

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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Wisaka

Wisaka is the culture hero of the Sac Indians. He is human in appearance — the son of the virgin daughter of Masakomigokwa, old Grandmother Earth. Almost all of the customs of the people were taught to them by Wisaka. After preparing the earth for mankind and teaching people how to live, he withdrew to the North where he now abides. Some day he will return and deliver his uncles and aunts, the Indians, from the yoke of the white man.

The adventures of a culture hero constitute the great fundamental religious myth of all the north central Algonquian Indians, including the Pottawatamie, Menominee, Kickapoo, Sac, and Fox tribes. His name and exploits vary among the different tribes, but the essential phases of the hero cycle invariably appear in Algonquian lore and tradition. The Sac versions of these legends have been recorded by Isaac Galland and Alanson Skinner.

In the beginning, Getci Munito, the Great Spirit, a white-haired old man of majestic mien who sits smoking in the heavens everlastingly, created the world by putting islands in the sea. The earth is the grandmother of everything that breathes, and her name is Masakomigokwa. The roots and herbs are the hairs of her head.

Now it happened that the world was originally inhabited by innumerable supernatural beings. The Aiyamwoy were giants that lived in the sea and were possessed of evil purpose. Monstrous snakes, whose leader was Mahshekenapek, the great horned serpent, and fierce submarine panthers, the Nampeshiwuk, dwelt everywhere in waterfalls, in dismal swamps, in the sea, and under the sea. The panthers had spotted bodies like wildcats, and tails of immense length. In the western empyrean lived giant eagles, the Thunderers called Nenemikiwuk, who were gods of war and rain and from whose eyes the lightning flashed. They constantly preyed upon the serpents with thunderbolts. That is why snakes are not desired about the lodge, because lightning often strikes places where they lurk.

After Getci Munito created the earth he took up some yellow clay like wax and molded in his hand the image of a human being. Then he blew his breath upon it four times and it came to life. So it was that the Sac Indians came into being. The Foxes were made of red earth.

For a long time Grandmother Earth lived in

the world alone. Then, in some mysterious way, a daughter was born to her. The Menominee say that one day Masakomigokwa heard a noise under a wooden bowl. When she turned the dish up there appeared a little daughter who grew up at once into a woman. In due time she became the mother of Wisaka, whom Getci Munito sent in human form to govern the land and teach mankind how to live. After his mother died he dwelt with his grandmother who reared him.

When he was yet a youth he began to fulfill his mission as the friend of man. It was he who stole fire for the Indians, so that they were no longer cold or lonesome; and it was also Wisaka, the hero, who discovered the sweet smoke of tobacco one autumn in Indian summer and captured it for the use and comfort of his uncles and aunts, the Indians. As it was his duty to destroy the enemies of man, he roamed over the earth, killing a great many snakes because they were the incarnation of evil spirits, the embodiment of powers of the underworld.

By the time Wisaka was full grown the Aiyamwoy had overrun both the earth and the sea, threatening mankind with extinction. Resenting the culture hero's control over all creatures, the giants united with the monsters whose habitations were under the sea to make war against Wisaka and his people. But they were afraid, so they summoned a great council to assemble upon the earth. When this vast meeting of Aiyamwoy and undersea creatures had

convened, after long debate and consultation, they resolved to prepare a great feast and invite Wisaka to it that they might there ensnare him and put him to death.

But when the deliberations of the council were concluded and a messenger had been appointed to carry their invitation to Wisaka, behold! his younger brother, who was called Yapata, was discovered in their midst. The whole assembly was thrown into confusion by perceiving that their stratagem was exposed.

"Where is thy brother, Wisaka?" they demanded.

"I know not", he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Thereupon the council, being sorely vexed, rushed upon Yapata and slew him.

According to another version in Sac mythology, the underworld serpents invited Grandmother Earth to their meeting.

"Your eldest grandson is abusing us so that we want to destroy him in some way", they told her.

"It is useless to try it", answered the old woman. "Wisaka is immortal. Yet maybe you have power to kill his younger brother."

So in revenge the serpents planned to put an end to Wisaka's younger brother, Yapata. They challenged Wisaka to race with a three-year-old buffalo around Lake Michigan. As soon as the contestants had reached the opposite shore, the serpents attacked Yapata. Even where he was, Wisaka

could hear his younger brother crying for assistance. It seemed to him that Yapata had called, "Oh, my elder brother, they are killing me!"

