PART ONE

An Ecological Interpretation of European Contact with the Micmac*

*This section is an adaptation of my article "The European Impact on the Culture of a Northeastern Algonquian Tribe: An Ecological Interpretation," *William and Mary Quarterly* 31 (January 1974):3–26.

CHAPTER ONE

The Protohistoric Indian-Land Relationship

As the drive for furs expanded and gathered momentum in seventeenth-century Eastern Canada, complaints of beaver extermination became correspondingly more frequent and alarming. By 1635, for example, the Huron in the Lake Simcoe area had reduced their stock of beaver to the point where Father Paul Le Jeune, the Jesuit, could flatly declare that they had none.[1] Likewise, a half-century later Baron de Lahontan was present at a council session between the Five Nations Iroquois and the French governor-general, Monsieur La Barre, at which the principal Iroquois spokesman explained that his people had attacked the Illinois and Miami for trespassing on Iroquois territory to hunt beaver, "and contrary to the custom of all the Savages, have carried off whole Stocks, both Male and Female."[2] The severe exploitation of beaver and other furbearing species seems to have been most intense in the vicinity of major trading posts and among the native tribes most intimately associated with the trade (the Micmac, Montagnais, League Iroquois, Huron, Ojibwa, and others),[3] while those tribes which remained beyond the effective limits of European influence and the trade, such as the Bersimis of northeastern Québec, enjoyed an abundance of beaver in their domains.[4]

Long before the establishment of permanent trading posts, it would seem that the Micmac of the extreme eastern tip of Canada were engaged in vigorous trade with European fishermen.[a] The result was that areas important in the early fishing industry, places such as Prince Edward Island, the Gaspé Peninsula, and Cape Breton Island, were cleaned out of moose and furbearers by the mid-seventeenth century.[5] Reviewing this grim situation, Nicolas Denys, a merchant who had lived intimately with the Micmac for forty years, commented that game was less abundant in his time than formerly; as for the beaver, "few in a house are saved; they [the Micmac] would take all. The disposition of the Indians is not to spare the little ones any more than the big ones. They killed all of each kind of animal that there was when they could capture it."[6] In sum, the game which by all accounts had been initially so plentiful was now being systematically exterminated by the Indians themselves.

The hunting, gathering, and fishing Micmac who lived within this Acadian forest, especially along its rivers and by the sea, were omnivores in the trophic (or energy) system of the community. At the first trophic level the Micmac consumed wild potato tubers, wild fruits and berries, acorns and nuts, and the

a. See Wilson D. Wallis and Ruth Sawtell Wallis, *The Micmac Indians of Eastern Canada* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), for a thorough ethnographic study of the Micmac. Jacques and Maryvonne Crevel, *Honguedo ou l'Histoire des premiers Gaspesiens* (Québec: Editions Garneau, 1970), give a fairly good general history of the Micmac during the seventeenth century, along with a description of the centuries-old fishing industry. Alfred Goldsworthy Bailey, *The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian Cultures, 1504–1700: A Study in Canadian Civilization*, Publications of the New Brunswick Museum, Monographic Series No. 2 (St. John, New Brunswick, 1937), has the best analysis of the effects of European contact on the Micmac and surrounding Algonkians. Cornelius J. Jaenen, "Amerindian Views of French Culture in the Seventeenth Century," *Canadian Historical Review* 55 (September 1974):261–291, and Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), who relies heavily on Bailey, is useful on early French-Indian relations. See Harold Franklin McGee, Jr., Stephen A. Davis, and Michael Taft, "Three Atlantic Bibliographies," *Occasional Papers in Anthropology*, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), Department of Anthropology, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, for a comprehensive bibliography of Micmac history, ethnology, archaeology, and folklore.

