In the summer of 1967 I was involved with a number of student volunteers in a "community development" project at Sipayik (Pleasant Point), a Passamaquoddy reservation community near Eastport, Maine. There was a great deal afoot that summer. Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty arrived at Sipayik at the same time we did, in the form of a newly constituted “Community Action Program”. Lawyers for the Passamaquoddy were at work on an Indian claims case that, 13 years later, would bring them, for the first time in more than a century, federal recognition, a land base, economic power, adequate housing, and control over their children’s education. In 1967, however, they had no recognition, no control over their land or education, no work, no money, no transportation, no fire or police protection. The dilapidated housing was woefully inadequate, even in summer. We were there to try to help with some of these problems.

Despite the severe housing shortage, we were told that a place known as Mary Dana’s house was available for rent. We soon learned why this particular house was available: a former occupant had been murdered two years earlier by a party of White deer hunters. He had predicted his own death a week in advance and had promised a pair of black boots to two children along with “a pile of keys that would open any lock around.” He also said that, after his death, his ghost would be in the house and might be heard walking from room to room. This contributed greatly, of course, to our success in renting the house as a base for our summer program. It also made us the objects of considerable interest to the Sipayik residents, particularly the children, who came by frequently to check on our welfare.

A number of children, varying in age from about 8 to about 16, became habitual visitors at Mary Dana’s house. It was clear that they were not overly concerned with their very limited access to formal education,
medical services, mechanized transportation, and other benefits normally available to American children. They were creating and perpetuating an exciting world of mystery, wonder, and enchantment through the exercise of their own imaginations, the tales and observations of their parents and grandparents, and whatever else came to hand, such as the arrival of our own prosaic little group of summer volunteers. They seemed blissfully unaware of the dreary and uncompromising realities of Sipayik as they went about the business of energizing the reservation and socializing one another to participate in, and contribute to, their encapsulated and essentially pre-literate community. And they were doing this in two vastly different languages, with at least some degree of fluency.

They spoke of encounters with several types of supernatural beings: nisekopisicik, or ‘ghosts’; wahant, ‘the devil’; pukcinsqehs, the ‘jug woman’; sqewtomuhs, the dreaded ‘swamp woman’; wiwilomeq, a sea-going dragon seen from time to time on Passamaquoddy Bay; and at least two named types of “little people”, mishkomehsisok and winokoméhsuwok. The beliefs and concerns implicit in the tales and anecdotes of the Passamaquoddy children who frequented Mary Dana’s house in 1967 can be viewed as fragments of an integrated belief system that was pervasive in the minds of their ancestors not so long ago and still dominated the conventional wisdom of their parents and grandparents. From the mouths of the Passamaquoddy children we got apocryphal tales, naïve interpretations, and somewhat distorted images drawn from a worldview that still had the power to instruct and entertain, but seemed insufficient to explain the alien world outside the reservation, a world that, in 1967, was beginning to inundate the Passamaquoddy with a seemingly endless series of programs promulgated by an array of federal and state agencies and religious and academic institutions and implemented by a host of well-intentioned, but hopelessly uncoordinated, English-speaking outsiders.

This paper will recount some of the Passamaquoddy children’s stories current at Sipayik in 1967. Their primary focus was on omens, prophecies, supernatural capabilities, and miraculous events, some of which defy basic constraints governing spatial and temporal relationships. These were the typical ingredients of the tales told in 1967 around Mary Dana’s house. That the former occupant of the house had predicted his own death a week in advance of his murder was just a single instance of a recurring pattern. The winokoméhsuwok, the children said, could be heard singing wedding
songs before marriages and requiem hymns before deaths. If that were not
enough, it was plain to see that the rock carvings across the highway, which
everyone attributed to the *winokoméhsuwok*, had anticipated the invention
of the steam engine and the airplane. There are many other indications that
Passamaquoddy children in 1967 were concerned with omens and
prophecies, invoked traditional omens, and made new prophecies based on
traditional models.

Death and destruction might be predicted on the basis of visual
evidence. We were told, for example, that the Big Dipper, which had been
seen over a certain family’s house, was a bad omen for the occupants. We
were also told that a huge ball of fire had been seen over another house and
had burst into many small fireballs. This had been seen by the man living
there, who interpreted it as a sign of bad luck; within a month, we were
told, his wife was bed-ridden. In another month, the man himself was
badly injured.²

Some portents of impending death took the form of scents or sounds.
One woman, for example, was said to have smelled a pine coffin and
flowers in her house. This had been interpreted as a sign that some relative
was soon to die. A few days later, we were told, one of her relatives did
indeed die.

Audible signs of impending death were also brought to our attention.
We were told, for example, that to hear footsteps when no one is around is
a sign that someone will die in a week’s time. A teenager said that once,
when she was small, she was in bed with her mother and they both heard
footsteps and the rattling sound of a dish being moved back and forth. She
hid under the covers. A week later, sure enough, somebody died. There
was also the case of a teenaged girl who said she had heard a knocking on
her window a week before the man living at Mary Dana’s house was
murdered. She looked for tracks outside the window, but none were there.
The absence of tracks was, for her, proof that some intangible, gray
presence had done the knocking.

