

Foreword

When I wrote this book, I knew the contents would cause great pain for many Canadians of English descent. It must be discomfoting to come to grips with the knowledge that one's ancestors were not always the kind, gentle folks that some historians have depicted, but rather were barbaric in the way they treated other humans. However, the destruction of every civilization that thrived in the Americas and the annihilation of 70-100 million indigenous souls during the European invasion speaks for itself. These assaults, committed against innocent people in the name of greed, mean that each modern nation in the Americas was founded with the spilling of much Native American blood. Consequently, there can be no real peace in the Americas until each European-founded nation assumes responsibility for its past crimes against humanity and makes atonement to Native Americans for the indescribable horrors to which they subjected them.

This book primarily recalls the trials and tribulations of one of the First Nations, the Mi'kmaq. However, because the cultures of Northeastern North America's First Nations were so interrelated, it also includes reams of data about them. Canada has kept the horrors committed against the First Nations resident within its borders under wraps for centuries. The physical and psychological torment the Mi'kmaq suffered started shortly after significant European intrusions began in northeastern North America in the late 1490s and has continued to some degree right up to the present time. Prior to 1492, Native North Americans had had innumerable encounters with Caucasians who had come mainly from what is today Scandinavia. Apparently, these Caucasians were well received because early reports indicate that blue-eyed and light-skinned Native Americans were not rare. In fact, Mi'kmaq were able to dress up in French or English uniforms and mingle with European soldiers while gathering information for war councils, leading some of the French and English to wonder whether the Mi'kmaq were possibly a Caucasian race. Therefore, the term "pre-European contact" is not used in this history. I use the term "pre-Columbian" because in my opinion no one can say with certainty when the first contact took place.

Any sensibilities the Europeans may have had based on their racist views about Mi'kmaq ancestry were soon obscured by their drive to satisfy one of the European societies' worst traits: greed. The plundering of the Americas for gold and other riches became the top priority. To justify the horrors that would soon commence, the invaders branded the Mi'kmaq and other Native Americans as "heathen savages" so no consciences would need to be disturbed when the slaughter of the People and the theft of their property began. The atrocities recounted in this book have not been placed here to engender pity. They are retold to persuade people of the majority society to use whatever power they

have to see that Canada makes meaningful amends for the horrifying wrongs of the past. The Mi'kmaq were, and are, a great people. To be a descendent of this noble people, who displayed an indomitable will to survive in spite of the incredible odds against them, fills me with pride. I am in awe whenever I think of their tremendous courage in overcoming the daunting obstacles placed in their path!

Daniel N. Paul

I. Civilization, Democracy and Government

The Need for a Native American Historical Perspective

The reason for the urgent need for First Nations histories penned by First Nations authors was articulated to me by Chuck LeCain, a retired high-school history teacher of thirty-one years: “‘Until the lion has his historian, the hunter will always be the hero’ (unknown author). For more than a decade you have been the lion’s historian. Take pride in knowing that you have assisted countless others, not only to review, but to re-think history. I gained greatly from your writings. Wela’lin!” (Personal memo, March 18, 2005).

To begin this chronicle, I would like to explain the need for a Native American historical perspective and also my use of certain historical references. The subjugation of the Northeastern North American Native American nations by the English Crown was accomplished with the use of much barbarity. Not surprisingly, these actions have been studiously ignored or downplayed by most Caucasian male historians. However, their reluctance to enter into honest discussion and critically comment on the matter does not obscure the facts that the documents and journals left behind by colonial English and French scribes irrefutably prove: the blood of the citizens of the Mi’kmaq, Maliseet and their smaller sister nations, located in what is today eastern Canada and the New England states of the United States of America, was spilled by the English to the point where many were left on the verge of extinction or had passed into it.

The same historical documents also prove beyond a reasonable doubt that supposedly “civilized” colonial English politicians and military personnel used means of terror against First Nations peoples which would repel truly civilized people. Thus, the reluctance of most Caucasian male scribes to discuss and put to paper the details of such behaviour is understandable. To do so is to question the very civility of those who perpetrated the atrocities. As a person who has no such reluctance to expose the crimes against humanity committed by the English, I wrote this book. It details a chronicle of a people’s inhumanity that has few, if any, equals in human history.

