

A Comparison of Some Gigantic Characters in Iroquois and Saami Traditions

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Summary

A comparison of similar narrative figures in presumably unrelated cultures may contribute to the discovery of blind spots and new areas of reflection in ethnographical description and thus indirectly contribute to a better basis for comparative studies. The lack of money and precious metals in the Iroquoian repertoire shows contrasting concerns between Saami and Iroquoian tradition, suggesting new directions of reflection on the Iroquoian material, namely in terms of hunting and warfare luck in the context of guardian and helping spirits. The stereotyped simplicity of the Iroquoian material in contrast with the variety of the Saami material suggests 1) the superimposition of a heavier load of concerns and values on the Saami figures and opens for reflection the possibility of an archaic *Stallo* who more purely represents the interaction between the human and the natural world in terms of guardian and helper spirits; and 2) the possibility of approaching the Saami material from the point of view of local repertoire and concern in order to reduce false problems of complexity.

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1. The Iroquois as subject of circumpolar research

The relative complexity of Iroquoian society and culture compared with those of other peoples in the eastern Woodland area, and indeed in North America as a whole, has been for generations the object of speculation. Native American cultural complexity gave rise to the most astounding theories among Europeans, some of which, despite their lack of foundation in the evidence, remained current until the present century. Among these is the idea that native American populations have their origins in the ten lost

tribes of Israel. The presupposition behind this is of course the idea that such cultural complexity could not have been produced by ignorant savages, and must therefore have derived from a civilization familiar to the new-comers.

The problem of cultural complexity is the root of the major theory behind mid-century Iroquoian and Cherokee studies as well (Symposium 1951). It was not so much neo-evolutionary theory that buttressed the popular local diversity studies of the early 1950s. Rather, they presupposed the diffusion of northern and southern culture traits. Thus the new evolution came onto a ready field, and the two theories joined in explicating the local diversity observed in twentieth century Iroquoian cultures and which the discussion of diffusion of northern and southern traits was insufficient to elucidate fully.

Iroquoian cultural complexity has been classically examined in terms of northern and southern traits. It has been assumed that important features in Iroquoian culture and religion are cognate with similar features in the boreal hunting societies. Much of the culture of such societies is shared throughout the circumpolar area, so that through such traits the Iroquois touch on circumpolar research. There is therefore at least a formal justification for including the Iroquois in circumpolar studies, although the Iroquois may not be studied exclusively from that point of view.

Two traits have been chosen for the present study as examples of motifs that have been considered northern in the classical study of Iroquoian religion. These motifs are bear sorcery and stone giants. These are obviously chosen with a view to comparison with Saami traits. For similar characters do exist in Saami lore, the first in the bear sorcery complex and the second in the well-known *Stallo* figure.

2. Method

The focus of the present paper is above all methodological, despite the fact that I shall not contribute to a sharpening of comparative theory as it has been developed to the present. Rather, I shall suggest a rudimentary beginning toward a technique which has another end in view, that of applying comparative method to local, descriptive problems rather than to generalization.

The purpose of comparative theory is to generalize from bodies of tangent descriptive material. It tends to produce both generalized explanations of cultural phenomena as well as to chart descriptively cultural boundaries on the one hand or to place cognate motifs within a cultural continuum. I do not intend to impeach this noble aim of science. Rather, I suggest that comparative feedback may enhance descriptive work of a

single society. Since comparative studies are dependent on the quality of such descriptive work, from which the evidence for all comparative generalization must be drawn, the technique should be seen as obliquely contributive to comparative studies.

There is a more scientific motive behind this suggestion than the mere reticence of a scholar specialized in the study of a particular society to approach comparative generalization. This motive rises from the pragmatic problem of finding comparative studies in many cases not only irrelevant to but at times inconsistent with the ethnography of some particular society concerned. It seems that the lack of feedback from comparativism into the description of particular communities produces ethnographies with limited usefulness in developing generalized theory. The divorce of descriptive ethnography from comparative theory, which is a constant danger as theory becomes more sophisticated, weakens the material evidence on which theory is based.

