

# "Women Are in the Village and Men Are Always in the Bush": Food, Conversation and the Missing Gender in Northern Dene Society

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**Abstract:** *In subarctic Canada, Chipewyan (Dene) men's meals have become a significant forum for talking about vexing shifts in relationships between men and women. While not necessarily resolving these issues, men's bush meals emerge as a powerful clearinghouse of information, an expression of fellowship and community, an ongoing assessment of gender relations and, perhaps, compensation for what has been lost in recent transformations in men's and women's lives. Food, therefore, and the varied forms of discourse surrounding it, are inextricably part of and reflective of the social transformations impacting Chipewyan society. How these dynamics play out in the semiotics of actual meal-time conversation are explored in several case examples of men's meal gatherings. In these settings, conversations about, around, through and as food embrace an ensemble of iconic, indexical and symbolic properties which underscore the dilemma of "missing women." Thus, even as Chipewyan women have withdrawn from bush landscapes in recent history, men's pervasive meal-time conversations about their wives and female relatives are a way of symbolically inserting them back into these spaces.*

**Keywords:** Food and conversation, gender segregation, men's bush meals, "missing women" as iconic metadiscourse, Chipewyan, Canada

## Prologue

One of my most vivid memories as a young anthropologist in Chipewyan Indian country involved a meal-time conversation among a group of young men. It was in the late summer of 1971. I had just arrived in the village of Patuanak, a remote locale near the headwaters of the Churchill River in northwestern Saskatchewan. I was setting up a temporary camp and had caught a jackfish for my dinner when a half dozen unmarried young men dropped by my tent unannounced. They arrived with offerings of dried moose meat, bannock, dried whitefish and a tea pail in an impromptu gathering around my fire, transforming my solitary act of eating into a meal.

As a stranger in the community, I assumed I was being checked out by the locals. Even so, I was grateful for the men's hospitality and companionship and the opportunity to meet new people. While

many things were discussed, including my own presence and plans, a pervasive topic of conversation was the opposite sex. The men talked about young women they were fond of, their varied qualities, plans for meeting them, and hopes of attracting them. With rapt attention, I listened to these high-spirited young Chipewyan men compare notes and joke with one another about their efforts at “girling,” that is, looking for female companionship and sexual adventures in villages along the Churchill River. There was also considerable concern about not offending the parents of young women in their own community, hence, the pressure to “girl” elsewhere. As one man put it: “Their mommies and daddies are too strict around here (Patuanak). You gotta go down to Pinehouse if you want to have fun.”

At the time, I interpreted these jocular conversations as a form of male camaraderie, but I had no frame of reference for assessing the larger meanings they might convey. Years later, after sharing hundreds of meals in the bush with all-male hunting and fishing teams, my grasp of Chipewyan cultural realities had grown considerably. The conversations among men sharing meals were not random, formless events. Rather, they exhibited patterns, trajectories and meanings that were connected to and reflective of broad transformations impacting Chipewyan society in the late 20th century.<sup>1</sup>

The central argument in this paper is that Chipewyan men’s meals have become a significant forum for talking about vexing shifts in relationships between men and women. While not necessarily resolving these issues, men’s bush meals emerge as a powerful clearinghouse of information, an expression of fellowship and community, an ongoing assessment of gender relations and, perhaps, compensation for what has been lost in recent transformations of Chipewyan men’s and women’s lives. Food, therefore, and the varied forms of discourse about it and around it, are inextricably part of and reflective of the social transformations impacting Chipewyan society. The manner in which Chipewyan men and women prepare and consume food has diverged in recent history and become emblematic of fundamental changes in gender roles and relationships. How these dynamics play out in the semiotics of actual meal-time conversation will be explored in the remainder of this paper.

## Semiotics of Food and Language

Food, and the “talk” which surrounds it, can become part of the social and symbolic means by which people negotiate tensions and contradictions produced by rapid economic and political change. I have pursued this idea elsewhere (Jarvenpa 2008, 2013). Similar terrain has been explored in Searles’ (2002) analysis of food as a symbolic resource in constructing Inuit identity, in Powers and Powers’ (1984) innovative work on “mediating foods” in Oglala Lakota social change, in Riley’s (2013) analysis of syncretic foods as a basis for forging hybridic identities and cultural revival in the Marquesas, and in Meigs’ (1988) interpretation of food among the Hua of New Guinea as a vehicle of relatedness between and across groups. Relevant to the issue of food as a semiotic and linguistic resource is Cavanaugh’s (2013) research on social exclusion and boundary maintenance in northern Italy.

Counihan’s (1999:6-24) demonstration of how maleness and femaleness in many cultures are associated with specific foods, rules by which such foods are consumed, and the rich symbolic fields they evoke is germane to the gender concerns of this paper. Moreover, much recent scholarship on food and culture, my own included, owes a debt to Douglas’ (1971, 1984) seminal work on food as a “code.” In her view, meals are not merely nourishment but conveyors of messages about social relationships and dilemmas enveloping the diners’ lives:

If food is to be treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relationships being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries (Douglas 1971:61).

Likewise, Chipewyan men's meal-time conversations do not always, or necessarily, focus on the food itself. Rather, partaking of food is an important context in which men share information and opinions on many matters. Accustomed to sharing meals in isolated hunting and fishing camps, men often talk about immediate practical concerns such as ice and trail conditions, movements and behaviors of animals, weather patterns, forest fires, and the situations of other hunting and fishing teams, which become part of the mix of knowledge men use to continually modify and fine-tune their hunting and fishing strategies. At the same time, however, bush meals are occasions when Chipewyan men are likely to express their views on an equally profound topic, namely that half of the community absent from the bush landscape: women. Conversation at many meals is dominated by speculation about the situations of particular female relatives, the nature of changing male-female relationships, and amorous pursuits. These gender-charged conversations are the focus of this paper.

In keeping with the analytical themes in this volume, the *semiotics of food and language* will be broadly conceived here to encompass several distinct ways that discourse is associated with food. These include conversations *about*, *around*, *through*, and *as* food. Embracing an ensemble of iconic, indexical and symbolic properties, the Chipewyan bush meal may be seen as a medium by which particular emotional, social and cultural meanings about gender are communicated. This differs from an analysis of how particular foods symbolize certain social categories, for example, how among the Wamira of Papua New Guinea taro plants are regarded as men's "children" (Kahn 1988). Rather, the approach taken here is similar to Croegaert's (2011) recent study of *cejf*, a slow coffee-drinking institution maintained by refugee Bosnian women in Chicago. Like Chipewyan men's bush meals, which become an ongoing assessment of gender relations, the Bosnian migrant women use occasions of coffee consumption to manage and evaluate their new social positions in the neoliberal economy of the United States. In both cases, the consumption of certain foods and beverages, in particular cultural contexts, become frameworks for articulating and appraising problematic social relations.