When amassing the information that was needed to write about the English invasion of the territory of the Mi’kmaq, reams of information about the Tribe’s Amerindian allies also had to be digested. For data on the early stages of the invasion, I relied heavily upon doctoral dissertations by Caucasian male scholars and on documents, books and articles prepared by Caucasian male

historians, politicians etc. From these I retrieved praise of the Mi'kmaq and other Amerindians, and also minute descriptions of the shocking racist behaviour of English colonial authorities. To assure as much accuracy as possible I compared their conclusions against one another and with many other original sources, and then formed my own conclusions from a Mi'kmaq perspective.

I used the research of these men as sources for two reasons. First and foremost, because of my ancestry, Eurocentric society would tend to discount, as biased and exaggerated, research on the subject presented by an "Indian." But, I reasoned, how can they argue with the documents and findings of their own? Second, why do work that has already been done?

In later chapters I have also quoted heavily from well-researched papers about the Mi'kmaq struggle for survival prepared by two Caucasian women. In distinct contrast to the whitewashing of the subject by most Caucasian male writers, these women condemn the monstrous mistreatment of the Mi'kmaq and their allies.

However, I want to emphasize that the information contained herein about treaties, the Indian Act, Colonial Council meetings, court cases, centralization etc. was gleaned from Nova Scotia and Indian Affairs archival records and other sources by Don Julien and me.

National Identity

The term "Mi'kmaq" rather than "Micmac" will be used in telling this story because it is now the preferred choice of our People. However, the word "Micmac" has been around for at least 350 years and is cherished by many. Its historical root was included in a book penned by historian Marion Robertson:

The Micmacs were known by the early French settlers as the Souriquois, "the salt water men," according to Roth in "Acadia and the Acadians," to distinguish them from the Iroquois, who inhabited the fresh water country. The name "Micmac" was first recorded in a memoir by de La Chesnaye in 1676. Professor Ganong in a footnote to the word "megamingo," earth, as used by Marc Lescarbot, remarked "that it is altogether probable that in this word lies the origin of the name Micmac." As suggested in this paper on the customs and beliefs of the Micmacs, it would seem that *megumaagee*, the name used by the Micmacs, or the *Megumawaach*, as they called themselves, for their land, is from the words *megwaak*, "red," and *makumegek*, "on the earth," or as Rand recorded, "red on the earth," *megakumegek*, "red ground," "red earth."

The Micmacs, then, must have thought of themselves as the Red Earth People, or the People of the Red Earth. Others seeking a meaning for the word Micmac have suggested that it is from *nigumaach*, my brother, my friend, a word that was also used as a term of endearment by a husband for his wife....

Still another explanation for the word Micmac suggested by Stansbury Hagar in “Micmac Magic and Medicine” is that the word *megumawaach* is from *megumooowesoo*, the name of the Micmacs’ legendary master magicians, from whom the earliest Micmac wizards are said to have received their power.¹

The Horrors to Come

“The Prophecy,” a short story written by a Native North American Basil H. Johnston, relates a fictional visionary’s dream about the post-Columbian horrors that awaited the First Nations of the Americas. The visionary Daebaudjimoot begins by saying:

“Tonight I’m going to tell you a very different kind of story. It’s not really a story because it has not yet taken place; but it will take place just as the events in the past have occurred.... And even though what I’m about to tell you has not yet come to pass, it is as true as if it has already happened, because the Autissookaunuk told me in a dream.”

Daebaudjimoot tells of a strange people who are white and hairy and wear strange clothes they practically never take off. He describes them as having round eyes that are black, brown, blue or green, and having fine hair that is black, brown, blond or red.

He says they will arrive from the east in canoes five times the length of regular canoes. These big canoes will have sailed using blankets to catch the wind to propel them from a land across a great body of salt water. His words are greeted by his audience with laughter and disbelief. He continues:

“You laugh because you cannot picture men and women with white skins or hair upon their faces; and you think it funny that a canoe would be moved by the wind across great open seas. But it won’t be funny to our grandchildren and their great-grandchildren....

“The first few to arrive will appear to be weak by virtue of their numbers, and they will look as if they are no more than harmless passers-by, on their way to visit another people in another land, who need a little rest and direction before resuming their journey. But in reality they will be spies for those in quest for lands. After them will come countless others like flocks of geese.... There will be no turning them back.

“Some of our grandchildren will stand up to these strangers, but when they do, it will have been too late and their bows and arrows, war-clubs and medicines will be as nothing against the weapons of these white people, whose warriors will be armed with sticks that burst like thunderclaps. A warrior has to do no more than point a fire stick at another warrior and that man will fall dead the instant the bolt strikes him.