I therefore presume to draw conclusions from the Iroquoian material (using Seneca data) which may be turned back on the Saami material by a competent scholar in that area. The conclusions as well as the problems, and this latter is of utmost importance, will be induced from the Saami material. This is precisely the technique that I suggest. It will effect two results. The first is a kind of control on the received data, in this case the Iroquoian material. In other words, blind spots in the accumulation of data may be revealed. The second result is a stimulus to fresh interpretations of the received data. The initiating stance is a humble one, but when returned on the Saami material, may produce unexpected results.

For the formal requirements of controlled systematization, my work on narrative material has greatly depended on the idea of thematic slots (Dundes 1964), which is of course a rather mechanical formal theory. I have focused on the selection among slotted alternatives (McElwain 1978, 97-101), considering that the selection of one motif over another is not fortuitous, but may be associated with specific local, individual, and situational factors. The mechanism for the selection of motifs is reminiscent of the theory that has developed from von Sydow's concerns (Ward 1976, 348, 349).

This technique may now be applied to a selection of Saami and Iroquoian material.

3. Case one: stories of humans appearing in the form of a bear

There are at least three similar story configurations that seem to form a part of the bear sorcery complex in many parts of the circumpolar area. The first

that may be mentioned is the story of the child taken in and cared for by the bear. In the Iroquois material this configuration may include a range of concerns from stepmother difficulties (in which the child is rejected) to the origin of shamanistic societies. My cursory review of Saami material showed more of interest for the two following configurations (Qvigstad 1927–29).

The second type is the encounter with a human transformed into a bear, which in the story results in fear. This configuration is largely lacking in the classical collections of Iroquoian narrative, but I have found it to be of widespread importance in the repertoires with which I am familiar on the Allegany, Cattaraugus, and Tonawanda Reservations and on the Grand River Reserve. It is not lacking in the Saami literature, and I suggest that this reveals a difference in ethnographical sources for the two peoples. A good deal of Saami narrative data is mixed in with other ethnographical matters (e.g. Manker 1960; Collinder 1949), while the Iroquoian material is traditionally strictly separated (Curtin & Hewitt 1918). Hewitt's texts give no inkling of their association with medicine societies, although he could hardly have been ignorant of them, so that Parker's revelations of such societies were unexpected news to the non-Indian world (Parker 1909). Collections of native American texts seem to be in mimicry of the King James version of the Bible, and there is a concern for creating a canon of native tradition. This concern seems to be less evident in the Saami material. I suggest this as an explanation for the suppression of this kind of story in Iroquoian collections.

Narratives of fearful encounters with sorcerers reveal a concern with the extension and maintenance of that personal power which is sorcery. The concerns are probably functionally similar among the Iroquois and the Saamis. No doubt the telling of such stories is an act of sorcery in itself, for it gives the narrator an aura of power, a suggestion that to cross him may trigger unpleasant encounters. Given the beliefs of the society and even the fears of those outside the society, narrative is often the only act of sorcery necessary to extend and maintain one's personal power.

Among the Iroquois it has been noted that such stories are told in the context of a concern for traditional values and generational roles. They function to guard young people from socialization into white society while at the same time allowing the symbiotic relations of participation in the economic world common to both. They preserve the hold of tradition and elders.

The third story configuration is the encounter between human and sorcerer in the form of a bear in which the human is rewarded for unexpected kindness shown to the sorcerer. This is the most conspicuous point of

contact between Saami and Iroquoian traditions. Besides showing a concern for elders as in the second configuration above, it reveals the ambiguous relationship of sorcerer to society. The love–fear complex is of course typical of all sorcery, as evidenced by the mere fact of transformation or metamorphosis.

Some Saami and Seneca versions of this kind of story are slot for slot identical. A human is living or camping in an isolated place in winter-time. An injured or hungry bear appears and the human gives it aid, food, or shelter. The grateful bear turns out to be a sorcerer who rewards his benefactor.

There is one alternative that shows a contrast between the two traditions. The Saami reward of money and precious metals is found to contrast with the Iroquois reward, which is invariably well-being in the form of hunting luck. The contrast is mitigated by only one instance in Seneca lore, a very recent story in which a dog leads a man to money. This story is of course structurally, thematically completely different from those of the bear sorcery complex and the *Stallo* tradition.

