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Gayong
1897

[FROM THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST FOR JANUARY, 1895.]

MICMAC CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS *

BY STANSBURY HAGER

My information about the customs and traditions of the Micmac Indians of Nova Scotia has been derived almost entirely from Abram and Newell Glode, the first a man of seventy-three years, the latter somewhat younger and of exceptionally pure blood for a time when none are wholly so. These two Indians have justly achieved a reputation among their tribe for intelligence and knowledge of their native lore. During the many days I have spent with them at Digby and elsewhere I have invariably found them as eager and interested in being questioned as I was in catechizing them. However, in most cases I have confirmed what they told me by information obtained from others, and I have read to them what I have written in order to avoid mistakes.

It is a misfortune to these Indians that while all their tribe have been taught to read the characters invented by one of the early priests they have been debarred from learning the much simpler Roman characters by the successors of that priest, who until quite recently forbade Micmac children to attend the public schools.

The Micmacs have a system of communicating while in the woods. Sticks are placed in the ground; a cut on one of them indicates that a message in picture-writing on a piece of birch bark is hidden near by under a stone. The direction in which the stick leans from its base upward indicates that in which the party moved, and thus serves as a convenient hint to those who follow to keep off their hunting grounds.

A game much in use within the wigwams of the Micmacs in former times is that called by some writers *altestakun* or *wöltz takün*. By good native authority it is said that the proper name for it is *wöltzstömkwön*. It is a kind of dice game of unknown antiquity, undoubtedly of pre-Columbian origin. It is played

*The author's thanks are due to Major W. S. Beebe for valuable assistance in the preparation of this paper.

upon a circular wooden dish, properly rock maple, almost exactly a foot in diameter, hollowed to a depth of about three-fourths of an inch at its center. This dish plays an important rôle in the older legends of the Micmacs. Filled with water and left over night, its appearance next morning serves to reveal hidden knowledge of past, present, and future. It is also said to have been used as a vessel upon an arkite trip. The dice of caribou bone are six in number, having flat faces and rounded sides. One face is plain, the other bears a dotted cross. When all the marked or all the unmarked faces are turned up there is a count of five points; if five marked faces and one unmarked face or five unmarked faces and one marked face are turned up one point results; if a die falls off the dish there is no count.

There are fifty-five counting sticks—fifty-one plain rounded ones about seven and a half inches long, a king pin shaped like the forward half of an arrow, and three notched sticks, each presenting half of the rear end of an arrow. These last four are about eight inches long. Three of the plain sticks form a count of one point; the notched sticks have a value of five points, while the king pin varies in value, being used as a fifty-second plain stick, except when it stands alone in the general pile. Then it has, like the notched sticks, a value of five points. Thus the possible points of the count are seventeen (one-third of fifty-one) on the plain sticks and fifteen (five times three) on the three notched sticks, a total of thirty-two; but by a complex system the count may be extended indefinitely.

In playing the game two players sit opposite each other, their legs crossed in a characteristic manner, and the dish or *woltes* between them usually placed on a thick piece of leather or cloth. A squaw keeps the score on the counting sticks, which at first lie together. The six dice are placed on a dish with their marked faces down; one of the players takes the dish in both hands, raises it an inch or two from the ground, and brings it down again with considerable force, thus turning the dice. If all or all but one of the upturned faces are marked or unmarked, he repeats the toss and continues to do so as long as one of these combinations results. When he fails to score, the amount of his winnings is withdrawn from the general pile and forms the nucleus of his private pile. His opponent repeats the dice-throwing until he also fails to score. Two successive throws of