If the *semiotics of food and language* is the general process informing Chipewyan men's meals, there are specific dynamics at play as well. As the case material will demonstrate, meal-time talk can be emphatically *about* the food being prepared and consumed, even when the conversation simultaneously grapples with emerging dilemmas in the sexual division of labor. Moreover, the very nature of men's bush meals, including the pronounced collegiality and sociality that accompany a communal cooking fire, ensures that prolonged men's conversations are, axiomatically, *around* food. As seen in the prologue, and as explicated in case examples below, language also operates *through* food in the sense that partaking of culturally salient foods (dried moose meat, dried whitefish, bannock, tea, etc.) facilitates communication. We might argue further that Chipewyan men's discourse functions *as* sustenance, in the sense that men need to share the talk as much as they require the nourishment of the food.<sup>2</sup> All of this speaks to the fact that a meal is, semiotically, a dense event. It is the job of the anthropologist to tease out the signs and symbolic anatomy of various food-talk events and, thereby, capture their meaning within specific cultural milieus and historical contexts.

## Recent Changes in Chipewyan Food Culture and Gender Relations

As in many societies, the Chipewyan, *Dene* or Athapaskan-speaking hunter-fishers of central subarctic Canada, organize their food culture around a daily rhythm of meals in family-households. However, in the all-male bush economy which emerged with post-1950s political-economic change, mobile teams of hunter-trappers and fishermen now endure long periods of isolation away from the centralized settlements where other family members largely live and work.<sup>3</sup>In this context, Chipewyan men are confronted with a structural dilemma. They must choose among replicating, abandoning or modifying the highly specialized food processing and preparation skills which were routinely performed by women in seasonally nomadic family camps of former years.

Analysis will focus upon meal preparations and dining practices, or cuisine, in the all-male bush camps of recent years and how these behaviors are continually contextualized and evaluated in streams of conversation and commentary. Most meals are shared by work teams of two or three men at their respective hunting, trapping or fishing camps. Occasionally, larger groups of men partake in impromptu "trailside meals" whereby two or more hunting or fishing teams meet by chance on a remote forest trail, lakeshore, riverbank or portage. The unpredictability of such encounters spurs a celebratory feast of several hours duration with ritualized sharing of food items and a spirited verbal exchange of observations, personal experiences, news from villagers, humor, criticism and advice. As complex social dining events, both types of bush meals will be interpreted as a semiotic field through which men signify and evaluate their shifting relationships vis-à-vis women.

Information derives from ethnographic research conducted among the *Kesyehot'ine* ("poplar house people") group of Chipewyan in northwestern Saskatchewan between the early 1970s and early 1990s with some updating from recent years. These people are descendents of *Ethen-eldili-dene*, or "caribou eater" Chipewyan, who moved southward into the full boreal forest at the end of the 18th century to gain access to European fur traders at newly established posts at locales like Île à la Crosse (Brumbach and Jarvenpa 1989:31-34; Smith 1975:413). In recent years, many *Kesyehot'ine* have gravitated toward the settlement of Patuanak, but these people also occupy smaller seasonal villages and utilize a vast hinterland of forest, lakes, rivers, and muskeg as part of their hunting and fishing livelihood. Particularly useful for my interpretations here were prolonged periods when I lived, traveled and worked as a *sits'eni*, or "partner," with several Chipewyan hunting-trapping and fishing teams (Jarvenpa 1980, 1998). This experience provided an intimate view of bush camp food culture that was complemented by partaking in meals with my partners' respective families in a village context.

In the past 50 years Chipewyan food culture has become increasingly gender-segregated or gender-typed in terms of the content and social context of meals. This can be seen in the contrast between task group and family-household meals. For example, an all-male trapping team might prepare and serve an expedient meal of three or four items such as boiled beaver (*tsa*), bannock and lard (*lest'eth kles*), and tea (*ledi*). The abbreviated menu reflects the logistical constraints of eating outdoors while traveling between base camps or while inspecting snares and traps. Typically, the men consume game or fish freshly harvested that very day in the course of their work. On the other hand, a family in the village of Patuanak might prepare and serve a more complex meal of six or seven items such as fried moose steak (*deni*), potatoes (*debata*), moose pemmican (*etsins*), cranberries (*nak'er*), bannock and lard (*lest'eth kles*), and tea (*ledi*). While such meals often include locally harvested game and fish, the items may have been butchered, processed and stored for days or weeks prior to consumption. Also, family meals in a village context are more likely to be supplemented by commercial foodstuffs purchased from the local

store. Most often, the female household head and any older daughters or other female relatives handle the cooking and serving of food to any family members present.<sup>4</sup>

One element which has not changed over time is that women have always prepared meals for entire family or extended family units, including children of all ages and any adult men reunited with their families between forays in the bush. This continues and, indeed, the development of a public school in Patuanak in 1968 heavily contributed to the year-round anchoring of women in one permanent settlement where they would be available to nurture their school-age children. By contrast, male hunting, trapping and fishing teams basically cook for themselves, an adult male constituency, with the occasional presence of adolescent and younger men serving as apprentices.

Prior to World War Two, when most Chipewyan families were seasonally nomadic work units, women were always present at or near the temporary bush camps (*noθi*) and the multi-family winter communities (*eyana'de*) and, therefore, available to handle most of the food processing and meal preparations (Jarvenpa and Brumbach 1988). Such work included fine butchering of large animals like moose and caribou and thin-cutting and smoke-drying of the meat into sheets of dry meat (*egane*) or pounded into flakes of pemmican (*etsins*). Women handled most of the storage of food items which they eventually prepared in meals as well as sharing of food with kin, friends and neighbors. No less important, women smoke-tanned hides and manufactured clothing items, rendered animal fat into usable grease, prepared furs for market, and harvested many small mammals and fish (Jarvenpa and Brumbach 2006).

However, after the rise of permanent settlements, like Patuanak, women continued most of their former harvesting and food processing activities from the new central base. Men persisted as a seasonally mobile bush work force on farflung hunting, trapping and fishing ventures, but now they were operating for weeks or months at a time without the support of their families and, most tellingly, without the repertoire of food processing skills of their wives, mothers, sisters and other female relatives.<sup>5</sup>

The 1950s and 1960s, therefore, were watershed decades when Chipewyan men were confronted with difficult choices in the management of their livelihood. As I have argued elsewhere (Jarvenpa 2013), it appears that most men chose *not* to replicate women's food processing roles and skills. When and where possible, men would attempt to funnel resources, such as roughly-butchered caribou or roughly-skinned furs, to female relatives in Patuanak rather than handling the final processing themselves. Where women had once moved to the site of a moose kill to handle the fine butchering, smoke-drying and hide making, for example, men were now transporting rough-butchered moose to women in the village (Brumbach and Jarvenpa 1997:426-428; Jarvenpa and Brumbach 1995:66-68). This general state of affairs has continued.