“It is with weapons such as these that the white people will drive our people from their homes and hunting grounds to desolate territories where game can scarce find food for their own needs and where corn can bare take root. The white people will take possession of all the rest, and they will build immense villages upon them. Over the years the white people will prosper, and though the Anishinaubaeg may forsake their own traditions to adopt the ways of the white people, it will do them little good. It will not be until our grandchildren and their grandchildren return to the ways of their ancestors that they will regain strength of spirit and heart.

“There! I have told you my dream in its entirety. I have nothing more to say.”

“Daebaudjimoot! Are these white people manitous or are they Beings like us?”

“I don’t know.”²

This fictional prophecy seems almost civilized in comparison to what the Mi’kmaq actually suffered after the European invasion of their territory began in the early sixteenth century. Over the course of history they were spared few indignities.

Mi’kmaq and European Civilizations

Exaggerated reports about the facial features, clothing and customs of the Amerindians by early Norse and Viking travellers were probably the reasons pre-Columbian contacts promoted stories in Europe about a strange people—non-humans, hairy monsters, subhumans—inhabiting a far-off land. Probably



To welcome a stranger

not much thought was given to the prospect that they could be intelligent and civilized human beings, an existence well documented by early European colonial scribes.

Prior to European settlement the Mi'kmaq lived in countries that had developed a culture founded upon three principles: the supremacy of the Great Spirit, respect for Mother Earth and people power. This instilled in them a deep respect for the laws of the Creator, the powers of Mother Earth and the democratic principles of their society. As a result they enjoyed the benefits of living in a harmonious, healthy, prosperous and peaceful social environment.

The nature of their society, which included sharing and free expression, was so advanced in the establishment of equitable human rights principles that greed and intolerance were all but unknown. Thus, the European concepts that separated people into a distinct hierarchy based upon birth, colour, race, lineage, religion, profession, wealth, politics and other criteria would have seemed to them unbelievable. This absence of biases about the differences of others found among the majority of Amerindians is one of the best indicators of how far advanced their cultures were in the development of human relations. The lofty plateau they had reached, where all people were accepted as equals, is an ideal that modern society is still working towards. In retrospect, if the Native Americans had not reached this stage by 1492, European colonization could not have occurred. Instead, because of their skin colour and strange religions, Europeans would have been either enslaved, repulsed or exterminated upon arrival.

In a discourse about Amerindian tolerance for the differences of others, Ronald Wright relates a Seneca Chief's response to the efforts of a White preacher to convert his people to Christianity:

In a scene reminiscent of the debate between Franciscans and Aztec priests nearly 300 hundred years before, the formidable Red Jacket rose to reply. His answer is one of the best ever given to Christianity's claims. Which mentality, he makes one wonder, is the more primitive: that which believes itself to have a patent on truth or that which pleads for cultural diversity, for tolerance, for mutual respect?³

Chief Red Jacket's words:

Brother... listen to what we say. There was a time when our forefathers owned this great island. Their seats extended from the rising to the setting sun. The Great Spirit had made it for the use of Indians. He had created the buffalo, the deer, and other animals for food. He had made the bear and the beaver. Their skins served us for clothing. He had scattered them over the country, and taught us how to take them. He had caused the earth to produce corn for bread.... If we had some disputes about our hunting

ground, they were generally settled without the shedding of much blood. But an evil day came upon us. Your forefathers crossed the great water and landed on this island. Their numbers were small. They found friends and not enemies. They told us they had fled from their own country for fear of wicked men, and had come here to enjoy their religion. They asked for a small seat. We took pity on them, granted their request; and they sat down amongst us. We gave them corn and meat; they gave us poison in return.

The white people, Brother, had now found our country. Tidings were carried back, and more came amongst us. Yet we did not fear them. We took them to be friends. They called us brothers. We believed them, and gave them a larger seat. At length their numbers had greatly increased. They wanted more land; they wanted our country. Our eyes were opened, and our minds became uneasy. Wars took place. Indians were hired to fight against Indians, and many of our people were destroyed. They also brought liquor amongst us. It was strong and powerful, and has slain thousands.

Brother, our seats were once large and yours were small. You have now become a great people, and we have scarcely a place left to spread our blankets. You have got our country, but are not satisfied; you want to force your religion upon us.

Brother, continue to listen. You say that you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind, and, if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right and we are lost. How do we know this to be true? We... only know what you tell us about it. How shall we know when to believe, being so often deceived by the white people?

Brother, you say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it?...

