

# Prophets, Priests and Preachers: Dene Shamans and Christian Missions in the Nineteenth Century

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## Article abstract

Throughout the nineteenth century, European and Canadian observers recorded instances of “prophets” arising among the Dene in the northwest. These men and women reported having travelled to the land of the spirits or to heaven, where they learned new rules for human behaviour which would bring about a change of circumstances for the better. Missionaries of the Church Missionary Society and particularly the Oblates of Mary Immaculate were concerned about these events and interpreted them in a variety of ways. Anthropologists and historians have considered similar postcontact events in North American Indian societies as “revitalization movements” and “crisis cults.” These concepts are examined and found somewhat misleading when applied to the Dene prophets. Instead, the activities of these prophets are interpreted as manifestations of traditional cultural responses to the various pressures of life in a harsh northern environment.

# Prophets, Priests and Preachers: Dene Shamans and Christian Missions in the Nineteenth Century

KERRY ABEL

## *Résumé*

*Throughout the nineteenth century, European and Canadian observers recorded instances of "prophets" arising among the Dene in the northwest. These men and women reported having travelled to the land of the spirits or to heaven, where they learned new rules for human behaviour which would bring about a change of circumstances for the better. Missionaries of the Church Missionary Society and particularly the Oblates of Mary Immaculate were concerned about these events and interpreted them in a variety of ways. Anthropologists and historians have considered similar postcontact events in North American Indian societies as "revitalization movements" and "crisis cults." These concepts are examined and found somewhat misleading when applied to the Dene prophets. Instead, the activities of these prophets are interpreted as manifestations of traditional cultural responses to the various pressures of life in a harsh northern environment.*



*Au cours du 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle, des observateurs canadiens et européens ont fait mention de la présence des "prophètes" parmi les Dene du nord-ouest. Ces hommes et ces femmes rapportèrent avoir voyagé au pays des esprits ou au ciel, où ils apprirent de nouvelles règles de comportement humain qui pourraient apporter des changements positifs. Les missionnaires de la Church Missionary Society et plus particulièrement les Oblats de Marie-Immaculée étaient préoccupés par ces événements façons. Des anthropologistes et des historiens ont considéré de semblables manifestations post contact dans les sociétés indiennes nord-américaines comme des "mouvements de revitalisation" et des "cultes de crise". Nous faisons ici l'examen de ces concepts pour les juger quelques peu trompeurs lorsqu'on les applique aux prophètes Dene. Nous interprétons plutôt les activités de ces prophètes comme des réactions culturelles traditionnelles aux diverses pressions que comporte la vie quotidienne dans le dur environnement nordique.*

When Sir John Franklin visited Fort Chipewyan in 1820, he reported that its inhabitants had recently constructed a tower for the purposes of keeping a watchful eye on area Indians, who were believed to be contemplating an attack on the post. "They had been instigated to this rash design," Franklin recorded, by an Indian

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This paper is an edited version of one presented to the Annual Meeting. My thanks to those who commented on it at the meeting and the comments of the reviewers; some suggestions have been incorporated.

“who had acquired great influence over his companions by his supposed skill in necromancy.” This Indian had predicted that important changes were about to occur in people’s lives, that scarcity would give way to plenty, and that the whites would soon be replaced by traders who would “supply their wants in every possible manner.”<sup>1</sup> It was not the first observation, nor would it be the last, of a Dene prophet calling on his people in anticipation of an improvement in the social order. Who were these prophets? What role did they play in precontact Dene society, and how did they respond to the pressures of the fur trade and mission eras in the North? Answers to these questions help to shed light on some of the fundamental issues in the history of Indian-white contact in North America. Were native peoples forced into dependence on the imported economy and did their social systems crumble away under European pressures? Did technological change necessitate a change in world view or cultural value systems? One small aspect of these questions will be examined through a study of the response of Dene shamans to the Christian missionaries.

Early observers of the Athapaskan-speaking people of the North were generally very vague on the subject of religious practices and beliefs. Language difficulties and a reluctance to share information of such importance must surely have contributed to this lack of understanding. Nevertheless, some general observations may be advanced regarding Dene beliefs and practices in the latter decades of the eighteenth century on the eve of direct contact with Europeans.