The present-day contrast between men's expedient cuisine and women's cooking, then, reflects rather different contexts and purposes: mobile task groups in the bush vs. family nurturing in the village. Yet, this contrast is imperfect and historically contingent. For example, women occasionally prepare their own expedient meals as when boiling a rabbit after reaching the end of a snare line. Moreover, prior to the 1950s, when family units were seasonally nomadic, women's family cooking likely had a more expedient quality than that seen in the contemporary village setting. At the same time, men were generally less involved in meal preparations in the pre-1950s era when women were available for such work.

Considering the foregoing background, the "core" of any Chipewyan meal includes some form of locally procured game or fish accompanied by bannock and tea. Male task group meals in the bush

epitomize the core stripped to its bare essentials (C), whereas family household meals in the village include the core supplemented by other items (C+), often of imported origin. Semiotically, then, these meal types index both locality and sociological context: C meals index the bush and temporary male work teams while C+ meals index the village and more enduring female-anchored family household units. Nonetheless, the core meal (C) is not a simple or straightforward reflection of Chipewyan identity at this point in history. In part, this is because men alone do not constitute Chipewyan society.

I have noted elsewhere (Jarvenpa 2013:60-61) that Chipewyan men who prepare their own meals in the bush occasionally express unease at their processing of food items, particularly fine butchering procedures. This discomfort stems from a profound and persisting belief in the efficacy of a proper Chipewyan way of handling traditional bush food. Some men may be able to thin-cut and smoke-dry moose meat adequately from a purely technical standpoint, for example, but it never feels quite “right” or correct because women have not participated in its production.

Without subscribing to all of Levi-Strauss’ (1964) structuralist arguments, it does appear from a Chipewyan ontological perspective that women’s cooking is needed to convert food from its “raw” state into something that is fully or genuinely cultural. Stated another way, both women’s *and* men’s knowledge and performance are needed to construct a complete Chipewyan meal and, by extension, a complete Chipewyan identity.<sup>6</sup> In semiotic terms, then, a core meal (C) alone is not iconic of Chipewyan identity or Chipewyaness because women are not present. Moreover, an augmented meal (C+) is only a potential icon of Chipewyan identity since men are frequently absent from the village household environment. Herein lies an existential dilemma created by recent social change.

Prior to the 1950s, however, it is likely that a core meal (C), as described above, was iconic of Chipewyan identity writ large. Indeed, it is interesting that boiling and roasting versus frying of food animals, whether beavers, ducks, rabbits, or caribou, persist as a marker of Chipewyan identity as contrasted with Cree. For example, Chipewyan people who occasionally fry their food may be jokingly disparaged for “acting like Crees.” Thus, preparation of foods, rather than the food items themselves, can be iconic of cultural identity or ethnicity in certain contexts.

Nonetheless, Chipewyan men and women still search for the most satisfying and meaningful ways of combining traditional bush foods and imported foods. Bannock is interesting in this regard. A bread staple made from flour, lard, baking powder and water, it is an ubiquitous item at all Chipewyan meals (C and C+) whether in the bush or village. Round loaves of bannock are baked in ungreased iron skillet placed on stove tops, open fires or even in sands banked with hot embers. Typically, slices of bannock are slathered with lard when eaten. Deriving from EuroCanadian and Métis fur traders in the 18th and 19th centuries, over time bannock has become “nativized” or “Chipewyanized.” Following Powers and Powers’ (1984) perspective, bannock also may be regarded as a “mediating food” in that it symbolically mediates between subordinate and dominant, local and supralocal, and peripheral and cosmopolitan social orders.<sup>7</sup> The same argument can be made for tea, a European fur trade commodity that gradually became “nativized” as a standard part of Chipewyan cuisine. It is notable also that bannock has not become gender typed, so that both women and men appear competent and comfortable preparing this food.

What follows are several case examples of conversations about and around food as Chipewyan men prepare and consume their core meals (C) in the bush.<sup>8</sup> Thematically, these conversations grapple with the dilemma of absent or “missing women,” although from differing vantage points. They will serve as empirical substance for generalizing about the semiotics of food and language.

In turn, the cases reveal that something as prosaic as a meal can be a forum for assessing and critiquing monumental social changes.

## Case 1: Missing Women: Eating a Moose in the Bush

The dilemma created by the recent segregation of the sexes is revealed by the flow of events and mealtime conversations surrounding a fortuitous large game kill.<sup>9</sup> In this case example, two trapping partners, men in their mid-40s, Victor Lynx and George Saizi,<sup>10</sup> were making improvements to a remote base camp during mid-summer in preparation for the early winter fur hunt. At the onset of their work, they killed a large adult male moose. The latter was both an unplanned windfall and a logistical problem. The men were committed to a week of arduous work at their camp, but the ca. 600 kg moose was many times beyond what they could consume. Moreover, they were several day's travel from Patuanak and their wives who ordinarily handled the fine butchering, thin-cutting and smoke-drying of meat, the key procedures for preserving large quantities of meat during warm weather.

This meant that the men would have to attempt making *egane* or dry meat themselves or risk spoilage of a significant food supply for their families and relatives. They quickly rough butchered the animal into hindquarters, forequarters, rib sections and other parts and hung them on a temporary storage rack. Then, with trepidation, they carved rectangular hunks from the back-pelvic section for subsequent slicing into thin sheets for smoke-drying over a slow-burning smudge fire. As they performed this work, the men carried on a dialogue while eating raw pieces of the moose's stomach lining and kidneys. Victor observed with disgust:

*Tag'ai!* Look at all the holes I'm making in this dry meat! And I'm so slow. I guess that's why men don't do this kind of work, eh?

George, also frustrated by his own clumsiness at this task, replied:

Well, you can't expect a man to do a woman's job very well. If Rose (George's wife) were making this dry meat she'd be done by now. And it would be just right. No holes in the meat.

Recalling a Chipewyan proverb, Victor remarked somewhat facetiously:

Yah, but remember what our old people say. If a wife makes a hole in this dry meat, her husband can kill her!

Responding with another Chipewyan aphorism, George had the final word for the moment:

That's right. Our old people also say that if a man can't find the leg joint on the first cut (dismembering the hindquarter from the pelvis), he's not ready to get married!