Brother, we do not understand these things. We are told that your religion was given to your forefathers and has been handed down from father to son. We also have a religion, which was given to our forefathers, and has been handed down to us, their children. We worship in that way. It teaches us to be thankful for all the favours we receive; to love each other, and to be united. We never quarrel about religion.

Brother, the Great Spirit has made us all, but he has made a great difference between his white and red children. He has given us different complexions and different customs.... Since he has made so great a difference between us in other things, why may we not conclude that he has given us a different religion?...

Brother, we do not wish to destroy your religion, or take it from you. We only want to enjoy our own.⁴

The tolerance shown by Chief Red Jacket for different views was also a trait

deeply imbedded in Mi'kmaq society. It was well reflected in the method the Nation had devised to resolve disputes, whereby disputing parties were brought together for mediation and reconciliation by community members, who would then assist them to reach an agreement based on justice and fairness. When struck, the final agreement would address all major concerns of the individuals, groups or governments involved. After the opposing parties accepted an agreement, it was understood and supported by the will of the people, that they would live by its provisions.

In contrast to the First Nations' democratic approach to the adjudication of problems, European civilizations of the day, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., the Swiss), used a totalitarian approach. This was a direct result of the fact that they were governed by a titled elite who considered themselves to have a divine right to rule. Therefore, democratic principles were not permitted to interfere to any great extent in matters they adjudicated. Because of this elitism, average citizens within these domains were routinely denied basic human rights and freedoms. Many were treated as property and held in bondage from cradle to grave. Disputes that arose among them more often than not had settlements devised and imposed by the aristocrats. Justice was often denied.

It is easy to conclude that the Mi'kmaq approach was more civilized. Of course, this reality would have been difficult to reconcile with the European definition of what being civilized was. At that time their intelligentsia equated civilization with Christianity. They declared that if the people of a land were not Christian, then they were not civilized. This ignoble declaration was the root cause of the living hell that the Natives of the Americas would have to endure. Unfortunately, the rest of the world was also not left untouched by it. Superiority attitudes led Europeans to attempt to Christianize the Middle East, Africa and Asia by force. They failed monumentally, primarily because these regions had their own self-perceived superior religions, which in some cases predated Christianity by thousands of years.

When reviewing the history of this era, it is difficult to conclude which European nation was the most arrogant in insisting that the Amerindian blindly accept the superiority of its cultural conventions and doctrines. In hindsight, when making an honest attempt to rate the period's major powers according to their presumptuous picture of themselves as superior, the nod must go to the English, followed closely by the Spanish and Portuguese, with the French a distant fourth.

These European superiority complexes hampered the efforts of their early scribes to make fair judgments about the human values of American cultures. Because of their belief that European civilizations were superior, and therefore all others were inferior or savage, these writers reported the superior human rights practices of Amerindian civilization as if they were abnormal. Later, using these biased records as gospel, many Caucasian authors have written works about Mi'kmaq civilization that doesn't present a true picture. Their efforts were

probably undertaken with sincerity and honesty, but many, if not all, are lacking in two respects: they ignore the Mi'kmaq perspective on civilization and fail to appreciate that the values of the two cultures were in most cases completely opposite.

An excellent example of the conflict between Amerindian and European perceptions of being civilized is a statement contained in a progress report about the “civilizing” of the Cherokees made by Colonel Thomas L. McKenney to his superiors in the United States federal government in the early 1800s. He proudly noted that, under Caucasian influence, the Cherokees had progressed to the point where many were becoming involved in selling and buying Blacks as slaves. The majority of Cherokees, uncomfortable with this term, referred to these Blacks as servants, not slaves. After Emancipation these servants formed their own Tribe and are known today as the Black Cherokees.

More contemporary authors who have written about Amerindian civilizations have also used European standards to evaluate the relative merits of these cultures. Thus, their efforts are flawed.