4. Case two: Stone Coat and *Stallo*

A second northern narrative motif in Iroquoian tradition is the Stone Coat. It is another gigantic figure reminiscent of the Saami *Stallo*, despite a good many differences between the two. It will not be surprising when someone publishes in the pseudo-scientific press a theory of common origins for the Stone Coat and *Stallo* among the Vikings.

The characters contrast in narrative in that *Stallo* is somewhat diffuse, whereas the Stone Coat is heavily stereotyped even when it appears as a lesser figure in a story. When it is among the leading characters of a story, the story will always fall into one of two configurations, a hunting story or a warfare story.

Perhaps one of the reasons for considering the Stone Coat a northern trait has been Hewitt's etymology of the Seneca word for it, *kę:nq:skwa*? He sees the word to have come from a word meaning to glare or glitter, which could be applied in true Iroquoian fashion to either ice or chert (Curtin & Hewitt 1918, 63, 64). The word is indeed, from Hewitt's point of view, an apt Seneca translation of *Stallo*, the steel-man, from the berserker's glittering armor. The original intention would have been ice-clad and be in reference to a god of winter, but this was changed, first through punning and later through confusion, to stone and a being altogether separate from the winter god appeared. This spurious evidence for the kinship of Stone Coat and *Stallo* must be relinquished in the light of Chafe's more recent and

convincing work in which he successfully analyzes the word to mean "it used to eat skin" (Chafe 1964). The word is indeed reminiscent of the word for stone (ka?skwa:a?) at least to an English-speaking person who may easily overlook the glottal stop and vowel length, both of which are phonemically significant in Seneca. The only trait remaining to the Stone Coat which suggests its northern origin is the fact that it is often associated with hunting but never with agriculture.

The Stone Coat is characterized by enormous size in some cases, permitting him to carry bear carcasses like squirrels hanging from a belt, and by stone clothing. It may be associated with flight in a stone boat (here another theme for a popularizer looking for evidence of extraterrestrial travel). Hewitt refers to a tradition that people can become Stone Coats by covering themselves with pitch and rolling in the sand (Curtin & Hewitt 1918, 64).

Stone Coats figure only briefly in some stories of the Curtin and Hewitt collection. An interesting episode in number 48 is a flight from a pursuing Stone Coat in which a Thunder-being plays the crucial role in saving the hero. In another case (Curtin & Hewitt 1918, 330) Doonongaes finds a Stone Coat sharpening chert knives in order to eat him. He discovers the Stone Coat may be overcome with a basswood club. On page 444 two Stone Coat women eat two boys and die giving birth to them.

Stone Coats play a leading role in a number of stories in the same collection. Among the hunting stories are found number 12, in which a lone hunter is chased by two Stone Coat women; number 85, in which a Stone Coat woman found tasting a child remains to help the hunters, taking to eating beavers instead of humans, and ends up by killing her own husband and aiding the hunters against his avenging brother; number 86, in which a Stone Coat offers hunting luck if one of the party will marry a Stone Coat, which hunter wins a race with the rival Stone Coat lover and thus gains hunting luck; and number 87, in which the best-known theme is developed in the flight from a Stone Coat, the hiding in the top of a tree and the stealing of the magic finger which is exchanged with the Stone Coat for hunting luck.

Warfare stories are included in the Curtin and Hewitt collection in which Stone Coats are given a leading role. These are number 67, in which a Stone Coat woman eats a girl and steals a boy who are rescued by their storm goddess grandmother with her relatives who are attacked by a band of Stone Coats who are defeated in a typical ravine massacre; and number 88, in which a party of Seneca Indians on the warpath are challenged by Stone Coats who are defeated by the Creator in a ravine massacre.