Another case was of more immediate concern to me. On 22 August
1967, shortly before we were to leave Sipayik at the end of the summer, we
played some tapes belonging to a Sipayik resident to a large gathering of
visitors at Mary Dana’s house. The tapes consisted of songs sung in

² This injury was sustained at the hands of White deer hunters in the same
episode in which Peter Francis was murdered (Spiker 1966).
Passamaquoddy at a requiem mass and prayers for the deceased recited in Passamaquoddy by an elderly woman. Many Sipayik residents came to hear these tapes. The next morning, however, a woman who had not been present predicted that, because we had played the tapes, three people would surely die. That same morning an infant was stillborn at Indian Township. In the evening a man went swimming, got caught in a thunder storm, and was found dead the following morning. The academic schedule required that we take our departure, leaving the Passamaquoddy to await the third death. It is certain that some people held us responsible for these calamities. Some must also have blamed the owner of the tapes, who, being a member of the community, was obliged to stay on after our departure.

Several of the Passamaquoddy children’s stories involved the dissolution or radical reordering of normal space/time relationships. There were tales of seeing or hearing the ghosts of people at the same time that they died at some other location. A woman of about 30 was said to have gone to the hospital to have a baby. She was lying awake at about 11 o’clock at night, well after visiting hours, when she saw the ghost of a man who, she later learned, was dying at about the same time in another town. Again, two teenaged girls were convinced that they had heard a woman scream at the exact moment that she was killed in an automobile accident several miles away.

A very unusual sort of premonition was reported by yet another girl. She said that her grandmother’s sister had been accustomed to meet a certain man in the woods every night. As she was looking in the mirror and fixing her hair before leaving on one particular night, something told her not to go; she went to meet him nonetheless. When she went out, however, she saw a woman coming toward her. As they drew near to each other, she saw that the woman was herself. She died a week later.

We also heard about a priest who had been at Sipayik some years earlier and, for some time, did not believe in ghosts. One night he took the confession of one of the residents, but never saw the man enter or leave the confessional — he only heard his voice. A few minutes later he was called to give the last rites to a dying man and found that it was the same man he had just confessed; he had been lying in his bed at home all the time. After this experience, we were told, the priest believed in ghosts.

This last is not merely a story about prescience or telepathy. Like the story of the woman who went out and met herself, it is a story about
someone who is in two places at the same time. This is a shaman’s feat. One must be a shaman, or have what the Passamaquoddy call motewolon, to be in two places at the same time.

The Passamaquoddy children, then, told stories involving the suspension of normal spatial and temporal constraints, stories that are consistent with the traditional accounts of Passamaquoddy shamanism recorded in the nineteenth century by Fewkes (1890), Leland (1884, 1898), and Prince (1898, 1899). This implies a worldview that can easily accommodate Bugs Bunny and Superman, but is scarcely consistent with the work ethic.

The stories attribute death and disaster to mysterious forces, not to a critical lack of information or a disinclination to develop a defensive capability. Nor do the implied causal relationships in these stories encourage listeners to commit themselves to any sustained program leading to the ultimate acquisition of deferred rewards. In these stories it is never prudent to rely on appearances or count on stability. Everyone and everything is suspect — no one can be trusted. The price of survival is constant vigilance in an insidious world. On the other hand, unimaginable benefits may suddenly devolve on those who least expect them. These stories told by Passamaquoddy children were English-language improvisations that incorporated the essential ingredients of the shamanistic lore of their ancestors. Like children of previous generations, the children at Mary Dana’s house were incipient shamans. If one or two turn out to be motewolon when they turn 50 in the first decade of the next millenium, it should come as no surprise.

The Passamaquoddy are familiar with many mythological figures endowed with a capability for prophesying death and disaster. Jesse Walter Fewkes (1890:276–7) recorded stories of the prophetic powers of sqewtomuhs told by Noel Joseph in 1890. Sqewtomuhs can probably be identified with the Micmacs’ dreaded skatekamuč, “a frightening ghost-like spirit who often signifies approaching death” (Bock 1978:116). At Sipayik in 1967, sqewtomuhs was referred to in English as “Swamp Woman”. She cries like a man, a woman, an infant, or whatever sort of person is to die, so her crying marks a particular sort of person for death. She is heard, but never seen.

In an account of the ring-and-pin game played by the Passamaquoddy in the 1880s, Mrs. Wallace W. Brown told of a tradition that the first implements for this game were made from
that peculiar fungus which grows out from the bark of trees and is known to the Indian as wa-be-la-wen or squaw-oc-t'moos-wal-dee, that is, “the swamp woman’s dishes” (Squaw-oc-[t']moos is the bete noire of the Indian legends and even now, children will not play with toad-stools, through the fear of the swamp woman). [Brown 1888:43–44]

The fungus growing on trees was not associated with sqewtomuhs in 1967 so far as I know, but it may have retained some of its magical power. There is a miniscule lichen that grows on stumps and other semi-decayed wood in sunny areas. Country people in Maine call it “British soldiers”, because in late spring and summer its tiny, upright stems have attractive, bright red tops like the red coats on miniature British soldiers. Botanists call this lichen Cladonia cristatella. One of the student volunteers brought some home and put them in a saucer of water to decorate Mary Dana’s house. We had to dispose of them, though. Our youthful Passamaquoddy visitors were alarmed and fearful, not about the severe economic, social, political, legal, and medical problems, all of which threatened Sipayik that summer, but at the sight of the British soldiers, which they said were “witch flowers”.

REFERENCES