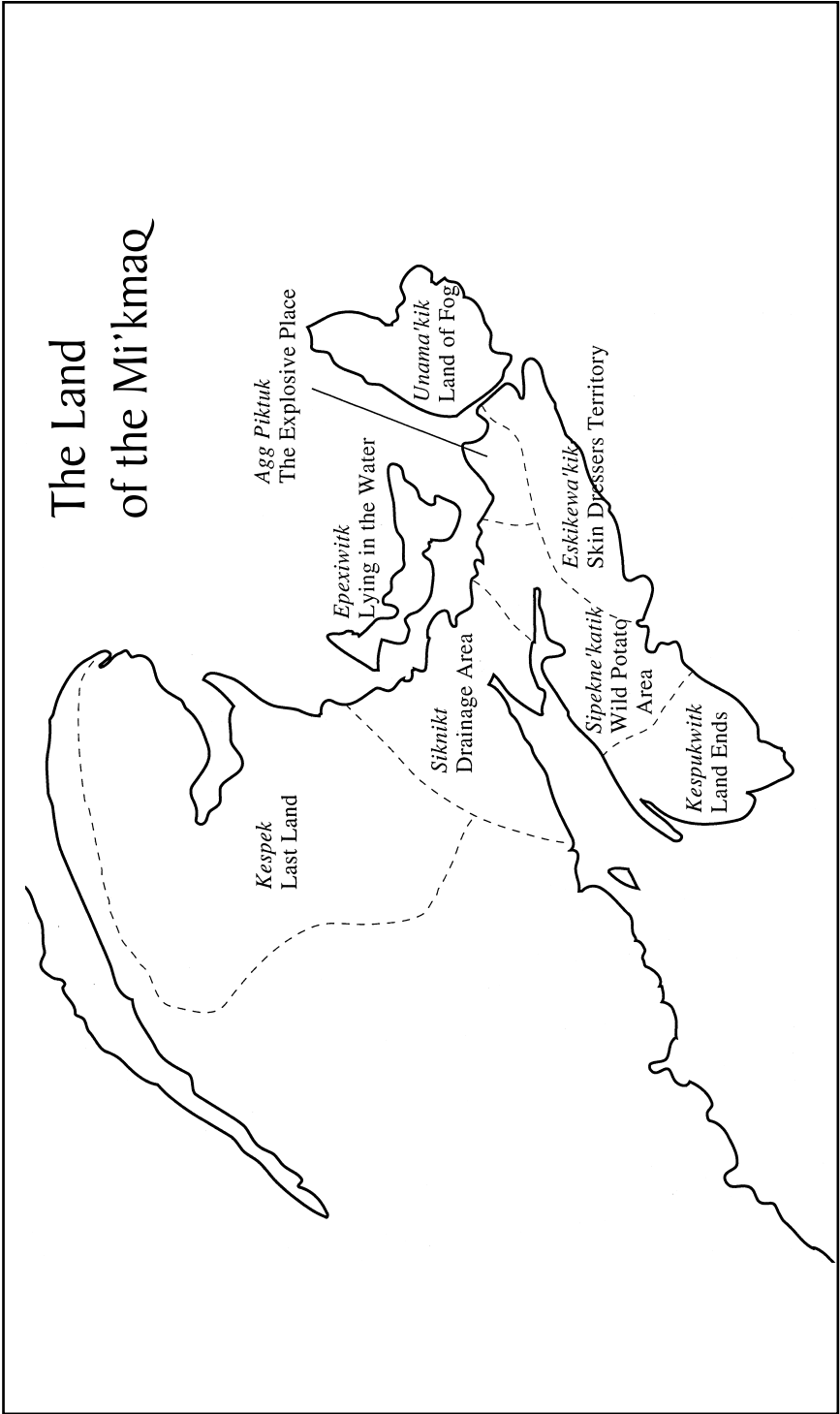
When writing on the subject of civilization, one must understand that the ability to read or write a European language does not create a superior civilization. Nor does the ability to point exploding sticks that cause instantaneous death or injury, or to launch missiles that could blow the world apart, provide a moral basis to declare one's culture more civilized than another. The question to ask when judging the values and merits of a civilization must always be: “How does the civilization respond to the human needs of its population?” By this standard, because they created social and political systems that ensured personal liberty, justice and social responsibility, most Amerindian civilizations must be given very high marks.

When making an unbiased assessment, and comparing the values of early American civilizations with those of European civilizations, one cannot but find that the suppression and wanton destruction of American civilizations by European civilizations was in many ways a case of inferior civilizations overcoming superior ones. This is especially true in the area of respect for human rights. Although they were not as technologically advanced as the Europeans were by 1492, many Amerindian Nations possessed democratic political practices that were light years ahead.

Mi'kmaq Government

The Mi'kmaq occupied a large area of northeastern North America for approximately 5,000 to 10,000 years. The Nation's original territory covers most of what today comprises Canada's Maritime Provinces, a good part of eastern Quebec and northern Maine. The approximate boundary of the vast territory is shown on the map in this chapter.