Wisaka ran all the faster, and as he drew near home, he passed the buffalo. Still he ran faster, and as he came nearer he could hear Yapata calling distinctly, "Oh, my elder brother, Wisaka, they are killing me!" But when Wisaka arrived it was too late. They had already killed his brother and skinned him and carried the skin away.

Now when Wisaka learned of the murder of Yapata he was extremely sorrowful. He blackened his face and mourned for ten days. After the tenth day the gods sent his dead brother to the wigwam where Wisaka lay weeping.

"Here am I, my elder brother!" cried Yapata. "Let me in!"

"No", responded Wisaka, "I can not admit you!"

Again Yapata begged, "Let me in, my elder brother!"

"No", answered Wisaka, "I can not admit you."

Still his younger brother besought him. "Admit me, Wisaka." And still the elder brother refused him entrance.

Then for the fourth time Yapata pleaded, "Let me in, oh elder brother!"

This time Wisaka responded: "It can not be, my younger brother, I must not let you in, but here is a little drum and here is a sacred whistle. Go west through the heavens to the other world where the

dancing ground of the dead is located. Every time you beat your drum our uncles and aunts will come to you."

Yapata took the whistle and blew upon it, and struck his drum. Lo, at once there were five or six souls of newly dead persons standing beside him. These accompanied him on his journey over the Milky Way to the Hereafter in the west where Yapata still rules.

Thus death came to mankind, and resurrection of the body was prohibited. Before entering Heaven all Sacs must cross a river which is guarded by Pokitapawa, old Knocks-a-hole-in-the-head. A watch dog barks alarm whenever a new soul approaches, and Pokitapawa tries to dash out the brains of the fleeting spirit. If he succeeds, the soul is lost forever. But if the passing soul is swift and eludes Pokitapawa it darts across the log over the river to the abode of the dead, where there is everlasting feasting and rejoicing.

When the Nenemikiwuk, who lived above the clouds, heard Wisaka wailing in sorrow as if chanting a war song, they formed a league with him to avenge the blood of his lost brother. Meanwhile, the sea serpents and panthers had fled to their natural habitations beneath the sea, leaving the Aiyamwoy alone to defend themselves against Wisaka and his allies. The scene of the battle where the hero fought the giants was in a flame of fire. The whole race of Aiyamwoy was destroyed with great slaughter

so that not one remained living upon the face of the earth.

When the horrible sea creatures learned the dreadful fate which had befallen their friends, the Aiyamwoy, whom they had deserted, they were much afraid, and cried aloud for help. Papoanatessa, hearing of their distress, swept over the earth with frost, snow, hail, ice, and north wind. The waters of every river, lake, and sea became solid ice and the whole surface of the earth was covered with an immense sheet of ice and snow. Thus the first inhabitants of the earth — men, beasts, and gods — all perished, except a few choice ones of each species which Wisaka managed to preserve with himself.

Again the monsters of the sea came forth upon the earth, and, observing that Wisaka was almost alone, they rejoiced in the hope of being able to destroy him and take possession of his country. But all their schemes were in vain, because Wisaka knew their plans as soon as they were formed. At last, in despair, the evil powers became mad and resolved to ruin the whole face of the earth which they desired so much to inhabit, for they determined if they could not enjoy it themselves that they would make it unfit for the habitation of others. So they retired beneath the sea again and implored the gods of rain, the Nenemikiwuk, to drown the whole surface of the earth with a flood. The Thunderers heard their war song and listened to their entreaties. Calling upon the clouds to gather, a tremendous deluge was

poured down until the whole surface of the earth, even the top of the highest mountain, was covered with water.

But Wisaka, seeing the clouds gather and the rain descend, took some air and made a huge bubble, called Opeskwe. Into this he betook himself and with him all sorts of living animals and man. As the water rose, Opeskwe was lifted up and floated upon the surface. After they had remained for a long time on the flood with no sight of land, Wisaka commanded the tortoise to dive to the bottom of the water and bring up some earth. But the tortoise never returned. Again and again other animals tried to obtain some earth, but their efforts were unsuccessful and many lives were lost. Finally the muskrat dove down and at length was seen floating on the surface. Though the faithful creature was dead, still upon careful examination some earth was found in his mouth and claws. With this soil Wisaka formed a new earth, spreading the island upon the surface of the watery waste. When he had finished he went forth and with him went also all of the creatures that were in Opeskwe. Together they occupied the dry land.