either a single point or of five points count thrice the amount of one throw—that is, three points or fifteen points respectively. Three successive throws count five times as much as a single throw, etc. After the pile of counting sticks has been exhausted a new feature is introduced in the count. The player who scores first takes a single plain stick from his pile and places it by itself, with one of its sides facing him to represent one point, and perpendicular to this, either horizontally or vertically, to represent five points. He continues to add sticks thus as he continues to score. This use of the sticks as counters to indicate unpaid winnings is a device for deferring further settlement until the game seems near its end, and also serves to increase the count indefinitely to meet the indefinite duration of the game, as after one player secures a token his opponent when he scores merely reduces the former's token pile by the value of his score. The reduction is effected by returning from the token pile to the private pile the amount of the opponent's score; hence at any time the token pile represents the amount of advantage which its owner has obtained since the last settlement. These settlements are made whenever either party may desire it; this, however, is supposed to be whenever one player's token pile seems to represent a value approaching the limit of his opponent's ability to pay. If his opponent should permit the settlement to be deferred until he were no longer able to pay his debts, then he would lose the game to the first player; whereas if one player after the settlement retains five plain sticks, but not more, a new feature is introduced which favors him. If while retaining his five sticks he can score five points before his opponent scores at all, he wins the game in spite of the much greater amount of his opponent's winnings up to that point. If his opponent scores one point only before he obtains his five points he still has a chance, though a less promising one. After paying over the three plain sticks that represent a single point, two plain sticks still remain to him; he is then compelled to win seven points before his opponent wins one, or he forfeits the game; but if he succeeds in winning his seven points the game is still his. However, in these last chances he is further handicapped by the rule that he can at no time score more points than are represented in his private pile; consequently, if with only five plain sticks in his possession he could score only a single point, even if his toss

should call for five; but with six plain sticks he could score two points; with nine sticks, three, etc. The last chances are: With only five plain sticks, five points are necessary to win; with four plain sticks, five points are necessary to win; with three sticks, six points; with two sticks, seven points; with one stick, seven points.

There are two other minor rules: one, that in counting five points on the plain sticks four bundles of four each are given instead of the five bundles of three each, as one should expect; total, sixteen. The other rule is that to count six points we use a notched stick plus only two plain sticks, instead of three, as might be expected.

It will be seen that the complex counting system of this game presents marked inconsistencies. Ingenuity of a high grade exists side by side with features which can only be regarded as extremely clumsy when viewed from the standpoint of simple utility. Granting the necessity for using three plain sticks to mark a count of a single point, the method by which the results are simplified is admirable; but what is the necessity for using three sticks instead of one to represent a point? The apparently needless confusion which results directly from this feature will be patent to any one who attempts to explain the game in his own language. Why did the inventive genius of the race simplify the results of a clumsy start instead of simplifying the start itself? Does it not seem that it would have done so unless there had been some motive other than that of utility for the retention of this feature? Through almost all the customs, dances, and legends of the Micmac, as through those of all peoples not affected by our literal modern civilization, there runs a vein of mystic or allegoric motive, and here must we look for the explanation of the woltes or dish. When we examine the numerical combinations of the game the preponderance of odd numbers is noticeable. We are dealing with 1, 3, 5, 7, 15, 17, 51, and 55, and most of these numbers occur in several distinct relations. The only even numbers that we encounter are 52, 32, and 6, the first two occurring but once and the last twice, though in an insignificant position. This agrees well with the observations of Dr. Rand and Mr. Leland of the remarkable respect in which the number 7 is held by the Micmacs. It would thus seem that they are believers in the luck of odd numbers. Is it chance, moreover, that two of the even

numbers (52 and 32) and one of the most prominent of the odd (17) are intimately associated with time relations among the Indians of Central America? The number 52 among the Maya is the *chau katun* or great cycle of years, and is divided into two smaller cycles of 20 and 32.

If we turn to the materials of the game we obtain further suggestions. The circle about the perimeter of the dish and the cross on the dice and on the king pin provide two figures which throughout America are connected with the calendar. Moreover, it can scarcely be chance that if we put together the straight sides of two notched sticks and attach the king pin at one end of them we obtain the unmistakable representation of an arrow.