Tricks are played on Stone Coats in most narratives, and these are generally meant to be amusing. These include crossing a stream to avoid

Stone Coats, hiding in a stream, climbing a tree (because of their armor Stone Coats cannot look up), snatching the magic finger from the perplexed Stone Coat, and leading the Stone Coat to fall into the river and be drowned. The Stone Coat is a marginal character in the story of the Potent Boy, but here too the tricks and results are interesting. The boy hides meat in an eat-all contest with a Stone Coat and thus wins through deceit, and finally in a contest of kicking a log into the air, the log comes down, killing the Stone Coat. Both of these tricks are of course fabulous recourses in traditions outside North America, but the result is typically Iroquoian: the boy gains hunting luck in the form of the fallen Stone Coat's dog.

Hunting luck is obtained by two means. The most widespread motif is the contest or chase, in which the Stone Coat always challenges, always loses, and always rewards the antagonist with hunting luck. The second motif is hunting luck gained from the generous offer of a Stone Coat. The Stone Coat is usually overcome by an accident in returning the finger, by cutting off the head bet in a contest, or by a basswood club or spike.

The latter means of overcoming the Stone Coat is shared with stories of the warfare configuration as well, although it is typical of the warfare encounter that the Stone Coat is overcome with the aid of some wind god. This story type thus shows the triangular relationship in the human acquisition of power or luck through the action of a guardian wind spirit (which is benign but powerless to aid directly) over a helping spirit (which is neutral or antagonistic, but able to give aid when forced to do so). The Stone Coat can be seen as a potential helping spirit, despite the indications that it may have a human-like ontology seen in cooperation, marriage, and pitch and sand origins.

It is now appropriate to turn to the *Stallo* figure for a general description. It seems impossible to find so clear and simple a stereotype for this giant character, despite some striking similarities with Stone Coat, such as a predilection for beaver meat. The figure is difficult to summarize, and presents a confusing array of traits and motifs (Manker 1960, 226, 303). I suspect that this is suggestive of a different kind of source problem than that found in the Iroquoian literature. Stories with a similar figure with the name *Stallo* are brought together indiscriminately from many narrators and localities. The problem of conflicting narrative situations produces a false complexity, which might not appear in precise studies of a limited range within narrator repertoire and specific narrative situation. If this paper contributes to *Stallo* research, this suggestion of local limited studies in view of careful comparison is likely to be the most important contribution. No doubt all that can be said about the multiple origins of the figure, as well as about generalized characterization, has already long since been said.

Some characteristics seem to be widespread. The ruthless, amoral character of *Stallo* tales is apparent (Manker 1960, 225, 226, 304). *Stallo* is an eater of human flesh, with a preference for Lappish children (Manker 1960, 225, 304). He is almost always defeated (Manker 1960, 303).

The deception practised by the Lapps on *Stallo* and his family is of extremely diversified character and the same motifs may be found to appear in the most distant bodies of folklore. *Stallo* is overcome by luring him into a boiling cauldron, onto weak ice, off the edge of a cliff, by deceiving him into eating his own children (a motif reminiscent of the Iroquois bear-lover story where the unfaithful wife is deceived into eating the entrails of her lover), and by luring him into running naked towards the winter moon. *Stallo* may be aided by a powerful dog, and even resurrected (another motif common to the Iroquois but missing from the Stone Coat stories) (Manker 1960, 304).

The macabre destruction of genitals, both those of *Stallo* and Saami alike, is typical of some tales with motifs of an amazing variety, such as the biting off of testicles by a dog, cutting off of testicles with a knife, vaginal penetration with a knife, and burning with hot broth (Manker 1960, 304).

Some relations between Saami and *Stallo* seem to have no purpose greater than mere antagonizing. This is exemplified in the Saami habit of setting off the alarm to *Stallo's* beaver-nets (Manker 1960, 305).

Marriage deceptions seem to be important in the *Stallo* repertoire (Manker 1960, 304). The thwarting of *Stallo* by means of a dressed log is a motif found among the Iroquois as well, but again not in the context of gigantic figures. This is again indicative of the greater spectrum of values and variety of concerns which *Stallo* as a narrative figure is forced to carry. Both Stone Coat and *Stallo* do carry a similar semantic load, however, one that has been described as profane because it has no connection apparently with ritual.

