

## The Chippewa Creation Story

Chippewa is actually an Anglo mispronunciation of the word “Ojibwa,” which may have referred to the puckered toes in people’s moccasins. In their language, the Chippewa call themselves “Anishinaabe,” which means *the original people*. The Anishinaabe have their own creation story which was recorded on birch bark scrolls and was passed down orally through the generations. In their origin story, their central figure is *Gitche Manito*, or the Great Mystery (also called the Good Spirit), who first created Mother Earth. Gitche Manito used Mother Earth and her elements to make the animals, the plants, and then the Anishinaabe.

Gitche Manito sent birds to spread the seeds of life to all of the four directions and to the land above and the land below. The Great Mystery made plants with the ability to heal, feed animals, and provide beauty. Lastly, he took the four elements of rock, water, fire, and wind to mold the Anishinaabe and blew the breath of life into Anishinaabe through a sacred shell called *megis* (cowrie shell). Gitche Manito then lowered the original (first) Anishinaabe to Earth. Men and women were the last life forms created. Therefore, the Anishinaabeg (plural) feel that the plants and animals are elders, having lived on Mother Earth longer.

The Great Mystery then felt pity for the Anishinaabeg, because they experienced hunger and sickness, and did not know how to make the best use of the natural world around them. So Gitche Manito sent his messenger *Nanaboozhoo* to help them use food and plants to live long lives and overcome suffering. “Nanapush,” which appears as a tribal surname in *Love Medicine*, is an alternate spelling for *Nanaboozhoo*. He was both a trickster and a teacher, exemplifying the wrong and right ways to live.

The otter brought the teachings of the Four Sacred Directions to the Anishinaabeg, as well as being a teacher for sacred ceremonies used to cure the sick. The Anishinaabeg who followed these teachings were called the *Midewiwin*, or Grand Medicine Society. Both men and women could become members (called *Mide*), although it was thought that initiates into the group must already have the gift of healing, which was bestowed by the Creator and could not be taught. Midewiwin societies are still in existence and very active today.