Multiple Layers of Meaning in the Mi'kmaq Serpent Dance

TRUDY SABLE
St. Mary's University

Dance, whether formal or informal, suffused the Mi’kmaq culture of eastern Canada in prehistoric, proto-historic, and early contact times. Dances continued throughout the following centuries and into current times, although the contexts shifted to accommodate the influx of European culture and its accompanying diseases, religion and wars. Many gradually dropped into oblivion or reside in the memory of only a few. As with the legends of the Mi’kmaq, many of these dances were a storehouse, or an embodiment, of multiple layers of information and meaning encapsulated in the bodily movements and choreography of particular dances. In the dances of the Mi’kmaq extensive knowledge of the world was conveyed, one’s relationship to the world was reaffirmed, and, in essence, the world was danced into existence. The Serpent Dance discussed in this paper provides one of the most stunning examples of the multiple layers of meaning embodied in some of the dances, and the power of dance as an effective form of communication.

A few themes that have recurred throughout my research are relevant to the discussion of the Serpent Dance. These have arisen from conversations regarding the nature and structure of the Mi’kmaq language with Bernie Francis, the Mi’kmaq linguist, Dr. Margaret Johnson and Wilfred Prosper, two elders from Eskasoni, Nova Scotia, and John Hewson, a linguist from Memorial University. These themes are also evident throughout the legends, songs and dances and traditional Mi’kmaq culture in general.

First, as seen in the language, the world is experienced and expressed as fluid, in a constant flux, or as a process, not static and objectified. For instance, there are a number of words for Creator, e.g. kisu’lkw, ankweyulkw, jikeyulkw, tekweyulk, most of which are transitive verbs describing different processes of creation that do not begin or end, but are ongoing. The word adapted by the missionaries to communicate the abstract concept of ‘God’ is Niskamij, which is both a kin term and an honorific term.

Second, because of the fluid nature of reality, everything in the culture seems to accommodate and adjust to a world of shifting realities. Many of the legends are filled with shape-shifting and unpredictable beings with whom one had to interact appropriately to survive. The nature of the language, stories, songs and dances, all seem to be a way to re-create and re-evaluate reality again and again, and to re-establish one’s relationship within it continuously.

Third, everything expresses a world of relationships, or things in association or in relation with other things, not existing as separate entities. This can be seen in the language in the extension of kinship terms to things, animals and other-than-human-beings, as well as in the social organization. Similarly, the terms for colours illustrate this relational quality. Except for the four colours red, black, white and yellow (also the colours used for the four directions), all colours are associative — or “analogized”, as Francis (personal communications, 1995–96) terms it. Even these four, however, are thought to have derived from Proto-Algonquian words that associate them with blood (red), light/sunlight/dawn (yellow and white), and ash (black) (Whitehead 1982:71). Other colour terms mean ‘like the sky’ (blue), ‘like the fir trees’ (forest green), etc. Thus there is no way to describe the colour of blue and green rocks, or even a dream of blue and green rocks, without ascribing to them a connection, or relation, to the sky and fir trees. Furthermore, all colours — including black, red, yellow and white — are intransitive verbs that can be conjugated. The translation of maqtew’k (black) is ‘in the process of being black’, inferring that there is no fixed state of blackness, but rather a stage in a process that could change (Francis, personal communication, 1996).

Fourth, many levels of meaning can be compressed into one word, one utterance, one step — a whole image that might take many sentences in English to write out can be expressed in one word or one movement, similar to mnemonic marks made to convey information, or wampum belts with each bead associated with some message. As well, there may be implicit meanings that are not conveyed in the literal translation of a word but simply come from being part of the culture.

