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Barbara Rieti

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Article abstract

This article examines the social implications of the tradition found in certain parts of Newfoundland that an offended "Indian" can put a "wish" or "spell" on the offender. Narratives typically involve itinerant native basketsellers from Nova Scotia, but have been recorded in connection with Micmac residents of the south coast as well; there is also a group of non-narrative reports about alleged Micmac methods of getting magic power. A full analysis of this material must set it in relation to the larger body of Newfoundland witch lore, but, as a subset with distinctive features, the idea of "Indian curses" poses many questions about native/European interaction. Did it foster fair (if guarded) relations, or hostility - or both ? Did it have a basis in Micmac culture, and did the Micmacs use it, or is it purely a folklore of "otherness."

ABORIGINAL/ANGLO RELATIONS AS POR- TRAYED IN THE FOLKLORE OF MICMAC 'WITCHING' IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Barbara RIETI

St. John's, Newfoundland

In Newfoundland, the idea that some people can exert magical influence over the fortunes of others has been well-documented but little analyzed: in the past twenty-five years, students have contributed several hundred accounts of "witches" to the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA). How and why certain people acquire such a reputation is the subject of my present research, in which I am combining fieldwork with archival material to draw a social portrait of witchcraft in Newfoundland.¹ The majority of "witches" in my study are women whose reputation evolved in the communities they lived in, but "Indians" as witches are an important subset in the Newfoundland witchcraft corpus; among them, both men and women are likely to be considered witches. The question this immediately brings to mind is, what do native people and women have in common? A lot, of course—such as secondary social status to white males—but what is of especial interest here is their underrepresentation from vernacular perspectives in the historical and ethnographic record. The study of folk tradition often offers wider avenues of approach than elite written history does to the experience of people excluded from official versions of the past (and present). The accounts reviewed for this paper illustrate this point: recorded from "ordinary" people, they offer insights into aboriginal/white relations in everyday life that are absent from the thin printed record.

A student in 1968, for instance, wrote about some Nova Scotia Micmacs who visited his community around 1957:

I can remember very well when the Indians came to Seal Cove for the first time to sell baskets... When the people knew they were in Hermitage, which is ten miles away... they began to gather together in bundles, talking about them. The main topic was whether they would be witched or not. These people believed that those Indians

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1. I would like to thank Martin Lovelace, director of MUNFLA, for permission to use archival material, as well as his help with most other aspects of my research. I would also like to thank Dorothy Anger and Ralph Pastore of Memorial University for perceptive comments. I am very grateful to the Institute of Social and Economic Research and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for post-doctoral fellowships that made this work possible. This paper was first read at the Folklore Studies Association of Canada/Learned Societies of Canada meeting in Prince Edward Island in 1992, and I was offered many helpful comments by people at that session.

can really witch.... One thing the people home made sure of and that was to buy a basket from them. The women not only bought a basket, but gave them clothes as well. They were so scared when they wanted lunch, they hardly knew what to say. They wouldn't dare say no, though.

These Indians were not wanted in the community because the people there, and mainly women, were so scared of being witched. However, the trips were always rewarding, and still are, because they received piles of goods each time.²

Well into the 1980s, people in the area continued to buy for fear of a curse, according to students in Folklore classes.³

The traditions about the itinerant Nova Scotians probably built upon existing lore about the Micmacs long resident in Newfoundland; at least one student made the connection explicitly, explaining (in 1968) that people in Francois bought baskets from the Cape Bretoners because they feared the Indians could "cast spells":

This seems to go back to the earliest days of the community. In those days Micmac Indians came from Bay d'Espoir to the area and a number of stories are told about spells being cast on the early inhabitants. An example is the story told about the McDonald family that lived at Ruben's Cove (Chaleur Bay on the South Coast). The Micmacs were in the McDonalds' home, the children were playing, and one of the McDonald children threw the Micmac's cap on the stove and burned it. This made the Micmac angry and she said, 'None of you will live to wear out a cap.' Mrs. McDonald was sewing and stuck a needle in the Micmac. The Micmac then replied, 'You draw blood from me, me no witch you.' The father was away at the time and so he escaped the spell. The children, however, all died and are buried in Ruben's Cove. The old people at Francois still maintain that they died because of the spell cast on them by the Indians.⁴

