

Culture

The Micmacs of Newfoundland: A Resurgent Culture

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

Privés désormais de leurs institutions sociales traditionnelles et à défaut d'être reconnus comme population autochtone, les Indiens Micmac de Terre-Neuve ont entrepris au cours de la dernière décennie, un processus de renouveau culturel. C'est par le truchement de leur histoire qu'ils tentent de retrouver leur identité culturelle et, en ce sens, les liens qui les rattachent au territoire constituent un symbole de la plus haute importance. Cet article se base sur la signification et l'importance du territoire pour permettre une meilleure compréhension du renouveau politique et culturel inhérent à la renaissance du peuple indien.

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The Micmacs of Newfoundland : A Resurgent Culture

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...Indian rites, sacred ceremonies and holy rituals shall remain undisturbed and shall continue as they were given to our people by the Great Spirit since time immemorial, for they are useful and necessary for the good of all mankind. ¹

These are words from the investiture in June 1979 of a Newfoundland Micmac chief, the first man in over fifty years to hold that position. Renewal of the office marks a significant change in the political and cultural development of the Newfoundland Micmacs.

The time of Micmac settlement on the island has long been a matter of controversy. The problem is due to the paucity of documentary evidence of Micmac migration to Newfoundland prior to the seventeenth century, and European disinterest in the interior where the Micmac settled. Records from the mid-17th century clearly indicate the use of the island by Cape Breton Micmacs, who would make the arduous two-day journey by canoe or shallop in order to exploit the richer wildlife resources for trade and survival of the increasing Cape Breton population (Speck, 1972: 119; Pastore, 1978: 10). That these were seasonal migrations over the fall and winter, with the population dispersed in small hunting parties increases the difficulties of ascertaining length and patterns of occupation through archaeological investigation. By the late 17th century, the number of Micmac migrating seasonally had increased and some remained year round, bartering their furs at the French fishing base at Placentia.

The Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 established British sovereignty in Newfoundland and confined the activities of the French fishing fleet to the west coast. The Micmac, although viewed by the British as subjects of the French, continued to use their hunting territory which extended from Bay St. George on the west coast to Fortune Bay in the south-east. The year 1763 saw another major influx of Micmacs to Newfoundland upon the expulsion of the French from the Maritimes (Rogers, 1911: 140-141; Bartels, 1978: 11-16). Settlement in Newfoundland permitted continued contact with the French on St. Pierre. Fear of French-Micmac alliance led to attempts by the British to remove the Micmacs from the island, all of which were unsuccessful, and Micmac occupation continued, unviolated, in the southern interior. After the extinction of the Beothuck, they moved north-east extending their territory as far as Gander Bay.

The ambiguous status of the Micmac, without formal recognition but with informal acknowledgement, has continued to the present day. The ambivalence which was once due to rival political claims to Newfoundland and the Micmacs' alliance with the losing side is now a result of political and socio-cultural factors acting in collusion to impede their official recognition.

When Newfoundland joined confederation in 1949, no special provisions for native peoples were included in the Act of Union. Indian status, in accordance with the Indian Act as it was, would have

brought disenfranchisement, naturally considered a retrograde move. However, when the Act was revised in 1951, no attempts were made to include the native peoples of Newfoundland or Labrador under the new terms. Special federal-provincial agreements were later negotiated which put Labrador natives under the aegis of the Department of Indian Affairs. It was not until 1973 that the Micmacs of Conne River were recognized as a designated Indian community, entitling them to the benefits of the DIA, but status recognition under the Indian Act was withheld.² In addition, Micmac people elsewhere on the island were not included in the terms of the agreement at all.

Cultural assimilation stultified the continuation of a native identity. Some priests suppressed use of the language and undermined the traditional system of government. In 1924 the Micmac chief was deposed for "insubordination" by the parish priest of Baie d'Espoir who, in his words, "abolished the office of chief. Since then the Micmacs have got along without a chief" (St. Croix, 1937: 286).

Encroachment of white settlement and industrial development in the early 20th century restricted use of hunting and trapping areas and the concomitant decimation of wildlife, particularly caribou, lessened the economic viability of these activities. In addition, the loss of fur markets made commercial trapping fruitless.

Another less tangible deleterious effect on Micmac culture and pride is due to the belief-turned-history that the Micmac were only brought over as mercenaries by the French to kill the Beothuck, a charge unsubstantiated by any evidence.³ On the contrary, available evidence suggests that there was little conflict between the two groups, but rather avoidance and respect for boundaries. But the belief has persisted, perhaps because it absolves those who fear that they were responsible for the extermination of the Beothuck and also because it denies Micmac claims to aboriginal rights. In a land of immigrants, Micmac are considered recent settlers and itinerant killers. Ironically, while Newfoundlanders recognize the extinct Beothuck historically, the extant Micmac do not exist as a native people.

However, they have survived and to some degree retained their culture; not so much as a cognitive ethnic identity, but as a praxis in lifestyle, technological skills, genealogical knowledge and, to a limited degree, familiarity with their language. Particularly in Conne River an Indian identity has remained, due to a high degree of cultural homogeneity and geographical isolation. Until the early 20th century, strong political and cultural links were preserved between the Cape Breton and Conne River communities. These were effected through continued migration from Cape Breton to Newfoundland, through personal contacts between the respective chiefs and, lastly, through the

common celebration of Ste. Anne's Day in Cape Breton.

