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**“TA’N TELI-KTLAMSĪTASIMK (WAYS OF BELIEVING)”:**

**MI’KMAW RELIGION IN ESKASONI, NOVA SCOTIA**

By

Mary Angela Robinson, B. A., M.A., M.Phil.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2002)  
(Religious Studies)

McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario

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NUMBER OF PAGES xi, 276

## ABSTRACT

The residents of Eskasoni make up the largest Mi'kmaw community in eastern Canada, the majority of whom claim Roman Catholicism as a primary religious affiliation. However, to describe the Mi'kmaq of Eskasoni as Roman Catholics belies the diversity and complexity of religious belief and expression practiced in the community. This ethnography contributes to the growing body of literature that includes Native views on the role of religion in Aboriginal societies. Drawing upon fieldwork conducted in a number of Mi'kmaw communities in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, this ethnography is concerned with three specific aspects of Mi'kmaw Catholicism. First, I elucidate the reciprocal nature of the exchange between Roman Catholicism and "traditional" Mi'kmaw beliefs and values, and the multiplicity of religious orientations that emerge from this exchange. Second, I address claims to authenticity by neo-Traditionalists, Mi'kmaw Catholics and Catholic-Traditionalists, paying particular attention to the various cultural markers, especially religious or spiritual motifs, beliefs and values that individuals may either invoke or subvert in the process of constructing positive Mi'kmaw personal and social identities. Third, I look at the role that religion and spirituality plays in the day-to-day lives of the Mi'kmaw people. Taken together, these three aspects of religion and spirituality highlight the distinctive local quality and significance of Roman Catholicism among the Mi'kmaq.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is based on fieldwork conducted between July 1997 and September 2001. From this projects inception up to its conclusion I have sought and received advice, guidance and support from many individuals. To the following I am particularly grateful: Ellen Badone, my supervisor, mentor and friend who painstakingly supervised all stages of this work. Ellen is truly an inspiration for those of us who are fortunate enough to work with her. I would also like to thank Dr. Trudy Nicks and Dr. Travis Kroeker whose advice and assistance proved invaluable. I am also grateful to Dr. Margaret Johnson, Dr. Bern Francis, Helen Sylliboy, the extended members of the Sylliboy family, Marjorie Gould, Roddie and Caroline Gould, Wilfred and Bessie Prosper, Sylvia Denny, the late Eugene "Eagle" Denny and my numerous Mi'kmaw "relatives" and friends. All of whom welcomed me into their hearts and homes, and who most generously shared thoughts, ideas and conversations with me. Of course, I am eternally indebted to my family who have sustained and nurtured me in ways too numerous to mention.

This dissertation is dedicated to the Mi'kmaw people for whom I have the utmost respect and admiration and who have bestowed me with many riches.

*Welali'oq*

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## Glossary of Mi'kmaw Terms and Expressions\*

alasukmuo'kuomk	At the church, or literally "at the praying wigwam."
<i>alatsutmaykapo</i>	Commonly translated as "It's a sacred time." Used historically to announce a death in the community.
ki'ju	A common term for grandmother.
Kji-keptin	Literally translates as Grand Captain.
Kji-saqamaw	Literally translates as Grand Chief. Sometimes appears as Kji saqmaw.
Kniskamijinaq wskitqamumuow	Meaning 'our ancestors world' and <i>kniskamijinaq eimu'ti'tij</i> , which is less specific, meaning 'where our ancestors are'. For instance, <i>naji-tkweiwatka kniskamijinqa</i> , would be akin to 'gone to another plane of existence'" (personal communication).
Lapa'tko'tewimk	Mi'kmaw reference to the annual Grand Council meeting at Potlotek on Pentecost Sunday. The term is derived from the French le Pentecôte.
L'nu	According to oral tradition this term is the proper referent for the Mi'kmaw people. Many Mi'kmaw people claim that the first Europeans mistook the term No'kmaq, meaning "all my relations," to be the actual name of the group.
L'nu'ktat	Translated means "s/he is wearing Mi'kmaw attire."

\*The Smith-Francis orthographic system is employed throughout this dissertation except in instances where direct quotes are used.

luskinikin	A local type soda bread usually served with butter and molasses.
metua'lik	Loosely translates as, "I'm not doing very well," or "I'm having a difficult time."
Mi'kma'ki	Refers to Mi'knaw territory which includes lands within the Atlantic provinces of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and parts of Gaspé, Québec.
Mi'kmaq	This term is believed to be derived from No'kmaq, meaning "all my relations," but was taken by Europeans to be the name for the group. Mi'knaw is the singular form of Mi'kmaq. The Mi'kmaq maintain that prior to contact, they referred to themselves as "L'nu" (see reference above).
Mi'knaw Mawio'mi	Literally the "Mi'knaw gathering," refers to the annual powwows held at Eskasoni.
mijipoti	Refers to medicine bag. Also wijipoti his/her medicine bag; nijipoti, my medicine bag; and kijipoti, your medicine bag.
mjijaqmij	Translates as spirit (no declension). Also, jijaqmij, my spirit; kjijaqmij, your spirit; and wjijaqmij, his/her spirit.
negm	Refers to the third person singular (s/he).
nemu'ltes	Literally translates as "I'll see you." Nemu'ltes is said to a person who is departing for either an interim period, or the final destination of the next world.
nept	Literally means "dormancy," "sleep," or a state inconsistent with a personal awareness of this world. Usually translated into English as "death."

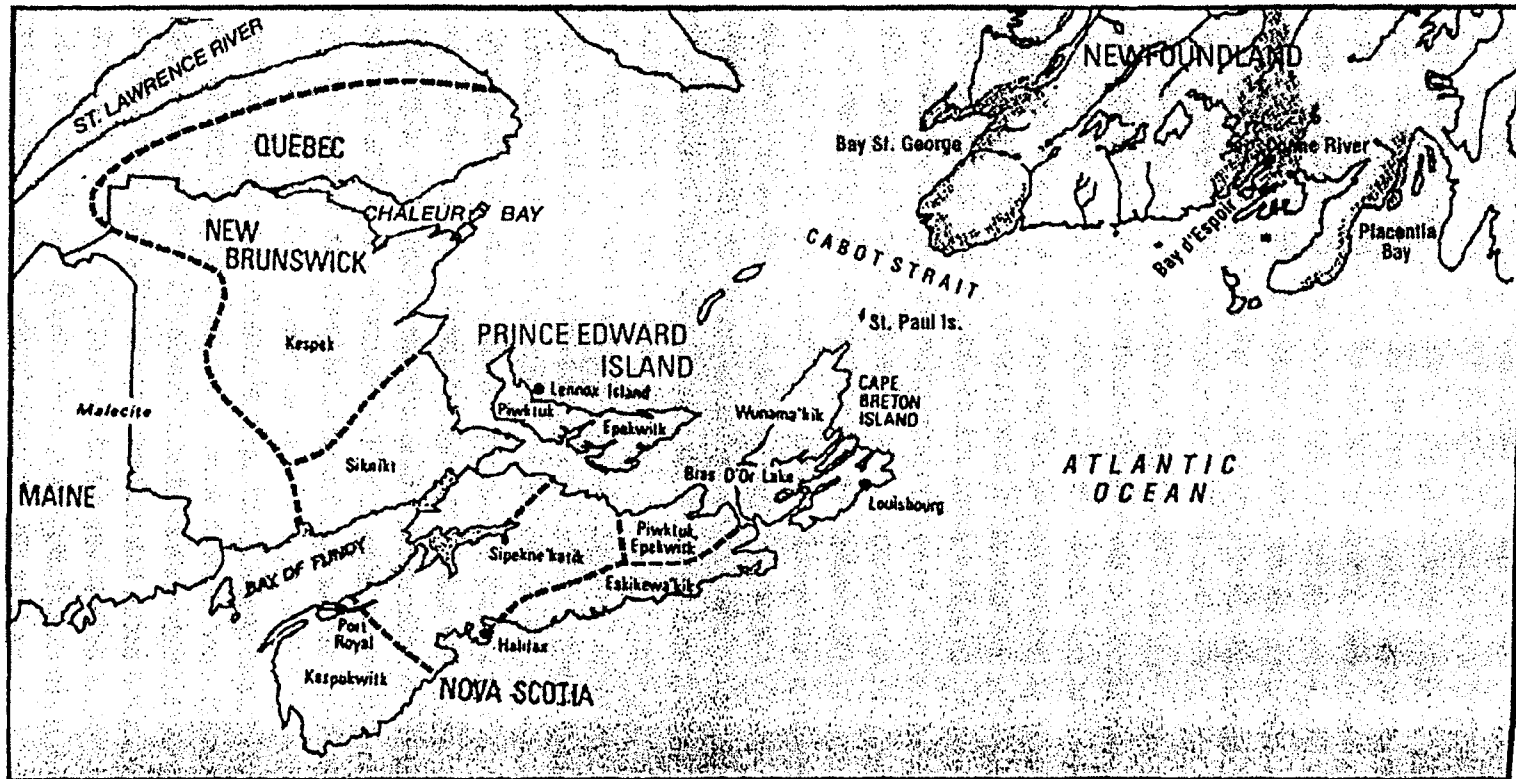
ntio'mel	Frederick Johnson translates this term as “spiritual agents” (Johnson 1943: 66). However, I have been unable to find present usage of the term.
nujialasutma'jik	Literally meaning “those who pray,” this term applies to prayer leaders assigned by the <i>Sante' Mawio 'mi</i> .
<i>Nujjinen</i>	Mi'kmaw term for the “Our Father.”
Pako'si	A traditional root taken from the “cow lily” plant, usually prepared as an infusion to be taken orally (Assembly of First Nations 1990: 61).
pa'tlia's	The Mi'kmaw term for a Catholic priest.
puo'in	Currently, this term is generally taken to mean evil spirit or devil. Frank Johnson (1943: 66) refers to <i>buo'in</i> [sic] simply as a spirit, which, according to oral tradition, is closer to the original meaning of the term.
Sante' Mawio'mi	Sometimes written as <i>Santeoi Mawio 'mi</i> , refers to both the Grand Council and the annual “sacred gatherings” of the Grand Council held on Pentecost Sunday and <i>Se'tta'newimk</i> at Chapel Island.
sagamore/saqmaw	Both these terms translate as chief.
Se'tta'newimk	Literally, “at St. Anne's Mission.”
ta'n ninen telo'tiek	Translated, this expression means “the way we [the Mi'kmaq] are.”
tu's	Literally means “daughter,” but is often used as a term of endearment.
Unama'ki	General Mi'kmaw term used to refer to Cape Breton island. It is often translated as “land of the fog,” but some Mi'kmaq dispute this interpretation.

wasoq	The five-pointed star shape appearing on the Grand Council flag. This star in Mi'kmaq hieroglyphics represents heaven.
wela'lin	Literally, "you do me well." Commonly used as an English equivalent of thank-you. Wela'lioq (pl.)
wkutputim	The carrier used in the St. Anne's Day procession to carry the statue of St. Anne.

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Site Map: Mi'kmaki (Mi'kmaw Territory):



This map includes provincial territories and Mi'kmaw political units (Morrison and Wilson 1986: 350). The territory labelled Wunama'kik (a variant spelling of Unama'ki) refers to the region of Cape Breton Island.



## Chapter One

### Introduction

*Throughout the world, indigenous peoples have had to reckon with the forces of “progress” and “national” unification. Many traditions, languages, cosmologies, and values are lost, some literally murdered, but much has simultaneously been invented and received in complex, oppositional contexts. If the victims of progress and empire are weak, they are seldom passive. It used to be assumed that conversion to Christianity...would lead to the extinction of indigenous culture rather than to their transformation. Something more ambiguous and historically complex has occurred.*

James Clifford (1988:16)

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On a warm day in late July 1999, a group of six or seven hundred people gathered at Holy Family church in Eskasoni, Nova Scotia. The crowd is unusual for this time of year for by mid-July the Mi'kmaq<sup>1</sup> of this predominantly Roman Catholic Native community have already moved to Chapel Island (Potlotek)<sup>2</sup> for the annual St. Anne's Mission (*Se'tta'newimk*). On this particular

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<sup>1</sup>Refer to Glossary of Mi'kmaw Terms and Expressions, p. vii.

<sup>2</sup>The island of Potlotek (Chapel Island) shares its name with a neighbouring Mi'kmaw community. For reasons of clarity, the Mi'kmaw term Potlotek is used throughout this thesis to refer to the island which hosts the annual St. Anne's Mission (*Se'tta'newimk*), and Chapel Island is used to refer to the nearby Mi'kmaw community. The island of Potlotek, located on the Bras d'or Lakes, has been the site of the annual St. Anne's Mission at least since the middle of the eighteenth century. The Mission was established at Potlotek by Fr. Maillard who is considered to have been one of the most influential missionaries to have worked among the Mi'kmaq. The island of Potlotek remains uninhabited throughout the year except during the Mission and on Pentecost Sunday. St. Anne's Mission is also referred to as *Se'tta'newimk* and “the Mission” among the Mi'kmaq. All three referents are used interchangeably throughout

occasion, people had either stayed in or returned to the community to attend the funerals of two of its residents who had tragically drowned. Mali,<sup>3</sup> a friend of mine, who is a family member of one of the victims, invited me to attend the funeral mass, and the feast and *salite* (auction) immediately following internment of the deceased. The *salite* is a “local” funerary ritual which cannot be accommodated under the rubric of mainstream Roman Catholic practice. However, it is also a ritualistic expression of specific beliefs and values which helps to illuminate various features of Mi’kmaw religion, culture and tradition.

I watched as a man strode between the dining tables in the church hall holding a set of books high over his head, "Any offers?" he asked. No offers came, so he set the bidding at forty dollars. In a very short time the price was well over a hundred dollars. Mali, seated next to me, became more and more agitated as the bids rose. "They're my father's books" she said with tears welling up in her eyes. "I offered them for the *salite* because I knew they would get a good price, but, Angela I can't afford to buy them back. I'm broke." I felt totally at a loss, for as much as I wanted to help I could not afford to match the bids being offered. Mali's sister approached the table and was told that the books being auctioned belonged to the family. Mali was even more upset than before and said with resignation, "Father's books are gone now and I can't do anything about it." Her sister left immediately and soon bids started coming from other family members, but they could

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this thesis.

<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise noted, the actual names of respondents will not be used in this dissertation for reasons of privacy. The name Mali is the Mi’kmaw equivalent of Mary.

not compete with those of the other interested parties.

The parcel up for auction was a set of Mi'kmaw prayer books, some written in the Mi'kmaw language and some written in Mi'kmaw hieroglyphics. The editions offered for sale are old and difficult to obtain; most are out of print. Among the Mi'kmaq, books such as these are highly prized items, not simply because of their rarity but because they also have social and personal significance. As well as being historical artifacts, such books are usually family heirlooms which are often passed on to a relative when the owner dies. Mali had obtained the prayer books in this manner upon the death of her father.

As the bids steadily rose Mali became more and more upset, and by the time the final bid was submitted and accepted, she was devastated, in tears with her face buried in her hands. It was heart-wrenching to watch. As I was trying to comfort Mali I noticed that the lady who had purchased the books was approaching our table. She came up to where we sat and placed the books in front of Mali astonishing her and said, "Now let this be a lesson, don't you ever do that again." "*O'wela'lin, wela'lin t'us*" (Oh, thank-you, thank-you daughter)<sup>4</sup> said Mali, hugging the woman while trying to restrain her tears. This gesture was one of the most moving I have ever witnessed. In the space of twenty minutes I watched Mali's anguish as she saw an heirloom slip out of her hands with the prospect of being lost to her family forever, contrasted with her

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<sup>4</sup>Here daughter (*t'us*) is meant as a term of endearment and should not be taken literally. It should also be noted that in Mi'kmaq *wela'lin* means "you do me well," but is often used as the functional equivalent to the English thank-you.

overwhelming joy when the coveted objects were returned with simplicity and generosity. I was soon to learn that such unselfish and considerate acts are commonplace among the Mi'kmaq people.

Typically,<sup>5</sup> the family, friends and acquaintances of the deceased assemble after the funeral mass for a communal “feast” and the auction of sundry items.<sup>6</sup> On a social level, the feast<sup>7</sup> and *salite* provide people with the opportunity to share food, swap stories, and to visit with friends and family. However, both the feast and the *salite* also have spiritual and practical dimensions in that the essential purpose of these events is to celebrate the life of the deceased and to help the grieving family financially and emotionally. *Salites* are not sombre affairs. There is much laughter and conversation and sometimes the bidding for desired items enters into friendly competition. The items sold at the *salite* are provided by friends and family of the deceased and quite often an inexpensive but treasured item sells for a price far beyond its retail value. For example, a two dollar

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<sup>5</sup>During my fieldwork period, *salites* were held without exception at each of the funerals that I attended. Furthermore, I have never heard of an instance when a *salite* was not held as part of funerary ritual within the community of Eskasoni.

<sup>6</sup>A more detailed description of the *salite* is provided in Chapter Five, pp. 163-169 of this dissertation.

<sup>7</sup>Among the Mi'kmaq the term feast is used to refer to a special meal, usually shared communally by a large number of people. A feast is considered to be different than an ordinary meal. Normally feasts are part of larger celebrations, like funerals, Treaty Day celebrations, clan gatherings, or any special occasion where a large number of people gather for a common purpose. The food served at feasts typically consists of traditional foods, such as salmon, lobster, eels, deer, moose, and bear, but may also include non-traditional foods such as chicken, lamb, beef, pork and turkey. Whatever is served is usually in abundance.

mug purchased locally might sell for eighty dollars, and might appear again in future *salites*, becoming a standing joke. The exorbitant prices paid for *salite* items are actually donations to the grieving family and if people cannot afford to participate in the auction they refrain from bidding. Typically, those whose budgets cannot accommodate the amounts of money required for the purchase of auction items contribute whatever they can afford to help the family of the deceased. For many Mi'kmaq, the *salite* is arguably one of the most important features of Mi'kmaw funerary ritual.<sup>8</sup>

As mentioned, the *salite* is a feature of "local" Mi'kmaw religious expression which does not fall under the rubric of mainstream Roman Catholic practice. The *salite*, has added significance as a communal gathering that encourages a sense of unity with which many Mi'kmaw people identify, to varying degrees and for different reasons. However, there are other features of Mi'kmaw religious practice which promote conflict and dissent. Although the Mi'kmaq, like many other Aboriginal groups, are confronted with the daunting task of maintaining personal and social identities there are diverse, and often competing, understandings of how this task is to be accomplished. The role of religion in the daily ordering and reordering of Mi'kmaw social life constitutes a domain in which conflict becomes manifest owing, in part, to the diversity of religious

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<sup>8</sup>While some people are unable to attend either the wake or the funeral mass, most Mi'kmaq do make a concerted effort to attend the *salite* because it is considered to be the most practical and important way to help the grieving family. The *salite* also has social and cultural significance, for as I was often told, "It is the Mi'kmaw way." On a personal level, it is the beginning of a healing process, and on a social level it is the way in which the community comes together to help those in need of emotional support, and to help offset funeral costs.

and spiritual values and rules of conduct which influence social organization. Because Mi'kmaw identity is at issue, some Mi'kmaq reject the Catholic Church entirely, associating it with British colonialism and the demise of Aboriginal culture. Others, however, hold that the Church is as legitimately "traditional" as many of the newly imported and recently adopted, Aboriginal religious traditions. Yet again, there are many Mi'kmaq whose religious practices<sup>9</sup> combine features of Christian and non-Christian Native traditions. For the Mi'kmaq of Eskasoni, religion is not strictly confined to institutionalized religion, such as Roman Catholicism, but is informed by both Christian and non-Christian influences, from which a diversity of practices emerge.

This dissertation has several main foci related to the points discussed above: first, I aim to elucidate the reciprocal nature of the exchange between Christian and Aboriginal religious beliefs, values and expressions; second, I address the multiplicity of religious or spiritual orientations that individuals may either invoke or subvert in the process of constructing positive Mi'kmaw personal and social identity; and more generally, I look at the role of religion in the day-to-day lives of the Mi'kmaw people.

### **Context and Methodology**

Located on the Bras D'Or Lakes in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Eskasoni is home to over

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<sup>9</sup>Anthropologist Caroline Brettell, takes the term practice to embody "both belief and behavior" (Brettell 1990:55). Throughout this thesis, the term practice is applied in the same manner as Brettell uses it.

thirty-five hundred Mi'kmaq.<sup>10</sup> It is the largest Mi'kmaw community in existence and is the only Native Roman Catholic parish in Nova Scotia. The remaining Mi'kmaw communities in the province are served through the Catholic mission church system. The residents of Eskasoni are predominately Christian with approximately 95% of the inhabitants claiming affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup> The remaining 5% of the population are "Traditionalists"<sup>12</sup> of which there are about one hundred, or practitioners of the Baha'i faith which claims a membership of thirty to forty people. However, these simple statistics obscure the distinctiveness and creativity of Mi'kmaw beliefs and expressions.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>The Mi'kmaq are members of the northeastern Algonquian group, who reside south and west of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the Atlantic Provinces and the Gaspé Peninsula. Culturally and linguistically the Mi'kmaq bear similarities to the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy and Maliseet (Pritzker 2000: 433).

<sup>11</sup>By affiliation I mean that one's relationship with the Church is not necessarily a close one. Of those who are baptized into Catholicism many are nominally Catholic and participation in church activities, such as funerals and christenings, is often perfunctory.

<sup>12</sup>For the Mi'kmaq, the term Traditionalist is laden with meaning. For the most part it refers to someone who subscribes exclusively to a non-Christian Aboriginal religion. However, this definition is misleading, in ways that cannot be discussed at this juncture. A more comprehensive treatment of the meanings of the term will be taken up later in this chapter.

<sup>13</sup>I would like to add that there is a paucity of data on the religious affiliation of Native Canadians, in general. As a case in point, James S. Frideres states that, "According to present statistics, 46 percent of Indians in Canada are Catholics...Protestants make up another 36 percent, while 'no religion' adds another 17 percent. The second largest Indian religious group is Anglican, with 18 percent. Another 10 percent of Indians belong to the United Church, and the remaining 8 percent are distributed among the other Christian churches in Canada. This information is based on official government statistics. However, no information has been gathered regarding the extent to which Aboriginal people still adhere to pre-Christian religious beliefs. Apparently, a significant number of Aboriginal persons have retained their indigenous

To date, much of the scholarship concerning Mi'kmaw religious life deals exclusively with either Roman Catholicism or non-Christian traditionalism. However, through this tendency to essentialize, or to emphasize one aspect of culture over and above all others, specific aspects of Mi'kmaw belief and expression have been ignored. Little attention has been paid to the ways in which features of both Roman Catholic and non-Catholic religious systems are evident in "local" (Christian, 1981a) religious expression. It is clear from my research that what is understood as Mi'kmaw "spirituality" -- a term which many Mi'kmaq conflate with Mi'kmaw culture -- informs the way in which Roman Catholicism is believed and practiced. As in most societies, among the Mi'kmaq there is no single, comprehensive definition that encompasses the many individualistic and nuanced understandings of what it means to be spiritual. However, generally speaking, the Mi'kmaw people do not think of spirituality as an abstract entity -- spirituality is not something that one *has*. Rather, it is something that one *does* each and every day of one's life. Accordingly, Mi'kmaw spirituality must be embodied in real people and in real contexts. Because spirituality is perceived to be evident and expressed in everyday life, spirituality and culture are often inextricably intertwined for the Mi'kmaq. As a result, Mi'kmaw religion cannot be confined to the dogma and ritual of the Catholic Church, but must be understood in more comprehensive terms, and must be recognized as playing a role in all aspects of Mi'kmaw social life. While Catholic teachings and

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religious beliefs" (Frideres 2001:88-89). Even though these figures are based on "official government statistics," (and are somewhat dated) as the author points out, one must question the degree to which Christianity predominates Native religious affiliations in Canada.



practices are clearly a part of Mi'kmaw daily life, there are elements of Mi'kmaw "spirituality" that are also Mi'kmaw socialization processes that are commonly and continually practised which are separate from the teachings and beliefs espoused by the Roman Catholic Church. However, Mi'kmaw spiritual and religious teachings do not necessarily negate those of the Church, since there are both points of convergence and points of departure between Catholicism and non-Christian Mi'kmaw faith.

Between July, 1997 and April, 2000, I conducted three separate periods of participant-observation research in Cape Breton. My first two visits were spent mostly on the island of Potlotek where I attended the annual St. Anne's Mission in July of 1997 and again in 1998. The third period of research was conducted between April 1999 and April 2000. My preliminary research periods at Potlotek sought to determine whether or not my research on Mi'kmaw religion was feasible and whether the Mi'kmaw people themselves were receptive to this study. I found that not only were many Mi'kmaw people receptive, but most with whom I spoke were excited about the idea and several made the point that Mi'kmaw religion is an important aspect of Mi'kmaw culture and society that has never been adequately addressed by social scientific researchers.

In addition to attending the St. Anne's Mission at Potlotek for three consecutive years, I attended funerals, weekly mass, special liturgical celebrations such as the Good Friday pilgrimage "up the mountain," and the masses for Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, New Year's Eve, Candlemas Day, and Ash Wednesday at Eskasoni. I also attended a powwow, a sweat, and several "prayer" meetings held by a group of Mi'kmaw "Traditionalists."

In addition I had the privilege of being invited to share in numerous “feasts” and celebrations, specifically those associated with baptisms, anniversaries, a wedding, a clan gathering, *salites*, and birthday parties.

As part of my field research, I also conducted 42 open-ended formal interviews with members of the Eskasoni community, and several former clergy as well as the priest and nuns who now reside in Eskasoni.<sup>14</sup> Without exception, the respondents who participated in these formal interviews were first contacted either by phone or in person and a time and place for the interview was arranged. The interviews sought to elicit personal reflections on and interpretations of Mi’kmaq religious life.<sup>15</sup> For the most part, those interviewed were men and women between the ages of 40 and 85, from diverse economic and educational backgrounds, and from different religious affiliations. Initially I had intended to interview people from a broader age range. However, soon after beginning my research I realized that the members of the 40 to 85 year old demographic group have lived in Eskasoni for all, or most, of their lives and have witnessed significant changes both in the Catholic Church and in the ways in which non-Christian traditional beliefs and expressions have persisted and evolved. My research, however, was not restricted solely to this

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<sup>14</sup>Currently there is one priest, and four nuns (from the The Sisters of Martha order), residing in Eskasoni.

<sup>15</sup>I usually opened an interview by asking the interviewee to tell me about Mi’kmaq Catholicism, Christian-Traditionalism or neo-Traditionalism, depending on his or her religious affiliation. Interviews were, for the most part, open-ended to avoid restricting the type of information gathered, and to prevent overly directed questions from shaping interviewee’s responses. The term neo-Traditionalism is defined in detail on pp. 24-25 of this chapter.

age group. I also had the opportunity to hold a number of informal interviews and conversations with children and young adults, and to observe people of all ages in a variety of social settings, both formal and informal.

As a discipline, ethnography demands a wide variety of sources and contexts in order to give depth and breadth of meaning to the study of culture in its many dimensions. In the domain of the social sciences, ethnography is a nascent or emergent discipline which has gone through a series of growing pains since its inception in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Since the mid-1980's, ethnographic research and writing has been subject to series of critiques, sometimes characterized as a "crisis of representation" (Marcus and Fischer, 1986:8). In classical ethnography, the monologic authority of the author mediated the voices of the "informants" by speaking *for* them and by concealing the construction of the "Other" by an invisible anthropological self. Ethnographers, by removing themselves from their texts, attempted to impart an objective view of the cultures under study. However, in the final decades of the twentieth century, this objective ideal has been abandoned by many ethnographers (e.g. Badone 1989; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Danforth 1982, 1989; Geertz 1973; Jackson 1996, 1998; Narayan 1989; Rosaldo 1989; Tedlock 1983) who have adopted a reflexive approach to the ethnographic process which embraces dialogism or multivocality as a central feature of ethnographic writing and research. This multivocality, or inclusion of many voices, is now necessary to the enterprise of ethnography, because it recognizes and allows the participants' voices to be heard on both individual and collective levels. As James Clifford suggests, multivocality is crucial to the study and interpretation of culture, for "Culture is

contested, temporal and emergent. Representations and explanation—both by insiders and outsiders—is implicated in this emergence” (Clifford and Marcus 1986:19). It is the participants themselves, who, in cooperation with the author, lend intricacy, complexity and breadth to ethnographic research and writing.

While the inclusion of multiple voices is currently promoted as a necessary component of responsible anthropological scholarship, the transparency of the subjective authorial voice is also accepted and encouraged in the production of ethnographies. As mentioned, the authors of classical ethnographic texts were usually invisible authorities, who, in an attempt to maintain subjectivity, remained obscurely remote from the text. Anthropologists George E. Marcus and Dick Cushman point out that, “[w]hile the use of the omniscient [invisible] author heightens the sense of scientific objectivity projected by the text, such usage also helps to sever the relationship between what the ethnographer knows and how he [she] came to know it” (Marcus and Cushman 1982:32). Within the social sciences, it is now well accepted that the subjective experience of the researcher/author in the field is a continually negotiated and interpreted performance which must be acknowledged and addressed in the course of “writing culture.” After all, as Mary Pratt informs us, ethnography is not “a neutral, tropeless discourse,” free from “our own values and interpretive schema” (Pratt 1986:27). Thus, it is no longer tenable for the ethnographer to ostensibly extricate herself from the text. Instead, an awareness of the subjective positional nature of the authorial voice and the need for reflexivity are considered requisite features of research analysis and text

production.<sup>16</sup>

Within the field of anthropology, there has been a past tendency to locate and study “exotic others” whose cultures are remarkably different from our own. This trend is particularly evident in North America where Native American groups have been the subject of anthropological study for generations. However, anthropologists have also been taken to task for “essentializing” Native cultures, and constructing too radical a dichotomy between “Them” and “Us.” As Johannes Fabian points out, this criticism is not groundless.<sup>17</sup> In an attempt to establish social and cultural differences, some researchers have stumbled into the pitfall of temporally and spatially dislocating Native groups, isolating them into convenient cultural enclaves which somehow elude the passage of time.<sup>18</sup> What is now called for is that ethnographers be cognizant of, and receptive to, spatial and temporal demarcations as they are perceived and understood within the society being studied.

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<sup>16</sup>See especially Renato Rosaldo 1989.

<sup>17</sup>“Anthropology contributed above all to the intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise. It gave to politics and economics—both concerned with human Time—a firm belief in “natural,” i.e., evolutionary Time. It promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, some downstream...A discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage...does not think, or observe, or critically study, the “primitive”; it thinks, observes, studies *in terms* of the primitive. *Primitive* being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object, of Western thought” (Fabian 1983:17-18). Emphases are those of the author.

<sup>18</sup>Commenting on the situation of the Wampanoag Natives of Mashpee Massachusetts, James Clifford remarks, “Indians have always filled a pathetic imaginative space for the dominant culture; they were always survivors noble or wretched. Their cultures had been steadily eroding, at best hanging on in museum like reservations. Native American societies could not by definition be dynamic, inventive, or expansive” (Clifford 1988:284).

While the description and interpretation of social and cultural differences is at the heart of the anthropological enterprise, in my experience as a field researcher, it is the Mi'kmaw people themselves who wish to establish their distinctiveness as a group.<sup>19</sup> In respect to spatial distancing from the dominant White society, for many Native groups, the Mi'kmaq being no exception, isolation is no longer a reality. Most Native communities now have all the modern conveniences available to those living in the twenty-first century, including computers, satellite dishes, motor vehicles, televisions, radios, cellular phones, and internet connections. However, alongside the availability of such expanded communication devices, there is also a perceived need to establish and maintain a certain amount of community insularity, whereby the community becomes a crucible for the preservation of Aboriginal culture and society. For instance, in 1980 the Mi'kmaq of Eskasoni managed to gain control of the local educational system to ensure that Mi'kmaw culture and language is now taught as part of the core curriculum.<sup>20</sup>

Oftentimes, claims of "otherness" on the part of Native groups have serious social, political and cultural implications. In terms of locating or relocating themselves historically, Native groups

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<sup>19</sup>It is important to note here that many Mi'kmaq not only wish to establish the uniqueness of their culture and society from that of non-Natives, but also to emphasize their distinctiveness relative to other Native groups.

<sup>20</sup>Eskasoni has had access to primary and elementary education within the community for an extended period of time, but curriculum content was beyond the control of the Mi'kmaq. This situation has since changed and new programs based on Mi'kmaw culture and language are continually being developed. Prior to the completion of the local high school in 1998, children were bused from Eskasoni to non-Native schools in Sydney nearly 40 km away.

have been accused of resurrecting aspects of the past to further specific political agendas, such as land claims settlements, control of natural resources, or increased political autonomy. Writing about the Mi'kmaq in the mid 1980's, anthropologist Tord Larsen remarks that:

Indians employ elements in their universe—among other things, elements of their aboriginal culture, the history of Indian/White relations, the ways in which they see themselves different from whites—in order to construct a statement which is intended to make whites see things differently. In doing so, Indians give new import to old facts, juxtapose ideas that have not been related previously and endow forgotten events with new significance (Larsen 1983:39).

Political uses of the past are, however, only part of the overall picture, which also includes the issues of cultural integrity, and social and personal identity. References to the past can also be seen as a Native response to (historical and current) colonialism and the contemporary trend towards globalization, both processes which contribute to the possible erosion of Indigenous societies. The recognition of connections to an Aboriginal past does not mean that Native peoples are not part of the twenty-first century; that they are somehow ensconced in a past from which they cannot extricate themselves. In contemporary postmodern societies, intermingling influences of the past and present shape the ways in which Native peoples relate to the world around them.

The confluence of present and past traditions, worldviews and modes of religious expression provide a portrait of Mi'kmaw society which is far more complex and varied than most previous scholars have suggested. For instance, in the study of Mi'kmaw religion, researchers have often privileged non-Christian religious practices over those of Christianity, while failing to consider the influence of the latter. And conversely, other researchers have failed to recognize that

institutionalized religion, such as Roman Catholicism, has been influenced by non-Christian Native religious traditions and ideologies. In the case of Mi'kmaw religion, the radical splintering of non-Christian Native practices from those associated with Christianity cannot be easily made. Part of the problem with earlier treatments of Mi'kmaw religion derives from the tendency to subject the Mi'kmaq to investigation and analysis informed by the cultural categories of the dominant society. Since the 1980's, however, research on Native religion has moved away from assimilationist models which interpret the contact between Christian and non-Christian Native practices from the perspective of the dominant Euro-American, Christian culture (Barker 1998; Grant 1984; Morinis 1992; Watanabe 1990). The present dissertation draws upon current studies of Native-Christian interaction which elucidate the reciprocal nature of the exchange between Aboriginal and Christian values, beliefs, and practices. Works relevant to this project include those which consider the importance of the Native voice as a primary source of information (Axtell 1985; Brown 1996; Dickason 1984; Henderson 1997; Warkentin 1996), the effects of cross-cultural exchange (Barker 1998; Chute 1992; Goulet 1982; Hulkrantz 1979; Kan 1991; Morrison 1990; Steckley 1992, Stirrat 1992), the persistence of non-Christian Native practices (Barker 1998; Blanchard 1982; Dusenberry 1962; Goulet 1982; Kan 1991; Morinis 1992; Morrison 1981, 1990), and the role of religion in the formation of individual and collective Native identities (Chute 1992; McMillan 1996; Preston 1987; Reid 1995; Slaney 1997; Watanabe 1990). Of the latter category, Jennifer Reid's book, *Myth, Symbol, and Colonial Encounter*, is one of the most significant ethnohistorical works to date on the role of religion in the shaping of Mi'kmaw identity. Reid



astutely points us to the understanding that it is human religiosity that gives meaning to history. Reid argues that in the construction of a British colonial identity, the Mi'kmaq served as a counter-identity, whereby the Christianity and civility of British colonials was held up against the savagery and heathenism of Indigenous peoples.<sup>21</sup> Reid does not consider Native religion in terms of Christian categories and ideologies, but suggests that sacred beliefs, like "rootedness" in the land, were conveniently denied and ignored throughout the colonialist project to serve British interests (Reid 1995:101-102). This point is significant, since it seems that we have inherited the tendency to understand Native religion in terms of Euro-American ideologies and perspectives. The work at hand will serve at least as a partial corrective to such approaches, in that it uncovers and recognizes how Mi'kmaq understandings of the sacred inform current religious beliefs and expressions.

### **Present Scholarship**

The relationship between Indigenous peoples and Christianity is an area of scholarship which currently receives considerable attention. However, with the exception of several short articles (Brooks 1986; Campbell 1998; Chute 1992; Krieger 1989), Bock's 1966 ethnography of the Mi'kmaq of Restigouche, New Brunswick, Anne-Christine Hornborg's 2001 historical study

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<sup>21</sup>Roy Harvey Pearce also argues that Euro-American society used the idea of "savagism" in opposition to their own civility. Pearce suggests that the gaping distance between "savagery" and civilization allowed Euro-Americans to accept their brutal conquests of Native Americans as a victory of civilization over "savagery" (Pearce 1988, [1953]:120, 242).

of the Mi'kmaq and Leslie J. McMillan's research on the Grand Council,<sup>22</sup> scholarship on Mi'kmaq Catholicism is practically non-existent. While some ethnographic work (Hoffman 1946; McGee 1974; Wallis and Wallis 1955) exists, these studies are primarily concerned with pre-missionary Mi'kmaq religious practices, and pay little attention to the role of Catholicism in Mi'kmaq life. Thus, the subject of the interaction between Christian and non-Christian Mi'kmaq

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<sup>22</sup>Anthropologist Leslie Jane McMillan contends that the Grand Council (*Sante' /Mi'kmawey Mawio'mi*) is a Mi'kmaq institution that has always changed in response to the social, political and religious milieux in which it operated. McMillan informs us that, prior to European contact, the *Sante' Mawio'mi* "maintained internal peace and protected the [Mi'kmaq] nation against outside aggression. In traditional times, spiritual, political, economic, and social aspects operated in balance with one another. It is this holistic way that enabled the Mi'kmaq to flourish and survive...After European contact...[t]he Grand Council disappeared from European view but maintained a place in Mi'kmaq society...During this time, the Council took on greater spiritual leadership roles, a strategy that probably enabled its survival as the Indian Act eradicated Native political authority"(McMillan 1996:197). After Band Councils were established in Mi'kmaq communities, the role of the Grand Council was reduced to conducting the Sacred Gathering each Pentecost, and overseeing the annual St. Anne's Mission (personal observations; cf. McMillan 1996:92). Since 1986, the Grand Council has also presided over Treaty Day celebrations. With the inception of Treaty Day in 1986, the Grand Council has been provided a renewed political status which is now widely recognized and acknowledged by the Mi'kmaq people, and by the federal and provincial governments (McMillan 1996:119, 129). However, the Grand Council as a governing body holds insignificant fiduciary powers in comparison to those held by local Band Councils, and federal and provincial bureaucrats. Attempts by the Grand Council to reclaim and reaffirm its political role as a central authority for all Mi'kmaq people is the focus of discussion in Leslie J. McMillan's informative and insightful thesis. Presently, however, the Grand Council (*Sante' Mawio'mi*) exists primarily as a spiritual organization that is closely associated with the Catholic Church. Heading up the *Sante' Mawio'mi* is the *Kji-Saqamaw* (Grand Chief) and an executive council consisting of a war chief or *Kji-Keptin* who is second in command and a *Putu's* or wampum keeper. Next in rank are the regional *Keptins*, who represent different districts throughout Mi'kma'ki (Mi'kmaq territory). Throughout this thesis, I use the most commonly used references of Grand Council, or *Sante' Mawio'mi*, interchangeably. McMillan prefers to use *Mi'kmawey Mawio'mi*, but this reference is not in common usage.

religion remains an open field for ethnographic study.

In the discipline of anthropology, the move away from viewing a specific social system, or culture, as a functionally integrated whole, has been prompted by the realization that social and personal identities are not guided by one single worldview or one homogenous set of collective values. Among anthropologists, it is now commonly held that social systems are in a continual state of flux and that conflict and negotiation have always been at the heart of social and cultural dynamics (Asad 1993; Kapferer 1997; Morrison 1990; Turner 1969). For the most part, past scholarship concerning Mi'kmaq religion has not adequately reflected such understandings. However, in her work on the changing roles of the Grand Council, Leslie J. McMillan addresses how, in their ongoing attempt to forge and maintain a positive sense of identity, the Mi'kmaq have been forced continually to redefine and adapt the role of the Grand Council. McMillan suggests that the Grand Council, as a persistent feature of Mi'kmaq society and culture,<sup>23</sup> reflects changes in Mi'kmaq political, spiritual and social identity: changes which are evident in the transition of the Grand Council from a powerful political and spiritual authority in the early colonial period, to one which is now divested of much of its political clout. McMillan notes that the attempt to restore the role of the Grand Council to its former status has also met with political and social resistance, and

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<sup>23</sup>“Evidence suggests that the Grand Council is an aboriginal construct, predating contact with European missionaries, traders, explorers, settlers, and the earliest fishers...Despite European attempts to acculturation and assimilation, the Council has demonstrated resilience throughout the centuries and it remains a very important part of Mi'kmaq history” (McMillan 1996:1).

thus has become a locus for competing discourses. However, while McMillan's work deals with particular features of Catholicism "from the top down" (the Grand Council is primarily a Catholic institution), my research deals more with grass roots, or "from the bottom up," understandings of Mi'kmaw religion. McMillan's research and my own have several common foci. For example, we are both concerned with the ways in which Mi'kmaw identity is shaped by religion. Likewise, both McMillan and I focus on the plurality of social and political perspectives that influence Mi'kmaw social organization and related conflicts. However, my findings are drawn from a larger, more comprehensive research base, and seek to demonstrate how religiously based Mi'kmaw systems of belief (which are derived from Christian and non-Christian values and principles) influence Mi'kmaw identity on individual and collective levels.

