Micmacs and Gypsies:
Occupation of the Peripatetic Niche

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There is a long history of the study of the Gypsies (or Rom) of Europe and North America. Pioneer folklorist Charles Leland who of course published Algonquian oral traditions including reworkings of Micmac myths collected by Silas T. Rand (Leland 1884a, 1884b, 1884c; Leland and Prince 1902) was also one of the first to seriously investigate Gypsy “lore” (Leland 1874, 1891). It is only in the recent past, however, that investigation of Gypsy culture and society has passed from romantic amateurs into the hands of professional social anthropologists. That passage has given us a number of insightful ethnographies (e.g., articles in collections edited by Rehfisch 1975 and Salo 1982).

In addition to the recent spate of high-quality literature on Gypsies, there has been a recognition that they are members of a class of mobile minorities who seek clients from among sedentary populations (see S. Gmelch 1986). These minorities have been given various designations such as “non-ecological nomads”, “service nomads”, “commercial nomads”, “non-food producing nomads”, “symbiotic nomads”, or “peripatetic minorities” (see S. Gmelch 1986:309; Rao 1987:2). The negative attitude of the dominant or mainstream society toward many of these minorities is reflected in Barth’s designation of one such group, the Taters of Norway, as a “pariah group” (Barth 1975:286). Since, as in other nomadic populations, descendants of these groups often become sedentary, Sharon Gmelch (1986) prefers “artisan, trader, and entertainer minorities.”

Barth notes the absence of peripatetics “in Oceania, major parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and aboriginal America” (Barth 1987:ix). Barth is almost certainly correct for aboriginal America north of Mexico (however, I would not be surprised if the phenomenon were found in Mesoamerica). However, if peripatetic minorities are absent from aboriginal North America, this did not prevent aboriginal North Americans from becoming a peri-
This paper focuses on peripateticism as the adaptive strategy of the 19th-century Micmac. This similarity of the way of life on 19th-century eastern Algonquians to other nomads did not go unnoticed by their contemporaries and has received passing mention in modern scholarship. In 1830 William Moorsom noted in Nova Scotia, “The greater part live a wandering life, similar to that of our gipsies” (Moorsom 1830:112). Governor Hubbard of Maine observed Indians “leading a wandering gipsy like life amongst our white population” (quoted in Smith 1989:310). In her discussion of witchcraft notions in Newfoundland, Martin (1979:178) noted similarities between Micmac and British Travellers.

The argument that 19th-century Micmac were a member of the class of peripatetic minorities suggests an important corrective to the view of their history in the 19th-century. The failure to adopt farming comes not merely as a result of inept government programmes, indifferent administrators, crop failures, or white encroachment on reserve lands, although to be sure Micmac who attempted to farm faced all these problems (McGee 1973, 1974; Gonzales 1981; Razzolini 1979). Instead Micmac rejection of farming can be seen as a positive adaptive decision on their part to exploit a niche in the society of the Maritimes. Comparison of the 19th-century Micmac to other peripatetic minorities will provide insights in the nature of this Micmac adaptation. The problems and dilemmas faced by other peripatetic nomads were similarly faced by 19th-century Micmac, and solutions to these are often similar.

In her introduction to a collection of essays dealing with peripatetic adaptation in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa, Rao provides us with a definition of peripatetics: “Of various ethnic origins and speaking different languages peripatetics are thus defined as primarily non-food producing/extracting, preferentially endogamous, itinerant communities subsisting mainly on the sale of goods and/or more or less specialized services to sedentary and/or nomadic customers” (Rao 1987:3). She provides us with a useful figure (Rao 1987:6) in which one axis is mobility (varying from minimum to maximum) and the second axis is food production and

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extraction (also varying from minimum to maximum). At the minimal end of both axes are populations termed “sedentary commercialists”. At the maximum end of both axes are “hunter-gatherers” and “pastoral nomads”. Agriculturalists are low in mobility and high in food production and extraction. Peripatetics are at the maximum end of the mobility axis but low on the food production and extraction axis. An important point made in her discussion is that almost all societies are not pure, but most fall toward one or another of these four possibility. In this paper I argue that despite Micmac activities in food production and extraction through hunting, fishing, and gathering, other economic activities would place them well within the peripatetic quarter of Rao’s diagram.