The arrow whose point is single and whose rear end is bifurcate is to be found in many mystic associations in America. For example, it occurs in the hands of two of the converging rows of figures on the so-called Great Gateway of Tiahuanacu, Bolivia, and also in the left hand of the central figure on the same monument. We meet with it again figured on a bowl which Squier brought from Nicaragua, where the three arrow-points alternate with three feathered tips, thus giving the alternate stellar interlacing, which is one of the most conspicuous ornaments on the façade of Uxmal. In this connection we may consider the magic arrows of Glooscap, the Micmac demigod, which arrows, to use the words of Mr. Leland, "are, of course, world-wide and date from the shafts of Abaris and those used among the ancient Jews for divination."* Again, this feature suggests the Navajo story of the Apache who came from a hole in the ground and dived with some Navajo opponents until he had won everything that the latter possessed. They were so angry over this that they tied the Apache to an arrow and shot him off into space; but he lived to have revenge, for he brought the whites in three bands and utterly exterminated the Navajo.†

The only other Micmac game of which I have learned anything is *tooālijik* or football. The goals were of two sticks placed slantingly across each other like the poles of the traditional wigwam. About a score of players, divided into two parties, faced each other at equal distances from the center of the field. The ball was then rolled in by the umpire, and the object of the

* Algonquian Legends, p. 23.

† Bancroft: Native Races, iii, p. 83.

game was to kick it between the goal posts. In more recent times a player may catch his opponent by the neck and thus hold him back until he can obtain the ball himself, but scalping was anciently employed as a means of disposing of an opponent.

The *choogichoo yajik*, or serpent dance, is well worthy of attention. Newell Glode assured me that very few of his tribe knew anything about it now, and not even he remembered the song of the dance, for he had not heard it since his childhood. It appears to have been suppressed by missionaries.

In performing the serpent dance the male and female participants, in no fixed number, formed a circle, at the center of which stood the head man, who did the singing. 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.

Again, the line twisted and turned around the field until at length the head man remained stationary and the last dancer led the line around him as a center, coiling and uncoiling as in the preceding figure. Then the head man resumed the leadership, there were more twistings and turnings, and a third time the line coiled and uncoiled again around the last dancer. Three times, they say, the rattlesnake must coil before it can shed its

skin; therefore, after the line came forth from its third coil the head man led it back toward the point whence it started, and as soon as he moved in that direction the dancers dropped out of line one after another at regular intervals, beginning with the last dancer, until the head man only remained; then the music ceased and the dance was ended.

The authorities seem to be agreed that there are no rattlesnakes in eastern Maine, the Maritime provinces, or any part of eastern Canada, nor is there any evidence that there ever have been any in those localities.* It seems a fair inference, therefore, judging from this dance, that one of the most important features of Micmac ritual has come into Nova Scotia from the southwest. The word *choogich* is indeed but a general name for reptile, according to Dr. Rand, but several Micmacs have assured me that it designates the rattlesnake. 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. The symbolism of the dance evidently coincides with the time of exuviation. In modern times I cannot find that the performance of the *choogichoo yajik* has been limited to any particular time of the year, further than that it was never danced in the winter; but this might have been due to other than ritualistic causes. It is, however, considered a proper feature at the election of a chief, and the connection of its symbolism with ritual and time relations of some sort is self-evident. In Maya the Pleiades are called *tzabec* or rattle asterism, and altars in the form of the rattle are numerous in Yucatan, as Major Beebe has pointed out to me in the illustrations of Charnay's *Ancient Cities*, pages 140, 149. The scorpion is also connected with the same stars in Maya mythology, and when we hear of the gathering of the poison for medicinal use we may recall the Italian cure for the bite of a tarantula or scorpion by the use of its bane (*similia similibus curantur*). In Peru, Yucatan, Mexico, and in almost all parts of the world this group of stars was preëminent

* Whatever may be the opinion of naturalists in this matter, it is a fact worthy of note that the Indian women of the Hudson bay region, particularly the Cree, formerly drank water in which the rattle of a rattlesnake had been boiled to relieve pain during parturition. See Harmon's *Voyages and Travels* (1800): Lond., 1820, p. 345. — F. W. H.

as time-markers, especially in the first-named countries, in connection with the period of fifty-two years, when its celestial position was carefully noted. Again, the special and ultimate connection of the seven stars with ritual dances in widely distant localities has been noted in the masterly researches of R. G. Haliburton, who says, in his "Traditions of Mount Atlas," "The very words of the song of the Pleiades, who are known in the New World as well as the Old as 'The Dancers,' the 'Celestial Chorus' of the Greeks, the 'Heavenly Host' of the Hebrews, and the 'Seven Dancers' of the North American Indians, are familiar to ears that can catch 'the music of the spheres,' and have been repeated to me by one of those favored mortals, a Susi wanderer from the Sahara.