Anne-Christine Hornborg's recent publication (2001) also shares a number of common themes with this present work. However, Hornborg's ethnohistorical treatment of "traditionalism" and concepts of the "sacred" are considered in light of specific ideological and cosmological concerns. Hornborg does not, as I do here, draw on the more nuanced (and diverse) cultural and religious meanings of both these terms. Rather, she employs particular interpretations of "sacredness" and "tradition" that pertain to current Mi'kmaw territorial and environmental issues. Additionally, both myself and Hornborg avail of Michael Jackson's theoretical frameworks for phenomenological anthropology. However, we interpret Jackson's concept of *lifeworld* differently: Jackson's, *Paths Toward a Clearing* (1989) informs Hornborg's understanding of Mi'kmaw lifeworlds (or "being-in-the-world") (Hornborg 2001: 302), but in this case the term is not applied

to the forms of Mi'kmaw religious expressions addressed in this dissertation. The sense in which I understand and use the term is drawn from Jackson's later works (1995, 1996) and forms the basis for a comparative analysis of Mi'kmaw and Western cosmological structures that includes a comprehensive survey of the ways in which these different cosmologies are reflected in present-day religious motifs and occasions.

### **Terminology**

Although it would be easy, and perhaps convenient, to consider Mi'kmaw life-perspectives as relics or "survivals" of the past, to do so would be negligent. Conversely, to ignore the pervasive influences from Euro-American institutions, laws and ideologies on the lives of the Mi'kmaw people would be equally remiss. Present-day Mi'kmaw culture and social organization, like that of most Aboriginal peoples, are drawn from both Western and non-Western contexts: it is influenced by the worldviews encountered within Western thought and also by the views that emerge from Indigenous understandings of the world. Thus, when we speak in terms of spirituality, religion, and tradition, we must do so with the understanding that, within Mi'kmaw society, such references may, or may not, hold the same intentional meanings as they do within Western society at large.

In 1691, the Jesuit priest, Christian Le Clercq, writing on the Indians of Gaspesia,<sup>24</sup> stated

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<sup>24</sup>Gaspesia refers to the general area of Quebec and the Atlantic provinces. The Indigenous peoples inhabiting Gaspesia, the modern-day Mi'kmaq and Maliseet, were once called Gaspesians.

that:

I should never finish if I wished to report to you here all the traits of superstition of these barbarians. That which I have said thereon is enough to make you see the extent of the error and the simplicity of this blind people, who have lived in the shades of Christianity without law, without faith, and without religion (Le Clercq, 1968 [1691]:233).

Of course, the charges of being “blind” and in “error” can also be applied to those on the opposite side of early Native-European encounters. The religious predispositions of early European visitors, combined with their lack of knowledge and understanding of Indigenous languages, life-ways and systems of belief, precluded a recognition of “religion” when it presented itself in unfamiliar forms and contexts. Instead, Indigenous religions were often perceived as “superstition,” and have been variously described by such pejorative terms as “jugglery,” “Devil worship,” or simply “nonsense” (Le Clercq 1968 [1691]:216, 221). Even though such derogatory terms are now recognized as the products of a less enlightened era, and have fallen into general disuse, the residual effects of the ideology of European dominance remains with us. Kenneth M. Morrison suggests that the inability of early ethnographers and historians to recognize and appreciate the complexity of pre-contact Indigenous religions emerges “from an outdated effort to classify religious practices on some evolutionary scale of institutionalized expression” (Morrison 1981:237). Thus, when we speak of “religion” it can be taken to refer to institutionalized religion alone. However, if we understand the concept of religion to include aspects of religion that are non-institutionalized, then many Native traditional religions practices can be included under the general category of “religion.” This understanding is particularly important when referring to non-Christian practices which do not

conform to Western models of religion.

Aloysius Pieris points out that, “None of the Asian soteriologies...has offered us a comprehensive word for, or a clear concept of, religion in the current Western sense” (Pieris 1988:90).<sup>25</sup> Pieris’ suggestion that there are conceptual differences between the ways in which Western and non-Western cultures define and understand religion is applicable to the Mi’kmaq case. In particular, Pieris’ observation that nonbiblical Asian soteriologies which advance philosophy as a “religious vision” and religion as a “lived philosophy,” from which, every “metacosmic soteriology” becomes “an interpretation of a ‘view’ of life and a ‘way’ of life” (Pieris 1988:83-84) share a number of ethological concepts found within Mi’kmaq society. It is important to emphasize that not all Mi’kmaq view religion from a non-Western perspective. However, in interpreting Mi’kmaq religion it is necessary to give equal weight to both Christian and non-Christian orientations.

The operational understanding of religion employed in this dissertation is derived from the definition of religion offered by Clifford Geertz. In keeping with Geertz, I take religion to be a meaningful “system of symbols” which serves to establish powerful “moods and motivations” which in turn give rise to a vision of a “general order of existence” for the society in which it functions

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<sup>25</sup>Pieris suggests the “implied notion of ‘religion’” is Western because...[I]n earlier times, we had words only to describe the various facets of what could be designated as religion. For in our Asian context, religion is life itself rather than a function of it, being the all-pervasive ethos of human existence. This is even more true of tribal religion, which often overlaps with ‘culture’” (Pieris 1988:90).

(Geertz 1973:90). Moreover, following Talal Asad, I take the concept of “symbol” to mean not simply “an object or event that serves to carry a meaning but a set of relationships between objects or events uniquely brought together as complexes or as concepts, having at once an intellectual, instrumental, and emotional significance” (Asad 1993:31). Accordingly, the process of constructing, appropriating and utilizing symbols (religious or otherwise) takes place in response to the economic, political and social milieux from which these symbols emerge and in which they exist and operate. Thus, the public and private uses of religious symbols may be imbued with diverse meanings depending on the contexts in which they occur. As a case in point, among the Mi’kmaq of Eskasoni, the appropriation and use of Christian and non-Christian religious symbols is often idiosyncratic and is largely dependent on one’s religious orientation(s). In Eskasoni, the creative use of religious symbolism is particularly notable when elements of Catholic and non-Catholic traditions are combined.

There are three prominent and immediately identifiable religious groups in the community of Eskasoni: “Traditionalists,” or neo-Traditionalists,<sup>26</sup> Catholics and Catholic- Traditionalists,<sup>27</sup> all

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<sup>26</sup>I use the term neo-Traditionalist to refer to a particular religious orientation. As it is used throughout this dissertation, neo-Traditionalist(s) refers to Mi’kmaq who espouse specifically non-Christian practices believed to have their origin in “authentic” pre-contact Mi’kmaw religion. However, since many aspects of original, or “authentic,” Mi’kmaw religion fell into desuetude, current practices associated with “Traditionalism” have been primarily re-sourced through, and “recreated” from, orally transmitted texts and etymological analysis of the Mi’kmaw language. The terms neo-Traditionalist/m and “Traditionalism” are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation: the term “Traditionalist/m” (upper case “T”) is the nomenclature for a specific religious orientation employed by the Mi’kmaw people themselves and appears throughout this work in reference to direct quotations. The instances where



three of which are not rigidly bounded categories. Rather, these groups refer to the specific religious orientations which are made up of individuals who participate to different degrees in these religious affiliation(s). For instance, a Catholic-Traditionalist may prefer regular church services to occasional prayer circles, or conversely, may prefer non-institutionalized practices to routine church services.

Traditionalism is a term fraught with ambiguity among the Mi'kmaq of Eskasoni. For some Mi'kmaq, tradition, spirituality<sup>28</sup> and religion are discrete terms. However, for many others, these three specific facets of Mi'kmaw culture are not discrete categories, but fluid concepts that are often intertwined and open to interpretation. At base, the perception of what it means to be Mi'kmaw, as in personal and social identity, influences religious affiliation(s). Many Eskasoni

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“traditionalism” (lower case “t”) is used in reference to the socio-cultural, rather than a religious, sense of the term. Similarly, anthropologist Thomas Parkhill noting that “the process of reclaiming ways began in the late 1970's among Micmac and Abenaki people, and that devout Micmac Catholics refer to *their* religion as ‘traditional,’” opts to use the term “neotraditionalism” to refer recently formed “traditional” religions and to distinguish these particular religious orientations from “traditional” Catholicism (Parkhill 1997:135).

<sup>27</sup>The three groups described below do not include all possible combinations of religious affiliations in Eskasoni. There is also the Baha'i faith, whose membership constitutes approximately 1-2% of the population of Eskasoni. Additionally, there are those who do not actively participate in any public religious activities. However, since most Mi'kmaq are baptised Catholics, many of those who are not religiously active may be considered nominal Catholics. Of those who do not attend public religious gatherings at least some may participate in private Christian/non-Christian devotions. With the exception of the Baha'i, the groups identified above are representative of the people whom I interviewed during the course of my fieldwork.

<sup>28</sup>Refer to Chapter Two pp, 41-45 where different interpretations of spirituality, religion and culture are discussed in more detail.

residents employ the term “Traditionalist(s)” to refer to specific persons, or groups of people, within the community who subscribe to what are considered to be “authentic,” pre-Christian religious practices exclusive of Catholicism. However, among Catholic Mi’kmaq there is the understanding that one can be a traditionalist in another sense of the term, meaning that one upholds Mi’kmaw culture and tradition, but also accepts Catholicism as one’s primary religious orientation.<sup>29</sup> Of the latter group, those who consider themselves traditionalists assert that, since most of “authentic” Mi’kmaw religion has been lost to posterity, and since Catholicism is an ancestral religion, it is a legitimate form of Mi’kmaw religious tradition. Conversely, many non-Christian Mi’kmaq who espouse decolonizationalist views seek to forge a Mi’kmaw identity quite separate from dominant Euro-American ideologies and institutions which they perceive as formidable, and continual, threats to the preservation of Mi’kmaw society and culture. Of course, such an orientation demands an outright rejection of Catholicism. The third group, Catholic-Traditionalists, are those whose beliefs allow for the incorporation of elements of both religious affiliations in a variety of public and private devotional practices. This group is quite diverse with respect to individual religious understandings, practices, especially in terms of their relationship to the creation and maintenance of personal and social identities. Of these three groups, the latter is

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<sup>29</sup>In reference to Catholic and non-Catholic religious orientations, a significant point to keep in mind is the fact that many Mi’kmaw non-Christian beliefs bear close similarities to those of Roman Catholicism. Therefore, it becomes difficult to attribute certain beliefs to either Roman Catholic teachings or to non-Christian Mi’kmaw understandings. There is an abundance of oral and written documentation supporting this claim which will be discussed in the following chapter.

possibly the least recognized category among the Mi'kmaw people. It seems that individual religious expression is condoned by most Mi'kmaq as long as tradition, in its broadest sense is upheld, meaning that Catholicism, along with other traditional beliefs, is respected.

Many Mi'kmaw people are seriously concerned with retaining, reclaiming and recreating Native culture and a return to non-Christian "Traditional" religion is one feature of culture which is of fundamental importance in the reconstruction and maintenance of Mi'kmaw personal and social identity. While the more formalized and regulated forms of religious expressions found in Mi'kmaw Catholicism are generally accepted and upheld, an increasing number of present-day Mi'kmaq find that the less structured and more individualized forms of neo-Traditionalism offer a viable means of reclaiming self-identity and self-expression.

The statement that neo-Traditional religion is less structured than Catholicism essentially means that non-Christian "Traditional" practice and belief is non-dogmatic, lacks a formal institutional context and liturgy and has no "canon." While many individuals participate in specific non-Christian neo-Traditional rituals such expressions are not governed by any central authority that provides specific rules, regulations and guidelines. The manner in which these practices are performed, and the frequency and degree to which they are conducted, is left to the individuals themselves.

The types of rituals commonly practiced within neo-Traditionalism include powwows,

prayer in the four directions, sacred (or prayer) circles,<sup>30</sup> smudges, sweats<sup>31</sup>, sunrise ceremonies and drumming, chanting and dancing. Of these rituals, prayer in the four directions and smudging are the most frequently performed as they are usually included as important elements of most ritual events. Smudging is a purification ritual involving the burning of sweetgrass, tobacco, sage, cedar, or any combination of these materials in a small vessel, usually a mollusk shell or an earthenware pot.<sup>32</sup> The smoke produced in the process of smudging serves to purify, or cleanse persons and ritual items involved in the ceremony to follow. Typically, before a sacred circle ceremony commences, the various items to be used in the ceremony are purified by passing the items over the smoke from the smudge. Likewise, in the case of a powwow or a sweat the persons and items

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<sup>30</sup>Sacred, or prayer, circles are events that are frequently practiced among the Mi'kmaq. These occasions are essentially non-calendrical and tend to be performed in response to individual or group requests. Sacred circles involve smudging as a form of purification, often led by a pipe-carrier. The smudge is followed by prayer in the four directions which may, or may not, include Christian prayers.

<sup>31</sup>Other than powwows, sweats require the most preparation. Normally sweat lodges are dismantled at the end of the lunar year and are rebuilt during the next lunar month. The lodges used by the Mi'kmaq are domed shaped structures built low to the ground and are constructed almost entirely from Indigenous materials. The construction of a sweat lodge begins with the digging of a circular pit. Saplings are gathered and are lashed to a dome shaped frame with red ties made from leather or other suitable materials. The lodge is completed by covering the frame with blankets or furs in order to prevent steam from escaping. The only "imported," or non-Indigenous materials used in the construction of a lodge are the blankets.

<sup>32</sup>For larger events, such as powwows or sweats the smoke from a sacred fire is used for smudging.

involved in the ceremony will be “smudged,” or purified with smoke from the sacred fire.<sup>33</sup>

Prayer in the four directions<sup>34</sup> is an important feature of most ritual ceremonies, including smudges, sweats, sacred circles and sunrise ceremonies. Prayers offered in the four directions differ from person to person and are often customized to suit the occasion. For instance, the prayers said for a deceased person and those offered for the birth of a child vary greatly.<sup>35</sup> However, while there are differences in content, the form remains much the same: prayer is offered first to the east, then moving in a clockwise direction the orison prays to the south, next to the west, and ends with a prayer to the north.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>For powwows, the dancing circle and the arbor where the chanters and musicians are housed, are purified/smudged with smoke from the sacred fire. Usually the fire keeper fashions a torch which is lit from the sacred fire and is carried to the powwow grounds where smudging takes place. For sweats, the sacred fire which is used to heat the stones to be used in the sweat lodge is also used to smudge all participants and the various items to be carried into the lodge. For instance, the pipe, the various salves and ointments and the water to be used are purified with smoke before the sweat can commence.

<sup>34</sup>Some Mi'kmaq insist that prayer in the four directions is actually prayer in the seven directions. The seven directions centre on the person conducting the prayer. The first direction, or the point of orientation, is that of the orison: this is the subjective or personal direction. The remaining six directions include the nadir, the zenith and the four cardinal directions. Praying skyward (zenith) suggests a personal connection with the heavens, and prayer in the earthward (nadir) direction indicates a connection with the earth. The four cardinal directions, north south, east and west radiate outward horizontally from the subjective position.

<sup>35</sup>While content varies greatly, in most of the prayers in the four directions that I have witnessed, all of creation is venerated, including minerals, the elements, and all animal and plant life forms.

<sup>36</sup>There may be variations in this pattern, but of all the prayer ceremonies that I either witnessed or participated in began with prayer to the east and ended with prayer to the north.

Sweats, sacred circles and sunrise ceremonies<sup>37</sup> can be conducted to venerate the dead, to appeal for spiritual or emotional healing and to seek help for physical or social hardship. Traditional rituals can also be celebratory, such as welcoming a new family member, or offering thanks for spiritual, emotional or physical nourishment. Since these ceremonies are held year round they are often part of regular worship as well. Typically, the person who offers ceremonial prayers at ritual events is a pipe-carrier, meaning that the person<sup>38</sup> conducting the prayers has gone through a period of initiation to “earn” their pipe and having done so is recognized as a sacred person<sup>39</sup> by Traditionalists and by some Mi’kmaw Catholics.

The degree to which Traditional rituals are practiced and accepted as legitimate religious devotions ultimately depends on religious orientation(s). In order to illustrate how different religious

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<sup>37</sup>Sunrise ceremonies and sacred circles are usually, but not always, intimate events. Sunrise ceremonies are often done on an individual basis and include prayer in the four directions. A sunrise ceremony is conducted at sunrise and involves praying in the four cardinal directions. These prayers have no set form and are usually of a highly personal nature. However, these prayers are often an expression of thankfulness to the “Creator” for the sustenance and nourishment found in all of creation. Depending on the participants, sunrise ceremonies may or may not include use of a sacred pipe. However, sacred circles are often, but are not necessarily, led by a pipe-carrier. Sacred circles are normally done in a small group and involve smudging, prayer in the four directions, and drumming and chanting.

<sup>38</sup>It is my understanding that while some women conduct sweats this is an exception more so than a rule. There are several female pipe-carriers in Eskasoni, but in the community most sweats are overseen by males.

<sup>39</sup>To be a pipe-carrier is a great honour for a neo-Traditionalist. It may take years to acquire a sacred pipe since they are only given to those Traditionalists who have advanced through various devotional levels, including intensive sweats and prolonged fasts. Usually a pipe-carrier has to have withstood at least one fasting period of seven days or more.

orientations influence Mi'kmaw devotions, I have selected three profiles that I feel clearly express the diversity and creativity of Mi'kmaw religious beliefs and expressions: Tumas<sup>40</sup> (pronounced Dumas) is a self-professed "Traditionalist," Nora is a Catholic, and Piel<sup>41</sup> (pronounced Biel) is a Catholic Traditionalist.

Tumas, a man in his early 50's, is a former Catholic who became involved in neo-Traditionalism during the early 1980's. He conducts sweats both on and off the reserve, and holds sunrise ceremonies on a regular basis. Tumas is also a former student of the Shubenacadie residential school. The Shubenacadie residential school was located in the town of Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, approximately 270km from Eskasoni. The school, called "Shubie" by many Mi'kmaq, operated for 37 years. It was closed in 1967 in the midst of much controversy relating to charges of physical, mental and sexual abuse of Native children by the nuns and priests who ran the institution. Owing to his negative experiences there, Tumas harbours a deep resentment towards the Catholic Church. The Church is anathema to him: as far as Tumas is concerned the Church is the source of many of the problems affecting Mi'kmaw society, beginning with the abuses at the residential schools. Tumas feels these abuses still continue because of the Church's failure to properly compensate Mi'kmaw people for the past wrongs inflicted upon them. Tumas refuses to participate in Catholic ceremonies of any kind and is openly critical of the Church. He quite

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<sup>40</sup>Tumas is the Mi'kmaw equivalent of Thomas.

<sup>41</sup>Piel is the Mi'kmaw equivalent of Peter.

vehemently told me:

...the Church is responsible for allowing the abuse at Shubie to happen. They sent us a bunch of criminals. People who did things wrong wherever they were before and this was their punishment – send them to the Indians! No one knows what some of those people did before. They weren't fit for regular society so they pawned them off on us – a bunch of misfits and criminals sent to teach the Indian children. They're all responsible. They should just settle with us now and fight between themselves later, who pays for what. All the former residents are paying now in their own way. We all have our stories (Fieldnotes, Book V:940).

Tumas is also perturbed by subsequent actions of the Catholic Church. He said that “since the Pope’s visit,<sup>42</sup> the Church has been intruding into “Traditionalism” because the Pope said it was OK. Now, the Church uses sweet grass, drumming and chants, and the [Eagle] feather, but I don’t think the Church respects it...How would the Church react if I started holding confession and passing around [Communion] wafers in the sweat lodge.” He added jokingly, “There’d be Hell to pay!”

According to Tumas the Church has lost a lot of Native people and the use of “Traditionalism” is “an attempt to stop the bleeding.” Clearly, Tumas sees the Church’s use of “Traditional” symbols and rituals as superficial – as a means to appease the discontented. In Tumas’s opinion, the Church does not accept “Traditional” practices as legitimately religious. However, Piel, who openly practices Catholicism and neo-Traditionalism, holds a markedly different view of the Church.

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<sup>42</sup>This is in reference to Pope John Paul II’s visit to Canada in 1984.



Piel, another of my respondents in his 50's, is deeply devoted to the Church, but incorporates features of neo-Traditionalism in his regular devotions. In addition to attending weekly mass and other church functions, Piel conducts sweats and smudges and is a pipe-carrier. Piel is usually the person called upon to perform non-Catholic Native rituals in the local church on special occasions. He told me that the Church attempts to accommodate "Traditional" ceremonies, but that this process did not begin until 1984 after Pope John Paul II's visit to Canada. Piel recalls that it was as late as 1992 when the first pipe ceremony was conducted in the church during a general absolution ceremony.

When asked about the resurgence of "Traditionalism" in Eskasoni, Piel suggested that as a result of their negative experiences at residential school, many former residents have turned to "Traditionalism" for healing. Neither Piel nor his wife attended the Shubenacadie school, but he comments that:

I don't think it was too good. There's a lot of pain associated with it [the school]. I also think that's why a lot of people turned to Traditionalism for healing. That's not why I did it, but I can see why people become fanatics about their traditional culture. I'm a Traditionalist, but I'm not a fanatic. I try to strike a balance between culture, religion and the material aspect [of culture]. I have all three...When you look at it everything is three, the Holy Trinity is three (Fieldnotes, Book IV:800-801).

When I asked Piel about prayer in the four directions, I was quite unprepared for the response I received. Piel explained that the east is represented by the colour red: It "can represent the blood of Christ that was spilt to save us. The south is yellow. It indicates warmth, summer, growth...It's mother's warm bread. When you think of it you can see Mary kneeling at the foot of

the cross [south being the foot of the cross]...The west is black-the spirit world. Jesus bowed his head toward the west when he died...The north is white-good medicine, healing, purity, Jesus' soul. So, we were praying the cross even before Jesus was crucified." For Piel then, "Traditionalism" is part of what makes him Mi'kmaw. Neo-Traditional religion is important to him, but Catholicism is of greater importance, since Native "Traditional" practices and beliefs only become religiously meaningful for him when they are interpreted within a Christian frame of reference.

Finally, there is Nora, a middle-aged woman whose concept of what is sacred extends beyond that which is typically identified as Roman Catholic. While Nora incorporates features of both neo-Traditionalism and Catholicism into her religious life, she does not refer to herself as a "Traditionalist": she is a self-proclaimed Catholic. Like many Mi'kmaw people, Nora has a personal altar at home. What is most striking about this altar is the way in which "Traditional" sacred objects are mixed with Catholic icons and iconography. The various objects placed on the altar, such as holy water, blessed candles, rocks, *wijipoti*<sup>43</sup> and Eagle feathers may appear to be

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<sup>43</sup>In 1943, anthropologist Frank Johnson comments "At present a woman's pocketbook is called *widjibo'di*. The 'buo'in [spirit] containers' may either contain plain pieces of bone or pieces which have been carved to represent animals. These pieces of bone are called *ntio'mel* meaning 'spiritual agents'" (Johnson 1943; 66). Currently, *wijipoti*, meaning his/her medicine bag, is a small pouch used for carrying a combination of items that have special meaning for the owner. *Kijipoti* are medicine bags that many Mi'kmaw people wear around their necks. *Kijipoti* are associated with healing and various items connected to healing are carried in these pouches. For instance, Nora also carries *pako'si* (an indigenous medicinal root), a St. Anne's medal, a dream catcher earring, a snip of tobacco (also traditionally connected with healing) in her *kijipoti*. The term "buo'in," (actually a misspelling of *puo'in*) is generally taken to refer to an evil spirit or the devil. However, according to oral tradition, the original meaning of the term is simply "a spirit."

an eclectic and odd grouping, but for Nora they are not: they are highly symbolic. To anyone familiar with Catholic iconography and sacred items, the holy water and candles can be readily identified as part of Catholic tradition, but here they become infused with added meaning. The rocks, feathers, candles, and holy water also represent for Nora the four basic elements of earth, air, fire and water, respectively. These four elements<sup>44</sup> are also symbolically represented in numerous neo-Traditional rituals, including powwows, sacred circle ceremonies, sunrise ceremonies and sweats.

Nora is not actively involved in ceremonies such as powwows and sweats but on occasion she attends sacred circle ceremonies where she participates in chanting, smudging and praying in the four directions. However, Nora interprets and understands these ceremonies differently than Piel: she accepts them as part of Mi'kmaq culture, but also views them as legitimate religious rituals *in and of themselves*. Nora approaches Catholic and neo-Traditional expressions of faith with the same devotional zeal – both are seen as opportunities to worship the divine. For Nora, importance

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<sup>44</sup>There are a number of items used in different rituals which represent the four basic elements. Typically, in sacred circle ceremonies, powwows and sunrise ceremonies the fanning of an Eagle feather is used to represent air; water is used in most ceremonies as well. For instance, in sacred circles participants are ceremoniously sprinkled with water that has been smudged. This water is sacred and is never thrown away. It is used later to clean the smudge pots and shells and may be reused again in future ceremonies; earth can be represented in a number of ways, but is usually symbolized by stone or sand. Many people carry small stones that are special to them in *wijitpotis* (medicine bags); fire is central to most ceremonies. It is used in the process of smudging that initiates neo-Traditional ceremonies. For powwows and sweats especially, a fire keeper is assigned to keep watch over the sacred fire to ensure that it remains lit for the duration of the ceremony.

is not placed on the actual expression, but on the sincerity of devotion: any expression of faith is legitimate – a prayer is a prayer, a meditation is a meditation.

The preceding narratives are a small, but telling, sample of the diversity and creativity of Mi'kmaw practices. These narratives illustrate that, in the process of constructing Mi'kmaw social and personal identity, meaning can be derived from Christian and non-Christian views of the sacred. In Tumas' case, the practice of "Traditionalism" is closely linked with his identity as a Mi'kmaw person and Catholicism is viewed as a threat to that identity. However, for Piel and Nora, Catholicism provides a formal religious structure, but it does not preclude their involvement in neo-Traditional religion: non-Christian devotions are also predominant features of their respective religious and cultural identities. Like, Tumas, Piel and Nora, there are many Mi'kmaq who, to varying degrees, accept features of either Catholicism or neo-Traditional religion, or both, as legitimate and meaningful expressions of faith.

## Chapter Two

### *“Ta’n ninen telo’ltiek”*<sup>1</sup>: Mi’kmaw Lifeworlds and Life-ways

Our father taught us to respect all life,  
the life that we have been given,  
the beauty of the sun, star and sky,  
the animals that walk with us,  
one must die, so one may live.  
Ahay, it is good to give.

Helen Sylliboy, from “Life and Death.”

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### Introduction

While working on the original title for this chapter, “T’an ninen telo’ltiek”: Mi’kmaw Worldviews and Ethos,” I began to experience a great deal of difficulty attempting to “fit” Mi’kmaw systems of thought and belief into the category of worldview. However, upon reading Michael Jackson’s “Introduction” in *Things As They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology*, I began to understand that I had taken the wrong tack in my approach: despite my efforts to rid myself of any preconceived biases, I was applying the term worldview inappropriately. Instead of explaining my findings on Mi’kmaw systems of thought and belief “in their own terms,”

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<sup>1</sup>In English, the functional equivalent of “*ta’n ninen telo’ltiek*” translates as “the way we are.” In the Mi’kmaw language, the pronoun “we” can be used in either inclusive or exclusive forms. The form of we (*ninen*) used here appears in the exclusive form: “we” refers to the Mi’kmaw people.

I was confining them to categories, offered up within Western discourse, into which they did not fit.<sup>2</sup>

Jackson states that as “an attempt to describe human consciousness in its lived immediacy, before it is subject to theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematizing” (Jackson 1996:2), phenomenological anthropology, when applied, avoids many of the problems encountered in the process of translating, analyzing and constructing ethnographic texts. Jackson argues that it is “presumptuous and unedifying” to give “intellectual viability” to any non-Western system of thought simply by assimilating it to the categories of Western philosophical and scientific discourse (Jackson 1996:6). He suggests that, like political opinions, philosophies and theories need to be regarded as part of the world in which we live “rather than transcendent views that somehow escape the impress of our social interests, cultural habits, and personal persuasions” (Jackson 1996:1). Phenomenology is a way of revealing “things by bringing them into the daylight of ordinary understanding” and by refusing to invoke cultural privilege as a basis for “evaluating worldviews or examining the complex and enigmatic character of the human condition” (Jackson 1996:1). To this end, Jackson suggests that “when we make cross-cultural comparisons between various ‘systems of thought,’ we would do well to construe these not as worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*) but as lifeworlds (*Lebenswelten*)” (Jackson 1996:6). Jackson explains lifeworld as: “that domain

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<sup>2</sup>Of course, part of this problem results from the fact that Mi'kmaw views of the world and of their existence in it, are not derived from one specific orientation: Mi'kmaw culture and patterns of socialization are drawn from both Western and non-Western perspectives.

of everyday, immediate existence and practical activity, with all its habituality, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic character, its biographical particularities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies, which theoretical knowledge addresses but does not determine, from which conceptual understanding arises but on which it does not primarily depend” (Jackson 1996:7-8).

The problem of decontextualization/recontextualization,<sup>3</sup> described above is one of any number of problems that may be encountered in the process of transposing the lifeworlds and life-ways<sup>4</sup> of non-Westerners into texts to be received by Western readers.<sup>5</sup> Critiques of anthropology have unveiled several tendencies that lead to inaccurate, or at least inadequate, representations of the “other.” First, there is the tendency to stress the distinctiveness of non-Western cultures to the point that they become radically “other”<sup>6</sup> (Fabian 1983, Appadurai 1988).<sup>7</sup> Second, there is the

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<sup>3</sup>I take the term decontextualization to mean the process by which the aspects of any given culture are taken out of the original context in which they exist, and I take recontextualization to mean the process of placing aspects or features of one cultural system into an “other” system of beliefs and values.

<sup>4</sup>The term life-ways, as it is used throughout this dissertation, refers to the process through which Mi’kmaq people construct and apprehend the world in which they live. Life-ways involves sociological contexts but also includes collective and individual systems of belief and the symbolic representations of those beliefs.

<sup>5</sup>This list that appears above is by no means an exhaustive one, but it does represent the various concerns addressed in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup>Refer to Chapter One, pp. 10-12 of this thesis.

<sup>7</sup>Arjan Appadurai maintains that anthropologists have tended to incarcerate non-Western peoples by denying them the same capacity of movement and interaction that we have as Westerners. In other words, the fluidity of group languages, practices and boundaries have been sacrificed to establishing untouched or enduring cultures (as stated in Abu-Lughod

notion that non-Western cultures have “blindly and spontaneously” reacted to external domination (Jackson 1996:37. See also Blanchard 1982; Delâge and Hornbeck-Tanner 1994; Guha 1983; Morrison 1981). Third, in constructing portraits of the “other,” many scholars lend primacy to the power of politics, over and above the power of *existential* concerns, in influencing the ways in which the lifeworlds of persons and groups are constructed (Jackson 1996:22). Fourth, in the process of depicting the “other,” scholars have often subjugated the creative and idiosyncratic features of personal identities while privileging normative cultural traits and distinctions (Jackson 1996:25-29). Finally, debates about “the invention of tradition,” while not specifically mentioned in Jackson’s article, are also pre-empted, or are at least seriously called into question, by the phenomenological approach. Phenomenological anthropology is, at base, ahistorical and apolitical. This does not mean that the political and historical aspects of any given tradition are to be ignored: rather, it suggests that such concerns do not hold precedence over the fact that a specific tradition currently *exists*. Therefore, political and historical considerations should be addressed, not to establish the “authenticity” of a specific rite, belief or ritual, but to elucidate the significance of a tradition in the various contexts in which it appears. As Jackson suggests, the fact that specific traditions exist within a culture should be considered more important than verifying their historical precedence or validity: “[p]henomenology is less concerned with establishing what happened in the past than exploring the past as a mode of present experience” (Jackson 1996:38).



In response to the “politics of representation”, critiques of ethnography have emerged which question the very nature of the work that anthropologists undertake; we are asked to consider seriously the ways in which we translate encounters with “others” *on the ground* into accurate accounts of the living subjects that we study. A number of anthropologists suggest that paying particular attention to the personal lives of individuals is the most effective means of constructing adequate ethnographic accounts (Jackson 1996; Abu-Lughod 1993a; Drewal 1992). For instance, Abu-Lughod argues that by drawing on the complex personal narratives of Bedouin women, she offers a challenge to “the capacity of anthropological generalizations to render lives, theirs or others’, adequately” (Abu-Lughod 1993a:xvi). Abu-Lughod proposes that rather than attempting to explain cultural differences in terms of collective identities, we need to focus on the ways in which “individuals and the particularities of their lives” uncover similarities and differences between “a world set up to produce the effect of structures, institutions, or other abstractions (as T. Mitchell [1988] argues the modern West has been) versus worlds that have not” (Abu-Lughod 1993a:27).

Similarly, in writing on the *Yoruba* of southwestern Nigeria, Margaret Drewal observes that there are key cosmological differences between Yoruba and Western perceptions of the world. In describing Yoruba beliefs and rituals, Drewal notes that *ase* is a “generative force or potential present in all things,” including hills, rocks, streams, mountains, animals, plants, deities and ancestors as well as “in utterances—prayers, songs, curses and even everyday speech... *Ase* has no “moral connotation: it is neither good nor bad” (Drewal 1992:27). Humans also possess this

generative force and “through education, initiation and experience learn to manipulate it to enhance their own lives and the lives of those around them” (Drewal 1992:27). What Drewal identifies as *ase* holds a resemblance to the Mi’kmaw understanding of active “spirit,”<sup>8</sup> or life force, from which “spirituality” arises. However, among the Mi’kmaq, spirituality is variously understood and interpreted. Following Drewal, I find that giving voice to the particular through personal narratives allows for diversity of meaning, and provides for a depth of expression that helps to illuminate the multidimensionality of Mi’kmaw spirituality.

After numerous conversations, interviews and formal and informal meetings, the familiar and deceptively simple phrase “The Mi’kmaq are a spiritual people” took on complexities and nuances of meanings that I had not anticipated. For many Mi’kmaq, “spirituality” extends beyond the strictures of what Westerners perceive to be “religious” and finds expression in the day-to-day life of the community.<sup>9</sup> For many, “spirituality” is embedded in Mi’kmaw socialization processes, and is often equated with, culture. Still, for others, spirituality may be part of religious orientation, or conversely, may be separated from religion altogether. Although spirituality is variously

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<sup>8</sup>The Mi’kmaw understanding of “spirit” must be distinguished from the Christian concept of “soul”. “Spirit,” like *ase*, is a generative force existing in all things, whereas, within Christianity, the “soul” is attributed only to humans and owing to human failings is often corrupted through sinfulness. Refer also to the comments by Bern Francis on pp. 43-46 of this chapter.

<sup>9</sup>Fr. Dan MacDonald, a former priest at Eskasoni, told me that the “Mi’kmaq have a different type of spirituality that I wished non-Native people had. Non-Natives tend to compartmentalize their faith—it fits into a category. For Natives, spirituality pervades being and is an important part of everyday life” (Fieldnotes, Book I:28).

interpreted, for many Mi'kmaq, it is very much at the core of Mi'kmaw personal and social identity. That which is "spiritual" or "sacred," in Mi'kmaw terms, cannot be confined to specific "religious" observances, but is frequently perceived as a "power," or a spiritual outlook on life, that unites Mi'kmaw peoples, collectively and individually. "Spirituality" may be expressed in such "mundane" events as birthday parties, family or clan gatherings, anniversaries, or when rites such as weddings, funerals, *salites* and christenings are performed. The Mi'kmaw people band together in times of plenty, of scarcity, in times of sorrow and of happiness. These gatherings provide the Mi'kmaw people with the opportunity to support each other in a sense of fellowship that encompasses physical, emotional and spiritual needs. However, the heterogeneity of Mi'kmaw religion and spirituality cannot be contained by any single homogenized view. Each individual experiences and expresses his or her own understanding of what it means to be religious or spiritual in Mi'kmaw society.

In the service of rendering as complete an account as possible of the ways in which the Mi'kmaq perceive Mi'kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways, I have adopted the phenomenological approach described by Jackson and followed by Drewal and Abu-Lughod. My intention in this chapter is not to extract some romantic or stereotypical rendition of Mi'kmaw reality. Rather, the task assumed here is to relate the ways in which current philosophical, ideological and cosmological understandings inform present-day religious practices, as they have been imparted to me, and as I understand them. The Mi'kmaw voices presented here demonstrate that Mi'kmaw religion and spirituality are variously interpreted.

## Mi'kmaw Voices

The interrelatedness of Mi'kmaw spirituality, culture and language was explained to me in great detail by the Mi'kmaw linguist, Dr. Bern Francis. Bern, now in his early 50's, grew up on the Membertou (Sydney) reserve and was raised as a Roman Catholic. As a young boy Bern participated fully in the Catholic faith and for a period of time served as an altar boy. However, he left the Church in his early teens and has not returned to it.

As a linguist and as a Mi'kmaw person, Bern maintains that for himself, and for most Mi'kmaq, Mi'kmaw beliefs and values are firmly embedded in the language. He suggests that a close look at the structure of the language can elucidate key cosmological and philosophical concepts which influence present-day Mi'kmaw life-ways. Bern explains that the reason for this close relationship between language and cosmology is straightforward: he contends that the process of translating ideas and concepts from Mi'kmaq into English is difficult, principally because the Mi'kmaw language is verb-oriented whereas English is noun-oriented (personal communication). According to Bern, the far-reaching implications of what it means to say that the Mi'kmaw language is verb-oriented are difficult to discern, especially in terms of their affect on culture and ultimately spirituality:

For one thing, it would be very, very tough to establish a dogma in the Mi'kmaw spiritual aspect of the culture simply because of the structure of the language...[which] tells me that it [the language] is very capable of changing very fast...as compared to English...The second thing, of course,...is that the language is not capable of seeing the world and the universe as any other way except as being in constant flux. It's not capable of doing so. So, it would be difficult to pin down any particular dogma and expect people, Mi'kmaw people, to follow it to the letter a thousand years from now...A concept of "god" in Mi'kmaw culture

and Mi'kmaw language is also not stationary. In fact, the words, or many of them, that we have for "god" are all verbs. They conjugate like any other verb in the Mi'kmaw language, and that's an indicator that "god" is not someone who is sitting up in the sky who oversees all things. It is difficult for a *true* Mi'kmaw mind to conceptualize something ["god"] like that.<sup>10</sup>

For Bern then, Christian dogma cannot be adequately translated into a system of belief compatible with the Mi'kmaw way of thinking.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the notion that "God" oversees the universe from

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<sup>10</sup>Bern Francis cautions that although the language conceptualizes "God" as an active entity, "many [Mi'kmaw] people think that God is overseeing everything and anytime you want something you can simply pray to God...[but] there's a very thin veneer, especially with many of the elders, that separates them from Christian Catholicism and Mi'kmaw spirituality. You don't have to scratch too deeply through the surface to see that a lot of the elders understand spirituality in the way that our ancestors understood it because they have no other recourse. They speak only the Mi'kmaw language" (taped interview). Bern also provided me with the following list of Mi'kmaw verbs used to refer to the "Creator": *ankweyulkw* or, she/he/ it who is looking over us; *kisu'lkw* or, she/he/it who creates us; *tekweyulkw* or, she/he/it who is with us; *jikeyulkw* or, she/he/it who is watching over us (personal communication).

<sup>11</sup>The intimate connections between language, thought and culture have been forwarded by linguists Edward Sapir (1949) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956). Sapir states that "Human beings do not live in the objective world alone...but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society...The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group...We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation" (as quoted in Whorf, 1956:134). Similarly, Whorf claims that, "There are cases where the 'fashions of speaking' are closely integrated with the whole general culture"(Whorf 1956:159). "[E]very language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness" (Whorf 1956:252). However, later linguistic studies challenge the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: Jill Fain Lehman, et. al. conclude that, "Language can in fact, determine thought, but its power to do so independent of the task itself varies over time and context" (Lehman 1996:505); Steven Pinker finds that, "[a]lthough there is evidence that the memory system used in language acquisition and processing has some of the properties of the associative network,

afar is inimical to the “true Mi’kmaw mind” which perceives the process of creation as unfolding, and as something in which the “Creator” continues to participate fully.<sup>12</sup> According to Bern, for Mi’kmaw speakers, the “Creator” is not *nounified*<sup>13</sup> as an abstract entity who is altogether remote and transcendent, but is seen as an active presence in the world (Fieldnotes, Book I:8). Bern suggests that this perspective is evident in devotional expression as well. He comments that, in making the Sign of the Cross, you cannot say in Mi’kmaq, “In the name of *the* Father and *the* Son.” Rather, one has to say, “In the name of a father who has a son, and a son who has a father”(Fieldnotes, Book I:6). In the Mi’kmaw language there is no absolute posited. Personal relationships are understood in terms of possessive reciprocity: “you cannot be a son unless you have a father and you cannot be a father unless you have a son or daughter” (Fieldnotes, Book I: 6). In terms of the relationship between a “Creator” and creation, this perspective implies that there is no “Creator” without creation and there is no creation without a “Creator.” Bern understands the

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these properties do not exhaust the computational abilities of the brain. Focusing on a single rule of grammar, we find evidence for a system that is modular, independent of real-world meaning, nonassociative (unaffected by frequency and similarity), sensitive to abstract formal distinctions..., more sophisticated than the kinds of ‘rule’ that are explicitly taught, developing on a schedule not timed by environmental input, organized by principles that could not have been learned” (Pinker1996:567).

<sup>12</sup>Writing on Mi’kmaw myths and stories, Ruth Holmes Whitehead expresses ideas similar to Bern’s views. She observes that, for the Mi’kmaq “Creation itself was fluid, in a continuous state of transformation. Reality was not rigid, set forever in form...This Creation is clearly depicted in Micmac stories: not only through their content, interestingly, but through their basic structure and the language in which they were told” (Whitehead 1988:2).

<sup>13</sup>Compare to Jonal’s comments in this chapter.

view of creation as it is expressed in the Mi'kmaw language, to be in direct contrast to the predominant Western, or Christian view, that God exists as a transcendent being whose existence is independent of creation.<sup>14</sup>

Bern is critical of the Church, but not because he fundamentally disagrees with Christian teachings.<sup>15</sup> Rather, he objects to the ways in which Catholic teachings subvert the Mi'kmaw way of thinking.<sup>16</sup> Bern suggests that the Catholic Church has been instrumental in replacing Mi'kmaw systems of belief with Westernized concepts of the relationship between "God," man, and the rest of creation.<sup>17</sup> Since Mi'kmaw communities are losing many of the elders who retain what Bern

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<sup>14</sup>For instance, Genesis 1:1, 20 which states, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth...And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creatures that hath life, and the fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven" suggests that God exists independent of earthly life.