Finally, as Francis stated, the Mi’kmaw language is probably the closest anyone can come to understanding the geophysics of the Maritimes
as it existed in pre-contact times. It is a reflection of the world, its rhythms, its processes, and the Mi’kmaw did not experience themselves as separate from those processes. In fact, I use the image of a mirror, because everything mirrored everything else — the microcosm was the macrocosm and vice versa, like the concept of fractals in modern chaos theory. A person did not exist outside of that reality as an objective entity but was an active participant in the shaping of the reality through his or her conduct and ways of interacting with the various forces at play. The way the Mi’kmaw experienced their world in pre-contact culture was mirrored in both the structure and content of their language, stories, songs and dance. Looking at all of these modes of communication reveals an extraordinary awareness and reflection of the physical properties of the world and the interconnectedness, or relatedness, of all things, much as a mirror and its reflections can not be isolated from one another.

This may be an application of systems thinking in our modern day terminology. As Peter Senge et al. (1994:88) explain regarding systems thinking, “The subject—verb—object constructions of most western languages (where A causes B) makes it difficult to talk about circumstances in which A causes B while B causes A, and both continually relate with C and D.” We need special approaches to deal with such interdependence. This type of thinking is implicit in the Mi’kmaw language, and is evident in many forms of expression, including dance.

The Serpent Dance is an illustration of this. In contemporary times, this dance is often performed at powwows, mainly for children. The powwow dance is a shortened form of the version described by Stansbury Hagar in the 1890s. It is Hagar’s description (1895) that is used as the basis in this presentation.

How far back this dance goes among the Mi’kmaq is difficult to say. Possibly it originated from the Ohio Valley where the serpent mounds of the Adena tradition are found: interchange between the Ohio Valley and the Maritimes 3,000 years ago is documented (Ruth Whitehead, personal communication, 1996). One Mi’kmaw from Eskasoni was told that the Serpent Dance (or Snake Dance) was given to the Mohawk at the Great Council of 1749 (Vaughen Doucette, personal communication, 1996). In another account, the dance was performed in 1860 by Maliseet for the Prince of Wales at Government House in St. John, New Brunswick (Whitehead, personal communication, 1996). Versions of the Snake or
Serpent song and dance were documented among the Penobscot by Frank Speck, William Mechling, and Walter J. Fewkes around the turn of the 20th century. Stansbury Hagar documented the “Serpent Dance”, which he records as *choogichoo yajik* [jujijuajik, literally “they are doing the Serpent Dance” (Francis, personal communication, 1996)] as remembered by Newell Glode in 1895. Glode reported that very few members of his community remembered the dance, and that he himself had forgotten the song that accompanied the dance. Hagar interviewed both Newell and Abram Glode, the latter being 73 years old (Hagar 1895:31, 37).

The word *jujijuajik*, according to Margaret Johnson, means ‘acting like a snake’. She explained that the word *juji* refers to things that crawl on the ground, e.g. snakes, lizards and spiders. This is in keeping with Hagar who quotes Silas T. Rand, the 19th-century Baptist minister to the Mi’kmaq, as defining *juji* as a general term for ‘reptile’. Hagar also mentions that, despite this definition, several Mi’kmaq assured him it designated the rattlesnake (Hagar 1895:37). John Hewson defined *juji* as ‘serpent’ and *jujijuajik* as ‘they do the serpent’, but Francis was uncertain that this was an accurate definition. Nicholas Smith cites Jack Solaman, a Maliseet from Tobique Point, as using the word *al-la-de-gee-eh* in a singing of the “Snake Song” in 1915. This word was translated by Peter Paul as ‘moves like a snake’, though it does not actually contain the word ‘snake’ in it; rather, it literally means “it has the motion of a snake” (Smith n.d.). In the Mi’kmaw language, this would be *alatejiey*, which is translated as ‘crawling around, or the movement that the snake makes’ (Francis, personal communication, 1996). This translation seems similar to Margaret Johnson’s definition of *jujijuajik*. The actual word for ‘snake’ in Mi’kmaq is *mteskm* (Hewson, personal communication, 1996).

