

**The historical ethnography of the Micmac of the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:
Part 9**

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CHAPTER IX - CONCLUSIONS

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IX. CONCLUSIONS

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In the foregoing sections we have attempted to synthesize and reconstruct a reliable and fairly complete ethnography of the early historical Micmac. With this task completed it is now possible for us to proceed to more general and comparative problems, and to consider the cultural position of the Micmac within their sector of the North American continent.

With respect to the subsistence economy the evidence seems to indicate that fish, sea mammals, and other marine products were basic to Micmac existence, and that hunting activities became important and essential only during three months of the winter. In this respect the Micmac fall into a pattern characteristic of the early peoples of the St. Lawrence drainage and of the New England coast, with the difference that the Micmac lacked agriculture. The latter handicap, however, seems to have been more than made up by the Micmac's extremely favorable location relative to the marine biome. The common cliché to the effect that the Micmac were a hunting-gathering people largely dependent upon the products of the chase seems to derive from (a), the disproportionate prestige granted to hunting activities (reinforced in recent times by the activities of the fur trade), (c), misconceptions concerning the subsistence

patterns of the early historic "hunting" tribes of the St. Lawrence river, and (c), preconceptions concerning the position of the Micmac tribe within the subsistence groupings of the area.

In the matter of material culture items the Micmac show associations pointing both north and south. The birch-bark "tipi-like" wigwams are typical of the circumpolar boreal forest, for instance. The "long wigwams," however, with their separate entrances for men and women (Hagar, 1896b, p. 258), point in the direction of New England and to the Iroquois. The use of birchbark for the houses, utensils, canoes, etc., is commonly regarded as a feature of northern taiga-living peoples, but here it may reflect nothing more than the presence of suitable birch trees. Micmac costume, at least in the matter of sleeves, was intermediate between the type worn in the boreal forest and that worn in the woodland. The so-called "Micmac pipe" here is at the most northerly and easterly part of its distribution.

Micmac socio-political structure seems to have been the most complex of any known nonagricultural group within the Northeast, standing in sharp contrast to the amorphous structuring reported from the Montagnais-Naskapi. The family units were organized bilocally, and were monogamous or polygynous; bilocally and bilaterally extended households or village units were also present. Kinship classifications largely ignored

lineage to emphasize age and generation differences. The political structuring allocated authority to hereditary and regional chiefs, who functioned with the aid of councils of elders; furthermore, these regional chiefs recognized the authority of hereditary "grand chiefs." Chieftainship was usually inherited in the male line, falling to the eldest son if this individual was capable.

Micmac personality traits exhibited many, but not all, of the features observed at later dates for the more western Algonquians, namely the Montagnais-Naskapi, the Algenkins, the Ojibwa, the Saulteaux, and also the Huron (Wyandot). Among these more western Indians a characteristic syndrome as described in the literature involves an elaborately extended pattern of emotional restraint or inhibition—effective in almost all aspects of personal and social relationships, and extending into the philosophical system. This pattern reveals itself particularly in the inhibition of overt aggression, and in the commonly manifested social ideal of the generous self-effacing individual (Hallowell, 1946, pp. 204-225). Those aspects of Micmac cultural behavior which seem to fall within the scope of this syndrome include: the inhibition of overt aggression; constrained inter-personal relations; violent release of aggressive tendencies under alcoholic influence; a philosophy of Stoicism; the presence of suicide; and a torture complex associated with warfare and

participated in especially by the women. Other aspects of Micmac culture ran directly counter to the behavior postulated by this syndrome hypothesis. Despite the features just described, Micmac personality structure seems to have been capable of supporting affective emotional relationships within the family system, of permitting emotional display in certain public situations, and of allowing the individual to participate in an elaborate political structure in which authority was sometimes highly concentrated (e.g., in case of war). The presence of these traits makes it rather unlikely that Hallowell's "atomistic personality" hypothesis can be used to explain all the behavior patterns observed for the early Micmac. James (1954) has presented similar reservations with respect to the early Chippewa.

The religious beliefs and rituals of the Micmac afford ample evidence of relationship with the Central Algonquian system. Striking affinities appear not only with regard to the death rites, but also in the shamanistic practices, in the beliefs regarding the deities and spirits (i.e., the Great Spirit and the transformer diety), and in other traits. So close are the relationships, in fact, that Micmac supernaturalism must be regarded as a variant of the Central Algonquian pattern.

Micmac warfare affords us additional evidence of the complex nature of Micmac institutions, and also additional

evidence of Micmac affiliations with the agricultural Woodland. The relationships of the games also supports this view.

The Micmac therefore present us with the rather unusual picture of a nonagricultural maritime peoples having intimate cultural connections with the agricultural tribes to the south-west, specifically with the Central Algonquian groups. The relationships are so close, in fact, that there seems no doubt that the Micmac and the Central Algonquians once formed a common group and occupied a single area. In this respect the thinness of the agricultural veneer upon the Central Algonquians has some interesting implications when viewed in the light of Micmac culture. This, however, may speak less for the recency or antiquity of agriculture among these people than for a completely different orientation. From the standpoint of complexity of institutions and beliefs there is no doubt that the Micmac and the Central Algonquians form a part of the Woodland peoples. Micmac culture derives its uniqueness through its maintenance of a Woodland-type culture in a non-agricultural environment.