

June 5, 2003
ID 2668

MOTHER EARTH

CBC IDEAS Tra@pts PO Box 5DO St3bon A Toronto ON M5W IE6

<http://www.cbc.ca/ideast>
Tel. 416.205.6010

ideast@toronto.cbc.ca
Fax. 416.205.6025

© 2003 by CBC Corporation

Under no circumstances may this transcript or matters contained herein be reproduced or otherwise used for any purpose beyond the use of the media (other than newspaper or magazine, purposes of reference, discussion and review) without the written consent of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

PHIL LANE

“Among indigenous people all over the world, honour and respect for Mother Earth is a fundamental belief”.

STAN CUTHAND

I'm not a skeptic, but I just don't accept it because that's not the way I was taught.

PAUL KENNEDY

I'm Paul Kennedy, and this is IDEAS. Tonight, we skate out onto very thin cultural ice: looking for authenticity in aboriginal religious imagery and spiritual rhetoric. This is a show about the idea of Mother Earth.

JOHN SNOW

I think Mother Earth is kind of universal.

ART SHOFLEY

We look on the Earth as a mother, and we've always had our traditions and our ceremonies connected. There is a spiritual connectedness with the Earth.

JOHN SNOW

So, we akin to the Earth Mother as provider of all the necessities of life: the food, the plants, the medicine.

PHIL LANE

We receive the teachings from the interaction with the same Mother Earth. We know from science that Mother Earth's natural laws are one.

JOHN SNOW

Mother Earth is almost a household word, and I think that's really good.

PAUL KENNEDY

Tonight, a careful look at Mother Earth - a cultural idea with long European roots, but a very short Canadian history, a seductive idea which has transformed the way we think about both aboriginal people and about the environment.

PAT McCORMACK

This is a metaphor for a way to talk about the world in which we live, and we can rely it and say, "It is our mother." I guess it depends on what we want to do and why we are using that kind of language, and there is a lot of feeling now that we don't examine that kind of language. And why shouldn't we?

HUGH DEMPSEY

The only time that I have encountered Mother Earth has been in speeches and prayers, and prayers made, I might say, in English rather than Native language. I have never seen it demonstrated through legends, through myths, through anything in the way of a presentation other than just verbal.

ROGER ROULETTE

Wherever this notion came from, it is widespread. I am at a loss to who came up with it, first of all, and also that they would think that it is our concept. And it isn't. I am definitely, positively, absolutely sure.

PAUL KENNEDY

"Mother Earth," a Canadian story, by Winnipeg journalist Maureen Matthews.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

I met Mother Earth on the pages of Akwesasne Notes, an influential Native newspaper published in Quebec. It was early 1970, and I was living in a Cree community, making Cree-language radio and TV programs.

And there she was, a central figure in a speech attributed to the Suquamish chief, Seattle. The speech perfectly combined white guilt, a just God, and innate aboriginal ecological consciousness. Twenty years went by before I discovered that the real author was not Chief Seattle. He was Ted Perry, a white scriptwriter from Texas. He invented that speech for an ecological film made by the Southern Baptist Convention. Chief Seattle was real but the speech was fiction. So, what was I to think of Mother Earth?

Since I was recording old Cree stories at that point, if Mother Earth was a Cree idea, I'd have known about it, but Mother Earth never appeared in Cree. And if she wasn't a Cree idea - and Cree is the most widely spoken aboriginal language in Canada - how did she become a household word in this country? Well, it's a long story.

And, on the face of it, it's not my story. I'm neither aboriginal nor an expert on aboriginal religion. But, over the years, I have worked with some of the best aboriginal scholars in the country. They think it's time to say something about Mother Earth. They see the rise of Mother Earth and the corresponding development of a new pan-Indian religion as a threat to historic religious traditions. They say it undermines aboriginal scholarship and alienates aboriginal people from their history. So, in this show, we're going to take a critical look at the idea of Mother Earth.

I want to be methodical about this, because there are a few questions that need to be answered. First of all, what are people really saying when they talk about "Mother Earth"? If you listen carefully, Mother Earth is rhetorical shorthand for a whole range of ideas. First of all, she is a female religious deity.

JOHN SNOW

Mother Earth is called *inaa*.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

Chief John Snow is Nakota. He's a former chief of the Stoney Indian Band at Morley, Alberta, and a retired United Church Minister.