The dance, as documented by Hagar, was done by both men and women who formed a circle around a chanter and lead dancer. The circle of dancers moved first to the right three times around the head man. The dancers then turned their backs to the head man and repeated the revolution three times; next the two sets turned their backs to one another and again moved thrice around the circle; finally, in the same position, they reversed the direction of the motion and move backward around the circle three times. This figure was thus completed in four positions and twelve revolutions, and, according to Newell Glode, signifies the rattlesnake waking from his winter sleep. The head man now left the circle through the space made for him, simulating a serpent coming from its hole; he led the dancers around the field, making many snake-like twistings and turnings. In one hand he held a horn filled with
shot or small pebbles; with this he rattled the time for the step and the song of the other dancers. After they had advanced some distance the last dancer remained stationary and the others moved around the leader in a constantly narrowing circle until all were closely coiled around him. The head man then reversed the direction of the motion and the dancers came out of the circle in line as before. This represented the coiling and uncoiling of the rattlesnake. [Hagar 1895:37]

Hagar’s description goes on to describe the line twisting and turning around the field, coiling and uncoiling around the head man. This was done three times in order that “the rattlesnake can shed its skin” (Hagar 1895:37). Finally, the head man leads the dancers back toward the centre, with the dancers dropping away at regular intervals leaving the headman alone to end the chanting and dancing.

Hagar also reports that “the Micmacs assert that the traditional object of the dance was to obtain the poison of the serpent for medicinal use... and that at one time long ago their ancestors used to dance it so much that nearly all of them were turned to serpents” (Hagar 1895:37). In other words, the dancers invoked or became the energy or essence of the snake so much that it overpowered their own human form. This is partly what I mean by dancing things into existence, which represents the implicit or unspoken level.

Additionally, Hagar alludes to the dance being associated with the Pleiades, which, he says, is known in the Mayan culture as the “rattle asterism”; he states that “the Micmacs’ own interpretation of the dance [is] that it refers to the seasons” (Hagar 1896:38). Frank Speck notes that among the Penobscot, Newell Lion had heard that “the dance anciently represented the movements of a serpent (constellation) in the sky. But he could give no further connection with it” (Speck 1976:284). This connection of the dance with the larger cycles of the universe, e.g. the cycles of the constellations appearing in the sky, again points to the relationship between the action of individuals and universal processes, as well as the mirroring of those processes in the dance.

In a separate account written a year later, Hagar loosely implies that the dance was done in conjunction with the collecting of a medicinal plant called meteteskewey, translated as ‘the rattling plant’. According to Hagar (1896:175), “its three leaves strike each other constantly with a sound like that of the rattlesnake.” Hagar’s informants stated that the plant resembles a wild turnip:

It stands about knee high, with leaves about eight inches long, like those
of the poplar. Its root is the size of one’s fist, and the stalk is surrounded by numerous brownish yellowish balls as large as buckshot. Others describe the plant as being much smaller. [Hagar 1896:175–6]

Jerry Lonecloud, a Mi’kmaw who lived from the mid-1800s to the 1920s, calls meteteskewey the “most mighty of medicines” (Lonecloud 1923:25). John Hewson defines it as ‘heard knocking against something’, but Bernie Francis questions whether the word heard should be included in the definition and defines it as ‘the tapping thing’. According to Margaret Johnson metetesk means ‘rattling’, and the whole word connotes something that rattles. Whatever the appropriate definition, all agree that it makes a noise of some sort — rattling, knocking, or tapping.

In Hagar’s second account, he reports the appropriate ritual for collecting the plant. Again the rattlesnake is seen associated with it; as well, both a male and a female must be present at its picking.