<sup>15</sup>Bern makes distinctions between the teachings of Jesus Christ and the ways in which the Catholic Church has construed these teachings (Fieldnotes, Book I:4).

<sup>16</sup>It is important to note, that counter to this opinion, some Mi'kmaw people see the Church as being instrumental in the preservation of the Mi'kmaw language and culture. Many of the liturgical texts (such as prayers and hymns) used in the Church were written in the Mi'kmaw language, and Church records containing information on births, deaths and marriages are a valuable source of information for the Mi'kmaw community.

<sup>17</sup>Clearly, Bern views Catholicism as an inflexible, authoritative religious system that has little in common with pre-contact or original Mi'kmaw ways of thinking and believing. However, folklorist Stanley Brandes points out that Roman Catholicism is often mistakenly referred to as a religion of "homogeneous, undifferentiated cosmologies, world views and sets of ritual behavior" (Brandes 1990:185). The main argument of this thesis supports Brandes' position. However, I also provide a number of views of Roman Catholicism held by a representative selection of Mi'kmaw people who reside in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Of the various discourses that emerge concerning the relevance and importance of the Catholic Church in Mi'kmaw society, Bern offers an important perspective which is shared by a number of

defines as “the Mi’kmaw way of thinking”, he fears that the knowledge and understandings they hold will die with them (personal communication). Therefore, he insists that it is of paramount importance that the upcoming generations of Mi’kmaq understand the basic distinctions between Mi’kmaw and Western/Christian conceptions of the world. For instance, Bern feels that one of the most important Mi’kmaw teachings is respect for the self and for others, but the Church does not reinforce this teaching:

The Church is negligent in this regard. It teaches about the sinfulness of persons and how we are insignificant and too human. We are not taught respect of the self, but that we are sinful creatures. Also, that we are masters of the earth, that all living creatures are beneath us. This is wrong! We should teach respect for all living things, ourselves, others and all other living matter on the planet. The Church is much more concerned with souls than the welfare of the Mi’kmaw people. We were granted souls in 1610, before that we didn’t have any. The Mi’kmaw people have been in servitude to the Church ever since. Many [Mi’kmaw] people do not go to Church out of love and respect for God, but out of fear. Fear is not a solid spiritual base (Fieldnotes, Book I:4-5).

Bern suggests that Catholic teachings, which, in his view, are based on “fear” and “sinfulness,” serve to undermine the very beliefs and values that define Mi’kmaw society and culture:

The missionaries told the Mi’kmaq that you must believe this [the Catholic] way otherwise you will be damned and you will go to hell... You must believe in Jesus as being the absolute and only begotten son of God and you must believe that Jesus is the only way—that’s more conditioning, and that’s more based on fear than any reality in the mind of the Mi’kmaw person. In other words, because of that fear, they will ascribe to that kind of belief, at least on the surface. But really, a reality check will tell us that many of the elders, when you begin to speak with them in the Mi’kmaw language, you will say “Gee, I know they go to church, but just listen to them! Look at what they’re saying!” They speak very differently than the way any Christian would speak...I consider myself fortunate in that I was able to look at

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Mi’kmaw people.



Native spirituality, specifically Mi'kmaw spirituality, not Mohawk, not any other, but Mi'kmaw spirituality and I was able to speak with elders who spoke to me without being threatened and without being pressured and without having fear...they have taught me so much over the years (taped interview).

Bern claims that, beneath the surface, “god,” religion and spiritual beliefs can only be conceived by Mi'kmaw speakers within a specifically Mi'kmaw context. Despite extensive “conditioning,” Mi'kmaw elders continue to apprehend the world the way in which their language allows. In Bern's view, the basic spiritual understandings to which many elders subscribe are in keeping with a Mi'kmaw way of thinking rather than a Catholic, or Western, way of comprehending faith, belief and the sacred.

The description of the way in which the Mi'kmaw language operates provided by Bern suggests a way of looking at the world that is conceptually different than the teachings espoused and disseminated by the Catholic Church. Since Christian cosmology and philosophy posit absolutism and by extension promotes exclusivistic claims as the Mother Church,<sup>18</sup> the question

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<sup>18</sup>Exclusivism, as a feature of Roman Catholicism follows from the premise that there is one absolute power or one true “God,” and that the Catholic Church (Mother Church) is the one *true* way to communion with that “God.” The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner states: “the Catholic Christian must experience the Church as the vanguard, as the sacramental sign, as the historical reality of a saving grace which goes beyond what is sociologically tangible, which goes beyond being a ‘visible Church’; he must also experience the Church as the historical, tangible reality of an anonymous Christianness which, ‘outside’ the Church, has not yet fully found itself, but which, ‘inside’ the Church does find itself—and this is so not because it absolutely does not exist outside the Church, but because there it has not in an objective way reached its full-flowering, and therefore does not yet fully comprehend itself in the explicitness and reflexive objectivity of a formal creed, in the objectivity of a sacramental making-present, and in the objectivity of social organization, such as all this occurs in the Church” (Rahner 1966:56).

to be considered here is: can the cosmology and philosophies inherent in the Mi'kmaw language and its attendant beliefs and values which rest on principles of mutability and inclusivity be reconciled with those of Christianity?

Some Mi'kmaw Catholics manage to reconcile these two positions. At least, for certain people, there is no public recognition that tension between the two perspectives exists. Dr. Marie Battiste is one Mi'kmaw spokesperson for whom the primacy of language in determining and maintaining Mi'kmaw culture cannot be too strongly emphasized. As a devout Catholic, Marie does not consider Catholic teachings to be a threat to Mi'kmaw tradition. Born in Chapel Island, Marie was raised in Maine and now works extensively in the areas of Native language and education.<sup>19</sup> Prior to her appointment at the University of Saskatchewan's College of Education, Dr. Battiste worked as an educational advisor in Eskasoni. Because of her extensive education and her involvement in the community, many residents of Eskasoni recognize Battiste as an authority figure. However, others consider her an "outsider," due to the fact that she is not a fluent speaker of the language and is not a permanent resident of the community (Fieldnotes, Book IV; Jan. 2000; Book V: March 2000).

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<sup>19</sup>In 1984 Dr. Battiste received an M. A. degree in education from Stanford University. Her unpublished thesis, titled "An historical investigation of the social and cultural consequences of Micmac literacy," is concerned with various learning problems that arise from translating Mi'kmaw beliefs and understandings into their English equivalents. The thesis is also concerned with the reluctance of Western educational institutions to recognize and to address this problem properly. Battiste holds honorary doctorate degrees from St. Mary's University and the University of Maine at Farmington.

Dr. Battiste suggests that Mi'kmaq lifeworlds and the philosophies that inform them can be understood through stories, oral tradition, and through complex socialization processes. Drawing on such sources, Marie writes:

In the beginning when the Mi'kmaq people awoke naked and lost, we asked our Creator how we should live. Our Creator taught us how to hunt and fish and how to cure what we took, how to make clothes from the skins, to cure ourselves from the plants of the earth. Our Creator taught us about the constellations, to make our way through the darkest of nights, and about the Milky Way which was the path of our spirits into the other world. Our Creator taught us how to pray, to sleep, and to dream and told us to listen to the animals that would speak to us in the night bringing us guidance and support. Our Creator taught us all that was wise and good and then gave us language, a language in which we might be able to pass on this knowledge to our children so that they could survive and flourish. Our Creator also taught us about the two worlds that were divided by a cloudlike wall that opened and fell at various intervals and the firm and believing of heart could be able to move between those worlds unscathed but the weak and unbelieving would be crushed to atoms. (Battiste 1997b:147).

In reference to the concepts of "Creator" and creation described by Bern, the description of the "Creator" and the act of creation provided by Marie Battiste is more in keeping with the *nounified* "God" of Christianity than a Mi'kmaq "Creator" who is an "active presence in the world". Teachings about "our Creator" as the overseer of creation, as one who provided teachings and instruction, are dogmatic in nature and are more in line with what Bern perceives to be a Western concept of "God" and "His" works.<sup>20</sup> For some Mi'kmaq people this hybridization of Mi'kmaq

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<sup>20</sup>Interestingly, Marie does not include a description of the act of creation. This omission may result, in part, from the fact that pre-contact Mi'kmaq believed themselves to be autochthonous, or to have emerged from the earth. Ruth Holmes-Whitehead states: "The People [Mi'kmaq] were born from the body of the earth, their mother. In the eighteenth century, prayers to the sun and the moon...acknowledged the role of both in the creation of the world" (Whitehead 1988:8). However, not all Mi'kmaq agree that their ancestors were "sun

and Western concepts poses a problem. For instance, Bern suggests that it is through the influence of Western/Christian teachings that has changed the way in which “God”/“Creator” is perceived and understood by the Mi’kmaq.

There are, however, a number of obvious similarities between Marie Battiste’s description of pre-contact Mi’kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways and Bern’s observations on the ways in which the world is posited in the Mi’kmaw language. For instance, Marie’s reference to “our Creator,”<sup>21</sup> as opposed to “*the* Creator” acknowledges the particularistic concept of “god” implicit in the Mi’kmaw language. She also suggests that the Mi’kmaq held strong religious beliefs and understood the significance of a “Creator” prior to European contact.<sup>22</sup> However, Marie does not acknowledge the incongruities between Christian and Mi’kmaw conceptions of the world that were pointed out by Bern. In the following passage she claims that “[t]he formal and ceremonial rituals

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worshippers.” Some feel that their ancestors did pay homage to the sun, not as a deity, but because they possessed the scientific understanding that life depends on the sun for sustenance. This view is consistent with the Mi’kmaw understanding of the interconnectedness of all that exists. The notion that the Mi’kmaq viewed the sun as a deity is believed to have been propagated by Catholic missionaries in the attempt to establish the Mi’kmaq as “pagans” or worshipers of “false gods” (Fieldnotes, May 1999; Jan. 2000).

<sup>21</sup>It is interesting to note here that Marie Battiste’s references to “our Creator” do not imply a gendered entity. This is a feature of the Mi’kmaw language which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

<sup>22</sup>The notion that the Mi’kmaq knew “God,” or had “religion” before the contact period could also be construed as a Western construct. Later in this chapter, Tanas points out that, according to oral tradition, such “labels” only became important with the arrival of the Europeans.

of spirituality have been imbedded in Christianity,” suggesting that Mi’kmaq Catholicism has been incorporated into Mi’kmaq spirituality without unduly affecting the belief system that existed prior to European contact:

The Mi’kmaq are deeply spiritual people who throughout their daily life demonstrate their spiritual consciousness. Spirituality is a very strong part of a child’s growth and development and is very evident in all aspects of Mi’kmaq life. The formal and ceremonial rituals of spirituality have been imbedded in Christian traditions, although there have been changes occurring as Mi’kmaq search their identity through pan-Indian spirituality and traditions. But Mi’kmaq history holds a rare relationship with the Catholic church. In 1610 the Mi’kmaq people entered into a compact with the Holy Roman Empire when our Chief Membertou and 140 others were first baptized. While our alliance with the Church was more political than spiritual, it was solidified in daily rituals when the French priest Father Antoine Maillard learned Mi’kmaq and began addressing the spiritual questions of the people...Following the expulsion of the French priests...[the] Mi’kmaq people held to their strong spiritual rituals in the Catholic church by conducting their own adopted Catholic rituals. They had prayer leaders who led Sunday prayers, baptized children, accepted promises of marriage, and provided last rites for the dying...These Catholic rituals continue today in many communities, and elders play still an important role in them, although a priest in the community offers the primary services (Battiste 1997b:157-158).

In Marie Battiste’s view then, the relationship between the Mi’kmaq and the Roman Catholic Church was at first a political alliance. That initial acceptance of Catholicism by the Mi’kmaq was based on political rather than existential concerns. Accordingly, Marie Battiste appears to be receptive to Catholicism principally because the alliance formed between the Catholic Church and the Mi’kmaq peoples provided an arena for autonomy, leadership and religious self-expression. However, Marie does not explain the far-reaching effects of Catholicism on Mi’kmaq culture and society, nor does she explain how Catholicism has, or has not, gained religious significance among the Mi’kmaq.

It seems that, for Battiste, Catholicism does not threaten the integrity of Mi'kmaw culture, rather it is viewed as a feature of it. Although she does not explain the process through which Catholicism became incorporated into Mi'kmaw tradition, Marie does state that the Mi'kmaw conducted "their own adopted Catholic rituals." This phrase suggests, of course, that the Mi'kmaq actively participated in, and exercised some degree of control over, the ways in which Catholicism was incorporated into Mi'kmaw culture. For Marie, Mi'kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways remain intact through Mi'kmaw oral tradition and socialization, of which Catholicism is only one part:

The Mi'kmaq language exists as the essential base of knowledge and survival. More than just a knowledge base, Mi'kmaq language reflects a philosophy, a philosophy of how we shall live with one another, a philosophy that reflects how we treat each other, and how all things in the world fit together...Mi'kmaq people believe that because all things are connected, all of us must depend on each other and help each other as a way of life, for that is what it means to be in balance and harmony with the earth. If we do not care about each other and about the animals, about the plants and their survival, about the trees and their survival, then we will not survive ourselves for very long...Mi'kmaq language embodies the verb and relationships to each other; how we are kin to each other...How we are with one another, how we treat one another and our life together in community is more important than the degree of education, the wealth, or the kind of job we have. So, within the philosophy of language is a notion of how we should relate to one another and how we should retain that relationship. The verb-based language provides the consciousness of what it is to be Mi'kmaq and the interdependence of all things (Battiste 1997b:147-148).

There are noticeable incongruities between Mi'kmaw lifeworlds and related philosophies and processes of socialization, as they are described by Marie Battiste, and the worldview that informs Christian teachings. Again, Marie's understandings of Mi'kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways, as they are related through language are consistent with those explanations offered by Bern Francis. However, while Bern views Catholicism as being assimilationist, Marie suggests that only specific

aspects of Mi'kmaw spirituality have been assimilated into Christian contexts, while others are syncretic, or, exist alongside, Catholicism without being unduly affected by it. For Marie, the most immediate challenge confronting present-day Mi'kmaw people is not directly related to religion and religious identity *per se*, but centers on the need for Mi'kmaw people to “unleash” themselves “from colonial doubt, inferiority complex [sic], and confusion created by public and federal schooling and Eurocentric assumptions and fallacies”(1993:160). Battiste does not associate Catholicism with Eurocentrism, but views it as a religious tradition that has been adopted into Mi'kmaw culture and society.

Another Mi'kmaw woman, Eva, is in agreement with Battiste. (Battiste 1997b:160). Eva, in her mid to late fifties, is also an educator. Eva is a life-long resident of Eskasoni, where she presently lives with her husband. Her children, grandchildren and many members of her extended family also reside in the community. Eva has a strong sense of what it means to be Mi'kmaq and considers her Catholic faith to be very much a part of her Mi'kmaw identity. She explains:

One of the main reasons why the Mi'kmaq became followers of Christianity is because of the vision of the three crosses. We were already a nation of cross-bearers before the missionaries arrived. It is a symbol that was not alien to them [the Mi'kmaq]. The shaman knew that the third cross was going to appear, so when the missionaries arrived with the cross, then the vision was fulfilled. I believe that Jesus was not alien to the Mi'kmaq either—that many of the teachings about Jesus were similar to what the Mi'kmaq already believed. The Mi'kmaq are a communal people—they have strong sense of what is good for the group. To our people, someone who was willing to die for the good of all had to be good, and in this way Jesus appealed to the Mi'kmaw sense of community. Initially, the Natives did not understand the rituals and the sacraments of the RC church. They were mysterious to the Mi'kmaw people. They did not understand the wholeness of the faith, but the generosity, kindness and forgiveness taught resembled traditional Mi'kmaw beliefs. The Christian faith is something that is always unfolding. The Mi'kmaq have something to

teach the Church and the Church has not caught up with the Native way of thinking. Religion unfolds like the seasons. The seasons happen four times a year, there is constant changing, but nature is also constant. It is hard not to make things hierarchical but in the interconnectedness of things it is easy to see God in nature. You just have to look...For the Mi'kmaq there is a spiritual duality. The Mi'kmaq respect nature and in doing so have respect for the Creator. How can you respect nature if you do not respect the Creator? One follows from the other, but I do not see any problem between thinking this way and being a Catholic as well (Fieldnotes, Book I:17-19).

Although Eva locates Mi'kmaw Catholicism in the past, she does so with the claim that the Mi'kmaw people knew "Christianity" prior to European contact. For her, the introduction and acceptance of Catholicism into Mi'kmaw culture and society was a logical extension of existing Mi'kmaw faith and belief. It is significant that Eva's understanding of religion and spirituality is contextualized within a Christian framework. Eva's insistence that the Mi'kmaw were "a nation of cross-bearers" before the arrival of the missionaries, suggests that the Mi'kmaq were not only a "religious" people in their own right, but that they had an awareness of Jesus and the Christian God. For Eva, little has changed in this regard: the arrival of the Christian cross was simply the fulfillment of a pre-existing prophecy, and the basic teachings of the Church were "not alien" to her people. The Christian sense of community and the concepts of "generosity, kindness and forgiveness" which are cornerstones of the Christian faith, existed among the Mi'kmaq prior to European contact: Catholicism merely offered a different religious context for the expression of such beliefs.

The Mi'kmaw "spiritual duality," of which Eva speaks, implies that the Mi'kmaw cosmology does not coincide with that of Christianity. Eva suggests that, for the Mi'kmaw people, life is a continual process, that nature is continually "unfolding," and that "in the interconnectedness



of things,” “God”/the “Creator” is very much a part of this process. For Eva, respect for nature and respect for the “Creator” follow logically from each other, but she is also aware that the Church does not share this view. In effect, the view that the “Christian faith is something that is always unfolding” is a reinterpretation of Christianity within the Mi’kmaw understanding that nature, life and all of existence is a continual process.<sup>23</sup> Eva suggests that the Church fails to recognize faith as process, and in this regard has not “caught up with the Native way of thinking.” The Church’s failure to acknowledge that the Mi’kmaq “have something to teach the Church” carries the strong implication that the Church assumes a position of authority. So, while Eva defends Mi’kmaw Catholicism, she has reservations about the role of the Church in her community, intimating that, on some level, it is subversive of Mi’kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways.

Another of my respondents, Jonal, attends church regularly, but like Eva, expresses a

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<sup>23</sup>James Clifford refers to cross-cultural appropriations of this type as *hybrid authenticity*. Phenomenologically, *hybrid authenticity* or the innovative process of incorporating features of one culture into another, operates against the “[t]wo linked stereotypes” that tribal peoples are “presumed to be *either* primitive and untouched *or* contaminated by progress” (Clifford 1997:157). In his critique of a London exhibit at the Museum of Mankind, called “Paradise: Continuity and Change in the New Guinea Highlands,” Clifford comments that, “for many who pass through the gallery, the notion that traditional culture must diminish in direct proportion to the increase in Coke and Christianity is axiomatic. Against this, the exhibit shows the people of highland New Guinea producing their own fusion of tradition and modernity. The Wahgi make their own history, though not in conditions of their choosing. They are part of a complex Melanesian modernity which is not, or not necessarily, following preordained Western paths. To the extent that visitors to “Paradise” come to understand something like this, the exhibit will perform an important service. Absolutist, all-or-nothing scenarios for change will be undermined, affirming the historical reality and agency of diverse humanity” (Clifford 1997:161-162). Certainly, Clifford’s observations can be applied to the phenomenological features of present-day Mi’kmaw religion and spirituality.

certain degree of dissatisfaction with the role of the Church in Mi'kmaw society. Jonal, a man in his late 50's, has lived in Eskasoni for over fifty years. He is married, the father of five children and the grandfather of nine. Jonal has little formal education, but he is an articulate man who has given considerable thought to Mi'kmaw religion and spirituality. Jonal is a moderate Catholic. While he acknowledges that the Church fulfills a specific function in the community, Jonal is critical of the Catholic Church as an institution and is reluctant to cede spiritual authority to it:

I do not have much use for the Catholic authorities, but I still go to church. I spent a lot of time thinking about the definition of religion and of spirituality. Spirituality is how you live your life and religion is just one way of making contact [with] or praying to the Creator. You can be spiritual without being religious. You really don't need religion, but spirituality is a completely different matter. You must be able to strike a balance between mind, spirit and body and too much of any one is no good...I am a victim of the residential school. I have nothing but contempt for the nuns, priests, lawyers and politicians who always treated us as subservient. I go to church not because of the priest, but because it is part of my upbringing and there are good points to the church (Fieldnotes, Book I:199).

For Jonal, attending church is a religious matter, but not necessarily a spiritual one. In his estimation, the Church provides some essential services, but it has been remiss in its responsibilities to the Mi'kmaw people. From his experiences at residential school,<sup>24</sup> Jonal has learned to mistrust the

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<sup>24</sup>The former students of "Shubie" with whom I spoke often refer to themselves as "victims." Current research on the topic of residential schools in Canada reveals widespread physical sexual and emotional abuse. Writing on the treatment of Mi'kmaw children at the Shubenacadie residential school, Isabelle Knockwood states: "If the rewards were meager and slow in coming, the punishments were plentiful and swift. By the early 1950's the school's reputation has spread throughout the Native community, so that on many reserves, 'Don't do that or you'll be sent to Shubie,' was a standard threat to children. The school was so strongly associated with punishment in children's minds that those who were 'sent to Shubie' as a result of their family circumstances constantly wondered what crime they had committed. For many of them the school's reputation as a place of punishment proved all too accurate" (Knockwood

Roman Catholic Church as an institution, but he remains faithful to it, not because of belief, but for more pragmatic reasons, namely family tradition and services to the community. In some respects, Jonal sees the Church as being inimical to Mi'kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways:

It [the Church] does provide us with some things that are good, but I don't buy into certain dogmas. For instance, I don't buy into the way in which the hierarchy of God-man-nature is divided up. I've done a lot of thinking about this and when you think about such things there is a logic that defies Church teachings. First, there is water--our life-blood, then plants and animals. If you think logically about the structure of how things are then Christian dogma doesn't make any sense. Everything on the planet needs water, and animals need plants and water, but man needs animals, plants and water. The last three can exist without man, but man can't exist without those three things. This should tell us something, how dependent we are and where we really are in the order of things (Fieldnotes, Book I:199-200).

Jonal views Christian teachings as illogical and misleading especially in respect to this way of thinking. The notions of dependency and interrelatedness expressed by Bern, Eva and Marie Battiste resonate with Jonal's understanding of how we as humans must rely on the rest of creation for subsistence. For Jonal, the Christian worldview is not logically coherent. He considers other aspects of Christianity unacceptable as well:

When the missionaries came they gave us a White God who spoke English.<sup>25</sup> What does

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1992:86). For further reading on the treatment of Native children in residential schools refer to Elizabeth Furniss, *Victims of Benevolence: The Dark Legacy of the William's Lake Residential School*.

<sup>25</sup>Jonal's reference to a "White God who spoke English" is quite obviously a mistake. The first missionaries to the Mi'kmaq were French, the fact of which Jonal is very much aware. It appears that Jonal is superimposing present-day power structures and discourse on early contact history. The main point being made by Jonal is that the "White God" introduced into

a White God who speaks English have to do with us? For us, God is not a noun. God is a spirit—an active spirit. The White God is inactive in the spirit of the people. You [“White’ people] pay allegiance to a noun and do not act on your own beliefs. The God that we knew before colonization is as valid as the Christian God. What about all the other nations and the gods they had before Christianity? How old is Christianity? Two thousand years old. What happened before that? What about the other nations of the world and their beliefs, didn’t they exist?...Another thing, God is genderless. There’s no gender in the Mi’kmaw language, there’s equality for all... We have lost our place in the cosmos, but how do we get it back? I would say, not in the Church (Fieldnotes, Book I:199, 213).

While Jonal acknowledges the social function of the Catholic Church in Mi’kmaw society, he also understands that many of its tenets and beliefs are not consonant with Mi’kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways. Jonal points to linguistic, racial and ideological differences as specific areas of divergence between non-Native and Mi’kmaw. Jonal’s understanding of God as a verb is consistent with what Bern says about the way in which “God” is conceived and understood within the Mi’kmaw language. Jonal also recognizes that Christianity has displaced the Mi’kmaw cosmos. While this point is not explicitly stated, Jonal does comment that the Mi’kmaw people do not think in terms of hierarchies, but believe in “equality for all,” even “God is genderless.”<sup>26</sup> Such beliefs indicate that the Christian/Western worldview violates Mi’kmaw cosmology at a fundamental level.

Jonal also told me of the spiritual teachings of the Mi’kmaq.<sup>27</sup> He said that humility, charity,

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Mi’kmaw society spoke a non-Native language and is from a different cultural milieu.

<sup>26</sup>In Mi’kmaw nomenclature, personal pronouns are genderless. For example, *nekm*, the referent for the third person singular, refers to either he or she (Fieldnotes, Mi’kmaq 210, Oct. 12, 1999).

<sup>27</sup>The Mi’kmaw educator, Murdena Marshall identifies and explains the basic principles of Mi’kmaw spirituality. However, I am not at liberty to discuss them here. Murdena graciously

equality, respect, honesty and love are among the most important teachings passed on to children by their parents and grandparents. When I asked about the origins of these teachings Jonal told me that “we [Mi’kmaq] do not look for origins. For instance, I asked to be born. It’s also possible that I asked to marry [my wife]. What does that tell you about origins?” (Fieldnotes, Book I:201). However, I was offered a very different perspective on Mi’kmaw origins when I spoke to Tanas.

Tanas,<sup>28</sup> is a man in his late 40's who was born and raised in Eskasoni, where he currently lives with his wife, children and grandchildren. Tanas’ opinions on Western concepts of the world are similar to those held by Jonal. Like most Mi’kmaq, Tanas was born and raised Catholic. However, Tanas has abandoned the Church and focused his energies on reclaiming his Mi’kmaw roots. Many people in Eskasoni refer to Tanas as a “Traditionalist,” but he does not claim this identity himself. Like Bern, Tanas considers the Mi’kmaw language to be the key to reclaiming pre-contact understandings and teachings. However, unlike Marie Battiste, he views the Church as an encumbrance that hinders the understanding of Mi’kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways:

I don’t think the Church is for spirit conditioning...Cultracide is what Catholicism has done...We don’t have anything like God. No such thing. No such thing as angels, that’s bullshit...That’s something that people believe, what they were taught to believe. If you believe in Santa Claus, then you will surely ask for toys....I can’t even claim that anything

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provided me with a copy of an unpublished paper on the principles identified above with the proviso that I would not include them in my writings.

<sup>28</sup>In Mi’kmaw, Tanas, pronounced Danas, is the shortened form of Athanasius.

I do is mine...[It's] *L'nu*,<sup>29</sup> the people's... [*L'nu*] believed in life force. Everything that has life has a life force...life force of water...It's very nice to have people go back to their culture and identify their culture. What is, what's there, but another thing...you don't confuse it with somethin' else... We have to go back into the origin of the words. My family grew up with old Mi'kmaw [language]... We have to go back to our language...What is it that we're deciphering. We have a descriptive language. We don't have a labelistic language...No such thing as a woman. How do you describe a woman? No such thing as a man. No aunt, uncle, girlfriend, boyfriend... These are very violent, violent labels on people....I know my language. [We must] use what we have today. People change the descriptions of words. We might as well not teach...I could say "this is wrong, that is wrong" and everybody's doing it (taped interview).

For Tanas, much of what was known and understood by *L'nu*, has been lost to the past. However, he does not rule out the possibility that much can be regained. Like Jonal, Tanas feels that there are profound differences between the God of Christianity and the Mi'kmaw conception of "God." Tanas also agrees with Bern's assessment that Christian and Western influences have obfuscated the "true" meanings and understandings of Mi'kmaw language and culture. Tanas claims that as the language underwent change, people's ideas and understandings changed with it. In effect, Western concepts have infiltrated Mi'kmaw language and thinking to the extent that what was once held sacred has now been demonized. Tanas also feels that the former conception of social and familial relationships has been radically transformed. They are now "labelistic" and foreign to the Mi'kmaw way of thinking:

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<sup>29</sup>The Mi'kmaq claim that *L'nu* is the original name of the Mi'kmaw people. The term Mi'kmaq, derives from *no'kmaq*, which refers to "all my relations," inclusive of humans and others. Oral tradition tells us that early visitors to Mi'kma'ki (Mi'kmaw country) mistook the term as a reference to the Native inhabitants.

The thing is we're sort of adapted to cults—to all that stuff, and Traditionalism.... The people here in Eskasoni are very racist about ...stereotyping. There's people that might label themselves as Traditionalists...[There are] different kinds of traditionalists... "Traditionalism" is a very bad way to describe a person, [it's] not very polite because it's labelistic... How do you get away from that? That's your environment and that's conditioning. That's conditioned violence... I think that the role of devil lingers in the mind. Some people say, "Oh, this guy is working for a devil," but if we take the word *mn 'tu* (what we know today as devil) means life force--we will call it life force, and *kji* means great. *Kji-mn 'tu* is great life force... Today you say *Kji-mn 'tu*, devil! But, yesteryear it was great life force... Of course, if you're looking at something like *niskam*, *Kji-niskam*, which is the same thing as *Kji--mn 'tu*... *Niskam* today we know as God, but *niskam* means what it means... we got to get away from this God thing... God! What is God? God must be busy, huh?... But they don't know what God is first of all. How can you believe in something that you don't know? Gee, this is how stupid the whole thing is. It's stupid (taped interview).

Tanas suggests that through "conditioning," the original Mi'kmaw understanding of *Kji--mn 'tu/Kji--niskam* as great life force has now been replaced by alien ideas of "God," or devil. He suggests that the only way to reverse this process, and reclaim original Mi'kmaw understandings and teachings, is through etymological analysis of the language. He feels that people no longer understand the "true" meanings of Mi'kmaw words and their usage, that "cultracide" and the Westernization of the Mi'kmaw language has taken hold. Tanas is insistent that, despite the intrusion of Western ideology into Mi'kmaw culture and society, past practices can be revitalized, on both individual and collective levels. However, Tanas also asserts that it is through "looking *in*," (or knowledge of the self) "rather than looking up" toward the Christian "God" that the process of reclaiming Mi'kmaw origins is to be realized:

If you're smart enough,... you can step out [of] your conditioning, or whatever you grew up with, and step back, then you can look *in* rather than looking up... You know the difference then... Some people make it outside. Some have a better understanding of what life force is. Once you understand that then you're into what we call visions, or vision

centers...Subconsciously and mentally you start using these [visions]. When you see something important...you are aware of what it is that you are receiving. What is real and what is a dream...we need to recondition ourselves—to accept the other [Mi'kmaw] way of teaching. We cannot use something that has been a constant of the Europeans...That's all silly. Very silly how they kept control here...They're still doing it (taped interview).

It is apparent from Tanas' statements that he recognizes language as the most powerful medium in the transmission of fundamental ideological and pedagogical principles. At the very heart of Tanas' analysis of Western influence on Mi'kmaw culture and society, there is the recognition that the failure to preserve the language has resulted in a ceding of power to the West. Tanas, like Bern, fears that, if attenuation of the language is allowed to persist, Mi'kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways will become increasingly susceptible to the destructive powers of Western discourse. One could argue that (phenomenologically) the language is always changing and that as it accommodates Western concepts, something new is emerging—different from the past, but still Mi'kmaw. In other words, trying to regain the “pure” Mi'kmaw culture through a return to the language, unadulterated by Western concepts, may be impossible: phenomenologically what exists now *is* Mi'kmaw.

## Conclusions

The five voices we have heard in this chapter are a small but representative sample of the various ways in which Mi'kmaw personal and social identities are constructed. I encountered a number of Mi'kmaw people, who like Bern and Tanas, consider analysis of the Mi'kmaw language to be the key to cultural survival. However, I did not meet anyone who expressed as much passion for the Mi'kmaw language as Bern and Tanas. I have, however, met a substantial number of people



like Eva and Marie Battiste who share the Catholic faith, and who recognize it as part of what it means to be Mi'kmaq. I also met others, like Jonal, for whom the abuses experienced in residential school have resulted in feelings of resentment and distrust toward the Catholic Church.

Clearly, all five of these people are unique individuals with their own personal views on the subject of religion and spirituality, but their voices also relate experiences, ideas and opinions similar to those held by many other Mi'kmaw people. Throughout this thesis, I explore most of the ideas and opinions expressed in the communications of this chapter and attend to the various points of convergence and divergence they unveil. However, some of the motifs evident in these discourses merit attention at this point, both to summarize some of the central issues that have been raised and to provide context for subsequent chapters.

I have also found that the role of institutionalized and non-institutionalized religion in forming individual and collective identities is significant for most Mi'kmaw people. In the discourses presented in this chapter, the role of religion as it pertains to Mi'kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways is emphasized, primarily because religious and spiritual views help shape the way in which the world is perceived in relation to the self and others. While Catholicism remains the predominant form of institutionalized religion in Eskasoni, its ideologies and teachings do not entirely eclipse Mi'kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways.

One apparent feature of Mi'kmaw religion is the tension between “Traditional” and what is perceived to be non-traditional religious expression. For some Mi'kmaw speakers, the culture and society in which they live is firmly embedded within the Mi'kmaw language, in the sense that

the language retains and conveys a particular cosmology along with the philosophies and patterns of socialization that emerge from such a view. Because it is verb-based, the Mi'kmaw language exhibits a flexibility that can readily accommodate change, and thereby reflects the Mi'kmaw understanding that the universe is active and ever-changing. Such notions of fluidity and adaptability are also evident in Mi'kmaw spirituality and culture.

For Bern and Tanas, etymological analysis of the language provides a privileged source for reclaiming, retaining and reconstructing original Mi'kmaw ideas and beliefs. Both Bern and Tanas are critical of the Catholic Church, claiming that it has had, and continues to have, an adverse effect on Mi'kmaw culture and society. Conversely, the other three participants' views on the role of the Church in Mi'kmaw society counter this claim. Their interpretations of Mi'kmaw society and culture are not so much concerned with origins as with what the speakers perceive to be valid religious beliefs and expressions. These individuals suggest that the Church plays a vital role in the religious lives of the Mi'kmaw people. However, while the Church is accorded some degree of status and authority in the community, its position is not accepted naively or without qualification: although Jonal and Eva both attend Church, they articulate some misgivings about the institution. The participants' dynamic and ambivalent views on the Church reveal the importance of Mi'kmaw autonomy and self-expression as they pertain to religion and spirituality generally. In addition, the divergence among these views may also reflect the difficulty with which Mi'kmaw personal and social identities are currently constructed and maintained.

Of equal importance to understanding Mi'kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways is the Mi'kmaw

perception of humanity's place in the cosmos. During the 1990's, scholars writing on Mi'kmaq culture and society dealt almost exclusively with the significance of attachment to place, or "rootedness in the land" in the formation of Mi'kmaq social and cultural identities (Parkhill 1997, Reid 1995). However, it is important to note that the Mi'kmaq *metaphysical* sense of *place*, which informs locality, also holds significant philosophical and teleological orientations that impact on existing Mi'kmaq life-ways. In general, Mi'kmaq understandings of the cosmic order have a direct bearing on the beliefs and values which underlie present-day Mi'kmaq culture and social organization. More specifically, Mi'kmaq perceptions of the cosmological order influence the diverse ways in which the sacred is understood and venerated by the Mi'kmaq on both personal and collective levels.

It can be ascertained then, that the diverse cosmological perspectives held by the Mi'kmaq are not confined to the Western or Christian view that the "Creator"/"God" stands in a hierarchical relationship to the rest of creation. Many Mi'kmaq claim that all aspects of creation are interdependent. Attendant to this belief is a Mi'kmaq concept of spirit may or may not be identified with institutionalized religion and is markedly different from the notion of spirit located within Christian discourse. For some Mi'kmaq, the idea of life force or spirit is very much an active part of the physical world. In this perspective, all aspects of creation hold a spiritual element that binds us all together. The nature of the spirit gives each aspect of creation its purpose and its unique character.

This dissertation draws upon the crucial themes identified above and is primarily concerned

with: the past and its uses; the multiplicity of religious or spiritual frameworks that individuals may either invoke or subvert; the role of religion (often apparently contradictory); and the ambivalent process of constructing positive Mi'kmaw identities. In an effort to address these concerns in a holistic fashion, the following chapter deals with the historical and social aspects of the Catholic Church in Eskasoni.

## Chapter Three

### *Alasutmuo'kuomk*:<sup>1</sup> The Church

Bored, uniformed, knowing the ghostly silt  
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground  
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt  
So long and equably what since is found  
Only in separation–marriage, and birth,  
And death, and thoughts of these–for which was built  
This special shell? For, though I've no idea  
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,  
It pleases me to stand in silence here.

Philip Larkin, excerpts from "Church Going."

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### Introduction

The anthropologist Ruth Behar suggests that when writing about "popular"<sup>2</sup> religion and "official" church religion we must be "cautious about attributing too much power to the church" (Behar 1990:78). Behar is reminding us here that religious practioners have always been selective and creative in their interpretations of religious belief (Behar 1990:78). This creativity is particularly evident among the Mi'kmaq of Eskasoni. It is generally acknowledged that the Mi'kmaq have been followers of the Catholic faith since the early seventeenth century, but this claim alone tells us little about the actual practice of Catholicism in Mi'kmaw communities. In general, this chapter is

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<sup>1</sup>*Alasutmuo'kuomk*, translated literally means "at the wigwam where we pray."

<sup>2</sup>References to "popular" religion as it is used in this context follow from William A. Christian's understanding of the term. Christian refers to "popular" religion as "religion as practiced" rather than "religion as prescribed" (Christian 1981a:178).

concerned with the ways in which Catholicism remains socially, culturally and historically relevant, in addition to being religiously meaningful for many Mi'kmaq people at the turn of the twenty-first century. More specifically, this chapter addresses two particular issues relating to Catholicism in Eskasoni. First, I look at the ways in which Catholicism became accepted as a "traditional" practice which continues to define "religion" in the community today. Second, I wish to draw attention to the differences between the role of the Church as perceived by the parishioners and by the various priests who have ministered to the Mi'kmaq.

### **The Church in Eskasoni**

Upon entering Eskasoni from the East Bay road, the most prominent building to come into view is Holy Family Catholic Church. This church is somewhat of an anomaly in *Una'maki* (Cape Breton); it is the single Mi'kmaq parish church in the area. All other reserves are served through the Catholic mission church system.<sup>3</sup> Holy Family church was erected in 1910, replacing a previously-existing mission church.<sup>4</sup> However, Eskasoni did not

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<sup>3</sup>For instance, the neighbouring reserves of Chapel Island and Membertou (Sydney) are served by St. Peter's parish in St. Peters and St. Anthony Daniel parish in Sydney, respectively.

<sup>4</sup>Most of the information concerning the history of Holy Family church was provided by the Sisters of Martha and the current priest of Eskasoni, Fr. Robert MacNeil. The Sisters of Martha also own early photographs of the interior and exterior of the church.



2. Pictured above is the tabernacle (where Communion wafers are kept) in Holy Family parish church in Eskasoni. This particular tabernacle was made by local craftspersons. Photo by Angela Robinson, 2000.

achieve parish status until 1944 during the period of centralization.<sup>5</sup>

On a number of levels, the Catholic faith, and Holy Family Church as an embodiment of this faith, are meaningful for many residents of Eskasoni: as an institution the Church offers local

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<sup>5</sup>Centralization was a cooperative venture on the part of the federal government of Canada and the provincial government of Nova Scotia to relocate the Mi'kmaq people from small, scattered bands to larger, more manageable central locations. The primary site chosen in Cape Breton was Eskasoni. Centralization began in the early 1940's and by 1949 was deemed a failure by both government officials and by those who were subject to its policies (Paul 1996).

residents a formal religious structure in which to raise their children, to observe rites of passage and to express themselves religiously.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these obvious functions, many people in Eskasoni view the Church as being socially, culturally and historically significant. The historical and cultural relevance of Catholicism derives from the early contact period when alliances between the Mi'kmaq and the Church were established.<sup>7</sup> Many Mi'kmaq consider that the Church was a repository for Mi'kmaw culture during the periods when the demise of Mi'kmaw life-ways and beliefs appeared imminent.<sup>8</sup>

The Church also remains one of the most important religious and social institutions in Eskasoni. For many Mi'kmaq, the Church provides the religious direction necessary for personal

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<sup>6</sup>Since Holy Family Church is also the only religious institution in Eskasoni it is the primary location for the performance of rites of passage such as births, deaths and marriages. However, the Church is also considered a social venue as well: it houses the Gabriel Centre which originally opened in 1982 and was expanded in the late 1990's. The original Gabriel Centre has been converted to a vestry and administration rooms. The expanded centre is now located in the basement of the Church. This facility, named after the late Grand Chief Gabriel Sylliboy, is where communal gatherings commemorating special occasions are often held. During my stay at Eskasoni, I personally attended a number of feasts, *salites*, a wedding anniversary, a birthday party, a New Year's Eve celebration and several other social functions at the centre. On occasion, wakes are also held at the facility, but this is more the exception than the rule; wakes are typically held at the family home (personal observations).

<sup>7</sup>One respondent told me that this alliance is actually a treaty that has been orally transmitted, "and like all treaties it has to be honoured... We honour what has been passed on to us by our elders" (Fieldnotes, Book IV:730).

<sup>8</sup>As previously mentioned, not all Mi'kmaq share this view. While many espouse the opinion that the Church was always, and continues to be, an ally of the Mi'kmaw people, others consider such an alliance to be detrimental to Mi'kmaw society and culture.



and social well-being. To a certain degree, Catholic pedagogy is reflected in Mi'kmaw understanding of what constitutes moral or immoral behaviour, and is also evident in the way in which certain social distinctions are made. For instance, Fr. Martin,<sup>9</sup> a former priest of Eskasoni told me that the Mi'kmaq are “good church-goers”:

Church is very important to them. I think probably they might look down on someone that didn't go. This is a thing that you do, you don't miss Church. You're expected to go. They laugh at you if you go once at Christmastime. They'll say to them, “Well, you're here!” (Fieldnotes, Book I:43).