The territory was divided into seven distinct “Districts.” Their names were Kespukwitk, Sipekne'katik, Eskikewa'kik, Unama'kik, Epekwitk Aqk Piktuk,



Siknikt and Kespek. The English translations are shown on the map and are as close as one can come to conveying their true meaning in that language.

Citizens lived in small villages, which were populated by fifty to five hundred people. The number of villages and total population within each District is subject to conjecture.

District governments comprised a District Chief and Council. The Council included Elders, Band or Village Chiefs, and other distinguished members of the community. Among these leaders the Elders, both men and women, were the most appreciated. The Mi'kmaq held them in the highest regard and accorded them the utmost respect. Their advice and guidance was considered to be essential to the decision-making process, and thus no major decision was made without their full participation. A District government had conditional power to make war or peace, settle disputes, apportion hunting and fishing areas to families, etc. Thus, a District may be likened to what we call a "country" today.

At an unknown point in the distant past a Grand Council was established by the Districts to coordinate the resolution of mutual problems, promote solidarity, and act as a dispute mediator of last resort. District Chiefs elected one of their number as Grand Chief. The Grand Council's influence was derived from the esteem in which the District Chiefs were held. The Council did not have, beyond friendly persuasion, any special powers other than those assigned to it by the Districts. At sittings of these Councils, all men and women who wanted to speak were heard, and their opinions were given respectful consideration in the decision-making process. In modern terms, the Grand Council may be compared to the British Commonwealth of Nations, which also has no real powers other than persuasion.

Mi'kmaq Districts also belonged to a larger association known as the "Wabanaki Confederacy," which had been formed by the northeastern First Nations for the purpose of providing mutual protection from aggression by Iroquoian and other hostile nations. The Confederacy continued to function until the early 1700s, at which time the decimation of its member nations by disease and wars with the English caused it to become dormant. It has been revived to a certain extent in recent years. The Confederacy may be compared to the modern North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in function.

The offices of Grand, District and local Chiefs were filled by men who were well-respected members of their communities. The myth created by certain European accounts of Mi'kmaq history that an ambition to become Chief was helped by being a member of a large family was based on misperception. In fact, the customs of the Nation were such that all members of the community considered themselves to be an extended family. Because of this they used family salutations to greet one another, which could have led an outsider to believe they were all blood-related. This custom survived into the 1960s. For example, in the 1940s, when I was young, we were required to call all the Elders of our

community “Aunt” or “Uncle.” It was a good tradition—the community was much closer because of it.

In contrast to most of the cultures of Europe, where the divine right to rule was the province of the aristocrat, Mi’kmaq culture held that a leader had to earn the right to lead. The standards were rigid for men who aspired to leadership. Aspirants had to be compassionate, honourable, intelligent, brave and wise. The term of office was indeterminate, and if a leader conducted himself well, his leadership could continue until death. Grand Chief Membertou, the greatest Mi’kmaq chief in living memory, remained in office until his death at an age said to be well over a hundred.

A Mi’kmaq leader’s social status was also sharply different from that of his European counterpart, who was paid handsomely, perked indiscriminately and feared. Chiefs and other office holders were not accorded special perks and privileges because of their positions. Those they did receive were freely given by the people as rewards for services rendered and as tokens of esteem.

Because of the nature of Mi’kmaq culture, political corruption was unknown. The European practice of using one’s leadership to enhance personal and family fortunes by extracting favours from the community or its citizens would not have been tolerated. Any leader who engaged in such dishonourable practices would have soon found himself deposed and disgraced. The early Mi’kmaq had no taste for corruption and, given the principle of community ownership, there was no need for it.

Sieur de Diéreville wrote about leadership within Mi’kmaq society:

The cherished hope of leadership inspires resolve to be adept in the chase. For it is by such aptitude a man obtains the highest place; here there is no inherited position due to birth or lineage, merit alone uplifts. He who has won exalted rank, which each himself hopes to attain, will never be deposed, except for some abhorrent crime. No wise noteworthy are the honours paid his high estate, for he is merely first among a hundred..., more, or less, according to the size of his domain.⁵