Later in the day, with the initial handling of the moose under control, Victor and George had their first of many cooked meals provided from their bounty. They enjoyed pieces of moose tongue, mandible and heart boiled together in a large kettle. As they ate, they discussed their plans for improving their base camp, but the conversation kept drifting back to their original dilemma:

George:

You know, we wouldn't have to worry about wasting any moose meat if we were closer to the village.

Victor:

Sure. Cecile (Victor's wife) would give most of it away in one day. Some to my dad and mom. Then her dad and mom. To Nobert's (Victor's brother) family and my grandfather. Some to Cecile's aunts. And then our cousins.

George:

Yah, Rose (George's wife) is the same way. She'd give away to eight or maybe ten families. And make good dry meat for us too. The women know how to do it.

Victor:

Remember when we were just kids, and our families used to travel around together in the bush?

George:

Yuh. In the old days it seemed like some things were easier. Our dads and moms were together. There wouldn't be a problem with this moose, eh?

Victor:



No problem back then. But now? Women are in the village, and men are always in the bush. It's no good.

George:

No. Not good this way. And I'm quitting this work, not making any more dry meat. Too many holes.

The conversation ended as George departed the butchering area to resume work on other matters. A week later the men returned to Patuanak with what they could salvage from the remaining rough-butchered moose. Reluctantly, they had discarded the valuable hide and some pieces of meat that had become infested with maggots and had spoiled in the warm weather. Nevertheless, within a few days their wives smoke-dried a considerable portion of the salvaged meat and distributed the rest to close relatives and neighbors.

Précis: In the preceding scenario, the conversation is clearly *about* and *around* food as the men confront and discuss the complexities of butchering and processing a moose they are also eating. However, equally compelling is how the food itself, including the men's efforts to deal with the moose, operates as a form of language *through* food. That is, the moose operates as an indexical segue into discourse about broader social issues impacting Chipewyan society. Separated from their wives and other female relatives, the men are at a disadvantage in processing the moose, particularly when performing the fine butchering operations for making dry meat. When Victor upbraids himself for making holes in the meat, he is acknowledging that he, and men generally, have not learned or perfected the butchering skills routinely handled by women. George's terse remark: "The women know how to do it," underscores women's arena of expertise. "It," in this regard, includes not only food processing, cooking and storage but also the intricacies of sharing or distributing food among networks of kin and friends. Moreover, with increasing segregation of women and men fostered by recent changes in mobility and economy, men often find themselves in the awkward position of attempting to replicate women's food handling skills. Victor's declaration: "Women are in the village, and men are always in bush. It's no good," is more than an expression of discomfort at attempting to replicate women's work. In effect, it is an indictment of the past half-century of transformations which have eroded the complementary husband-wife work units that were formerly the core of Chipewyan subsistence and economic life.

George and Victor's conversation about food handling, therefore, centrally indexes the absence of women. In turn, this very absence indexes a pervasive concern about a rupture between the way Chipewyan people used to live and their lives at present. The proverbial or aphoristic elements of this conversation are also weighted with meaning about Chipewyan gender relations. Victor's comments about the right of a husband to "kill" a wife who makes holes in dry meat parodies the traditional view of the sexual division of labor with women as the food processors *par excellence*. Even if delivered facetiously, however, the comment also suggests an inferior or subordinate status for women.

By comparison, George's aphorism about men's butchering abilities and eligibility for marriage appears less condemning of male status or privilege. In part, these proverbial aspects of discourse

derive from historical circumstances and express certain persisting cognitive values without necessarily reflecting current behavioral realities in gender relations.<sup>11</sup>

As the foregoing themes suggest, a rich corpus of knowledge about Chipewyan gender relations, their historical antecedents, and their current state of ferment is encapsulated in George and Victor's conversation about the moose they are butchering and eating. Food practices and food talk, in this instance, are the medium for expressing rather complex sentiments and ideas regarding women's and men's changing roles and relationships. This is a prime example of the semiotics of food and language as an evocative communicative process.

## Case 2: The Missing Woman: Love Gone Bad

In this second example, an impromptu bush meal evolved when several two-man spring hunting-fishing teams encountered one another while traveling on an ice-free channel of the Churchill River. At that time in late April, the snow cover was still deep in the forest. Thick ice still covered the large lakes, but turbulent sections of the rivers were breaking up. Accordingly, men employed a combination of dogteams, snowmobiles, wooden skiffs and canoes to move across the rapidly changing landscape. At the same time, they trapped muskrats for market trade while fishing and hunting for food. Initially, a team of two maternal cousins in their mid-twenties, Johnny Montgrand and Edward Muskrat, put ashore a few yards downstream from a major set of rapids. They carried their grub boxes to a prominent terrace and built a fire for tea. Each man roasted a whole whitefish (*lu*) on slanted spits or stakes, cut from nearby poplar saplings, as the main course of their mid-day meal.

Shortly thereafter, two other teams traveling in opposite directions on the river, spotted the fire and joined the initial party. One was a partnership of two paternal cousins in their mid-forties, Prosper Ethengoo and Louis Ethengoo. The other was a father-son team, 48 year-old Gerard McLeod and 22 year-old Jimmy McLeod. The new arrivals contributed their own tea pails and whitefish to the evolving meal gathering. Moreover, each man had retrieved his personal "grub box" or *ber teli*, a small wooden container holding skinning and butchering knives, tools, tobacco, salt, sugar, tea and a few portable food items and personal effects. The colorfully painted boxes, with lids propped open, were arranged around the fire near their seated owners. Without visible cue, the men rose from their places and casually walked around the fire retrieving an item from each of the assembled boxes: a small hunk of bannock, a piece of dried moose meat (*egane*), or a flake of dried whitefish (*et'thai*). This ritual exchange was a preamble to the main part of the meal, eating the roasted whitefish. During the ritual exchange phase the men remained standing while making occasional adjustments to their spits and tea pails. While partaking of the whitefish, however, the men knelt or sat on the ground with their cooked fish arranged before them on boughs of freshly cut spruce. Enjoying one another's company from this relaxed position, the dining and conversation proceeded apace.

Thus, a fire started by one team became available for all following teams who wished to join. Food was freely shared, prefaced by the ritual exchange of items from one another's grub boxes. And the gathering was savored as an occasion for prolonged conversation and fellowship. Arguably, the grub box itself is an indexical sign of maleness and male expertise. A cluster of grub boxes with lids propped open is an index of male bonding and camaraderie. Conversely, these same signs indicate an absence of women.