Although Fr. Martin contends that church attendance is important to the Mi'kmaq he is actually speaking of a particular group of people in the parish.<sup>10</sup> There is a core group of families who go to church regularly, while the majority of the population attend periodically (Fieldnotes, personal observations). Rather than claiming that the Mi'kmaq “might look down on someone that didn't go,” I would like to suggest that it is not so much that those who do not participate in the mass are looked down upon but instead that regular church attendees are looked up to as leaders or role models within the community. Broadly speaking, the Mi'kmaq are non-confrontational and while often critical of one other, an individual's involvement in community matters is considered to be just as important as their reputation for attending church regularly. However, those who voice

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<sup>9</sup>Owing to the sensitive nature of much of the material presented here, biographical information and the actual names of priests are withheld unless otherwise noted.

<sup>10</sup>There are alternative views on church attendance: another priest told me that “missing mass is not a big deal with them [the Mi'kmaq]...It's a place for rites of passage” (taped interview).

negative opposition to the Church are often openly criticized principally because such outright dissension is often perceived as a threat to, or at the very least an infringement on, personal religious convictions.

### **The Church: History and Tradition**

Generally speaking, Catholicism is significant for Mi'kmaw Catholics and Catholic Traditionalists alike. As mentioned in Chapter One, those who subscribe to the Catholic faith consider it to be equal, or perhaps superior to, many Native religious "traditions" found in present-day Mi'kmaw culture. For some, loyalty to the Church is commensurate with respect for one's forebears: to be Catholic means to participate in the religious traditions embraced and upheld by Mi'kmaw ancestors. One respondent told me that he supports the Church because it "connects to our past", and a denial of that past is an admission that "our ancestors were wrong." The Mi'kmaw people "have an agreement between the Mi'kmaq and the Vatican. If we [the Mi'kmaq] deny that, then we deny our ancestors...They [the Catholic Church and the Mi'kmaq] were in trouble and there was a mutual agreement between them to protect each other. We have to uphold this agreement" (Fieldnotes, Book IV:729).

The Mi'kmaq trace their affiliation with Catholicism to the conversion of Chief Membertou in 1610. The historical development of Mi'kmaw Catholicism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is marked by contestation and general adversity. Missionary activity in Île Royale (Cape Breton) was reasonably consistent from the early seventeenth until the mid-eighteenth century when

the area was under French control. However, once New France was ceded to Britain in 1763, British authorities instituted penal statutes that outlawed the practice of Catholicism and forbade the presence of Catholic priests and missionaries in the region.<sup>11</sup> Despite attempts by the British to eliminate the Catholic faith, Catholicism persisted among the Mi'kmaq, owing, for the most part, to the efforts of Fr. Pierre Maillard and the tenacity of the Mi'kmaq people. Maillard, who was missionary to the Mi'kmaq from 1735 - 1762, appointed lay catechists and leaders of Mi'kmaq bands to oversee religious matters in the absence of a priest (Johnston 1958:86).<sup>12</sup> The practices introduced by Maillard were born out of necessity since itinerant priests could only manage to visit their mission posts once or twice a year.<sup>13</sup> Although the lay involvement in Catholic ritual resulting

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<sup>11</sup>When Catholic priests were reintroduced to Nova Scotia it was more for political exigency than to address spiritual concerns. In 1768 the British Surveyor-General writes: "There still remains the Quantity of 808,000 Acres unapplied which I have stiled the Savage or Hunting Country. ... This however to be put to the Use the title implies, may be brought to great Value, by affording a Trade in Furs, with the Indians in Return for English Manufactures... But to bring this, as well as other Matters to Perfection, to train them [Mi'kmaq] upon our Interests, & bring them to lend us their Assistance on all Occasions, they must have a priest of the Roman Catholic Religion" (as quoted in Johnston 1958:89).

<sup>12</sup>"From his 'oratory' Father Maillard also gave spiritual direction to the Catholics who were scattered throughout the province and as far afield as Boston. This he did by appointing 'catechists', whose duty it was to see to the religious instruction of children, preside at public prayers on Sundays, administer Baptism, receive matrimonial promises, and officiate at funerals" (Johnston 1958:72).

<sup>13</sup>In 1740 the bishop of Quebec appointed Maillard as vicar-general of Île Royale. While in residence on the island, Maillard only visited his mission posts during the summer months when the Mi'kmaq gathered for political, religious and social purposes. The remainder of the year Maillard spent at the fortress of Louisburg where he devoted much of his time to study of the Mi'kmaq language (Prins 1996:140).

from Maillard's instructions was intended only as a short-term solution, in the long-term it became the basic means through which the Catholic faith was sustained among the Mi'kmaq of Cape Breton and throughout Mi'kma'ki.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, Maillard supplied the Mi'kmaq with religious writings based on the Mi'kmaw hieroglyphic writing system. The use of hieroglyphics for religious instruction was first introduced by Fr. Christien Le Clercq, who adopted the system from the Mi'kmaq. Fr. Maillard improved on Le Clercq's system, developing a prayer book that the Mi'kmaq used in the absence of a priest:

Each Sunday, in the absence of a priest, the chief of the place gathered the Indians about him in the church, took the book in his hands with profound reverence, deciphered the hieroglyphics, and then, with great earnestness, impressed upon the minds of his hearers its most important truths. And when the Catholic Indian was laid to rest, the chief read the burial ritual from this book. Again, when Catholic couples were united in the bonds of matrimony, the chief read the prayers of the Church from the Micmac book. And in the homes of the lowly Indians, the head of the family opened the Micmac book each Sunday morning and on other occasions, to read the instructions and prayers for the edification of his wife and children. In this way the Micmac book had taken the place of the missionary for nearly a hundred and seventy years (Lenhart 1932:22).

The method of devotion developed by Maillard, aided by the hieroglyphic prayer books, was instrumental in the performance of rites of passage and congregational services and provided guidelines for general religious instruction. Aside from their practical function, Maillard's prayer books held cultural, religious and historical significance for the Mi'kmaw people. The Mi'kmaw

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<sup>14</sup>Fr. Maillard's ministry covered a large area including all of Cape Breton, parts of mainland Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and portions of New Brunswick and Newfoundland. The Mi'kmaq refer to this area as Mi'kma'ki.

poet, Rita Joe, recounts the importance of the prayer book to her father:

One of my most memorable experiences as a child was a trip to Halifax with my father. I will never forget how happy father was to get a hieroglyphic prayer book. My father could read the hieroglyphics and had a prayer book that had gone missing. My father was overjoyed and read the prayer book over and over from cover to cover. He would read some part out loud and taught me some of the symbols that I now forget (Fieldnotes, Book III:424).

Rita also told me that her father was not exceptional in this practice. She remembers as a young child hearing her father and some of the older men in the community talking: "They were always talking and after a while I realized that they were talking about the hieroglyphics" (Fieldnotes, Book III:424).

It appears that the Mi'kmaq had a great attachment to the prayer books, but this attachment was not based solely on religious conviction. In many cases, family prayer books were handed down from generation to generation. Indeed the books were sacred, but they were treasured for other reasons as well. For one thing, the mere existence of the texts proved that the Mi'kmaq were an intellectually sophisticated people.<sup>15</sup> This fact alone operates against the

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<sup>15</sup>Most Mi'kmaq insist that the writing system formalized by the Jesuit missionary Christien Le Clercq and expanded by Fr. Maillard was based on an existing writing system. Le Clercq notes that, "I noticed that some children were making marks with charcoal upon birch-bark, and were counting these with the finger very accurately at each word of prayers which they pronounced. This made me believe that by giving them some formulary, which would aid their memory by definite characters, I should advance much more quickly than by teaching them through the method of making repeat a number of times what I said to them. I was charmed to find that I was not mistaken, and that these characters that I had formed upon paper produced all the effect I could wish" (Le Clercq 1968 [1691]:131).

perception that the Mi'kmaq were illiterate and incompetent people by non-Native standards.<sup>16</sup>

Although Catholic parishes were firmly established in Nova Scotia by the turn of the twentieth century (Johnston 1958, vol. II:112-115), many Mi'kmaq continued to rely on the system established by Maillard.<sup>17</sup> In the early twentieth century, Maillard's prayer books were largely replaced by Fr. R. P. Pacifique's *Alasotmamgeoel Le Paroissen Micmac* and *Aganleoimgeoel offices du dimache extrait du Paroissien Micmac*.<sup>18</sup> Fr. Pacifique's *Paroissen*, which includes

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<sup>16</sup>It is important to the Mi'kmaq that misunderstandings about Mi'kmaw society and culture be corrected. Many Mi'kmaq believe that non-Natives have very little understanding of their culture and social life and as a result they continue to be labelled as illiterate and incompetent people. The current *Kji- Keptin* (Grand Captain) of the *Sante' Mawio'mi* (Grand Council), Alec Denny, told me that the Mi'kmaq were always, and still are, a highly intelligent and learned society: "We were not stupid . [My father] used to write letters...He knew French, Gaelic, and Mi'kmaq—the language and the hieroglyphs. There were educated people, some did writing, others spoke. In the 60's and 70's some people appeared to come out of the woodwork. We are persistent!..My father told me that the Mi'kmaq used different systems to communicate with each other. They would write letters in the Pacifique system, then they would change [them] to hieroglyphics to encrypt letters" (Fieldnotes, Book V:983).

<sup>17</sup>A former parish priest states: "They [the Mi'kmaq] date their association with [with the Catholic Church] to 1610. It is so deeply rooted, and the French dominance and the priests are remembered. Maillard is an example. There was a period of about 100 years when there were no priests and it was the Grand Council, which is the cultural entity over all the Mi'kmaqs [sic] in the Maritimes which kept the faith going" (Fieldnotes, Book I:77).

<sup>18</sup>There are a number of Mi'kmaw prayer books several of which those written in the Mi'kmaw language (as opposed to hieroglyphics) were published by Fr. Pacifique. The *Aganleoimgeoel offices du dimache extrait du Paroissen Micmac*, published in Quebec in 1917 is a republication of Maillard's 1759 text. The prayer books in most common usage is a two volume set titled *Alasotmamgeoel Le Paroissen Micmac*, written by Fr. Pacifique. Volume I was published in 1912 and the completing volume was published fourteen years later in 1936.

hymns, prayers and liturgies written in the Mi'kmaw language,<sup>19</sup> eventually became the standard religious text for the Mi'kmaq.

In Eskasoni, the use of Pacifique's *Paroissen* and the Maillard system remained intact until the mid 1940's only being dispensed with upon the arrival of the first resident priest Fr. A. A. Ross. Prior to Fr. Ross' arrival in 1944, the Mi'kmaq of Eskasoni depended on members of the *Sante' Mawoi'mi* (Grand Council)<sup>20</sup> and priests from neighbouring parishes to preside over religious services. If no priest was available, members of the *Sante' Mawio'mi*, especially the *Kji-Saqamaw* (Grand Captain), the *Keptins* (Captains) and the *nujialasutama'tijik* (those who pray),<sup>21</sup> served as catechists who oversaw religious matters. One respondent, Dora, now in her

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<sup>19</sup>Fr. Pacifique is also responsible for the first Mi'kmaw orthography which is based on French language usage. In the early 1980's, Pacifique's orthography was replaced by the English-based Smith/Francis system which is now in general use throughout Nova Scotia. However, the Mi'kmaq of New Brunswick retain the Pacifique system of writing (personal communication).

<sup>20</sup>The English (Grand Council) and the Mi'kmaw (*Sante' Mawio'mi*) references to the Grand Council are in common usage among the Mi'kmaq. Leslie McMillan points out that there is "no homogenous perspective of the Grand Council, its roles and responsibilities." Rather, there are various perspectives ranging from viewing the Grand Council as a "traditional governing body" to seeing it as an institution that provides spiritual leadership for the Mi'kmaw nation. McMillan suggests that since the formation of chiefs, band councils and lobby groups in the 1960's, the Grand Council has experienced a decline in its political leadership (McMillan 1996:131-132).

<sup>21</sup>Schmidt and Marshall state, "Prayer leaders were trained by the missionary [Fr. Maillard] to provide religious instruction, administer baptisms and marriages, and officiate at funerals. Many *nujialasutma'jik* were local and regional chiefs who, in the absence of a priest, gathered their people on holy days to recite from hieroglyphic books" (Schmidt and Marshall 1995:11). More recently, in each Mi'kmaw community there are prayer leaders

60's, remembers Grand Council leaders officiating at religious services:

Although we had a church we did not have a priest. Sometimes the priest from Christmas Island would come for Mass, but only on special occasions like Easter and Christmas. Sunday Mass was held once a month and was led by Grand Chief Gabriel Sylliboy. If he could not do it for some reason, then the Grand Captain or one of the members of the Grand Council would. Even though we didn't have a priest we always had a choir. I remember a wake ritual, which is now dying out, where the choir, or certain members of the choir, would come to the wake and sing all night for two nights in a row<sup>22</sup> (Fieldnotes, Book III:381-382).

In a conversation with two prominent Mi'kmaw elders in Eskasoni, Wilfred Prosper and Dr. Margaret Johnson, I learned that in addition to special services like wakes, the Mi'kmaq gathered on holy days, especially during Lent, to conduct prayer services.<sup>23</sup> Wilfred recalls that the readings for these meetings were mostly taken from the hieroglyphic prayer books.<sup>24</sup> Wilfred

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(usually, but not exclusively, female) assigned by the *Sante' Mawio'mi* to oversee various types of prayer services in the community. The role of prayer leaders will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five in relation to the performance of prayer at wakes.

<sup>22</sup>This particular funerary ritual was explained to me in greater detail by two Mi'kmaw elders, Dr. Margaret Johnson and local historian Wilfred Prosper. Margaret and Wilfred recall participating in local religious services from the early 1930's until the 1980's.

<sup>23</sup>Wilfred and Margaret mentioned that these services were attended by elders, family members and friends from throughout Mi'kma'ki. Apparently, people travelled great distances to gather for occasions such as funerals, weddings and for special liturgical celebrations such as Easter, Christmas and St. Anne's Day. This feature of Mi'kmaw Catholicism is discussed in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis.

<sup>24</sup>Wilfred stated that, "I can read all of it, but there are few people who still do" (Fieldnotes, Book III:436). Wilfred contends that a reliance on hieroglyphic texts is no longer a necessary part of Mi'kmaw religion. When I asked him whether or not young people still learn the hieroglyphics, he responded by saying, "What for? We no longer need to depend on them. They were memory aids. Now people can read and there's tons of printed materials. We don't need them anymore" (Fieldnotes, Book III:437).



participated in many of these types of services and vividly recalls how they were conducted:

[D]uring Lent prayer leaders and the elders would gather in someone's house and say prayers and sing. They would do this all through the night. Whenever an elder came they would start up praying and singing until everyone was exhausted, sleeping where they sat or on the floor...At wakes they used to do pretty much the same thing, but this is no longer done (Fieldnotes, Book III:435-436).

From Wilfred's account of community religious practices, it is clear that devotional services were not restricted to those held at the Church. The fact that the Mi'kmaw people gathered on their own to recite prayers and to sing hymns suggests that the lay persons who congregated with prayer leaders in informal gatherings also contributed to maintaining the Catholic faith among the Mi'kmaq.

Another Mi'kmaw elder, Mrs. Suzie Denny, recalls that before *Kji- Saqamaw* Gabriel Sylliboy moved to Eskasoni, church services were conducted by Grand Council members and lay persons:

There were six or seven men along with Peter Denny who said prayers every Sunday in the church. They did not give Holy Communion, but they could bury people and baptize children if it was an emergency. The priest would come over once a month from Christmas Island to hear confession and serve mass. Peter Denny and the choir would say prayers and sing at wakes. They would bury people and when the priest came he would bless the grave. Fr. Ross was the first priest to live in Eskasoni. Before we had a priest First Communion would be done in the community. It was the children from Malagawatch, Potlotek<sup>25</sup> and Barra Head who had First Communion at Potlotek. If you wanted to get married, you went to Christmas Island. People also got married at Potlotek, but not too many, just sometimes. I got married in 1945. Fr. Ross married me and my husband...Steven Simon used to say prayers and read at the mission and also did things in the church here. He used to say prayers from the prayer books and light candles. He was an altar boy and did the Stations of the Cross during Lent (Fieldnotes, Book V:828).

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<sup>25</sup>Here, Mrs. Denny is referring to the community of Potlotek (Chapel Island) and not the island where the annual St. Anne's Mission is held.

In the late 1990's, it was within recent memory that the church at Eskasoni was still very much a church of the Mi'kmaw people. However, with the arrival of a resident priest local religious services were promptly and dramatically changed. Many of the old Mi'kmaw traditions were quickly set aside and were replaced with official Church policies and practices administered by the local parish priest.

Speaking of the changes that occurred after the arrival of Fr. Ross, Dora remarks that the *pa'tlia's* (priest) had a decided effect on the way in which the Church functioned in the community. Before a priest was stationed in Eskasoni, the Mi'kmaq had control of their own church and were accustomed to conducting prayers, rituals and devotional services in their own way. They were not used to the intervention of Church representatives in regular devotional services. As mentioned, most religious events were overseen by various members of the *Sante' Mawio'mi* both inside and outside the church. Dora, who witnessed the transfer of power and authority from a primarily community-based to an official Church system, recalls that many of the changes were not fully accepted by the Mi'kmaq, especially since they were imposed by an outsider who knew little about the community and its people:

Once Fr. Ross came...many practices stopped. I guess you have to take the good with the bad. Fr. Ross was very authoritative and controlled everything that went on in the parish. He stopped the Mi'kmaw prayers, the choir and changed everything to Latin. He picked his own people for the choir and stopped a lot of the things that people used to do. I thought this was a direct challenge to Mi'kmaw culture because once they stopped using the language they started to lose their culture. Fr. Ross insisted that Mi'kmaq not be spoken in the schools and you were punished when you did (Fieldnotes, Book III:383-385).

Dora points out that the patriarchal authority assumed by the parish priest extended beyond strictly religious matters and was perceived as a formidable threat to Mi'kmaw life-ways. However, Dora also makes it clear that the people did not acquiesce to the priest's prohibition on the use of the Mi'kmaw language but actively protested this restriction:

I was personally delivered home by Fr. Ross one day. He insisted that I be punished for saying a Mi'kmaw word. But, my father refused to punish me and he told the priest "if we lose our language, we lose our culture." He [my father] knew what would happen. I know that the Church itself is authoritative and that the priest was only doing his job, but it's awful the way that priests come into communities and take over (Fieldnotes, Book III:384-385).<sup>26</sup>

While in conversation with a group of Catholic women in Eskasoni, I also learned that in addition to the reforms noted above, Fr. Ross took it upon himself to change the name of the parish from Holy Family to St. Anne's. The people were not consulted about this change and voiced their opposition to it. However, the objections of the people went unnoticed and the church retained the name of St. Anne's for the duration of Fr. Ross' stay in Eskasoni. However, when Fr. Ross left the

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<sup>26</sup>Dora adds that an incident at Conne River, Newfoundland, is a good example of the way in which priests asserted control: "My grandfather was the Grand Chief in Conne River. Fr. Croix ordered that no Mi'kmaq be spoken. If you went to confession and confessed to speaking Mi'kmaq there would be no absolution. My grandfather argued against the priest and as a result two camps developed in the community: those who supported my grandfather and those who supported the priest. From what I've been told, grandfather was chased out of Conne River. A group of men who supported the priest came to my grandfather's house in the middle of the night armed with guns, sticks and weapons and threatened his life. This was enough for my grandfather, so he took his family and moved here to Cape Breton, which was another country at the time. It must have been a terrible time for him...When my grandfather left he took his Grand Chiefs medal and placed it on the statue of St Anne. I remember seeing it there on trips to Conne River" (Fieldnotes, Book III:385-386).

parish in 1954 the people insisted that it revert back to Holy Family, the name by which it is still known (Fieldnotes, Book III:379).

Indeed, the appointment of a priest to Holy Family parish appears to have been a mixed blessing. At last, the Mi'kmaw people had their very own priest, but judging from the information provided by Dora and Mrs. Suzie Denny, the formal Church structure imposed by Fr. Ross in the mid 1940's involved the reconfiguration of local Catholic practices. From what Dora tells us, the arrival of a resident priest changed the balance of the existing power structure. Essentially, the parish priest ushered in dramatic changes to the liturgy and limited the involvement and control of the *Sante' Mawio'mi* and lay persons in the church. Although such innovations were consistent with mainstream Catholic practice, the residents of Eskasoni were faced with peremptory changes in "local" religious practice and expression. While modifications to devotional procedures were somewhat disconcerting to the Mi'kmaq, they were not perceived to be as intrusive as the unwarranted censure of the Mi'kmaw language and culture enforced by the parish priest. Even in the late 1990's tensions existed between perceptions of the Church held by Mi'kmaw Catholics and the views and policies embraced by Church officials.

### **The Priest, the Church and Mi'kmaw Catholicism**

Many Mi'kmaq claim that Mi'kmaw Catholicism is distinctive from mainstream Catholic practice. The differences in the character of Mi'kmaw Catholicism can be attributed to centuries of historical development and interactions, or lack thereof, between clerical authorities and local

parishioners. As noted, the formalization of Church services in Mi'kmaw communities like Eskasoni is a fairly recent phenomena, essentially developed in the early half of the twentieth century. Prior to this, participation in Catholicism among the Mi'kmaw people was essentially guided by the involvement of local religious specialists (members of the *Sante' Mawio'mi*) and lay leadership. However, once Eskasoni officially became a parish and the authority of the priest was established, the privileging of Church policies and procedures by Catholic officials over and above local devotional practices generated conflict between official and unofficial religion in the community.

Anthropologists studying the interaction between popular and official religion suggest that ongoing conflict between the religious experiences of ordinary people and the religious practices sanctioned by church officials<sup>27</sup> are relatively common (Abu-Lughod 1993a, 1993b; Badone 1990; Behar 1990; Brettell 1990; Christian 1992, 1996; Freeman 1978). For instance, in her study of a Bedouin community, Abu-Lughod observes that

scholars often artificially separate localized practices...from the official religion, and then devalue them. Distinctions are drawn between popular and orthodox religion, local and universal belief and practice...or, in the worst case, between ignorance and the knowledge of true religion...Practices disapproved of by learned religious authorities may be dismissed as superstitious vestiges of the past or corruptions. In more socially grounded analyses, the orthodox and "universal" versions of religion might be recognized as the ideology of certain social groups or the world religions themselves as the imposition of dominant outsiders (Abu-Lughod 1993b:189).

Abu-Lughod states further that anthropologists are aware of such distinctions and normative claims

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<sup>27</sup>For detailed accounts of Roman Catholic and Catholic Orthodox religion in Europe refer to *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*, Ellen Badone (ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

and now examine “without judgement the interaction of the complex of practices” which make up religious contexts (Abu-Lughod 1993b:189). Likewise, in her study on Roman Catholicism in Portugal, anthropologist Caroline Brettell contends that conflict between local and official traditions is a notable feature of “popular” religion. In general, Brettell focuses on “the contractual relationship between the doctrinal definition adhered to by the parish priest and other church officials and the ideas about religion and community behaviour that are the will of the people” (Brettell 1990:55). Brettell also recognizes that the rootedness of local Catholic practice is “such that manifestations of religious practice (embodying both belief and behavior) are neither of the orthodox institution (represented by its priests) nor totally of the people. They are, more often than not, an accommodation between the two” (Brettell 1990:55-56). More specifically, Brettell identifies “four structural oppositions” within Portuguese Catholicism, several of which can be aptly applied to Catholic practice in Eskasoni.

The first structural opposition relevant to the Mi’kmaw case “is rooted in the notion of anticlericalism as religious belief. The parish priest must carry out his orthodox functions in cooperation with his people and in the face of censure and criticism” (Brettell 1990:56). For instance, in Eskasoni, adherence to Mi’kmaw cultural and social conventions is often (but not always) perceived by the Catholic clergy to be in contravention of orthodox Catholic teachings. In some cases, the attitudes of the priest toward popular religious beliefs and practices among the Mi’kmaq are paternalistic and perpetuate the notion that the priest as a figure of authority knows what is best for the Mi’kmaw people. Specific devotional practices, such as the veneration of St.

Anne, the incorporation of non-Christian religious traditions into Catholic practices and the insistence on Mi'kmaw autonomy regarding religious matters, are all features of Mi'kmaw Catholicism that have been, and to some extent still are, sources of conflict between parishioners and the priest.

The second of Brettell's structural oppositions applicable here is "the uneasy balance between the sacred and the profane" (Brettell 1990:56). Brettell states that the sacred and profane "are not separate realms but instead complexly intertwined aspects of Portugese Catholicism" (Brettell 1990:56). As stated in Chapter One, within Mi'kmaw cosmology, religion, faith and spirituality are understood experientially, meaning that, for many Mi'kmaq, the realm of the sacred is very much a part of everyday life. The "spiritual duality"<sup>28</sup> of which Eva speaks in Chapter Two is a particular religious orientation that is not perceived by many Mi'kmaq as inimical to Catholicism, but rather as a logical extension of belief in "God/Creator."

During my fieldwork I interviewed a number of priests who ministered to the Mi'kmaq in Cape Breton, most of whom are former parish priests at Eskasoni. Fr. Ryan described his time with the Mi'kmaw people as an experience that he thoroughly enjoyed but sometimes found frustrating and demanding. Prior to his arrival in Eskasoni, Fr. Ryan had never ministered to a Native community. His previous assignments were carried out in primarily English-speaking orthodox Catholic parishes. Although Fr. Ryan received some special training before being assigned to

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<sup>28</sup>Refer to Chapter Two, p. 56.

Eskasoni he told me that on his arrival he experienced a certain degree of culture shock. Holy Family parish was an unusual ministry for him and required a period of adjustment both for the priest and for his parishioners. Fr. Ryan told me that initially he was particularly struck by the fact that many liturgical prayers and devotional practices at Eskasoni are distinctively different from those currently used in most Catholic parishes:

It's all old church prayers. Even like they do the Stations of the Cross in Mi'kmaq and they're all old, old prayers that we used to say in church that they still have. They translated all these old prayers and that's what they keep saying. It's not very good really...Like, from the point of view of our Church, and since Vatican II with the changes and all that...I'd like that they learn the new rites of the Church. But some of these old hymns that they sing<sup>29</sup>...I guess they're nice, but they're boring. I find them boring...The new choir...they're hip and hype...joyous, but some of them when you get the older ones singing the old Native hymns, they're just like Gregorian chant. Not that Gregorian chant is bad, it's nice if you were in a monastery. If you just wanted to sit back and listen, but when you're having liturgy with the group it's too slow. The atmosphere doesn't provide for it...I'm pretty sure the hymns are old hymns from the Church that were put into Mi'kmaq. When [they] say the Creed in

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<sup>29</sup>The "old hymns" of which Fr. Ryan speaks are no longer in use except on special occasions such as funerals and St. Anne's Mission. The hymns that are now commonly used in many Catholic parishes have been translated into Mi'kmaq by the Holy Family Church choir and are typically sung each Sunday at mass in Eskasoni. Elder Wilfred Prosper told me that the old hymns were not hymns at all, but were actually biblical passages set to metre in Mi'kmaq. He suggests that this was the way in which the early missionaries taught the Bible to the Mi'kmaw people since many Mi'kmaw ancestors were primarily Mi'kmaq speakers and had a limited grasp of English: "[T]he genealogy in Matthew is sung in Mi'kmaq—that's quite a feat!--really something difficult to do to get all those names to rhyme and to be able to put them to music. I always wondered why these hymns were so long and draggy. I think it's because that's the way the gospel was taught. The missionaries knew that the Mi'kmaq liked music and loved to sing, so they put the gospels to music. There's another prayer 'Hail Holy Queen' usually said at the end of the rosary, but the Mi'kmaq did not use it that way, they sung it" (Fieldnotes, Book V:994-995).



Mi'kmaq on Sunday, it's the oldest Creed going<sup>30</sup>...the Nicene Creed is older than the Apostle's Creed and even before the Nicene Creed there's still another Creed and I think that's the one they translated and that's the one they say...(Fieldnotes, Book I:141).

I draw attention to Fr. Ryan's statement because it provides a suitable orientation with which to begin an analysis of the relationship between the institutional church and "popular" religion<sup>31</sup> in Eskasoni. The point I want to consider here is that the discrepancies between the views held by priests and those of the parishioners indicate that there are different understandings about the role of the local community church. Fr. Ryan's comments suggest that most practising Mi'kmaw Catholics in the parish wish to retain the traditions held by their ancestors. The "old church prayers" that "[t]hey translated" are actually taken from Pacifique's *Paroissen*, and are very much a part of what is considered by the Mi'kmaq to be ancestral Catholic tradition. Therefore, in addition to being part of a valued religious tradition, these prayers preserve important aspects of Mi'kmaw history. The changes that Fr. Ryan would "like to see," while moving closer to the contemporary liturgy of the official Church, detract from traditional Mi'kmaw Catholicism as it is presently known and

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<sup>30</sup>The *Nujjinen*, (The Lord's Prayer) recited in the late 1990's is also an older form of the prayer. The Mi'kmaw version omits the section "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever" which was added as part of Vatican II reforms. This final section is recited in English immediately after the *Nu'jinen* and the priest's invocation. It is not clear whether this version is recited simply because it is the only Mi'kmaw version, or because the Mi'kmaq do not feel the need to translate the final section of the prayer into the Mi'kmaw language.

<sup>31</sup>William A. Christian maintains that "popular" religion, or "religion as practiced" is "rooted in particular historical communities and geographical localities and that it is often conservative, resisting changes imposed by nonlocal authorities" (as quoted in Badone 1990:6).

practiced in the community. While Fr. Ryan is somewhat critical of Mi'kmaw devotional practices, he appears to be unaware that resistance to change is essentially an attempt to retain Mi'kmaw Catholic tradition and identity. However, Fr. Ryan did tell me that shortly after his arrival in the community, he realized that the people of Eskasoni adhered to their Mi'kmaw heritage. He said that this fact was impressed upon him by a Mi'kmaw elder who offered him some unsolicited, but very useful advice:

Many of the people in Eskasoni are proud of their Mi'kmaw heritage. When I first arrived there, a male elder said, "Do you want to be happy here Father?" I said, "I've never been happy, why start now?" The elder said, "Well father, if you want to be happy you have to change. Eskasoni has four thousand people who will not change, and it's easier for you to change than everyone else." That was one of the soundest pieces of advice I ever received (Fieldnotes, Book I:141).

In effect, the elder was letting it be known that the Mi'kmaw people claim ownership of their religion and that interference from any "outsider," even a priest, is an unwelcomed intrusion. For instance, one prominent Church leader intimated to me that "We're [the Mi'kmaq] having a hard time getting the Church to see things our way...He [the priest] could make things easier," suggesting that ordained Catholic officials do not always comply with the wishes of the people (Fieldnotes, Book V:871). Several other people also mentioned to me that when priests are first assigned to Holy Family parish they are unfamiliar with the Mi'kmaw way of doing things and must be "trained" (Fieldnotes, Book III: 449).<sup>32</sup> Sometimes this period of training lasts for years and the Mi'kmaq

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<sup>32</sup>Laura, a resident of Eskasoni, related an incident to me that illustrates the ways in which people in the community keep the actions of the priest in check. Her anecdote recalls a newly appointed priest's reaction to the noise level in the church during mass. Laura told me

never become content with the priest who has been assigned to their parish. It is generally understood that conformity to local ways on the part of the priest usually ensures the happiness of both priest and people.

Fr. Connor, another priest who ministered in Eskasoni observes that the Mi'kmaq "take a great deal of pride in...and have taken a real ownership of the Catholic faith. Certainly in Eskasoni more than in any of the other reserves" (Fieldnotes, Book I:77). Fr. Connor's claim that Catholicism is the "dominant force" or "the power structure...[that] binds the community together" (Fieldnotes, Book I: 77) suggests that he does not consider the influence of Mi'kmaq ancestral tradition to be significant. He does stipulate, however, that Catholicism as it is practiced and understood in Eskasoni is distinguishable from mainstream Catholicism in a number of ways:

The Mi'kmaq give Catholicism a beautiful flavour...The faith concepts taught by the Church are unlike the more tactile or natural types of beliefs with Mi'kmaq traditions....The Mi'kmaq are truly a spiritual people. They look upon nature as very important. It is one and the same as themselves. They are a part of the cycle of nature... They still have a large number of children and this is part of the natural progression of nature. They take on the responsibility of creating as part of their role [in life]...The Mi'kmaq make a close connection between nature and spirituality. For instance, the seasons, the spring emphasizes new life which arises from the darkness of winter. It is not hard to make connections between Mi'kmaq traditional beliefs and the Liturgical seasons...The Mi'kmaq taught me more than I taught them. For instance, Pentecost Sunday is supposed to be one of the most sacred days in the liturgical calendar, but we hardly commemorate it at all. For the Mi'kmaq, this day is a very special one...I believe this developed from an early teaching. The symbols and motifs associated with Pentecost—the descent of the Holy Spirit, the dove

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that one Sunday the priest announced that there was no point in showing up for mass if children were allowed to disrupt the service. The following week the church was unusually quiet as many people had not bothered to bring their children or grandchildren to church, nor had they taken the trouble to attend themselves: attendance had dropped dramatically.

and the circle of fire, all had meaning for the Mi'kmaq and they identified and understood these symbols. These things fit into their culture. Of course, the dove becomes an eagle in the Mi'kmaw interpretation, but this is not such a stretch, really. (Fieldnotes, Book I:26-30)

In Fr. Conner's view, the "tactile or natural types" of traditions upheld by the Mi'kmaq depart from the "faith concepts" taught by the Catholic Church. From his comments it is clear that Fr. Connor does not see the non-Christian features of Mi'kmaw tradition as being a negative influence on Catholicism but rather as an enhancement of it. Even though Fr. Connor articulates a positive view of the Mi'kmaq his terms of reference suggest that he does not fully appreciate, or perhaps recognize, the interdependent relationship between Mi'kmaw life-ways and cultural expression. For example, his depiction of the Mi'kmaw people is consistent with stereotypical portrayals of the "Indian" in Western culture.<sup>33</sup> Fr. Connor's observations that the Mi'kmaq "make a close connection between nature and spirituality," that nature is "one and the same as themselves," resemble attributes often applied to Native culture at large. Essentially, such descriptive terms serve only to establish the Mi'kmaq as being "typically" Native, indicating a rather cursory or naive understanding of Mi'kmaw culture and social organization. While Fr. Connor does not suggest that Mi'kmaw expressions of faith are in any way inferior or misdirected, overtones of inherent colonialism are apparent in his assessment of Mi'kmaw religious beliefs and practice. However, Fr. Connor does express a great deal of admiration for the Mi'kmaq and also credits them as being

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<sup>33</sup>For detailed descriptions and analyses of Western concepts of the "Indian" refer to: Francis 1992; Gill 1987; Jansen 1995; Krech 1999.

primarily responsible for maintaining the Catholic faith in Cape Breton:

I believe the survival of Catholicism in Cape Breton is because of the efforts of the Mi'kmaq. The Mi'kmaq protected priests. They hid bibles and hid priests when the British were at war with the French...[The Mi'kmaw] Roman Catholic community is oriented as a community of faith. They can still teach us many things...The Natives [Mi'kmaq] have a different type of spirituality that I wish non-Natives had. Non-Native compartmentalize their faith—it fits into a category. For Natives, spirituality pervades being and is an important part of everyday life (Fieldnotes, Book I:30).

Clearly, Fr. Connor recognizes the influence of a “different type of spirituality” on Mi'kmaw expressions of faith and on aspects of daily life, but he does not adequately explain how this “spirituality” reflects a specifically Mi'kmaw religious orientation. He does, however, point to the fact that Mi'kmaw spirituality is non-compartmentalized, meaning that religious beliefs and expression are not restricted to specific times and places, like Sunday mass, they are a part of daily life. The spiritual aspect of Mi'kmaw religious belief identified by Fr. Connor is also recognized by the Mi'kmaq themselves and to some degree why priests are in need of “training”. One Mi'kmaw woman told me that, in her opinion “some priests...are not truly Christian...I'm more pagan than Christian, but I feel more Christian than some of those priests act.” Meaning, of course, that priests from non-Native cultures have a more formal or institutionalized approach to the Catholic faith.<sup>34</sup>

Fr. Ryan, Fr. Connor, and several other priests with whom I spoke, generally agree that Mi'kmaw Catholicism is distinctive from orthodox Catholic beliefs and practices. However, there

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<sup>34</sup>Interestingly, several priests also made similar remarks to me. One priest told me that the Mi'kmaq were “holier” than he was. Another priest said that he wished non-Natives had the same spiritual appreciation for the Catholic as the Mi'kmaq have (Fieldnotes, Book I:30; Book III:445).

are contrasting views such as those offered by Fr. Greene. Fr. Greene has never been assigned to a Native parish, but has worked as a mission priest to the Mi'kmaq for over seven years. Fr Greene believes that Mi'kmaq culture is quite simply a "rural culture." In his opinion, a Mi'kmaq cultural orientation, that is, an appeal to "Indian ways," is actually a counterfeit technique employed by Native peoples to advance social, cultural or political causes:

I have real problems with this whole business "it's Indian ways"...all this business about love for the environment and all this stuff. I think it's all bs...They're going to do what they want. ...They have also exploited their position and they know they're on the winning side and I see such a change in them. Their leadership is so different, so articulate, and they are just so clever, naturally clever. They have a very brilliant streak in them and they are exploiting it every inch of the way and so they get what they want...There's no culture. It's a rural culture, but there's a nomadic streak and there's I think a strong spirit of superstition that...must be part of their culture, and their beginnings, and the Great White Spirit and that kind of thing...[I]t seems to me that they're hiding behind the culture thing and I don't think that it will get them anywhere, because that's not it! You have to have basic things, values, discipline or else the whole thing is gonna fall apart... You see they're growing up without religion because the adults, their parents, are not practising...(taped interview).

In Fr. Greene's view, the Mi'kmaq reliance on ancestral tradition is essentially a ruse. But, not only are the Mi'kmaq lacking in "authentic" culture, they do not have such "basic things" as "values and "discipline." Obviously, Fr. Greene regards Western values and codes of behaviour as preferable to the uncultured life-ways of the Mi'kmaq.<sup>35</sup> This type of discrimination is also apparent in his claim that the Mi'kmaq predisposition toward "superstition" and their reverence for a "Great

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<sup>35</sup>During the interview, Fr Greene also remarked that "...some of the better ones [Mi'kmaq] could pass as White people quite easily in their behaviour, in their customs—the way they live and so forth...they could be integrated into White customs (taped interview).

White Spirit”<sup>36</sup> are vestiges of a pre-Christian past. It is also evident from Fr. Greene’s apparent disapproval of Mi’kmaw devotionism that tension exists between “prescribed religion” and “religion as it is practiced.” He states that it is for this principal reason that his mission to the Mi’kmaq proved frustrating; that is, his attempts to introduce faith concepts more in line with appropriate Church teachings were futile:

I used to get so frustrated that I tried to introduce them to Katerie Tekakwitha<sup>37</sup>...to someone you can touch, someone real in our era...They don’t come [to church]...See, missing mass is not a big deal with them. It’s interesting because I think the White people have picked up the habits of the Indians very quickly. So, we’ve become a Church that is very much Mi’kmaq really. It’s a place for rites of passage. It’s a place where a lot of people can identify with superstition and a whole lot of stuff. It’s not very healthy. They cling to crazy things. This is happening more and more with people who are vulnerable to superstition. We have tons of people that are as tied up with Mary as this crowd is tied up with St Anne. You can hardly identify them as Catholics because you know to me it’s an extreme. So, you know they’re not any different than we are except that we’re not into St. Anne...They can tell us what it’s like because I think all they’ve had is what I look upon as the superstitious side of faith and that doesn’t tell you very much about how to live. It really doesn’t tell you what the value system is. So, you make your own rules and in their case they tell us that it’s Indian rules. In our case, we say it’s poverty because people are deprived and haven’t integrated their faith with life...We don’t preach that stuff, so where does it all come from? We may have in the past, but for the past twenty-five years we’ve been preaching homilies that are reflecting the Gospel and that has nothing to do with devotional life...So, where did all this come from?... I think it’s becoming increasingly a problem for the Church because Catholic religion for a lot of people is simply a place to go

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<sup>36</sup>Incidentally, during the course of my fieldwork Fr. Greene’s reference to the “Great White Spirit” was the first and only time I ever encountered such a reference for “God/Creator.”

<sup>37</sup>Katerie Tekakwitha or the “Lily of the Mohawk” is the only Native American to be named a blessed. Kateri is a symbol of virtue and holiness for many Native Catholics in North America. There is a statue of Kateri in the church at Eskasoni and there is a chapel dedicated to her in the nearby Mi’kmaw community of Chapel Island. See also Weiser 1972

for rites of passage. The Catholic Church is, and so it becomes associated with a lot of peripheral things and you know Jesus, as the Saviour, that way of life, the Son of God, can enrich your lifestyle, I think, goes by the wayside...It's a very frustrating ministry and if I went back into it I would be better equipped because I knew nothing, absolutely nothing. (taped interview).

In Fr. Greene's estimation, the Mi'kmaq are only nominally Catholic and have a utilitarian attitude towards the Church. His suggestion that "missing mass is not a big deal" shows that Fr. Greene's standard of religious obligations includes compulsory attendance at mass. However, as one *Keptin* of the Grand Council points out, the Mi'kmaq do not necessarily share this view:

They [the Mi'kmaq] still believe, but you won't see them in church. Look at Ash Wednesday, the church is full to the rafters. They will go when they feel like it. They will tell God that they will do everything for the next forty days. Another day is Good Friday...everyone goes, it's a tradition (Fieldnotes, Book V:979).