like. Trees and shrubs provided in addition a wealth of materials used in the fashioning of tools, utensils, and other equipment. A lack of mortars and pestles, corn husks, and other signs of agriculture in the archaeological record suggests that the prehistoric Micmac were not horticulturalists, this despite a legend which credited them with having raised maize and tobacco "for the space of several years."[7, b] Climatically, the Micmac lived, then and now, within a short summer zone, which would have discouraged maize agriculture, but not absolutely precluded it. They could conceivably have harvested their crop green.[8] Yet, whatever transpired before this time, we are told that by the early seventeenth century the Micmac were acquiring maize, beans, pumpkins, tobacco, and wampum (which they are said to have greatly prized) from New England Algonkians of the Saco River area and possibly regions even further south.[9]

Next to photosynthesizing plants in the energy system of the community were herbivores and carnivores, occupying the second and third trophic levels respectively, with top carnivores situated at the fourth level. The Micmac hunter tapped all three levels of energy-yielding wildlife, aquatic life, and marine life in his seasonal hunting and fishing activities, for these sources of food were "to them like fixed rations assigned to every moon."[10] "Now, for example, in January they have the seal hunting," continued Father Pierre Biard, ". . . for this animal, although it is aquatic, nevertheless spawns upon certain Islands about this time." Biard was writing this from memory, his recollection apparently failing him at this point: North Atlantic coastal seals pup in the spring rather than in mid-winter. Possibly Biard confused June with January in the subsistence cycle.[11] If he were correct, the Micmac were in the habit of interrupting their winter, interior hunting activities and moving back to the coast for the month of January, heading inland once again in February, all of which seems unlikely. Be that as it may, seal fat, whether it

b. Marc Lescarbot, *The History of New France* (1618; first published 1609), translated by W. L. Grant, 3 vols. (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1907–1914), 3:252–253, claimed that the Micmac definitely grew tobacco, most likely the so-called wild tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*).

was obtained in mid-winter or spring, was customarily reduced to oil for food and body grease, while the women made clothing from the fur.[12]

Next came "the great hunt for Beavers, otters, moose, bears (which are very good), and for the caribou. . . ."[13] The attorney Marc Lescarbot explained that the Micmac confined their hunting activities to the winter season because there was such a plethora of fish (and we might add shellfish) throughout the rest of the year.[14] Winter was the most unpredictable season for the Micmac, as it was for all of these Eastern Canadian hunter-gatherers, for at no other time of the year were they so dependent on the caprice of the weather—a feast being as likely as a famine. A heavy rain could spoil the beaver and caribou hunt, while the moose hunt suffered from a deep, crustless snow.[15]

Beaver were preferably taken during this season, when their coat was in its prime and they were more readily pursued on the ice.[c] Hunters cooperated by working in teams, demolishing the lodge or cutting the dam with stone axes. Sometimes they brought in dogs to track the fleeing beaver as they sought refuge in air pockets along the edge of the pond. At other times they harpooned the rodent as it came up for air at air holes. In the summer hunt, beaver were shot with the bow or trapped in deadfalls baited with poplar, although the commonest way to take them was to breach the dam and drain the pond. The exposed animals were then slaughtered with bows and spears.[16]

Next to fish and shellfish, moose was the most important item in the Micmac diet, serving as a staple during the otherwise lean

c. See Horace T. Martin, *Castorologia, or the History and Traditions of the Canadian Beaver* (Montreal: William Drysdale and Company, 1892); A. Radclyffe Dugmore, *The Romance of the Beaver: Being the History of the Beaver in the Western Hemisphere* (London: William Heinemann, 1913); and Lewis Henry Morgan, *The American Beaver and His Works* (1868; reprint ed., New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), for treatises on the Canadian beaver. It is significant that the archaeological record from Maine "indicates that the beaver and other sedentary fauna were of considerable importance aboriginally" (Dean R. Snow, "Wabanaki 'Family Hunting Territories,'" *American Anthropologist* 70 [December 1968]:1145), which would suggest this to have been the case among the nearly identical Micmac while revealing that a dependence on beaver antedated European interest in the beast.