In their discussion of Gypsies and Travellers in Britain, Gmelch and Gmelch (1987:135; see also S. Gmelch 1982:349) point out that “commercial nomads are generalists who use a range of strategies over time, yet specialize at a given time (or in a given location) in order to take advantage of particularly rich resources or opportunities.” They observed “self-employed nuclear families (and temporary partnerships between close kin) who switch occupations frequently and move whenever demand slackens or local possibilities are exhausted” (Gmelch and Gmelch 1987:135). While such mobile generalists may never amass a large fortune, they maintain their autonomy and independence because they are able “to fill gaps in the market which large-scale or permanently established businesses would find uneconomic or insecure . . . Their flexibility and range of skills also allows them to switch from one activity to another to take advantage of changing opportunities in the mainstream economy or to pursue several occupations simultaneously” (S. Gmelch 1982:349). A survey of English Gypsies (Adams et al 1975:152) found the greatest diversity of occupations within a family was found among the wealthiest. The less wealthy exhibited a “scope of occupations . . . more restricted both in quantity and quality.”

Important in this adaptation is a willingness to diversify to suit given local conditions, but also important is the ability of the family to pursue alternative routes to exploitation of the client sedentist population. Thus among English Gypsies while males gather scrap metal or lay tarmac driveways, their wives and daughters will gather rags, hawk goods, tell fortunes or whatever.

I see parallels between contemporary scholarly description of Traveller and Gypsy adaptation and that of the 19th-century Micmac. Indeed, I would suggest that the bias of 19th-century observers inhibited their appreciation of that adaptation and this in turn has made it most difficult for contemporary ethnologists to fully appreciate the Micmac economy. Nineteenth-century non-Micmac maritimers, both officials and philanthropists, concentrated on issues of land: the establishment of reserves,
their preservation from white encroachment, the construction of housing, and the adoption of agriculture. I do recognize that there are petitions emanating from Micmac themselves addressing these concerns but their frequency is low.

While it is probably impossible to reconstruct in an quantitative way the nature of 19th-century Micmac adaption, there is abundant evidence that Micmac were pursuing, depending on local demands, a very large variety of economic activities; cf. the discussion by Gonzales (1981:54–69) of the Micmac in Nova Scotia's "Golden Age". Natural bias, both on the part of contemporary observers and current scholars, probably leads to an over-emphasis on aboriginal activities such as hunting and gathering or basket-making. These were not without significance; cf. Smith (1989) on baskets and Whitehead (1982) on quillwork. However Gonzales has pointed Micmac activities in such areas as porpoise fishery (Gonzales 1981:56; see Leighton 1937), coopering (Gonzales 1981:62), guiding (Gonzales 1981:64), lumbering (Gonzales 1981:62–63), and fishing (Gonzales 1981:63). She summarizes:

Micmac economic activities for this period were multiple and complex. The were a combination of traditional subsistence activities, government subsidized work projects . . . , wage labor and activities which combined indigenous knowledge and skills with market demands . . . These activities were periodically supplemented by begging and government rations. Not every Micmac performed all of these activities . . . Yet, no Micmac family was committed solely to one economic endeavor. (Gonzales 1981:65)

Gonzales errs, I would argue, in her suggestion that the participation of Micmac females in craft work was the product of "the colonial sex division of labor [which] rigidly circumscribed a very narrow sphere of economic activity for Micmac women" (Gonzales 1981:69). Rather than seeing "the developing asymmetry of the sex division of labor" (Gonzales 1981:67), it appears to me that the Micmac adopted the diverse exploitive techniques, with family members concentrating in different occupations or markets, that characterize peripatetic minorities about the globe. Similarly I would quarrel with her assertion that it was government pressures which caused the nuclear family to grow in importance (Gonzales 1981:66). Again, I would see the pressures of adapting as a peripatetic minority as focusing upon the nuclear family as the significant social unit.

Their peripatetic adaption would seem to have put two types of pressures on the Micmac which would have increased the importance of the nuclear family. The first is the importance of the nuclear family as an economic unit. This maximized mobility and flexibility in dealing with variable demands and markets. The second is that the peripatetic niche required
that the Micmac be close to white settlements from which they derived their livelihood. As the century drew on, potential camp ground (especially those of any size) in settled areas became scarce, so it was far easier for a smaller social unit to find a place to live while marketing goods and services. Silas Rand observed that the Micmac population was growing, not declining, in Nova Scotia, but that many thought the contrary because the Micmac were travelling about in smaller groups than in the past (Rand 1894:xix).