Rather than separating the natural and supernatural, the Dene viewed the environment as an integral unit. A person’s life was not a linear progression through a series of events culminating in a final passage to another world which was unknowable in natural or human terms. Instead, a lifetime was experienced simultaneously in both physical and spiritual worlds. A skilled person could travel at will between the worlds, and communicate with all of it, including animals, other human souls, and unnamed spirits. Those spirits were of constant concern. They affected all areas of life from success in the hunt to illness or the weather. Therefore, it is somewhat artificial to attempt a discussion of Dene religion because of this world view. Any discussion of their social customs is necessarily also one of their religious beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Dene, events were never randomly caused, since all were precipitated by the activities of spirits and men. The universe was governed by moral rules which might be unstated and yet were unbreachable or severe consequences might result. Individuals could adopt a personal spirit-guide who would help them through life if personal taboos and rituals were carefully observed. Contact with a spirit-guide might be sought for individual aid or for community guidance. People who had particular skill in communicating with the spirits were

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1. John Franklin, *Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea in 1819–22* (London, 1829), II: 44–45.
  2. See chapter 2 of K. Abel, “The Drum and the Cross: An Ethnohistorical Study of Mission Work Among the Dene,” PhD diss., Queen’s University, 1984.

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accorded respect for as long as their talents and contacts proved effective. These shamans were not members of an organized "priesthood" but none the less played an important role within each band. They cured or prevented disease, answered questions about the future or distant loved ones, and might even invoke the spirits against an enemy. European observers reported most frequently on the curative ceremonies of the shamans. Samuel Hearne was the first to note that the "Northern Indian" (Chipewyan) healers worked to cure the sick through both magical ceremonies and sleight-of-hand. He therefore referred to them as "conjurers."<sup>3</sup> Nineteenth-century observers noted the continuing existence of these customs. Sir John Franklin described the construction of a special tent for the healing ceremony, into which the shaman would retreat for several days of fasting before the patient would be presented to him. The shaman then chanted over the patient and called on the evil spirit which was distressing the patient to withdraw.<sup>4</sup> In another technique, an incision would be made in the flesh and a small bone or other object, said to be from the spirit causing the illness, would be withdrawn.<sup>5</sup> Émile Petitot, an Oblate missionary and early ethnologist, observed yet another variation at Great Slave Lake in 1863, in which the patient first confessed his errors to the shaman. As Petitot described it, "Finally, when the patient has confessed everything, the shaman brings down on him the Far-off Spirit, his own familiar, which, entering into the sick man, takes away his sins, whereupon the disease immediately leaves him."<sup>6</sup>

The importance of the shaman in treating illness or in other communication with the spirits must not be overstated, however. Every individual could enter into a personal relationship with the spirits, so every individual had access to such power. Since shamans did not have a monopoly on such skills, there was no need for an organized priesthood. Because some people were clearly more successful in this aspect of life, however, they would be respected as shamans while their abilities remained proven, and they could influence considerable numbers of people with their prophecies and proposals for individual and community behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

Contacts with the spirit world were generally made in dreams, during which the dreamer's soul would undertake a journey to meet a spirit or spirits.<sup>8</sup> There is little evidence to suggest that the dream quest was a deliberately sought adolescent rite-of-passage in Dene society; none the less, many people reported having had the

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3. Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort...* (Toronto, 1958), 123-6, 138-43.

4. Franklin, *Journey*, 56-7.

5. Émile Grouard, *Souvenirs de mes soixante ans d'apostolat dans l'Athabaska-Mackenzie* (Winnipeg & Lyons, 1923), 118.

6. Petitot, *Traditions Indiennes du Canada nord-ouest* (Paris, 1886), 418ff. The quotation is translated by A.G. Morice and quoted in "Dénés," entry in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York, 1928), IV: 639. Confession was also noted by George Keith in 1814 in a letter to Roderick Mackenzie; see L.R. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la compagnie du nord-ouest* (New York, 1960), II: 107.

7. Abel, "The Drum and the Cross."

8. See one particularly interesting discussion in Robin Ridington, "Beaver Dreaming and Singing," *Anthropologica* N.S. 13, 1-2 (1971): 115-28.

experience. Soul travel is also reported regularly in Dene oral tradition. For example, in 1808, North West Company trader George Keith transcribed some of the tales of the "Liard" Indians, including one in which the people recalled a catastrophe in which the sun stopped providing heat or light and a great snowfall threatened to kill all living things. The people proceeded on a great quest to consult the various members of the animal world regarding an appropriate course of action to bring back the sun.<sup>9</sup> In another tale, a man leaves his wife to take up residence on the moon.<sup>10</sup> One very full account of such a dream-quest experience was included in a recent volume of Dene stories recorded originally by Émile Petitot. A very powerful man called "Miracle Worker" follows the souls of dead men through a hole in the base of the sky; he dwells among the souls while his body lies dead for two days. Once he is restored to life, he is able to report on the life of the spirits to the people.<sup>11</sup> Dreams, spiritual journeys, and the integration of the "natural" and "supernatural" were thus key elements of the Dene world view, just as they were with so many other North American Indian societies.

