Micmac Indians as Witches in the Newfoundland Tradition

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This paper is based on material from the Folklore and Language Archives at Memorial University (MUNFLA). I had access to the Archives while a student at Memorial in 1977. My initial study (Martin 1977) reviewed 90 narratives involving both Anglo-European and Micmac witches. In this paper I will focus on the narratives in which both resident and travelling Micmac Indians in Newfoundland appear as witch figures in the outports. Comparisons with the rest of the material will be made only when necessary. It is important to note at the outset that this is not a fieldwork project, but is based on the original archival material as well as published literature. Therefore, a full ethnographic context is lacking. Certainly the nature of the subject warrants field investigation as to the current status of the complex. A second point to note is that the material at hand presents Micmac witchcraft from white perspectives. It is therefore difficult to do more than hypothesize as to how the Indians perceived their own role in the witching process.

As an introduction, I will review 36 stories of Micmac witchcraft. All of the incidents took place in Newfoundland outports and were collected by Memorial students in their home communities. Most of the collections were dated in the late 1960's; however, many of the incidents seem to have occurred in the late 19th century and the early part of the present century, the stories having been told to the students by parents and grandparents. One can only guess the approximate time period for the majority of them. The stories, as told by Newfoundlanders, demonstrate the general Anglo-European witchcraft pattern with Micmac as witches inserted into a Newfoundland social and economic setting.

Six of the stories are not, in the folkloric sense, narratives, but are general statements of community belief, such as the statement that most people in the community bought baskets and wares from Micmac sellers because of fear of witchcraft. The other stories contain a statement of belief, a setting, an explanation of conflict, a curse, and a result. Some of them also contain descriptions of so-called 'cures' for witchcraft, incorporating well-known Anglo-European folk beliefs such as the use of silver bullets and pictorial representations of the witch.

In 34 of the stories, the witch is portrayed as a stranger, usually a Micmac from Nova Scotia or Conne River, Newfoundland. Eighteen of the witches are specified as men, eleven of them women. There are two instances of man and wife acting together, both witches, and in five cases no sex is given. Age does not seem to be a significant factor except in the case of women, who tend to be described as old and eccentric, much like the classic Anglo-European witch figure.
There is a clear pattern in the stories which would seem to be significant and which may be related to the high incidence of men as witches in the tales. That is, all but eight of the stories involve economic issues for the Micmac. The remaining eight stories exemplify a closely-related theme: the denial of hospitality or favors to the Micmac. Twelve stories concern Micmac basket sellers, and they relate instances of the refusal of Newfoundlanders to buy baskets - not to mention the dire consequence of such a refusal. For example, there are four versions of a story about a man named Garland who refused to buy furs from some Indian trappers, and was cursed with the loss of his vision, colour vision, and business. In another cycle, a woman loses valuable baskets when a coastal boat sinks, and when the CNR refuses to reimburse her, she causes their boats to sink.

The stories share a theme in which the Micmac are frequently forced to rely on the cooperation and generosity of Newfoundlanders in order to make a living as basket sellers, trappers, or fishermen in markets dominated by Anglo-Europeans. They are able to manipulate Anglo-European witchcraft beliefs and their own traditional witch-like roles to insure continued economic viability.

History

The first section will deal with the historical development of the situation; why did this folkloric synthesis evolve among the northeastern hunters and gatherers and not among other Algonquian groups? The answer probably lies in the nature of the white-Indian contact in the area. The Algonquian cultures shared a strong aboriginal belief in individual supernatural power, manifest in dreams, spirit quests, and visions. Some individuals were known to have more power than others, and they used it in the securing of game and in social control (Conkling 1974:16-18; Richards 1972:262; Kenton 1956:52-56; Speck 1938:184-85). There have been two general trends common to many Algonquian groups that have accompanied increased dependence on Anglo-European economic systems and aggregation in settlements. There has been an exaggeration of a traditional division between good and bad powers and between good and bad manipulations of power. Second, there has been an increase in emphasis on interpersonal witchcraft over the traditional emphasis on the use of power in the food quest (Henriksen 1975:76; Rogers 1972:71; Wallis and Wallis 1955:156; Guillemin 1975:102-4, 111-12).

The Indians on both the coast and the interior came into early contact with white traders and missionaries. However, the highly functional synthesis of Anglo-European and native supernatural beliefs seems to be unique to the Micmac and their particular economic and social relations with the white community. Algonquian tribes living in the interior to the west, for example, maintained a semi-nomadic existence until the 20th century, and many of them avoided intensive contact with whites other than occasional trading during the nomadic period. The missionaries discouraged the overt expression of native religious beliefs, which nonetheless probably survived away from the missions (Rogers 1972a:91, 95, 133; Henriksen 1973:10-13).
On the northeastern coast, however, Anglo-European fishing and trading were flourishing by 1600, and inter-marriage between French men and Indian women probably began at this time (Miller 1976:119-20; Conkling 1974:5-7). Both whites and Micmac were soon gathered around the missions; the Indian men trapped furs while women and children often stayed in the settlements year-round (Guillemin 1975:11-60). Indian men were also hired by the French as guides, hunters, and warriors. The Europeans and the Indians were living side by side early on, then, with intermarriage and economic inter­dependence occurring by the 17th century.