On this occasion, the younger cousins, Johnny Montgrand and Edward Muskrat, had been joking and teasing one another about their recent experiences in the Cree community of Pinehouse Lake. Like some other unmarried Chipewyan men, Johnny and Edward occasionally sought out female

companionship in Cree or Métis Cree communities. As noted earlier in the paper, such sexual adventuring was driven by a perception that parental control over daughters was more relaxed in distant communities coupled by the fact that the men were removed from the scrutiny of their Chipewyan relatives.

As the newly arriving men thrust their staked whitefish over the fire and drew their first mugs of tea, Johnny was playfully quizzing Edward:

So you have a new girlfriend at Pinehouse, eh?

Edward replied:

Sure, you were there. I guess you weren't so lucky?

Johnny:

No, but Mary (a regular girlfriend) was gone. Away to Meadow Lake.

Edward:

Well, maybe you should try girling in Île à la Crosse. You're not so lucky at Pinehouse.

The verbal sparring was interrupted by a caution and query from Prosper Ethengoo:

You young guys should be careful around the Cree people. You heard about what happened to Mary, eh?

Johnny:

What do you mean? Something happened to her in Meadow?

Prosper:

Not your girlfriend. I mean Mary Ptarmigan from Patuanak.

There was a momentary silence as the mood turned serious. All the men had heard about the 20 year-old Chipewyan woman from Patuanak, a boarding school student who, the previous month, had attended an all-Indian hockey tournament in a distant community to the south. At the tournament she simply vanished. Weeks passed by with no word of or from the young woman. While information was sketchy, and interpretations of events varied, a widely-held view in Patuanak was that Mary Ptarmigan had somehow been victimized by malevolent Cree forces. While the overt conflicts and hostilities which had characterized Chipewyan-Cree relations during the early fur trade period (late 18th to mid 19th centuries) had long faded, the Chipewyan still regarded the Cree as having superior magico-medicinal knowledge which could be used for either beneficial or evil purposes (Jarvenpa 1982a). Such realities continued to generate profound intercultural tension and ambivalence. The hockey tournament had been staged near several Cree reserves, a fact that became more discomfoting as time passed.

Johnny:

Mary Ptarmigan? She's missing down south.

Prosper:

No. That's what I'm trying to tell you. They found her. Well, Gregoire (Ptarmigan), her dad, he found her. Just brought her back to Patuanak last week. Louis and me saw them before coming out here.

Most men at the meal gathering had been in the bush for a week or more and were unaware of these recent developments. As they adjusted their roasting whitefish on the windblown flames, they listened attentively to Prosper's and Louis' accounts of the drama unfolding in Patuanak.

Louis:

Yah, like Prosper said, Gregoire found her. He had to get some help from a Cree seer (i.e. diviner) in Île à la Crosse, I think. The seer told him where to look ....

Prosper:

So Gregoire goes down to the Black Kettle Reserve<sup>12</sup>. A pretty long trip. That's where these two young Cree guys were living, brothers. They were at that hockey game, you

know. That's where they met Mary. And they used love medicine to get her, take her away and keep her at their house at Black Kettle ....

Louis:

But don't forget, those brothers got that love medicine from their mother. Gregoire said she's a strong *manitukasiu* (Cree word for shaman or curer), a strong medicine woman. Bad too. Lot's of people are afraid of her ....

Prosper:

That's right. And the mother and sons live together. They were keeping Mary there in that house with love medicine. So, like I was saying, Gregoire went down to Black Kettle. He gets to the reserve there and looks around for the chief. And he finds out the chief is a woman! Gregoire, well, he thinks that's kind a strange ....

Louis:

But it's true! The band chief is a woman there. Gregoire tells her he's come to get his daughter. But the chief tells Gregoire she will not go with him to fetch Mary. She's afraid of that old medicine woman. So she just points ....

Prosper:

Yah, points to the house. So Gregoire just walks right into the house. As soon as Mary sees her dad she just starts screaming. Screaming real loud! Sort of crazy like. She doesn't want to leave. But Gregoire drags her out of there and brings her back to Patuanak. She's home now ....

At this point, Edward Muskrat interrupted the account with a query:

Boy that Gregoire is tough! But you think Mary is okay now?

Prosper:

I think so. Well, that's what I heard, anyway. Mary told her dad and mom that about a week before Gregoire found her at Black Kettle, that old medicine woman predicted what was gonna happen. She's like a soothsayer too, eh. The old woman said that someone would be coming in a week to take Mary away. And that nobody could stop it.

As the men finished eating their whitefish, the conversation momentarily drifted to other topics. Who else had they encountered on the Churchill? Where would the teams be hunting beavers in May after the final breakup of river ice? The men seemed distracted as they packed up their skiffs and shoved off. Prosper and Louis Ethengoo had conjured a powerful image of the captive Mary Ptarmigan screaming in the old Cree woman's house. No doubt, this lingered in everyone's thoughts. News of the incident would spread downriver and up tributaries to other meal gatherings in the days and weeks to follow. The dramatic nature of the account, with its undercurrent of intercultural and male-female violence, arguably, reinforced the men's sense of isolation or separation from meaningful events in the larger community. Johnny Montgrand's and Edward Muskrat's mirthful account of "girling" in Cree country became an ironic, and perhaps easily forgotten, footnote in the unfolding story.

Précis: The second case illustrates how bush or trailside meals constitute a distinctly male-defined space in contemporary Chipewyan society. The ritualized exchanges prior to dining, the style of leisurely communal feasting, and the prolonged conversations which typically accompany such meals are, in toto, a form of communication or discourse *around* and *as* food which both celebrates male bonding and, simultaneously, critiques the changes which have separated men and women, thereby, relegating women mostly to the village and men to the bush. The latitude of talk is illustrated by a shift in conversational tone from jovial banter about sexual adventuring to a solemn discussion of the abduction of a young Chipewyan woman by Cree love medicine. Thus, the young men, Johnny and Edward, signal their masculinity by talking of girlfriends and sexual conquests whereas the older men, Prosper and Louis, temper the conversation with the latest news about the abducted woman's rescue. The latter information introduced a hopeful note into what had been a grim account of a Cree magical or sorcerous assault on a Chipewyan woman from the men's own community.<sup>13</sup> The ironic juxtaposition of sex as pleasure and sex as violence heightened the emotional tension at the meal gathering.