It appears then, that the understanding of religious obligations defined by Fr. Greene and those held by the Mi'kmaq are divergent. The *Keptin* suggests that a failure to attend mass does not necessarily mean that the Mi'kmaq do not believe, but indicates that the Mi'kmaq have their own ideas of how to practice their faith. By downplaying the importance of mass attendance, the *Keptin* emphasizes that while the Catholic faith is meaningful to his people, Mi'kmaq Catholicism is not necessarily Church dependant: some Mi'kmaq Catholics find spiritual refuge in the Church, but others do not.

In addition, Fr. Greene's denies the Church's role in the introduction and promotion of the "extreme," "superstitious side of faith," or the "crazy things," such as the veneration of St. Anne among the Mi'kmaq. Instead he attributes this type of devotionism to the influences of pre-



Christian Native traditions. Although the Church does not currently “preach this stuff,” it is ultimately responsible for establishing St. Anne as the patron saint of the Mi’kmaw people.<sup>38</sup> However, as Ruth Behar points out, in the post-Vatican II era, the Catholic Church, both in Europe and in other areas, has “fought battles against forms of popular religion that it defines as ‘idolatry’ ...The concern to separate religion from what is viewed as a magical view of the world in order to purify the faith is evident in the various changes introduced by the Second Vatican Council...[R]ationalizing reforms were, from the point of view of the Vatican, an effort to ‘divest Catholicism of much of its mystery and mysticism’ (Brandes 1976:25)” (Behar 1990:80). As a priest schooled in the post-Vatican II Church, Fr. Greene maintains that non-prescribed traditions, such as the veneration of St. Anne and other “superstitions,” should be suppressed and replaced with more appropriate devotions. His view both overlooks and undermines the significance of St. Anne for the Mi’kmaq and the degree to

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<sup>38</sup>William A. Christian establishes that, historically, the Catholic Church has tended to utilize aspects of local culture to communicate its message. For instance, there were two levels of Catholicism that developed in rural Spain during the late sixteenth century: “that of the Church Universal, based on sacraments, the Roman liturgy, and the Roman calendar; and a local one based on particular sacred places, images, and relics, locally chosen patron saints, idiosyncratic ceremonies, and a unique calendar built up from the settlement’s own sacred history” (Christian 1981a:3). However, Christian also points out that local communities have always adopted and domesticated “the symbols and discourses of the Universal Church for local votive use” (Christian 1981a:181). This two-way system of adoption and adaptation is also the case in Mi’kmaki with the veneration of St. Anne among the Mi’kmaq. It is commonly believed that in the early eighteenth century, Catholic missionaries to the region understood the significance of the grandmother figure in Mi’kmaw society, and chose St. Anne, the grandmother of Jesus, as the patron saint of the Mi’kmaq. At the turn of the twenty-first century St Anne is still a religiously meaningful and culturally relevant symbol for the Mi’kmaw people. The significance of St. Anne for the Mi’kmaq will be discussed at length in Chapter Four of this thesis.

which her patronage is considered to be an integral part of Mi'kmaw culture and tradition. In effect, for Fr. Greene, Catholicism as it is believed and practiced among the Mi'kmaq is palatable only if it is transformed into a system of belief that coincides with current Church teachings.

One of the most popular priests to serve at Holy Family parish was Fr. Martin. Fr. Martin considers his time with the Mi'kmaq to be the most enjoyable and rewarding period of his career: "I think I loved every day I was with them [the Mi'kmaq]. I enjoy them. They are never of a nature to get ruffled, never get bored or tired. I've gotten along great in the parishes" (Fieldnotes, Book I:43). Fr. Martin's approach to his ministry in Eskasoni involved participating in every aspect of Mi'kmaw Catholicism. He accompanied his parishioners on trips to the shrine of St. Anne de Beaupré,<sup>39</sup> regularly attended the Chapel Island Mission and even travelled to the blueberry barrens in Maine to serve mass.<sup>40</sup> Fr. Martin took his ministry seriously, but his considerable attention to the Mi'kmaw people was also born out of genuine respect and affection. However, Fr. Greene believes that Fr. Martin "patronized" the Mi'kmaq:

I think he [Fr. Martin] patronized them [the Mi'kmaq]. I think he had some wisdom in his approach and I had to deal with that and come to terms with it...But, I don't feel he allowed

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<sup>39</sup>Each year hundreds of Catholic Mi'kmaq, especially elders, carry out the long-standing tradition of attending the shrine of St. Anne the Beaupré in Québec. During the months of May and June busloads of Mi'kmaq from different communities throughout Mi'kma'ki travel to the site (personal observations/communication).

<sup>40</sup>Another Mi'kmaw tradition is to travel to the blueberry barrens and the potato fields in Maine. The Mi'kmaq have migrated to Maine for generations to help with the harvest. In many cases, the labour intensive work of picking blueberries and harvesting potatoes is the only lucrative employment obtained for the entire year (personal observations/communication).

them to grow and I don't think he challenged them [religiously]. I don't think he wanted them to grow...he affirmed them in their superstitions. I know a case one time...someone died at the hospital...He got the call. The person was already dead and he came in the middle of the night and anointed the person!...I think that says a lot and I think he patronized them terribly (taped interview).

Fr. Greene's claim that Fr. Martin did not challenge the Mi'kmaw religiously, implies that he did not interfere with existing traditions, or at least he was unwilling to impose innovative religious teachings on his parishioners. In contrast, Fr. Greene's assessment of Mi'kmaw Catholicism is informed by a vision of the contemporary Church in line with post-Vatican II reforms. Reforms which pose a direct challenge to key features of Mi'kmaw Catholicism. By adopting the official Church position, Fr. Greene is unable to realistically perceive Mi'kmaw Catholicism as a unique and valid expression of the Catholic faith. For him, "true faith" demands both conformity to orthodox beliefs and practices and an outright rejection of what is perceived to be anachronistic "popular" Catholicism. However, Fr. Martin does not view Mi'kmaw Catholicism as an inadequate or misguided religious orientation. Rather, he sees it as a particular expression of the Catholic faith that has depth and breadth of meaning for the Mi'kmaq. He comments that: "When you experience their [the Mi'kmaq] love for St. Anne and for religious things...it's really something" (Fieldnotes, Book I:40-41).

## **Conclusions**

The main points considered in this chapter are primarily concerned with Mi'kmaw perceptions of the Catholic Church and the role of the Church within Mi'kmaw society. This chapter

establishes that Mi'kmaw Catholicism is very much a religion of the people. It also illustrates that at the turn of the twenty-first century in addition to being religiously meaningful, the Catholic Church is historically, socially and culturally relevant for Mi'kmaw Catholics.

For many Mi'kmaq, Catholicism is as important a tradition as it is as a religious orientation. When British incursions into Nova Scotia threatened to eliminate both the Catholic Church and the Mi'kmaw people it was to their mutual benefit that an alliance be formed. The strength of this alliance figures prominently in Mi'kmaw Catholic society today. Many Mi'kmaq, especially Mi'kmaw Catholics, consider the Catholic Church to be one of the first institutions to acknowledge the Mi'kmaq as a sovereign nation. Among the Mi'kmaq, it is generally believed that Catholicism was embraced by Mi'kmaw ancestors not merely for spiritual reasons, but because it also provided leadership roles and the opportunity for self-expression in the face of persistent racism and severe social and cultural marginalization. The importance of the historical alliance between the Catholic Church and Mi'kmaw ancestors is sometimes referred to as "a treaty like any other," that must be honoured and protected (Fieldnotes, Book IV:730).

For the most part, the Mi'kmaq resist changes to the existing liturgy and the traditional features of Mi'kmaw Catholicism, such as devotion to St. Anne, essentially because such changes involve a departure from ancestral tradition. One key aspect of claiming "ownership" of the Catholic faith, is the retention of Mi'kmaw traditions passed down to them from the past. Many Mi'kmaw Catholics continue to read Pacifique's *Paroissen* and continue to follow the lead of their parents and grandparents in their devotion to the Catholic faith. The Mi'kmaw people experience

Catholicism in culturally specific ways that may appear to be anachronistic or “superstitious” to outsiders. However, among Mi’kmaw Catholics, preferences for “old prayers,” specific hymns and ancestral devotional practices are historical and cultural patterns of significance that are continually and repeatedly reinforced.

While the Mi’kmaq uphold ancestral traditions, Mi’kmaw resistance to liturgical and devotional changes should not be over-stated. Mi’kmaw Catholicism has withstood a number of changes in routine devotional practices during the twentieth century. For instance, the Eskasoni choir has translated modern hymns into Mi’kmaq and innovations to the mass service consistent with Vatican II reforms have been introduced. However, Mi’kmaw Catholicism remains very much a religion of the people despite attempts by Church officials to initiate faith concepts consistent with contemporary orthodox Catholicism. While some Church officials may point to Mi’kmaw Catholicism as a discursive tradition, for many Mi’kmaq a move toward a contemporary church necessitates a move away from the ancestral tradition that are an integral part of Mi’kmaw culture and society. Reluctance on the part of ordained Catholic clergy to accept local expressions of faith can be viewed as a challenge to Mi’kmaw autonomy and self-identity. There are a number of specific practices associated with Catholicism that are unique to the Mi’kmaq. Of these various practices the tradition of pilgrimage in general, and the annual St. Anne’s Day celebrations in particular, are prominent features of Mi’kmaw religious tradition. The following chapter looks at pilgrimage as specific feature of Mi’kmaw tradition with an emphasis on St. Anne’s Day celebrations.

## Chapter Four

### *Se'tta'newimk'*: The Mi'kmaw Annual Pilgrimage to Potlotek

And thus it was: I, writing of the way  
And race of saints in their own gospel day,  
Fell suddenly into an allegory  
About their journey and the way to glory,  
In more than twenty things, which I set down:  
This done, I twenty more had in my crown,  
And they began to multiply,  
Like sparks that from the coals of fire do fly.

John Bunyan, from *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

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On the eve of St. Anne's Day in late July a large group of women were gathered at the Mission church at Potlotek. I watched as the women at the front of the church gently washed the statue of St. Anne with soft white cloths. After the ritual washing, the women divided the washing cloths into long thin strips and passed them around to those in attendance who then ceremonially tied the cloth around their ankles or wrists. Some women took extra pieces of cloth which were

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<sup>1</sup>The terms *Se'tta'newimk* and *Se'tta'newey* are frequently used as references to St. Anne's Mission. Both of these forms appear in Mi'kmaw spoken and written expression, but *Se'tta'newimk* is the form most commonly used (personal communication). The *k* which appears at the end of *Se'tta'newimk* is a locative ending indicating "at"/"to"/"on". Throughout this thesis instances of "at/to *Se'tta'newimk*" are often stated. These expressions often appear throughout this thesis in redundant forms but the prepositions "at"/"to"/"on" must be retained in English in compliance with proper grammatical expression and meaning. I have also seen *Se'tta'newimk* referred to as *setonewing*, which, according to my sources, is erroneous.

carefully folded and placed in pockets or purses for safe-keeping, later to be given to the sick and elderly who were unable to attend this event. Many woman came forward with bottles and vials to fill with the water in which St. Anne had been bathed. Both the water and the cloth strips are considered by many Mi'kmaw people to be sacred items that serve to help protect or cure the user.

The ceremony described above is a ritual carried out each year in preparation for the St. Anne's Day procession. St. Anne is adored and revered by many Mi'kmaq, and the act of bathing and decorating St. Anne's statue<sup>2</sup> is very much an expression of love and devotion. The origin of this ritual event is uncertain, but within recent memory this ceremony has always been a feature of St. Anne's Mission.<sup>3</sup> Women members of the Grand Council usually wash the statue<sup>4</sup> while those in attendance are invited to "dress" St. Anne and to decorate the *wkutputim* (carrier).<sup>5</sup> St. Anne

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<sup>2</sup>St. Anne's is typically an image of St. Anne holding the child Mary in her arms. Both statues in St. Anne's Church at Potlotek are of this design.

<sup>3</sup>In her study of St. Anne's Mission in the mid 1920's, Elsie Clews Parsons observes that "One evening from every woman twenty-five cents was collected by Ben Christmas, the Sydney Chief, who went from wigwam to wigwam, this for refurbishing the image with ribbons and artificial flowers" (Parsons 1926:465). Parsons makes no mention of any other types of special "dress" or decoration for the statue.

<sup>4</sup>There are two St. Anne's statues in the church: a large statue approximately 5 ft. high that remains in the church at all times and another smaller 3 1/2 ft. statue that is carried on a *wkutputin* (wooden palanquin) during the St. Anne's Day procession. Refer to footnote 5 on the following page.

<sup>5</sup>The *wkutputim* is a carrier similar to a palanquin (Portugese *palanquin*), or covered litter, designed to seat one passenger.



3. The above photo, taken at Potlotek in 1997, shows the statue of St. Anne carried in the annual procession at Potlotek. Note the hand-crafted adornments for the *wkutputin* (carrier) and the capes worn by St. Anne and the child Mary. Photo by Angela Robinson.

and the child Mary are provided with capes handcrafted by Mi'kmaw women. On my first visit to Potlotek in 1997, the capes were made of blue and purple satin trimmed with gold tassels. However, these adornments have since been replaced with deer skin capes embroidered with beadwork. The canopy covering for the *wkutputim* has also been replaced. At one time the canopy was decorated with gold satin and tassels similar to those on St. Anne's cape. Like the capes for the statue, the satin canopy cover has been replaced with one made of deer skin adorned with beadwork (personal observations).



### **St Anne: Patroness and *Ki'ju* (Grandmother) of the Mi'kmaq**

The veneration of St. Anne as the patron saint of the Mi'kmaq predates the mission at Chapel Island by approximately one hundred and twenty-five years. Extant documentary evidence suggests that St. Anne was introduced to the Mi'kmaq as early as 1629 when the Jesuit priest, Fr. Barthélmey Vimont dedicated the first chapel at Fort St. Anne in Cape Breton to St. Anne d'Apt (Chute 1992:51; Johnston 1960:8-9; MacPherson 1910:59). The historian A. A. Johnston claims that it was "Father Vimont who first planted in the hearts of the Micmac Indians the tender love they have for Mary and her mother, and this devotion led them to dedicate most of their later chapels in honour of St. Anne" (Johnston 1960:9).

As historian Elizabeth Chute notes, by the 1730's when Fr. Maillard arrived in Cape Breton,<sup>6</sup> St. Anne had taken on additional symbolic meanings associated with the Mi'kmaw mythic character of "Grandmother Bear" or "Bearwoman." Chute suggests that: "Bearwoman's capabilities, which underline the need to respect the potential for healing and renewal in even the old and incapacitated, bear close associations with the revitalizing powers ascribed by the Micmac to St. Anne, who aids infants, the elderly and mothers in child-birth" (Chute 1992:52-53). However, in the late 1990's there was no longer any close connection made between the role of

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<sup>6</sup>Fr. Maillard served as missionary to the Mi'kmaq between 1735-1762 (MacPherson 1910:60).

the bear (*muin*)<sup>7</sup> figure and that of St. Anne within Mi'kmaw society. Currently St. Anne is viewed as *ki'ju* (grandmother) to whom the Mi'kmaq pray for protection and healing

For the Mi'kmaq, the fact that St. Anne is the mother of Mary is less significant than her relationship to Jesus. The fact that St. Anne is *ki'ju*, or a grandmother resonates within Mi'kmaw culture because of the elevated familial role extended to *ki'ju* within Mi'kmaw society. As progenitor of the family, *ki'ju* is given special status as the protector and giver of life, but she is also looked upon as a provider of spiritual and physical nourishment and as a source of wisdom and knowledge. The attributes ascribed to *ki'ju* within the family unit are also ascribed to St. Anne. As patron saint and *ki'ju* to the Mi'kmaq she is appealed to for guidance, and for thaumaturgic aid in matters of emotional, spiritual and physical healing.

Pilgrimages to St. Anne for the purpose of healing or appealing for special favours has a long history among the Mi'kmaq. According to one 1868 account,

They [the Mi'kmaq] make often pilgrimages in honour of St. Anne. When they are in great danger on the sea in their canoe, or in the winter hunting in the woods, or to obtain the grace of baptism for a child not yet born, or to be restored to health, or to obtain some other favours from heaven through the intercession of St. Anne, they make a vow to visit one of the places where she is honoured, and to offer some presents in that place. I saw an Indian who was very sick and given up by all. He made a vow to St. Anne in Canada, if God would restore him to health. His petition was granted, and he walked all the way to Canada and back. In general, they make the vow to go to the Indian Island, C. B., and to

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<sup>7</sup>*Muin* or bear in Mi'kmaw society is a prominent symbol. The *muin* clan is associated with the surname of Sylliboy. Each summer a clan gathering is held in Eskasoni where all extended members of the *muin* clan gather for a communal feast.

other chapels, and also to places where crosses are erected ([Kauder ?] 1868:239).<sup>8</sup>

The sacredness attached to the bread,<sup>9</sup> water and cloth received at *Se'tta'newimk* is an affirmation of the healing powers the Mi'kmaq attribute to St. Anne. These religious items are usually stored and are only used when someone is in need of healing. The following testimonials and personal narratives provided by Mi'kmaw pilgrimage participants attest to the efficacy of prayer to St. Anne. One woman said that she has attended the Mission "for as long as I can remember" and places great faith in St. Anne's ability to help the sick. She has first-hand knowledge of this ability as she firmly believes St. Anne cured her son:

My son was born in July ten days before St. Anne's. It was the oddest thing, the boy didn't cry. I had someone stay up with him all the time. He mewled, but couldn't cry. I was afraid he would choke...My son didn't cry for a long time, so I took him to Chapel Island. I took him to St. Anne on Saturday evening and washed him with the cloth that the statue was washed in. The next day I took him to the St. Anne's Day mass and prayed for him. On Monday he began to cry. It's too bad in a way because he hasn't shut up since (Fieldnotes, Book I:35-36).

A young man in his early forties also told me that he has "never missed a Mission" since he was cured by St. Anne over thirty years ago. He said that:

When I was a young boy I used to have seizures, or fits, you know. I had them for a long

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<sup>8</sup>This excerpt is taken from an article titled "The Micmac Indians: The Catholic Church in the Wilderness." In *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*. XLI, (Feb. 1868). The authorship of the article is uncertain. However, the bibliographical information notes that the author is possibly Fr. Christian Kauder who worked among the Mi'kmaq from 1856 -1871.

<sup>9</sup>On St. Anne's Day bread is blessed by a priest to be distributed among the people. This is described in greater detail later in this chapter.

time until I was seven or eight years old. My mother took me to the doctors but they could not stop them. One time she took me to St. Anne's, I was about eight then. She prayed for me and asked St. Anne for a cure. I had one more seizure when I was on the island and I never had one after. I believe St. Anne cured me (Fieldnotes, 1997).

An elder from Eskasoni, now in her mid-eighties, told me that:

St. Anne is good to the Indian people. She is special to us and she helps us...remember one time at Chapel Island when I was much younger, the men brought over a man for the Mission. There were no wheelchairs at the time so the men put two pieces of two by four under a wood chair and carried him that way. The man was very sick and couldn't walk. They carried the man to the church and put him in front of St. Anne. The man was carried into the church, but he walked out. No one could believe it...I was there. I saw it!(Fieldnotes, Book IV:567-568).

One Mi'kmaw woman describes St. Anne in the following manner, "St. Anne is an elder.

Elders give us knowledge, wisdom and care...She is also a grandmother. The grandmother holds the family together" (Fieldnotes, Book I:19, 21). While the grandmother "holds the family together" there is a real sense in which, as *ki'ju*, St. Anne is a symbol of Mi'kmaw group solidarity. However, among non-Catholic Mi'kmaq, the significance of St. Anne is open to dispute.

### ***Se'tta'newimk* (St. Anne's Mission): Travel to Potlotek**

The spring and summer seasons are for many Mi'kmaq a time of travel. Throughout Mi'kma'ki groups of Mi'kmaq congregate at formal and informal gatherings to participate in feasts, powwows, clan gatherings and especially pilgrimages. Each year, hundreds of Mi'kmaq make

pilgrimages to various shrines including St Anne de Beaupré<sup>10</sup> in Quebec, the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico and Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>11</sup> However, the most important and popular pilgrimage undertaken by the Mi'kmaq of Cape Breton is to the local site of *Se'tta'newimk*, or St. Anne's Mission at Potlotek (Chapel Island). In late July between 3,500-4,500 Mi'kmaq travel to Potlotek to attend the annual *Se'tta'newimk* which is held on July 26<sup>th</sup>, the feast day of St. Anne, or on the following Sunday.

For most Mi'kmaq *Se'tta'newimk*, also referred to as “the Mission,” is the focal point of Mi'kmaq summer gatherings. With the possible exception of Treaty Day<sup>12</sup> *Se'tta'newimk* is by

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<sup>10</sup>The shrine of St. Anne de Beaupré, located thirty miles north of Quebec city is a site of healing. Since the first documented miracle cure during the construction of the original church (1657-1662), thousands of pilgrims have obtained cures at the shrine. The crutches, walking canes and wheel chairs left at the shrine are testimony to the healing powers of St. Anne. The current Basilica, dedicated in 1876, is the fourth church constructed on the site (Annals 1889:iii-iv).

<sup>11</sup>In addition to these well known locations, there is a local Mi'kmaq pilgrimage every Good Friday at Eskasoni. One of the most notable features of the Eskasoni landscape is the prominent 15 ft. cross situated at the top of Holy Mountain, sometimes referred to as Poulette's Mountain (Schmidt and Marshall 1995:1). The original cross was erected by Fr. Placide, a Capuchin priest who was missionary to the Mi'kmaq from 1915-1941. Fr. Placide began the pilgrimages “up the mountain” and in 1922, on the feast day of the Holy Cross, erected a cross at the top ([Kauder ?] 1868). The climb “up the mountain” is primarily a Catholic devotion. Beginning at sunrise, residents of Eskasoni and Mi'kmaq from nearby communities begin the trek up the mountain, stopping periodically to pray at the Stations of the Cross (*Glotjeioie Aogigtog*) located along the way. The climb “up the mountain” is intended to replicate Jesus' journey to Calvary.

<sup>12</sup>Treaty Day began in 1986 and is an event of political, social, and cultural significance for most Mi'kmaq. Each year on October 1<sup>st</sup>, regional Band Chiefs and Grand Council leaders meet with government representatives in the Nova Scotia legislature to renew treaty agreements

far the most important and well-attended event in the Mi'kmaw calendar. St. Anne's Mission, rather than being a strictly religious celebration as the name implies, is significant on a number of levels for Mi'kmaw Catholics, Catholic Traditionalists and non-Catholics alike.

The official St. Anne's Mission at Potlotek runs each year for approximately one week usually at the end of July and the beginning of August.<sup>13</sup> The Potlotek mission is not the only St. Anne's celebration within Mi'kma'ki. There are similar but smaller and much less elaborate celebrations held in other Mi'kmaw communities. For instance, the community of Membertou celebrates St. Anne's Day on the Sunday prior to the Potlotek celebration. The communities of Conne River (Newfoundland), Restigouche (Québec), Big Cove (New Brunswick) and Shubenacadie (Nova Scotia) also hold St. Anne's festivals. However, the mission at Chapel Island is the largest celebration and is the one in which all members of the Grand Council are expected to attend. Since *Se'tta'newimk* attracts about half of the Native population of Cape Breton (3,500-4,500 people out of approximately 8,000 resident Mi'kmaq), it is identifiably one of the

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and to discuss the significant events of the past year. There are numerous social and cultural activities associated with Treaty Day, such as concerts featuring Mi'kmaw musicians, special museum exhibits, and an annual dinner ("feast"), with venues provided for the exhibition and sale of Mi'kmaw arts and crafts at most events. However, St. Anne's Mission, Potlotek is one of several similar celebrations held regionally by the Mi'kmaq. There are annual St. Anne's Day gatherings held at Big Cove in New Brunswick, Lennox Island in P.E.I. and in Conne River, Newfoundland to name a few. However, the annual gathering at Potlotek is considered to be one of the oldest and best attended celebrations throughout Mi'kma'ki.

<sup>13</sup>Each year the dates for the Mission are decided on Pentecost Sunday during the annual Grand Council meeting.

most significant events in the Mi'kmaw calendar. This chapter explores the meanings of *Se'tta'newimk* for the Mi'kmaq.<sup>14</sup>

### Theoretical Perspectives on Pilgrimage and *Se'tta'newimk* at Potlotek

The Mi'kmaw practice of pilgrimage is considered here in the framework of two distinct, yet related, sets of theoretical literature. The first set, applicable to the distinctiveness of Mi'kmaw Catholicism in general, serves to identify this particular form of religious expression as an example of "vernacular," "local," "popular" or "folk" religion (Badone 1990; Barker 1998; Christian 1987, 1981; Freeman 1978; Riegelhaupt 1973).

To date, research on the role of popular forms of Native-Christian religious expression has been limited, essentially because such work usually demands interdisciplinary skills, and these forms of religious expression are not contained under the rubric of mainstream ritual practice. The Canadian anthropologist John Barker suggests that, in North America, contemporary forms of "vernacular" Christian expression may be obscured by an overemphasis on "standard mission histories and biographies and occasional anthropological studies of acculturation" (Barker 1998:433). However, the theoretical frameworks developed by anthropologists working on

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<sup>14</sup>Although the *Se'tta'newimk* celebration is primarily attended by the Mi'kmaq of Cape Breton, many Mi'kmaq who no longer reside in the area return each year for the gathering. In addition, Mi'kmaq from other provinces also attend especially members of the *Sante' Mawio'mi* (Grand Council) which is comprised of representative members from Mi'kmaw communities throughout Mi'kma'ki.

popular, local, and grass roots forms of Catholicism in Central America, rural Europe, and Asia can usefully be applied to the Mi'kmaw case (Badone 1990; Behar 1990; Brandes 1976; Christian 1996, 1992, 1991, 1987; 1984; 1981a; Davis 1974; Freeman 1978). Researchers dealing with such expressions of local Catholicism have established a clear distinction between "religion as practiced" and "religion as prescribed" (formal church dogma), in order to understand the complexities of contemporary Catholic practice (Christian 1981a, see also Badone 1990; Behar 1990; Brandes 1976; Freeman 1978; Davis 1974; Miller 1997). This distinction is pertinent to *Se'tta'newimk*, since Mi'kmaw Catholicism, in its historical and contemporary contexts, is understood both by participants and non-participants to be a local form of Catholic expression (Henderson 1997:102; Battiste 1997:17; Marshall 1995:109; Milliea 1989:263).

The second set of theoretical literature relevant to *Se'tta'newimk* includes anthropological studies relating to the function and meaning of pilgrimage. The particular theoretical approaches considered are those of Victor and Edith Turner 1978; John Eade and Michael Sallnow 1991; Simon Coleman and John Elsner 1995; Jill Dubisch 1995; Alan Morinis 1992.

Victor Turner suggests that the pilgrimage process exhibits identifiable characteristics of *liminality* and *communitas*. According to this perspective, participants symbolically leave behind ordinary social structure and are caught "betwixt and between" two different social worlds (Turner 1995 [1969]:107). This movement from structure to anti-structure brings with it a dismissal of the "stasis" that usually accompanies "normal" existence and includes a reevaluation of the social constructs and norms associated with the mundane world (Turner and Turner 1978:2,13).



Alternative frameworks for the interpretation of pilgrimage, developed by John Eade and Michael Sallnow and by Jill Dubisch in the 1990's, consider the Turnerian view too restrictive and simplistic to comprehend fully the complex nature of pilgrimage (Dubisch 1995; Eade and Sallnow 1991). Dubisch argues that while the Turners' assessment may be accurate in that pilgrimage contains elements of *liminality* and *communitas*, such elements do not fully explain the event or experience of pilgrimage for all participants, and therefore should be classified as dimensions, rather than the central features, of pilgrimage (Dubisch 1995:45). Similarly, Eade and Sallnow identify pilgrimage as a polymorphic phenomenon with no essential, uniform meaning, either for individual pilgrims, or for the category of pilgrimage itself (Eade and Sallnow 1991:5; Sallnow 1981:164). This perspective suggests that each pilgrimage site must be analyzed as "an arena for competing religious and secular discourses...for conflict between orthodoxies, sects, confessional groups, for drives towards consensus and *communitas*, and for counter-movements towards separateness and division" (Eade and Sallnow 1991:2). Therefore, each pilgrimage must be considered in terms of its specific cultural, political and historical contexts.

While Simon Coleman and John Elsner acknowledge the valuable contributions of previous researchers to the study of pilgrimage, they also recognize that commonly held definitions of pilgrimage impose limitations on the meaning and significance of ritual travel. Coleman and Elsner maintain that pilgrimage is a cultural and social phenomenon which can not necessarily be restricted to "sacred"/"religious" categories (Coleman and Elsner 1995:214). They suggest that any form of visit which contains elements of spatial and temporal dislocation as well as elements of the sacred

and the profane, shares structural similarities with pilgrimage. Therefore, a visit to a museum or to an "exotic" destination may "serve as a licence for experiment and self-discovery," and may offer similar experiences to those found on more traditional pilgrimages (Coleman and Elsner 1995:214). Essentially, Coleman and Elsner expand on former definitions of pilgrimage by suggesting that the types of travel associated with trade, vacations and social gatherings may represent forms of pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage site is an appropriate context in which to seek to determine the diverse motives behind pilgrimage participation. As several anthropologists have suggested, there can be multiple, overlapping, sacred and secular motivations for participation in such ritual gatherings (Coleman and Elsner 1995; Dusenberry 1962; Eade and Sallnow 199; Morinis 1992; Turner and Turner 1978).

The theories of pilgrimage considered above represent two heuristic approaches. The first is the Turnerian model, which emphasizes *liminality* and *communitas* as the essence of pilgrimage, and the second approach, which allows for broader contextual considerations, is one in which differences in the meaning and significance of ritual journeys can be uncovered and assessed (Coleman and Elsner 1995; Dubisch 1995; Eade and Sallnow 1991; Morinis 1992). The theoretical position assumed in this chapter accommodates both perspectives. Following Dubisch, the notions of *liminality* and *communitas* are considered as dimensions of pilgrimage, rather than its central features (Dubisch 1995:45). My analysis of *Se'tta'newimk* also takes into account the specific cultural, political and historical contexts in which the pilgrimage events at Potlotek are set,

and highlights a number of competing discourses surrounding these events. In addition, I will consider the possibility that, for some (if not all) participants, the annual visit to Potlotek has more than a single meaning or purpose. *Se'tta'newimk* participants represent a broad cross-section of Mi'kmaw society, including persons from diverse educational, social, political, generational and economic backgrounds. Participants range from new-born infants to the elderly, from the poor to the wealthy, from the less-educated to the well-educated, and from those who hold significant political and social positions in the Mi'kmaw community to those who have no officially recognized social or political status. Accordingly, it is assumed here that there are multiple discourses about *Se'tta'newimk*, rather than one dominant and deterministic discourse, which contribute to the meaning and significance of St. Anne's mission at various interpretative levels.

### **Potlotek: Sacred Land**

Most Mi'kmaq attach historical, social and cultural significance to Potlotek. Potlotek, located on Bras D'or Lake, is a short ferry ride from the main part of Cape Breton Island. Pilgrims arrive singly and in groups during the week prior to St. Anne's Day, as well as on the day itself, to participate in a variety of activities. Religiously oriented activities include the veneration of St. Anne, through the preparation of her statue and participation in the St. Anne's Day procession, novenas, rosaries, confessions and special Masses. Socially oriented events include playing cards and bingo, sharing meals and socializing with family and friends.

According to oral historians, prior to becoming the official venue for *Se'tta'newimk* in

1742, Potlotek was the site of pre-missionary Mi'kmaw gatherings<sup>15</sup> (Basque 1995:276; Battiste 1997a:17; Chute 1992:53). One respondent told me that “the missionaries took advantage of the [Mi'kmaw] sense of community and introduced St Anne's Day into an already existing event” (Fieldnotes, Book I:12). When Fr. Maillard began his mission to the Mi'kmaq in 1635 he resided alternatively at Malagawatch (presently an uninhabited community) during the spring and summer seasons and at the Fortress of Louisburg during the fall and winter. Oral tradition suggests that at the time of Maillard's residency Malagawatch was recognized as the centre or “capital” of Mi'kma'ki (personal communication). Around the year 1742, in the midst of British-French hostilities, Fr. Maillard relocated the “capital” of Mi'kma'ki territory (Hoffman 1946) from Malagawatch to Potlotek and established St. Anne's mission on the island. One possible incentive for the relocation of the Mi'kmaw capital may be for reasons of security. Malagawatch is located on a small low-lying peninsula that juts into the Bras d'or Lakes with no elevated land for use as sentinel points. In addition, an approaching enemy could easily take advantage of this location by cutting off the single entrance to the site. However, the island of Potlotek has several advantageous

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<sup>15</sup>Elizabeth Chute suggests that the missionaries took advantage of Mi'kmaw summer gathering places, and chapels built at these locations eventually became “foci for summer gift-giving, where French authorities distributed presents, medals and commissions to the assembled bands” (Chute 1992:52). Mi'kmaw spokesperson Will Basque maintains that, before Catholicism the annual gathering at Potlotek “was already a spiritual gathering, so it was an ideal opportunity for the Church. Both sides were able to integrate the faith with traditional Micmac faith” (Basque 1995: 276). In addition, anthropologists Wallis and Wallis describe St. Anne's Day celebrations as the Mi'kmaw “‘national holiday’ which was the union of the aboriginal summer council with the feast of Ste. Anne” (Wallis and Wallis 1955:283).

features: as an island it can only be approached by water, and it has several elevations that can be used for lookout points. One woman told me that the church at Potlotek was built on a hill so that “we [the Mi’kmaq] could see the enemy approaching” (personal communication). It is unclear whether or not St. Anne’s Day celebrations took place at Malagawatch. However, several people suggested that historically Malagawatch was the official burial site for the Mi’kmaq and was also the centre where Catholic Mi’kmaq congregated during the spring and summer. This would in part explain why Fr. Maillard took up residence at the Malagawatch location.<sup>16</sup>

Potlotek is regarded as sacred by Catholic and non-Catholic Mi’kmaq alike who separate it, physically and conceptually, from the world of the mundane. However, for members of each of these two groups, the sacredness of Potlotek is derived from different sets of criteria. For instance, the fact that the site is now the location for specifically Catholic religious functions represent a point of contention for some non-Catholic Mi’kmaq. On my first trip to Potlotek I learned that a particular group of Mi’kmaq had requested permission to hold a powwow on the island during the Mission. The Grand Council subsequently considered this proposal but refused the group access to the site (Fieldnotes, 1997).

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<sup>16</sup>During the 1980's a resident of Eskasoni, Mr. Noel Denny sought to preserve the Malagawatch site. Through the personal efforts of the Denny family and several other members of the Eskasoni community, a stone cross and a stone tepee style altar were erected at Malagawatch. At the end of the summer, usually in late August, Mi’kmaq Catholics gather at Malagawatch to attend mass and to share in a communal meal hosted by the Denny family. The mass is held in the graveyard where the cross and altar have been erected. The fact that many Mi’kmaq people have ancestors buried at Malagawatch gives added significance to the location. However, interments are no longer carried out at this site (personal observations).

Non-Catholic Mi'kmaq assert their claim to Potlotek on the basis that it was always a sacred site. Among the Mi'kmaq, it is generally believed that prior to, and after, European contact, both Potlotek and Malagawatch were preferred areas for annual assembly in which political, economic and social matters were discussed and where ritual celebrations and religious ceremonies such as weddings and burials took place. One non-Catholic man told me that he was certain that there were multiple burial sites on Potlotek and that "before the French, it [Potlotek] was always a sacred site. Could be a thousand years old, could be more than that. Actually, could be more than ten thousand years old" (taped interview). Another non-Catholic man told me,

I go to Potlotek every year and usually a few heads turn, ha!...I go, but not for St. Anne's. I go because it's part of family tradition and it's social. The island belongs to my people—has always belonged to my people long before the Catholics came. So, that's why I go, because of my ancestors (Fieldnotes, Book IV:741).

For some Mi'kmaq, there exists the belief that the spirits of the ancestors remain at Potlotek. I was told by one pilgrimage participant, a Catholic woman from Eskasoni, that the "old ones" (ancestors) sometimes appear on the island: "When [my husband] and some other men were working on the church, they heard the 'old ones' ...paddling. I heard of this before but I was not sure of it until [my husband] told me about it" (Fieldnotes, Book II:327).

While partisan sectors of Mi'kmaw society are unified in accepting the site as sacred, fundamental disagreements exist about the reasons for its sacredness. It is sacred to Mi'kmaw Catholics because it is the site of St. Anne's Mission, but it is sacred to many Mi'kmaq who share the belief that the island was important to the ancestors. Since the mid-eighteenth century, the island

of Potlotek has emerged, on one level, as a sacred space central to Mi'kmaw spiritual revitalization and social solidarity, and on another level, as a locus of dispute, since many non-Catholic Mi'kmaq reject Catholicism as a legitimate form of Mi'kmaw religious expression. In line with those theoretical approaches to pilgrimage that emphasize multiple discourses, Potlotek may be understood as both a centre of unity and of conflict within the Mi'kmaw community (cf. Coleman and Elsner 1995; Eade and Sallnow 1991).

### *Se'tta'newimk*

With the possible exception of the Grand Council assembly<sup>17</sup> on St. Anne's Day and the speeches immediately following St. Anne's procession, formal activities at Potlotek are primarily devoted to religious observances. The schedule of events distributed to mission participants outlines the date and time of the various devotional events to take place on the island. The schedule also refers to specific amusements such as games of *waltes*, bingo, horseshoes and karioke competitions which are held during the mission, but these diversions are not promoted as central

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<sup>17</sup>The Grand Council annual St. Anne's Day meetings and addresses to mission attendees by the *Kji-Keptin* (Grand Captain) and *Kji-Saqamaw* (Grand Chief) relate to Mi'kmaw social, political and cultural concerns as well as religious matters. A comprehensive account of the duties and concerns of the Grand Council is provided in Leslie Jane McMillan's 1996, M.A. thesis titled "*Mi'kmawey Mawio'mi: Changing Roles of the Mi'kmaq Grand Council From the Early Seventeenth Century to the Present.*" Department of Anthropology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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camping area, or “the other side,” is very much a part of the temporal world. In the nearby mainland community of Chapel Island<sup>19</sup> a number of tepees mark the site for non-religious activities such as a children’s pageant and other sorts of amusement which according to Tord Larsen were once a part of St. Anne’s celebrations on the island (Larsen 1983:113-114).<sup>20</sup> Most older adults and the elders do not participate in the festivities off the island, but restrict their entertainment to social activities such as sharing company with friends and family at Potlotek, and playing cards and bingo. On “the other side” there are numerous recreational vehicles, and campers with amenities such as showers and baths. Some of those who own RVs also have cabins on the island and choose to stay on Potlotek, making periodic visits to “the other side”. For health reasons, some people find it difficult to move on and off the island and who wish to be a part of the Mission choose to stay in the more comfortable accommodations available on the mainland.<sup>21</sup> However, many people do not stay on the mainland side because teenagers and young adults tend to “party” during the Mission. Most parents and elders do not approve of such behaviour and the island remains “dry” at all times,

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<sup>19</sup>Refer to footnote 1 in Chapter One of this thesis.

<sup>20</sup>Refer to Appendix 1, p. 254 for Larsen’s outline of “Chapel Island Festival” events.

<sup>21</sup>For instance, people with arthritis and other ailments that prohibit freedom of movement find it difficult to get in and out of the boats that take passengers to the island. Trailers and other large recreational vehicles cannot be transported to the island and must remain on the mainland side. In many cases the RVs provide the elderly and the sick comfortable accommodation, and give them the option of attending the Mission.

meaning that alcohol and recreational drugs are strictly forbidden.<sup>22</sup>

During the Mission, the church at Potlotek is rarely empty. Throughout the day and long into the night, Mi'kmaw people go to the church for personal prayer or to attend the various services such as evening mass, the rosary or special services provided during the mission. Special services associated with *Se'tta'newimk* begin on the eve of St. Anne's Day with the preparation of her statue and end on the Monday following "Procession Day" with the Stations of the Cross and special "Prayers for the Living and the Dead". Once St. Anne's statue is prepared for the Sunday procession, visits to the church increase. On Saturday night people go to pay their respects to St. Anne, many stop to say prayers, and each person who visits the church kneels at the statue with head bowed, often touching or kissing the statue after prayers are said. These are inaudible personal prayers, invocations to St. Anne requesting personal favours for family members and loved ones, especially those who are ill or who have passed away.

The afternoon of St. Anne's eve is a special time for women attending the Mission. In the

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<sup>22</sup>During the mission, the island is patrolled by the Grand Council's Chief of Security and his assistants. The duty of these security guards is to maintain order on the island at all times. Anyone found indulging in alcohol or drugs is immediately removed from the island. Also anyone suspected of drinking excessively is denied admission to Potlotek. St. Anne's security also enforces a strict curfew for younger children. At 10:30 p.m. all children under the age of ten must return to their cabin or be accompanied by a parent or guardian. At 12:00 midnight "Quiet Time" is in effect. At this time, all children under the ages of twelve must return home unless chaperoned by an adult, and radios, CD players and portable stereos must be turned down. Refer to Appendix 2, pp. 254.

early afternoon the priest offers a special blessing for women who have given birth.<sup>23</sup> The church is usually full at this time, since all mothers, old and new, come to receive blessings for themselves and their children.<sup>24</sup> After the blessing of the women the priest leaves, and the women are given possession of the church while St. Anne's statue is being prepared. At this time no men are allowed on the church premises and members of St. Anne's security are posted just outside the doors to ensure that the woman are not interrupted in their duties.

Throughout the week of the Mission, confessions are held and there is a recitation of the rosary before mass each evening.<sup>25</sup> However, on St. Anne's eve liturgical celebrations have the

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<sup>23</sup>The "Churching of women" is the "name of the rite which invokes God's blessing on a woman after childbirth, probably having its origin in Jewish purification rites (cf: Lv 12:1 and Lk 2:22-24)" (*Catholic Encyclopaedia* 1991:218). This was common practice in the Catholic Church until the latter part of the twentieth century when "Churching" was replaced with a new rite found in the Catholic Book of Blessings emphasizing "the dignity of women, who, like Our Lady, give new life, so great a gift to the world" (*Catholic Encyclopaedia* 1991:218). The "Blessing of Women" rite held annually at Potlotek probably goes back to the time when "the Mission" was the only time that women could be properly "Churched" by an officiating priest. A 1868 author (possibly Christian Kauder) notes that Mi'kmaw women were careful to partake in the Catholic ritual for post-partum benediction: "the hieroglyphical book of rites which they possess tells the woman that [after giving birth] they have to receive the churching before confession," otherwise if a woman dies without having received this special benediction "she cannot enter heaven" ([Kauder ?]1868:244-245).