Oh, Moon, oh, Mother, we hold our feast tonight;
We are dancing before God between heaven and earth.

Words that recall Milton's allusion to those 'morning stars that sang together with joy' at the creation.

And the Pleiades before him danced,
Shedding sweet influence."

As to the Micmac tradition of the transformation of the dancers into serpents. Squier states that the serpent was prominent in nearly all the mysteries of the so-called Old World, and that in America the rattlesnake was typical of the most arcane ideas. Is it not possible, therefore, that this tradition, literally rendered, would read that in former times this Micmac dance formed an initiation into their esoteric ritual? for we know at least that nearly all if not all the Indian tribes have possessed some such ritual. "Why I am a Serpent" is the title of a work by a native Maya, and in the Maya language *ah ak chapat* signifies both serpent and wisdom. Again, we see by the Micmacs' own interpretation of the dance that it refers to the seasons, and this is not surprising, for, alike in Persia, India, Egypt, and Mexico, exuviation was the peculiar symbol of the year. It seems, then, that the existence of this dance among the Micmacs should be considered evidence that they once possessed a ritual having noticeable points in common with that of Indian peoples farther south.

One of the folk-tales told me by Abram Glode was that of the water fairies. Far within a thick dark forest there dwelt a family

in which were two sons. The younger of these when traveling one day along the shore of a lake saw a group of beautiful young women playing ball. He was so pleased with their appearance that he decided to go nearer and watch them. When he approached he found that the girls were dressed in the costumes of the olden time [which, I suspect, means that of nature]. At length one of them perceived him and cried out "*Hucydabay!*" "Look out!" None of the girls had ever seen a man before, and, being alarmed by his appearance, all of them dived into the water and vanished. The young man was much disappointed, for they were so pretty that he wished to capture one of them. Thinking they might return, he made himself small by magic and hid near the spot in a peculiar leaf, which has a kind of cover over its top [probably the jack-in-the-pulpit or the pitcher plant]. This leaf he had previously broken off its stem and placed upon a rock. Presently, as he had hoped, the girls reappeared from the water and renewed the ball game not far from the spot where our hero lay hidden but too far off for him to reach them. When he saw that the girls came no nearer he jumped up and down in the leaf, shaking it nearer to them, but when he had nearly succeeded in reaching them one of their number again espied him and cried out as before. Again the fairies plunged into the water and disappeared, leaving the young man more disconsolate than ever, yet more determined to win one of them for his bride. He looked about for some new place in which to hide, and espying a bunch of rushes growing near the water, he broke one off and found within it a little hollow, in which he hid. A third time the water fairies appeared and set about their game, coming very near the rushes in which our hero lay, but a third time something alarmed one of them, and, with the usual cry, they all fled to the water; but this time, however, our hero managed to capture one of them before she could disappear. She begged him to let her go, pleading that she was married, and promising that if he would release her she would bring her younger sister to him on the following day. So he did as she wished, and the next day she returned with her beautiful young sister, who willingly followed him to his wigwam.