JOHN SNOW

Inaa is mother, and, as human beings, we know that our mothers love us. At first, we are breastfed. We are given life. We are brought into the world. So, we akin to the Earth Mother as provider of all the necessities of life: the food, the plants, the medicines. And also, Mother Earth is not only the Earth itself, but when we talk about "Mother Earth," we're also talking about the wind, the river, the fire, the light, the sun, moon and all that surrounds Mother Earth. That's what I mean by saying "Mother Earth."

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Secondly, Mother Earth is the symbol of a timeless ecological sensibility, framed in opposition to Christianity and "European" values.

ART SHOFLEY

We have always said, "Me Earth doesn't belong to us, We belong to the Earth."

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

Art Shofley is Anishinaabe. He's a well-known Winnipeg elder.

ART SHOFLEY

And that seems to be opposite of what I learned when I was in residential school from Christianity, that God gave man dominion over the Earth and all therein. It's different perspective; it's one that connotes respect for the Earth herself. We say "her" because we look on the Earth as a mother, and we've always had our traditions and ceremonies connected with the Earth. And we're also one with the animal world: the four-leggeds and the flying creatures and all that walk and crawl. And we're also one with the plant world: the medicines, the grasses. And we're also one with the elements: fire, rock, wind and water.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Thirdly, Mother Earth is the central figure in universal aboriginal beliefs.

PHIL LANE

Among indigenous people all over the world, honour and respect for Mother Earth is a fundamental belief.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

Phil Lane is Sioux. He's a former Native Studies professor and now a CEO of Four Wodds International, in Lethbridge, Alberta.

PHIL LANE

And really, if you think about it, it makes such good, logical sense. And when I go, for instance, to Europe, I've found that they are every bit as tribal as here, and their core values, if you really get down and look at the core values, culturally, have great similarities to here, just like in Africa or any other place in the world where people have lived close to Mother Earth and learned from Mother Earth's teachings.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

It's hard to argue with that. They're all aboriginal people, and they genuinely believe what they're saying. Like so many others, they're proud of their involvement in traditional religious practice. They sincerely revere Mother Earth.

STAN CUTHAND

The concept of Mother Earth came from another culture. It came from Europe.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Stan Cuthand is a Cree linguist and scholar, a theologian and teacher.

STAN CUTHAND

I went to Chitek Lake. There was an elder there, and we sat with the teachers who were teaching Cree from various schools at the Tribal Council. One of the women mentioned about Mother Earth, that she was teaching about Mother Earth. And I told Isaac, the old man, "Have you ever heard of Mother Earth? Did the old people talk about it?" And he said "No." I said, "That's my experience too. They never talked about Mother Earth."

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

Stan Cuthand grew up in a house full of Plains Cree storytellers, including the son of Poundmaker, a relative of his mother. Stan is an Anglican minister, with an eye for comparative religion. He has studied linguistics, taught Indian Studies at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College and is widely read.

ROGER ROULETTE

I've never come across it.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Roger Roulette is an Ojibwe translator and linguist. He grew up in Manitoba, the son of a well-known medicine man.

ROGER ROULETTE

I've heard many, many legends. I've heard many kinds of expressions. I've been to many ceremonies where they used the ceremonial jargon, if you will, and I've never come across it. And because I grew up in this kind of environment, monolingually, I had to have been exposed to many hours of orations, speeches and prayers, and so, I've never come across it.

MAUREEN MATFHEWS

I've worked with Roger Roulette for nearly ten years. Together, we've taped, transcribed and translated hours of Ojibwe stories and interviews. He grew up steeped in ceremony and has developed his understanding of Anishinaabe religious practice through many hours of conversations with old people. He now teaches Ojibwe language at the University of Manitoba, and he and another professor are working on a Southern Ojibwe dictionary, which already has 60,000 entries.

Both Stan and Roger care about getting things right, and they both doubt Mother Earth. This is important because, between them, they know a great deal about the historic beliefs of the two largest groups of Indians in Canada. Between the Cree and the Ojibwe, they represent people who occupy at least one-third of Canada. And they're both born skeptics, like me.

So, the newspaper had a story the other day about a sweat lodge being built in downtown Winnipeg. The headline read "Mother Earth's Womb." Readers were informed that the city's first urban sweat lodge will open in mid-June. It said that the

real word for sweat lodge is *maadoodooson* and that it is the Cree word for "womb." "What you're doing when you enter the sweat lodge," the article went on, "is you are entering Mother Earth's womb." When I read the article to them, Stan laughed, and Roger went through the roof.

