RST 35.2 (2016) 123–130 Religious Studies and Theology (print) ISSN 0892-2922
doi:10.1558/rsth.v35i2.32548 Religious Studies and Theology (online) ISSN 1747-5414

Feeding the Fire: Food and ReciprocityAmong the Dene

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Abstract

For the indigenous Dene of subarctic Canada, food is central to negotiating their relationships with family, animals, and the spirits of ancestors. Indigenous religions and environmental relationships are seldom discussed in terms of foodways, yet centering a discussion of Dene spirituality around the materiality and necessity of food grounds an understanding in the lived realities of Dene peoples. Dene understand animals to gift themselves as food to hunters, who in return demonstrate respect to the animal by sharing the meat within the human community and by offering meat to ancestors through ceremonies such as feeding the fire, thus maintaining social relationships with animals and ancestors through respectful reciprocity. Dene also demonstrate respect by following interspecies social conventions, protocols of respect particular to different beings which are followed by all those involved in the killing, distribution, cooking, and eating. This includes not just male hunters but also women so that animals will continue to give themselves to the people. In traditional Dene ontologies, respectful reciprocity through sharing food serves to maintain balanced and mutually beneficial relationships between social beings living in the same environment.

Keywords

indigenous religions, ontology, foodways, climate change, reciprocity, gifting

Introduction

To discuss indigenous religions is to discuss how people engage their environment. In classrooms and in academic forums this discussion may involve practical, spiritual, personal, and communal concerns, it may relate to historical, pre-contact worldviews and life-ways, and it may relate to contemporary and historical struggles for rights and resistance from colonial powers, all of which relate to relations with the environment. Dene people with whom I work in northern Canada touch on all these themes in their discussions of environmen-

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tal relationships, but the most common theme is food. Dene discuss food in terms of acquiring sustenance from the environment predominantly through hunting and fishing, food in terms of gifting what one has acquired and sharing a meal with family or at feasts, food in terms of giving back to the environment by feeding the fire, the land, and the water, and food in terms of changing dietary patterns, and restrictions placed on their caribou hunts due to rapidly declining caribou populations. Common to all these discussions is the constant theme of spirituality expressed in terms of respectful reciprocity.

Centering a discussion of indigenous Dene religion around the materiality and necessity of food grounds an understanding in the lived realities of Dene peoples. Stating that indigenous religions are tied to their environments is not novel. Yet, this statement is too often abstracted from the living environment to the realm of spirits and interior beliefs, imposing a Western dichotomy between the natural and supernatural and between the physical and the mental. To focus on food, however, is to focus on physical engagement with the immediate environment and to focus on religion as practice. In this essay I explore how Dene engage beings in their environment, including embodied animals and the spirits of ancestors in personal and social relationships consistent with holistic indigenous worldviews. Additionally, I suggest that a study of foodways reveals the need for sustenance and the sharing of food as fundamental in indigenous Dene spirituality. Dene share food offerings with beings in their environment, who in return offer aid in the hunt, forming a complex of relations negotiated through food and for food.

The Dene peoples maintain hunter-gatherer lifestyles on their ancestral homelands of northern Canada and interior Alaska. My work is predominantly with the Tłicho Dene—pronounced "CLEE-chon, de-Nay"—formerly known as Dogrib—who share in larger Dene culture, ontology, and life-ways. The Tłı̨chǫ nation lies north of Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories of Canada, between Great Slave and Great Bear lakes, and stretches to the edge of tree-line and the tundra. Many Dene still practice hunting and fishing subsistence lifestyles. The Tłı̨chǫ in particular eat diets high in fish, moose, caribou, duck, geese, small game like rabbit, muskrat, and beavers, as well as wild berries (Tłı̨chǫ 2012). Other foods have been naturalized into the traditional Dene palate, particularly easily transportable foods that can be taken into the bush such as coffee and tea, salt, rice, canned meats, and bannock bread. Tłı̨chǫ elders with whom I work predominantly eat traditional foods and prefer them to the store-bought foods that have entered the diets of younger Tłı̨chǫ individuals. The food that carries the most cultural significance and is loved by Tłı̨chǫ of all generations, however, is caribou.