As a final resort the evil powers appealed to Getci Munito for advice. It was upon his suggestion that they decided to initiate Wisaka into the Medicine Lodge. Thereupon they set to work to build a Mitawigan and sent the hawk to call Wisaka.

Three times the hawk carried the invitation to

Wisaka, but he refused to look up. When the hawk appeared for the fourth time, he raised his head and inquired, "What do they want me for?"

"Getci Munito sends for you", replied the hawk.

Thereupon Wisaka arose and followed the hawk to the Mitawigan. The door was opened for him and he went in.

The lodge, which was long and low, was so situated that the ends where the doors were located faced east and west. In the northeast corner sat Getci Munito, and Wisaka was given a seat on his right, with his back against a bur oak pole. The Great Spirit himself conducted the ceremonies.

Now all the Munitowuk, or Spirits, were called into the Mitawigan — except the Nenemikiwuk, who were not invited. Even the black bear and the grizzly bear were there. Then Wisaka was instructed in the rites of the Medicine Lodge and invited to return four days later to be fully initiated.

At the appointed time Wisaka went to the Mitawigan where the manitous were gathered. All kinds of serpents and beasts had been invited. The drum was placed in the northeast corner of the lodge before Getci Munito and the guests were seated on his right beginning with Wisaka. When all was in readiness the Great Spirit began the ceremony, and the culture hero was admitted to the mysteries of the Medicine Lodge. Thus Wisaka obtained for mankind the secrets of long life on earth and the resurrection of the spirit.

One day after the deluge Wisaka assembled all the people, the ancestors of the Sac Indians, and divided them into two groups. One he called the Okemawuk, or chieftains, which was composed of six clans — the Paukauhaumoi, Sturgeon, Eagle, Great Sea, Bear, and Thunder. To them he entrusted the care and keeping of the holy mishaman, or sacred bundles, which were to be carried with them everywhere and transmitted from fathers to their eldest sons through all generations. The second band was composed of Mamishiwuk, or servants, and they were also divided into six clans — the Water, Deer, Bearpotato, Turkey, Wolf, and Fox. Priests and attendants at feasts and ceremonies were to be chosen only from this group who were not to be regarded as servants to the Okemawuk.

Wisaka then ordered the people to give sacrifices and feasts in his memory and to the Great Spirit, and instructed them minutely in the method of conducting the ceremonies. A Sac brave who desired to observe the sacred rites, he ordained, should first provide a clean animal for his feast; then he should send his women and children out of the wickiup and call in the priests, one of whom should be dispatched to invite a few clansmen to the celebration. When the priest had killed the victim for the sacrifice and had prepared the feast, the one observing the custom should bring forth his sacred bundle and open it in the presence of his companions. Thereupon the sacrifice was to be brought in and laid before the misham,

some incense (tobacco) taken from the misham was to be divided into five parcels which were to be tied one to each leg of the victim and one to the neck, and thus adorned and appropriately painted the sacrifice should be placed before the fire until the close of the feast. The master of the feast should then take some incense from the misham and cast it into the feast fire to make a sweet savory perfume. He should also make two holes in the earth, one at each end of the feast fire, and, having placed in them fire and tobacco to make the earth smoke, he should address the Great Spirit thus:

“Oh, thou who hast made all things, both upon the earth and in the sea, and also under the sea, it is unto thee that I have fasted and cried; the trees of the forest have witnessed my sorrow and affliction; and I trust that the mountain’s echo has borne my supplications to thine ears. This feast which I have prepared is in memory of thee and Wisaka; accept therefore, in this victim, my best beast, the animal most admired by me, the especial favorite of my family. In offering it unto thee in sacrifice, I follow the ordinance of Wisaka. Grant me this favor, that I may live long upon the earth. Make me strong in the day of battle, and cause the terror of my face to spread confusion in the ranks, and dismay and trembling through the hearts of my enemies. Give me, in dreams, a true and faithful warning of every approaching danger, and guard me against the evils to come.”

Then, according to the decree of Wisaka, the master should begin the feast with song and, when the meat was cooked and the guests present, each with his own dish, he should order the festive animal served in equal portions, except that the head should be given to the guest esteemed to be the most valiant. When the guests had been served and the food had cooled, the master of the feast should give a signal to begin eating as fast as possible. Meanwhile the sacred song of the clan should be sung. The bones that remained were to be cast into the fire or a stream of running water. After the feast, one of the guests should address the company, saying:

“To all who are here assembled to participate in the commemoration of Wisaka around this sacred food: know ye, that it is the good will and pleasure of Wisaka that we should in this manner celebrate his memory and observe his holy ordinance. Our worthy entertainer, in whose lodge we have just now feasted, and who is our brother, has opened in our presence his most holy misham, and he and his companions have sung in our ears the delightful sacred song of his forefathers, which has been handed down from generation to generation, since the days of Wisaka, to our present respected brother.

