

Missionaries, Merchants and the Mi'kmaq Issues of Exchange in Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth-Century Acadia

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To a substantial degree Europe entered North America through the doorway of Acadia where, in the sixteenth century, the French came into contact with the Mi'kmaq.¹ Contact between these two groups was played out primarily within the arena of trade so that during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the exchange of matter predominated their interaction. Despite this fact, the Mi'kmaq and French were possessed of antithetical notions concerning the meaning of trade itself and this divergence established what might be regarded as a European colonial pattern of regarding the New World of Acadia – a pattern with potentially devastating effects for the Mi'kmaq community.

I refer to “matter” here as “that which forms a relationship among and between ourselves and other human beings and the created world,”² and the exchange of matter as the primary mode by which human beings negotiate boundaries or perceived incompatibilities among themselves. In effect, negotiation of such boundaries constitutes recognition of the fundamental meaning of not only other humans but also of one’s relationship with them.³

The critical role played by exchange within the creation and maintenance of human community was a reality that the Mi'kmaq appear to have embraced at least from the time of earliest contact;⁴ this people possessed a basic understanding of the definitive character of exchange for

the human, and consequently every act reflected this assumption and a language of symbol existed to express it. They confronted the encounter with Europeans as an encounter with new matter; and upon reflection, adapted their mode of exchange to the new situation, consistently striving to maintain their human orientation in a changing world. Contact with European people was experienced by the native community in terms of a tangible mutation of the world it knew. The arrival of the French translated into the advent of a variety of material forms that required a new understanding of the nature of the world the Mi'kmaq occupied. To begin, this materiality took the form of human encounter through sexual relationships with others – in this case French fishermen, seamen, explorers and merchants; and consequently the creation of a new variety of offspring that had not existed before this time. These children were usually mothered by native women and so were received into that community to be reared.

Another form assumed by the experience of contact was that of alcohol (primarily wine and brandy) which had been previously unknown to the Mi'kmaq. European disease too quite rapidly became a significant incursion with which the native population had to contend,⁵ and there were numerous means by which the spread of disease was facilitated including sexual contact⁶ and the introduction of new European types of food into the native diet.⁷ It has been noted that by the late sixteenth century the effects of these three endowments of contact (sex, alcohol and disease) were already being experienced to a substantial degree.⁸ In addition to these the arrival of European commodities attendant the French must also be recognized: conspicuous among these were the musket,⁹ axes, kettles and knives.¹⁰

An inventory of the variety of new forms of materiality to have entered the world of the Mi'kmaq in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries could obviously be substantially more extensive than what has been presented here. These particular instances have been offered simply to establish the fact of their presence during this period in order that we might regard the more salient issue of the impact of new forms of matter upon the native community. This impact was considerable.

Lescarbot indicates that the language of the Mi'kmaq, for instance, was reverberating from the pressure exerted by early involvement in trade with Europeans, as it had by the first years of the seventeenth century become inundated with French vocabulary.¹¹ The introduction of European commodities also had a substantial impact upon the native community.

Iron kettles, for example, items which were much more convenient than their large wooden counterparts that had been in use until that time, distinctly altered native movement within the region.¹² European iron that the Mi'kmaq received in return for beaver pelts not only changed the design and character of hunting weapons but also encouraged the appropriation of this resource.¹³ The result was that the native population fairly rapidly shifted the focus of its labour away from fishing and hunting in favour of trapping. More effective tools of the hunt also resulted in the ability to kill more game than had ever been possible with stone spears and consequently animal stocks suffered significant reductions. With less food available to them the native community became increasingly reliant upon the French for this commodity.¹⁴

The world of the Mi'kmaq was clearly altered dramatically within a relatively brief interval. In a sense, this people had come to occupy a new space and time that demanded a reassessment of the place of the human being who occupied this space. To do this, the Mi'kmaq exploited the medium of human exchange in order to affirm a conception of the human (both Mi'kmaq and French) as a being who negotiates the boundaries presupposed by the presence of other humans.