ROGER ROULETTE

A womb? Oh, no, no. That's not even religious, and those practices in the old days were the last resort, particularly when you're on your deathbed basically. That's when they used it. They didn't do a sweat lodge in the old days just because it was a sunny day or it was the thing to do. And they would never even toy with the idea of making an analogy with a sweat lodge. Sweat lodge is completely different. Nowadays, it's like, oh, my god, everybody's in the sweat lodge - men, women - and that is just... And the old people are going, "What the hell are they doing?" And I'm thinking, "Well, you can't tell them anything, because that's what they want to do, and they think they know better than our ancestors."

MAUREEN MATIRHEWS

Are you sure you're right?

ROGER ROULETTE

Well, not only can't you say "Mother Earth" in Ojibwe, but if I were to explain the concept of going back to the womb with the old people, I'd offend them - absolutely - because that's offensive in any way. Even if you want to do it metaphorically in Ojibwe, that would be offensive. I don't know. I'd probably get a slap for the first time in my life from an old person. There's some things that just don't carry from English metaphors to Ojibwe. Some things can, like, for instance, "He runs for election." In Ojibwe, *Gii-bimibattoo*, which means has literally running, but it's now

used figuratively to run for elections But something like "going back to the womb," it's like, "Oh my god, what are you discussing here?!"

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Okay. So, what about the word for "sweat lodge"? Obviously, this is an Ojibwe word, not Cree. But is it the right Ojibwe word?

ROGER ROULETTE

As far as I know, there are two words that are nouns for the "sweat lodge." In the North, they have a long vowel sound at the end, which is *Madoodiswaan*, and in the South, they have the short vowel sound at the end, which is *Madoodiswan*, but both mean "sweat lodge." And you can't break down the word, because it's archaic. There is no other morpheme that identifies what it could possibly be. And it is not the word for "womb," sorry to say.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Okay. So, what is the word for "womb"?

ROGER ROULETTE

There's not an actual word in Ojibwe or Cree for womb." It's actually *abinoojii ebid*, "where the child sits." That's what the word is. Although, as I understand it, they have words for 'womb' for animals.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

The Plains Cree word for "womb," just for the record, is another polite euphemism. Stan says you use the phrase that means literally "with child." "Womb" is not a word to be used in company, and certainly never by a man.

So, you've guessed by now that Roger Roulette doesn't think much of the new downtown sweat lodge.

As a linguist, he's well-positioned to make his arguments, and if you listen closely, they reveal a pattern. His critique is cultural, contextual, historical and linguistic.

If we apply those same criteria to the basic idea of Mother Earth, what answers do we get?

If I ask about Mother Earth, checking its authenticity as a European idea, I get a simple "yes" every time. Linguistic? It works perfectly in Latin, Greek and English. Historical? It's easily traced back to Gaia, the Greek Earth Mother goddess, after whom the science of geology was named. How about the context? It's still there. Ecologist David Suzuki invokes Mother Earth in his efforts to educate us about ecological issues.

When Roger Roulette and Stan Cuthand considered the question of authenticity of Mother Earth, they did it from their cultural, historical perspective. They looked at the books, they talked to others, and they canvassed their own memories to see if they could verify the aboriginal authenticity of this idea. First of all, they looked for linguistic proof. Can you say it in Cree? Can you say it in Ojibwe?

ROGER ROULETTE

Language is sort of our safety valve. If a practice is presented to our people, and we don't have the necessary language, or we don't have the terms for it, then it tells us this is foreign. This is not ours. Mother Earth is a great example. Mother Earth is something that people use constantly when they're talking about native spirituality. And that's difficult to say, if not impossible to say, in Ojibwe, because Ojibwe is divided into animate and inanimate categories. So, "mother" is animate, and

"Earth" Is inanimate. You can't make a compound term where one word is animate and one is inanimate. It goes against the rules of our grammar.

STAN CUTHAND

We never talked about Mother Earth In our language, there's neither "he" nor "she." That's the problem. We don't think in terms of male and female. It's an animate object.

HUGH DEMPSEY

That's interesting. In Blackfoot, the word for "Earth" is *kaakomm*, and it is a neutral word. It is neither masculine nor feminine, nor is there anyway that I know of that you can make it gender significant. It would be rather surprising, I think if someone attempted it.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

The last voice you hear was Hugh Dempsey. He is Chief Curator Emeritus at the Glenbow Museum, in Calgary. He's studied Blackfoot history and is married to a Blackfoot woman. And it's not that these languages are limited. The group of languages to which Cree, Ojibwe and Blackfoot belong are very strong in metaphorical and figurative usage. It's not that you can't make such a metaphor; you just wouldn't.