In recent years the caribou have been suffering from rapid population decline that now threatens the relationship between Dene and caribou. Climate change has been the primary cause of a rapid decline in caribou populations, particularly the Bathurst herd, the main heard for Tłı̨chǫ hunters, which has declined rapidly from 350,000 animals in the 1990s to just 16,000–22,000 animals in 2015; a 93–95% decline (Government of Northwest Territories 2015). Environment

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and Natural Resources wildlife biologists state that several complex factors affect caribou viability in the Northwest Territories, including (predominantly) climate change, and to a lesser extent development (towns, roads, and diamond mines) as well as over-hunting. The biologists recommended that hunting must be limited in order to ensure caribou viability. The Government of the Northwest Territories responded by implementing a complete ban on caribou hunting beginning in January, 2010, which was met with immediate backlash from indigenous peoples, sport-hunting outfitters, and territorial residents. In the six years since the initial ban, Territorial Government and indigenous representatives have negotiated for various compromises on limiting hunting, yet the caribou population has not responded to these efforts.

Many Dene people perceive the imposition of hunting restrictions as a threat to their treaty rights and life-ways, and that the Territorial Government demonstrated an arrogance in thinking they could manage the caribou, an animal on whom the Dene have been taught to rely for their own survival. Tłı̨chǫ elders suggested to me that hunting restrictions fail to take into account that it is the caribou who determine the success of a hunt and whether to return to an area based on how respected or disrespected the animal feels (Walsh 2015). For Dene, respect is paramount to maintaining reciprocal relationships with other beings, such as caribou, who are active agents in the hunting exchange as well as active agents over their own destiny. Animals such as caribou gift themselves to hunters who in return treat this gift with respect through proper care of the animal—killing it quickly, taking nearly all the meat, and leaving the remains in neat piles to feed scavengers such as bears and ravens—and proper sharing with others. Animals in return demonstrate gratitude that their sacrifice was appreciated by gifting themselves again. In traditional Dene ontologies reciprocity between hunter and hunted maintains a balanced and mutually beneficial relationship.

Dene ontologies are predicated on a relatable world wherein human-beings directly engage other living-beings in their environment in reciprocal, social relationships. Dene relatability contrasts sharply to the Cartesian-inspired dichotomy of nature and culture prevalent in modern modern Western worldviews (Latour 1993 on Western ideologies' failed attempt to separate humanity from nature through the project of modernity). Western dichotomies between the secular and the sacred, or culture and the supernatural, are equally non-applicable to Dene and many other indigenous peoples' ontologies (Morrison 2002; Harvey 2005; Shorter 2009; and Astor-Aguilera 2010). The categories of nature, culture, and the supernatural are not separated or unified but simply do not exist as concepts and the "religious" exists within the same environment as Dene and the beings on whom they rely for food. The separation between species, then, is both a practical and a religious concern and one that must be negotiated in order to acquire food. Animals must be engaged through personal and ceremonial communication and enter a relationship with hunters, yet their relationship must not draw them too close: distance is necessary in inter-species relationships to maintain ontological difference so that one can be comfortable eating the other, and ceremony holds this tension as well.

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Communication between Dene, animals, and ancestors happens through a number of means. Here I discuss communication through dreaming, through making offerings and prayers to ancestors at grave sites, through feeding-the-fire, and finally through demonstrations of respect by sharing the gift of food with the land and water. Sharing between humans also demonstrates respect to animals and thus also presents an opportunity for communication with the environment. Communicative actions are a technique in aiding the hunt and are just as important as other practical actions such as packing the right equipment. Yet, Dene do not always carry out these actions as they are not necessary every time; whether or not a person chooses to offer food, for example, depends on their personal relationship and history with the animal and their hunting success so far.