Most narratives about Newfoundland Micmacs concern those at Conne River in Bay d'Espoir, who only received official governmental status as native people in 1985. (There are smaller populations on the west coast and in central Newfoundland.) Conne River is neither homogeneous or isolated—the long history of intermarriage with Europeans shows a constant interaction with their neighbors. In his *Report by the Governor on a Visit to the Micmac Indians at Bay d'Espoir* of 1908, William MacGregor wrote, "...it may be doubted whether there is a single pure-blooded Micmac on the Island today. As an ethnic unit the Micmac can therefore hardly be said to exist here. At the same time the Micmac community, such as it is, will not, at least for several generations, be absorbed into the

2. MUNFLA Folklore Survey Card 68-13/128.

3. Personal communication from students in my classes, 1993 and 1994.

4. MUNFLA Folklore Survey Card 68-3K/154.

European population of Newfoundland.”⁵ The double-bind held throughout the century, so that when Dorothy Anger undertook a study on Newfoundland Micmac political identity in the late 1970s, she found that “their credentials as a bona fide ‘native group’ have been disputed,” and that comments like, “So-and-so is no more Indian than I am” were common expressions of resentment over claims to native status. But Anger’s native informants testified to denigration by whites, embodied in epithets like “dirty Micmacs” or “black Indians.” “To call yourself a Micmac is putting yourself pretty low,” explained one man, an Indian himself.⁶ In 1993, Edwina Wetzel, a native of Conne River, told a Memorial University convocation assembly that until the 1970s, “People were ashamed to be identified as Micmac.”⁷

The folklore of Micmac witchcraft adds further evidence of stigmatisation and stereotyping, provided by whites themselves. For some, it justified dislike on “impersonal” grounds. “Some of them wasn’t fit to have around, you wouldn’t know what they would do if you crossed them,” said one man, citing the case of a Micmac who supposedly caused the death of a son of a man with whom he had quarreled.⁸ “Nobody liked the Injuns,” said another, “That’s the name the people gave to the Micmacs from Bay d’Espoir that used to come out here selling baskets. They had witched people before.” He recounted the story of a Micmac couple who got lost in the fog while out in boat and were put up at a white household. When a boy at the house wanted a puppy belonging to them, the woman reluctantly gave it to him; during a storm a few days later, a thunderbolt came down the chimney and killed the dog. According to the boy’s father, “the old Injun witched the dog because she didn’t want to part from it.”⁹

Other accounts are more sympathetic toward the Micmacs and may show their actions—that is, their alleged magic actions—as justified. A widely recorded story around Bay d’Espoir concerns an Indian (or group of Indians) who bring some beaver fur to sell to a notoriously stingy merchant. “Of course they didn’t sell their furs but gave them away,” said one informant, meaning that they didn’t get a good price to begin with; in his version the Indian “was very poor and didn’t have anything to eat.”¹⁰ The merchant insists that the colour of the fur isn’t right, and either doesn’t buy it or gives almost nothing for it. The Indians tell him that by the following year he won’t see the colour of a beaver, and twelve months

5. William MacGREGOR, *Report by the Governor on a Visit to the Micmac Indians at Bay d’Espoir*. Colonial Reports, Newfoundland No. 54. London; for his Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1908, p. 7.

6. Dorothy ANGER, “Putting It Back Together: Micmac Political Identity in Newfoundland,” M.A. Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1983, p. 198.

7. Edwina WETZEL, “Address to Convocation,” May 29 1993, *MUN Gazette*, June 3 1993, p. 21.

8. MUNFLA Folklore Survey Card 69-6/114.

9. MUNFLA Questionnaire 68-255/4-5.

10. MUNFLA Folklore Survey Card 68-7J/157.

later he has become either blind or colourblind.¹¹ In another mean merchant story, a shopkeeper refuses an Indian a pound of sugar on credit. The Indian says he'll be sorry, and that same day the shopkeeper injures his knee so that he cannot get around. He tells an Indian friend about his plight, and she advises him to put on "a scoff" (a feast) for some of the Indians. He does this and recovers.¹² Here, civil generosity is not just an avoidance mechanism but a corrective one. Occasionally it is even rewarded. A Bay d'Espoir informant told his son how one year when he was working in the lumber woods, he set out in boat for the head office on pay day, but turned the boat back to pick up a Micmac, over the protests of the other passengers. Although the office was packed when they got there, the paymaster called them first. "My father still says this was because they had helped the Micmac," wrote the collector, "He says, 'They can do some terrible things, but they can also do some good things'."¹³