Fur trade activity in the Athabasca and Mackenzie districts intensified in the early years of the nineteenth century. Fierce competition between the Hudson's Bay and the North West companies contributed a most unpleasant chapter to the history of Indian-European contact, as W.A. Sloan has described.<sup>12</sup> The usually peaceful Dene grew restless and uneasy, avoiding contact with the posts and contemplating what action might be taken. During the winter of 1812-13, the North West Company party at Fort Nelson was killed by a group of area Indians,<sup>13</sup> and rumours reached Fort Chipewyan about the same time that a similar plan was afoot in the Athabasca district. The role of a shaman in instigating this latter plan has already been noted. The North West Company finally decided to withdraw from the Mackenzie trade for at least a season.

European and Canadian traders learned to deal with the Dene more carefully after these and other incidents, and a greater awareness of Indian concerns and activities becomes apparent in the literature. Nevertheless, there are very few recorded instances of "prophet" activities between 1818 and 1858. Two examples are noted by Sir John Franklin, the first of which has already been described. The second occurred about three years after the excitement at Fort Chipewyan, and involved the use of dogs. Franklin wrote of the Chipewyan Indians,

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9. Masson, *Les bourgeois*, 80.

10. *Ibid.*, 86-87.

11. Petitot, *The Book of Dene* (Yellowknife, 1976), 32.

12. "The Native Response to the Extension of European Traders into the Athabasca and Mackenzie Basin, 1770-1814," *Canadian Historical Review* 60 (September 1979): 281-99.

13. George Keith to Roderick MacKenzie, January 1814, cited in Masson, *Les bourgeois*, 125.

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a superstitious fanatic so strongly pressed upon their minds the impropriety of employing these animals, to which they were related, for the purposes of labour, that they universally resolved against using them any more, and, strange as it may seem, destroyed them.<sup>14</sup>

Arctic explorer Thomas Simpson reported an incident at Fort Confidence in the 1830s when the "chief conjurer" there claimed he had undertaken a spirit journey to visit Simpson's camp and predicted that the party would be killed by the Inuit.<sup>15</sup> Anthropologist Robert Janes cites W.H. Hooper's report of prophecies at Great Slave Lake at midcentury:

Not many years ago a report was prevalent amongst those of the Slave Lake Quarter that their dead had been restored to life, and had established a fort in the interior, where food and supplies of all kinds were to be obtained in profusion. So strong was this belief, that great numbers made pilgrimages to the spot designated, and many died of famine and privation in consequence.<sup>16</sup>

After midcentury, however, reports of such claims become much more common, partially because the number of outside observers increased, but also because these new observers were much more concerned about the prophets. European and Canadian missionaries reported regularly to their superiors, devoting particular attention to those individuals who confronted them directly, or who seemed to demonstrate the most persistent interest in alternative religious ideas. Presenting themselves as possessors of the only religious truth, representatives of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Church Missionary Society began a competition for northern souls which was to last several generations.<sup>17</sup> The Dene responded with polite hospitality, but did not accept the new messages directly. They waited for tangible demonstrations of the newcomers' powers, just as they expected demonstrations of power from their own shamans. Once a missionary had established some credibility through a medical cure or other act, he had to face the possibility of shifting allegiances as people turned to other, more successful shamans.<sup>18</sup> A wide range of personal responses is evident from the historical record.

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14. Franklin, *Journey*, 60.

15. Thomas Simpson, *Narrative on the Discoveries of the North Coast of America, 1836-39* (London, 1843), 315-6.

16. Quoted in R.R. Janes and J.H. Kelley, "Observations on Crisis Cult Activities in the Mackenzie Basin," mss. for Department of Archaeology, University of Calgary, 1975. Original not seen.

17. Methodist missionary James Evans visited Ile à la Crosse briefly in 1844; Abbé Thibeault arrived the following year. The first permanent Roman Catholic mission in Athabasca was founded at Fort Chipewyan in 1849, and both Anglicans and Roman Catholics arrived in the Mackenzie District in 1858. Mission stations (both temporary and permanent) proliferated rapidly throughout the NorthWest thereafter.

18. Abel, "The Drum and the Cross," ch. 6, "The Dene Response" and 311ff. Dene responses are also discussed in Martha McCarthy, "The Missions of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate to the Athapaskans, 1846-1970," PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 1981, where the author argues the Indians developed an essentially syncretic religion following the introduction of Christian teaching.