winter months when these large ruminants were run down with dogs on the hard-crusted snow. In the summer and spring, we are told that moose were both tracked and stalked and then shot with the bow; in the autumn, during the rutting season, bulls were lured by a clever imitation of the sound of a cow urinating. Another frequently used method was to ensnare the animal with a noose.[17,d]

In the exotic menu of the Micmac Indian, moose ranked first in preference. The entrails, a great delicacy among these people, were carried along with the "most delicious fat" to the campsite by the exultant hunter, who then sent the women to fetch the carcass. It was up to the mistress of the wigwam to determine what was to be done with each portion of the body, every part of which evidently was used. Grease was boiled out of the bones and either drunk pure (with "much gusto," recalled Le Clercq) or stored as loaves of moose-butter;[18] leg and thigh bones were crushed and the marrow consumed; hides were converted into robes, leggings, moccasins, and tent coverings;[19] tools, ornaments, and game pieces were fashioned from antlers, teeth, and toe bones, respectively[20]—in short, the beast was converted into an extraordinary range of necessities and luxuries. Confident of future hunting success, the Micmac typically consumed the moose flesh immediately, preserving the leftovers through a smoking process which, it was claimed, was capable of curing the meat for up to a year.[21] Black bear were likewise captured during the cold months, although such hunting was coincidental and fortuitous. Spring bears found in hibernation were generally shot with the bow.[22]

Eventually, as the lean months of winter passed into the abundance of spring, the fish began to spawn, swimming up rivers and streams in such numbers that "everything swarms with them."[23] In mid-March came the smelt, and at the end of April the herring. Soon there were sturgeon and salmon, and flocks of

d. Frank G. Speck and Ralph W. Dexter, "Utilization of Animals and Plants by the Micmac Indians of New Brunswick," *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 41 (August 1951):255, have ranked caribou before moose in order of importance but cite no evidence to support their claim.

waterfowl making nests out on the coastal islands—which meant there were eggs soon to be gathered. Mute evidence from seashore middens and early written testimony confirm that the Micmac were heavily dependent on various mollusks, harvesting them in enormous quantities.[24] Fish was another staple for the Micmac, who were thoroughly familiar with the spawning habits of each species harvested. Weirs were erected across streams to trap the fish on their way downstream on a falling tide, while large varieties, such as sturgeon and salmon, were often speared or trapped.[25]

The salmon run marked the beginning of summer in the Micmac calendar, the time of year when the wild geese shed their plumage. Most wildfowl were pursued at their island rookeries; waterfowl, in particular, were generally hunted from the canoe and knocked down as they took to flight; others, such as the Canadian goose which grazed in the meadows, were dispatched with the bow.[26]

As the waterfowl made their exit in the autumn, migrating southward in anticipation of the cold months ahead, the eels began spawning up the many small rivers along the coast. Consequently, from mid-September to October, the Micmac left the ocean to follow the eels—"of which they lay in a supply; they are good and fat," added Biard. October and November were given over to hunting beaver and woodland caribou, we are told, while December brought the tomcod and the turtles bearing their eggs.[27]

Surveying the seasonal cycle of these Indians, Biard was profoundly impressed by Nature's bounty and Micmac resourcefulness. "These then, but in a still greater number, are the revenues and incomes of our Savages; such, their table and living, all prepared and assigned, everything to its proper place and quarter."[28] Although I have omitted mention of many other types of forest, marine, and aquatic life which were also exploited by the Micmac, those listed above were the most significant in the food quest and ecosystem of these maritime Indians.[29]

Placed in the context of this cornucopian situation, the following claim made by Nicolas Denys becomes readily credible:

"Their [the Micmacs'] greatest task was to feed well and to go a hunting. They did not lack animals, which they killed only in proportion as they had need of them." One does not get the impression that the Micmac of protohistoric times, the period to which Denys was alluding, were hampered by their technology in the taking of game. Obviously there must have been seasons of austerity, for whatever reason is immaterial. The point is that in the generality of cases, Micmac technology was quite adequate to keep them well provisioned, even during the winter season. As Denys acknowledged elsewhere: "The hunting by the Indians in old times was easy for them. They killed only in proportion as they had need. . . . When they were tired of eating one sort, they killed some of another. If they did not wish longer to eat meat, they caught some fish. They never made an accumulation of skins of Moose, Beaver, Otter, or others, but only so far as they needed them for personal use. They left the remainder [of the carcass] where the animals had been killed, not taking the trouble to bring them to their camps."[30] Need, then, and not technology, was the overriding factor, and need was determined by the great primal necessities of life as these were understood and regulated by cultural considerations. Hunting was above all else conducted and controlled by spiritual rules.

In order to understand this crucial dimension to the food quest, and hunting in particular, one must first appreciate the world view of the Indian. Up to this point we have been witness to the empirical, objective, physical—or "operational"—environmental model of the observer; what we lack is the "cognized" (emic) model of the Micmac.[31]

Anthropologists generally regard the pre-Columbian North American Indian as having been a sensitive member of his environment, an individual who merged "himself sympathetically into the world of living and even non-living things." The Indian's was a world filled with super-human and magical powers which controlled man's destiny and Nature's course of events.[32] Murray Wax explains:

> To those who inhabit it, the magical world is a "society," not a "mechanism," that is, it is composed of "beings" rather than "objects."

Whether human or nonhuman, these beings are associated with and related to one another socially and sociably, that is, in the same ways as human beings to one another. These patterns of association and relationship may be structured in terms of kinship, empathy, sympathy, reciprocity, sexuality, dependency, or any other of the ways that human beings interact with and affect or afflict one another. Plants, animals, rocks, and stars are thus seen not as "objects" governed by laws of nature, but as "fellows" with whom the individual or band may have a more or less advantageous relationship.[33]

American Indian folktales are an especially rich source of information on this subject. Reading them, one is struck by the anthropomorphic nature of animals. "They reside in lodges, gather in council, and act according to the norms and regulations of kinship. In these tales, as in those of many peoples, man and the animals are depicted as engaging in all manner of social and sociable interaction: They visit, smoke, gamble, and dance together; they exchange wisdom; they compete in games and combat; and they even marry and beget offspring."[34]

The essential ingredient in this peculiar relationship between man and animals, and indeed between man and all of Nature, is Power. Power—called *manitou* in Algonkian—is a phenomenon common among pre-industrial people the world over. Roughly defined, it is the spiritual potency associated with an object (such as a knife) or a phenomenon (such as thunder). To the Micmac, as well as to all the rest of these Eastern Canadian hunter-gatherers, manitou was the force which made everything in Nature alive and responsive to man.[35] Only a fool would confront life without it, since it was only through the manipulation and interpretation of manitou that man was able to survive in this world. To cut oneself off from manitou was equivalent to repudiating the vital force in Nature; without manitou Nature would lose its meaning and potency, and man's activities in Nature would become secular and mechanical.

Ethnologists have frequently compared Power to static electricity in its properties, "in the sense that it may be accumulated by proper ritual and then be employed in service or discharged by contact with improper objects." Power, continue the Waxes, "is never regarded as a permanent and unconditional possession,

but may be lost by the same kinds of forces and circumstances as it was gained." One handles Power according to the principles of ritual. Ritual thus becomes the means of harnessing, or conducting, Power.[36]

It is important to understand this concept of Power if we are to appreciate fully the Indian hunter's role in the fur trade, something which will receive considerable attention in part 3. Suffice it to say, here, that the world of the Micmac was filled with super-human forces and beings—dwarves, giants, and magicians; animals that could talk to man and had spirits akin to his own; and the magic of mystical and medicinal herbs—a cosmos where even seemingly inanimate objects possessed spirits.[37,e] Micmac subsistence pursuits were inextricably bound up within this spiritual matrix, which, I am proposing, acted as a kind of control mechanism on Micmac land-use, maintaining the natural environment within an optimum range of conditions.

