In "Indians in New Brunswick in Champlain’s time", published in 1904, Montague Chamberlain made some preposterous statements. He said that in Champlain’s time, i.e. in the very early 17th century, the Maliseet in the St. John valley lived in “fixed villages” with palisades, extensive cornfields, a green corn ceremony complete with the making of new fire, and ritual supplication of the sun, moon, and thunder. All these are characteristic of the southeastern United States and Mexico, but are seemingly misplaced in an Algonquian hunting society in Canada which Champlain himself described as “a people with no fixed abode... for they pass the winter... wheresoever they perceive the hunting of wild animals is the best” (Champlain 1922–36, 1:294).

Confirmation for at least some of these practices on the St. John has been provided by Harald Prins (1992), who assembled documentary evidence for palisaded villages with extensive corn, bean, and squash fields on the St. John — not in Champlain’s time, but in the 1680s. Prins uses the testimony of Villebon, Gyles, Cadillac, and others to demonstrate that Abenaki from south and west of the Penobscot River migrated in very large numbers in the late 1680s to French mission settlements and seigneuries in the St. Lawrence, St. John, St. Croix, and Penobscot valleys, where they lived together with the resident Maliseet. On the St. John and St. Croix rivers the newcomers were in time assimilated by the Maliseet, their descendants adopting the language of their Maliseet hosts. On the Penobscot River, however, the resident Maliseet were absorbed by the Abenaki refugees, their descendants in the 18th and 19th centuries speaking the Penobscot dialect of Eastern Abenaki.

Chamberlain was mistaken. The palisades and cornfields did not appear until the late 17th century and they were not the work of Maliseet alone, but of a mixed population of Maliseet and refugees from the war-torn west and south. But there is no reason to doubt that the influx of
Abenaki on the St. John in the late 17th century engendered ceremonial practices of the sort that Chamberlain described.

“One of the oldest of the semi-religious festivals”, Chamberlain said, was a thanksgiving service — the Green Corn Dance, they called it. In the olden time when the corn was ripe the Sakum directed the people to gather on the village green where a fire was built under the direction of the war chief. The Sakum began the ceremony by making an address of thanks to the Corn Spirit, coupled with an admonition to the people to give thanks in their hearts. After his address, he placed corn in a dish on the fire and while it was roasting he sang a slow, weird chant and danced around the fire. Then the corn was eaten by all present and speeches were made by any of the older men who were moved to talk. When the corn was disposed of the entire party joined in the green-corn dance, which was the most complicated of their dances... [Chamberlain 1904:285]

This description of the green corn ceremony is consistent with accounts of past and present rituals in the southeast in all respects — the giving of thanks, making of new fire, ritual cooking of the new corn, the communal feast, and a dance in which the people pass around the fire, to which they give their sacrifices. All this takes place on a “village green” — what southeastern Indians call (when speaking English) a “square ground” or “stomp ground”.

Chamberlain described another custom and set of related beliefs that have parallels in the southeast. Many of the older Maliseet in his day (1904) believed that “the Thunder Spirit is a red man turned into a god.” In ancient times, they said,

when we heard the Thunder, we built a fire out of doors and put tobacco in the fire that our brother might have a smoke as he passed by. For this kindness the Thunder Spirit kept the lightning away from us. You never hear of an Indian being killed by lightning. [Chamberlain 1904:286]

In The Swimmer manuscript, Mooney and Olbrechts (1932:23–24) write that the 19th-century North Carolina Cherokee referred to the Thunder as “Red Man”, the “friend of all Indians... Not one case can be cited, they say, of a Cherokee having been ‘struck by the Thunder’, whereas white people have frequently been killed on the reservation”. Similar statements were often made to me in the 1960s by conservative Creek and Cherokee in Oklahoma who, rather than build tornado cellars like their White neighbors, relied on the ritual use of tobacco. Charles Hudson, in The southeastern Indians, wrote that “The Indians regarded the Red Man [Thunder], as their friend. He sometimes killed white men with
lightning, but never Indians, unless of course they treated him disrespectfully” (Hudson 1976:127).

The Maliseet belief that “the Thunder Spirit is a red man turned into a god” is widespread in the southeast, but contrasts with the notion shared by many central and western Algonquian groups that thunder and lightning emanate from the Thunderbird (Michelson 1930:51–55).

