

Native american culture – the micmac

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It is not known when the Micmac first arrived in the Canadian Maritime provinces. Sea levels have risen such that early sites are now underwater. The earliest descriptions that we have are of people who already had contact with the west

The Micmac, along with the Beothuk of Newfoundland, may well be the first of the first peoples to have had contact with Europeans. This could have occurred with the Vikings in the 11th century and / or with Basque and other European fishing fleets that fished on the Grand Banks, but did not publicly reveal the source of their large catches. All this was well before Columbus in 1492. In 1497 when John Cabot returned to England he took three members of the Micmac tribe back with him.

The Basques fished off Canadian shores, and by 1519 would dry their catch and to carry out trade shore. By 1578 there were about 400 European boats coming in summer. Trade with the Micmac for furs, especially beaver, was profitable for both sides. The demand was greater than the Micmac could supply and quickly adopted the role of middlemen for tribes such as the Algonquian who lived far from shore. The metal weapons received in trade mean the Micmac had a tremendous advantage in battle over other Canadian tribes.[1]

Rivalry over trade eventually led to the Tarrateen war of 1607 when the Micmac moved in as far as Massachusetts. However, they contracted a disease that eventually killed three quarters of the population. In 1613, the British, anxious to make claim to territories held by the French, destroyed Port Royal and the mission at Mont Desert. The Micmac were caught in the raid and were sold by the British as slaves. The original Micmac population

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number has been estimated to reach as high as 30, 000 but was probably less. Contact with westerners lowered their numbers to around 1, 800 in the 1820's after contracting various diseases including a devastating epidemic of smallpox.

They occupied the Canadian Maritimes including eastern New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec, Prince Edward Island, and after about 1630, a Micmac band also lived in southwestern Newfoundland. There were now about 25, 000 members of the tribe in Canada. The Jay treaty of 1794 between the newly formed United States and England allowed the Micmac to cross and re-cross the border freely. Nowadays there are groups in New York and Maine, where in 1991 they finally gained official federal recognition particularly in Boston where they make up the largest first peoples group in New England.[2]

The original spelling of their name was Mi'kmaq, which means 'allies'. Over time, Micmac became the commonly used spelling, although it has several variations. Various groups have also been known as Cape Sable Indians, Gaspesian, Matueswiskitchinuuk (Malecite "Porcupine Indians") and Shonack (Beothuk "Bad Indians"), The French called them Souriquois and the British Tarrateen.

Their language is a branch of Algonquian, although somewhat different from that used further south. There are links with other local languages such as that of the Cree and the Montagnais. Most Micmac still use it as their first language, with either English or French being the second. Regional dialects are so strong that for instance those in Quebec have difficulties communicating with those in Nova Scotia. Because their language is similar

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to that of the Cree it is possible that they moved into the Maritimes from the north.

The people did very little farming since they lived too far north to be able to grow corn, though some was done in the warm summer months. Instead they were skilled in hunting, gathering and fishing, especially with regard to the catching of fish and sea mammals. This made them skilled in the making and use of birch bark canoes and those made of caribou skin. After 1600 they also used sails. Their larger distinctive light, humpbacked canoes could be used even on the open sea. However they quickly learnt that some European vessels were also useful and adopted them.

The birch bark, poles and skins were also used to construct their homes - smaller conical ones in cold weather and long house types used in warmer times. They were semi-nomadic living near the shore during the summer fishing season and inland during the colder weather when it was easier to track moose and deer in the snow. Snowshoes, sledges and toboggans were used to make movement easier in the deep snow. Hunting camps would consist of only one family but in spring and summer, families would come together and form villages of several hundred people able to take advantage of plentiful food supplies. Before the arrival of metal kettles, water was heated by placing hot stones in wooden kettles.[3]

Clans are patrilineal and the tribes are confederacies of these smaller groups. Each clan had and still has a symbol, used to mark possessions such as homes and canoes. Local chiefs and a group of elders governed the villages. The oldest male in the area became the district chief. His importance was linked to the size of his family hence polygamy was

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practiced. The leaders would decide when and where to hunt and fish. For instance in December they would ice fish for cod, in January they would hunt seals, in February move inland to hunt moose, deer and bear as well as smaller game by the end of March they would move to the coast to begin fishing again, they would begin to catch eels in the estuaries in mid September and then move into the forests when the snow came.

This pattern started when they were trading beaver with the Europeans, as the furs would be thicker in winter. Also they had to be on the coasts in summer in order to meet with trading vessels. Methods used to catch game were varied. Spears or bows and arrows would be used to catch larger game and snares and traps were used for smaller creatures. They made ingenious callers from birch bark to attract moose.[4] In order to catch fish they used tridents, hooks, nets and weirs. Seals would be harpooned. In historical times bone or stone tools were replaced by iron and steel ones gained in trade.

The groups would occasionally come together and elect a high king - the Grand Saqamaw. This method of political authority meant that in times of war organization was made easier.

As with other woodland tribes clothing for both sexes was fringed buckskin. This was used for leggings, breechclouts and sleeves. At some point during the 1700's the women began to wear pointed headdresses. Clothing, bags etc were decorated with porcupine quills, though traded glass beads largely replaced these after the arrival of the Europeans. They would originally be sewn together using sinews and bone needles. In areas where porcupines were not present trade would either obtain their quills or other items would be used in imitation of them e. g. spruce roots. By the 18th century woolen

blankets were being used, and in the 19th century men began to wear great coats and the women were using woolen and cotton cloth and steel needles.

The Micmac feasted at weddings, funerals and before the hunting season began. Unusually funerals were conducted before the person had actually died. If someone was incurably ill dogs were killed as a sign of grief, then after much singing, the person would be allowed to make a last speech and then they would be abandoned and no one would help them.

Regarding religion, one supreme god was believed in, but also there were lesser gods including those in human form. Stories often centered on Glooscap, a hero whose stories explain how the world came into being and how it works. The ancient Micmac did not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. A spirit might inhabit everything from the large sun to a small rock. They had shamans known as puion who provided both curses and cures and interpreted the natural world. The missionaries discredited them but some traditional beliefs persist. In the 19th century missionary Silas Rand made a collection of these stories and beliefs. Even today a Micmac web site, Traditional Micmacculture, states that Glooscap still lives in every Micmac.[5]

After the arrival of the French, who brought very few women with them, intermarriage became common and so did conversion to Christianity. The Jesuits arrived in 1610 and the first Micmac family was baptized in the same year. However the Micmac branch of Catholicism includes many native ideas. When the French gave up the Maritimes to the British in 1713 the Micmac remained loyal to French links and most now have French family names. They are proud of the way their culture has contributed to life and language

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in North America whereby the hand drawn toboggan and snowshoes are still in use. The fact that they now often speak English, drive cars and wear similar clothes to everyone else does not make them any less Micmac.

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