ROGER ROULETRE

The concept is not there. There's a lot of ways to do what you would call "personification," or you can use metaphoric terms to animate something inanimate. But some things do not exist in the central part of Ojibwe philosophy.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Does that mean that the land is not important?

ROGER ROULETTE

People don't understand why we would think that land is important, but land is what provides for you. it provides for you in the sense of plants, animals and everything else. But we don't find that medium to be sacred. It isn't. It isn't at all.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

"Sacred": This is a very important idea because Mother Earth is said to be sacred, and the environmental insults she experiences become defilement. "Sacred" is essential to the idea of Mother Earth. Roger says the Earth is not sacred. Stan says the idea "sacred" is very hard to translate into Cree.

STAN CUTHAND

What is sacred is something that people fear because they think there's a spirit there. *Kostachwak*.- It's a place that is feared. There is no word for 'sacred,' but maybe that's what they mean. It's a problem. And the missionaries translate "sacred" literally. It's something that is *eternal*. *Kakikeweyitakwan* "What you think is eternal" is sacred. You stand on sacred ground. "This is sacred ground." Well, why is it sacred? They say, "This is where we had our rituals." Yeah, but we had rituals all over the Prairie, and as soon as we left the place, it no longer is sacred because it's not the plot that is sacred. It's what you worship.

ROGER ROULETRE

The word "sacred" in Ojibwe would be to treat something as if it has a divine quality, so that would be *omanidoakaadaan*, 'He treats it like it was divine.' But not everything is. There are leeways for we, as human beings, to make mistakes. I think that if we found everything sacred we wouldn't be able to do anything. I think that's too limiting. And semantically, 'sacred' to me would apply to things that are

taboos, that are known to be taboos in our cultures, and it seems like if we break our taboo, we pay for it.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

So it's pretty clear that Mother Earth doesn't pass a Cree or Ojibwe linguistic test. Not only can you not say "Mother Earth," you can't even really apply the concept "sacred."

So, what about the next test, cultural context? The cultural taboos that Roger speaks of are taught in legend, and if Mother Earth were an important cultural idea, she'd be in the stories.

STAN CUTHAND

You have to back up your statements by a story. You just cannot make a statement and say, "This is it," no. Everything that you say has to be backed up by a story, so that's what I do. When I teach, I back it up with a story.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

It seems that Mother Earth should be pre-eminent among the gods or the *manidoowag*. But there's no sign of her. There aren't many gendered gods period - because of the structure of the language - spirits are simply animate - and because being a god allows you to appear when you choose, in any form you chose. The closest thing in the Cree pantheon to the idea of Mother Earth is Wilderness Woman, Pakwaciskwew. You know she's around when the air fills with the scent of beautiful blossoms. And some have even heard her sing.

STAN CUTHAND

Pakwaciskwew is a woman in the wilds. *Pakwid* means a "wild animal", not in the sense of "wild women" in today's world, but wild in the sense that she lives by herself in the forest

There was an Alex Halkett, who used to work north of La Ronge, trap. He stayed there all winter by himself, and I said, "You shouldn't stay by yourself." He says, "At night, I could hear a woman singing." Then I said, "That's a very bad sign. You should have somebody with you." "Every night," he said, "I heard this woman singing." And I said, "Did you see her?" He said "No." So one winter, he was crossing a stream, and he fell through the ice, and his matches were wet, so he wrapped himself in a blanket and died there, froze to death. That was a bad sign to hear this woman singing. They call it *e-amacisot*. *-e-ainacisot* means that you hear the spirits, which means sometimes death. So that's the story of Pakwaciskwew.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

I have a friend whose grandfather was bewitched by Pakwaciskwew. He went quite mad. She pestered him constantly. Apparently, he saved himself by becoming a Christian. She is said to be more beautiful than any mortal woman, but jealous and sometimes sexually aggressive. Her presence explains deaths on the trap line. This is not the benign, nurturing Mother Earth, for sure.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

So, if Mother Earth is not a god, can she be a female legendary hero? Once again, there aren't many women. The field seems to be dominated by men and shape-shifters. But there is one, the swashbuckling Gezhizhwazh. Roger's Aunt Harriet knew more than 50 stories about this Ojibwe heroine.

ROGER ROULETTE

Gezhizhwazh, she is a hero in Ojibwe legends. And one of the things about her is

her cleverness and *her* own sacrifice to battle these *Windigoo*, which are, of course, our main enemies.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

Caroline Anderson, from the Ojibwe Reserve at Fairford, in Northern Manitoba, told us this story about Gezhizhwazh. The name means to try to cut," and it refers to her willingness to be snacked upon by cannibals while she is waiting to murder them.