It should be noted that even following a century of contact with the French, the Mi'kmaq were acutely aware of the capacity for, and the inherent power of, the sacralizing of exchange. In 1606, for example, Lescarbot wrote of the use of the gift in Mi'kmaq society to amend injury and in so doing to restore harmonious communal relationships.¹⁵ The point to be underscored here is that exchange signified more than the value of matter as it was afforded the possibility of human definition – of sacred power.

In light of this it is difficult not to begin to reconsider the implications of the fact that native people sought exchange with Europeans from earliest instances of contact. It has been noted that the earliest records of European excursions to North America contain references to encounter with indigenous people bearing supplies of pelts which were intended to be traded for European goods. Were these indigenous people truly dazzled by the combs, tin bells and tin rings¹⁶ they received from the Europeans, or is it possible that they may have been more concerned with the acts of giving and receiving – basic physical acts that could negotiate the boundary between themselves and the new white humans who had appeared from the Atlantic? It is obviously difficult to know. Yet literature of the period

is replete with clear illustrations of new types of exchanges involving the Mi'kmaq and the French that betrayed efforts on the part of the native people to understand what constituted the human who confronted colonialism.

A major constituent of the process was the Christianity created by contact during this period. The first Mi'kmaq to “convert” was Membertou who was subsequently emulated by twenty-one members of his clan in 1610.¹⁷ Between European Christianity and native culture there existed, in the minds of the missionaries who sailed for Acadia, an irreconcilable abyss.¹⁸ For Membertou such a void did not exist as, in some sense, he appears to have regarded his conversion as an embrace not of French Catholicism but of the definitive components available to him in his changed world. Le Jeune noted that Membertou had repeatedly told the Jesuits, “Learn our language quickly, for when you have learned it, you will teach me; and when I am taught I will become a preacher like you and we will convert the whole country.” Of course, for Membertou, conversion did not signify the abandonment of ungodly ways. Over the period of a number of days during which he was dying he pleaded with Biard to allow him to be buried with his father and his ancestors, but the Jesuit would have nothing to do with the notion of burying a converted Christian with “Heathen whose souls were to be lost.” Membertou acquiesced shortly before death,¹⁹ yet it is clear that his Christianity, like the ritual of mourning, was a medium for negotiation as well as a means of defining the person which had emerged from the context of contact and exchange. The Jesuits had to be willing to learn the Mi'kmaq language; the natives, had to be willing to convert. The Jesuits would consequently teach their doctrine; and the natives would maintain their spiritual bond with their ancestors. To Membertou it must have appeared to be a fair exchange through which something novel could arise – novel in the sense that it united elements of both cultures without being defined in terms of one or the other.

The Mi'kmaq universe was in a state of transformation and disequilibrium and Membertou might be regarded as emblematic for not only the confusion but also the reverberations induced by the presence of Europeans. The arrival of the French signalled the end of the world the Mi'kmaq knew and the birth of the colonial world in Acadia. In order to establish some measure of orientation within this culturally tumultuous situation the Mi'kmaq, on the one hand, looked to the exchange of matter

to delimit the nature of their relationship with this changed world and consequently their meaning as human beings within it; they drew on their “religious imagination of matter,”²⁰ by which they were able to conceive of themselves and the French as beings whose meaning bore a relationship to the experience of their lives.

The French, on the other hand, had a great deal of difficulty confronting the reality of a new world primarily because they were not culturally equipped to regard the exchange of matter as sacred, in the sense that exchange could bear the potential for delineating the significance of human beings. Material shortages that gave rise to the “crisis of feudalism” in Europe had compelled Europeans to seek out and appropriate goods and raw materials beyond their continent,²¹ and this activity necessarily involved the exploitation of other human beings who were devalued within a qualitative scale of humanity in order to provide justification for European appropriations. This devaluation was initially accomplished by means of the ideologies of mercantilism and imperialism, each of which denied the importance of relationships with matter and the process of exchange within the creation of individual and communal self understanding. The mercantile human being dominated objects of acquisition as all the world’s resources were ripe for seizure; the notion of conquest that was integral to imperialism denied the possibility of exchange.²² For indigenous peoples the critical implication of this rejection of the constitutive component of exchange is that it invited a European flight from the recognition of relationships with those whose matter was to be appropriated. In other words, it permitted Europeans to function as though non-Europeans were not legitimate human beings.

