The Mystery Religions of the Ancients

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Description of the "Ojibwa" Native American Mystery Religion

According to their oral history, seven great *miigis* (radiant/iridescent) beings appeared to the peoples in the Waabanakiing (Land of the Dawn, i.e., Eastern Land) to teach them the Mide way of life. These beings established *doodem* (clans) for the peoples in the east, symbolized by animal, fish or bird species; and then returned to the ocean.

The traditions and practices pertaining to the Ojibwa Midewiwin, Society of the Mide or Shamans, popularly designated as the "Grand Medicine Society" had a system of facial decoration for each of their degrees. The first degree colors were a broad green band across the forehead and a narrow strip of vermilion across the face, just below the eyes. The special benefits from advancement are that a Mide (on his admission into a new degree) receives the protection of the Manido (powerful spirit) which is the special guardian of that degree, and the initiation ritual adds to the magic powers previously received by the initiate.

FIRST DEGREE, ruled by the Panther "Manido". Before the candidate is allowed to receive a degree, he is taught by his instructor about things like:

- The peculiar properties of the drum, rattle, migis (ritual shell), etc., and their powers in exorcising evil spirits and curing the sick are explained.
- The candidate is also instructed in the Mide songs and prepares his chart with mnemonic characters for his songs.
- He also has instruction in the properties of herbs and plants.

When the preparatory instruction is ended, then a day set for the initiation and, beginning on the eve of the 5th day prior, a sweat lodge is done for 4 days in a row. During the process of purgation the candidate's thoughts must dwell upon the seriousness of the course he is pursuing and the sacred character of the new life he is about to assume. When fumigation has ceased, he is visited by the officiating Mide priests, and the talk is confined chiefly to the candidate's progress. He then gives each a present of tobacco, and after offering to Kitshi Manido (the Great Creator God) with the pipe, they expose the articles contained in their Mide sacks and explain the merits and properties of each of the magical objects. The candidate for the first time learns of the manner of preparing effigies, etc., with which to present to the incredulous ocular demonstrations of the genuineness and divine origin of the Mide-wiwin tradition. During the initiation, the sacred migis (ritual shell) is directed by the priests toward the sides, head or heart of the neophyte.

SECOND DEGREE, ruled by the "Kitshi Manido" or 'Great Spirit'. The candidate is now aware of the course he must take when he seeks advancement. When he is prepared, he invites eight of the Mide (who already have the higher degree) to his wigiwam and tells them he wishes to present himself for initiation at the proper time. A feast is set before them, tobacco is presented and smoking indulged in for the purpose of making proper offerings as already described. Then he seeks to secure the services of one of the priests present as his instructor.

The practical purpose of this next degree is to seek further information on the preparation of certain secret remedies. For acting as instructor, a Mide priest receives blankets, horses, and whatever may be mutually agreed upon between himself and his pupil. The meetings take place at the instructor's wigiwam about two weeks apart, and before he receives the degree, the candidate must take a vapor bath as a purgation and, again, he must make serious consideration of the sacred rites and teachings with which his mind "and heart" must thereafter be occupied, casting aside everything else from his thoughts. Now the sacred migis (ritual shell) is directed by the priests toward the joints of the body.

THIRD DEGREE, ruled by the “Makwa Manido” or ‘Bear Spirit’. Usually one year passes before a Mide can be given the third degree. The candidate chooses a Mide who already has the third degree and gets his instruction as before, the same being a summing up of traditions and special medicine secrets, with tales of exploits in medication, incantation and exorcism.

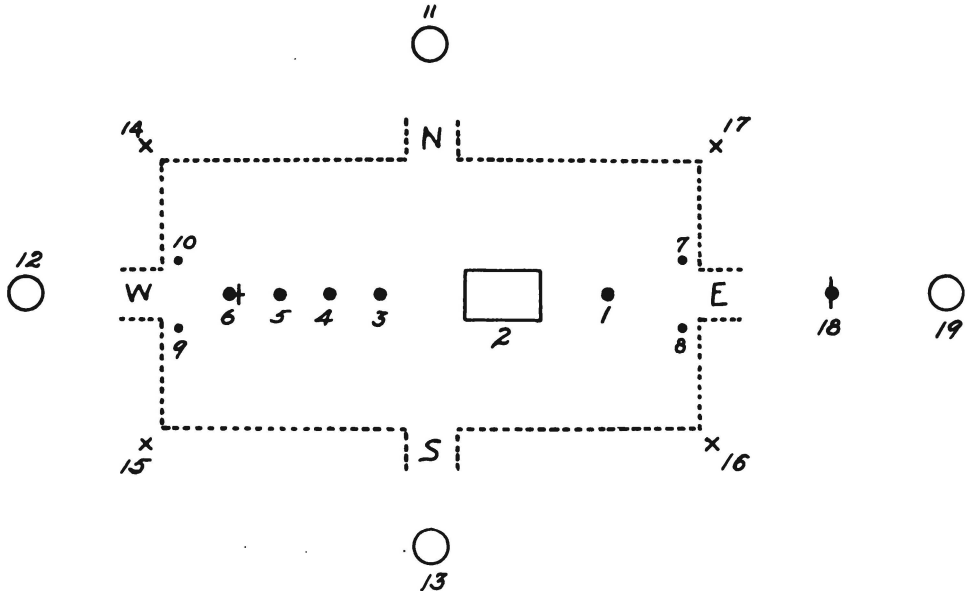
A tradition of the Sun-spirit restoring life to a boy is an act exemplified by the Midewiwin ritual and a modification of the original tradition is used in this degree. An outline it is given because of its value in this study of their ritual:

> Once an old Mide with his wife and son started out on a hunting trip. The son died, and the mother went to the village to get the help of her father who was the chief Mide priest, and whom she believed had the power to restore the boy to life. The chief Mide took three assistant Mide priests and went forth to the wigiwam where the body lay covered with robes.
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> The chief Mide placed himself at the left shoulder of the dead boy, the next in rank at the right, while the two assistants stationed themselves at the feet. Then the youngest Mide (who stood at the right foot of the deceased) began to chant a Mide song, which was repeated four times. When he had finished, the Mide at the left foot sang a Mide song four times; then the Mide at the right shoulder did the same, after which the chief Mide priest sang his song four times, whereupon there was a perceptible movement under the blanket, and as the limbs began to move the blanket was taken off, when the boy sat up. Being unable to speak, he made signs that he wanted water which was given him. The Mide priests then, each in turn (as before), sang songs and gave the boy four pinches of powder which he was made to swallow. He then recovered his speech and told them that during the time his body had been in a trance, his spirit had been in the "spirit land" and had learned of the "grand medicine". The boy then told this story:
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> > “The chief spirit of the Mide Society, gave us the "grand medicine", and he taught us how to use it. I have come back from the spirit land. There will be twelve, all of whom will take wives; when the last of these is no longer without a wife, then will I die. That is the time. The Mide spirit taught us to do right. He gave us life and told us how to prolong it. These things he taught us, and gave us roots for medicine. I give to you medicine; if your head is sick, this medicine put upon it, you will put it on...”

This revelation to the boy was said to have been imparted to the Indians in the way recited. The number 12 supposedly referred to 3 times the sacred number 4, and that 12 priests shall succeed each other before death will come to the narrator.

Diagram of the Mide-Wigan (their Temple or Church)

1 - Sacred stone
2 - Space where blanket is spread to receive presents or for candidate (or others) to sit down
3, 4, 5, 6 – Sacred Mide posts



The other items are detailed between pages 82-83 of the book *Indian Masonry* (1907) by Robert Catlin Wright.