To find the plant, one must first hear the bird called cooasoonen (“dwelling in old logs”) singing in an interval in the forest, otherwise the plant is invisible. This bird is brown and very small, but is chosen chief of all birds because he is quickest and can hide in the smallest holes. He is sometimes called booin, “the magician,” from his aptitude for quick disappearance and his ability to fly through fire without being injured. When he sings, one should follow him at once, although... he often leads one on and on through the forest depths, leaving him lost and forlorn. But the fortunate one will at last hear the rattling of leaves of the magic plant as he approaches it, and then the plant itself will soon be seen. He must now gather thirty sticks and lay them in a pile near the plant. Next he must induce a girl, the more beautiful the better, to accompany him to the plant. Under circumstances of the greatest temptation, both must have no wish save to obtain the medicine or the plant will disappear. Now the plant is inhabited by the spirit of the rattlesnake, which comes forth as they near the plant, and circles around it. The man must pick up the serpent, which will then disappear without harming him. These tests of perseverance, self-control, and courage are all I have heard, but there may be others. The plant must be divided in four portions, of which three may be taken, but one must be left standing... Some say that, divided in seven parts, this medicine will cure seven diseases, but the great majority believe that it will cure any disease and gratify any wish. It is held to be especially potent as a love-compeller. No woman can resist it... [Hagar 1896:175–6]

Hagar finally mentions that “The rattlesnake which accompanies the plant brings it at once into touch with the mysteries in all parts of the globe. The same species is associated by the Micmacs with a dance which they used to perform only at night. This dance was mystical in a marked degree and was connected with the Pleiades” (Hagar 1896:176).
The Serpent Dance may have nothing to do with the rattlesnake, as Hagar implies: there are no rattlesnakes in the Maritimes. The timber rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*) can be found in southern Ontario, and the massasauga rattlesnake (*Sistrurus catenatus*) lives in southern and western Ontario. The timber rattler and the copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*) do reach as far as southern Maine (John Gilhen, personal communication, 1996).

It is possible the dance diffused to the Maritimes from other areas, or was “given” to the Mi’kmaq by another people. Whatever its origins, there are numerous indications that the dance is in reference to the *jipijka’m* or horned serpent prevalent in Mi’kmaw legends, which in turn is connected to the collecting of medicine. Elsie Clews Parsons, the early 20th-century anthropologist among the Mi’kmaq, also surmises that the Serpent Dance, as reported by Hagar, is in reference to the *jipijka’m*, and not the rattlesnake (Parsons 1925:60).

Through careful reading of a number of legends, it appears that the *jipijka’m* is the keeper or spirit-protector of medicine. The association of serpents and medicine is documented in cultures throughout the world. The *jipijka’m* is a powerful symbol in Mi’kmaw legends. It lives and travels beneath the earth or water, and its horns, one red and one yellow, were used for personal power particularly by *puoinaq*, or what are referred to as shamans today. It can also take on human form and live as a human in the underwater world. The red and yellow horns of the *jipijka’m* are power objects, and stories about the use of *jipijka’m* horns are known all the way across northern North America and across the centuries, back to northern Asia (Whitehead, personal communication, 1996).

Margaret Johnson defined *jipij* as “like a crocodile, or a big jujij [as in jujijuajik, the name of the dance] that lives in swamps”. Isabelle Googoo Morris told Elsie Clews Parsons that *jipijka’maq* “live in big swamps rooting in trees... Every chibeshkam [jipijka’m] has a big red or yellow horn. This horn has magical application and such a horn was part of the outfit of a witch (bu’owin [puooin])” (Parsons 1925:60). Hagar describes it as “a horned dragon, sometimes no larger than a worm, sometimes larger than the largest serpent... He inhabits lakes, and is still sometimes seen” (Hagar 1896:170).

Piecing together all these references, various levels of meaning emerge that are difficult to treat individually because they are so inseparable from
one another. On the external level, the rattling of the horn, filled with pebbles, mimicked or reflected the rattling or tapping sound of the plant. The words of the chant that accompanied the dance suggested and mirrored the movement of the snake. The movement of the dance itself also mimics the movement of a snake, coiling and uncoiling, and was said to mimic the snake shedding its skin and coming out of hibernation.

The second, or inner level, has to do with the nature or essence of the medicine in embodied in the form of the jipijka’im. In legends, puoinaq (powerful and often feared shamans) often had jipijka’maq as allies, or what some people call spirit helpers. These puoinaq were extraordinarily powerful and could heal or destroy. Their energy could go both ways, like many medicines that can either poison or cure. Only the most powerful puoinaq could have the jipijka’im as their ally. The plant meteteskewey, in turn, was one of the most powerful medicines for the people, indicating a relationship between these three — the two-horned jipijka’im, the puoin, and the medicinal plant meteteskewey. To approach any one of these required knowledge, power, respect and caution. All three could overwhelm someone whose strength was inadequate.