By the 19th century, however, the fur trade was over in the east. The Micmac were settled in Nova Scotia reserves and in the coastal community of Conne River, Newfoundland (Conkling 1974:1-24). To support themselves, the Micmac had become migrant agricultural workers, craftsmen, fishermen, trappers, and guides; many have also migrated to urban areas looking for work (Guillemin 1975; Wallis 1955:14, 277-79). One of the principal crafts, manufactured and sold door-to-door by both sexes, was the splint potato basket. The wandering basket-sellers became the stranger/witch figures of many Newfoundland outports in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The nature of the Indian-white contact was from the beginning intense and social, and involved ordinary French and English citizens who were likely to have been respectful and afraid of Indian supernaturalism, thus count­eracting missionary activity.

These early contacts are reflected in the folklore of the Micmac, folklore often being a singularly social aspect of culture. When Elsie Clews Parsons collected folklore among the Micmac of Cape Breton in 1923, reported in Parsons 1924, she collected Indian versions of European magical tales and folk beliefs. When the Wallises returned to the Nova Scotia Micmac in 1953, forty-two years after their original field­work, they collected witchcraft lore, avowedly Indian in origin, from French-Canadian women who had married Micmac men (Wallis and Wallis 1955:298). They also discerned European elements in the witchcraft complex that they had not noted before, such as the belief in the caul, the use of mountain ash as a protection against witches, and the perception of animals as the familiars of witches rather than as incarnations of the witches themselves. The curing role of the traditional 'buoin' had been reduced to the making of love charms (Wallis and Wallis 1955:299-300).

Jeanne Guillemin, who worked among urban Micmac in the 1960's, noted similar changes in the witchcraft complex. Whereas men talked of having great physical powers, women had taken control of supernatural powers as healers, storytellers, and witches. They had remained in touch with the supernatural bases and motivations surrounding illness, including both causation and curing (Guillemin 1975:97). The Newfoundland material provides some corroboration of the pattern. In four stories, the transgression was against Micmac men, but the women were actually called upon to deliver the curses.
Economic and Social Conflict

At this point it would be useful to return to a discussion of the economic conflict between the Anglo-Europeans and the Micmac in the stories. Guillemin (1975:124) notes that, "Claim to an aggressive and punitive use of special knowledge is usually reserved for tales of conflict with non-Indians." I have already noted the claim of women to special powers, but there are still 18 men said to have delivered curses in the stories. For one thing, both Indian men and women were actively engaged in the marginal economic struggle, even in the same roles, for example, as basket sellers. Second, in looking at all of the Memorial Archive witch stories combined, one sees that Newfoundlander distinguished two categories of witches - women and Micmac. At this level the sex difference becomes irrelevant in the Micmac material. The two categories of witch have much in common, at least from an economic point of view, in that both groups occupied marginal niches - usually making a living off of the generosity and cooperation of the community. Cato Wadel, in his study of the impact of welfare on a Newfoundland community, discusses the social ostracism of welfare recipients; those who are unable to make their own living are considered somehow morally deficient (Wadel 1973). Many of the Anglo-European witches in the stories were old women and widows who had no husbands to support them; therefore they had to live off the graces of relatives and neighbours (Firestone 1967:53-55). Witchcraft was one way the women in the stories could persuade these good people to continue their hospitality. They were able to do this by "cashing in" on a community distrust and fear of people who were different, who did not fit into accepted economic and social roles. The witch role itself was an assertion of a new, if delusional, reality (Lewis 1971:78). Poor and economically helpless women acted out their bitterness in anti-social behaviour, bringing forth suspicion, fear, and food for the table.

The Micmac witches apparently occupied a similar niche in Newfoundland society. Not only do they cast their spells in the stories when they are denied money, service, or cooperation, but the Anglo-European victims of the curses encounter misfortunes which are economically disastrous: fires, sickness, death of spouses and children, loss of livestock, and wrecked vessels. Denied an opportunity to be economically independent, the witches reciprocate in kind. For example, Micmac trappers cause a merchant who has refused to buy their furs to lose business. An Indian who is edged out by a white man in hunting causes the man's sheep to die. Micmac who lose their illegal game to the RCMP sink the police boats. Finally, in two stories, we find that a Newfoundlander has done a voluntary favour for an Indian - presumably out of fear - and has been rewarded with good fortune.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the stories is the frequent insertion of the narrative statement of the curse itself. Some curses are very general; for example, "You will be very sorry that you did not sell the sugar to me" (MUNFLA 68-7-156). Others are more specific: "By next year, you won't see the colour of a beaver" (MUNFLA 68-7-157). It
is entirely possible, of course, that during the process of narrative transmission, the various tellers have made up or modified the curse to fit the incident, and possibly there is a pre-existing legend template into which relevant circumstantial details can be inserted. Most of the curses state what will happen, and they give a certain time span within which the cursed misfortune can be expected to occur. Most are sufficiently vague in both these requirements to incorporate any accident or misfortune likely to have occurred anyway. In addition, if the curses did come straight from the mouths of the witches, one might assume that in small communities with a limited number of occupations and lifestyles, the witch might possess enough knowledge of the range of likely accidents and misfortunes which might befall the victim to at least pick an area of potential turmoil.

