

# Black robe: fact or phoney essay



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The film *Black Robe* is about a French Jesuit missionary, named Father Laforgue, who traveled to New France in the 1600s. His main goal was to bring European culture and religion to the native groups of the Huron and Algonquians. *Black Robe* revolved mostly around the Jesuit point of view, so were the Huron, Algonquians and the Iroquois Indians portrayed realistically? After examining *Black Robe* and comparing it to the records of the Huron one may find numerous similarities. *Black Robe* opens the historical door, allowing the viewers to take an in depth look at the Huron, Algonquian, and Iroquois Indians.

Surprisingly, the movie is very close to the records we have on these tribes. The cinematic production *Black Robe*, directed by Bruce Beresford and written by David Moore, accurately portrays First Nation's people and Canadian history. When comparing the actual lifestyles of the Huron, Algonquians and Iroquois, to the film *Black Robe*, we see many similarities. In the film, the Iroquois were shown living near wooded areas in longhouses.

Gilbert Legay, author of the *Atlas of Indians in North America*, writes " the Iroquois called themselves ho-de-no-sau-nee, or people of the longhouse. The movie showed many people living in these longhouses. Legay also writes, " the large houses were grouped into villages usually protected, and many of them situated on hills near water sources. " 2 In the movie, there was a scene in which a group of longhouses were shown being protected by armed archers on the upper level of the walls. This can be compared to medieval castle walls with archers defending them.

The movie Black Robe accurately portrays the Huron and Iroquois' material culture in this instance. The treatment of the prisoners in the movie was also realistically portrayed. When an Iroquois tribe captured a man or a woman, they were tortured while everyone else watched. As Bruce Trigger, author of the book *The Huron, Farmers of the North*, writes "...

had an enemy in their power, they tore out his fingernails and cut off the fingers that he used to draw a bow. " 3 As seen in the movie, Father Laforgue along with other characters was captured and tortured. Father Laforgue, bounded by ropes and unable to move, had his finger cut off as the natives chanted. The description of the torture in the book by Trigger is very much alike to what was shown in the movie. Trigger also writes, " his choice was to obey or be killed on the spot.

In spite of the prospect of being tortured, most men preferred to surrender because they had hopes of escape or rescue at a later time. " 4 Father Laforgue along with Daniel, Annuka, and Chomina were shown in the movie trying to escape from being held captive by the Iroquois. Father Laforgue did not scream while his finger was being severed, instead he obeyed. In spite of criticism of portraying the Native people as savages, the fact is the treatment of the prisoners in the movie Black Robe was accurately portrayed.

Religion, rituals, and beliefs are also portrayed accurately in Black Robe. Near the end of the movie, a shaman is seen performing a ceremonial dance to cure the sick that were stricken with disease in a Huron village. The shamans were essentially the doctors of the tribes. Derek Smith, author of

the article "Shaman", writes "the healed shaman is believed to become a bringer of health...

" 5 The ceremonial dance to cure the sick illustrates this point written by Smith. Many Huron people believed that their dreams were visions into the future. Nancy Bonvillain, author of the book *The Huron*, illustrates this point, "Huron people generally could understand many of their dreams ...

but to comprehend the hidden meaning of more obscure dreams, they sometimes consulted with members of their village. " 6 The above was apparent in the movie when Chomina, the Algonquin Chief, was speaking to his wife about the dream he had the previous night and asking her for interpretations of it. The French Jesuit missionaries were also portrayed realistically in the movie. Father Laforgue, the Jesuit missionary, was making the journey to the Huron tribe alongside the Algonquian tribe.

Father Laforgue is believed to be the character of the actual Jesuit missionary Jean de Brebeuf. Cornelius Jaenen, author of the article "Jean de Brebeuf," writes "in 1640, following a devastating smallpox epidemic, the Huron attacked him and his companion and damaged their mission. " 7 This indicates that the scene where Father Laforgue arrives at the Huron mission to find another priest dead has some truth to it..

The Jesuits were also portrayed realistically in which they were clearly displayed as sources that were desperately trying to convert the natives to Christianity. John Grant, author of the article "Missions and Missionaries", illustrates the point of the Jesuits, "the Christianization of the native Indian population was an ostensible motive for European occupation... " 8 Perhaps

the most accurate information displayed was the description of the Huron's fate at the end of the movie. Heidenreich, the author of the article The Huron, writes " the Iroquois defeated and dispersed the Huron in 1649.

Many joined the Iroquois; others fled westward... " 9 The message at the end of the movie illustrates this fact and it shows that the directors of the movie really did their research in putting together an excellent film.

The movie Black Robe accurately and realistically portrayed First Nation's people and Canadian history. This essay discussed the lifestyles of the Huron, Algonquian, and the Iroquoian tribes in the early 1600s. With well constructed scenes, Beresford and Moore allow the viewers to clearly see the lifestyles and the beliefs of the First Nation's peoples.