

Lion people gave her power to heal

by Hubert Johnson

Rae-Edzo — Madeleine Rabassca isn't joking when she tells about the supernatural experience which she says gave her the ability to cure the ill.

The 80-year-old Indian woman is serious when she relates her confrontation with an African lion here in the Northern bush.

She means it when she says the lion transformed before her eyes into two human figures, one of whom offered her the power to cure the ill.

It's incredible, isn't it? Just not logical....

But that's the reason Madeleine Rabassca gives for becoming a "medicine woman" more than 25 years ago.

She's quite well-known among native elders here in the southern Mackenzie Valley and reportedly treated hundreds of people for various ailments and illnesses over the years.

Having heard about the woman, I arranged a brief interview to hear her story—but not to prove or disprove what she had to say.

She is living with a daughter and family in this predominantly Indian community of about 1600 more than 100 kilometres northwest of Yellowknife.

I needed an interpreter to understand Madeleine's Dogrib dialect. It happened to be a prominent resident, 60-year-old Elizabeth Mackenzie, who has known the medicine woman for decades.

We found Madeleine resting in the bedroom of the sparsely-furnished home, pillows and blankets propping up her small frame.

The medicine woman has retired from her "medical practice" for several years. She tires easily and has difficulty getting around. Although life has left its lines, there is still a sparkle in her eyes.

The Dogrib words and expressions flowed fluently and freely from her lips, eliminating any suspicion of senility or mental instability.

And above her bed hung a picture of Jesus Christ as well as a holy cross necklace.

Vision at 55

Madeleine was 55 when she had her vision or experience with the lion.

"My children were grown up, and I was with my husband in the bush. He was hunting and I was collecting firewood and spruce boughs for the floor of our tent", she said.

"I was walking in the bush and all of a sudden I heard a loud roar. I looked around and saw a big lion with his long mane blowing in the wind. He was approaching me from the edge of a lake at the bottom of a mountain.

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Madeleine Rabassca

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"In a few seconds, the lion turned into a man, and a woman was standing behind him in the distance. They were dark-skinned people but not Indian. I had never seen them before or since", Madeleine said through the interpreter.

"I told him to leave me alone and I would leave him alone. He said he only wanted to give me the power to make people well."

"At the time, there was much sickness around. He knew this and said he wanted me to help. I don't know why he chose me."

Although the vision lasted no more than a minute or two, Madeleine says she immediately began to feel "like another woman, like another person."

Back in Rae-Edzo, Madeleine told friends about her experience, and subsequently had people knocking at her door for relief from an assortment of afflictions.

At this stage of the interview, Madeleine was looking very tired, so we left immediately rather than risk the consequences of the unnecessary fatigue.

My interpreter, Mrs. Mackenzie, confirmed other reports that people were treated by Madeleine for such health problems as skin diseases, arthritis and rheumatism, mental disorders, heart problems, shock, and cuts and relatively minor physical injuries.

"She would begin her treatment by chanting verses about the experience with the lion, she would really sing up a storm and shake all over", Mrs. Mackenzie said.

Sometimes—depending on the ailment—the chanting was adequate. At other times, Madeleine would dispense medication made from the roots and grasses and other vegetation of the prime Mackenzie Valley soils.

"I knew a lot of people who said they had been cured by her, but I can't think of any who are living here now", Mrs. Mackenzie said.

Patients usually paid Madeleine for her services with small gifts such as

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moccasins or other leather goods, furs, gun shells or animal traps, my interpreter said.

Not the only one

Dene Nation president George Erasmus confirmed that Madeleine is well-known among Mackenzie Valley residents for her medical abilities.

And although Madeleine is believed to be the oldest living medicine woman in the region, she certainly is not alone.

The white man's education system and government health programs have eroded the role of the traditional Indian medicine man or woman, but not destroyed it.

"There are medicine men and women practising in most Mackenzie Valley communities today", Erasmus said.

Natives in the smaller, isolated communities are inclined to turn to the local medical practitioner for treatment rather than inconveniently travel elsewhere to a doctor or hospital.

"But even in the larger communities, if a doctor can't help them, they will go to the native medicine man", Erasmus said.

He acknowledged that the traditional medical practices are scorned by contemporary scientists. What can't be proved can't exist.

"But the practices of these medicine men are only mysterious because they haven't been put together as a science yet. They may be in the next two or three decades, though", Erasmus said.

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