One means of communication between hunter and hunted is dreaming. Dreaming, or *nàte* in Tłı̨chǫ, is associated with medicine power and thus relates to hunting and curing sick individuals (Helm 1994; Sharp 2001). In non-dualistic Dene ontologies dreams are real experiences wherein individuals communicate with other beings and gain practical knowledge (Goulet 1998, xxix). Dene hunters would dream of a specific animal before a hunt with whom they would later meet if the hunter successfully persuaded that animal to give itself. Ridington (1990, 88–89) describes the meeting of animal and hunter in waking life as a reunion. Historically, great Dene hunters were leaders who could meet animal leaders in dreams, such as the head caribou, and would explain to them the people's need for nourishment and request that head caribou lead the herd to the hunters. Dreaming before a hunt purportedly occurs less frequently today as contemporary Tłı̨chǫ speak of hunting dreams as a power held by their ancestors. My consultants suggest that their ancestors had harder lives than Tłı̨chǫ today—who rely on modern technologies—and developed techniques such as dreaming and formed strong relationships with beings in their environment in order to survive, relationships which remained in tact through death. Contemporary Tłı̨chǫ more often dream of a personal ancestor, rather than the animal itself, and ask the ancestor to use their power to aid in the hunt or in other matters such as medicine.

Ancestors function as intermediaries between hunters and animals and Dene often propitiate ancestors at grave sites on their way to a hunt. Dene perform *dǫ̀kw'ǫ̀ǫ̀ whetǫ̀ǫ̀*, the visiting of graves, where they clean the grave, recite prayers, leave an offering, and request aid. Offerings may be anything small that the deceased may appreciate, such as tobacco, matches, coins, or bullets. I was told the most appreciated offering is usually the foods the ancestors miss such as fish or caribou meat. Death does not represent a complete break from life as the deceased retain their personalities and preferences in death and continue to interact with the living in social relationships. Ancestors appreciate being visited by their kin; they appreciate the care that is shown to them in cleaning their grave and by the sharing of food, and in return they may offer aid in hunting or medicine. Dene may also perform a specific ceremony of giving food to ancestors through a *feeding-the-fire*.

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Feeding-the-fire, or *kǫ̀ ghàts'eèdi,* is a burnt food offering to whichever deceased beings are present at the fire. I have seen simple acts of sharing wherein Dene individuals toss a piece of their meal into the fire, without fanfare or spoken prayers, as a thank you and acknowledgment of any unseen beings who may be present. Dene also perform more formal versions of the ceremony for events such as the beginning of the school year or ground breaking on a new community building. These are group ceremonies wherein individuals typically give food to one person who places all the food pieces together into the fire while the eldest or most respected elder offers prayers. If male drummers are present they will sing and drum while the food burns.

Feeding-the-fire ceremonies do not conform to formal rules and often vary widely. Dene understand feeding-the-fire not as symbolic action but one in which the food is literally transformed by the fire into an edible state for the deceased, therefore right practice is less important than the demonstration of care through the sharing of food. Formal feeding-the-fire ceremonies align with Bourdieu's (1977, 234) assertion that a "shared meal is a ceremony of reconciliation [...] An offering of food to a patron saint or ancestor implies alliance [...] [as] it brings people together." Individual acts are not less important than group ceremonies but they are what Bourdieu (1977, 7) terms "little presents" that "keep friendship going [...] [and thereby] maintain the everyday order of social intercourse." The bonds of social reciprocity that extend beyond the living community are maintained through sharing food, often in the name of securing more food.

Sharing food also maintains bonds with other entities in the Dene environment, such as the land and waterways hunters traverse (Sharp 2001, 57). Dene often make an offering when they approach a waterway on which they have not traveled, or when they camp on an island on which they have not spent time. Apotropaic offerings of food, matches, coins, spruce boughs, or other small gifts are given with propitiations for safe travels and aid on the hunt. A Tłı̨chǫ elder demonstrated this to me by saying to a lake "my father traveled on you and had good weather and I would like to do the same." The elder appealed to the lake through a shared connection: the lake knew the elder's father and therefore he was not a stranger after all. Offerings are not selfless acts but are exchanges in order to enter or maintain a reciprocal relationship. Offerings are material aids in the negotiation of what one wants, sustenance, without upsetting and taking advantage of the giver.

