

## Memories of Contact

### A Discussion of the Earliest Recorded Memories of Contact Among the Ojibwe and the Cree

Theresa M. Schenck

European tales of first encounters with the aboriginal people of this continent are numerous. They tell of wonderment and awe, gratitude and respect, of joyous welcoming and great generosity.

Most of us are familiar with Nicholas Perrot's account of his reception among the Potawatomi at Green Bay in the mid-17th century. He was, according to his own description, regarded as a god, carried upon their shoulders, so revered that they could not even look at him. The next year the Mascoutens farther south honored him with a pipe ceremony, blowing smoke in his face, seating him on the finest buffalo skin, and rubbing his head, back and legs with their hands, all mysterious ways of welcoming him. Similar descriptions of reverential welcome were given by Pierre Radisson, Jacques Marquette, and Louis Hennepin. All believed they were honored as gods, treated as superior beings. But how are these gestures to be understood? Were they evidence of worshipful ignorance, or genuine marks of honor intended for the visitors and for the goods they brought: the iron, flint, guns, kettles, and beads, objects the natives had already begun to acquire through trade? And to what extent are the ethnocentric interpretations given by the Europeans even to be trusted?

More than a century earlier Europeans were given a different reception. Verrazzano writes in 1524 that the natives on the coast of Maine would not allow his men to go ashore, preferring to trade their goods by means of a rope. "We found no courtesy in them," he wrote, "and when we had nothing more to exchange, and left them, the men made all the signs of scorn and shame that any brute creature would make." In an age-old gesture, they mooned them! Similarly, there is evidence that other coastal people had had unsatisfactory experiences with the traders: in 1534 when Jacques Cartier approached the Micmacs of eastern Canada, the natives took care to hide their women before they invited the strangers to approach to trade. It took longer for this resistance to be recorded here in the upper Great Lakes region, but even the Jesuit Claude Allouez had to acknowledge that the Odawa and Ojibwe who accompanied him to Lake Superior in 1665 had tried to abandon him on the way, and refused to give him any help, even forcing him to paddle the canoe like a commoner.

But what of the aboriginal people themselves? What stories do they tell? What are their memories?

Native stories of contact have been passed down orally for countless generations. Some were written as early as 1634, others only recently, or never. All reflect the culture of the narrator, and usually explain something of the cultural change effected by the encounter. In the most common narrative of contact someone, usually an important personage, sees a mysterious object approaching the shore. Is it a fish? A monster? No! A floating island with trees (masts), clouds (sails), and living creatures, often bears.

The earliest account of the sighting of a ship was in 1633 by a young Montagnais man whose grandmother had herself witnessed the event. The astonished people believed at first it was a moving island; then they saw the sails, and men on the deck. The women immediately began to

prepare to receive them, and the men went out in canoes to board the ship. There is no doubt that the natives were both curious and welcoming. The French gave them a barrel of biscuits, probably the hard tack which was the common fare of sailors. The Montagnais tried it, found it tasteless, and threw it into the water. So much for French bread!

And as for wine, the Micmacs in the early 18th century remembered being offered red wine as they visited the newcomers aboard their ship. They refused to taste it, convinced that it was blood, and that these strangers were cruel and inhuman.

Similar stories abound among coastal peoples, from the Chinook at the mouth of the Columbia River to the Algonquians of Manhattan Island. Surprisingly, even the Ho Chunk recounted such a story to Paul Radin in the early 20th century. A mysterious object, a ship, appeared on the lake near Green Bay. The people went to the water's edge with tobacco and white deerskins to greet the newcomers. The French in turn fired their guns, which were immediately seen as thunderbirds. They went ashore extending their hands in the common gesture for a handshake, but the Ho-Chunk put tobacco into them. The French, they said, had no knowledge of what to do with tobacco. To the Ho-Chunk they brought tools and guns and taught them how to use them. While it is a story which serves as a vehicle to explain culture change, the acquisition of new items of value, it also allows for the superiority of native knowledge. What we learn about the aboriginal society is not their mistaking strangers for gods or spirits, but their customs of welcoming strangers, and their wonder at the power of some of the objects they brought.

