

Notes on Ojibwa-Ottawa Pictography¹

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During recent field work among Ojibwa-Ottawa groups in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan it proved still possible to obtain a limited amount of information concerning Ojibwa-Ottawa pictographic writing. This is a subject which engrossed Copway (1), Tanner, (2), Schoolcraft (3) and other 19th century commentators on Ojibwa customs, and a number of the pictographic symbols used by this Great Lakes tribe were published during the last century. More recently Miss Frances Densmore (4) has also contributed to the subject in her comprehensive outline of Ojibwa ethnography. The data presented by Densmore derive from Minnesota, Wisconsin and eastern Ontario Ojibwa informants, whereas my field material comes from more easterly and southerly mixed Ojibwa-Ottawa groups who moved from Beaver Island, in the northern end of Lake Michigan, to the south shore of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan several decades ago.

Among these mixed groups pictographs were used to convey messages, to furnish topographic information, and to illustrate narratives. All information recorded was, apparently, of an exoteric character. The use of pictographs as recording devices for preserving the esoteric history or songs of the Midewiwin or Grand Medicine secret society was denied by informants who either had been initiated themselves into the Mide society, or who had frequently witnessed the initiation ceremony as formerly practiced at Nama, on the south shore of the Upper Peninsula.

Pictographic symbols used for messages, maps, and as illustrations were drawn on pieces of birch bark, usually on the inner side, on the birch tree itself or on a peeled section of elm tree; on flat, thin cedar or ash chips; on perpendicular rock surfaces; in sand or dry earth, in ashes, or in well-packed snow. A pointed stick or pointed bone was ordinarily used to incise the symbols on bark or wood, and to outline them in sand or ashes; a piece of charcoal also was sometimes used to outline drawings on wood or bark, or in the snow. In post-white times a pointed piece of metal was occasionally substituted for the wooden or bone stylus. Some pictographs were outlined in paint; the one color

¹Data for this paper were gathered during an ethno-linguistic survey of Upper Peninsula Ojibwa-Ottawa groups undertaken with Dr. C. F. Voegelin during the summer of 1941. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the Social Science Research Council for a grant-in-aid which enabled me to join Dr. Voegelin in this survey. Ojibwa-Ottawa informants who gave information on pictographic writing were:—Angeline Williams (age 73), Louise Boulley (36), Jennie Williams (43) of Sugar Island, Michigan; Katherine Osogun (45) of Hessel, Michigan. Dr. Voegelin has kindly supplied all the linguistic material contained in this paper.

informants mentioned as having been used was red, obtained from blood-root. Red paint was also used to fill in the outlines of incised figures.

Messages, inscribed on any one of the materials mentioned above, were left by travellers for the benefit of persons who were to follow or who had preceded the writers. A message sketched on birch bark might be placed in the cleft of a split stick, the stick being stuck slantwise in the ground and pointed in the direction which the writers of the message had taken. Or the communication might be hidden under a stone on the ground, or hung from a tree alongside a trail. Maps, which were said to have been drawn on birch bark or in ashes, dry earth or sand, were sketched for travellers or to record a trip which had been taken. Permanent or semi-permanent illustrations for narratives were said to have been made on birch bark.

The outline of a conical tent or tipi, not that of the much-used Ojibwa-Ottawa domed house, was sketched to indicate a dwelling place, whether semi-permanent or a camp. Straight lines drawn beside the tipi were said to indicate the number of days which would elapse before the sender of the message would arrive at the recipient's dwelling place; to Densmore's informants such lines near a tipi indicated the number of nights spent camping at a certain spot (5).

Human beings could be depicted in three ways; either by a perpendicular line, by a semi-stylized drawing with head, body and extremities noted, or by a fairly realistic picture of a person's totem animal. If straight lines were used, a child was represented by a short perpendicular line, an adult by a somewhat longer one. The same variation in size to distinguish between children and grown persons was used if individuals were represented by sketches of the human figure, or of their totem animals. Since children always had the same totem animal as their father, the representation of a family group by its totem animals would make identification fairly easy for anyone who knew the totemic backgrounds of the families in his or her neighborhood.