ROGER ROULETTE

The Windigoo are, to us, monsters because they are - how shall I say this? - they are our worst nightmare.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

What do they do?

ROGER ROULETTE

They're cannibals. They'll eat you. And the thing about the cannibals is that they represent all that is ugly of humanity. And what's the worst thing? Cannibalism. So, she's a hero because she's the one that battled for us, and she's the one that killed them, and she *was* famous for killing them. And Caroline, she remembers part of the story. It's a longer story, but I guess she just wanted to relate what she deemed an important hero in Ojibwe culture.

ROGER ROULETTE

The story goes ... she sacrificed herself to be taken by the *Wiindigoo* because they were going toward where the Ojibwe people were living. And there was a band of them. So she thought, if she sacrificed herself to be taken by the *Wiindigoo*, in that way, she'd have an eye on them, of what they were going to do, what their plans were, even though during the time she was with them, they would cut pieces of her and eat parts of her. But in order to save her

own people, the Anishinaabe, she would be taken as lunch. And then she knew their plan. So, when she had the chance to go to the Anishinaabe village, she told them what the *Wiindigoos* plans were.

She wanted to be the first one to strike, and she also showed the Anishinaabe how to kill the *Wiindigoo*. And she's seen as a hero because she was the main killer of *Windigoo*. And that's the story.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

Many Gezhizhwazh stories are fairly racy. I went for the most discrete version. I have tapes of Gezhizhwazh stories where she kills her unfortunate male *Windigoo* adversaries by tearing off their private parts - a fate the old ladies who tell these stories seem to find hysterically funny

ROGER ROULETTE

I think it gives you a little lesson on how women can see a sort of a weakness in somebody. I think it gives to girls who are going to be women a lesson to be resourceful, independent and also clever, to use your wits as best you can, and I think that it provides that kind of lesson in those stories.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

Gezhizhwazh is a model of intelligence, strength and forbearance in a dangerous world. But to get back to the point about proofs, Gezhizhwazh is an example of what Mother Earth is not. There are no legends in which Mother Earth appears, but there are many different Gezhizhwazh stories. There are even Cree versions of these stories. Some involve a hero named Anway, a man and a foreigner, usually Ojibwe, but definitely a hired gun, who comes to help the Cree kill *Windigoo*.

Unlike Mother Earth, the Anway/Gezhizhwazh stories fit into a complex of beliefs, which reinforce the Cree, and Ojibwe horror of cannibalism. There is a harsh ecological lesson here. When starvation comes, the cannibals have to be killed to protect Cree and Ojibwe society and human values. There are historic instances of people being murdered, even begging to be killed, because they were becoming *Wiindigoo*. It's a fully embedded idea, unlike Mother Earth.

So, how else might Mother Earth appear? If she were a revered religious figure to the Cree and the Ojibwe, there should be traditional prayers. A prayer in an aboriginal language mentioning Mother Earth would be a significant piece of evidence. When he was a child at Utde Pine Reserve, Stan Cuthand saw an old man apparently praying to the earth.

STAN CUTHAND

The man who performed the ceremony, the ritual at the feast of the dead by the graveyard, old Muskwa [bear], used to point to the Earth. And then I discovered that it's not the Earth. It's the place where the people were buried. That's what it was. Of course, I was a young kid when we sat there, and their prayers were not very long. But nowadays, their prayers go on and on and on. We had this big feast at one o'clock. It was five o'clock by the time we finished. That comes from Christianity. A lot of elders are Christianized, and then they suddenly discover Indian spirituality. I call them "modern elders." Then they exaggerate a lot of things, and they borrow ideas from others. This is pan-Indianism about this Mother Earth.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

Stan found a good example of this kind of Christian-inflected prayer to Mother Earth in a book called Manitous. Basil Johnson, a former staff member at the Royal Ontario Museum, wrote it in the mid-1990s.

STAN CUTHAND

Basil Johnson said they pray in the *Midewiwin* lodge, and they tell the spirit, "When I am cold and wet, you shelter me. When I am downcast, you comfort me. For this, I am grateful. I am indebted to you." That's what they say to Mother Earth. "To you, Mother, we give thanks." This is at the pipe ceremony to Mother Earth in the smoking lodge. That comes from the 25th Chapter of St. Matthew, the 35th verse, almost word for word. But it gives me problems because this was not written for Indian people. It was written to sell. It will sell to the white people.