The next spring his wife said that she wished to see her father and mother again. The young man consented, and decided to

accompany her; so she led the way to the ocean, carrying her child in a case on her back. Arrived at the shore, she continued straight on into the water, where her husband was at first afraid to follow her. At length, however, she managed to overcome his fears, and he went with her, even under the surface of the water. Things soon began to appear to him much as in the upper world. After a journey they came to a large village in the midst of a hard-wood country of wondrous beauty. "My father is chief here," said the wife, and she led her husband and child to his wigwam, where they were hospitably received. All kinds of fish dwelt in the village, and the chief and his wife were themselves fish below the waist. The chief was the ruler of all the fish. Our hero and his wife passed some time very pleasantly with the parents of the latter, but at last he wished to return to earth. He and his wife had not gone far, however, when they were pursued by an enormous shark, and after a wearisome flight the wife's strength began to fail her. Then she took off her case in which she carried her child and fastened it upon her husband's back, so that it might be saved. "Do not wait for me," she said, "but flee yonder," pointing to the sun, "and you will reach the shore at the point where we left it. If I am saved I will follow you." Our hero did as she directed, and when he reached the shore sat there and waited for a long and weary time, but his wife never appeared again. At last he knew she must have been slain by the shark, and so he went sorrowfully home.

Curious enough is the commentary which my Micmac host attached to this tale. "When Moses led the children of Israel through the Red Sea one woman was drowned, and she became a fish from her waist downward. I think she was the same woman who was lost in this tale." The Micmacs frequently connect some feature of their legends with a biblical episode which to our eyes bears little resemblance to the point in question.

The student of Indian mythology will recognize that this tale of the Water Fairies is but a variant of the Chippewa legend of the "Magic Circle in the Prairie." Nevertheless that legend presents some curious contrasts when compared with the Micmac version. In the former the home of the bride is in the upper world of the stars instead of in the under world of the sea, and birds take the place of fishes, but the dancing girls are present with their game of ball, and the youngest of them is captured by the hidden hero, etc.

Another legend is of the *culloo*, the most terrible of creatures. So large was this winged monster that it could dispose of any animal at a single swallow. It had a huge nest on a very high cliff, which no man could possibly scale. Thither it would bring moose and caribou with which to feed its young. One day the monster captured a man who was hunting moose and carried him to its nest. It was the custom of the *culloo* when it reached home to beat its victims to death on the rocks, so it proceeded to dispose of the hunter in this manner. But the hunter had kept hold of his bow and arrow, and when the monster attempted to destroy him he saved himself by keeping his weapon underneath him, so that the pressure upon him simply bent the bow. For some reason the *culloo* failed to discover this, and after pounding the hunter against the rock till weary, found to its great amazement that he was still uninjured; so it departed in search of other food, leaving the man in the nest. Soon the hunter began to cut up pieces of meat with his knife and to feed them to the two young *culloos* in the nest. These were so pleased with this novel method of serving food that on the return of their parent they interceded for the hunter's life. The request was granted, and the hunter resided with the *culloo* family until the members thereof became quite attached to him. Once there arose a terrible storm, and then the younger *culloos* crawled under their parent's wings like chickens under a hen. The hunter went to the same refuge, and the *culloo* brooded over them all till the storm was over. But the man longed to return to his home, so in devising a means of escape it occurred to him to kill one of the young *culloos*, skin it, and try to use its wings for his own benefit. At once he put the project into execution, but just as he was adjusting his borrowed plumage the parent *culloo* returned. The hunter, nothing daunted, quickly managed to adjust his wings in a sort of half-way fashion, and then jumped off the cliff. The *culloo* saw at once what had occurred and angrily pursued the winged man; but the man fell uninjured upon the tree tops, and scrambled to the ground only an instant before the *culloo* descended on the same tree. Owing to its immense size, the *culloo* could not penetrate below the tops of the trees, and so our hero was saved. The defeated monster then returned to its nest, in which there was now only one young bird. That one will not be big enough to fly until the last day.

It is easy to see some analogy between this legend and the Illini myth of the Piasa. Newell Glode related it to me immediately after I had told him about the Piasa, and himself commented on the resemblance.

These last two traditions were selected at random from a collection of thirty or more obtained by me this summer. It is a good indication of the extent of Micmac legendary lore that of the many tales related to me all but one or two are new to us, in spite of the years of research of such able investigators in the field of Micmac folklore as the late Rev. Dr. Rand, Mr. Leland, and others. The knowledge of these myths is rapidly disappearing; but few Micmacs now know anything about them, but with those few the most insignificant peculiarities in animate and inanimate nature often suffice to call to mind some new old story.