Some of the social ramifications of the witchcraft pattern in the stories have already been mentioned, for example, social ostracism of misfits and the manipulation of anti-social behaviour to perpetuate a sorcerer's reputation. Quoting Wadel (1973:78) in his study of a Newfoundland outport, "When a person begins to choose interaction partners from other categories than those specified by the informal rules, that is from kin, neighbours, and friends, then his behaviour will likely cause controversy in the moral community." Those who do not fit into these categories can be suspected, then, to be of a different moral character. Just as the witchcraft complex insured the economic survival of the Micmac, it insured the social survival of the community by relegating marginal figures like Indians, widows, and unpleasant old women to a segregate social class.

The role of the witch has also been compared to the role of the stranger in the Newfoundland outport. Not all witches were strangers, but Micmac basket-sellers were more likely to be strangers than Anglo-European witches, a position which made them more vulnerable to witchcraft accusations (Firestone 1969; Faris 1969:138-40). Some have suggested that both the stranger and the witch are scapegoats for interpersonal hostility (Firestone 1969:73-75; Faris 1969:138-40). However, in the stories involving Micmac witches, the hostility is balanced by fear. I would suggest that if any emotion was being displaced in the behaviour toward the witches, it is as likely to have been guilt as hostility, and, in fact, hostile statements toward witches could well be concealing underlying guilt. A combination of guilt, anger, and witchcraft ambiguity may lead to confusion in the bad-wisher himself as to whether or not he truly is a witch. This is illustrated by a story of a young woman who told an old man chasing her through a field to "drop dead;" he did so, and she was not sure if her curse was the cause of death (MUNFLA 73-138-15).

A reading of all the witchcraft narratives reveals a sort of moral code when one examines the kind of behaviours that a witch was likely to punish - selfishness, refusal of hospitality, rudeness, and stinginess. These are the same kinds of behaviours that were discouraged by the norms of social relations and economic cooperation and which helped
to keep the Micmac and the old women in a state of economic dependency.

In summary, the Memorial Archive stories represent a synthesis of Anglo-European witchlore and a Micmac tradition of supernatural power. The history of Indian/white relations has been characterized by early social contact and inter-marriage between the two groups, leading to a merging of the belief systems, as well as by increasing domination of resources by the Anglo-European community. The latter process resulted in the relegation of the Micmac to marginal economic positions by the late 19th century. At this time the witchcraft complex became a mode of ethnic interaction whereby the Micmac were able to encourage continued economic cooperation and support from the white communities, and the whites were able to associate the Indians with a separate social class - that of the witches and strangers.

A Final Note

The English and Irish who settled Newfoundland may have known a historical and social precedent to the role of the Micmac basket-selling witch, that of the travelling gypsies and tinkers, who have been in Great Britain for hundreds of years (Acton 1974:205). There seem to be some similarities between the two roles. Like the Micmac, the tinkers and travellers had to be flexible in ways of making a living, able to adapt to changing circumstances, and able to move into service jobs that the dominant society needed but refused to perform themselves (Acton 1974:247). Like the basket seller, the travellers moved from community to community, door to door hawking their wares, which frequently included baskets (Vesey-Fitzgerald 1944:81). Both groups were subject to unfavourable stereotypes from the Anglo-European dominant society, and both have been able to manipulate these stereotypes to maintain economic viability.

Gypsy fortune-tellers are a case in point. Though their mystical foresight was largely a synthesis of past experience and insight into human character, gypsy women knowingly played the part of sorceress to maintain an income by fortune-telling and hawking (Vesey-Fitzgerald 1944:126-127; Leland 1971:180-92; Rehfisch and Rehfisch 1975:278). Like the Micmac curses, gypsy predictions were often vague, involving long time periods and usual events (Leland 1971:181). These similarities would have to be investigated in more detail to be considered truly useful, and certainly there were important differences in ethnicity and circumstances between the Micmac in Newfoundland and the travellers in Britain.

However, this concluding quote from F. Rehfisch and Rehfisch (1975:278) concerning Scottish travelling women could well be applied to the dominant character of Micmac/white relations in the Archive narratives discussed here:

"One very interesting common belief about the travelling women is their association with the supernatural. Women encourage this belief among (outsider) women and often are able to earn money by fortune-telling, selling magical potions, etc. Not only do those beliefs yield
an income, but also help to protect the travelling women. Outsiders are afraid of interfering with them for fear that the latter will attack them through supernatural means."

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