Some Indians adopted elements of Christian teaching which appeared to be more useful or successful than the paths taught them by their old spirit-mentors. Others learned to express themselves to the missionaries in ways which the Europeans found tolerable, and yet could cling inwardly to their old beliefs. As the missionaries frequently lamented, the Dene seemed to "possess two minds in the matters of religion."<sup>19</sup> In the longer term, elements of Christian belief and practice had been incorporated into the lives of the majority of the northern Indians, although the persistence of traditional concepts was noted by many observers.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, those individuals who stood to lose the most from the arrival of the missionaries were their direct competitors, the shamans. Men and women who had sought positions of respect and prominence amongst their families found themselves challenged by these outsiders. The Dene prophets did not acquiesce. Instead, they continued to assert their capabilities in dealing with the spirits, and offered alternative visions of the world which were intended to undermine mission teaching. Several examples of these prophets will be noted before a more general assessment of the events is attempted.

At Ile à la Crosse in 1859, a young man claimed he was the "Son of God." The youth apparently "spoke in tongues" and urged his family members to destroy all their possessions. He proclaimed that he had received a revelation in which "the heavens stooped down and the earth drew near until all came within the compass of his tent, and a voice revealed to him the will of God which had not been made known before to any man."<sup>21</sup> He said that he had learned that man could achieve eternal life here on earth, and that he had a magical bag of powerful articles to help himself and his followers. The Oblates reported that interest in his ideas lasted several years.

At Fort Chipewyan the next year, Isidore Clut, OMI reported the appearance of another prophet who claimed to have talked to God and the angels, bringing back messages of greater wisdom than those of the priest. The prophet proclaimed

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19. William Spendlove, Fort Simpson Journal, August 1, 1884, CMS C.1/0, Public Archives of Canada, microfilm reel #A112.
  20. Abel, "The Drum and the Cross." See Hugh Brody, *Maps and Dreams* (Penguin, 1983); June Helm, *The Lynx Point People*, National Museums Bulletin #176 (Ottawa, 1961); David M. Smith, *I'ko'ze: Magico-Religious Beliefs of Contact-Traditional Chipewan [sic] Trading at Fort Resolution, N.W.T.*, National Museums Mercury Series, Paper #6 (Ottawa, 1973); Robin Ridington has written extensively on this topic as it applies to the Beaver.
  21. Several versions of this incident appear in the literature. This outline is taken from M. McCarthy, "Missions," 311-2. She bases her account on that reported by the Reverend Robert Hunt, CMS missionary at Stanley Mission, who recorded it in his journal for 5 and 11 June 1859 (PAC, microfilm reel A90). Alexandre Taché recorded it in *Vingt années des missions* (Montreal, 1869), 120-2 and P.E. Breton noted it in *Vital Grandin, O.M.I.* (Paris and Montreal, 1960), 118.

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that adultery and “fornication” (Clut’s word) were no longer sins. The prophet died before gaining much support from the people,<sup>22</sup> but two years later, another Fort Chipewyan shaman performed a series of magical feats, then became immobile for eight days before issuing his predictions. When Isidore Clut challenged this shaman, the latter threatened to kill Clut.<sup>23</sup>

At Portage la Loche in 1860, two sons of a shaman named Gros Tête told the people that they had been visited by three gods who had revealed many truths to them. Interestingly enough, the young men referred to these three visitors as the Creator, Jesus, and Mary. Acting on instructions, the youths called the people together and spoke to them at length about the messages which they had received.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, no details of their message have survived.

In 1865, a devastating epidemic of scarlet fever swept along the Mackenzie; every band and community was affected, and there was little anyone could do except pray. The Indians accused the missionaries of having caused the deaths of loved ones on several occasions.<sup>25</sup> At Fort Good Hope, these accusations came from a number of individuals who claimed to have “walked in heaven” and demanded the respect of their kin accordingly. Father Seguin reported that these people competed amongst themselves for supporters.<sup>26</sup> After the epidemic had passed, people continued to predict and to promise. Again at Good Hope, in 1874, the Indians said that they had seen a man who had died that autumn, then had risen again in spring, having spent the winter with God. The prophet had brought back a series of messages for the people, stemming from the premise that God was angry at the Roman Catholic priests for making so many people die and therefore giving him so much work. The people were told that it was perfectly acceptable to work on Sunday (injunctions against labour on the Sabbath were a major feature of both Anglican and Roman Catholic teaching in the North), that it was wrong to say Mass after dark, and that it was wrong for the people to have dog teams. The prophet also predicted that another man would die and pass the winter with God so as to be able to return with the same message.<sup>27</sup>

A more specifically antiwhite prophecy was recorded by Father Émile Petitot at Fort Good Hope in 1878. There, a couple of seers prophesied that a great flood would sweep away the mission and trading post at that place, destroying all the