This relationship between the puoin, medicine and the jipijka’im is further illustrated by the reference in legends to the horns of the jipijka’im as power objects. The two horns of the jipijka’im probably represent red and yellow ochre, minerals collected for paint and used as power substances. Red ochre in particular was thought to have powerful properties, and was used as a medicine (Mechling 1958:242). For instance, men would paint themselves with red ochre before going to war, and red ochre has been found in numerous burial sites. Ochre too comes from the ground, the dwelling place of the jipijka’im.

The power of the horn of the jipijka’im is illustrated in the story “The history of Usitebulajoo” (Wsitiplaju). In the story, Wsitiplaju becomes imprisoned by a horn which is rooted to his head by a group of hunters who wish to overpower him. The boy is only freed, after many failed attempts by his sister to saw through the horn, by the application of red ochre to the horn. The red ochre immediately dissolves the power of the horn (Rand 1894:53–58).

The story “A man became a Tcipitckaam” (Jipijka’im), told by John Newell of Pictou Landing, illustrates further the connection of the jipijka’im with medicine. In this story a man is taken down to the bottom of a lake by a female jipijka’im. Among the people he left above was a puoin:
Among them was a medicineman. The medicineman said, “If he sleeps with her under the same blanket, we cannot bring him back. If he does not do so, we can.” The medicineman went out, dug a trench, put water in it, and placed medicine upon this water. He climbed a tree and trimmed off the branches. Soon he saw two big dragons approaching. The dragons made a big noise. One came to the tree where the medicineman was, curled around and around it, and thrust up his head in the middle of the coil. The medicineman said to the returned brother, “All right. That is your brother.” He was now a big Tcipitckaam, and the brother could not go near him. With a wooden knife the medicineman cut off the creature’s head, and removed the entire body of the man. His wife was beside herself with joy. She jumped and danced, and shouted. The medicineman gave the man medicine which caused him to vomit. The brother said: “When I tried to converse with him, he made a noise like a Tcipitckaam — he could not speak properly.” [Wallis and Wallis 1955:345-6]

Most likely this is a description of a man who was poisoned by taking the wrong medicine. Speculating further, it may have to do with picking a female plant rather than a male, since in this case the jipijka’m is female. In so doing, he becomes unconscious, and goes to the underworld, the dwelling place of the jipijka’m. His revival is brought about by the puoin administering an antidotal medicine. Through the proper procedures, the puoin is able to call the jipijka’m to the upper world (back to consciousness), and liberate the man’s body from her clutches. Poisoning can cause comas, convulsions and delirium, and affect a person’s respiratory and circulatory system. The man’s inability to speak properly may have been due to the poison’s constricting his muscles, causing him to speak like a jipijka’m (Funk and Wagnalls 1986:95). In this, and all the references previously cited in this paper, the snake comes up from the ground, coiling and uncoiling. Both men and women were present, which may have to do with male and female medicines.

The dance and chant most likely were part of becoming, awakening, honouring, and possibly testing the energy of the jipijka’m, the essence of the medicinal plant, to see if it was going to heal and protect the people. Another description of a medicine dance by Jerry Lonecloud gives a bit more understanding of the Mi’kmaq relationship to the gathering of medicine:

Bad spirit gives you disease. Indians believed greatly in prevention. Indians make medicine and go through ceremony with the medicine to drive [?] out the evil spirit before they take it, so the evil spirit can’t leave any sting upon the body. Sick or well the medicine is taken two times a
year; spring and fall, everyone took it. Medicine was made in secret. They danced around it. Ceremony the evil spirit doesn’t like is performed and he can’t get in them. [Lonecloud 1923:129]

The exact identification of the plant meteteskewey is unknown, but Hagar’s description matches the features of the golden club (Orontium aquaticum) (Wernert 1982:480). If this identification is correct, the plant itself mirrors some of the features of the jipijka’m in both appearance and the sound it makes. The plant has a red and white stalk with a yellow spadix of closely clustered flowers at its tip that resembles a rattle. Its three leaves have a waxy covering which drips off the leaves, which may be why it is also referred to as the “tapping plant”.