In contrast to the respect accorded the Mi’kmaq leader because of honourable performance, English and other European leaders mostly garnered their reputations through brutal force. Even the most minor offence committed against a European official met with swift retribution. The severity of punishment inflicted is illustrated in the minutes of a Council meeting held at Annapolis Royal on September 22, 1726. Robert Nichols was tried by Council for insulting the Governor of the province. After a very short trial, Mr. Nichols was found guilty and sentenced to brutal punishment “in order to terrify the other Citizens.” For three days, he was to sit upon a gallows for a half hour each day with a rope around his neck and a paper upon his breast with the words “audacious villain.” Afterwards, he was to be whipped with a cat-o-nine-tails

at the rate of five stripes upon his bare back every one hundred paces, starting from the prison to the uppermost house of the Cape and back again. Finally, he was to be turned over to the army to be made a soldier.⁶

In 1988, the contribution made by the Mi'kmaq and other North American Nations towards establishing democracy in the world was acknowledged for the first time by a Euro American jurisdiction. During November of that year the Congress of the United States debated and passed a resolution recognizing that the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights were modelled to a large extent upon the tenets of the constitutions and bills of rights of the Iroquoian Nations and other Amerindian groups.

Religion

The Great Spirit's directives were the Mi'kmaq Nation's eternal light. The People believed that His dominion was all-inclusive, and that He encompassed all positive attributes—love, kindness, compassion, knowledge, wisdom, etc.—and that He was responsible for all existence and was personified in all things—rivers, trees, spouses, children, friends, etc. No initiatives were undertaken without first requesting His guidance. His creations, “Mother Earth” and the Universe, were accorded the highest respect. Religion was blended into daily life—it was lived. Nature, as was the case with most American civilizations, supported Mi'kmaq religious beliefs.

In comparison, Europeans followed religions, collectively called Christianity, based upon blind belief. They too promote a belief in a Supreme Being who possesses all good qualities, but until recent times they also promoted a belief that God condoned the use of several bad qualities, e.g., vengefulness to spread and protect the word. Horrendous events such as the Crusades and Inquisitions were initiated under the dogma of Christianity. Innocent people who could not defend themselves against charges of heresy were found guilty and thrown into prison or burned at the stake. Non-believers were branded pagans and heathen savages. The Mi'kmaq, as non-Christians, were also thus branded.

In most European minds, the vision of Mi'kmaq savagery was solidified by the fact that the Mi'kmaq offered tobacco and other tokens to the Great Spirit as a mark of respect and humility. Yet “Christian” and “civilized” Euros saw no contradiction in their own offerings of bread, wine, incense and so on to their God. Most Europeans, especially religious leaders, also found it strange that the Amerindians viewed the Great Spirit as a likeness of themselves, but these same Europeans did not find it strange that they saw their own God as a Caucasian man.

The Mi'kmaq, like most other Amerindians, had a place similar to what the Christians called “Heaven” for the repose of their dead, called the “Land of Souls.” It was a place of eternal rest, peace and happiness where the dead were welcomed by the Great Spirit and their ancestors.

“Evil spirits” were also part of Mi’kmaq belief. The People believed that these were the cause of disease, famine, natural catastrophes and all other evils that can afflict mankind. To limit the damage these spirits begot, the Mi’kmaq beseeched the Great Spirit for assistance. There is little evidence that they used these spirits to terrorize and intimidate one another. In contrast, Christianity’s “demons,” especially the “Devil,” were used by priests and ministers to strike fear into their congregations.

European Christians also believed that their God was to be feared because, if they erred, He would damn them to eternal pain and suffering. This kind of vengeful action by God was incompatible with the Mi’kmaq belief that the Great Spirit was goodness incarnate and there was thus no need to be terrified of Him.

Nevertheless, many people remark on the seeming ease with which the Mi’kmaq and many other Amerindians adopted Christianity. The simple explanation for this is the civility of the People. They believed that a host should make every effort to please a guest. If it required them to worship the Great Spirit in another fashion, then so be it. After all, they reasoned, if the same God is worshipped by all men, the mode of worship is incidental.

Morality and Customs

The modesty and chastity of the Mi’kmaq, especially the women, were virtues well remarked upon by those who wrote about the ideals of the culture. The fact that a woman took pride in her honour and would not willingly compromise herself was seen as incredible by many European writers. From their racist points of view it was inconceivable that a people they considered heathen savages would act in a more civilized manner than they.

From their moral outlook, the Mi’kmaq developed laws governing relationships between the sexes. Thus marriage rites were celebrated with great pomp, ceremony and feasting. They also included gift exchanges between the families of the bride and groom. The preliminaries leading up to a marriage provide an excellent example of the individual freedoms the People enjoyed.