Dene most commonly exchange food not with ancestors, land, or water, but with living kin; family, friends, and even strangers come together over food, and this sharing presents another opportunity to demonstrate respect to the animals. Dene say animals are aware of what becomes of their gift after death and the animals appreciate when their meat is shared and enjoyed by others. Dene are keenly aware that reciprocal gifting is necessary for maintaining social bonds which include their human, animal, and ancestral community (Simeone 1995, 153–9; Nadasdy 2003, 73). Tłı̨chǫ with whom I spend time share all foods, not just those acquired from hunting, trapping, and berry-picking, as new foods

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also offer opportunities to demonstrate respect and reciprocity with the community. However, Tłı̨chǫ most appreciate sharing traditional foods such as fish and caribou.

Scholarship on hunter-gatherers focuses on food acquisition, as the term implies, but focusing on food sharing includes a larger and more complete sense of the role of food within indigenous sociality and also allows for equal attention to male and female labour. Studies that limit the notion of hunting to the killing of animals, a predominantly male activity, impose gendered biases and miss the importance of women's labour in the efficacy of hunting (Bodenhorn 1990). Successful Dene hunters give the meat and hide to the head woman of the household and it is her responsibility to determine what is shared and with whom. After initial distribution of the uncooked meat, again it is the women who prepare, cook, and serve. Dene women's control of food means they have the responsibility of respectful sharing (demonstrating respect to both human recipients and the animals who are watching) and the power to determine who comprises their relations and who is important (who gets the best pieces and when they are fed). However, gendered labour is fluid. For example at community feasts it is often men who serve the food and Dene men have often cooked for me or otherwise offered me food. I know Dene women who hunt and trap and women are also responsible for acquiring food through berry harvesting. If the most important factor in acquiring food is an animal's determination of respectful actions then all those involved in the killing, distribution, cooking, and eating are accountable, both men and women.

Dene understand all animals to appreciate when their sacrifice is respected, but what constitutes respectful actions often differs between species. All animals consider certain actions respectful, such as returning bones, unused hide, and other remains to the land for land animals (Helm 1951, 189) and returning remains to water-ways for fish and other water animals (de Laguna and DeArmond 1995, 59–60), so that the animals may regenerate more easily when they are reborn. Other actions may be respectful to one animal but disrespectful to another. For example, it is respectful to kill muskrat quickly by hitting them on the head with a stick or axe handle but disrespectful to hit caribou and rabbits on the head; these animals will not return to that hunter or the area where the offense occurred.

Respectful actions are often categorized by scholars (Helm 2000; Nelson 1983; Ryan 1995) as rules, laws, and taboos. Rather than language that implies an institutional or cosmic penal system, I prefer a social language of interspecies social conventions. Rather than rules and laws, I see performances of etiquette in personal relationships. Dene do not speak of respectful actions in terms of cosmic law, they speak of upsetting the caribou personally if you were to hit it with a stick. Dene speak in terms of being polite or rude and they learn what constitutes politeness or rudeness from the animal.

The examples of respectful reciprocity through communicative, ceremonial actions discussed here are a small sample of the intricate relationships Dene have with animals, ancestors, and others in their environment. Dene environ-

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mental reciprocity demonstrates a non-dualistic relational ontology similar to other indigenous peoples of the Americas (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Astor-Aguilera 2010; Ingold 2000) but which contrasts sharply with the conservation perspective inherent in Canadian game laws and caribou hunting restrictions. Conservation strategies assume a dynamic of human stewardship over an objectified environment, while Indigenous ontologies understand beings in the environment to be agents in reciprocal relationships (Nadasdy 2003). Dene necessarily developed complex social relationships in order to mitigate the tension inherent in these reciprocal relationships in which one survives by the sacrifice of the other. Examining indigenous religions through foodways, in the case of the Dene and specifically through my work with the Tłı̨chǫ Dene, reveals a framework within which Dene relate to other beings in their environment with great sensitivity and knowledge, and with the goal of mutual survival. Dene religious practices are simultaneously a negotiation for food and a negotiation with food as Dene share food with ancestors, land, water-ways, and family in the hopes that they too will help feed the Dene.

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