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22. Clut to Vegreville, 28 December 1860, PAC, microfilm reel M-2073, as cited in McCarthy, “Missions,” 315–6.
  23. Clut to Faraud, 12 June 1862, Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa (hereafter referred to as AD), G-LPP635, cited in *ibid.*, 316.
  24. Vegreville to Taché, 29 July 1860, Archives of Archbishopric of St. Boniface, TO 120-1, cited in *ibid.*, 314–5.
  25. It is interesting to note that I have been unable to find records of similar accusations against HBC traders during the same period in the company’s records.
  26. Seguin to Clut, 15 February 1867, AD, G-LPP2685, cited in McCarthy, “Missions,” 320–1.
  27. Seguin to Clut, 4 February 1874, AD, G-LPP2686, cited *ibid.*, 321.



white men's buildings. Not until the appointed day had passed did the Indians doubt the message. Petitot also commented that several shamans who had converted to Christianity had returned "to their old superstitions" and fallen into trances which were taken by their friends to be "the expression of divine inspiration."<sup>28</sup> Another man named Ekérichli had required the Good Hope Indians to bow before him, confess their sins to him, and be rebaptized by him. His reputation among his followers was somewhat tarnished the following year, however, when his wife reported a dream vision of her own in which it was revealed to her that Ekérichli was a great liar, and that she was the Blessed Virgin sent to the people to bring them back to God.<sup>29</sup>

While most of the references to these shamans come from the Roman Catholic mission sources, one particularly interesting account was reported by the Reverend William Spendlove of the CMS. At Fort Simpson in 1880, he described the activities of an Indian who had emerged from a four-day trance to tell the people of the secrets of the unseen world which he had visited. He prepared an elaborate painting on a deerskin to represent the future world, hoping that this map would be used by the Indians to teach each other after his death. "In the spring he died as he had said to the sorrow of all his friends who almost worshipped him," Spendlove marvelled. "The parchment was brought here this spring for the Bishop and it is really wonderful."<sup>30</sup>

Sometimes the contests between shaman and missionary involved more than discussions of spiritual power. At Fort Resolution in 1899, a man shot and killed his sister-in-law; the NWMP report commented that there was no apparent motive.<sup>31</sup> Newspaper stories circulated across Canada explained, however, that

the crime was committed through Indian superstition. The sister-in-law had received some education at one of the missions and the Indian was a medicine man in his tribe. When his sister-in-law returned to live among her people he saw in her an evil spirit that menaced the welfare of his band. He thereupon, so it is stated, went to her tepee and shot her, returning and telling his people that the evil spirit had gone away.<sup>32</sup>

Most of these prophet episodes were shortlived, with little evidence for any widespread or organized response lasting more than a season or two. One possible exception may have occurred among the Kutcha- (or Yukon Flats) Kutchin. During his travels among these peoples, British adventurer Michael Mason noted in 1923 that "there is a belief among the old Indians. . . that some day an Indian Messiah will be born who will rid the country of white men. . . while keeping tea, tobacco

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28. Letter from Petitot, 1 June 1878, published in *Les Missions des Oblats* 17: 65 (March 1879), 6-7 (my translation).

29. *Ibid.*, 8.

30. Spendlove to CMS, Fort Simpson, 30 November 1880, CMS C.1/0, PAC, microfilm reel #A109.

31. Harwood Steele, *Policing the Arctic* (London, 1936), 69.

32. *Edmonton Bulletin*, n.d., reprinted in *Boisvevain Globe*, 23 September 1899.

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and metal implements.” Mason attributed this belief to the teachings of a man named Kaihaenjiuk who had lived among the Kutchin some two hundred years earlier.<sup>33</sup> No other record of such a lengthy anticipation of prophecy fulfillment has been found to date, however.

Clearly, Dene prophets continue to function. Anthropologists June Helm and Eleanor Leacock reported a “vigorous [prophet] movement” which had spread in the 1960s from the Beaver-Slave in northern Alberta to the Dogrib and Great Bear Lake people further north. They commented:

Each group has a major prophet who commands a set of adherents. . . . The Dogrib prophet, for example, has been to heaven and spoken with God. He has taken as his charge the regeneration of his people through public preaching and exhortation to virtue (notably, abstention from alcohol), and the leading of group religious ceremonies of prayer, offerings, and dancing.<sup>34</sup>

At an Edmonton seminar held in 1977, Julian Hardisty, a resident of Fort Simpson, explained the spiritual work of Nicola Black in this way:

He has his own drummers, five drummers who travel along with him. For the last three years now he has come over from Fort R[—] down to Fort R[—]. He takes a boat from there down to Fort Norman, and performs the drum dance as he goes. This is more or less a spiritual dance — that is what he calls it. . . . The stories he told them were mostly religious. I do not think it is the same religion the Churches go in for. He is like — like some sort of Prophet. He can foresee things ahead and he sees that somebody is taking a drink. If somebody drinks and goes to his dances, he just quits drinking right there.<sup>35</sup>