<sup>24</sup>Children of all ages attend this service as well. Inclusion of children in all community activities is considered to be part of the Mi'kmaw socialization process.

<sup>25</sup>The holding of confessions and the recitation of the rosary along with the evening mass are part of the regular religious observances associated with the mission. As stated, liturgical aspects of the mission typically run for a week, but may be of shorter or longer duration depending on the availability of priests. On my first visit in 1997, the mission ran for seven days. However, in 1999, scheduled religious activities overseen by a priest were conducted over a

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Church is also well represented at the mission. The diocesan bishop normally attends this function as do a number of parish priests who mission to the different Mi'kmaw communities throughout Mi'kma'ki.

With the exception of St. Anne's statue, her bearers and the Chief of Security, all members participating in the procession proceed to the outdoor altar just outside the church. St. Anne's statue remains inside the church until mass is over and the formal procession begins. The clergy, key members of the Grand Council and the choir are seated on the outdoor altar. All remaining Mission participants congregate on the grounds in front of the altar to hear mass.

The choir is central to St. Anne's Day celebrations as many of the hymns are sung in Mi'kmaq<sup>29</sup> and are also considered to be part of traditional practice. The St. Anne's Day mass is *Mesgig Alames* (High Mass) overseen by the officiating priest<sup>30</sup> and visiting Catholic clergy. Before the close of the mass, officials of the Grand Council announce the appointment of new members

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<sup>29</sup>The *Getapegiemgeoel* (hymns) are listed in the Mission Schedule as *O Sapeoin Ana* (Oh Good [St.] Anne); *O Mali, Mailen aqq Mali* (Oh Mary, Magdalen(?) and Mary); *Sent Ann Alastomelseoin* (St. Anne Pray for Us). Please note that the titles of the hymns quoted here are not consistent with Smith-Francis orthography, but are written in accordance with the Pacifique system.

<sup>30</sup>Each year a particular priest is given the honour of officiating over the St. Anne's Mission. For instance, in 1997 Fr. Cameron from the nearby parish of St. Peter's presided over the Mission; the following year, Fr. Curtis Sapier, a Maliseet priest from New Brunswick oversaw the Mission, and in 1999, the Mission was overseen by Fr. Robert McNeil, the parish priest for Eskasoni.

to the council.<sup>31</sup> Once announcements are made, communion dispensed and the closing prayers said, the blessed bread is distributed among the congregation.<sup>32</sup> People who are ill may consume their portion, while most others reserve the bread for future use.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Each year there are approximately one or two vacant positions on the Council to be filled. Usually, vacancies arise if a member is either deceased or is too ill to carry out his/her duties, Council members rarely resign their positions for any other reasons. Accepting a Grand Council membership is a serious undertaking, as Council positions are considered to be for life.

<sup>32</sup>Parsons notes that early in the twentieth century, Grand Council appointments and the blessing and distribution of the bread were carried out on different occasions. The ceremonies she refers to as the “men’s dinner”, “acclamation of chiefs [*keptins*]” and the “war-dance” all typically took place the day after St. Anne’s procession. Parsons describes the events as follows: “The dinner took place about half past four in the afternoon. Bread and tea (or a money equivalent) were contributed from each wigwam and carried to the grand wigwam (*kchi wigwom*)... Within the grand wigwam the chiefs, the *putus*’, the captains, perhaps others were to eat... The [other] men take seats in a circle around the wigwam entrance, and from within an address is made... After the address, there is a shout from within and a song—a *capitchn*’ is being acclaimed, and is singing. Out he steps, distinguished as a captain by the moon-crescent medal hanging by a chain on his chest” (Parsons 1926: 469). After this procedure was repeated by four different men who had been acclaimed captains, “the *putus*’, the wampum-record keeper, stands within the wigwam... near the entrance and facing out makes an address” (Parsons 1926:470). This ceremony lasted for about an hour and a half after which there was an evening mass followed by the “war-dance” described in the following manner: “On coming out of chapel people gather around the dance ring in front of the Grand Chief’s wigwam, a grass-grown rutted circle, with a diameter of about eighteen feet. At the centre stood a man to beat with a short unbarked stick, on a doubled-up piece of brown paper... He sang two or three words... in repetition for about one-minute periods. When he stopped singing, the circle stopped dancing and shouted... The dancers progressed in anti-sunwise circuit, one behind the other, their step rather a rapid clog” (Parsons 1926: 471). The imprint of the dance circle to which Parsons refers can still be seen approximately half way up St. Anne’s Way.

<sup>33</sup>Like the holy water and the cotton cloth, the bread distributed on St. Anne’s Day is believed to hold curative properties. I was told that many people preserve the bread by drying it. Preserved portions are often used to help heal the sick.

Immediately after mass the church bell tolls to announce the beginning of the main procession. The members of the procession take their respective positions and move toward the church.<sup>34</sup> The order of the procession is as follows: Flower Bearer<sup>35</sup>; Cross Bearer; Flag Carriers; St. Anne and her Bearers; First Communion girls; Church representatives (priests and bishop); *Kji-Saqamaw*, *Kji-Keptin* and *Putus*<sup>36</sup>; *Keptins*; Choir; pilgrimage participants. The Knights of Columbus flank the left and right side of the procession.

On St. Anne's Day, attending members of the Grand Council are easily recognized by their attire: each member wears a coloured sash that designates their specific position within the Council.<sup>37</sup> Girls who have recently received their First Holy Communion also participate in the procession. Many wear white lace and satin dresses while others wear white deerskin dresses

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<sup>34</sup>In 1999, the *Kji-Saqamaw's* wife joined the procession, but this was the first time that the Grand Chief's wife has been included in the procession (personal communication).

<sup>35</sup>The role of the Flower Bearer is to strew Wild Rose petals in front of the procession as it advances up the hill.

<sup>36</sup>The *Putus* holds the position of wampum reader/recorder. The traditional wampum that was worn by the *Putus* at *Se'tta'newimk* went missing some time in the 1960's. Some people say that it was offered for display during Canada's *Expo '67* and was not returned to the *Putus*. Meanwhile, others claim that it may have been sold.

<sup>37</sup>Grand Council positions and colour assignation of sashes: *Kji-Saqamaw* (Grand Captain), royal blue/white; *Kji-Keptin* (Grand Captain), deep yellow/white; *Putus* (Wampum Keeper), pale yellow/white; Secondary *Keptins*, pale blue/white; St. Anne's Bearers, dark green/white; Chief of Security, red/white; Cross Bearer, St. Anne's Security, Bread Servers, red; Flag Carriers, pink; Choir, pale yellow. In addition, the *Kji-Saqamaw* wears a special medallion which was presented to him upon taking up this special office within the Grand Council.

embroidered with Mi'kmaw insignia<sup>38</sup> and beadwork. The Flag Bearers and members of the choir are also variously dressed, some choosing to wear hand-crafted Mi'kmaw attire while others wear common dress. In addition, members of the procession as well as many pilgrimage participants accessorize their outfits with jewellery and adornments of Mi'kmaw or other Native designs.

After the members of the procession leave the main outdoor altar St. Anne's statue is carried out of the church to join with the procession. The procession then moves in a counter clockwise direction around the church and then slowly moves along "St. Anne's Way" which is a grassy incline bordered on both the left and right with flags bearing the symbol of a red cross upon a white background.<sup>39</sup> "St. Anne's Way" is considered to be sacred ground and is an area that is kept clean and well manicured at all times. As the procession moves up the hill, people are careful not to cross in front of the procession as to do so is considered to be disrespectful to St. Anne.<sup>40</sup>

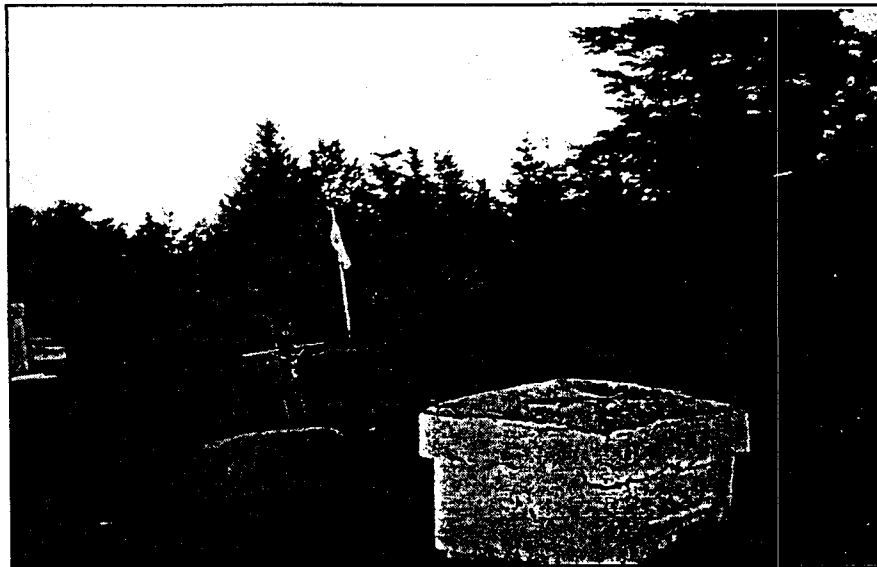
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<sup>38</sup>Typically, Mi'kmaw traditional "regalia" items are embroidered with a double curve motif. The symbol in the centre of the curves are believed to hold symbolic meaning, but the meanings of these symbols have been lost.

<sup>39</sup>The flags which mark "St. Anne's Way" are similar to the official Grand Council flag, excepting that in addition to the red cross at the centre of the flag, the council flag bears a red crescent moon in the upper right hand quadrant and a red star (*wasoq*) in the lower right hand quadrant. A replica of this flag appears on p. 24? of this thesis. The metal crosses that mark St. Anne's Way and to which St. Anne's flags are attached designate the twelve Stations of the Cross (*Glotjeioie Aogtigtog*). The commemorative metal crosses at the base of these flags were donated in memory of deceased family members.

<sup>40</sup>I was informed of this rule in advance and while taking photographs I was careful to stay behind the markers. However, there were a number of non-Native videographers who in the interest of obtaining quality footage, crossed back and forth in front of the procession. I was somewhat embarrassed by the fact that the other non-Natives documenting the event appeared to be unaware of the inappropriateness of their behaviour, and had obviously not bothered to





4. The rock and crucifix in the above photo marks the site where Fr. Maillard is believed to have said the first Catholic mass at Potlotek. The white concrete basin in the foreground is where water is blessed and dispensed on St. Anne's Day. Photo by Angela Robinson, 1999.

At the top of the incline, the procession passes through an arch fashioned from bowed saplings, green boughs and flowers. The procession then pauses near a rock and cement basin at the site where Fr. Maillard reportedly offered the first mass on the island.<sup>41</sup> The water in the basin is blessed and a short prayer said before the clergy, *Kji-Saqamaw* and *Kji-Keptin* advance to a small outdoor stage, overlooking St. Anne's Way, to address pilgrimage participants.

The clergy typically pray for the deceased and offer special prayers for those who are ill. However, the content of the greetings and messages given by Grand Council members is not \_\_\_\_\_ inquire about protocol.

<sup>41</sup>Some local Mi'kmaw historians note that at Potlotek the location of the rock where the first mass was said was once the site of Mi'kmaw Council fires (personal communication).

restricted to specifically religious matters. Public addresses made by members of the Grand Council at *Se'tta'newimk* are in keeping with long-standing Mi'kmaw tradition. It is believed that Mi'kmaw biannual assemblies of district and local chiefs served to address "Matters of treaties and alliances, trade, births, deaths, marriages and the general welfare of the people..." (McMillan 1996:40).

The Jesuit Missionary, Fr. Biard writes that:

It is principally in summer that they [Mi'kmaq] pay visits and hold their State Councils; I mean that several Sagamores [chiefs] come together and consult among themselves about peace and war, treaties of friendship and treaties for the common good. It is only these Sagamores who have a voice in the discussion and who make the speeches (Thwaites 1896, III:93).

Traditionally, Mi'kmaw summer gatherings were arenas in which band leaders and elders made important social, political and economic decisions. Parsons notes that Grand Council assemblies once made up a significant portion of the Mission period and a special day, separate from the St. Anne's Day celebrations, was allocated for the council's special assembly (Parsons 1926).

The commentaries made by the *Kji-Saqamaw* and *Kji-Keptin* may address any number of topics of social, cultural or political relevance to the Mi'kmaq. For instance, the address given by *Kji-Saqamaw* Sylliboy in 1999 emphasized the need for parents to take special care of their children and *Kji-Keptin* Denny's remarks were directed at combatting the continued social, cultural and political inequalities with which the Mi'kmaw people are continually confronted.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>The current *Kji-Keptin*, Alex Denny, is well aware of the traditional role of the *Kji-Keptin* who in former times was responsible for the social and political welfare of his people.

After the public address, the procession moves back down the hill. After the procession makes a clockwise circle of the church the members of the procession enter the church and St. Anne is restored to her position to the right of the altar. The *Kji-Saqamaw* and the officiating priest then take up positions in front of the altar and wait to receive the large number of pilgrimage participants who have formed a queue outside the church. The priest holds a relic of St. Anne and the *Kji-Saqamaw* holds a Grand Council medal received upon his initiation into the office of *Kji-Saqamaw*. People now enter the church in double file and upon approaching the altar kissing both the relic and the *Kji-Saqamaw*'s medal. This is a significant gesture as it marks the equal importance of St. Anne as the patron saint of the Mi'kmaq and the importance of the spiritual role of the *Kji-Saqamaw*. After the religious observations of St. Anne's Day are completed, Grand Council members assemble at the church to hold their main meeting of the year. The end of the council meeting signals the closing of the St. Anne's Day celebrations.

By the official close of the Mission on the Monday after St. Anne's procession, many people have left Potlotek. For those who have full-time employment, Monday is the beginning of the work week and many leave on Sunday to return to work. In addition, a significant number of young and middle-aged adults leave directly from Potlotek to travel to the potato and blueberry

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Leslie McMillan writes that "With the formation of Mi'kmaq political organizations after the [sic] 1960, the political role of the Grand Council was taken over by [elected] chiefs, band councils, and [by] lobby groups. However, since 1980 the Grand Council has experienced a resurgence of political significance" (McMillan 1996:131). Currently, the Grand Council is seeking to reestablish its traditional role.

farms in Maine where many will work as field-hands for the harvest season. As previously mentioned, the work supplied to Mi'kmaw labourers in Maine is often the most meaningful employment that many Mi'kmaq will manage to obtain for the entire year. Some families who work as a group are able to earn several hundred dollars a day and each day away from the fields means lost wages. Some of those who stay behind at Potlotek will travel to Maine after the official close of the Mission.

On Monday, the closing day of the Mission, mass begins at 11:00 a.m.. One woman attending the morning mass explained Monday's sequence of events to me. She said:

After the Stations of the Cross we come back to the church. A man has to enter first and the Chief of Security makes sure there is no one in the church. Then money is paid and prayers are requested for families, the sick and those who have just died. After the money is collected and the list is made out the list is read, then we enter the church on our knees. You don't have to go on your knees until you reach the knave (Fieldnotes, Book II:370).

Directly after the morning mass, the Stations of the Cross begin, led by the Cross Bearer, the officiating priest of the mission and several members of the choir. For the Stations of the Cross the steps along "St. Anne's Way" are retraced. Upon approaching each of the twelve stations the priest announces the station and says a short prayer after which a hymn *O Sapeoin Ana* (Good St. Anne) is sung in Mi'kmaq. After the Stations of the Cross are completed, most participants gather at the front of the church where a Grand Council representative collects money<sup>43</sup> for the special

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<sup>43</sup>Parsons notes that in the 1920's, "There was 'charity' to be 'thrown' to the image of St. Ann, thrown with the right hand, for if with the left, it was 'lost to God'" (Parsons 1926:465).

prayer service dedicated to the “Living and the Dead.”<sup>44</sup> As mentioned, prayers are requested in honour of family members, deceased and living, with special mention given to those who are ill. Those offering pledges usually donate a small amount of money (between two to twenty dollars) which is subsequently used for expenses associated with the Mission. After the list is prepared and read, those in attendance line up outside the church and upon entering the door of the church fall to their knees.<sup>45</sup> People continue two abreast on their knees to the altar where St. Anne’s statue is kissed. This act of supplication is believed to add to the effectiveness of the prayers being offered.<sup>46</sup> After prayers are said to St. Anne for the benefit of the ill and recently deceased the annual *Se’tta’newimk* gathering is officially finished.

Today, there are fewer people (between 300-400, or approximately ten percent of the number of people attending St. Anne’s Day procession) participating in the Monday ritual.

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<sup>44</sup>For the complete Mission schedule for July 1999, see Appendix 2, p. 254.

<sup>45</sup>Parsons also records this event. She states that the “Usually this ceremony is performed in the late afternoon of Procession Day, but this year because of the rain, it was postponed to the day following. Even so, because of the wet ground, the progressive kneeling ritual began at the church steps...First a prayer was made by the Grand Chief. The man headed the procession of kneelers, who moved forward three or four knee-lengths or strides between prayers, i. e. all moved together and all prayed together, movement and prayer alternating. As persons passed over the door sill they kissed it. The group moved up the centre aisle and then turned to the left where the the images stood, their feet to be kissed and small coins [‘charity’] “thrown” to them. It was a devout picture of a kind rarely seen on this continent” (Parsons 1926:468).

<sup>46</sup>Parsons states the Mi’kmaq believed that if you had ““a strong heart, a pure heart’ any sickness you have is sure to be cured ‘by going to see St. Anne on your knees’” (Parsons 1926:468).

However, the low attendance rate does not detract from the significance of this particular religious service. Many of those present are family representatives entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out a family duty, to ensure that deceased, ill or dying family members and loved ones receive the benefit of healing prayer.

Historically, St. Anne's celebrations provided a number of religious services that are no longer central features of the Mission. Prior to the installation of priests in local parishes, Potlotek was perhaps the only time that many Mi'kmaq saw a priest for the entire year. It was during the Mission that certain sacraments or rituals such as Marriage, First Communion, Confirmation Baptism, and the Churching of new mothers were carried out. However, since all Mi'kmaq communities now have the regular services of an ordained priest, the performance of such rituals at Potlotek is no longer necessary. By the latter part of the twentieth century, marriages were longer performed on the island and First Communion and Confirmation services were made available within local parishes. However, on rare occasions baptisms are still performed.<sup>47</sup>

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the religious services and devotional practices observed at Potlotek are less concerned with rites of passage and the receiving of sacraments and are more focussed on the figure of St. Anne as benefactress of the Mi'kmaq people. Since most

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<sup>47</sup>During the three consecutive visits that I made to St. Anne's Mission from 1997 to 2000, I only witnessed one Christening, performed by Fr. Robert McNeil in 1999. This Christening was held at the Mission out of personal choice rather than necessity and was performed in compliance with a special wish of the parents whose child was born shortly before the Mission (personal observation).

religious observances are directly related to sickness, death and healing, the religious context for the Potlotek Mission can be accurately described as *doulia*, or devotion in honour of a saint.

### **The Significance of St. Anne's Mission**

*Se'tta'newimk* is promoted as "time of reflection, friendship and prayer."<sup>48</sup> Although many people view St. Anne's as being religiously meaningful, travel to Potlotek is multipurpose. For most Catholics and Catholic Traditionalists, in addition to being religiously significant, the Mission has a number of important social, cultural and historical dimensions. For instance, non-Catholic participants visit Potlotek for a variety of non-religious reasons. However, for most Mi'kmaq, travel to *Se'tta'newimk* is closely associated with family tradition, or time spent there may be viewed as a vacation or retreat. Possibly, for most participants, it is the sense of community and the warm social atmosphere surrounding the Mission that motivates attendance.

While commonly held as a "sacred place," Potlotek also has the *liminal* aspect of being set apart from the rigours and routine of everyday life. Quite a number of the families who own large, comfortable cabins<sup>49</sup> on the island move to Potlotek well in advance of the Mission, staying as long

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<sup>48</sup>Refer to Mission schedule for July-August 1999, Appendix 2, p. 254.

<sup>49</sup>A number of families have large cabins equipped with refrigerators, stoves and heaters that run on propane gas. These are considered to be luxuries at Potlotek as most cabins are relatively small containing only the bare essentials such as bunks, a few storage shelves and perhaps one or two chairs and a table. For those who own smaller cabins, everything required for a stay on the island must be brought in by boat and as there is no refrigeration, supplies have to be procured every couple of days (personal observations).

as three weeks to a month. One resident of Eskasoni told me that she preferred the time leading up to the Mission week itself because “there’s less noise and more relaxing” (Fieldnotes Book II:238).” Potlotek, for many Mi’kmaq is associated with vacation and rest. For those Mi’kmaq who work or live some distance away from Cape Breton, vacation times are often arranged to coincide with the Mission, and for many local residents, Potlotek is considered a retreat away from home.

Since St. Anne’s attracts a large number of people from different demographic groups, the social matrix at Potlotek is a complex one. Although the religious aspects of the Mission are often promoted as a central feature of *Se’tta’anewimk*, this gathering also offers a number of social opportunities for those who attend. For some elders and for others who are unable to travel extensively, Potlotek provides an opportunity to meet friends and acquaintances from around the province, or from different provinces and countries. In addition, the younger generation sees Potlotek as an opportunity to spend time with cousins and friends and in some cases even to begin a romance. For others, it is an opportunity to catch up on the past year’s news, to welcome the newly born into the community and to pass condolences along to families who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

To a large degree, the social aspects of St. Anne’s contribute to the Mi’kmaq sense of community which is a principle feature of Mi’kmaq collective identity, inclusive of both Catholics and non-Catholics. One Mission participant, Jim told me that:

outside the religious aspect of St. Anne’s there are many other things happening. There’s sharing of meals, games played [cards, *waltes*, bingo] and many young people go to find a partner...I have no official role at St. Anne’s, I’m just part of the rabble, but I’ve never



missed one...St Anne's Day is so popular...due to the fact that the Mi'kmaw people are given an opportunity to meet. The Mi'kmaq have a great sense of community and the Mission provides a way for this to be expressed (Fieldnotes, Book I:12).

As Jim suggests, St. Anne's Mission provides an ideal context for socializing, in which the sharing of food and friendship is central. As previously mentioned, most people provide more food than is personally needed in anticipation of the many occasions in which refreshments and meals will be shared with visitors. Throughout the Mission it is common to see people moving from cabin to cabin visiting each other. Among the Mi'kmaq, it is considered impolite to fail to offer food and refreshments to guests, and it is also considered inappropriate to refuse such offers. During the Mission special foods are served, such as family favourites or speciality items that are not eaten on a regular basis. Many people prepare traditional Mi'kmaw dishes such as baked salmon, stewed eel and moose roasts, all of which are shared. Baked goods are also plentiful and homemade cakes, cookies, pies and *luskinikin*,<sup>50</sup> frequently accompany the offer of tea. In many respects, the spirit of giving and sharing associated with the Christmas season within mainstream Christian culture is comparable to the social atmosphere surrounding *Se'tta'newimk*.<sup>51</sup> In effect, the gathering offers the Mi'kmaw people as a group an ideal opportunity to extend generosity and good will to one another. Like most Mi'kmaw social events, Potlotek is an arena in which spiritual, emotional and physical nourishment is in abundance.

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<sup>50</sup>*Luskinikin* is a traditional Mi'kmaw soda bread usually served with molasses.

<sup>51</sup>This is especially true since many Mi'kmaw people exchange gifts (usually of clothing) during mission week.

Another social aspect of *Se'tta'newimk*, especially among young Mi'kmaw adults, is that of courtship and marriage. Although marriages are no longer performed on the island, younger people attend the Mission to seek out a long-term partner. Historically, the Mission was considered the best time to find and secure a mate. Parsons relates that, "In one of the exhortations by the Grand Chief at the close of church service he urged parents not to oppose their girls getting married, here was a good chance, with the priest coming: it was 'safest' to let them marry, not to have them around at nights" (Parsons 1926:460). One woman, now middle aged, told me that she prayed to St. Anne to "send me a man who loved me for myself—for who I am...I continued to pray and finally I met [my husband]. I met [him] at Potlotek and we eloped a few months later...This was 29 years ago and we have been together ever since...I thank St. Anne for the man I asked for" (Fieldnotes, Book I:35). St. Anne's then has a special appeal for young marriageable men and women who wish to establish meaningful personal relationships.

## **Conclusion**

In many respects, identifying *Se'tta'newimk* as a strictly religious celebration overlooks the multiplicity of reasons that encourage participation in the event. Essentially, the annual gathering at Potlotek has a dual traditional aspect from which different meanings of sacredness are derived. First, since Potlotek is viewed by Catholic and non-Catholic Mi'kmaq as a sacred pre-contact gathering site, pilgrimage to the island retains meaning as what Alan Morinis calls "persistent peregrination," or a continuation of pre-contact ancestral tradition and patterns of social interaction (Morinis

1992:101). Furthermore, the *Se'tta'newimk* gathering holds significance as a communal gathering in which the sharing of food and friendship is facilitated. The second aspect of pilgrimage, the annual St. Anne's Day procession, holds specifically religious meaning for devotees of St. Anne and for those who accept Catholicism as a meaningful and legitimate traditional religious orientation.

Pilgrimage to Potlotek as enactment of and respect for long-standing Mi'kmaw traditions bears similarities to the Lac St. Anne pilgrimage in Northern Alberta as described by the anthropologist Alan Morinis.<sup>52</sup> Morinis argues that pilgrimages persist through cultural change because the ritual form itself can accommodate new cultural content,<sup>53</sup> and that people continue to seek out the "salving ideal" that stands beyond time and space in sacred places (Morinis 1992: 102). This perspective suggests that although what is believed to constitute the "sacred" and the "ideal" may change, these values continue to be perceived as being accessible in special locations "situated beyond the sphere of everyday life" (Morinis 1992:103).

In Morinis' view the Lac St. Anne pilgrimage performed and continues to perform many of the cultural and social functions of the Plains Indians' pre-missionary summer assemblies. As a form of "persistent peregrination," Morinis argues that pilgrimage to Lac St. Anne is an extension of pre-

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<sup>52</sup>Significantly, the relationship between pilgrimage and the persistence of pre-contact traditions following missionization is documented in a number of other contexts in the Americas (Jarvenpa 1990:198; Sallnow 1981:176-180; Wolf 1958:38).

<sup>53</sup>Morinis' concept of the relationship between the "form" and "content" of ritual gatherings is comparable to Ferdinand de Saussure's explanation of the functioning of *langue* and *parole*, *langue* being the system of language in general, and *parole* any usage of language within it (Saussure 1986:645). *Langue*, then, corresponds to form, and *parole* to content.

missionary gatherings,<sup>54</sup> and that rather than being an exclusively Catholic ceremony, serves multiple purposes. He sees the Lac St. Anne pilgrimage as an arena, consistent with that of the Sun Dance, in which social interaction, trade, information exchange, and vacationing are facilitated and anticipated (Morinis 1992:109). Morinis' observations on Lac St. Anne can also be applied to the Mi'kmaw case. For non-Catholic as well as for many Catholic Mi'kmaq, Potlotek is viewed as a sacred site because it retains historical and cultural meanings separate from the Christian context in which it is now embedded.

From an ethnographic viewpoint, annual pilgrimage to Potlotek is a complex mosaic of devotionism, socialization, group solidarity and conflict. On one hand, *Se'tta'newimk* can be viewed as a form of "persistent peregrination," or a continuation of historically earlier Mi'kmaw summer gatherings in which matters of social, political, economic and religious significance were addressed. On the other hand, however, the structured and more formal aspects of the Mission currently focus on the veneration of St. Anne as *ki'ju*—the spiritual overseer, patroness, protector and healer of the Mi'kmaw people.

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<sup>54</sup>Some commonalities exist between St. Anne's Pilgrimage and the Sun Dance. For example, as Morinis observes, although the context for the annual gathering has changed there is continuity in the performance of the ritual itself, and during the Sun Dance personal vows were taken, a practice that has continued at the pilgrimage (Morinis 1992:111).

## Chapter Five

### “We are born to die”: Death, Illness and Grieving in Eskasoni

In spite of the learned have said,  
I still my old opinion keep;  
The posture, that we give the dead,  
Points out the soul's eternal sleep.

Not so the ancients of these lands—  
The Indian, when from life released,  
Again is seated with his friends,  
And shares again the joyous feast.

His imagined bird and painted bowl,  
And venison, for a journey dressed,  
Bespeak the nature of the soul,  
Activity, that knows no rest.

Philip Freneau, *The Indian Burying Ground*

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In Eskasoni, “years and years ago, before telephones and the like, if someone died a man<sup>1</sup> would stand in the doorway and shout ‘It’s a sacred time,’ [*alatsutmaykapo*]... Then the community would know that the person had passed on” (Fieldnotes, Book III:389). Essentially, the thrice repeated shout of *alatsutmaykapo*, literally “we are praying,” was a summons to the community to gather at the home of the deceased. *Alatsutmaykapo* meant it was time to come together, to talk, pray and to keep the grieving family company. By the turn of the twenty-first

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<sup>1</sup>The person who would announce *alatsutmaykapo* was typically a member of the Grand Council, usually a prayer leader.

century, the call of *alatsutmaykapo* is no longer heard in Eskasoni, but within hours of the death of a Mi'kmaw person most people in the community are aware of the event. The news of death is still received as a summons.

In Eskasoni, the death of a community member<sup>2</sup> is one occasion when the Mi'kmaw people are drawn together. Of course, it may be argued that in most face-to-face communities, death tends to bond people, but the degree to which the Mi'kmaq are collectively oriented is remarkable. The occurrence of death in Eskasoni is a time when the Mi'kmaq gather as a community to assist the family who has lost a loved one. It is also a time when political, religious and personal differences are suppressed in the interest of providing a comforting and supportive atmosphere for those in mourning. As one woman commented,

[w]hen someone dies we forget about tensions and arguments. This is not the time and place for such things...What we do is allow people to grieve. They want for nothing. We give them food and comfort and they're allowed to grieve in their own way. This is how we show our strength. We have to be strong...(Fieldnotes, Book II:257).

With few exceptions, deathways<sup>3</sup> in Eskasoni tend to follow a well-established pattern.

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<sup>2</sup>Although this is generally characteristic of funerary rituals for a community member it also exists in cases of non-Native persons who made exceptional contributions to Mi'kmaw society. For instance, a former priest of Holy Family parish requested that his funeral take place at Eskasoni. Upon the death of the priest in 2000, his wishes were carried out, including interment in the local cemetery, followed by a *salite* and funeral feast as a show of respect to the deceased and his family (personal communication).

<sup>3</sup>The term deathways generally refers to the various rites, rituals and emotional responses associated with the process of death and dying within any given society.

This pattern, as with many Mi'kmaw understandings relating to death and the after-life, is derived from a composite of Christian and non-Christian interpretative frameworks.

This chapter is primarily concerned with the ways in which Roman Catholic and non-Western cosmological (and ideological) beliefs and values inform various practices relating to Mi'kmaw illness, death and grief. The material presented here offers one particular discourse about Mi'kmaw deathways, derived from the descriptions, beliefs and opinions provided by adult members of the Eskasoni community. This particular group is the one which I came to know best during my fieldwork.

At this juncture, I would like to interject that the initial foci of my fieldwork did not include a detailed account of Mi'kmaw deathways. However, while formulating the themes for individual chapters to be included in this thesis I became increasingly aware of the social and spiritual significance of Mi'kmaw funerary rituals both for the family and the community. Unfortunately, I did not record certain aspects of Mi'kmaw deathways (such as specifics about private mourning),<sup>4</sup> but my frequent attendance at wakes, funerals and post-interment gatherings provided me with sufficient experience to offer an informed commentary on Mi'kmaw responses to illness, death and

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<sup>4</sup>While living in Eskasoni, I did not inquire directly about official or unofficial mourning periods. However, I did learn that one year is generally accepted as a reasonable mourning period. On several occasions when inquiring about specific persons I wished to interview, I was told that it "might not be a good time" because the person in question had "just lost" a close family member. Upon further inquiry, I found that "just lost" invariably referred to someone who had been dead for a year or less.

bereavement.<sup>5</sup>

### **Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Death**

For most of the twentieth century, anthropological theories relating to the study of deathways have tended to either focus on the Durkheimian view that death rituals, as mechanisms of social control, elicit emotional responses during “life crisis” situations, or the alternative view that, emotional responses guide the social construction of ritual practices.

Within the social sciences, analyses of death and deathways begins with Robert Hertz’s study of secondary burial among the Dayak of Borneo. Hertz, a student of Emile Durkheim, proposes that conceptions of death and the emotions associated with death are socially constructed and as such can be studied as sociological facts. Hertz claims that mortuary rites and practices serve to organize and govern public and private emotions. Based on studies on secondary burial, Hertz asserts that “death as a social phenomenon consists in a dual...process of mental disintegration” marked by the death of an individual, and social reintegration or “synthesis” which is achieved once specific mortuary rituals and a period of mourning have effectively “triumph[ed] over death” (Hertz 1960:86). Similarly, anthropologists Bloch and Parry note that in Hertz’s

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<sup>5</sup>Anthropologists writing on public and private expressions of grief ascribe different meanings to the terms grief, mourning and bereavement: For instance, thanatologist Robert J. Kastenbaum states that, “Bereavement is an objective fact. We are bereaved when a person close to us dies...Grief is a response to bereavement: it is how the survivor feels” and “Mourning is the culturally patterned expression of the bereaved person’s thoughts and feelings” (Kastenbaum 1998:309-313).



analysis of deathways, “the reassertion of society manifested by the end of mourning and by the belief that the soul has been incorporated into the society of the dead” is mirrored by the way in which the “collective consciousness of the living has been settled by the funerary rituals” (Bloch and Parry 1982:4).

The term *communitas* coined by anthropologist Victor Turner to characterize social relations during the “betwixt and between” (Turner 1995:94-108) stage when human relatedness, egalitarianism and anti-structure prevail, pertains to the “transition” stage of Arnold van Gennep’s tripartite model of *rites de passage* (Turner 1995:94-96; van Gennep 1960:11, 21). Van Gennep recognized that all rites of passage involve rites of separation, rites of transition (or liminality), and rites of incorporation, each of which is not developed to the same extent by all participants in every ceremony, but varies according to the social-cultural contexts in which it is used. In *The Ritual Process* (Turner 1995), Turner identifies the stage of “separation” as “symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or the group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both” (Turner 1995:94). During the the second phase, the transitional, or liminal period, “the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner 1995:94). In the final phase of “reaggregation or reincorporation...The ritual subject, individual or corporate,” returns to a relatively stable state and is granted rights and obligations of a “clearly defined and ‘structural’ type: he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents

of social position in a system of such positions” (Turner 1995:94-95).

In the latter part of the twentieth century more sophisticated theoretical frameworks for the study of ritual have emerged. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo argues that historically, among social scientists, theoretical approaches to the study of deathways tended to privilege the role of ritual over and above emotional responses to death (Rosaldo 1989). In his essay on Ilongot headhunting, Rosaldo observes that headhunting is a culturally and socially constructed idiom through which the rage associated with grief is acknowledged and expressed. For the Ilongot then, headhunting is a primary means of coping with death. However, Rosaldo argues that, in the study of deathways, the considerable influence of emotional turmoil on the ritual process has been continually overlooked by scholars and as a result “social structure, not death, and certainly not bereavement” has become the primary object of study (Rosaldo 1989:13). He suggests that social scientists tend to “mask the emotional force of bereavement by reducing funerary ritual to orderly routine” by fitting death “neatly into the author’s view of funerary ritual as a mechanical programmed unfolding of prescribed acts” (Rosaldo 1989:13).

In the following chapter, my main focus is to elucidate the various dimensions of funerary ritual in Eskasoni and to relate my own interpretation of people’s responses to death. The analysis of Mi’kmaq deathways presented in this chapter draws on van Gennep’s tripartite model of *rites de passage*, Turner’s concept of *communitas*, and also includes a discussion of Mi’kmaq emotional responses to death. In particular I draw attention to several rites of separation, transition and reincorporation that the Mi’kmaq closely associate with their cultural and social identity.

## **Mi'kmaw Deathways**

The idiom of healing associated with St. Anne's Mission can be broadly applied to various facets of Mi'kmaw deathways. For the Mi'kmaq of Eskasoni, the community solidarity sustained through close and frequent social contact is the means through which individual and collective healing takes place. The Mi'kmaq often say, "We try to do what is best for the community." However, "what is best for the community" often entails the emotional, physical and spiritual well-being of individual persons within Mi'kmaw society.

There is a proverb among the Mi'kmaq that "no one is born alone, and no one should die alone." In Eskasoni, the illness or death of any one of its residents is an occasion in which members of the community are drawn together. Generally, among the Mi'kmaq, the death of a community member is one occasion in which the Mi'kmaw people are drawn together. Of course, it may be argued that in most "face-to-face" communities death tends to bond people together. However, in my experience, the degree to which the Mi'kmaq are collectively oriented is remarkable. Many of the Mi'kmaw voices appearing below are careful to make this distinction as well: One Mi'kmaw woman told me, "We never leave the family alone. At the hospital when someone is dying, when they die and when funeral arrangements are made. We get together for meals and share with each other" (Fieldnotes, Book II:255). Upon hearing of a Mi'kmaw person's illness, family, friends and acquaintances visit the sick person, offering prayers, food and any assistance that may be required.

Whether the sick person is in hospital<sup>6</sup> or at home, is of little concern to the Mi'kmaq. Those who are ill are attended at all times either until the person's health improves or the person dies.

When a Mi'kmaw person is near death two specific rituals may be performed at the bedside of the dying person. Both of these rituals are drawn from Mi'kmaw tradition and social convention: the first ritual to be performed is *apiksiktatimk*, or the act of mutual forgiveness; the second ritual involves the recitation of Christian prayers. With the exception of sudden or tragic death, the latter ritual is normally carried out. However, although a number of people mentioned *apiksiktatimk* to me it is not clear to what extent this particular ritual is still enacted.

*Apiksiktatimk*, the first ritual to be performed, was explained to me in the following manner:

There is a ritual that we used to have and still do. When my uncle was dying the whole family went to him one at a time and asked him for forgiveness for any wrongs or hurts we had done to him. My uncle also asked each person for forgiveness (Fieldnotes, Book

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<sup>6</sup>When I spoke with a non-Native hospital worker about the Mi'kmaw concern to accompany the sick and the dying she told me that it was "inconvenient at times, but the Mi'kmaq are no problem. It used to be better at St. Rita's [Hospital] because it was run by the sisters [nuns] and they understood this and went along with it. At the new hospital [Cape Breton Regional Hospital] it's a little different. Sometimes there are so many of them that you can't get into the room. But, they get out of the way when a doctor or nurse needs to do something [for the patient] (personal communication). Significantly, anthropologists Joseph Kaufert and John O'Neil's study of Inuit patients in urban hospital settings in Winnipeg relates similar findings. Kaufert and O'Neil maintain, for the Inuit, Western models of care for chronically ill and dying patients evoke "fundamental conflicts with cultural values emphasizing the kin groups and communities' obligation to take care of its own" (Kaufert and O'Neil 1991:232). The authors conclude that although the Inuit "recognize the need for technical and personal care services provided by the hospital, the problems of maintaining communal support in the hospital environment are profound" Kaufert and O'Neil 1991:232).

III:387).

*Apiksiktatimk*, literally, “forgiving each other,”<sup>7</sup> is performed once the death of the sick person appears imminent. If a person is thought to be near death, it is common for family, friends and all those present to engage in *apiksiktatimk*. Among the Mi’kmaq, it is commonly held that, once requested, this mutual act of forgiveness is rarely denied. However, on occasion *apiksiktatimk* does not take place. I was present one evening when several people were discussing the deteriorating health of a friend, at which time one person commented:

I’m disappointed because [Jess] and [Dan] didn’t forgive each other...It’s [Jess’s]’s, not [Dan]’s [problem]. [Jess] will have to take it with [her].. There’s still quite a bit of anger. I wish they would come to terms with this. [Jess] doesn’t have much time left. [She’s] had contact with the spirit world already. [She’s] seen [her] father and others who have passed into the spirit world (Fieldnotes, Book V:915).

The failure to offer or grant *apiksiktatimk* is viewed as problematic both for the dying person and for surviving friends and family. *Apiksiktatimk* ensures that when a dying person leaves this world he or she does so with the best wishes of those around them. Performing this act benefits the living as well as the soon to be deceased, otherwise, survivors will have to carry unresolved differences between themselves and the deceased with them for the rest of their lives, and the deceased will have to carry his or her problems into the next world. While *apiksiktatimk* allows for healing through the relieving of personal burdens, it is also an act of mutual respect which is an important aspect of Mi’kmaq culture. A refusal to offer mutual forgiveness is

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<sup>7</sup>This ritual is also documented by Kauder [?]:

interpreted as a sign of disrespect for both the people involved and for basic Mi'kmaw social values.

In the final stages of illness, there is also a ceremony in which the dying person is attended by a Catholic Mi'kmaw "prayer group."<sup>13</sup> The prayer group sets up a vigil at the bedside of the afflicted person and continually offers prayers, especially the rosary, to comfort the dying person and his or her family. Many Mi'kmaq consider this way of dealing with death and illness to be distinctive from non-Native approaches. One Mi'kmaw woman proudly related to me that:

[w]e deal with sickness and death different than non-Natives. If someone is sick in the hospital there might be as many as fifty people in the room praying and watching over the sick person. Mi'kmaw people are accepting of illness and death... That's life (Fieldnotes, Book III:387).