The Menominee recounted a similar story to Walter Hoffman in 1890. According to their account, at the time of contact they were living on the shores of Lake Michigan, not far from their present-day location. Looking across the water one day, they saw some large vessels approaching, and they were startled by a sudden explosion like thunder. On the ships were light skinned men with hair on their faces, and they carried shiny metal sticks. So strange were these men, their leader must be a manido, not a god, but a being beyond the ordinary. They came ashore, and the Menominee chief greeted him by rubbing tobacco on his forehead. As a mark of friendship, they all sat around and smoked. The French - for so they were - then brought from the ship containers of a liquid which they offered their hosts. The Menominee, afraid of such an unknown and strong-smelling drink, feared it might kill them, so they selected four useless old men to drink it first. What wondrous results! The silent and gloomy men became almost garrulous. After a while, they began to walk dizzily around, and finally collapsed, unconscious. Although they later arose and told their friends how good and happy it made them, they did not succeed in convincing them to try it. Thus do the Menominee explain how Europeans first gave them liquor with the intent to make them crazy. Other gifts were given by the visitors, and their use explained to the Indians: flour from which they could make biscuits, guns and kettles. The kettles, however, were too big and heavy to carry about with them, so they asked for cups instead, and waited for them to grow into kettles.

For inland people it was generally a dream or a vision which led to contact, and thus it was the native people who discovered the European. For Indians, power most often comes in a dream, and so it was natural that a dream should lead them to the European and the goods they brought. One of the earliest accounts is by the Sauk chief, Blackhawk in 1834. According to him, his great-grandfather Na-na-ma-kee was inspired by the Great Spirit with the belief that, at the end of four years, he would meet a white man who would become as a father to him. In response to the power of the vision, he blackened his face, and began to fast, eating only once a day for four years. Eventually the Great Spirit told him that the time was near, and he should start on his

journey East, accompanied by his two brothers. After five days he sent them ahead to listen. When they finally heard a noise, they were to tie grass to a pole, and point it in the direction of the sound. Na-na-ma-kee would go alone to the place of the sound. There he found a tent in which was a white man, the son of the King of France, who came out to welcome him. The remainder of the story is mixed with parts of traditional myths and offers a rationale for Blackhawk's chieftainship, by tracing it back to French royalty. The powerful stranger remained there for four days, giving gifts of clothing, beads and cooking utensils, and also spears, lances, powder and lead which he taught him how to use. He gave medals to each of the brothers, making Na-na-ma-kee head chief, and his brothers civil chiefs, and explained to them their duties (Jackson, 41-44). The practice of making chiefs by the bestowal of medals was a practice much criticized by traditional chief in the 19th century.

The Ojibwe also have a very strong tradition of discovery of the white man through a vision. One prophet described "men of strange appearance, skins white as snow, on their faces long hair. They travelled in wonderfully large canoes with wings like those of a giant bird. The man have long and sharp knives, long black tubes which they point at men and animals. The tubes make a smoke that rises into the air like the smoke from our pipes. From them come fire and terrific noise."

William Warren in 1853 tells of a Mide priest from La Pointe who dreamed that spirits in the form of white skinned men approached him smiling, heads covered, their hands extended. Determined to go in search of them, he prepared for his journey during one entire year. When he was finally ready, he left with his wife and followed the same route to the East which the Ojibwe had taken on their migration west. Coming to a widening of the river he found an abandoned hut made of logs which had been finely cut with an instrument sharper than any his people knew. He continued down the river, and came upon another dwelling which was occupied by the white spirits. They welcomed him with a handshake, and made him presents of scarlet cloth, beads, a knife and an axe which he brought back to his people at La Pointe. The next year more Ojibwe went down to Montreal carrying beaver skins, and returned with guns and firewater (Warren 118-120).