“In this most holy misham are not only the symbols of all our sacred songs, but it also contains all the necessary rules for the government of our lives and regulation of our conduct. Our duties to Munitokusha, and to each other, are herein represented

by signs prepared by Wisaka himself, and which have been collected from the purest and most wonderful portions of the whole creation. Remember, therefore, to teach your children faithfully to observe all things which are taught by the sacred symbols of this holy misham, that Munitokusha may look on us with pleasure, and prosper our journey in the path of life."

The sacrifice victim was then to be carried beyond the limits of the village and hung facing the east upon a tree or pole coated with red clay. The ordinance of the feast and sacrifice having been accomplished, each man should then return to his own lodge.

After Wisaka had proclaimed the ritual of the feast sacrifice he delivered to the head man of each clan of the Okemawuk a sacred misham and charged them in these words:

"Keep this in memory of grey antiquity. This holy depository contains the symbolic memorials of Wisaka, his history of the earth, and his commands to the human race. In this sacred repository you shall find the signs which represent all your duties to Munitokusha, your obligations to each other and a confident promise, which will assure you of prosperity in this life, and happiness and glory beyond the dark forest of that river which you must cross soon after death. If you will have a due respect to the teachings of these sacred symbols, and strictly observe the sacred ordinances, and do them; then

you shall retain the vigor of youth even to old age; you shall increase in the land, and your multitudes shall cover the whole earth. You shall eat the fat beasts of the forest, the fish of the waters and the fowls of the air; and you shall be clothed with warm garments of wool and fur skins. Your young men shall return victorious from the battle; your young women shall come in at evenings loaded with the rich fruits of the earth; and at night young children shall rejoice in the dance. You shall be clothed with strength all the days of your lives; your faces shall be a terror to your enemies, and in the battle they shall not be able to stand before you. Your lives shall be prolonged upon the earth; and when you die, you shall pass joyfully over that horrid mountain and awful river which separates this earth from the spirit home. And you shall be in no danger of falling into that gloomy gulf where the wicked and disobedient are punished; but with rejoicing you shall join your ancestors (who observed these ordinances), in that happy land where pleasures and glory are prepared for you, of which you can now form no correct estimate, and where sorrows and afflictions never shall come."

Wisaka next proceeded to open the sacred bundle and explain the significance of the articles it contained. Each amulet, medicine pouch, or other object, he announced, was the holy sign of a divine commandment of the Great Spirit. Taking up one of the articles, he said, "This is the representative

of the first ordinance, which is: In thy youth thou shalt observe a fast unto Munitokusha, every day, until twenty winters have passed over you." Presenting another symbol, he said, "Secondly — When the twenty winters of infancy and youth have passed away, and ye have arrived to manhood, ye shall leave the lodge and separate thyself from all society, going forth alone into the forest, and abstaining from all food. Thou shalt also black thy face and lie down upon the ground, and cause the trees of the forest, the mountains and the rocks to respond to the voice of thy lament; and in this manner thou shalt continue thy fast for the term of ten days and nights. In about ten days and nights, or sooner, Munitokusha will visit ye in a dream, and show ye what his will is, and what he requires ye to do. Then thou shalt arise and return to thy lodge, wash thy face and partake of food; thou shalt also make a feast according to the ordinance of the feast and sacrifice; and at the feast thou shalt relate to thy companions and guests, all things which were shown to thee in thy dreams. The old men and chiefs will then explain to thee thy dreams, and instruct thee in thy duty, whether to go out against the enemy or to forbear."

Thus Wisaka continued to proclaim the commandments of the Great Spirit for the conduct of his children, the Indians. Sacred rules for personal cleanliness, honesty, generosity to the poor, vengeance upon an enemy, and the christening of chil-

dren were duly ordained. The meaning of everything he explained until every one possessed understanding.

At last, having subdued the evil powers in the world, having secured fire, tobacco, and other comforts for man, and having taught people how to live and pray, Wisaka withdrew to the North where he still resides, watching over the welfare of his uncles and aunts. Some day, they say, he will return.

JOHN ELY BRIGGS