

THE “HAIRY HEARTS”

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What’s been said about them hasn’t been very nice. They’ve been described as physically hairy, intellectually deficient, technologically inferior, foolish, selfish, hostile, primitive, cowardly, monstrous, and evil. Considered to be a low grade of human being, they were cannibals who fed not just on ‘real people’ but also on their own kind. They dressed themselves in breechcloths and coarse wrappings made from animal hide. They captured and enslaved Cree women and sought to exterminate the Cree people from the North Country altogether. Among the Cree of the Churchill River drainage, they have been referred to as the “Hairy Heart beings” (*mimiđitihisiwak* in the Cree language), meaning, “they have no goodness in them, no kindness, no human feeling,” according to ethnographer Robert Brightman. More charitably, they’ve been identified as “Ancients” or “Ancient People” (*kayasiđiniwak*).

It’s been estimated that human beings have inhabited parts of northern Manitoba since the end of the last Ice Age, or for about 8,000 years. The Aboriginal people of the region today are mostly *Asiniskawiđiniwak* (Rock Cree) and *Dené* (Chipewyan), but it wasn’t always so; tradition has it that in time beyond memory, Crees migrated into the Churchill River country from elsewhere, and when they did, they found other people already in possession of it. The immigrants brought with them what archaeologists call the “Laurel complex,” while the culture possessed by the indigenous northerners has been denominated “Shield Archaic” -- “Shield” because it is found across much of the Canadian Shield, and “Archaic” because it is very old. Traces of it have been reported from northern Manitoba, and the implications are that the Hairy Hearts image was applied to at least some of the Shield Archaic people by the immigrant Crees.

The criteria we normally use to identify a Native group – the name they call themselves, the name given to them by others, or the name of the language they spoke – are entirely unknown to us as regards the Shield Archaic people. Back in 1977, when Brightman was learning about the Ancients from a senior Cree resident of northwestern Manitoba, the Elder showed him what these Hairy Hearts looked like by pointing to an illustration in his grandson’s school book of a Neanderthal cave man with wooden club in hand and clothed in animal hides.

What’s especially intriguing about these Shield Archaic Ancients is their terrible reputation. Is it in any way justified, and could they possibly have been Neanderthals? The answer to the last question is definitely “no,” even though they seem to fit the

popular (and erroneously negative) Neanderthal stereotype. Anthropologists tell us that the true Neanderthal peoples (*Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*), who became extinct between 30,000 and 40,000 years ago, were confined entirely to the Eastern Hemisphere and never made an appearance in North America at all. In fact, archaeologists are hard put to trace a human presence anywhere in North America beyond 15,000 -- never mind 40,000 -- years ago, and all of the human beings that have ever lived on this continent have been of the fully modern *Homo sapiens sapiens* type. That includes the Shield Archaic people, and so there's no chance whatsoever that Cree people in northern Manitoba ever came into contact with Neanderthals. Nonetheless, I think that the Hairy Heart concept has some basis in historical fact -- there's something real and genuine behind the story. The question is, where did it come from?

The true answer to that question is surely lost in antiquity, but we can speculate. For example, the old stories clearly state that the early Crees and the indigenous Hairy Hearts were in serious conflict with each other, as noted above. Under such circumstances, it is not unusual for opposing sides to develop negative perceptions of one another, and perhaps therein lies, in part, the root of the uncomplimentary image of the autochthonous (Shield Archaic) people with whom the early Crees made contact in the North. Also, from a traditional standpoint, all things on earth are the handiwork of the Creator Being. There are old stories from around the world of people who in early times violated the codes of conduct bestowed upon them by the Creator, and they became degenerate as a result. Might this scenario perhaps explain, from a traditional Native perspective, something of the origins of the Hairy Hearts?

In contemplating the Hairy Heart phenomenon, something else occurred to me: there are those who believe that the *sasquatch* -- a large, furry, human-like creature reminiscent of the Hairy Heart in appearance -- inhabits the deep forests of the North today. Is it possible that the *sasquatch* motif is a recent adaptation of traditional Hairy Heart lore, the roots of which extend far back into the depths of northern Cree history?