This case exemplifies the *semiotics of food and language* in its broadest sense, that is, the communication of emotional, social and cultural meanings via discursive systems associated with food. Here, the meal-time conversation is a means of assessing male-female relationships of a profoundly distressing and dangerous nature with disturbing implications regarding both sexual and interethnic violence. More specifically, the men's meal-time talk can be interpreted as a form of discourse as food. When men's bush meals involve especially lengthy, thematically varied, and emotionally intense conversations among many participants, as in this instance, the diners appear to savor the talk as much as they relish the food. Indeed, talk as food is most prominent, perhaps, at trailside meals in the early to mid-winter months when male hunting teams experience maximum isolation and, thus, are especially eager to share conversation with other teams (Jarvenpa 1980;77-78, 88; 2013:53-56).

There are some other dynamics worth pondering. Carefree and jovial talk among men sharing a meal, contrasts sharply with solemn, sobering conversations about women. In the former situation, culturally salient foods – both gendered and Chipewyan (roasted whitefish, shared grub box items)

– are a medium through which men express fellowship and bond as men. Their meal-time conversations tend to nourish these social bonds through familiar forms of joking and repartee. Mirthful conversations about women, as in the case of jocular banter about “girling,” tend to reinforce these bonds by indexing heteronormative masculinity. Such conversations exemplify talk as food.

However, when absent (or in this case, abducted) women become the focus of men’s meal-time conversations, the discourse is a means of communicating loss, longing, and distress at what is missing from men’s lives. In the first context, then, discourse operates as food whereby meal-time talk creates nourishing social bonds. In the second context, discourse expresses disenchantment and discontent with the changing social order. In effect, this talk becomes a kind of iconic metadiscourse by repeatedly invoking stories, accounts and commentary about “missing women.”<sup>14</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusion

As we have seen, Chipewyan men’s bush meals and conversations are structured occasions for projecting uncertainties, hopes and fears about male-female relationships and, by extension, the future of Chipewyan society itself. Inchoate thoughts are given voice at these meal gatherings. Collectively, bush meals are a symbolic projection of men’s desires for order and stability in a world beset by uncertainty and flux. The social dynamics and semiotics of this process are intertwined in several ways.

Chipewyan men in the bush savor food, conversation and companionship that all meals offer, or what might be termed discourse as food. However infrequent or unpredictable in occurrence, impromptu trailside meals are especially cherished opportunities to exchange a wide range of information and maintain connections to the larger community. Particularly valued is any news about wives and other female relatives who are conspicuously absent from the bush landscape, now a de facto male space. A meal can become a forum for discussing sensitive or disquieting issues which, while not always referencing food directly, highlight male-female relationships. Arguably, the contemporary bush meal as a locus of all-male activity and camaraderie has become an emphatically “safe” space for freewheeling discussion, criticism and sarcasm that might be inappropriate or offensive in a family or village context. Men in the bush sometimes say, “I’ll bet people in Patuanak are wondering about us,” or “the women are probably talking about us now.” Such comments invert the fact that many men experience loneliness in the bush and relish news about their wives, children, and village cohorts.

Bush meals draw a rather severe gender boundary in contemporary Chipewyan society by their sheer physical separation of men from women. As seen in Case 1, such meals are a continual reminder of the prodigious food processing and preparation skills of women when contrasted with the limited and sometimes self-conscious handling of food by men. Moreover, when meal-time conversation includes disturbing news about events in the village, men’s feelings of loneliness and separation from their wives and children can be magnified. Indeed, the recency of this separation, about 50 years or two generations, is an aspect of gender relations which structures the very way that men talk *around* food as exemplified in the preceding paragraph.

Younger, unmarried men express their interest in women through meal-time conversation about their sexual experiences and pursuits. While the availability or suitability of girlfriends and potential wives is a profoundly serious matter, such discourse tends to be veiled in light-hearted banter, joking and bravado. Middle-aged and older men sometimes join in these mirthful conversations, but as seen in Case 2, concerning a love medicine incident, they also provide cautionary voices, reminding their younger colleagues of sexually-charged situations that are fraught with risk and

peril. Indeed, the abduction of a young Chipewyan woman from the community represents an existential double-bind. The growing physical separation of Chipewyan men and women, itself a profound dilemma, also may be perceived as contributing to the vulnerability of women to malevolent forces outside or beyond the community. An uncomfortable implication, especially for Chipewyan men, is the growing challenge of protecting family members at a distance.

Apart from interethnic or intercultural discord, love medicine has other insidious ramifications. Theoretically, Chipewyan men may obtain love medicine or love magic from Cree specialists to attract and/or seduce Chipewyan women from their own community. This kind of sexual deception by members of the same community may not have the serious overtones of an abduction by outsiders. Yet, it is something regarded as immoral, repugnant and potentially dangerous by Chipewyan women, as one woman stated (Jarvenpa 1982a:294-296):

They say if a man (Chipewyan man) uses love medicine that a woman will like that man, will stay with him, maybe as long as seven years. But if she ever finds out that he used Cree medicine then she will leave him for sure. She'll never even be able to look at that guy again.

Until recently the Chipewyan hunting economy involved cooperation between women and men in pre-kill travel, preparations and logistics and in post-kill butchering, processing and storage. The post-1950s segregation of the sexes, therefore, has created a vexing breach in the social relations of production and its spiritual-ideological dimension.<sup>15</sup> This is cogently expressed in Victor Lynx's lament in Case 1: "Women are in the village, and men are always in the bush. It's no good." This sentiment is expressed frequently by both men and women and is, in effect, a trope-like crystallization of the unforeseen costs of rapid economic and social change. The repeated utterance of this sentiment, coupled with stories about absent or "missing women," constitutes a distinctively poignant iconic metadiscourse at men's bush meals.

The whole corpus of conversations, behaviors and rituals surrounding men's bush meals may be viewed as a powerful, meaning-laden use of specific landscapes and locales comprising *Kesyehot'ine* historical territory. Memorable meals and conversations may occur at base camps within hunting and trapping territories, at portages, along winter trails, and at other sites, some of which have been utilized by generations of Chipewyan families since the late 18th century. These realities resonate with Appaduari's (1996:178-199) ideas about the cultural production of "locality" as a structure of feeling and an ideology of situated community. Thus, even as women have withdrawn from many of these bush spaces and places over the past 50 years, men continue to claim or reclaim them as quintessentially Chipewyan. Arguably, men's pervasive conversations about women are a way of inserting them back into these spaces, that is, symbolically restoring a complete community of Chipewyan families in their ancestral landscape.