This "control mechanism" was expressed outwardly in the form of seemingly innumerable, and to early French commentators, absurd hunting taboos. Yet these taboos connoted a sense of cautious respect for a conscious fellow-member of the same ecosystem who, in the view of the Indian, literally allowed itself to be killed for food and clothing. Beaver, for example, were greatly admired by the Micmac for their industry and "abounding genius"; for them, the beaver had "sense" and formed a "separate nation."[38] Hence, there were various regulations associated with the disposal of their remains: trapped beaver were drawn in public and made into soup, extreme care being taken to prevent the soup from spilling into the fire; beaver bones were carefully preserved, never being given to the dogs—lest they lose their sense of smell for the rodent—nor thrown into the fire—lest misfortune come upon "all the nation"—nor thrown into rivers —"because the Indians fear lest the spirit of the bones . . . would promptly carry the news to the other beavers, which would

e. Stansbury Hagar, "Micmac Magic and Medicine," *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 9 (July-September 1896):170–177, and Frederick Johnson, "Notes on Micmac Shamanism," *Primitive Man* 16 (July and October 1943):54, 56–57, report that such beliefs in the supernatural and spiritual survive even in modern times, although in a suppressed and attenuated form.

desert the country in order to escape the same misfortune." Likewise, menstruating women were forbidden to eat beaver, "for the Indians are convinced, they say, that the beaver, which has sense, would no longer allow itself to be taken by the Indians if it had been eaten by their [spiritually] unclean daughters." The beaver fetus, as well as that of the bear, moose, otter, and porcupine, was reserved for the old men, since it was believed that a youth who ate such food would suffer acute foot pains while hunting.[39]

Similarly with the moose, taboo governed the disposal of its remains—what few there were. The bones of the fawn (and the marten, for that matter) were never thrown to the dogs nor were they burned, "for they [the Micmac] would not be able any longer to capture any of these animals in hunting if the spirits of the martens and of the fawn of the moose were to inform their own kind of the bad treatment they had received among the Indians." Fear of such reprisal also prohibited menstruating women from drinking out of the common kettles or bark dishes.[40] Such regulations imply guarded respect for the animal. The moose and other game animals thus not only furnished food and raiment but were also tied up with the Micmac spirit world.

Along with the above taboos, the Micmac also practiced bear ceremonialism, as it is conventionally called. Esteem for the bear is in fact common throughout the boreal zone of northern Eurasia and North America, exhibiting the following outstanding characteristics: the beast is typically hunted in the early spring, while still in hibernation, and preferably killed with aboriginal weapons; it is addressed, when dead or alive, with honorific titles which serve as euphemisms for its common name; a conciliatory speech is made to the animal, either before or after killing it and sometimes both, by which the hunter sincerely apologizes for the necessity of his act; and the carcass is respectfully treated, those parts not used (especially the skull) being ceremonially disposed of and the flesh consumed while adhering to certain taboos. The stated purpose of all this veneration is to propitiate the spiritual controller, or keeper, of the bears in order that he will continue to furnish game to the hunter.[41]

Among the Micmac in particular, the bear's heart was not eaten by young men lest they become winded while traveling and panic in the face of danger. The bear carcass could be brought into the wigwam only through a special door made specifically for that occasion, either in the left or right side of the lodge. The Micmac reportedly based this ritual on the conviction that women did not "deserve" to enter the wigwam through the same door as the animal. In fact, we are told that childless women actually fled the lodge at the approach of the carcass, and did not return until it had been entirely consumed.[42] Through rituals and taboos such as these the hunter managed to satisfy the lingering soul-spirit of the slain beast.