Two years later at l'Ance Peter Jones told a similar story to German ethnographer Johann Georg Kohl. His ancestor, also a medicine man, was the first to travel to Montreal to meet the newcomers. Having seen them arrive in a dream, he made preparations to go meet them. He made sweats, did penance, fasted, and, after discussing his dream with other leaders of the people, he set out for the East with a deputation of several canoes. They travelled through areas where no one yet knew of the arrival of the white man. When they reached the lower regions of the river, and found areas where the trees had been cleanly cut, like no native person could cut them, they were filled with terror and awe. Finding wood shavings, most unusual to them, they took them to be powerful evidence, and wore them in their hair and on their ears. Pieces of cloth left behind were also admired, and fastened around their heads. At length they came upon the French who appeared just as they had been described in their leader's vision, and who welcomed them with presents of cloth. When they returned to l'Ance they tore the cloth into small pieces and fastened them onto long poles, with the wood chips, to send around to all their friends, as evidence of these wondrous strangers (Kohl, 244-247).

In all cases of contact as the result of a dream, a long period of preparation is indicated, precisely because of its relationship to a dream. All mention the outstretched hand, the handshake, because it was not an aboriginal practice. And finally, the gifts. They are given by the newcomers, not by the natives, for relations of reciprocity are not yet established. The gifts,

however, serve as explanations and validation for the cultural change which ensues.

The James Bay Cree remember contact through a story which contains both the floating island and the dream. And although this story has been told orally for over 300 years, it was only written down for the first time last year, as it was told by Cree storyteller Louis Bird. It is especially interesting in that it combines certain elements from other stories, yet it profoundly reflects beliefs and practices still alive among the Cree of James Bay.

Cha-ka-pesh was a powerful shaman who lived inland with his sister, a wise woman who seems to have been his caretaker. One evening after hunting all day he decided to go way out over the water, and to travel there instantly with his shamanistic power. Suddenly he was by the shore of the big bay, enjoying the sunset, when he heard voices, he-hee, ho-hee. He was curious, but he decided it was getting late, so he should return home. This he did as he had come, in an instant. Once home, he told his sister what he had heard. She was worried that he might someday travel too far, or into a far distant time, past or future, and this could be very dangerous. That night she had a dream that explained all. Her brother had traveled into the future, and had heard the men on a ship hauling up the sails, yelling "Heave ho, Heave ho!" In the morning she made him promise not to go there again. But by the next evening his curiosity got the better of him. After hunting all day he saw a seagull, shot it down, entered its body, and again took off for the bay. Following the voice he had heard before, he saw a strange little island with a cloud over it. He landed atop the clouds, on the mast, and began to watch the sailors. One of them was eating a strange thing that looked like a mushroom. He dropped it, and the seagull swooped down to pick it up. He flew to the shore, jumped out of the seagull's body, and became - Cha-ka-pesh. Putting the object in his hunting bag, he returned home.

When his sister opened the bag and found the strange object, she broke off a piece and tasted it. Something very strange! Once again the biscuit, or hard tack, enters the story. And once again his sister becomes very angry and tells her brother how he could have been killed as a seagull. This, says the narrator, is the end of the story, and the beginning of what would be a life change on James Bay.

Stories of contact are memories that have lived through generations of aboriginal people. They explain in native terms - visions and dreams - the profound changes which would transform many aspects of their lives, often condensing what might have been decades of encounters into a single event. These stories, as we have seen, are charged with traditional beliefs and values, and hence stand in stark opposition to European tales of first encounters. And unlike those European accounts, they show us a welcoming people exhibiting yes, respect for the wonders of European technology, but also a certain scorn for their hairy bodies, their ignorance of basic human relations, their lack of respect for the spirits, their inability to cope with the environment, and their excessive love of things material.

We are all ethnocentric.

Theresa M. Schenck, Asst. Professor,  
American Indian Studies and Life Sciences Communication  
University of Wisconsin–Madison