If a person represented by a totem animal was still living, the animal was always drawn in normal position; if the person was dead, however, the animal was drawn in inverted position, head downward.

Travel by foot was shown by the pictograph of a person (either straight line, human figure or totem animal) placed on a horizontal or crooked line representing a path. Travel by canoe was indicated by sketching a profile of a canoe and putting the figures representing humans in an orderly succession along the top edge of the canoe. In such a sketch the father or male adult in a family group would be represented as sitting in the back of the canoe (a position usually occupied by the man, who steered), the mother would be sitting in the front part of the canoe, and the children of the couple in the center of the craft. These positions of the man and woman, it might be noted, are opposite to those recorded by Densmore among the Minnesota Ojibwa (6).

An abundant food supply at a camp was indicated by the picture of a game animal drawn near the tipi representing the camp; several lines were drawn beside the animal to show that a number of animals of the species sketched had been secured.

No pictograph for corn was obtained; the plant itself was said not to have been cultivated by the Beaver Island and south shore groups in early days.

A limited number of symbols representing natural phenomena were known to informants. The earth, or the world, was represented by them as a straight horizontal line. The sun was drawn as the outline of a circle with short lines radiating outward from the circumference all around; the moon as a filled circle, without radiating lines. On maps, lakes were indicated in outline and the intersections of streams were shown.

At the present time members of the Ojibwa-Ottawa groups studied communicate by writing letters in English or Ojibwa, whenever the need arises for persons distant from each group to send messages. Non-literates usually ask literate relatives or friends to write for them. Occasionally, however, even today, pictography may be resorted to in sending a person a message. A non-literate friend of one of my informants who was planning to send the informant some smoked fish by parcel post in four days' time and wished the package to be called for at the postoffice as soon as it arrived, managed to make this message clear in a "letter" consisting entirely of pictographs. Furthermore, after the fish arrived the recipient also used pictographs to acknowledge receipt of the package and to assure the sender that the gift was appreciated.

Constantin Rafinesque, writing in 1836, states that the Ojibwa and Ottawa, among other tribes, had "painted tales and annals, called Neobagun (male tool) by the former. Tanner has figured some of these pictured songs or Neobagun in his interesting Narrative" (7). Present-day Ojibwa do not recognize Neobagun, but this may be due to orthographic difficulties. The nearest forms, which may have been intended by Rafinesque's Neobagun, are Ojibwa naapee—'male,' as in naapeesee 'male bird, rooster,' and ninaapeemim 'my husband.' Thus, if Rafinesque's Neoba—stands for Naapee—'male,' then the remainder of the word,—gun, may stand for a common suffix indicating "instrument of or for . . ." perhaps in the sense of 'tool.' We have actually found no combination of naapee— plus —kan, but this is apparently what Rafinesque's word would be to mean 'male tool;' the reference intended surely would then have been to the instrument for making pictographs, rather than to the pictures, tales, or annals. There are various words for the latter in Ojibwa, but none of them are at all similar to Neobagun.

The present day words for picture, photograph, pictographic symbol and so on are quite numerous, and furthermore vary considerably from dialect group to dialect group, especially along the border of the so-called Ottawa and Ojibwa groups. Thus 1) masiniccikan 'picture,' 2) masina'ikan 'paper, piece of writing, book, map,' 3) masina'ikaannss 'playing card,' but also 4) attaatiwin 'playing card,' 5) masinaasikan 'picture, photograph,' 6) masinipii'ank 'he draws it on something,' and 7) masinippi'ikaatee 'it is drawn, pictured,' for which the noun would be 8) masinipii'ikan 'pictograph.' Compare 9)

masinaatteessicikan 'picture, movie' with 10) masinaakkisikan 'camera,' but also translated as 'photograph;' so also 11) masinaak-kisowak 'pictures.' Of these, number 8 was most frequently used for pictographs, number 2 for a map, with the related verbal form masina²-ikee 'he makes shadow pictures on the wall.'

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5. —, 176.
6. —, 176-177, figs. 16, 18.
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