Another level of meaning in the dance has to do with its being performed to mark or effect the changing or “turning over” of the seasons, which also may have been connected with particular constellations present in the sky at certain times of year. Hagar refers to the Pleiades and Speck alludes to a Serpent constellation, but it cannot be identified with certainty. As mentioned, the dance was supposedly danced to coincide with the emergence of the snake from hibernation and exuviation, the moulting of its skin. Snakes moult once a year, either in the autumn, prior to hibernation, or the first thing in spring, after they come out of hibernation. When they moult depends on the range of temperature within which the species functions (John Gilhen, personal communication, 1996). This was also a marker of seasonal change.

The concept of turning over the seasons is seen in a number of legends, and again is associated with gathering medicine. The first is “Djenu and Kitpusiagana” [Jenu and Kitpusiaqnaw] told by Peter Ginnish of Burnt Church, New Brunswick:

Kitpusiagana was another strong man, not dead, who is buried in the ground. One who goes where he is buried obtains medicine. Twelve men go every three months and turn him from one side to the other, from his face onto his back, and then onto his face again. Everything grows above him. When you pull something that is growing above him, you obtain good medicine. A limb of a tree or a bush which grows there will cure anything. [Wallis and Wallis 1954:343]

Like the Serpent Dance, there is the turning one way and then the other, and it is done four times by twelve men, possibly for the three months of each of the four seasons. This seems similar to the Serpent Dance in which the dancers first face one another, then face outwards, just as Kitpusiaqnaw
is turned from his face onto his back, and then onto his face again. In the Serpent Dance, there are also the four revolutions around the medicine man in the centre. Again we see that good medicine can be procured by properly turning Kitpusiaqnaw over at the appropriate times.

In summary, the Serpent Dance involves many layers of meaning and embodies a richness of information and profundity. First, this one dance brings together a web or system of relationships that occur simultaneously — the changing of seasons, most probably linked to the appearance or position of a constellation in the sky, connected in turn to the time of the moulting of snakes, which were indicators for the ripening and picking of medicine. On another level, the *jipijka'm* was the essence or protector of medicine, which was the spirit ally of the puoin, who was the most powerful shaman. Ultimately, the dance protected the well-being of the people themselves.

Second, the mirroring of one thing in another is evident — the microcosm reflecting the macrocosm. The dance itself mirrored the sound of the plant, the coiling and uncoiling of both the literal snake awakening from hibernation and shedding its skin, and the essence of the medicine in the form of the *jipijka'm*, and possibly the constellation in the sky and the changing or “turning over” of seasons. The plant, *meteteskewey*, may have mirrored the *jipijka'm* in its appearance and sound, if the identification of the plant is correct. Possibly, as well, the constellation in the sky mirrored the cycle of the snake on earth, like the constellation Ursa Major mirroring the hibernation, birth, and hunt of the bear as it moves through the sky in the winter and spring (see Hoffman 1954:253). Furthermore the male and female dancers were possibly a reflection of male and female *jipijka'maq*, as well as the male and female plants.

Finally, the dance illustrates the Mi’kmaw relationship to the world as being part of universal processes and cycles, of “tuning in” to the fundamental energy and rhythms and reflecting and expressing those processes and rhythms in the dance. The dance was a means to help effect the changing or turning over of seasons, and channel the energy appropriately so that the medicine would be powerful and effective, just as other aspects of nature — temperature, soil composition, weather patterns, etc. — contribute to the process. Dance was a way to reflect and come to know the world, embody and communicate its rhythms and its stories, and re-establish one’s relationship to and within a shifting reality again and again.
REFERENCES


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