One of my informants, who has the reputation of a witch herself, describes the "good" and "terrible" things done by a Nova Scotian Micmac I'll call John Smith. When Smith visited her area, he boarded at her house for free; he told her that she "might get down low, but she would never want for anything," and she never did. But he told a man who charged him for a boat trip that "he would get nothing by it," and the man's family experienced a series of disasters soon after that. "That's what Smith done to him, that's true," said my informant, "I never had any trouble with him, because I treated him like one of my own." Thus many of the stories recommend fair and generous relations.

Were the Micmacs aware of white ideas about magical Indian powers, and did they exploit them to advantage (as many whites suggest)? It is impossible to say, in the absence of any Micmac testimony. But it seems improbable they would be unaware of such a widespread notion, considering that their own witchcraft tradition shows considerable European influence, and that internecine cases sound much like those of their white neighbours.¹⁴ More importantly, Micmac legendry includes disasters caused by white offense to Indians, such as the Miramichi or Campbellton fires in New Brunswick in 1825 and 1910.¹⁵ In a history of Micmac-white relations in Nova Scotia, Harold Franklin McGee goes so far as to say that "most of the folk history concerned with Micmac/white relations relates to mistreatment of the Indians by the whites with the consequence

11. MUNFLA Folklore Survey Cards 68-3K/156 and 69-6/117.

12. MUNFLA Folklore Survey Card 68-7J/156.

13. MUNFLA Folklore Survey Card 68-7J/155.

14. Elsie CLEWS PARSONS, for instance, had an informant in Nova Scotia (in the 1920s) who thought that her own mother was "witching" her. "Micmac Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 38 (1925): 55-133, p. 483.

15. Philip K. BOCK, *The Micmac Indians of Restigouche: History and Contemporary Description*, Ottawa, National Museum of Canada (Bulletin no. 213, Anthropological Series No. 77), 1966, p. 93; Wilson D. Wallis and Ruth Sawtell Wallis, *The Micmac Indians of Eastern Canada*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955, p. 169.

that the whites are punished by supernatural intervention."¹⁶ To persons shunted to marginal status by an imperialist culture, any tool that could command respect and power would surely be attractive.

It should not be imagined, however, that the white fear of Indian curses worked as straightforwardly to Indian advantage as the white accounts may suggest. John Smith's "curse," for instance, instead of making people more obliging toward him, forced him to find a new territory: "People took notice of it," my informant said, and no one would "carry him in boat anymore." Once again, the envisioned aggression of the "witch" justifies shunning him, even after he has provided a valuable service as scapegoat for an entire family's misfortunes. And once again, white folklore "about Micmacs" tells much more about whites than about Micmacs. Only the Micmacs themselves can answer questions about their knowledge of this material.

Despite some congruence of the Newfoundland lore with Micmac tradition (as in the punishment of whites), much of it is English stuff transplanted with remarkable stability. "Cat" magic is a case in point. "A Micmac superstition...to get the power to witch," wrote one student, was to put a live cat in an oven; "if you can stand the screams, you supposedly sold your soul to the devil." You then cut the front paws off the dead cat and put them in a river, and the one that floats upstream can be used for witching.¹⁷ Despite the surface plausibility to this being a "Micmac" practice—animal bones having magical properties in Micmac lore—a description of the method of the English toadman (a kind of magician), recorded near Cambridge in 1953, reveals its true provenance. To become a toadman, one had to catch a toad and skin it alive, or kill it in some other gruesome way. The dried bones are thrown into a stream at midnight, where they "let out such screams that only a brave man can stand for it. One bone, still screaming, points or even moves upstream. This bone must be taken out of the water, and carried about by the toadman who is now in league with the Devil."¹⁸ Thus an English item is attached to the Micmac, casting them as cruel and diabolical.

Broader outlines of English tradition remain equally intact: accounts of West Country witch beliefs are so similar to those of Newfoundland that one could probably recognize them as the direct antecedents without even knowing that the bulk of English settlers came from Dorset, Devon, and Somerset. English villagers, for instance, might worry that itinerant Gypsies would curse them if offended—and brought the fear with them, language and all: "I remember when we used to get them Gypsies coming around all the time selling flowers and baskets," said one informant

16. Harold Franklin MCGEE Jr., "Ethnic Boundaries and Strategies of Ethnic Interaction: A History of Micmac-White Relations in Nova Scotia." Diss. (Anthro) Southern Illinois University, 1974, p. 101.