If a boy wished to court a girl, he had to ask the permission of her father before he began. This was more a courtesy than an obstacle. The father would normally, after much teasing, give the young man permission to approach his daughter to ascertain if she was willing to involve herself romantically with him. Chrestien Le Clercq describes the process:

If the father finds that the suitor who presents himself is acceptable for his daughter... he tells him to speak to his sweetheart in order to learn her wish about an affair which concerns herself alone. For they do not wish, say these barbarians, to force the inclinations of their children in the matter of marriage, or to induce them, whether by use of force, obedience, or affection, to marry men whom they cannot bring themselves to like. Hence

it is that the fathers and mothers of our Gaspésians [Mi'kmaq from Gaspé] leave to their children the entire liberty of choosing the persons whom they think most adaptable to their dispositions, and most conformable to their affections.⁷

Under the Nation's laws marriages between blood relations, up to second cousins, were strictly forbidden. However, there were no taboos against marrying in-laws.

The culture also permitted polygamous marriage, but the record indicates that it was rarely practised. Marc Lescarbot expressed amazement that "although one husband may have many wives... there is no jealousy among them."⁸ Pierre Biard wrote:

According to the custom of the country, they can have several wives, but the greater number of them that I have seen have only one; some of the Sagamores pretend that they cannot do without this plurality, not because of lust, for this nation is not very unchaste, but for two other reasons. One is in order to retain their authority and power by having a number of children; for in that lies the strength of the house; the second reason is their entertainment and service, which is great and laborious, since they have large families and a great number of followers, and therefore require a number of housewives to (serve).⁹

The head wife in a polygamous household was usually the one who had borne the first boy. The extent to which polygamy was practised, like the misunderstanding about extended family, was no doubt exaggerated by the Jesuits and others. For example, Grand Chief Membertou had only one wife.

Love was the prime factor in creating marital bonds between Mi'kmaq couples. For European couples, especially among the elite, marriages were often entered into to enhance personal fortunes and stations in life rather than for love. As a result, children were sometimes "promised" at birth to individuals who were deemed by their families to be the best prospect for the child's future. To the Mi'kmaq this practice would have been considered uncivilized. However, in later years, up until the early 1900s, many Mi'kmaq parents followed this European custom. My maternal grandmother was victimized by the practice and lived in a loveless marriage until she was widowed, after which she met and married a man she loved.

Although not much mention of divorce is found in European records of the pre-Columbian Mi'kmaq, that it was practised is another example of their respect for human rights. However, because harmony in relationships and respect for each other's needs were paramount, one can conclude that instances of divorce were rare.

The funerals of individual Mi'kmaq also called for ceremony and feasting.

The Chief would be the first to speak at “the feast of the dead” and, as related by Le Clercq, he would talk about

the good qualities and the most notable deeds of the deceased. He even impresses upon all the assembly, by words as touching as they are forceful, the uncertainty of human life, and the necessity they are under of dying, in order to join in the Land of Souls with their friends and relatives, whom they are now recalling to memory.¹⁰

Others spoke after the Chief. Nicholas Denys relates:

Each one spoke, one after another, for they never spoke two at a time, neither men or women. In this respect these barbarians give a fine lesson to those people who consider themselves more polished and wiser than they.

A recital was made of all the genealogy of the dead man, of that which he had done fine and good, of the stories that he had heard told of his ancestors, of the great feasts and acknowledgements he had made in large number, of the animals he had killed in the hunt, and of all the other matters they considered it fitting to tell in praise of his predecessors. After this they came to the dead man; then the loud cries and weeping redoubled. This made the orator strike a pose, to which the men and women responded from time to time by a general groaning, all at one time and in the same tone. And often he who was speaking struck postures, and set himself to cry and weep with the others.

Having said all he wished to say, another began and said yet other things not said by the first. Then one after another, each after his fashion, made his praise on the dead man. This lasted three or four days before the funeral oration was finished.¹¹

Denys, although impressed with many aspects of Mi'kmaq culture, was among those with little ability to appreciate the values of a non-Christian culture possessed by a people of colour. Instead, as his writings indicate, he had a blind belief in the superiority of his own. As a demonstration of how long bad habits can linger, there is still a reluctance among many Caucasians to accept the fact that Amerindian cultures were well defined and that the values they possessed are among those that modern humanity is still reaching for!

One can safely conclude that the social structures and democratic forms of government found in the Americas were deemed by the European ruling classes as a serious threat to their own exercise of absolute power and unchallenged authority. The determination the European aristocracy displayed in their efforts to destroy the Amerindians speaks for itself.