Chipewyan men's discursive preoccupation with women reflects the inescapable reality of the segregation of the sexes ushered in by political economic changes in the post-1950s era. The impact of these changes on the division of labor and the bush economy continues to reverberate throughout Chipewyan society today. What is missing from my analysis at this point is a parallel women's discourse about men. How that discourse is structured and what it might reveal await further research.<sup>16</sup>



A final thought concerns the rich semiotic fields created by food talk. As we have seen, Chipewyan men's meals generate engaging conversation *about*, *around*, *through*, and *as* food. Occasionally, all of these semiotic operations coalesce within the same conversations to communicate particularly powerful and revealing assessments of the changing sexual division of labor, the loss of women from the bush landscape, and larger social transformations. Thus, men talk *about* harvesting and processing moose or whitefish, among other food animals, while eating *around* and sharing those very animals, the bush foods which represent (or communicate) the men's gendered and ethnic identities and which nourish them emotionally through the bonding of mealtime discourse. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that all this semiosis is confined to the expressive and symbolic realm. People learn from their talk, and from learning flows the potential for action, social change, and adaptation to altered circumstances.

The epilogue which follows is meant to highlight the potential linkage between talk, socialization and instrumental outcome. Some men's meal-time conversations have a didactic tone, whereby older men are providing cautionary tales, lessons, and far from subtle advice to younger partners or companions. Such occasions are good examples of talk as food or talk as sustenance, in this case sustenance for a young male audience. As the epilogue below reveals, such conversation is meant to both teach and sustain people as they attempt to comprehend and cope with the uncertain and the unfathomable. The scenario also illustrates how specific topics, such as the Mary Ptarmigan incident, discussed at previous meal gatherings can resurface repeatedly at later gatherings among different diners.

These realities suggest that there may be a payoff in paying more attention to both gender and generational differences in varying conversational settings. In future research on the food-talk nexus, several questions might be profitably addressed: 1) How do men's mealtime conversations vary from women's, both in specific content and semiotic organization?, 2) How are particular stories, accounts, and interpretations reproduced or transformed as they are communicated at multiple meal gatherings over time?, 3) How does mealtime conversation operate as a socialization or instructional medium?, and 4) In what ways do changes in food traditions and food culture alter the semiotics of mealtime discourse?

## Epilogue

Months after Mary Ptarmigan had safely returned to her family in Patuanak, her ordeal remained a prime topic of conversation and speculation. I was sharing a meal of boiled ducks, bannock and tea with a three-man team of fishermen a day's travel down river from the village. As the men dipped their mugs into a simmering tea pail, they speculated about the movement of storm clouds in the western sky and likely places to set their gill nets for pickerel the following day. Eventually, the conversation shifted to Mary Ptarmigan. Questions were posed, but there were few conclusive answers. Had Mary recovered from her ordeal? How was her family coping with the situation? Were other local women vulnerable to love medicine assaults?

Two younger men in our group, Jeremy Lynx and Rene Stonypoint, repeatedly expressed their dismay at the malevolence and sheer audacity of the Cree abductors in taking Mary, a distant cousin of both Chipewyan men. The senior member of the fishing team, Joe Whitefish, a man in his mid-50s, listened quietly while he tended the fire. Eventually, he broke into the conversation: "Yeah, like we're always telling you young people, you have to be careful around these Cree people. You know, they have a lot of medicine." He continued in this manner for a few minutes, delivering his caution as a gentle harangue. Then he shifted gears: "Okay, so the Cree have strong love medicine. We have our magicians too. Remember *Labidsas*?" The latter was a powerful Chipewyan *inkonzedene*, literally a person of power, dream person, shadow person, or "magician,"

one who commanded considerable knowledge and (super)natural power. *Labidsas* lived sometime in the unspecified historical past and is a prominent figure in Chipewyan folklore and myth-histories.

To make his point, Joe Whitefish repeated a tale about *Labidsas* which the younger men, no doubt, had heard versions of many times before. Under the present circumstances, the account gained new salience. In this particular rendering, *Labidsas* was confronted by a powerful Cree medicine woman (*manitukasiu* in Cree) on the Churchill River who demanded a gift or payment. *Labidsas* refused and was attacked by the old woman's sorcery, involving several near-death experiences before reaching his home: a violent storm, an attack by wolves, and a lethal fish hook embedded in his body. At the last instant, *Labidsas* summoned his spirit-animal helper, Wolverine, who removed the fish hook and sent it under the earth and upward into the old Cree woman, killing her instantly.<sup>17</sup>

At a symbolic level, the folktale solved a serious problem and restored order to the world. Arguably, Joe Whitefish selected this story out of a repertoire of tales because it was semiotically appropriate to the occasion and context of the meal. Even though the story plot reversed the male-female power dynamic (Cree woman assaults Chipewyan man) experienced in the Mary Ptarmigan case (Cree men, with assistance from their mother, assault Chipewyan woman), ultimately the Chipewyan were portrayed as victorious over their Cree adversaries. In effect, Joe Whitefish's take-home message for his young fishing partners seemed to be: it is not good that our women and men live apart, it is not good that our young women are preyed upon by malicious outsiders, but we Chipewyan (*Dene*) have the power to overcome these problems and endure.

By juxtaposing the actions of *Labidsas*, the Chipewyan *inkonzedene* and culture hero, with the abduction and rescue of Mary Ptarmigan, Joe Whitefish drew upon historically familiar themes of inter-societal conflict, sorcery and counter-sorcery to offer a calming perspective, if not a resolution to the current dilemma regarding absent or missing women. His narration became one more current in the stream of iconic metadiscourse about missing women that has been particularly resonant in conversations at Chipewyan men's bush meals.

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## Endnotes

1. Following Kiesling's (2007) ideas about masculinities and language, the jocularity and braggadocio displayed by young Chipewyan men may be seen as a form of "homosocial bonding" (rather than sexual interest) in constructing a masculine identity. Older men, with established careers as hunters and heads of families, seem to project a quieter confidence and masculinity with fewer words and less theatricality at meal gatherings. While linguists and sociolinguists have been theorizing about gender and language for several decades, most studies have focused on women's performance and use of language. See, for example, Cameron and Kulick (2003) and Lakoff (1975). As Kiesling (2007:653) notes, men have been "relatively invisible" in this area of research. As a result, men tend to be treated as a homogeneous group with insufficient empirical evidence on how different kinds of men actually talk and perform different cultural models of masculinity. While secondary to its focus on food and language, the present paper also offers new ethnographic data and contexts regarding men's discourse. [▶](#)

2. The strong connection between commensality and sociability has been noted by numerous scholars working in varied cultural settings. The serving of food often becomes an occasion for sociable talk or, metaphorically, the sharing of words resembles the commensal partaking of meals. Such themes are common in the literature of the European Renaissance (Jeanneret 1991). Among Sarakatsani Greek shepherds, as observed by Campbell (1964:191), the evening meal is a time when "the whole family, men, women and children, sit or lie around the hearth in no fixed order, laughing, gossiping and asking riddles." In yet another context, Lessa (1966:14, 20-21) notes that the Ulithians of Micronesia take their evening meals in large "commensal units," a distinct form of social organization separate from nuclear families and matrilineages, wherein people savor food, fellowship and conversation. [▶](#)