In addition to the prayer ritual described above, neo-Traditionalists and Catholic-Traditionalists often perform sweats, prayer in the four directions<sup>14</sup> and prayer circles to aid in the healing process of those who are ill. There was an emphasis on healing in both the sweat and the two prayer circles that I attended. In fact, the sweat was requested by the sister of a dying man, as was one of the prayer circles. At the sweat, the prayers offered were non-Christian and of a highly personal nature. Each person participating in the sweat was asked to make his or her own

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<sup>13</sup>Typically, prayer groups are chosen by members of the community to perform this service. The person who oversees the group, the "prayer leader" acquires this position through the Grand Council.

<sup>14</sup>Refer to Chapter One, pp. 22-24 of this thesis for a description of sweats, prayer in the four directions and prayer circles.

specific prayers to the “Creator.” In a number of cases, supplication was made to the “Creator” to ease the dying person’s transition from the world of the living to the “land of the ancestors.”<sup>15</sup> The last prayer circle that I attended focussed on healing. However, this particular ceremony was attended by several neo-Traditionalists, Catholic Traditionalists and one Catholic, all of whom were asked to offer personal prayers. On this occasion Christian prayers were also included as part of the ceremony.

During the latter stages of illness it is understood that prayers no longer assist in physical healing, but they do offer dying persons and their loved ones spiritual nourishment. A prayer ritual does not replace the prayers performed by a Catholic priest or the Church’s ritual of “anointing of the sick”, but is a gesture of solidarity on the part of the Catholic community to pray with, and for, the family about to experience the loss of a loved one. Once the dying person is approaching death, the priest is immediately summoned to perform Last Rites,<sup>16</sup> after which the prayer group

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<sup>15</sup>As mentioned, the prayers spoken aloud in sweats are very personal and are often confessional in content. The conductor of the sweat asks each participant to respect the privacy of those sharing in the ceremony. Out of respect for the participants, specific details of sweats should never be disclosed in either written or oral form.

<sup>16</sup>Reforms to the sacrament of “Extreme Unction” or “Last Rites” instituted by the Second Vatican Council modified nomenclature as well as a revising the rite itself. *The Documents of Vatican II* state, “‘Extreme Unction,’ which may also and more fittingly be called ‘anointing of the sick,’ is not a sacrament for those only at the point of death... ‘Anointing of the sick’ is a much happier term than ‘Extreme Unction,’ since it does not suggest imminent death. The comforting sacrament should be given, not at the moment of death, but as soon as there is some danger of death from sickness or old age” (Abbott 1966:161). Prior to these amendments, “Extreme Unction” was given only to dying persons. In Eskasoni, the parish priest is still called to the bedside of a dying person to perform “Last Rites.”

continues to hold vigil with the family.

After death occurs, the deceased is attended by members of the prayer group and relatives until arrangements are made to have the body prepared for burial. The restoration<sup>17</sup> of the remains is done professionally at a local funeral home<sup>18</sup> in the nearby city of Sydney after which the body is returned to Eskasoni for the wake, funeral and interment. From the moment of death until interment, the period of restoration is the only time that the deceased is unattended by a family member. If a death occurs late at night or early in the morning at least one family member will keep vigil over the body until it is taken under the professional care of a funeral director. The remains are kept at a funeral home in Sydney while the community makes preparations for the wake, funeral, *salite* and funeral feast. Once the deceased's body is returned to the community for the wake and burial, constant vigil is kept over the body until interment.

### **The Wake**

A Mi'kmaw man once told me that, "the best thing we can do for each other is offer food and friendship." The occurrence of death is a time when "food and friendship" are of central importance and both are freely given. In Eskasoni, death is a social affair. Many hands are required to assist with the practical, social and religious aspects of the funeral process. The event

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<sup>17</sup>Restoration is a professional term used within the funeral industry to refer to the embalming and cosmetic treatment of the deceased's body.

<sup>18</sup>Although there are several funeral homes in Sydney, the Mi'kmaq almost always use the services of one particular funeral home.



of death is a time in which almost every family in Eskasoni becomes either directly or indirectly involved in funerary preparations and the performance of funerary rites and rituals. Prior to and during the wake the family home is the centre of activity. Wakes are typically hosted in the family home and the men in the community work day and night repairing, cleaning and painting the interior and exterior of the home where the wake is to take place.<sup>19</sup> Friends, neighbours and the extended family help the mourners in any way they can: accommodation is offered to visitors, money and sundry items are collected for the *salite* and food is prepared to serve the mourners and their guests during the wake. Most importantly, grieving family members are provided with spiritual and emotional support at all times. At no time during the wake, funeral and *salite* is the family left alone.

The death of a Mi'kmaw person is considered to be a very special time among the Mi'kmaq. It is not unusual for extended family members and friends to travel long distances to attend funerals, wakes and post-interment ritual gatherings (*salites* and funeral feasts). If a Mi'kmaw person dies outside of Eskasoni, residents of Eskasoni often travel to the community of the deceased to attend the wake or at least the funeral service and the *salite*. Likewise, Mi'kmaq from other communities throughout Mi'kmaki travel to Eskasoni when a death has occurred. Among the Mi'kmaq, attendance at funerals, wakes and post-interment ritual gatherings, while not

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<sup>19</sup>In rare cases the family may opt to host the wake at the Gabriel Centre located in the basement of the church. However, the general rule is to hold the wake at the home of the deceased.

compulsory, is considered a proper show of respect for the deceased and the deceased's family.

Throughout Mi'kma'ki, there is an unwritten understanding that those in mourning are in need of support and as a member of the Mi'kmaw community one is expected to respond to this need. Interestingly, intra-community distinctions of all kinds are subdued in the case of death. Although personal and social conflicts are evident in various other social situations, there was no evidence of such tensions at the funerals, wakes, *salites* and funeral feasts that I attended. Instead, I witnessed a strong show of support for bereaved families despite existing political, social and religious differences. While living in Eskasoni, I found this sense of community to be especially remarkable on two particular occasions. In the first instance, Henry, a well-known politician from Eskasoni was under investigation for several indictable offences. Many people in the community were aware that Henry's questionable activities had adversely affected most members of the community and many residents were quite angry about the entire situation. A number of people had publically criticized Henry and insisted that he be brought to justice under the full weight of the law. In the midst of this controversy, Henry lost a close member of his family in a tragic accident. Interestingly, however, I found the wake, funeral and *salite* for Henry's deceased family member to be one of the most well-attended social functions that I witnessed in the community. I attended the wake with two of my closest friends, Jon and Dora who, prior to the accident, had publically criticized Henry. Both Jan and Dora admitted to feeling awkward about going to the wake, but put aside their personal differences and offered support to Henry and his family. Dora, expressing her feelings on the subject, remarked to me "It doesn't matter what the man [Henry] did, this is

different. I have to go [to the wake]. I'd feel a lot worse if I didn't" (personal communication).

While I was living in Eskasoni another death occurred that illustrates the willingness of the Mi'kmaw people to put personal grievances aside when a death occurs. When Baxter, a man from a neighbouring Mi'kmaw community was killed in a traffic accident, many family members, friends and acquaintances attended the wake, funeral, *salite* and funeral feast. Baxter was a noted anti-Catholic activist who, reportedly, at one time, interrupted a mass to renounce God and the Catholic faith in front of all those present. Many Mi'kmaw people, especially Mi'kmaw Catholics, were highly offended by such behaviour and Baxter came to be looked upon disavourably within the Mi'kmaw community at large. However, upon Baxter's death, community members again showed their willingness to overlook personal differences by attending the various functions that marked Baxter's passing.

The numbers of people participating in wakes and other public functions vary in relation to the notoriety or social importance of the deceased. If the deceased person was prominent in the community, or worked in a public capacity where he or she influenced the lives of many people, then acknowledgement of the deceased's contributions are reflected in the large number of people in attendance at the wake and other services.<sup>20</sup> Progeny and lineage are also factors influencing the number of people in attendance. For instance, services for elders are particularly well attended.

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<sup>20</sup>I also noticed that, in instances involving multiple deaths or the deaths of young people, especially children, the funerals, wakes, *salites* and funeral feasts were particularly well attended.

In addition to the immediate and extended family of the deceased elder,<sup>21</sup> which is often quite large, many Mi'kmaq who are not blood relatives of the deceased make a special effort to attend functions honouring an elder.

Mi'kmaw wakes are held over a period of three days, exclusive of the two to three day preparation period leading up to the event. Shortly before the return of the deceased's body to the community, close friends, loved ones and immediate and extended family members gather at the home where the wake is to be held. The gathering is normally attended by a representative from the Grand Council (usually a prayer leader), and the parish priest, who conduct prayers once preparations for the viewing are complete. The funeral director from Sydney accompanies the body of the deceased to the family home and prepares a room in the home for visitation. The funeral director and his assistants quickly transform the room into a reception area replete with standard funerary accoutrements: stands are supplied for floral tributes, guest books and sympathy cards, and a bier upon which the casket rests is placed on one side of the room. Kneeling benches are placed along the exposed side of the casket for those who wish to offer personal prayers. Typically, there are abundant flowers, including wreaths in the shape of crosses and hearts. Some floral tributes are simple nosegays pinned to the inner lining of the open casket.

The deceased is usually clad in regular clothing. In the case of a man a suit or a shirt and

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<sup>21</sup>Many elders have extensive family connections including children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and not infrequently, great-great-grandchildren, not to mention extended family which includes siblings, nieces, nephews and their families.

dress pants are worn and women are usually clothed in a dress or blouse and skirt. On occasion there are departures from this standard attire. At a funeral for a strong promoter of “Traditional” Mi’kmaw culture, the deceased man’s Mi’kmaw *regalia* (*L’nu’ktat*<sup>22</sup>) symbolically reflected the personal philosophies he embraced. He was dressed in a ribbon shirt, choker and headband<sup>23</sup> and a number of eagle feathers<sup>24</sup> were placed in the casket by friends and family (Fieldnotes, Book V:1008). The particular attire worn by the deceased is closely associated with Mi’kmaw identity. Typically, ribbon shirts, headbands and chokers make up modern Mi’kmaw *regalia*, worn by Mi’kmaw men on special occasions such as weddings, powwows, St. Anne’s Day, Treaty Day

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<sup>22</sup>Translated, *L’nu’ktat* means “S/he is wearing Mi’kmaw regalia” (personal communication).

<sup>23</sup>Mi’kmaw *regalia* is locally produced by Mi’kmaw men and women: the shirts are modified western clothing. Usually a buttonless cotton shirt is purchased to which traditional coloured ribbons (red, yellow, black and white) are sewn horizontally across the back and front panels of the garment and vertically along the sleeves; chokers are made of beads in traditional and non-traditional colours, sinew and leather; multicoloured headbands are made of beadwork, embellished with an array of Mi’kmaw and other Native patterns which may include traditional and non-traditional colours. On formal occasions either one or any combination of these articles may be worn (personal observations). Refer to Chapter Four, pp.115-116 of this thesis.

<sup>24</sup>As in most Native societies, the eagle is considered sacred by many Mi’kmaw people. Among the Mi’kmaq, the eagle symbolizes strength and freedom. Eagle feathers are used on sacred occasions and are often worn as an item of Mi’kmaw *regalia*. As a part of Mi’kmaw dress, eagle feathers are often worn attached to garments or are used as hair adornments. Among Catholic Traditionalists and Catholic Mi’kmaq, eagle feathers are rarely, if ever worn. However, most Mi’kmaq have eagle feathers in their possession. For instance, Catholic Traditionalists often use eagle feathers at prayer circles, at personal altars, or they may be included in medicine bags (*mijipoti*) (personal observations).



5. A number of the men appearing in the above photo are dressed in ribbon shirts. Note also that the male council members are wearing a sash over their left shoulder. Photo by Angela Robinson, 1999.

and funerals. The wearing of *regalia* both signifies the importance of the occasion and is an overtly symbolic means of expressing ethnicity and culture.

By the time the funeral attendants have completed the job of setting up the reception area, it closely resembles that of a typical visitation room at a funeral home. However, there are several differences that are distinctive to Mi'kmaw wakes. One remarkable difference is the prominent display of the Grand Council flag on the wall behind the casket. This tradition has been a part of local Mi'kmaw funerary practices for as long as people in Eskasoni can remember. Another distinctive feature involves a bowl or shallow dish placed directly on the casket where money of different denominations is collected for donation to the *salite*.

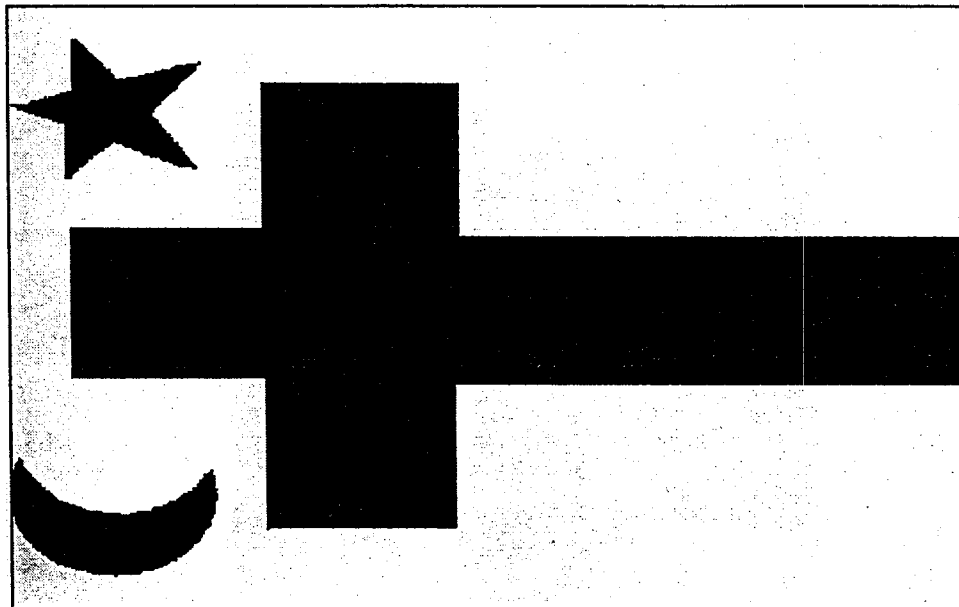
Immediately after arriving at the wake, guests proceed directly to extend condolences to the family members. Once condolences are offered, guests advance to the visitation area where most kneel to say a prayer<sup>25</sup> over the body of the deceased. After the visitation, guests usually move to a different room in the house to socialize with the other visitors and mourners. While in the visitation area people are quiet and subdued in consideration of those who need time for personal reflection or to offer prayers. However, the mood in the social areas of the house is in direct contrast to that of the reception area. Much like the *salite*, Mi'kmaw wakes are generally relaxed but vibrant social affairs. People talk, laugh, and exchange stories, usually humorous, about the deceased, while large amounts of tea, sandwiches and sweets are consumed. A typical wake in Eskasoni usually accommodates a large number of guests, most of whom arrive throughout the afternoon and early evening. Wakes, however, are never closed to the public as a number of family members and close friends keep vigil over the deceased throughout the night. These vigils are carried out for the duration of the wake.

### **The Funeral**

In Eskasoni, funerals are usually held at 11:00 a.m. on the morning of the third day of the

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<sup>25</sup>I cannot comment on the types of personal prayers said over the deceased at wakes as these prayers are not recited aloud. I did notice however that, upon kneeling at the casket, and again after finishing their individual prayers, most people made the "Sign of the Cross."



6. The Mi'kmaw national flag, or Grand Council flag, shown above, is used as a backdrop for caskets at wakes and as a pall during funerals. Image courtesy of Helen Sylliboy.

wake, but never on a Friday.<sup>26</sup> Once again, family members, close friends and loved ones gather at the home of the deceased for the “closing of the casket.” A Catholic priest and a member of the Grand Council, usually a prayer leader, preside over the “closing” ceremony. Led by the priest, prayers and blessings are said over the body after which those present are given the opportunity to have a private moment with the deceased. Normally, this is a very emotional time for those close to the deceased, and people openly weep and comfort each other. The casket is then carried out to the hearse which will transport the body to the church. The hearse heads up the procession

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<sup>26</sup>In Eskasoni, it is considered “bad luck” to hold a funeral on Friday. Some people maintain that if a funeral takes place on Friday then two more people will die in the community. According to my research, this restriction is not broadly applied in other Mi'kmaw communities throughout Mi'kma'ki (personal observations)



immediately followed by the limousine transporting the family. All other mourners follow close behind in their vehicles as the funeral procession makes its way to the church.

At the church, seats are reserved on the right side of the centre aisle for the deceased's family and on the left for members of the honour guard. Every Mi'kmaw funeral has a honour guard, comprised mostly of members of the Grand Council and representatives of the Una'ma'ki Tribal Police.<sup>27</sup> Quite often the church is nearly full to capacity by the time the principal mourners and the deceased arrive at the church.

Funeral masses at Eskasoni are performed in compliance with Catholic liturgical practice, with the exception that, as at regular masses, most of the prayers and hymns are said in Mi'kmaq. However, at the request of family members special poems or secular songs are sometimes performed at the service. I was informed that in some instances, "Traditional" practices such as the burning of sweetgrass, drumming and pipe ceremonies are also integrated into the funeral service, but these innovations are exceptional. During my fieldwork, none of the ten or more funerals that I attended included any "Traditional" rites or practices.

There is one remarkable funerary practice associated with interment. At the end of the funeral mass, the family and most of those in attendance proceed to the grave site. At this time, a

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<sup>27</sup>Without exception, the Grand Chief and the local members of the Grand Council regularly act as honour guards at Mi'kmaw funerals except when they have previous commitments. In one instance, when several people had died in a fire, the Fire Chief and several volunteer firemen made up part of the honour guard.

final prayer is said by the priest. The pall, which is invariably a Grand Council flag,<sup>28</sup> is removed and given to the principal mourner. After the final prayer and the removal of the pall, the casket is lowered into the ground at which time each family member takes a piece of earth and tosses it onto the casket and then leaves the grave site.<sup>29</sup> Each person in the graveyard follows replicating exactly the same gesture until everyone has left the graveyard. This poignant gesture of farewell symbolizes personal attachment to the deceased. It also symbolizes a strong sense of community, as it is the community of mourners, that sees one of its own committed to his or her final resting place.

Although some degree of tension exists between the various religious factions in Eskasoni, at the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been no incidence in which religious conflict has disrupted local funerary processes. It is possible that ritual disruption has been averted because the local rituals which foster positive social relations between community members are highly respected. However, in Eskasoni, there are several other overarching social, cultural and religious factors informing Mi'kmaw deathways that mitigate against the overt contestation of funerary rituals. First, none of those who promote the various neo-Traditionalist, or non-Christian

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<sup>28</sup>Again, it is possible that the Grand Council flag may not be used as a pall in neo-Traditionalist or non-Catholic funerals, but for all of the funerals that I attended the Grand Council flag was used without exception.

<sup>29</sup>Although this practice is not commonplace in North America, Ellen Badone reports that at nonreligious funerals in La Feuillée, Brittany, “those present file past the coffin to pay their last respects to the deceased.” In the case of Communist funerals, “red roses are thrown on top of the coffin” (Badone 1989:209).

discourses are yet deceased, therefore, to date the occasion of a neo-Traditional funeral has not arisen. Second, most Mi'kmaq have been baptized into the Catholic Church and are entitled to a Catholic burial. Third, in many cases, the immediate and extended families of many neo-Traditionalists, and others who have left the Catholic Church, maintain close ties to the Catholic faith. Typically, funeral arrangements are made and carried out in compliance with the wishes of surviving family members rather than those of the deceased. Baxter's death, mentioned earlier is a case in point. As noted, Baxter was a self-proclaimed anti-Catholic activist who, on one occasion publically renounced God and the Catholic faith. However, upon his death, Baxter was granted full burial privileges by the Catholic Church including a funeral mass and interment in the local Catholic cemetery. All this was done at the request of his wife, who despite her husband's wishes, remained a devout Catholic.

As mentioned, in Eskasoni, standard funeral practices tend to conform to the procedures prescribed by the official Roman Catholic Church. However, since the Vatican II reforms and Pope John Paul II's 1990 encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*,<sup>30</sup> the Catholic Church has become

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<sup>30</sup>John Paul II proposes inculturation as a means of correcting the ineffectiveness of Catholic missionary activity within non-Western cultures: "Through inculturation the church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples together with their cultures, into their own community....Developing ecclesial communities, inspired by the Gospel, will gradually be able to express their Christian experience in original ways and forms that are consonant with their own culture, provided those traditions are in harmony with the objective requirements of the faith itself" (John Paul II 1991:52).

more tolerant of incorporating traditional Native practices into Catholic liturgical celebrations.<sup>31</sup> Although considered acceptable, Native religious expressions have not been integrated rapidly into funerals at Eskasoni. For instance, it was in 1992 that the first “pipe ceremony” was conducted in the church during a general absolution ceremony, and in 1993 the first smudge was performed during a funeral in Holy Family parish, but very few have taken place since. As mentioned earlier, I was also told that, on occasion, drumming and the burning of sweetgrass have been included in a number of funeral services. However, I did not witness any of these practices at the funerals that I attended.

### **Mi'kmaw Post-interment Ceremonies: *Salites* and Funeral Feasts**

Among the Mi'kmaq, grief<sup>32</sup> associated with death of a community member is felt and acknowledged, collectively and individually. In Eskasoni, the profound emotions associated with individual and collective bereavement are mediated through two interconnected post-interment celebrations, the *salite* and funeral feast. The *salite* and funeral feast which occur directly after the interment of the deceased are an effort on the part of the community to offer emotional, spiritual and practical support to those in mourning. The social and cultural frameworks which underpin

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<sup>31</sup>Jane McMillan suggests that Pope John Paul II not only encouraged this but during his 1984 visit made a direct request of *Kji-Saqamaw* Donald Marshall to “incorporate [the Mi'kmaw] belief system into the Roman Catholic system” (McMillan 1996:115).

<sup>32</sup>As noted earlier, Kastenbaum defines grief as “a response to bereavement” (Kastenbaum 1998:310).

local post-interment ceremonies are informed by the basic Mi'kmaw values of equality, reciprocity and sharing. Essentially, *salites* and funeral feasts involve the sharing of emotional loss, the sharing of financial resources and the sharing of a communal meal. All of these supports will be reciprocated in turn to each and every family in its time of need.

*Salites*, briefly described in Chapter One, are “local” funerary practices which cannot be accommodated under the rubric of mainstream Roman Catholic practice. However, the *salite* (auction) and the accompanying funeral feast are considered by the Mi'kmaq to be among the most important features of Mi'kmaw funerary process. The communal “feast” and auction are not simply a meal and a sale, but are events perceived to contribute to the well-being of both the deceased's family and their guests. *Salites* and funeral feasts are also viewed as one of the most efficacious ways of dealing with communal and individual bereavement. Much like the Tanacross Athapaskan potlatch (Simeone 1991) the goal of the *salite* is “to transform grief into joy and reknit the bonds of community” (Simeone 1991:157). However, unlike potlatches,<sup>33</sup> *salites* have an added practical dimension: among the Mi'kmaq “no one [person] ever pays for a funeral” (Fieldnotes, Book III:453). Grieving family members never have to bear the cost of the funeral alone because *salites* are designed to relieve financial burdens just as they relieve the emotional

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<sup>33</sup>In potlatches, the manner in which goods/resources are dispensed by the aggrieved family is in direct contrast to the way in which the *salites* relieve Mi'kmaw families of costs incurred for funerals. Although “sibs and moieties” contribute money and labour to the potlatch, Simeone's description also suggests that potlatches often impose financial burdens on the family of the deceased (Simeone 1991).

burden of loss.

*Salites* and funeral feasts are generally festive occasions that celebrate the life more than the death of the deceased. As one person put it, “[at *salites*] you forget everything...after everyone cries and is miserable [during the wake and funeral], everybody is laughing and you don’t feel so bad anymore” (personal communication). In Turnerian terms, however, *salites* and funeral feasts are also complex ritual spaces in which rites of separation, transition and reaggregation are combined on a number of levels. First, funeral feasts are considered to be the last gesture of the deceased for his or her people, and as such mark the “separation” of the deceased from the temporal world and the transmigration (transition) of the soul to the after-life (reaggregation) (Turner 1995:94-95). On another ritual level, funeral feasts and the accompanying *salites*, mark a period of transition for the bereaved who experience a sense of *communitas*, or a “moment in and out of [ordinary] time”, when the rules of social interaction do not apply (Turner 1995:96-97). For instance, Mi’kmaq post-interment rituals are performed without exception for all deceased community members regardless of their status, notoriety, or religious affiliation. Essentially, these gatherings are social spaces where religious, political and social differences become neutralized, at least temporarily.<sup>34</sup>

In Eskasoni, post-interment ceremonies are usually held at the Gabriel Centre in the

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<sup>34</sup>I suggest that these differences are sometimes temporary. For instance, in Henry’s case, although the community supported him during this personal tragedy, the criminal charges against him were not dropped.

basement of Holy Family Church. The family of the deceased is expected to stay for the duration of these events, which typically last for five to six hours, since, along with the deceased, family members are considered to be the official hosts of the celebration. In Eskasoni, *salites* and funeral feasts are open affairs: anyone wishing to attend is welcome. Both ceremonies are normally well-attended, but are rarely overcrowded since some guests leave while others arrive to replace them. The entire time that the *salite* and feast are in progress there is a relatively even flow of people to and from the building.

At the Mi'kmaw funeral feasts that accompany *salites*, people are seated at large tables on which the main meal (usually roast turkey or ham), desserts and refreshments are provided for the hosts and their guests. The serving of meals and the order and manner in which people are served reflect certain aspects of Mi'kmaw social organization: the deceased's family members are given an elevated social position at this event in recognition of their dual role as hosts and honoured guests. The family of the deceased are assigned a special seating area and are the first to be served. The only other guests given special consideration are elders who are also among the first to be seated and served at the feast. All remaining guests are treated equally, including children who are seated at the tables alongside adults. Often there are too many people in attendance to be served at once, so as people finish their meals, they leave the table to socialize or to attend to other matters. Some people leave the gathering, but may return later to participate in the *salite*.

Throughout the *salite*, people continually socialize, recalling memories and relating anecdotes about the deceased, most of which have an element of humour. Implicit in these social

exchanges is the understanding that the life of the deceased was important to individuals and to the community. The relating of stories is a means of expressing this understanding. Amid the babble of voices and ripple of laughter, the voice of the auctioneer can be heard announcing items for bidding and the offers proposed. The articles auctioned at *salites* are donated by family and friends. In many cases, various personal possessions of the deceased are auctioned off. These items are often purchased by a close friend or family member who will return the item to the family as a gift, or keep it as a memento of the deceased. The personal belongings of the deceased are viewed differently than the other items in the auction, and usually fetch a selling price far beyond their actual material value. In effect, articles belonging to the deceased have an added emotional value because of their connection to the dead person.<sup>35</sup> For instance, at the *salite* of a well-known musician, one of his instruments was auctioned and sold for over four hundred dollars. At *salites*, the large amounts of money paid for such items is an indication of the esteem in which the deceased and his or her family are held by the buyer (personal communication).

In some instances, newly purchased items have attached emotional value as well. For

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<sup>35</sup>Anthropologist William E. Simeone notes that in the Tanacross Athapaskan potlatch gift items “are more than mere objects” (Simeone 1991:165). However, Simeone also finds that, within Athapaskan culture “objects have an essence comparable to the Maori concept of *hau*, which is considered to be ‘...a vital essence of life found in human beings, in land and in things. Because the *hau* is connected through people to land and things, things take on the power of personification’ (Weiner 1985:212).” Similarly, among the Tanacross Athapaskans, “When a person obtains an object it is personified by being infused with the power of the owner” (Simeone 1991:165). In the Mi’kmaw case, it is my understanding that the value attached to items of the deceased is not similar to *hau*, or the “power” of “personification” described by Weiner and Simeone.



instance, at one *salite* a family member purchased and donated an expensive piece of jewellery, which was repurchased by the donor for a large amount of money. This item was given promptly to the mother of the deceased. In this instance the gift was given three times: first, the item was bought as a gift to be donated to the auction; second, it was repurchased by the donor for a price at least equal to its retail value at the auction and the proceeds earned went to the deceased's family; and third, it was presented as a gift to one of the principal mourners. The significance of gifting of this type operates on a number of symbolic levels. First, the thrice given gift is the donor's public and private acknowledgement of the grief felt by the mother of the deceased. Second, it also acknowledges shared grief and expresses love and respect for the deceased and for the recipient of the gift. Third, the manner and context in which the gift was given exhibits family solidarity and exemplifies the generosity valued among the Mi'kmaw people.

Gestures of gifting, such as the incident described in Chapter One and the example provided above, are commonplace at *salites*. Gifts operate on a number of personal and social levels. However, the significance of gifting associated with *salites* has many nuances of meaning which are far too diverse and complex to be fully treated here. In general, the act of giving, as a crucial part of *salites* and the bereavement process, can be seen as an aspect of funerary ritual that coincides with the basic Mi'kmaw social values of benevolence, reciprocity and mutual respect. *Salites* and funeral feast are also occasions that create a social space in which the ability and willingness of the Mi'kmaq to provide for those in need is exhibited, and community solidarity is expressed and maintained. As one man told me "It's a good thing for us to do. It keeps the

community together” (Fieldnotes, Book III:453).

### **Public and Private Expressions of Grief**

Metcalf and Huntington note that “cultures vary widely in the ways in which they perceive and evaluate emotional states” (Metcalf and Huntington 1991:5). Within certain cultures, public expressions of grief, or mourning, are taken to indicate inner emotional states. In some cultures a failure to openly express emotions may be construed as a lack of attachment to the deceased. In Mi’kmaq society, however, a hesitancy to express one’s inner emotional state is viewed differently. Among the Mi’kmaq, excessive emotional displays are discouraged and therefore tend to be suppressed. Even though everyone is “allowed to grieve in their own way” (Fieldnotes, Book II:257), public expressions of grief generally conform to a culturally specific pattern.

The results of studies on death rituals in a number of non-Western cultures show that the suppression of the emotions associated with grief is part of social convention among various cultures throughout the world. For instance, among the East Cree (Preston and Preston 1991) and the Tanacross Athapaskans (Simeone 1991) grieving behaviour is subject to social restrictions.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the Mi’kmaq value stoicism in the face of emotionally charged situations: elation may be revealed by an irrepressible smile or excessive emotional pain may take the form of social detachment. Among the Mi’kmaq, most emotional situations, either joyous or distressing, are

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<sup>36</sup>Anthropologists Jane C. Wallenkamp (1991) and Michael Lieber (1991) note that similar behaviours are found among the Toraja and Kapinga, respectively.

normally met with a firm grasp of the hand or a hug, or, in the case of acute grief, someone may simply state *metua 'lik*—"I'm having a difficult time." While coping with the death of a loved one, lips may tremble, eyes may fill with tears and voices may waver with emotion, but the Mi'kmaq tend not to give in to emotional extremes. Generally, for the Mi'kmaq, equanimity and even-temperedness are considered the acceptable responses to bereavement, and are valued above public displays of despair and unconsolable grief.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike the East Cree (Preston and Preston 1991) and the Tanacross (Simeone 1991), the Mi'kmaq do not consider prolonged grief and mourning to be damaging to the physical and emotional health of the survivor. Rather, the impetus behind the suppression of grief within Mi'kmaw society arises from the need to ensure the emotional and spiritual well-being of dying or deceased persons. For instance, Ruth, a woman from Eskasoni, told me of a concept called "letting the spirit go." She described this idea in the following manner:

[My brother] was diagnosed with incurable cancer and was bedridden for well over a year...He had surgery around Christmas and a few months later had renal failure. They [his family] brought him to the hospital, but the doctors told them to take him home and keep him comfortable. He did OK on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, but by Wednesday it was clear that he would die. On Wednesday at 11 o'clock at night, the family went to him...His wife and children started crying when he stopped breathing, but he started breathing again. He opened his eyes and looked at us, but he was full of sadness because they were crying about him. His wife noticed how sad he was and told him, "It's OK, keep going wherever

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<sup>37</sup>However, private expressions of grief are expected and encouraged between friends, loved ones and family members of the deceased. On one occasion a woman mentioned to me that she had been depressed since the death of her daughter who had died some six months prior to our conversation. So, while grief is kept in check on a public level, people do feel free to express their grief in private.

you're going." His son understood and said, "Yes, keep going." Shortly after he died with a smile on his face (Fieldnotes, Book III:387-388).

The notion of "letting the spirit go" as described by Ruth suggests that the purpose of restraining grief is to secure the emotional well-being of the dying person. However, several Mi'kmaw people also told me that "letting the spirit go" also pertains to the spirit or soul of a *deceased* person. One woman explained to me that the "old people told us not to cry too much because the soul of the dead person turned back and they might not find their way to heaven" (Fieldnotes, Book II:271). Significantly, anthropologists working in Asia and Europe have found similar prohibitions against excessive grieving at funerals although the rationales behind these sanctions vary widely. Sherry B. Ortner notes that among the Sherpa of Nepal, there is a "cultural/religious injunction against exhibiting strong emotions around death, which itself has several rationales." One is that "too much crying at funeral will ...cause a veil of blood to cover the eyes of the deceased, so that he or she cannot find 'the road,' the way to a good rebirth" (Ortner 1999:139). Ortner also remarks that "women at funerals are often reminded by the lamas to stop crying, as hearing such crying keeps the deceased attached to his or her previous life" (Ortner 1999:139). Similarly, folklorist Anatole Le Braz recounts a legend, titled "Il ne faut point trop pleurer l'Anaon" about a young woman from Coray, Brittany. The legend relates the experience of a daughter who became overwrought with grief upon the death of her mother. The mother appears to the daughter and implores her to stop her persistent grieving because she is forced to

carry the bucket of tears shed by her daughter until Judgement Day.<sup>38</sup> This narrative also suggests that excessive grieving creates hardships for the soul of the deceased in the after-life.<sup>39</sup>

Many comments I heard among the Mi'kmaq suggest that prolonged or excessive grief is viewed as an undignified personal indulgence, as a sign of immaturity or indicates a lack of personal strength. For instance, Lorna, a Mi'kmaw woman repeated a recent conversation that she had with Martin, a man from Eskasoni. Lorna said,

[Martin] looked at me and said, "I believe we're losing our culture. When my mother died I didn't take as much as an aspirin, and when my brother died I did the same thing. That's the way I was taught. I had to take it. I had to deal with it. But today there was a man here who just lost his brother. He was so drugged up he could hardly talk. That's not the way that we were brought up. The doctors are giving these people drugs and they're taking them. They're not facing the fact that they have to deal with death" (Fieldnotes, Book III:390-391).

According to Mi'kmaw social and cultural convention then, one must "deal with death" in a manner consistent with Mi'kmaw values. Martin views the indulgence in emotional extremes or excessive grieving as being incompatible with the way in which the Mi'kmaq have traditionally confronted and managed their grief.

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<sup>38</sup>Le Braz writes, "Cesseras-tu bientôt de me pleurer? Ne vois-tu pas que tu me forces, à mon âge, à faire le métier d'une porteuse d'eau? Ces deux seaux sont pleins de tes larmes, et, si tu ne te consoles dès à présent, je les devrai traîner jusqu'au jour du Jugement. Souviens-toi qu'il ne faut point pleurer l'Anaon" (Le Braz 1928:102).

<sup>39</sup>"Si les âmes sont heureuses, on trouble leur béatitude; si elles attendent d'être sauvées, on retarde leur salut; si elles sont damnées, l'eau des yeux qui les pleurent retombe sur elles en une pluie de feu qui redouble leur torture en renouvelant leurs regrets" (Le Braz 1928:102).

Emotional restraint is viewed by many Mi'kmaq as a characteristic that is acquired and is therefore primarily associated with maturity. For instance, after a wake one elder complained that she was unable to concentrate on praying. She said, "There's too much noise. All the young people, they don't handle themselves like older people do" (Fieldnotes, Book II:270). Another woman who was present commented that, "The young people are carrying on and crying. Crying too much" (Fieldnotes, Book II:271). Implicit in the responses of these two women is the notion that young people who are "carrying on and crying...too much" have not been adequately socialized: they do not manage their grief in a responsible and mature manner consistent with that of the "older people".

The equanimity with which many adult Mi'kmaq confront grief should not be interpreted as being reflective of inner states, but is better understood as the way in which these Mi'kmaw people ensure the emotional and spiritual well-being of the dying or deceased person. Furthermore, excessive grief, rather than reflecting the individual's close relationship to the dying or deceased person, may be interpreted as a personal indulgence or lack of maturity that indicates an inability to "deal with death" in a dignified manner that is consistent with Mi'kmaw teachings.

### **Basic Attitudes, Conceptions and Beliefs Concerning Death and Dying**

The Mi'kmaw expression, "*Kisu'lkwtlite'lmisk wskwijinuin*," meaning that "It is the wish of the Creator that you should become a person," suggests that *being* exists before one

actually becomes a “person.” As a “wish” of the “Creator,”<sup>40</sup> life is a respected gift that is considered to be sacred.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, death as a part of created life is also considered to be the will of the Creator. The Mi’kmaw expression “We are born to die” suggests that life and death are incontestible facts, neither of which are permanent states. Most Mi’kmaw people with whom I spoke believe that death is part of a natural order preordained by the “Creator.” As one Mi’kmaw woman puts it:

It’s a very odd thing, but our people seem to be comfortable with death. They are very accepting of death and as far as I can see they view it as a part of the natural process. Life and death are one, they’re inseparable. I think this comes from our closeness with nature. We understand nature because we observe it. My father used to take us on walks. Along the way he would tell us the names of plants and trees. I forget them now, but I remember he knew all the names and taught them to us (Fieldnotes, Book III:389).

Among the Mi’kmaq, death is not necessarily conceived of as a permanent state. Rather, it is understood as a stage or state of being that is inconsistent with life as we know it in this world.

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<sup>40</sup>Among the Mi’kmaq, the terms “God” and Creator are often used interchangeably. The term Niskam, derived from *niskamij*, meaning grandfather is translated as “God,” whereas the term *Kisu’lkw* is translated as the “one who makes us,” or “our Creator.”

<sup>41</sup>It is primarily for this reason that abortion is practically non-existent in Eskasoni. The status of the foetus as a living being is never questioned. While this attitude to abortion is consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church, it is also a feature of Mi’kmaw values: once a child is conceived it is referred to as a living person and is accorded a status with rights and privileges. This status is maintained until death. Among non-Natives, the high birth rate among the Mi’kmaq is generally interpreted as a strategy for securing increased government funding and repopulating the Mi’kmaw race. While economic gain and racial viability cannot be entirely ruled out as explanatory factors for the high birth rate, fundamental Mi’kmaw social and cultural conventions promote the nurturing of human life in all of its stages (personal observations).

In the Mi'kmaw language, “the absentative case, indicated by the suffix *o'q*, suggests that a person is in a different state of consciousness” (personal communication, Bern Francis). For instance, to say *Anno'q* means that Ann is “away,” that she has arrived but left again, or is either sleeping, in a comatose state or deceased.<sup>42</sup> The suffix *o'q* then suggests that Ann is absent, or is in state of being inconsistent with those who are speaking of her.<sup>43</sup> When referring to a person who is deceased, *o'q* suggests that a person's spirit or soul, while not present in a worldly state, still exists. The person simply exists elsewhere. One respondent told me that,

In Mi'kmaw tradition death is looked upon as a type of birth really. It's a journey that you've prepared for. The Mi'kmaw word for death, *nept* means dormancy, death!, sleep. So, if you look at it in this way, it [death] has a different meaning. It's something that we have to think about (Fieldnotes, Book III:547).

The state of existence implicit in the use of *o'q* and *nept* is central to understanding the Mi'kmaw concept of death. The deceased person is not here on earth with the living, but he or she still exists

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<sup>42</sup>“The suffixes *aq* and *o'q* are absentative markers. For instance, when I speak of my father (*nuij*) who is deceased, I would use the absentative form *aq*, thus in this case I would refer to my father as ‘*nuijaaq*.’ For ‘Where is my daughter (*ntus*)?’, I would say, ‘*ntusaaq?*’, or ‘*Ntusaaq nepataq*,’ meaning ‘My daughter fell asleep.’ When a proper name is used, however, the absentative is *o'q*. For example, ‘Where is Jane?’ would be ‘*Janeo'q?*’ The two together would be as in the following: ‘*Nepataq ntusaaq Janeo'q*’, meaning ‘My daughter Jane fell asleep.’ In this case you see use of the two endings *o'q* for the proper name and *aq* for the personal pronoun” (personal communication).

<sup>43</sup>Ruth Holmes Whitehead notes that, in Mi'kmaq, the “absentive [sic] case-ending ‘conveys the idea of existence, though apart for the time.’ It is used in speaking of an absent person or a dead one—each still animate, but now out of sight of the speaker” (Whitehead 1988:10; cf. Rand 1894:xxxvi).



in another realm or in a different state of being. In this state, the deceased is still able to maintain connections with this world.<sup>44</sup> The anticipation of further communication with persons after death is also indicated by the fact that the Mi'kmaq never say good-bye. In fact there is no term for good-bye in the Mi'kmaw language. When someone is leaving, whether it is for an interim or "final" journey, the Mi'kmaq always say *nemu'ltes*, meaning "I'll see you."

Generally, Mi'kmaw Catholics and non-Catholics believe that living persons maintain communion with the dead both in the temporal and other worldly realms of existence. While I was living in Eskasoni I was told several anecdotes about communications between dying persons and the spirits of the dead. In the first case, mentioned earlier in this chapter, Jess, in the final stages of an advanced illness was said to have "... had contact with the spirit world already. [She's] seen [her] father and others who have passed into the spirit world" (Fieldnotes, Book V:915). In this instance, close contact with the spirit world is taken to indicate that the spirits of the ancestors had

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<sup>44</sup>Similarly, Preston and Preston note that among the northern Cree, "Death is considered a letting go of the body, and a subsequent departure of the spirit." However, there is also an "emphasis on continuity" that "constitutes a moral pattern for the subsequent behavior of spirits of the deceased, both human and other-than-human. On the occasion of a human's death, people watch for signs of the person's final intentions. At the same time, people watch to see the animals' intentions towards the human survivors (Preston and Preston 1991:137). Preston and Preston claim that the Cree believe that, to some degree, the spirits of deceased humans continue to maintain connections with the temporal world. For instance, deceased humans may influence the "animals' decisions to make themselves available" (Preston and Preston 1991:138). Ruth Holmes Whitehead maintains that in Mi'kmaw legends and myths about creation the "basic structures and the language in which they were told were in a continuous state of transformation....In their transformational properties, both Micmac language and Micmac tales have the same structure as the Micmac universe. As stories hold many levels of meaning, the cosmos holds many levels of existence..." (Whitehead 1988:2-3).

come to guide Jess into the next world.