ROGER ROULETRE

People like Basil Johnson and people like that, I look at their material, and I never see quotes or cited material. That, for me, is important, that you cite your sources. So, when I say something, I usually give credit to the old person that said it or that it's on some sort of a tape or whatever. But you've got to know who actually is the authority in this area, and usually it goes back to the old people, and all you have to do is just represent what they say. You don't have to make up anything.

MAUREEN MATIRNEWS

So, Mother Earth fails the basic intellectual tests for Ojibwe and Cree authenticity. There is neither historical nor cultural context to support the claim that Mother Earth has been with native people since time immemorial.

ROGER ROULETTE

I am, for one, not convinced. Definitely. I speak Ojibwe as my first language, and all the stories, all the conversations, all the stuff that I have sat through, ceremonies ... I have never heard that said in Ojibwe. People will try to say it, but it sounds ridiculous.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

The Cree and Ojibwe are the two biggest aboriginal groups in Canada. The East Coast tribes, including the Mig'mah, are members of the same Algonkian-language group and held similar basic beliefs. The Inuit don't have anything like Mother Earth, and there's good evidence that this is also true of the Dene. The Blackfoot in southern Alberta are actually adamant about it.

Gerry Conaty is the Chief Curator at the Glenbow Museum, in Calgary. He says Mother Earth came up when they were discussing a new Blackfoot gallery.

JERRY CONATY

When we were working on the Blackfoot Gallery with our 18 advisors or so, the idea of Mother Earth came up, as we talked about the universe and all the different beings in the universe, and a number of them were very adamant that Mother Earth is not a Blackfoot concept. In Blackfoot, the word for 'moon' is *kookookisoom*, which is 'mother.' So, the moon is the mother, and in their world, the sun is the father, and the moon is the mother, and Morning Star is their son. And then there's a whole number of different legends or myths or ancient stories, they like to call them, that revolve around Morning Star and how sacred things were given from the sun through Morning Star to the Blackfoot people, and the moon figures in there as the mother. So, although these same people in

the next breath would refer to Mother Earth, I think they just hear that a lot, and so it comes out. But really, when they start thinking about it and talking about it very carefully, they respect the Earth, the Earth is very important, but it's not Mother.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

This is interesting because it partly explains the confusion. Credible aboriginal people speaking in English use contemporary jargon. The same people would never refer to Mother Earth in their own language, and I've seen this a dozen times. But it still doesn't explain how Mother Earth came to be so pervasive.

ROGER ROULETTE

I don't know where Mother Earth comes from. I really don't know. Because I've interviewed over a hundred Anishinaabe elders, and I know for a fact that nobody's going to say it, but I ask them anyways. Even to look ridiculous, I ask them just to find out. But wherever this notion came from, it is widespread. I am at a loss to who came up with it, first of all, and also that they would think that it's our concept. And it isn't, I am definitely, positively, absolutely sure!

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

Hugh Dempsey has had a long association with the Blackfoot of Southern Alberta and he too wondered about the source of the idea.

HUGH DEMPSEY

It's a topic I have been interested in for some time, and I have been speaking to anthropologists and fellow ethnohistorians and so on, and they have said that Mother Earth was a term that was known to some of the Sioux Indians. It wasn't a general term used by all the Indians of North America, but by some of the Sioux. And

there was a book published in 1953, which was very popular both among natives and non-natives, called **The Sacred Pipe**, Black Elk's account of the seven rites of the Oglalla Sioux. Now, in there, I found a prayer that stated in part,

"My relatives, Grandmother and Mother Earth, We are of Earth and belong to you, Oh, Mother Earth, from whom we receive our food, You care for our growth as do our own mothers."

So, this is what they're referring to. And the author of this, the person who had edited this, Joseph Epes Brown, mentioned that the Earth is considered by the Sioux under two aspects: that of the mother and grandmother. The former, i.e., the mother, is the Earth, considered as the producer of all growing forms, that is, the act of growing. Whereas, the grandmother or Grandmother Earth refers to ground or substance of all growing things, that is, the potentiality of growth. But this is unique to the Sioux, and even as far as I know, It didn't extend beyond those particular prayers.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

So, Hugh Dempsey followed the idea of Mother Earth as it moved off the Sioux reservation.

HUGH DEMPSEY

What I've been told by American ethnologists is that this seems to have come out of California, that it was part of this Whole Earth concept of the hippie era, and extended from there both into the hippie communities and into the native communities.