Unlike the Stone Coat, *Stallo* is found only alone or with his family, never in a larger society (Manker 1960, 305). The larger society of Stone Coats is at least implicit in hunting tales, and explicit in tales of warfare. The matter of sex roles has been ignored in this study despite the fact that it is a key to the meaning of Iroquoian narrative of hunting, where male and female roles are essential. In this we find a contrast with the Saami material, and an important one too.

5. Some similarities and contrasts

The similarities between Stone Coat and *Stallo* are evident. They appear in perhaps similar genres. They are both giants. They are both anthropomor-

phic. They are both eaters of human flesh, as well as beavers and other game. They are both the object of tricks. They both lack cunning. They are both channels of acquisition, and as such express ambiguous relations to the informant society. Finally it seems that they are both always defeated by the informant society.

Despite the many similarities there are significant differences between Stone Coat and *Stallo*. For the Iroquois Stone Coat is an other-than-human being, the origins of which are not stated, except for Hewitt's one nineteenth-century note. For the Saami, the origins of a *Stallo* are discussed and seem to be diffuse. There is a range from a clear metamorphosis from the Saami human to *Stallo* on one hand to a clear other-than-human figure on the other.

Intra-group contest of individuals within Saami society is a striking aspect of some Saami tradition which is lacking in the Iroquois material.

The Iroquois material can be easily arranged into two types with few exceptions, the one with a concern with hunting luck and the other with warfare. The Saami material relating to *Stallo* seems more diffuse, suggesting the expression of a greater variety of concerns.

The Iroquois material refers overwhelmingly to relationships between human hunters and warriors with other-than-human beings, strongly suggesting a helper spirit character. What is acquired from the Stone Coat is precisely what is expected from a helper spirit. The Saami material has an overwhelmingly human character, suggesting that *Stallo* is expressive of a conflict-symbiotic relationship between two human societies. What is acquired from *Stallo* is varied, but often tends to be the things acquired from people, not gods. Precious metals, gold and silver, are often introduced. Since Saami society has shared the Iroquois concerns for hunting, fishing and gathering, the differences are a little surprising. It may be that the patterns of herding and centuries-long symbiosis with non-Saami societies may be associated with the differences in concerns.

For me as a student of Iroquois narrative the Saami material has served to clarify the particular configuration of the Stone Coat tradition through a comparison of similarities and contrasts. The other way around, I cannot pretend to have accomplished anything in the way of Saami research. Nevertheless, the Iroquois material may stimulate some clarification of the following points in *Stallo* tradition.

The contrast of money and precious metal reward (already noted in bear sorcery) with hunting luck in Iroquoian tradition may suggest the areas of concern most closely revealed by *Stallo* stories, as well as other figures in Saami tradition.

The clear Iroquois human: helping spirit: guardian spirit triangle may

suggest aspects of archaic *Stallo* tradition that remain obscure at present because of the complex and diffuse character of the Saami tradition. Because of the overlapping of subsistence concerns in the two societies, there may be at precisely that point *Stallo* material that has been overshadowed by Saami and non-Saami conflict and symbiosis. This is suggested by Manker's plea that *Stallo* symbolizes, more than human ethnic conflicts, the struggle of the little Lapp against the stern forces of Lapland and victory over them (the makings of guardian and helping spirits) (Manker 1975, 214).

The bumptious amorality of the *Stallo* tradition is striking to the student of Iroquoian narrative, who is accustomed to the interaction of human and giant to result in the expression and reinforcing of traditional values. It is fairly obvious that *Stallo* represents a series of superimpositions of traditions and concerns. It appears that the amorality and ruthlessness are to be associated not with the relations of Saamis to natural forces, but with the narrative moral breakdown resulting from contact between hostile human societies. In that case the human aspects of *Stallo* would be superimposed on an archaic non-human figure resembling more closely the Iroquoian Stone Coat than Vikings or berserker. In this sense a comparison with the Iroquoian material suggests a reversal of some of the earliest *Stallo* origin theories, a question that may now be fruitless.

On the other hand, the emphasis on conflict and symbiosis speaks to my mind for a *Stallo* who may well symbolize those bumbling and witless Finns and Swedes who grow so tall because they stay green so long, and whom the little Lap may not always overcome, but whom he likes to think he can generally outwit.

Stone Coats, for all we know, may be real giants.

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