3. Among other things, these changes included a variety of federal and provincial government programs for wildlife conservation, housing, health and welfare, a local school, and increased transfer payments from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development resulting in a consolidation of services and concentration of the formerly dispersed Chipewyan population of the upper Churchill River region into one major, permanent settlement at Patuanak. Most of these people have Treaty status as members of the federally recognized English River First Nation (formerly the English River Band) established by Treaty No. 10 in 1906. [▶](#)

4. There is a third meal type, the public festival-ceremonial meal. These are not mundane daily occurrences but special commemorative occasions involving most community members and sometimes hosted or promoted by institutions, like schools, tied to regional and national interests (Jarvenpa 2008:6, 11-12). [↗](#)
5. Early in my fieldwork I was struck by the dramatic seasonal population fluctuations impacting the Chipewyan villages. After most adult men departed Patuanak for their fall-early winter traplines in 1971, for example, its population plummeted from 434 to 294, a 32 percent reduction (Jarvenpa 1980:67-69). For months at a time, Patuanak became a community of women, children and a few elderly men. [↗](#)
6. Gendered complementarity of this kind is practiced in the food traditions of other societies like the Yapese. Egan, Burton and Nero (2006:38-39) note that "to truly eat," a Yapese meal must include foods from both of the paired culinary categories of ggaan, female-produced starches such as taro, and thumag, male-produced protein such as fish. [↗](#)
7. See Powers and Powers (1984) for a discussion of similar dynamics among the Oglala Lakota. Here the mediating foods include beef, coffee and fried bread (similar to bannock but fried in grease rather than baked) which are constantly in the process of becoming "nativized," that is, accepted and reassigned as culturally appropriate Oglala foods. [↗](#)
8. While I was learning the rudiments of spoken Chipewyan at the time of the fieldwork, the conversations reported here were conducted mostly in English. In the 1970s many people under 40 years of age were bilingual in Chipewyan and English. Older individuals spoke little or no English, but they often had facility in both Chipewyan and Cree and sometimes French or a patois of Cree and French. The texts presented here were recorded on the scene in shorthand scratch notes that were later expanded (during the evening of the same day) to longhand entries in formal fieldnotes. Most men I traveled with were accustomed to my practice of carrying 3x5 inch scratch notebooks in which I regularly recorded a variety of observations, conversations and measurements, and entered numerous sketches and drawings, whenever there was a pause in travel and work routines. The resulting transcripts represent streams of conversation that particularly captured my attention. They are not full accounts of everything said at the meal gatherings but, rather, portions of intact dialogue I was able to document. Such note taking was most productive when conversations were not directed at me or did not heavily involve my participation, which applies to the cases here. While I tape recorded many interviews in village settings, I found recorders awkward and too intrusive for most work in the bush. [↗](#)
9. While I have discussed this case elsewhere (Jarvenpa 2013:56-58), the present analysis includes a longer version of the men's conversation. [↗](#)
10. All personal names in this paper are pseudonyms. [↗](#)
11. Much scholarship on northern Athapaskan societies, including the Chipewyan (Oswalt and Neely 1996:94), has noted the inferior or subordinate status of women in "traditional" or early historical circumstances as depicted by European explorers and fur traders. See, for example, Samuel Hearne's (1795) accounts of the Chipewyan in the late 1760s and early 1770s. For ethnographic analyses of Chipewyan gender relations in recent times see Jarvenpa (2004), Jarvenpa and Brumbach (1995, 2006), and Sharp (1995). Regarding marriage, it is worth noting that in recent history husbands have been on average about six years older than their brides. This age gap between marriage partners may be enough to produce different social-psychological conditions for men and women vis-à-vis their natal families. The new groom, who is beginning to test his status as an independent producer in the community, may be somewhat less emotionally attached to his parents than his young bride, who has had less opportunity to develop a social identity and persona outside the environment of her natal family. Indeed, the full transition to adulthood and married status for women is made less abrupt and less traumatic by bringing their new husbands into their parent's home for a short period in a matrilocal residence and bride service arrangement which may last a year or two (Jarvenpa 2004:373-374). [↗](#)
12. Fictive name. [↗](#)

13. It should be noted that Cree love medicine or love magic is a sensitive issue which is not readily discussed with outsiders. The term "medicine" suggests a substance which is ingested by the target or victim of one's desire, but this may not always be the case. While more research is needed in this area, some clues regarding ritual procedures derive from the Plains Cree, culturally-related neighbors of the Western Woods Cree immediately to the south along the Saskatchewan River. One of Mandelbaum's (1940:255) informants provides an account of love medicine as a form of sympathetic magic. In this case, a Plains Cree man who wished to attract a young wife who kept leaving him approached an old man, the owner of the medicine, and offered him his clothing and a dog to be cooked as an offering to the spirit of the medicine. In return, the old man prepared two bark figures, representing the male client and his wife. Then, with a stick containing love medicine he touched the heart areas of the bark figures. That night the young wife awoke thinking of her husband, and, according to Mandelbaum's informant, she returned to him and never left him again. [▶](#)

14. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this particular interpretation. [▶](#)

15. Chipewyan cosmological or sacred power is inkonze. It is the personal knowledge and power that people obtain from spirit-animal beings in dreams and then demonstrate in their hunting prowess. Men rarely refer to their inkonze directly. If a hunter anticipates success he may acknowledge that he has been "dreaming good." Likewise, repeated references to "bad luck" usually indicate a spiritually deprived condition. At the same time, however, persistent "bad luck," in hunting, trapping and fishing ventures also may be interpreted as a consequence of the recent segregation of men and women and its subsequent undermining of the complementary features of the sexual division of labor. In this sense, the spiritual and the material are closely intertwined. See Sharp (1991) and Smith (1973) for interpretations of inkonze or inkoze among northern Chipewyan groups. [▶](#)

16. Some recent recommendations for future research on gender in hunter-gatherer societies include the use of paired biographies or life histories of husbands and wives, or brothers and sisters, in order to contextualize individual choices and actions of men and women within particular historical circumstances and cultural milieus (Jarvenpa and Brumbach 2014:1253-1255). Such an approach would be useful for understanding how both Chipewyan men and women have developed discursive styles around and through food. [▶](#)

17. For a longer version of this tale, see Jarvenpa (1982b). [▶](#)

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