The messages of these shaman-prophets follow a basic pattern, but vary in their specific manifestations. Nearly all messages were brought to the people following the shaman's visit to the spirit world, during which his physical body appeared to be suspended in a trancelike state. Some messages promised that the world would be rid of the whites if people agreed to follow prescribed behaviour. Later in the nineteenth century, there seemed to have been few who were willing to predict the disappearance of the whites; instead the message was a promise that the world would be a better place in general if people followed the new rules. Frequently, the shamans opposed the use of dogs as beasts of burden, an imported concept which conflicted with the traditions of many of the Dene people who believed themselves to be descendants of dogs, and that one's relatives had to be respected. Sexual behaviour was also an important part of the prophets' messages. Practices which the fur traders and missionaries defined as “adultery” and “fornication” were given a stamp of approval by the shamans; traditional behaviour was being asserted as a positive value. Food was the final element with which many

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33. *The Arctic Forests* (London, 1924), 61, 194–9.

34. “The Hunting Tribes of Subarctic Canada,” in Leacock and Lurie, *North American Indians in Historical Perspective* (New York, 1971), 368–9.

35. E.H. Waugh and K.D. Prithpaul, *Native Religious Traditions* (Waterloo, 1979), 66.

of the prophecies were concerned. The people were promised abundance and plenty if they followed the shaman's rules. Hence, the natural environment would become cooperative rather than threatening.

Some of the shamans commented directly about the missionaries in their prophecies. The priests were accused either of being wrong about many things, or of not doing their job properly. In some cases, threats were levied against a particular priest, and in at least one case, an Indian who had chosen to follow the priest was killed. Clearly, these shamans considered that they were involved in a serious power struggle against the foreigners. The idea of shamanistic power struggles was apparently not foreign to the Dene before contact, and it persisted well into the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> Contests to demonstrate superior spiritual power among Dene shamans, or against Christian missionaries, are scarcely distinguishable phenomena.

In spite of the fact that these prophets expressed ideas and behaviour which demonstrate an important continuity in the Dene world-view and religious beliefs, there are also some interesting outside influences evident in their messages. The prophets seemed to be expressing various degrees of tolerance for Christianity and the European world-view. The idea of heaven was merged with the aboriginal concept of a place where spirits dwelt, so that the Christian idea of an afterlife was enriched by the Dene belief that some people could visit that unseen world while still alive. Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary (as well, sometimes, as other saints) were readily accepted as spirits like the others with whom the Indians were already acquainted. The man who claimed he was the Son of God and the woman who believed she was a reincarnated Mary demonstrated the immediacy with which the Dene viewed the role of these spirits in the world. Other shamans accepted some limited aspects of the Christian faith while rejecting others. Baptism, for example, seemed a popular ceremony useful for pledging allegiance of one form or another,<sup>37</sup> and several of the prophets called on their supporters to come to them to receive this "sacrament."

All missionaries (and most particularly, the Oblates) recognized the importance of the threat these Dene shamans posed to the ultimate result of mission work, if only because of the shamans' ability to sway their followers. Yet the explanations which the missionaries proposed for the meaning of the prophets' teachings varied considerably. Most missionaries refused to acknowledge that the Dene had any religious beliefs, and so they were faced with the problem of explaining the existence of the shamans. Some, like Father (later Bishop) Grouard, recognized them as traditional medicine men or "jongleurs" who "instinctively" understood the dangers posed by the missionaries to their power and prestige and

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36. J.J. Honigman reported power contests among Great Slave Lake shamans in 1913, in his *Ethnography and Acculturation of the Fort Nelson Slave*, Yale University Publications in Anthropology No. 33 (1946), 40.

37. See the discussion of the meaning of baptism to the nineteenth-century Dene in Abel, "The Drum and the Cross," 257-9.

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who therefore “became the unyielding enemies of the priest, using all possible means to hinder his work.”<sup>38</sup> Most of the other missionaries, however, were not so perceptive. Often they dismissed the prophets as insane or mentally unstable.<sup>39</sup> One priest, Father de Krangué at Fort Simpson, was convinced that he was witnessing a case of actual possession by the devil.<sup>40</sup> The Anglicans seemed to be less aware of the teachings of these prophets; when they were noted in mission correspondence, however, the activities of the Indians were usually attributed to “fanaticism” induced by “superstitious” Roman Catholic teachings.