Hunting skills and the allocation of traditional family territories have survived the vicissitudes of government regulations, industrial encroachment and the loss of fur markets, but only as supplementary economic activities. However, recent increased demand for furs has revitalized trapping and a greater number of Conne River men depend on their traplines for a substantial part of their income.⁴

In 1972 the Newfoundland Micmac joined with Labrador Indians and Inuit to form the Native Association of Newfoundland and Labrador but by 1974 a separate organization, representing only the Micmac, had been established. Also during this time, in Conne River the office of chief and a band council were reconstituted, participation in a federal-provincial agreement was won, and a federally-funded development programme was initiated. Only the Federation of Newfoundland Indians can include Micmac people outside Conne River through local branches in fifteen communities across the western and central parts of the island. The FNI has implemented housing repair programmes, employment and development programmes, as well as lobbying for legal recognition and native rights. In 1979 the organization was restructured as a Micmac government, renamed Ktaqamkuk Ilnu Sagimawoutie. The chief of Conne River is again chief of Newfoundland Micmacs and a member of the Grand Council of Micmac Chiefs in Nova Scotia. This return to a traditional form of Indian self-government is a rejection of white political hegemony. There is increasing concern with language revival and development of Indian aesthetic and spiritual values, a shift in focus apparent in the annual assembly of last year. The presence of the Grand Chief, Donald Marshall, and the spiritual leader, Noel Knockwood, both from Nova Scotia, rather than provincial or federal politicians was designed to stress a Micmac cultural identity transcending provincial boundaries.

What have been the effects of political activism in the communities outside Conne River? These Micmacs were assimilated to a greater degree into their communities as white Newfoundlanders. While cognizant of their Micmac heritage, it was of little value for their participation in the white social order. But, over the past few years, an emergence of Micmac ethnicity and the establishment of distinct ethnic boundaries is evident. I would like to briefly discuss this phenomenon as related to one primary symbol of Micmac identity, use of the land. In the summer of 1979 I was employed by the Federation of Newfoundland Indians to collect Micmac genealogies in north-eastern Newfoundland. Therefore, the following discussion of one community in the area is based solely on personal observation and is not part of an ethnographic research design.⁵

At first sight, a visitor would not be aware that approximately one-third of the community is of Micmac descent. There are few distinguishing physical characteristics, no linguistic indicators, no easily identifiable ethnic residence patterns and no markers of differential socio-economic status. Most of the men are employed as loggers by a major Newfoundland lumber company and some, proportionately more Micmacs, work as guides for sportsmen or as game wardens. Our visitor would learn of the presence of Micmacs in discussions of such employment or of the terrain generally. Hunting is an avocation of most men in the community, but it is especially significant for the Micmacs. The single most important symbol of Micmac identity is the land, from which pride, legitimacy of identity, traditions and demands for rights originate.

Hunting skills, knowledge of the region and use of traditional hunting areas have been passed from father to son as part of their Micmac heritage. Many of the whites are familiar with the land, but their learning process is not laden with the same degree of cultural significance. The land as a symbol of ethnic identity is perceived differentially in the Micmac population according, for purposes of analysis, to three age groupings.

The first is the oldest generation, the last Micmacs for whom subsistence on their traplines and hunting skills was possible. Their identity as Micmac is an apolitical and localized heritage. Because of their former more traditional lifestyle, they are regarded by many whites as the only "real Micmacs."

The second category is the middle generation, those more completely assimilated into the white Newfoundland social system. Resident in the community from birth, they lived as whites. The lifestyle of their parents and grandparents was known to them, but was no longer relevant, and their Micmac heritage was acknowledged but not respected by their white neighbours.

The third category is the younger generation, products of a dormant Micmac culture and distanced from Conne River and Cape Breton by at least three generations of white assimilation. In essence, a cultural gap is superimposed on a generation gap, illustrated by the inability of the young to exist "on the country" for extended periods of time, as did their grandparents.⁶ Paradoxically, while they lack these skills, their common kinship supports their common identity; the young buttress their claim through association with the acknowledged Micmac identity of their elders. For them the land has become a politicised cultural symbol. However, their Indian identity, validated in their eyes by the lifestyle and knowledge of the old people, is nevertheless rejected by many whites. They express bewilderment at this intrusion of ethnicity and fears of restrictions on white land use

in the event of legal recognition of Micmac land rights.

Why after fifty years has there been this resurgence of identity? The most obvious factor is the general increase over the past two decades in expressions of ethnic and minority group identity and native rights issues elsewhere in North America. These developments have provided the Micmac with a support system and a role model for the legitimation of their claims. In addition, they have pointed the way towards a resolution of the inherent conflict in the dual identity of being both Micmac and Newfoundlander. While their Indian ancestry as such is acknowledged by both the Micmacs and their white neighbours, a contemporary Micmac ethnic identity is generally rejected by whites who claim that they become "just the same as us," an opinion reinforced by intermarriage and the lack of legal recognition. Unfortunately, recognition of Micmac ethnicity by whites usually has been accorded only as a stigma. Micmac ethnicity, therefore, at best unrecognized, at worst, a slur, becomes transformed by association with a pan-Indian movement into a source of personal and group pride.

NOTES

1. Mr. Noel Knockwood, at the 6th Annual Assembly of the Federation of Newfoundland Indians, June 22-24, 1979, Gander, Newfoundland.

2. The agreement between the federal and provincial governments consists of an exchange of letters between J.R. Smallwood, then premier of Newfoundland, and Prime Minister Pearson in May 1965. Conne River was included in an equally informal way.

3. The belief may have originated in a speech by W.E. Cormack at the inaugural meeting of the Beothuck Institution on October 2, 1827. The text is reprinted in J.P. Howley. *The Beothucks or Red Indians*, pp. 182-184.

4. In 1977 the Newfoundland Micmac Trappers Association was founded.

5. The community shall remain anonymous in respect of the privacy of the residents and because my comments are not dependent on factors peculiar to it.

6. By "extended periods of time" I mean subsistence by hunting activities for periods of up to four months and over extensive areas of land. The lifestyle is no longer possible, even for those who possess the skills.

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