Algonquian peoples in the southeast may well have used tobacco as a ritual shield against lightning at least as early as the 16th century. They grew it in both Virginia and North Carolina in the 1580s (Swanton 1946:382–3). According to Thomas Hariot, tobacco is of so precious estimation amongst them, that they think their gods are maruiously delighted therewith: Whereupon sometime they make hallowed fires & cast some of the pouder therein for a sacrifice: being in a storme vppon the waters, to pacifie their gods, they cast some vp into the aire and into the water: so a weare for fish being newly set vp, they cast some into the aire: also after an escape of danger, they cast some into the aire likewise: but all done with strange gestures, stamping, somtime dauncing, clapping of hands, holding vp of hands, & staring vp into the heauens, vuttering therewithal and chattering strange words & noises. [Hariot 1590:16]

Chamberlain has much to say about horticulture, defensive architecture, political organization, and ceremonialism, but makes no mention of folklore. Fortunately we have several English language synopses of myths told in Maliseet-Passamaquoddy in the late 19th century. Like Chamberlain’s ceremonies, they have striking parallels in the southeast. These parallels might be the result of the 1680s migration into Acadia or they might be due to earlier diffusion. The Atlantic coastal corridor had, of course, long been blanketeted with Algonquian languages.

Four versions of a Maliseet-Passamaquoddy myth featuring a homed serpent with supernatural powers were published in the late 19th century, by J. W. Fewkes (1890:266–7), Charles Leland (1884–98, 3:104–5), Albert S. Gatschet (1899:256), and John Dyneley Prince (1900:184–5).

The mythical homed serpent is known as wiwilomeq in Passamaquoddy, wiwiləyamekʷ in Penobscot, and jupijga’m in Micmac. According to Leland (1884–98, 3:326–7) it is “a worm, sometimes two or three inches long. It is seen sometimes in the water as large as a horse. Then it has horns. It is a very horrible looking little worm.”

Eckstrom said there was agreement among the Indians that the wiwilomeq is soft, slimy, has horns, and lives in water. John Soctomer told
her that it was “something like a hippopotamus, but different kind of claws. Covered with slime, poisons if it touches, has horns — can haul them in and spread them out, must be 20 to 30 feet long, like lizard, big, slimy soft outside. They find them in some of the big lakes” (Eckstorm 1945:89).

Tomah Josephs, the Passamaquoddy governor at Indian Township in the 1880s, said the wiwilomeq becomes human at times. I interpret this to mean that a wiwilomeq may act as the puwihkan, or familiar spirit, of a shaman. Josephs once saw one on a tree: the Thunder kept approaching the tree and finally struck it. It seemed to Josephs that the worm had attracted the lightning (Leland 1884–98, 3:366–7).

In the myths, Passamaquoddy shamans, motewolonuwok, master the wiwilomeq and scrape shavings from its horns. These can be used either to cure ailing patients instantly or to make evil witches age rapidly and, in a few moments, fall dead of old age (Leland 1884–98, 3:327–333; see also Fewkes 1890:270).

Four miles from the Passamaquoddy community of Sipayik (Pleasant Point) is Boyden Lake, the site of a mythical encounter between a Passamaquoddy shaman who fought, or whose puwihkan fought, the puwihkan of a Micmac shaman. The Micmac is said to have been defeated and soon after died; but his puwihkan, the wiwilomeq, lived on. In 1967, when sightings of the Loch Ness monster were aired almost daily on television, I was told by a Passamaquoddy woman at Sipayik that a wiwilomeq had recently been seen in the bay “near the island with all the trees”. It had also been seen three years earlier, she said, and by four different people.

The Passamaquoddy wiwilomeq is reminiscent of the Cherokee Uktena, identified by the Cherokee scholars Jack and Anna Gritts Kilpatrick, as a “mythical sea-dragon” (Kilpatrick 1966:187, n.23; Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick 1966:391, n.15). Charles Hudson writes that this was “the most horrible” of all the “Under World monsters” known to the southeastern Indians:

It had the scaly body of a large serpent, as big around as a tree trunk, with rings or spots of color along its entire body, but it had deer horns on its head, and it had wings like a bird. On its forehead it had a bright diamond-shaped crest that gave off blinding flashes of light. A similar monster existed in the beliefs of most southeastern Indians. [Hudson 1976:131–2]

Tomah Joseph’s notion that the wiwilomeq attracts lightning has a
parallel in a Cherokee myth about an epic struggle between Thunder, the “Red Man”, and Uktena in which a Cherokee hunter helps Thunder to prevail. Thunder rewards him with a piece of cane, the scrapings from which, steeped in water, the hunter uses to cure his ailing brother (Mooney 1900:300–1). Compare Leland’s version of the wiwilomeq myth, in which a cup of water with shavings from the wiwilomeq’s horn is used to cure the Passamaquoddy protagonist’s brother (Leland 1884–98, 3:327–330).

In view of the many features shared by Wabanaki and southeastern myths I think we may conclude that myths traveled freely along the Atlantic coastal corridor, as did square grounds, the new-fire ceremony, and the green corn dance. Tales of the compact with the Red Man and the wonders to be wrought by a few shavings in an innocuous looking cup of water were probably told on the St. John in the 1680s or even, perhaps, in Champlain’s time.

REFERENCES


Cover: Routes from Thunder Bay to the west, drawn by Ochagach for La Vérendrye in 1729.