One of the laws in the United States - and I don't understand this too clearly - but if there is a native claim, and there is federal land that is unoccupied, then Indians with the claim can occupy that land. And when Alcatraz was abandoned as a jail, it was considered, by the native people at least, to be unoccupied, and the Sioux had an outstanding land claim against the United States government, so they, supported by Indians from all across the United States, invaded Alcatraz and occupied it for - I don't know - a month, two months or whatever it was - this was in the '60s - and became a great cause for the hippies. So, the hippies and the Indians became inextricably mixed together, and a lot of the ideals of the Indians were being picked up by the hippies and Vice versa. And I think Mother Earth and Whole Earth concepts just united at that time.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

It might have stopped there but for a very important Canadian development: the Indian Ecumenical Conference at Morley, Alberta. It was funded by the Anglican and United Churches of Canada, but it was the idea of an American, Cherokee anthropologist Bob Thomas.

JAMES TREAT

Bob Thomas's idea was really pretty simple, when you boil it down.

MAUREEN MATRHEWS

James Treat is a professor at Honour College at the University of Oklahoma. He's written a book on this chapter in North American aboriginal history.

JAMES TREAT

Thomas and his colleagues were convinced that if it would be possible to bring together both traditional and Christian religious leaders from within native

communities from across the US and Canada and actually have them just sit down and talk about the issues they were facing in their communities, have them exchange ideas, have them form a kind of a community of support, that this might actually go a long way toward resolving some of these conflicts that tribal communities were suffering. And so, that was the basic idea, and that was what was talked about in November of 1969, when the first group of 12 met in Winnipeg, and then the following summer at the first full Indian Ecumenical Conference, which was held on the Crow Reservation in Montana.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

The following year, the conference moved here, to the Indian Park at Morley, Alberta, just west of Calgary, and from then on, the host was Chief John Snow, a Nakota speaker and United Church Minister, who saw the need for Indian leaders to come together.

JOHN SNOW

We're going over to the Stoney Indian Park, where the Indian Ecumenical Conference was held during the early 1970s. It was held there for over two decades.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

It was here at the Indian Ecumenical Conference that Stan Cuthand was introduced to the idea of Mother Earth.

STAN CUTHAND

Mother Earth? When I went to the Ecumenical Conference at Morley, Alberta, Alex Bonaise was talking, and he was a great speaker, and he said, "The Earth is my Mother." And I know he got it from other elders because there were elders from as far away as New Mexico and Arizona. That was the time in the '70s when the government gave money; the churches gave money for the ecumenical conferences.

And all of a sudden, the elders were asked to go and tell their stories. And their expenses being paid, they felt very, very special, very important.

JOHN SNOW

I think the real purpose of the Indian Ecumenical Conference was to remind our people that we have a legacy, a proud heritage and that we should go back and visit our elders, talk with our elders, do research and find out more about our spirituality and our beliefs.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

It was at one of the early Indian Ecumenical Conferences that Chief John Snow first heard the English phrase "Mother Earth."

JOHN SNOW

I remember very well a medicine man named Victor Young Bear. I think he's a Sioux Indian from the States. And I remember him talking about the sacredness of life, sacredness of Mother Earth. And he talked about the holy of holies within the female system and how new life was brought in. He just spoke off the cuff for about maybe an hour or so and after he spoke there, everybody wanted to touch him, to shake hands with him. It was just like an evangelical altar call. Everybody went up there. There were even Anglos that went up there. And there were very strong spiritual people who came here. Moving.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Mother Earth caught hold here because it so perfectly reflected the spirit of the times.

JOHN SNOW

Yes, I think the word was used quite a bit. Of course English was the language of communication by the various tribes there, and although it's not the indigenous words

that we would normally use, we used English to communicate, so we used the word "Mother Earth." I think it was used much more in the '70s, little used in the '60s and more so even today. Mother Earth is almost a household word, and I think that's really good.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

James Treat says that Bob Thomas, who started these conferences, was very aware of this development and the corresponding codification of a new pan-Indian faith. He wrote about it and rightly observed that it was a product of urbanization. Before the Friendship Centres and other pan-tribal institutions were created, urban aboriginal people simply assimilated. The creation of pan-Indian institutions gave them the chance to hang on to their identity in the city. But the byproduct - the new faith featuring Mother Earth made Bob Thomas pretty unhappy.