17. MUNFLA Folklore Survey Card 71-32/43.

18. G.W. PATTISON, "Adult Education and Folklore," *Folk-Lore* 64 (1953): 424-26, p. 426.

Boy, if you didn't buy something a curse was placed on you. They would say a magic spell, then that was it. Once Ann Moore didn't buy anything so the Gypsy cursed her. When Ann had her next child he was retarded. And Jack Sanders up in St. Jacques wouldn't buy anything either and he died two weeks later in his sleep and he wasn't even sick.¹⁹

The door-to-door questing behaviour of the Micmacs mirrors that of many "community" witches, and may have more to do with their identification as "witches" than ethnicity does. The roving beggars of Quebec were a similar case: both "good" and "bad" paupers were considered to have supernatural powers to extract revenge for refusals of charity.²⁰

But how is it that people in a position of begging or peddling come to be invested with such tremendous power? Its attribution to disenfranchised persons and groups is ironic, but reversals and subversions of power may be its key. One possibility is that the dominant group feels that the undergroup *must* hate and envy them—hence the murderous reaction they imagine the "witches" to have to even the smallest offense. Or perhaps the dominant group's own hatred is disguised through the psychological process of projective inversion, summarized by Alan Dundes as "A accusing B of carrying out an action which A really wants to carry out himself," so that "I hate you" becomes "you hate me."²¹ Micmac witches "kill" their "victims" in Newfoundland witch lore—but in Newfoundland history, who killed whom? The aboriginal Beothuks were wiped out by the mid-nineteenth century through the European usurpation of their land. The Micmacs (who had been crossing the Cabot Strait since at least 1600) faced constant material and cultural assaults, which escalated rapidly at the start of the twentieth century. In common parlance, projective inversion is known as "blaming the victim"; perhaps white consciousness of the rip-off of native Canadians was eased by making them out to be so dangerous and "savage" that assimilation to white society was a boon to all concerned (including cats). White conscience would also be salved by the widespread assertion that the Micmacs killed off the Beothuks, for which the historian Ralph Pastore can find no historical basis except perhaps "a sense of guilt on the part of white Newfoundlanders who feared that *they* were the major cause of the end of the Beothuks."²²

19. MUNFLA MS79-239/9. Dorothy Anger recalls an informant referring to Micmac basket-sellers as "gypsies" (personal communication).

20. Lucille GUILBERT *et al.*, *Pauvre ou vagabond: le queteux et la société québécoise* (Quebec, Rapports et mémoires de recherche du CELAT) 1987. Reviewed by Gary Butler in *Canadian Folklore Canadien* 12 : 2, 1990, pp. 156-160.

21. Alan DUNDES, "The Ritual Murder or Blood Libel Legend: A Study of Anti-Semitic Victimization through Projective Inversion," *Temenos* 25 (1989): 7-32, pp. 18-19.

22. Ralph PASTORE, *Newfoundland Micmacs: A History of their Traditional Life*, St. John's, Newfoundland Historical Society Pamphlet No. 5, 1978, p. 16. Many of the documents pertaining to native people in Newfoundland were collated by James P. HOWLEY in *The*

If such large psychosocial dynamics underlie witch beliefs, they are catalyzed in relatively specific and empirical social scenarios. In the typical witchcraft incident, the witch is refused a request—sometimes reasonable, sometimes not—whereupon she makes a direful utterance about the future of the offender, which sooner or later comes true. Keith Thomas catalogues precisely the same sequence in English witchcraft accusations and locates its mainspring in the “bewitched” persons’ unease about the refusal: when misfortune overtook them, “...it was their own guilty conscience that told them where to look for its cause.”²³ The guilt, he suggests, arose from “an unresolved conflict between the neighbourly conduct required by the ethical code of the old village community, and the increasingly individualistic forms of behaviour which accompanied the economic changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”²⁴ Imported to Newfoundland, the pattern found reinforcement in an ethic in which individualism and interdependence were both pronounced, yet coexisted with a high value on neighbourliness, hospitality and reciprocity.