Rao suggests “the movements of peripatetic Gypsies and Travellers in England and Wales are more frequent and less predictable than those of nomadic pastoral peoples and hunters and gatherers” (Rao 1987:16). Such would also seem to be the case for the Micmac in the 19th-century. A factor in the failure of the Protestant mission of Silas T. Rand was his inability to maintain continuous contact with potential converts or even to be able to predict where he would find them. Rand’s own movements in his missionary activity were wide-ranging, covering Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. A frustrating aspect of his journals is the infrequency with which he names the Micmac he met in his travels, but in the journals it is clear that he often met persons he knew in locales (as the St. John valley) far from where he first met them. It is also clear the migrations were not annual cycles. Rand’s initial interest in Micmac folklore was stimulated by the visit of Susan Barss to Prince Edward Island, a locale she had not frequented for several years (Rand 1889:46).

In 1858-59 Rand “travelled from Cape Breton to Yarmouth, and round by Liverpool and Chester to Halifax; on by Turo, Amherst, and Moncton, to Mirimichi; back by Parrsboro’ to Hantsport; thence by St. John to Portland, [and] Montreal.” He noted, “We have found Micmacs everywhere in these Provinces, and scattering ones all the way to Montreal. A Micmac family reached that city by the same train by which we arrived. We met another company there one day in the streets who were from Cape Breton” (Micmac Missionary Society 1859:10). In 1893 a tourist tract proclaimed “you can find bands of the once proud Micmacs in almost any part of the province you may happen to visit, and one begins to think the census enumerator made a slight mistake when he gave the country credit for owning only about two thousand of them” (Yarmouth Steamship Co. 1893:58).

With respect to mobility, Rao’s model looking at the relationship of demand and population of sedentists and peripatetics is of interest. She sees that a combination of both high frequency of demand and high predictability of demand will support sedentists in the marketplace. Similarly, a high frequency of demand will support sedentists even if predictability of demand is low provided the customer population is large enough. She argues, though, that low frequency of demand coupled with high predictability of
demand leads to market exploitation by "Less Mobile Peripatetics" and that high frequency of demand coupled with both low predictability of demand and a small customer population will lead to "Highly Mobile Peripatetics" (Rao 1987:17).

Given the sketchy data available on 19th-century Micmac and their neighbours, particularly given the diversity of Micmac economic interaction with the Maritime economy, it is difficult to place them with any degree of certainty or precision in this model. There are also some possibilities left out of Rao’s model, which may be relevant to the Micmac case. Rao does not couple both low frequency of demand with low predictability of demand. I would argue that this with a large population would produce "Less Mobile Peripatetics" (see Gmelch and Gmelch 1987) and with a small population would produce "Highly Mobile Peripatetics," provided they could survive at all. Consideration of factors of demand and client population size relative to the Micmac lead to the inevitable conclusion they should constitute "Highly Mobile Peripatetics."

There are other parallels between 19th-century Micmac and other peripatetics. Strong boundaries separate a peripatetic minority from its sedentist neighbours. Some of these are imposed by the mainstream population, but others are reinforced by the peripatetic group itself. Endogamy was included in Rao’s definition of peripatetics. She also points to language as "the commonest protective device employed by peripatetics" (Rao 1987:18). "In those cases where the peripatetic population appears to be of common ethnic origin with the sedentists, a ‘secret language’ is often used, as the Gammon or Shelta spoken by Irish Tinkers" (G. Gmelch 1977:37). While preservation of the Micmac language may not be entirely due to a peripatetic adaptation, it does seem significant that elsewhere in the world such an adaptation is conducive to linguistic distinctiveness.

Related to language retention is an active resistance to formal education among peripatetics. Schooling both limits a family’s mobility and removes a worker from the family labour force. In addition education in the mainstream culture is viewed as a waste of time. Skills learned there are of little value to the peripatetic adaptation yet they also fail to open any real opportunity for advancement to reasonable levels of achievement and reward in the mainstream culture. This has proven to be true even among Travellers in Britain and Ireland where there are no racial barriers to be breached for their children to enter mainstream society (although there are admittedly very formidable class barriers). Here again Micmac attitudes and behaviour are identical to those of other peripatetics.