JAMES TREAT

I think he didn't want to see the rise of a kind of generic Indian religion. My sense is that Thomas, although he was glad to see Indians relating inter-tribally on a social level, because of some of what developed there through the conference, particularly with the interests of the urban young people, I think he was dismayed, and he says as much in some of his writings, that he really never wanted to see the rise of a generic Indian religion. expressing it, which was that here he was, trying to cultivate co-operation and solidarity among all these different religious traditions practiced in native communities, and his attitude was, "All we need is another Indian religion!" even if it's a kind of generic religion. His point was that there is already so much religious diversity in Indian country. Why would we need to generate another one?

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Were he alive today, Bob Thomas would be surprised at the extent to which a variety of generic religions have supplanted his cherished diversity. Gerry Conaty, of the Glenbow, thinks there are good reasons why this happened.

GERRY CONATY

When you start getting these people from the different cultures mixing together in an urban setting and probably not being traditionally formed people, because it would be the younger people who would move, they're going to start mixing things together and defining their own ways of doing things, new ways of doing things that are going to give them an identity, which is what pan-Indianism does. It gives you a very strong identity in a very challenging environment. It's a difficult time now for people. There's a lot of pressure on them, and whatever helps them to work with other native people and to find some sense of self-pride, that's what's important, and that's what needed to get on.

Because if individuals don't survive, then the culture is not going to survive, but the struggle, of course, is to make sure that the culture keeps on surviving and being strong as distinct from other native cultures, and that's a hard argument to make today in a world full of globalization. Can you go out and just sample randomly? It's one thing to listen to music from another culture or to go and play with musicians from another culture and really learn how that all fits together. But if you're just kind of sampling, it's almost disrespectful. And then it ends up overriding that culture because what gets marketed is the sampling, and what gets forgotten about is the essence of where it came from.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Stan Cuthand says it's getting harder and harder to preserve that true essence. He saw the signs among his students when he was teaching.

STAN CUTHAND

They are very much influenced by the modern non-Indian population who are environmentalists, who want to save the world. The Indians themselves are environmentalists, but then they go on into this idea of Mother Earth, that we have to save Mother Earth. They don't want to be different. They want to be accepted. It's a popular theme, so they go along with it, and they'll be respected.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

It's puzzling because this is a subject that people talk about in the aboriginal community, and many people agree with Stan and Roger. In their own way, most people are looking for authenticity. They're searching for the real thing. So, why don't more people speak up?

ROGER ROULETTE

That's because a lot of the people who are capable of saying that do not have the English language, and if they do, they're passive speakers. They can understand, but they can't express themselves well enough to say to a person, "Hey, you can't really say that." I can because I have both languages.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

And then there's the power of those ecological ideas attached to Mother Earth. So, I asked Stan, is there any connection between those environmental ideas and the essence of Cree belief?

STAN CUTHAND

Absolutely none! And the other thing about Mother Earth is, the Indians have no

sense of history. It's culture. So, from the cultural point of view, they're defending the ecology and the forests, so they say "Mother Earth." But if they would go back to history, what happened in historic times, when there were great, big fires and little trees were trampled down by buffalo, it became a prairie.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

Historical memory is a fragile thing, isn't it?

STAN CUTHAND

It is, yes. That's my theory. They don't have a sense of history. Because they said, "We only took what we needed." I say, "Yes, we did." Historically, they slaughtered the buffalo to sell hides, but they only took the good meat and dried it and sold it to Hudson's Bay Company for pemmican. They made pemmican. They butchered for hides and pemmican. What happened to the rest of it? They just couldn't keep up with it. So, they would leave camp, leaving a lot of rubbish. The coyotes couldn't even finish all the entrails and everything else. And there was so much stench, so they had to leave. But you can't say that. It's politics.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

And obviously, politics or no, Stan and Roger are both willing to say these things.

ROGER ROULETTE

I always thought that it never applied to us, and it doesn't. But people keep hearing it, and they're going to start believing it. But, in fact, that's not how we think. We don't think in that way at all. And for those ones who are adamant and saying that this is real or true, come talk to me in Ojibwe, and I'll tell you that it is absolutely wrong, dead wrong.

MAUREEN MATTHEWS

We may not have particularly thought about Mother Earth before, nor have felt any sense of complicity in endangering aboriginal religious traditions, but by casually accepting an apparently harmless European fiction, Mother Earth, we do.

PAUL KENNEDY

"Mother Earth," written and presented by Winnipeg journalist Maureen Matthews. Special thanks to Margaret Ingram for her contribution to this program from its inception. "Mother Earth" was produced in Winnipeg by Dave Redel, with assistance of Suzanne Dufresne. The Executive Producer of IDEAS is Bernie Lucht and I'm Paul Kennedy.