If the Dene prophets were not mentally unbalanced or confused Roman Catholics, what do they represent? Anthropologists have observed the activities of “prophets” in many societies, and have noted that movements for social change frequently arise from the teachings of these individuals. A.F.C. Wallace calls these social movements “revitalization movements.”<sup>41</sup> According to his model, societies under stress experience a period of disorientation from which a prophet may arise to encourage a revival, renewal, or reworking of cultural traditions as a solution to the crisis. Wallace’s case studies of the Seneca and Delaware illustrate the vital role of individual prophets in stimulating or provoking these broader social movements.<sup>42</sup> According to Wallace, revitalization movements can be classified into a variety of subgroups. Two of these forms which are of particular interest to observers of North American Indian societies are “nativistic” movements and “millenarian” movements. Wallace defines the first as movements with an emphasis on the “elimination of alien persons, customs, values and/or material” from the community.<sup>43</sup> Millenarian movements stress an “apocalyptic world transformation engineered by the supernatural.”<sup>44</sup> Human beings are not, therefore, necessarily the sole agents of social change in some of these movements.

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38. Grouard, *Souvenirs*, 59–60 (my translation).

39. For example Clut to Faraud, 16 December 1861, cited in Gaston Carrière, “The Oblates and the Northwest, 1845–61,” Canadian Catholic Historical Association, *Study Sessions* (1970): 54.

40. Sylvio Lesage, “Sacred Heart Mission, 1858–1968,” unpublished mss., AD, BPC 513.L62, 14.

41. “Revitalization Movements,” *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 264–81; this is reprinted in abridged form in W.A. Lessa and E.Z. Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1972). There is a large body of literature on such movements; see, for example, B. Barber, “Acculturation and Messianic Movements,” *American Sociological Review* 6 (October 1941): 663–9; David Aberle, “A Note on Relative Deprivation Theory as Applied to Millenarian and Other Cult Movements,” in Lessa and Vogt, *Reader*, 527–31; Duane Champagne, “Social Structure, Revitalization Movements and State Building,” *American Sociological Review* 48 (December 1983): 754–63; and also work by Ralph Linton.

42. *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York, 1969); “New Religions among the Delaware,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 12 (Spring 1956): 1–21. The latter has been reprinted in *The Emergent Native Americans*, ed. D.E. Walker (Boston, 1972), 344–61.

43. “Revitalization Movements,” in Lessa and Vogt, *Reader*, 505.

44. *Ibid.*

Are the Dene prophets, in A.F.C. Wallace's words, promoters of "a special kind of culture change phenomenon" in a "deliberate, organized, conscious effort" intended to "construct a more satisfying culture"?<sup>45</sup> Alternatively, are these prophet movements really "crisis cults," more generalized responses to the unique cultural pressures of the contact era? Are they, perhaps, continuing manifestations of a traditional cultural response to ongoing social, economic, and political tension?

Certainly none of these prophets initiated a new social order or cultural transformation on any broad scale, but implicit in every message was the belief that the world could be made a better place if people followed certain guidelines. A "better world" might mean anything from a more plentiful food supply to a removal of all white intruders. Clearly those hopes for improvement tended to come most often at times when the community was under stress: short-term tensions associated with fur trade problems, the arrival of a missionary, an epidemic, or a game shortage could all provide motivation.<sup>46</sup> The means to achieve this more satisfying world were apparently innovative blends of culture systems, eventually recognizing the fact that the whites were not likely to leave. A syncretism of world-views was therefore attempted to promote a more or less harmonious relationship. All these factors would seem to lead to the conclusion that Wallace's model could be applied here.

Nevertheless, there are some pieces of evidence which do not quite fit the jigsaw puzzle. None of these prophets generated an "organization" (in the European sense of the word) to perpetuate his/her teachings. Dene religious response was traditionally a highly personal phenomenon in which the individual developed and maintained a unique relationship with the universe. Flexibility of response was as important in the unseen world as it was in the seen world, so an individual's personal set of rules would change when the circumstances warranted. Thus it is hardly surprising that these patterns persisted through the nineteenth century. The prophets did not call for collective action or unwavering obedience. They reported the existence of an alternative course of action, suggested how it might improve life, and left that course of action up to the individual band members. Once a prophet had died, there was apparently little reference to his/her messages in the community thereafter.

The second issue develops from the observation that many of these prophets appear to have been engaged in a pure and simple power struggle rather than attempting to reorganize a culture. The missionaries were foreigners claiming access to a new source of power and demanding exclusive adherence from their followers. For people who had been accustomed to public recognition and respect for their access to the spirits, and their ability to engage those spirits, the missionaries must have posed a significant threat to their sense of self-worth and sense of place in the

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45. *Ibid.*, 504.