The attitudes of mainstream society toward peripatetics is a combination of a romanticized ideal coupled with a largely negative view of those individuals and groups encountered in day-to-day interaction. A roman-
tic view of the real Gypsies retained in Britain, paralleling, according to Sibley (1981:18) the southerner's admiration of the real Eskimo reported by Brody (1975). This, however, allows prejudice against the Gypsies or the Inuit in an Arctic settlement encountered in everyday life for they fail to duplicate the image of the real Gypsy or real Eskimo. Similarly, in the Maritimes, the fall from grace of the noble savage is a constant theme of white observers of their Micmac neighbours. Writer after writer laments the failure of those Micmac they encountered to duplicate their image of the noble hunters of the past.

Erickson (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) and Martin (1977, 1979) have established a further interesting parallel between Micmac and Gypsy adaptation. Erickson relied upon field data collected by Ruth Wallis in 1953 among both Micmac women and non-Micmac females long married into the Micmac community. Her elderly informants clearly would recall the 19th-century. Martin worked with an archival collection of Newfoundland folklore, at least a portion of which probably has roots in the 19th-century. Although neither was working with a data base exclusively tied to the 19th-century, both related the Micmac peddler role to a belief in the client population that Micmac basket sellers could bewitch potential customers who rejected their goods.

Neither Erickson nor Martin see Micmac witches as developing independently of European ideas of Gypsies as witches, although both feel that Micmac indigenous concepts of individual use of supernatural power contributed to their white neighbours crediting them with acts of witchcraft. They see a convergence of belief among both groups, with the Micmac slipping into the role of stranger-cum-witch occupied in Europe by Gypsies and Travellers. Erickson argues that white influence led the Micmac to perceive the buoin as increasingly like a European witch.

It is interesting that, like Gypsies, Micmac used their reputation for control of the supernatural to coerce their sedentist clients to patronize them. Cases reported by Erickson (1978a:10, 22) and Martin (1979:176-177) indicate both Micmac and their clients had oral traditions of Micmac witches who cursed whites who had treated them ill — failing to purchase their goods and services or to provide favours when asked.

Finally, I would like to turn to the official attitude toward peripatetics. Here the Micmac shared the fate of others who have adopted such an adaptation. The Micmac share with the Gypsies the solution to the problem they presented. With respect to Gypsies in Europe, Liegeois (1987:370) has noted: "The 'Gypsy problem' has always brought solutions which are synonymous with the Gypsy's disappearance." He goes on to forcefully point out:
Gypsies are perceived and designated as "persons of nomadic origin" to be "readapted" in order to be included in the rest of society; once objects [emphasis mine] of readaptation, they are perceived and designated as inadapted [again my emphasis] and their lack of adaptation is linked to the image one already has of them. The blameworthy is pictured as such and blamed; and as the blamed is necessarily blameworthy, he remains so. (Liegeois 1987:371)

One could substitute Micmac for Gypsy in the above quotations and not one syllable is inaccurate or inappropriate.

Conclusions

As I began reading the literature on peripatetic minorities, I was struck by how frequently the position of Irish Tinkers, English Gypsies, Scottish Travellers, and other peripatetic minorities occupied similar positions vis-à-vis the mainstream society to that of the Micmac. The similarity included both their own exploitation of the sedentist population and the attitudes and policies of the sedentist population toward the peripatetics. We have here then a most interesting example in cross-cultural comparison. One must admit that much (but by no means all) of our data on mainstream culture is from European societies. However, it does appear very significant that a population, the Micmac, from outside the European tradition, could in such a brief time so convincingly occupy the peripatetic niche (and conform to so very many of its dimensions). There clearly is an adaptive niche to be occupied and there are pressures which lead to regularities among the groups that occupy that niche.

It also, I think, changes our view of the Micmac in the 19th-century. They are not a defeated people, robbed of their resources (although they of course had been), ready to retreat with few objections to their graves. Instead they are a dynamic population, active in seeking and exploiting those resources available to them. As such, they, like peripatetics elsewhere in the world, proved a threat to the sedentist population they exploited, and the sedentist population exhibited prejudice against their peripatetic adaptation. I think it important that we not view this era as simply one of hardship and poverty because of government neglect. Instead it should be viewed as an era of rational, positive, and energetic economic activity on the part of the Micmac, yet activity which ran counter to fundamental values of the mainstream society. It is possible not because the Micmac failed to adapt to white presence in the Maritimes in the 19th-century that the incurred efforts to alter their way of life; their fault was they adapted too well, but exploited the peripatetic niche which has proven threatening to sedentist populations. This is despite the fact that the sedentists were most willing to utilize the goods and services offered to them by peripatetics at bargain rates.
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