness calls this "the renewer of power." Armstrong saw it as the "transformer or changer" (from *andji*, meaning *change*).

5. *besreudang*—The echoer.

6. *bodreudang*—Approaching Thunder.

7. *bebomawidang*—Searching Thunders; Thunders which seem to advance and retreat.

8. *zaubikkwang*—The rainbow that appears after a storm. Armstrong did not think this could properly be called a Thunderer. He said that the rainbow was always born from a rock immersed in a lake. This conception and its connection with thunder was a bit unclear. Possibly the rock was one that had been struck by lightning.[19]

These names help to illustrate both the attention that traditional

Anishinaabeg gave to the thunderstorms and the precision with which they recorded their experiences in language. It is a mistake to assume that an experience of the world as "peopled" is a product of a consciousness that is unable to differentiate itself from its environment. The Anishinaabe lifeworld is undifferentiated only to the extent that humans are not understood to stand radically outside of the natural world. They exist in a world of interconnecting relationships, a cosmos populated by a variety of personalities who sometimes cooperate and sometimes engage in conflict. The study of thunder as a speech event provides an opportunity for the careful observation of a unique group of people. To say that we are all people is not anything like saying we are all the same.

NOTES

1. This paper is based in part on textual research but is also highly dependent on field and language studies and interviews that I conducted on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. Pronunciation, as well as spelling of Ojibwa words, differs according to geographic areas. Mine follows, as closely as possible, that of the Anishinaabe/Odawa dialect on Manitoulin.

In an effort to avoid both the imprecision of gender-specific language and the clumsiness of he/she constructs, I use, whenever necessary, alternating pronouns. This usage is meant to be inclusive.

2. *Manitouk,* the plural of *manitou,* denotes the power beings of the Anishinaabe cosmos. In this case, Thunderbird *manitouk* refers to the causal agents of the meteorological phenomenon.

3. On Manitoulin, I encountered only a few people who revealed non-English names to me. These names were, however, nicknames or honorific titles. My language tutor, Raymond Armstrong, was, for instance, named Ginozhe (large fish or pike) as a youth, because he was such a strong rower in the fishing boat. He was also given the title *Nigankwam* (First Thunder) by an Alcoholics Anonymous group, because he had shown leadership in this organization. I will not assume, however, that dream or vision names no longer exist on Manitoulin. If they do, it is not likely that they would have been shared with me.

4. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1958), 42, on the "participatory" nature of the symbol.

5. See Paul Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics" in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics,* ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

6. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 69.

7. Samuel Makidemewabe, quoted in Howard Norman, *The Wishing Bone Cycle: Narrative Poems from the Swampy Cree Indians* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson Publishing, 1982), 49.

8. The only exception I have found in literature or field studies is in George Copway (Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh), *Indian Life and Indian History, by an Indian Author* (Boston: Albert Colby and Company, 1860; reprint, AMS, 1978), 124. "In the Ojibway language, we say 'Be-wah-sam-moog.' In this we convey the idea of a continual glare of lightning, noise, confusion—an awful whirl of clouds, and much more."

9. In describing the *manitou* patrons of shamans, Ruth Landes says, "Sometimes Thunder's associate was Lightning, though natural lightning was considered a function of Thunder's activity." Ruth Landes, *Ojibwa Religion and the Midewiwin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 48.

10. A. I. Hallowell, "Ojibwe Ontology, Behavior and World View," in *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1975), 158.

11. See W. J. Hoffman, *The Midewiwin or Grand Medicine Society of the Ojibwa* (Washington, DC: 7th Report of the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology to the Smithsonian Institution, 1891), 157. "[T]here is no initiation by means of which one may become a Jessakkid. The gift is believed to be given by the thunder god, or Animiki, and then only at long intervals and to a chosen few. The gift is received during youth, when the fast is undertaken and when visions appear to the individual."

12. These stray shots are normally the misdirected work of young Thunderers who are still perfecting their skills. I would add, however, that I was told that lightning does not strike Indians—only white people. This statement reflects both the special relationship that the Anishinaabeg hold with the Thunderers and a certain amount of anger directed at whites. A member of the Fox tribe related the following to William Jones: "The Thunderers are kept busy with watching over us. . . . They grow angry at the sight of the wrong done to us. With great effort they restrain themselves when they behold the people driven to an extremity, when they behold the people enduring wrongs beyond all endurance. Naturally there must be an end of this thing: it will be on a day yet to come. The Thunder manitous will no longer withhold their patience. In that day they will crack open this earth and blow it to pieces. Where the white man will be hurled, no one knows and no one cares. After this, the manitou will then create this world anew, and put the people back into it to live again. In that day they will no longer be pestered with the white man." William Jones, "Notes on the Fox Indians," *Journal of American Folklore* 24 (1911):213–14.

13. Steve McGraw, conversation with the author, July 1988, Rabbit Island, Wikwemikong Unceded Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario.

14. Raymond Armstrong, conversation with the author, June 1988, West Bay Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario. While Thunderbirds are often depicted as eagle-like entities and while they are often associated with eagles (especially in terms of their living or nesting areas and their flight and hunting patterns), they are not identical with eagles. Eagles are generally held to be messengers from Kitche Manitou, the creator god of the Anishinaabeg. In the context of this discussion, I should note that while *animikeek* speak to humans, eagles show themselves to humans, i.e., the *animikeek* function as voices, the eagles as signs.

15. Sam Oswamick, conversation with the author, July 1988, Kaboni, Wikwemikong Unceded Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario.

16. Sam Oswamick, conversation with the author.

17. Interestingly enough, one of the ways in which white people are said to have developed electricity is through such a murder, an extraction of the energy of the storm from the Thunder *manitouk*: "The Ojibway elder also said that one time the white men took off for the thunderclouds on a plane and when they got up there they shot at the thunderbirds, took only the heads, put them in huge pots and the juice of the heads was turned into electric power." Norval Morriseau, *Legends of My People, the Great Ojibway*, ed. Selwyn Dewdney (Toronto: McGraw Hill, Ryerson Ltd., 1965), 6.

18. Diamond Jenness, *The Ojibwa Indians of Parry Island* (Ottawa: Bulletin 78, Canada Dept. of Mines Anthropology Series no. 17, 1935), 35. Jenness understands these *animikeek* to be "invisible thunders," fundamentally different from Thunderbirds. I believe he is mistaken in this opinion, obviously confused by the fluidity of Thunder forms. As he says himself on page 37, "Strangely enough, alongside of this belief in invisible thunders, the Parry Islanders possess the totally different concept of a thunderbird; and the same Indians will subscribe to both notions without remarking any contradiction." In other words, if you ask a member of the Anishinaabeg, "Is the Thunder the storm, or is it a bird? Can we see the Thunderers or are they invisible?" he is likely to reply, "Yes, yes, yes, and yes," for the various appearances of Thunderers are elaborations rather than contradictions.

19. Raymond Armstrong, conversation with the author.