One part of Thomas’s model fits the Micmac material nicely, and supports the notion of collective guilt posited by the theory of projective inversion. It was rare for large-scale disasters to be blamed on a witch, Thomas says, because:

To be plausibly suspected of bringing about such a disaster, it would be necessary to stand in a relationship of hostility, not to this or that individual, but to the community as a whole. The guilty party could only be someone whom everybody was conscious of having ill-treated.²⁵

This fits Micmac witch lore in that a common theme involves the loss of several ships (including the Titanic). (In contrast, “community” witches seldom cause damage beyond the individual who has vexed them.) Around 1963, it goes, some baskets belonging to a Nova Scotian Micmac were damaged on the ferry during the crossing to Newfoundland. When CNR (the Canadian National Railway, who ran the ferries) refused to pay for the baskets, the Micmac says, “you will pay more than the baskets are worth before long,” or words to that effect; soon after that, several CN boats ran ashore or sank. The sweeping impersonality of the curse mirrors the indiscrimination with which all Micmacs are cast as witches and antagonists.

Beothuks or Red Indians: The Aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland, first published in 1915 (Toronto, Coles Publishing, 1974). Another standard ethnographic source is Frank G. SPECK’S *Beothuk and Micmac*, New York, Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1922. A recent source is Doug JACKSON’S “*On the Country*”: *The Micmacs of Newfoundland*, ed. Gerald Penney, St. John’s: Harry Cuff, 1993, which includes three witch stories from Conne River, p. 147.

23. Keith THOMAS, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971, p. 663.

24. THOMAS, p. 670.

25. THOMAS, p. 67.

The CN story fostered behaviour that in turn could only increase resentment and anxiety. A student in a west coast community claimed that the press and radio made such an issue of it that people were "on the watch" for the witch: when she arrived, she sold a basket at every house.²⁶ When the *Northern Ranger* went aground near Wesleyville in Bonavista Bay on the east coast, it became a visible symbol of the reputed powers of the visiting Micmacs: "When a person refused to buy a basket," according to one student, "all he had to do was look out his door or window to see this boat on the rock to see just what would happen. I don't think there was anyone who didn't buy one...the boat beating against the rocks wiped out any doubt about the Indians not being witches."²⁷ Another student from the same area described how, when a Micmac couple visited with baskets each spring, the householders would bolt the doors, opening them a crack just long enough to buy baskets.²⁸

Is the frightened face peering through the crack that of native/white relations in Newfoundland? Not necessarily—but it is one of them. One cannot conclude from these expressions of fear and alienation that Micmac/white relations are characterized by fear and alienation, any more than one could conclude from the existence of racist jokes in Canada that Canada is a racist nation. Like any aspect of folklore, witch traditions reflect an element of culture which may be offset or qualified by other data. Herbal healing, for example, is a prominent theme in the open-ended conversations recorded in central Newfoundland by Halpert, Widdowson and their field guides in the 1960s, in which informants tell of great benefits received from the Micmacs through their cures.²⁹ Informants have told me of many positive relations with the Micmacs. "They were nice people," one said, even after telling of a woman who died because she didn't buy something from them.

Casual conversation, however, does not fit so readily into the established folklore genres that students are instructed to collect or the narratives that are retailed in relatively fixed form. It may be an inherent property of a set of assembled "texts" to assume disproportionate weight when compared with relatively unstructured discourse. On the other hand, the sheer numbers of the same item from different areas offers better evidence about folk attitudes than the occasional single outsider's commentary. Moreover, the scenes of everyday life provided by folk and oral history add depth and dimension to elite history's limited vision. Scanning the printed record led one researcher to observe that until the 1970s, the "only positive connotation" to being Micmac "was in connection with guiding and hunting skills."³⁰ To this, folk tradition can add herbal medicine.

26. MUNFLA Folklore Survey Card 68-17/84.

27. MUNFLA MS69-2E/2-6.

28. MUNFLA Folklore Survey Card 71-28/35.

29. MUNFLA MS/Tape Collection 66-25.

30. Dorothy ANGER, p. 23.

The less attractive Micmac “witching” stories, to reiterate in closing, are really about whites, not their ostensible subject, the Micmacs. The anatomy of stereotype, however, affects everyone involved. If we want to open the doors that make us dangerous strangers to each other, we have to understand how they get closed in the first place.