If taboo was associated with fishing, we have little record of it; the only explicit evidence is a prohibition against the roasting of eels, which, if violated, would prevent the Indians from catching others. From this and from the fact that the Restigouche band of the Micmac wore the figure of a salmon as a totem around their neck, we may surmise that fish, too, shared in the sacred and symbolic world of the Indian.[43]

Control over these supernatural forces and communication with them were the principal function of the shaman, who served in Micmac society as an intermediary between the spirit realm and the physical. The lives and destiny of these people were thus profoundly affected by the ability of the shaman to supplicate, cajole, and otherwise manipulate the supernatural beings and powers. Unfortunately, the seventeenth-century French failed to appreciate the full significance of the shaman's mediating position between the spiritual and the temporal, being much more interested in exposing them as frauds or jugglers in league with Satan. From the seventeenth century to the present these intriguing individuals have been given a uniformly bad review. One still finds the medicine man depicted in the scholarly literature "as a kind of madman," ruefully observes Erwin H. Ackerknecht, himself a physician. "The diagnosis varies from epilepsy to hysteria, from fear neurosis to 'veritable idiocy.' "[44] Using a Rorschach analysis, one researcher recently had his suspicions confirmed that the shaman was an individual with "strong oral and phallic

fixations" suffering "from a hysterical personality disorder, with attributes of the imposter."[45] Yet, within their own society, and this is the crux of the issue as Ackerknecht sees it, shamans were generally considered normal, or "autonormal," as he phrases it.[46]

Rather than be concerned with the authenticity of the shaman's performance, we should assess his function in Micmac society. In their opinion, the shaman was a successful soothsayer—a man who worked himself into a dreamlike state and consulted the spirit of his animal-helper to discern the future. He was also a healer, by means of conjuring. We are aware that the Micmac availed themselves of a rather large pharmacopia of roots and herbs and other plant parts, applying these with at least moderate success toward the cure of their physical ailments. When these failed to produce a cure, the sick or injured resorted to the healing arts of the most respected shaman in the district. The illness was frequently diagnosed by the shaman as a failure on the patient's part to perform a prescribed ritual or adhere to a particular taboo; hence an offended supernatural agent had visited the culprit with sickness. At times such as this, the shaman essentially functioned as a psychotherapist, or so it would appear from a Western medical point of view, diagnosing the illness and symbolically (at least) removing its immediate cause from the patient's body.[47,f]

As we reconstruct the Micmac cultural milieu of pre-contact times, using early historic and modern ethnographic sources, the impression we get is that the spiritual realm was the principal conduit, or channel, through which man was linked with his physical and natural surroundings. By operating in a spiritual realm, man found himself able to communicate—to have a dialogue—with Nature around him. Both became intelligible to and communicative with the other through the spiritual medium whose most adept operator was the shaman. It was principally

f. Nicolas Denys, *The Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North America (Acadia)* (1672), translated and edited by William F. Ganong (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1908), p. 418, felt that most of these ailments were (what we would call today) psychogenic.

through his good offices that the above-mentioned spiritual obligations and restrictions operated to maintain the Micmac ecosystem, as it were, in a well-balanced condition. More specifically, the exploitation of game for subsistence appears to have been regulated by the hunter's attentiveness to the continued welfare of his prey—both living and dead, it is immaterial—as is suggested by the numerous taboos associated with the proper disposal of animal remains. Violation of taboo desecrated the remains of the slain animal and offended its soul-spirit. The offended spirit would then retaliate in any of several ways, depending on the nature of the broken taboo: it could render the guilty hunter's (or the entire band's) means of hunting ineffective; it could encourage its living fellows to abandon the hunter's territory; and it could inflict sickness. In all three instances the end result was the same—the hunt was rendered unsuccessful—and in each it was mediated by the same power—the spirit of the slain animal or its "keeper." Any one of these catastrophes could usually be reversed through the magical arts of the shaman. More to the point, in the Micmac cosmology, as we shall see later on, the overkill of wildlife would have been resented by the animal kingdom as an act comparable to genocide and would have been resisted by means of the sanctions outlined above. The threat of retaliation thus had the probable effect of placing an upper limit on the number of animals slain.