46. See the chart tracing short-term stress events, baptisms, and prophet appearances in K. Abel, "The Drum and the Cross," following 307, and the discussion in the accompanying text, 306 ff.

community. It is interesting how often reference is made to the fact that these prophets were children or spouses of shamans, or were themselves shamans prior to the episode in question. Furthermore, the existence of several competing prophets in one area (such as at Fort Good Hope) lends credence to such an interpretation.

Finally, the descriptions of these periods of prophet excitement are remarkably similar throughout the contact history of the Dene and, if early observers and Dene oral traditions provide us with accurate descriptions of precontact religious practice, then the similarities between pre- and postcontact practices are also obvious. The pattern of an individual announcing to the community that s/he has had a dream experience in which s/he travelled to the spirit world and received advice on rules by which people ought to live is quite consistent with both traditional practices and these postcontact prophet episodes.

While similarities in *form* are evident, the question remains as to whether the *content* of the spiritual messages remained consistent through the period in question. Answers are necessarily speculative. It may be impossible at this already-too-distant date to evaluate the content of these messages with any accuracy. The delicate issue of meaning is the major stumbling block. When a man said he had spoken with "God," did he mean "God" in the Christian (and European) sense, with all its connotations, or was he simply applying the term to his own set of meanings? Furthermore, we can hardly be certain that he had even used the word "God," since all these accounts come through the filter of Euro-Canadian observations. This crucial methodological problem has yet to be resolved satisfactorily.

Nevertheless, it seems useful to suggest that models such as Wallace's may not be entirely appropriate in the case of the nineteenth-century Dene.<sup>47</sup> Community stress is not a phenomenon unique to contact time; accident, famine, political tension, and unpredictability of climate had been handled by people through their religious beliefs. Problems in dealing with the Europeans were added to this list, and were dealt with according to traditional cultural mechanisms. The northern prophets were actually shamans responding, as northern shamans had responded for generations, to the problems of life in the northern environment.

Another interpretation of these activities was recently suggested by Martha McCarthy, who has argued that "the Athapaskan prophetic movements seem to be primarily religious, syncretic attempts to combine the most appealing aspects of the

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47. Robert Janes and Jane Kelley argued a similar point but for different reasons in their "Observations on Crisis Cult Activities in the Mackenzie Basin." They note that the Mackenzie cults were not well organized or widespread, nor did they develop into formal ritual because of the nature of Athapaskan social organization and environmental considerations. They argue, 164, that "lower developmental levels of crisis cults . . . may need somewhat different handling" and suggest that models "structured in terms of chronic or ongoing disequilibrium or cognitive dissonance might be more useful for recurrent crises" such as these.

new religion with those of the aboriginal religion, and to adapt it thus to Athapaskan life and culture."<sup>48</sup> While the ideas of some of the shamans do indeed appear to have been blends of Christian and traditional beliefs, others do not fit so easily into this description. Some directly countered the missionary attempt to usurp spiritual authority in the community while others may have been using only a new vocabulary for traditional concepts.

Understanding the nature of these prophet movements is important not just as an academic debate, but because of its implications for understanding the history of the Dene as a whole. The persistence of world-view and adaptive social mechanisms among Dene shamans is indicative of a continuing cultural strength which can be demonstrated in other aspects of Dene life as well.<sup>49</sup> Academic studies of the impact of missions in Canada have all too often assumed that the cultural encounter between the European missionaries and the Indians was very much one sided. They assume too easily that the missionaries were able to impose their foreign values on the aboriginal peoples, without considering the possibility that Indian culture might not have been entirely overwhelmed into submission by European authoritarianism and assumptions of inherent superiority. Only recently has a more subtle understanding of the complexity of the situation begun to surface in the literature. John Webster Grant, in *Moon of Wintertime*, points to numerous examples of "distinctly Indian" interpretation and use of Christian messages in Canada, while Henry Warner Bowden has developed a similar analysis for the American encounter.<sup>50</sup>

It remains to be seen whether the case of the nineteenth-century Dene is unique, but it is clear that the Christian message did not hurl these northern people into the depths of psychosocial dislocation. Instead, the Dene responded to the missionaries as if they were newly arrived shamans: persons claiming to possess superior abilities to contact the spirit world, and hence persons of potential utility in the struggle to survive. The Dene shamans accordingly made efforts to demonstrate their continuing worthiness in reaction to the new competition. The vocabulary may have changed somewhat, but the concepts were very traditional.

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48. McCarthy, "Missions of the Oblates," 311.

49. Abel, "The Drum and the Cross."

50. *Moon of Wintertime. Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto, 1984) and Bowden's *American Indians and Christian Missions* (Chicago, 1981). Other studies which contribute to a revision of the old assumptions about mission encounter include James Axtell, *The Invasion Within* (New York, 1985).