In Acadia, for example, the Jesuit Pierre Biard recognized that climate wholly effected native patterns of food consumption. Despite this recognition the Jesuits nevertheless insisted that Mi’kmaq converts to Catholicism fully adhere to the church’s sacrosanct calendar of fasts.²³ Not only did the Jesuits fail to appreciate the nature of Mi’kmaq life in Acadia but they also refused to accept the reality of a colonial relationship between themselves and this people. Writing in 1610, Biard confuted the Mi’kmaq claim that the European presence had caused the countless new diseases that were ravishing the native community; and claimed rather that it was gluttony alone that had led the Mi’kmaq to experience the “discomforts” of smallpox, measles, typhus, tuberculosis, pleurisy, scarlet fever and consumption, to name a few.²⁴

For the Mi'kmaq community various forms of exchange constituted the means by which the humanity of both native and non-native could be assured. This understanding of exchange compelled them to confront the reality of a changed world and to deal constructively with its very new forms of relationships. The French however drew on their European ideologies to assure their own meaning as legitimate appropriators, but this was a meaning sustained at the expense of that of all others. To maintain a notion of their own superiority as human beings they were forced to disregard the actuality of their experience of the New World.

So long as they held fast to their ideologically inspired understanding of themselves and others they were unable to confront the reality of life in Acadia and consequently, to respond creatively as the Mi'kmaq did. Rather, they were compelled to engage in a sustained devaluation of indigenous society – an ominous prospect for a Mi'kmaq community that, from earliest contact, sought to affirm the common humanity of all New World people.

Endnotes

1. The Mi'kmaq are the easternmost group of Algonquin peoples.
2. Charles Long, "Matter and Spirit," in *Local Knowledge and Ancient Wisdom: Challenges in Contemporary Spirituality*, ed. Steven Friesen (Honolulu: Institute of Culture and Communication, East-West Center, 1991), 15.
3. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1967), 10-11.
4. In 1606, for example, Marc Lescarbot wrote of a young woman who was being held prisoner by the Mi'kmaq and who, in the process of attempting to escape, stole a "tinder-box" from the cabin of chief Membertou. For this offense the "savages' wives and daughters did execute her." Clearly a human being who would steal from another was subverting the community's valuation of exchange as it related to the significance of the individual; the act of stealing was a declaration that that mode of human constitution – that human being defined by exchange – was meaningless. For the community the life of the thief not only violated the peoples' notion of itself but was consequently worthless since it had declared its own insignificance (*Nova Francia: A Description of Acadia, 1606* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928], 264-265).

5. Among the illnesses which have been documented were smallpox, measles, typhus, tuberculosis and pleurisy, whooping cough, scarlet fever, strep infections and consumption (See Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976], 98; and Jeanne Guillemin, *Urban Renegades: The Cultural Strategy of American Indians* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1975], 29).
6. Alfred Goldsworthy Bailey, *The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonquin Cultures, 1504-1700: A Study in Canadian Civilization* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 18.
7. Bailey, 13.
8. Guillemin, 28.
9. Bailey, 52.
10. Nicolas Denys, *Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North America (Acadia)*, ed. W.F. Ganong (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1908), 442.
11. Lescarbot, 183-184.
12. Denys, 406.
13. Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 16.
14. Bailey, 13.
15. Lescarbot, 264.
16. James Axtell, *After Columbus; Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 158.
17. John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter Since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 4.
18. Biard, writing in 1612, remarked that he hoped he and his fellow Jesuits would incite the aboriginal people to “see the difference between Christianity and their ungodliness” (*The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites [New York: Pageant Book Company, 1959], II:15).
19. Thwaites, III:203-205.

20. Charles Long, from the introduction to “Colonial Discourse in the Study of Religion,” Course taught at Syracuse University, 1988, 2.
21. Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 108-109.
22. Francis Jennings notes, “America was [a] wilderness [that] civilization was required by divine sanction of the imperative of progress to conquer” (see *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* [New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1976], 15).
23. Jaenen, 72.
24. Thwaites, III:105-106.