In a similar incident, Neil, a young man dying of an incurable disease, was said to have had an experience in which an elder, with whom he was unacquainted, spoke to him in a language he could not decipher. Although Neil was unable to converse with the elder, he could recall part of what was said and offer a description of the person. After hearing the description, Neil's mother determined that the "visitor" was her mother whom Neil had never met and who had spoken to Neil "in old [archaic] Mi'kmaq." Neil's grandmother had died before he was born (Fieldnotes, Book III:608). The event was interpreted by the family and others as a clear indication that Neil was soon to die. As in Jess's case, Neil's ancestor had come to guide him into the next world.

For Mi'kmaw Christians, the after-life is most commonly referred to as heaven (*wa'so'q*), and among non-Christian Mi'kmaq it may simply be conceived of as a reunion with the ancestors.<sup>45</sup> Neo-Traditionalists and other non-Christian Mi'kmaq claim that, prior to European contact, belief in another realm was a feature of Mi'kmaw eschatology. For some Mi'kmaq the *Sk\*te'kmujuawti* (Ghost Road), or what westerners call the Milky Way, "is the path that our people walk on with our ancestors after death" (personal communication).

Among the Mi'kmaq, contact with the spirits of the deceased is understood to be a two-

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<sup>45</sup>Bern Francis supplied me with two phrases referring to the ancestral world that are no longer in common usage: "*Kniskamijinaq wskitqamumuow*, meaning 'our ancestors world' and *Kniskamijinaq eimu'ti'tij*, which is less specific, meaning 'where our ancestors are'. For instance, *Naji-tkweiwatka kniskamijinqa*, would be akin to 'gone to another plane of existence'" (personal communication).

way process of communication. For instance, at a relative's wake, Nora<sup>46</sup> told me that:

The spirits of the dead go to heaven where the people who went before wait for them. I prayed to my mother and father this morning that the wake would be blessed. I believe they answered my prayers because everything is going well so far (Fieldnotes, Book II:271).

The fact that Nora "prayed" to her parents and feels she has received a response clearly indicates that communication is presumed to be sustained between the living and the dead. This notion that the living and the dead continue to have contact was a recurrent theme on several separate occasions, when different Mi'kmaw people told me that they either prayed or spoke to deceased family and friends.<sup>47</sup> In some instances, prayers or verbal appeals were made to the deceased asking for their intervention in solving personal problems or relieving the illness of a sick friend or relative. Invocations to the deceased are made by Catholics, neo-Traditionalists and Catholic Traditionalists alike. For Catholics, prayers are usually personal invocations rather than formalized prayers such as the Our Father or Hail Mary. Similarly, Catholic Traditionalists and

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<sup>46</sup>Nora, first introduced in Chapter One, pp. 30-32, is a middle-aged Mi'kmaw woman who incorporates features of both neo-Traditionalism and Catholicism into her religious life. However, she does not refer to herself as a "Traditionalist, but is a self-proclaimed Catholic. Like many Mi'kmaw people, Nora has a personal altar at home where "Traditional" sacred objects are mixed with Catholic icons and iconography. On occasion, Nora also attends prayer circles.

<sup>47</sup>For instance, Jonal, introduced in Chapter Two, p. 55 ff. also told me that he regularly speaks to his deceased son. On another occasion, a seven year old girl told her ailing aunt, whom I was visiting at the time, that she would pray to a deceased family member to help cure her.

neo-Traditionalists appeal to the deceased, especially ancestors, in the form of personalized prayers. Among the two latter groups, offerings to the deceased in sweats and prayer circles are sometimes prayers of thanksgiving.

The spirits of deceased loved ones then, much like St. Anne, are appealed to for assistance in personal matters and for healing, and like St. Anne, the spirits of the deceased are believed to respond to the requests of the living.<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, among the Plains Cree, it is also believed that “the sprits of the dead” assist the living (Young 1990:21). In both the Cree and Mi’kmaq examples, it is the “spirits” and not the “souls” of the deceased that sustain contact with the living. I suggest that, at least for the Mi’kmaq, there is a fundamental difference between these two concepts.

One of the most notable distinctions in Mi’kmaq culture between the notions of soul and spirit is that the soul is often prayed *for*, while the spirit is prayed *to*.<sup>49</sup> While Catholic teachings

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<sup>48</sup>Similarly, anthropologist William Christian observes that it has been customary in areas of western Europe “for the faithful to pray to the souls in purgatory, just as they would any saint. For this reason in the parish church at San Sebastian [Spain] there is an alms box for the *animas* in which the villagers place thank-offerings for services rendered in response to petitions [to deceased ancestors]” (Christian 1989:94). Christian also comments that a young priest once complained to him “that people have the false notion that they can pray to the souls in purgatory, instead of for them” (Christian 1989:94). However, Christian points out that this notion was in fact inculcated by priests in the past. He remarks that, as in many cases, devotional practices which present-day clergy deem to be “folkloric or deviationist” are often practices that were taught by Church representatives in previous generations (Christian 1989:94).

<sup>49</sup>The historian Jacques Le Goff notes that “Christians seem to have acquired the habit of praying for the dead at a very early date. This is an innovation, as Solomon Reinach nicely

promote the notion of the “soul” and an after-life dependant on the state of the soul at death, Mi’kmaw understandings of the *mjijaqmij*,<sup>50</sup> translated as spirit or “shadow”, do not ascribe states of “sinfulness or sinlessness” to the spirit:

The spirit in the Mi’kmaw sense of the word has nothing to do with sinfulness or sinlessness...it [the spirit] exists long before birth and will move on long after death. The concept of spirit is referred to as ‘*mjijaqmij*’, i.e., spirit or shadow (personal communication).

The notion of spirit and soul as they are conceptualized within Mi’kmaw society bear strong similarities to the Nunamiut notion of soul (*inua*) as described by the anthropologist Daniel Merkur.<sup>51</sup> Merkur notes that the Nunamiut of northern Alaska:

employ a single term [*inua*] to refer to both the indwellers in nature and to a type of soul...When it refers to a type of soul, *inua* is the life-force...The *inua* has no specific location in the body. Ordinarily conceived as it exists in life, its origin and afterlife are

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observes: ‘Pagans prayed to the dead, Christians prayed for the dead’” (Le Goff 1981:45). Le Goff argues that, in part, the development of Purgatory in the late Middle Ages served to mark a distinction between the Christian concern for the souls of the deceased and the non-Christian tendency to appeal to the dead for protection: “But in order for the idea of Purgatory to develop, it was essential that the living be concerned about the fate of their dead, that the living maintain contacts with the dead, not in order to call on them for protection, but rather to improve their condition through prayer” (Le Goff 1981:46).

<sup>50</sup>“The initial ‘m’ is simply a marker telling us that the noun has not gone through declension: *Njijaqmij*, (my spirit); *kjijaqmij*, (your spirit); *wjijaqmijl*, (his/her spirit)” (personal communication).

<sup>51</sup>Merkur draws on the work of Åke Hultkrantz who observes that “the lowest common denominator” of traditional Inuit religion involves a dualistic concept of the soul: the life-soul, or breath soul and the free-soul (Hultkrantz 1953:55-60, as quoted in Merkur 1991:4).

vague. It is usually assumed always to have existed and to exist forever in the future...[Another] sense in which the Nunamiut use the term *inua* pertains to the postmortem soul...the name-soul (i.e., the postmortem breath-soul)...functions as a guardian soul...After death, all people's *inua* are in communication with each other...A further type of soul concept is the *taganinga*, "shadow," which is conceived as a second self (Merkur 1991:6-7).<sup>52</sup>

It is possible that the understanding of *inua* as it refers to indwellers in nature or life-force is akin to the Mi'kmaw idea of spirit, and the Nunamiut conception of the postmortem or name-soul is comparable to the Mi'kmaw notion of soul. Moreover, as in the Mi'kmaw case, the Nunamiut postmortem soul "functions as a guardian soul." Significantly, the dualistic concept of soul/spirit found among the Nunamiut and the Mi'kmaq is markedly different from the monotypic

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<sup>52</sup>Similarly, anthropologists studying Native North American belief systems have noted that the notion of multiple souls appears in a number of Aboriginal cultures, including the Huron and the Sanikiluarmit Inuit. Alexander von Gernet notes that the seventeenth-century "Huron believed that a living person could have as many as five or more souls...the general body-soul represented by, *aata*, the general life-soul by *onnhek8i*, the emotive soul by *eiachi-*, the intellect soul by *-ndi, onr-*, and several free-souls by *oki*" (von Gernet 1994:42: cf. Steckley 1978 ). Von Gernet also remarks that, "Since the apportionment of the Huron persona into a plurality of souls was an essential characteristic of life, it is not surprising that homologous divisions were believed to eventuate among the deceased, who after all, were merely the 'living' transferred to another realm....At the death of the body the souls-schema underwent a reconfiguration, with a concomitant shift in terminology. The souls of the afterlife were represented by the verb root *-sken-...*" (von Gernet 1994:43, 49) which is to be taken as "a manifestation of a person who has died" (Steckley 1978:101). The Huron thought that the deceased had two *sken*: the body-*sken* and the free-*sken*. The body-*sken* was believed to stay with the corpse, while the free-*sken* "lingered around the graveyard or wandered through the settlement" (von Gernet 1994:43). Similarly, Lee Guemple commenting on the concept of the soul among the Sanikiluarmit Inuit of Hudson Bay observes that, the soul consists of at least two, possibly three, aspects: "the *atik* or 'name' (pl. *atit*), and the *sauniq* or 'bone' (pl. *saunit*). There may yet be another dimension of being which a few natives, identified as 'breath,' *puuyuq*, literally 'he breaths'" (Guemple 1994:111).

concept of soul as it is commonly applied and understood within Western society.<sup>53</sup>

It is also noteworthy that the notion of sin for many Mi'kmaq, including devout Catholics, differs from Western conceptualizations. If a "sin" is committed by a Mi'kmaw person it is not so much considered an act against "God" or the "Creator" as a show of disrespect for the person who suffers because of the transgression. In most cases, the person who perpetrates the transgression is as adversely affected as the person or persons "sinned" against. Each Mi'kmaw person is held responsible for his or her own actions and must come to terms with the inappropriateness of his or her behaviour. Many behaviours deemed inappropriate by the Mi'kmaq are consistent with those defined as "sins" by Christian pedagogy. However, as one woman told me, the biblical Ten Commandments are viewed by some Mi'kmaq as redundant teachings:

I believe in my traditional roots. I no longer go to Confession and haven't for at least twenty-five years. God forgives me when I ask for forgiveness. No matter where I am God knows who I am. I'm not the only one. Natives [the Mi'kmaq] do not follow the Commandments. They are not necessary teachings. Like, "honour thy father and mother," this is not a necessary teaching because a Mi'kmaw person would not dishonour their parents. It's somethin' that they're taught from a very early age and is a part of Mi'kmaw consciousness. Most of the Commandments that are taught have no real meaning for the Mi'kmaq because they are already taught these things. The Mi'kmaq don't take everything in the Church as "Gospel." We have our own understanding of things (Fieldnotes, Book I:204).

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<sup>53</sup>Von Gernet also notes that through Åke Hultkerntz's observation of the Amerindian dualistic concept of soul, "one gains an appreciation of the difficulties that must have confronted the Jesuits who...were fettered by a unitary or monistic concept of the soul and that this single entity had a linear trajectory from life to afterlife" (von Gernet 1994:41).

To openly defy, insult or harm another person is considered to be an act inconsistent with basic Mi'kmaw beliefs and values. There is also a clear understanding that such inappropriate behaviour must be corrected. However, it is up to the individual him or herself to seek forgiveness from the person or persons wronged which may, or may not, include other than human persons such as God.

### Conclusions

In many ways, the simple phrase “no one is born alone and no one should die alone,” conveys an understanding of Mi'kmaw existence that finds expression in the various rituals associated with the processes of death and dying. The occasions of *apiksiktatimk*, local wakes, funeral feasts and *salites* which ameliorate emotional hardship and foster reciprocity, empathy and friendship are literal and symbolic “identity markers” that represent key aspects of Mi'kmaw culture. Within Mi'kmaw society, the passage from this world to the next is distinguished by a series of rites and rituals designed to assist at each stage of the death and dying process. In this chapter, I have focussed on the many dimensions of Mi'kmaw deathways and the several rites of separation, transition and reincorporation that reflect key Mi'kmaw beliefs and values.

Commenting on Berawan funerary rituals, anthropologist Peter Metcalf notes that, “death rites are the most compelling of community rituals. To constantly fail to attend them is to renounce membership in the community. Even when a person of little social standing dies, everyone should contribute something to the funeral” (Metcalf 2001:21). The social importance that the Berawan



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mourning. As “no one is born alone and no one should die alone,” it is also believed that no one should mourn alone or bear the financial and emotional hardship resulting from the death of a loved one. Among the Mi’kmaq, implicit in the exchange of goods and friendship is the guarantee of reciprocity, a mainstay of Mi’kmaw social organization. Any person who extends their hand in a time of need is assured that in their own time of need, the helping hands of others will be extended.

Among the Mi’kmaq death is looked upon as an immutable fact of existence that must be faced in a practical, yet sensitive manner. In Eskasoni, bereavement associated with death is collectively felt and shared by the community. The rites and rituals that accompany the death of a community member serve to reaffirm the continuation of Mi’kmaw society in the face of death. The Mi’kmaw experience of mourning tends to follow a specific pattern that is generally adhered to notwithstanding individual political or religious convictions. Although some features of this pattern are informed by Western ideological and institutional structures, other Mi’kmaw socialization processes, such as *salites*, funeral feasts and *apiksiktatimk*, involve specific occasions, beliefs and values that are considered by most Mi’kmaq to be vital aspects of Mi’kmaw personal and collective identities.

## Chapter Six

### Mi'kmaw Religion and Identity

The drumsong fills the air  
I dance as my heart fills with happiness.  
My joy I give to others in spirit  
Who need but are unable to express.  
The ban is still in place, put there long ago  
Naming it pagan, they did not understand  
My native word for God  
Kisu'lkw (the One who made us)  
I have had knowledge from the beginning.

Excerpts from "My Shadow Follows" by Rita Joe

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On a warm, sunny afternoon in late June 1999, the Eskasoni powwow was in full swing. Voices rose in chant, dancers circled the dance ground keeping time with the rhythm and pace of the drums. Colours flashed and beads, bone and feathers twirled in the air and bounced against bodies caught up in the motion and drama of the dance. Suddenly, the sharp blow of a whistle brought the dancers to an abrupt halt. The chanting stopped and silence replaced the beat of the drums. Several men formed a circle around an object lying on the ground. The master of ceremonies announced, "An eagle feather has been found in the dance circle. We have to find the owner." As he explained, the feather was now desecrated and must be "smudged" (purified) before the dancing could resume. I continued to watch as one



7. The above photo was taken at the Eighth Annual Eskasoni Powwow. Note that the ceremonial dress worn by powwow participants are not Mi'kmaw in design. For instance, the young girl appearing on the right is wearing an Ojibwa Jingle Dress. Photo by Angela Robinson, 1999.

of the dancers carefully retrieved the feather from the ground. A torch lit from the sacred fire was brought to purify the area where the feather had fallen. The owner was found and the smoke was passed over him. My companion, Lynn, told me that the owner must now lose possession of the feather since he had been negligent in its care. Once the smudging was completed the owner of the feather selected a person whom he deemed worthy of receiving it. The feather was passed to Les, a man I recognized as a regular participant at St. Anne's Mission. Once the feather was in the possession of its new owner, the drumming and chanting resumed and the men began an honour dance circling around Les to show respect and to acknowledge his new status as a feather bearer.

Lynn, a devout Catholic, brings her family to the powwow each year because she sees it as an opportunity to familiarize her children with “Native culture.” Lynn explained that Les had participated in the powwow only for the past two years, and this was the first time he had received a feather--a notable event according to Lynn. Among Mi’kmaw neo-Traditionalists, the conferring of a feather bestows honour on the recipient. As Carrie, a Catholic-Traditionalist, commented to me, “The eagle feather is important to us because if we receive one we instantly earn pride and respect” (Fieldnotes, Book V:887).

The event described above occurred at the eighth annual Eskasoni powwow, also referred to as the Eskasoni Mawio’mi, (literally the “Eskasoni gathering”).<sup>1</sup> Powwows at Eskasoni normally run over a period of five days, usually beginning on a Thursday and ending on a Monday. The Eskasoni Mawio’mi is usually held over the weekend of the summer solstice.<sup>2</sup> The powwow grounds are the locus of activity for the duration of the five days that the powwow is held. However, among the local residents who come to participate or to observe this event, there are diverse and often conflicting opinions about its importance and significance.

In the introductory chapter I drew attention to the ways that the term “traditionalism” is variously interpreted by the Mi’kmaw people. Since I make frequent reference to these multiple

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<sup>1</sup>The official crest of the Eskasoni powwow identifies the gathering as the “Eskasoni Mawio’mi.” However, most local residents refer to the event simply as “the powwow.”

<sup>2</sup>The general description of the Eskasoni powwow presented in this chapter is based on my own observations and fieldnotes collected between June 18-21, 1999.

interpretations throughout this chapter, it is necessary at this juncture to review the ways in which tradition is understood and employed in the following pages. For some Mi'kmaq, tradition, spirituality and religion are bounded terms that have very specific meanings. However, for many others, tradition, spirituality and religion are aspects of Mi'kmaw culture are not discrete categories, but fluid concepts that are often interconnected and open to interpretation. In Eskasoni, there are three immediately identifiable religious group:<sup>3</sup> "Traditionalists," or neo-Traditionalists,<sup>4</sup> Catholics and Catholic Traditionalists. For most Mi'kmaq, the term "Traditionalist(s)" refers to Mi'kmaq who subscribe to what are considered to be "authentic," pre-Christian religious practices exclusive of Catholicism. However, for many Mi'kmaw Catholics there is the understanding that a traditionalist is one upholds Mi'kmaw culture and tradition, but retains Catholicism as a primary religious orientation.<sup>5</sup> Of the latter group, those who consider themselves traditionalists maintain that, since

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<sup>3</sup>As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the three specific groups identified here do not exhaust all religious orientations in Eskasoni. Refer to Chapter One, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup>The term neo-Traditionalist/m used throughout this thesis refers to those Mi'kmaq who espouse specifically non-Christian practices believed to have their origin in "authentic" pre-contact Mi'kmaw religion. However, since many aspects of "authentic" Mi'kmaw religion fell into desuetude, current practices associated with "Traditionalism" have been "recreated" from orally transmitted texts and etymological analysis of the Mi'kmaw language. As outlined in Chapter One, the terms neo-Traditionalist/m and "Traditionalist/m" are used interchangeably: the term "Traditionalist/m" (upper case "T") is employed as nomenclature for a specific religious orientation and appears in reference to direct quotes. The usage of "traditionalist/m" (lower case "t") is also in reference to direct quotes, or refers to a socio-cultural rather than a religious sense of the term. See above, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup>In reference to Catholic and non-Catholic religious orientations, and in accordance with oral tradition, a significant point to keep in mind is that many Mi'kmaw beliefs and values

most of “authentic” Mi’kmaw religion has been irretrievably lost to posterity, and since Catholicism is an ancestral religion, it is legitimately Mi’kmaw. The third group, Catholic Traditionalists, accommodate elements of both religious affiliations in a variety of public and private devotional practices. Of the three groups, Catholic Traditionalists are possibly the least criticized category among the Mi’kmaw people. It appears that individual religious expression is condoned by most Mi’kmaq as long as tradition, as it is broadly conceived is upheld. That is, Catholicism, along with other traditional beliefs, is respected.

Participation in the Eskasoni Mawio’mi represents a specific type of neo-Traditionalism practiced by only a small percentage of Eskasoni residents.<sup>6</sup> However, the event of the powwow is a suitable starting point from which to launch a discussion of Mi’kmaw religion and identity. Competing claims to “authentic” as opposed to “inauthentic” religio-cultural expression and beliefs are crucial for understanding the ways in which identity is constructed and maintained by neo-Traditionalists, Catholic Traditionalists and Mi’kmaw Catholics, inclusively. The dominant discourse

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held to be pre-Christian bear close similarities to those of Roman Catholicism. Therefore, it becomes difficult to attribute certain beliefs to either Roman Catholic teachings or to pre-Christian Mi’kmaw understandings. There is an abundance of oral and written documentation supporting this claim which will be discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>6</sup>Of the two to three hundred performers/participants in the Eskasoni powwow, I estimated that only twenty percent (approximately 1-2% of the population of Eskasoni) were from the host community. Most of the other performers/participants were from Newfoundland, mainland Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick or Maine. I was told that many of the visitors participating in the powwow actually “worked the powwow circuit” during the summer months, traveling in and around the Atlantic provinces and to specific destinations in the United States (personal observations).

about authenticity expressed by Mi'kmaw Catholics, Catholic Traditionalists and neo-Traditionalists who do not participate in the powwow fundamentally challenges participants' claims that the occasion is a culturally, spiritually and/or religiously significant event.

In this chapter, I present a detailed ethnographic account of neo-Traditionalism in Eskasoni including first-hand accounts by "Traditionalists," Mi'kmaw Catholics and Catholic Traditionalists, who offer a number of diverse and often disparate views on the importance of neo-Traditionalism within the community. Here, I draw specific attention to the practice of neo-Traditionalism as a locus of dispute around which opposing discourses about Mi'kmaw identity are constructed, articulated and openly challenged.

### **The Emergence of Neo-Traditionalism**

During the early 1970's<sup>7</sup>, anthropologist Tord Larsen recorded a number of Mi'kmaw "identity markers" that in his view best represented Mi'kmaw identity and nationhood at that period. Larsen includes in his list of items and occasions that are "distinctively Micmac": "native language, basketry, aboriginal legends, the game of waltres, and Indian dancing," all of which he classifies as "precontact." Larsen also lists the Micmac ideographic system (developed by the Catholic missionaries, Fr. Christian LeClercq and Fr. Pierre Maillard); "customs such as *maomegisioltimk bousoubonananeouimk* (literally, 'we eat together and we wish each other a happy new year')";

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<sup>7</sup>Tord Larsen conducted research among the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia between 1972 and 1974 (Larsen 1983).



and the celebration of St. Anne's Mission as items which are "Catholic in origin, but heavily infused with Micmac content" (Larsen 1983:111). By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the complexity of Mi'kmaw experience has rendered such a simplistic classification inadequate.

Throughout the last three decades of the twentieth century, the Mi'kmaq, like many North American Native groups, have been experiencing a period of cultural renaissance (Barker 1998; Churchill 2000; Goulet 1982; Grim 2000; Kidwell 2000). Part of this renaissance involves the revitalization of non-Christian Native religion. In Eskasoni, the rise of neo-Traditionalism is an emergent and recent phenomenon. Since the 1970's, there has been a slow but steady resurgence of Native "Traditional" ways, some of which are believed to derive from pan-Indian influences, like powwows and prayer circles. "Tradition" as it is presented by Mi'kmaw Catholics, Catholic-Traditionalists and neo-Traditionalists involves strategically determined sets of values, beliefs and institutions in which select aspects of "tradition" are emphasized while others aspects of "tradition" are downplayed. For instance, most Mi'kmaq agree that rituals such as fasts, sweats and the use of a sacred pipe have their origin in "authentic" Mi'kmaw practices, but they fundamentally disagree about the original meanings of these practices and their relevance in present-day Mi'kmaw contexts.

The trend toward the revitalization of Native ways has its genesis in the American Indian Movement which began in the late 1960's. Lori, one of the Catholic-Traditionalists, with whom I spoke, was a member of this revolutionary movement, which sparked her interest in Native spirituality. Other neo-Traditionalists learned of "Traditionalism" while traveling to Native communities throughout the United States and Canada. Many Eskasoni residents became acquainted

with neo-Traditionalism through association with local adherents and Native visitors who imported specific Native practices and beliefs<sup>8</sup> to Eskasoni. Significantly, Eskasoni has now become one of the main centres in Eastern Canada where Natives and non-Natives alike congregate to participate in sweats, fasts, prayer circles and other neo-Traditional practices.

For most Mi'kmaq, the potential for cultural creativity (or cultural revitalization) is associated with the struggle to achieve Native autonomy based on traditional Mi'kmaw beliefs and values independent of those promoted by Western ideologies and institutions. For many neo-Traditionalists the struggle for autonomy includes a rejection of Roman Catholicism and a move toward Native religious expression. While this focus on the revival or re-creation of Aboriginal religious forms is celebratory for some Mi'kmaq, other community members are less enthusiastic about "Traditional" spirituality. However, as noted throughout this dissertation, the rejection of Western influences by some Mi'kmaq does not necessarily make Mi'kmaw "Traditionalism" and Roman Catholicism mutually exclusive religious orientations.

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<sup>8</sup>One neo-Traditionalist told me that some "Traditionalists" in the community conduct sweats in the Sioux tradition. However, most neo-Traditionalists in Eskasoni attempt to follow Mi'kmaw traditions, which is often problematic because most pre-contact Mi'kmaw religious practices were passed on through experience and oral tradition, and hence are difficult to trace. Moreover, with the inception and adoption of Roman Catholicism from the seventeenth century onward, many original religious practices fell into desuetude. As noted in Chapter Four, Elsie Clews Parsons observes that in the 1930's chanting and dancing were features of Grand Council activities at St. Anne's Mission. It is likely that when parish priests became the primary overseers of religious services in Mi'kmaw communities their attempts to standardize Catholicism throughout Mi'kma'ki involved the subversion of certain religious practices such as chanting, drumming and dancing that were formerly deemed part of Mi'kmaw Catholic tradition by the Grand Council. Refer also to Chapter Three of this thesis.

Since religion is considered by many Mi'kmaq to be of central importance in constructing and maintaining Mi'kmaw personal and social identities, it is also an arena for the articulation of conflict between Christian and non-Christian points of view. Divergent perspectives on the distant past, the recent past and the present as they pertain to Mi'kmaw religious beliefs and expressions have given rise to internal conflicts at Eskasoni.

Reasons for adopting neo-Traditional practices are as diverse as the people who choose this religious orientation. However, there are several dominant themes that appear in the personal accounts related to me by practising neo-Traditionalists. First, powwows,<sup>9</sup> sweats, fasts and participation in prayer circles are considered by most neo-Traditionalists to be religiously meaningful rituals through which individual and group spirituality is developed and maintained. Second, as mentioned above, involvement in neo-Traditionalism is viewed by some Mi'kmaq as a means of celebrating Native cultural heritage in alternative religious contexts which counteracts the invasive and persistent encroachment of western culture upon Native societies in general, and Mi'kmaw society in particular. Third, aside from being politically and culturally relevant, the revival of "Traditional" ways also holds an existential dimension. For many of its adherents, "Traditionalism" is perceived to provide a coherent and powerful therapeutic community within which a balance between the emotional, physical and spiritual aspects of existence are facilitated and maintained. Numerous neo-

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<sup>9</sup>Powwows are perhaps the exception in this list since not all neo-Traditionalists accept them as a traditional Mi'kmaw practice. However, neo-Traditionalists consider a combination of fasts, sweats and prayer circles essential to "Traditionalism" (personal observations).

Traditionalists have found non-Christian, more “spiritually” centred Native religions to be conducive to promoting physical and emotional healing, and effective in helping to correct what are perceived to be imbalances in their lives.

### **Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Culture and Tradition**

Since the 1980's, anthropologists and other social scientists have come to the understanding that “tradition” and “culture” are not stable entities that have been inherited from the past. Anthropologist James Clifford remarks that there exists a “pervasive habit in the West of sharply distinguishing synchronic from diachronic, structure from change” (Clifford 1988:341). However, “as Marshall Sahlins (1985) has argued, these assumptions keep us from seeing how collective structures, tribal or cultural, reproduce themselves historically by risking themselves in novel conditions. Their wholeness is as much a matter of reinvention and encounter as it is of continuity and survival” (Clifford 1988:341). Similarly, Lamont Lindstrom argues that tradition is “an attempt to read the present in terms of the past by writing the past in terms of the present” (Lindstrom 1982:317, cf. Hanson 1989:890). The contemporary uses and interpretations of tradition within any given society largely depend upon who is doing the “reading.” Edward Shils remarks that, in the process of transmission, traditions are prone to modification and reinterpretation by their users:

Traditions are not independently self-productive or self-elaborating. Only living, knowing, desiring human beings can enact them and reenact them and modify them. Traditions develop because the desire to create something truer and better or more convenient is alive in those who acquire and possess them (Shils 1981:14-15).

Frequently, however, the “reality” of tradition encountered “on the ground” is at variance with the social scientific view of tradition that contemporary ethnographers take into the field. Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin argue that “‘tradition’ is at once a commonsense and a scientific category (Handler and Linnekin 1984:273). The commonsense meaning presumes that an unchanging core of ideas and customs are inherited from the past (Handler and Linnekin 1984:273). From the perspective of the social constructivist ethnographer, however, tradition is not “defined in terms of boundedness, givenness or essence. Rather, tradition refers to an interpretative process that involves continuity and discontinuity” (Handler and Linnekin 1984:273). Handler and Linnekin observe that one inadequacy of the commonsense view of tradition is that it “posits a false dichotomy between the ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ as fixed mutually exclusive states,” while in actuality “the ongoing reconstruction of tradition is a facet of all social life” that is symbolically constructed (Handler and Linnekin 1984:273-276).

The “ethically problematic aspect” of the invention of tradition argument, according to Linnekin, is that it is perceived as being a “politically revisionist and anti-native rubric” that, either implicitly or explicitly, undermines the authority of Native peoples to claim cultural authenticity (Linnekin 1991:446). In effect, the argument for the invention of culture relativizes claims to authenticity by rendering symbols, practices and beliefs “valid” and “authentic” regardless of their genesis and the reasons for their incorporation into specific social and cultural matrices. For the ethnographer it is not problematic to give equal value to the different interpretations of tradition encountered in the field. However, for the Mi’kmaq of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, whose very

identity is at stake, discrepant claims to authenticity cannot be so easily accommodated. The personal narratives recounted in this chapter elucidate the ways in which divergent religious discourses, based on specific views of “tradition,” are central to the debate on issues of authenticity as they pertain to the formation of Mi’kmaw personal and social identity.

### **The Eskasoni Mawio’mi**

The Eskasoni powwow grounds is a large open field located just off Denny’s Lane.<sup>10</sup> The central powwow area is comprised of a series of circles. The inner circle, referred to as the *arbor*, is approximately seventy feet in diameter. This area is cordoned off by rope and has a roof that rises in the shape of a tepee. The arbor houses the drummers and chanters and is covered with a protective canvas tarpaulin to shelter the drums and the musicians from the elements.<sup>11</sup> The middle circle, approximately two hundred feet in diameter, is reserved for dance performances, and like the arbor, is separated from the general powwow area by a rope fence. The dance circle and the arbor

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<sup>10</sup>This area is the property of the same Denny family that hosts the annual Roman Catholic mass at Malagawatch. The sense in which the term “property” is used here implies stewardship rather than ownership. In Eskasoni, like most Native communities, land is rarely “bought and sold,” but is shared communally. However, the Band Council allocates specific properties to families for their personal use. In some cases, land has been held for generations within a family, as is the case with the Denny property (personal observations).

<sup>11</sup>Typically, powwow are postponed during bad weather owing to concerns that the drums and the dancers costumes will be damaged by rain and wind.

are considered “sacred” areas, meaning that entrance to both these areas is restricted to those who have been smudged by smoke from the sacred fire.<sup>12</sup> The perimeter of the middle circle is the area allocated for the audience.

To the left of the dance circle and arbor is a large canvas tent where elders, honoured guests and powwow participants share communal meals, or “feasts.” Next to the food tent is the sacred fire which is lit during a sunrise ceremony on the first day of the Eskasoni Mawio’ mi. This fire is the source for all smudging ceremonies over the five days of the powwow. The fire is always attended by a “fire keeper” who is responsible for its maintenance. Offerings of tobacco are continually added to the fire by powwow participants and the “fire keeper” keeps watch to make sure that no other items are accidentally, or intentionally, tossed into the pit.

Left of the sacred fire is the entrance to the powwow dance circle. Each day of the powwow, before the dancers enter the “sacred” area of the powwow grounds, officials smudge the dance ring, the arbor, and the drummers and their drums. As dancers arrive for the “Grand Entry”<sup>13</sup> they register with the master of ceremonies and proceed to the sacred fire where smudging takes place before the ceremonies begin. As each person is registered and smudged, they line up in single

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<sup>12</sup>This prohibition is lifted for general dances when members of the audience are invited to join in the dancing, but is never lifted for the formal dances which are performed by “registered” dancers.

<sup>13</sup>The “Grand Entry” marks the beginning of the day’s ceremonies and is considered to be one of the highlights of powwow celebrations. All those performing at the powwow for the day are introduced at this time (Fieldnotes, Book I:160).

file at the entrance gate in the order in which they are registered. Once the powwow begins the Master of Ceremonies announces the dancer, states his or her community of origin and announces the type of dance to be performed. Often, a person's dress indicates the type of dance performed by the wearer: the attire worn by a "Grass Dancer" varies greatly from that of a "Jingle Dancer" or "Fancy Dancer." The origins of particular dance forms are also mentioned. For instance, the "Jingle Dance" is recognized as Ojibway, and the "Grass Dance"<sup>14</sup> of Sioux origin. At the Eskasoni Mawio'mi, pan-Indian, or cross-cultural content is acknowledged and duly noted by the Master of Ceremonies. In most cases, the significance of the dance is also publically stated. At the Eskasoni Mawio'mi, it was announced that the Ojibway "Jingle Dance" is conducted for the purpose of healing. Once the "Jingle Dance" is announced, people who are ill or those who wish to dance on behalf of a sick relative or loved one are invited into the ring.<sup>15</sup> My companion Lynn remarked that

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<sup>14</sup>"Grass Dancers" wear brightly coloured clothing adorned with long fringes around the legs, arms and across the front of the garment. At the Eskasoni Mawio'mi, it was announced that, traditionally "Grass Dancers" were the first dancers to enter the dance ring because as they navigated the circle they would pick grass and stick it into the seams of their garments as a way of preparing the ring for subsequent dancers. By the time the "Grass Dancers" had finished their dance the circle would be picked clean of grass. However, "Grass Dancers" no longer perform this service and the former grass fringes are now made from brightly coloured yarn which adds to the drama of the garment (Fieldnotes, Book I:162).

<sup>15</sup>The original "Jingle Dress" upon which present-day "Jingle Dresses" are modelled, is reported to have been made by an Ojibway man whose wife was ailing. Lynn told me that "The old man dreamt about the dress when he was trying to find a way to cure his wife." The "jingles" attached to the dress are made from tobacco tin lids (tobacco is associated with healing) fashioned into a conical shape. Lynn said "The old man made the dress for his wife and said a prayer with each jingle that he put on the dress. There's supposed to be three hundred and sixty-five jingles on the dress—one for each day of the year" (Fieldnotes, Book I:162).



this dance always reminds her of St Anne's Mission because "the sick are being prayed for" (Fieldnotes, Book I:162).

Many of the dances included in the powwow celebrations are ceremonial, while others are simply for the demonstration of expertise and entertainment. Because "Honour," or "Ceremonial Dances" are considered sacred performances, members of the audience are requested to refrain from taping, filming or taking pictures while "Honour Dances" are being performed.

Outside the "sacred" area of the powwow grounds there is a large area reserved for vending booths. The booths are rented by individuals and groups offering a variety of items for sale. There are a number of stalls selling snack foods such as ice cream, hotdogs, pop, and "four cents cake," a local type of flat bread. Venders at various other booths offer Native handicrafts including basketry, beaded accessories, dreamcatchers and locally crafted items for sale. Often venders also sell raffle tickets on prize items. For instance, at one booth tickets were being sold on Native crafts to raise money for a local charity. In another instance, a woman wishing to go to the shrine of St. Anne de Beaupré in Québec sold tickets to raise travel money.

### **Neo-Traditionalism and Identity**

Like St. Anne's Mission, the occasion of the Eskasoni Mawio'mi holds a number of different meanings for different people. For some Mi'kmaq, the powwow is a ritualized celebration of origins and symbolic artifacts that harken back to a pre-contact past involving music, dance, regalia and communal gathering as vital aspects of Mi'kmaw social and cultural identity. Although particular

features of the Eskasoni Mawio'mi may differ from pre-contact ritual occasions, it is the performance genre of the powwow that makes it a meaningful event for many Mi'kmaw participants. Claiming the Eskasoni Mawio'mi as a culturally significant and religiously meaningful ceremony is equivalent to appealing to ritual practices and beliefs that are believed to be derived from pre-contact ideologies and institutions. However, as mentioned, the predominant discourse shared by many Catholic and non-Catholic Mi'kmaq maintains that this particular performance genre holds little historical, religious and cultural significance for most Mi'kmaw people. Primarily, it is viewed as a social occasion.

In many respects, the Eskasoni Mawio'mi is analogous to St. Anne's Mission: like *Se'tta'newimk*, the powwow is an arena in which to gather and socialize, and like the spiritual or religious aspects of "the Mission," the Eskasoni Mawio'mi is symbolically ambiguous. The powwow can also be seen as the inverse of the Mission, in the sense that Catholic Mi'kmaq ascribe religious and spiritual significance to *Se'tta'newimk*, whereas many neo-Traditionalists view "the Mission" as being culturally and socially significant, and religiously (but not necessarily spiritually) marginal. Conversely, some neo-Traditionalists view the powwow as a sacred occasion while Mi'kmaw Catholics consider it as being religiously, but not necessarily spiritually, marginal. In Eskasoni, the multiple discourses on identity that arise in response to the event of the powwow are diverse and contested.

As mentioned, for some Mi'kmaq, especially those who are not involved in neo-Traditionalism, the Eskasoni Mawio'mi may be viewed as a social occasion with little or no cultural or spiritual significance. Rather it is seen as a social space in which features of pan-Indianism are displayed, most of which fall outside the rubric of "authentic" Mi'kmaw tradition. While most

Mi'kmaq acknowledge that specific styles of drumming, chanting and dancing<sup>16</sup> are Mi'kmaq in origin, there is also the recognition that many neo-Traditional practices are unfamiliar to most Mi'kmaq born in the twentieth century. One visitor from a neighbouring Mi'kmaw community, a Catholic woman in her eighties, commented on the powwow that her "parents never did anything like that." For some Mi'kmaq, many neo-Traditionalist practices are perceived as "invented" traditions which are unconnected to established Mi'kmaw social and cultural convention. Other Mi'kmaq view specific aspects of "Traditionalism," especially the various beliefs and expression that have been imported through pan-Indianism, as inimical to "authentic" Mi'kmaw culture and tradition. Jonal, introduced in Chapter One, is a middle-aged Catholic man who views tradition likened to Mi'kmaw language, culture and socialization processes. He sees some neo-Traditional practices as abusive and threatening to "true" Mi'kmaw ways:

Some of those people are angry and Traditionalism is a platform for venting their anger, but there are other groups who call themselves the "real" Traditionalist—"true" Traditionalists who are devoted to what our ancestors believed. "Traditionalists" is a bad name for the others. They've abused the name. Many of them have been drug abusers. Some of them claim certain powers. You can't claim them just like that! (Fieldnotes, Book IV:728).

Explicit in Jonal's statement there is the notion that, inherent in Mi'kmaw socialization processes, there is a legacy of beliefs and values which have more cultural depth than the symbols associated with powwow "exhibitionism," and therefore must be upheld. To Jonal, the powwow

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<sup>16</sup>Interestingly, some Mi'kmaw songs that were ritually performed have survived intact. Presently, surviving songs are performed in traditional style by Mi'kmaw drummers and chanters at powwows and other functions, such as Treaty Day. Although I have managed to obtain cassette tapes of some of these songs, I must refrain from publishing the lyrics in written form. The Mi'kmaq enforce strict prohibitions on committing orally transmitted texts to paper (personal observations).

is a fetishization, or gross oversimplification of Native traditions, which have little to do with Mi'kmaw ancestral practices, but threatens to absorb them on some level. For Jonal, the events of the powwow are understood as a set of generic cultural motifs that must remain separate from the authentic socialization processes through which "true" Mi'kmaaw beliefs and values are mediated

Among the Mi'kmaq, there are those, like Jonal, who believe that the increasing influence of pan-Indianism threatens "authentic" Mi'kmaw spirituality and culture at a fundamental level. Another Mi'kmaw man, Len, a non-Christian, views the incorporation of non-Mi'kmaw traditions of any type into Mi'kmaw society negatively. Len told me that he was concerned because:

...they're bringing in so-called spiritual leaders from other Native groups...I've listened to these people and I attended some of the meetings that they conducted in Membertou under the name of spirituality. I'm concerned about that because...the question I keep asking myself is this, "Is it better to be bamboozled by non-Natives or is it better to be bamboozled by other Natives?"...My feeling is that it's worse when we get bamboozled by our cousins... We don't need that anymore...It's time now that we begin to look deeply at the Mi'kmaw culture and allow the culture to tell us the direction that we should go spiritually (taped interview).

For Len, adopting pan-Indian culture, or relying on external religious influences is analogous to rejecting, or at least obscuring, "authentic" Mi'kmaw practices. From Len's perspective, Mi'kmaw identity and autonomy must necessarily be independent of all alien symbolic artifacts, including those of "other" Native cultures. For Len, it is imperative that any spurious attachment to non-Mi'kmaw influences that pose a potential threat to Mi'kmaw autonomy and identity be broadly discouraged.

### Neo-Traditionalists and Neo-Traditionalism

As remarked throughout this thesis, neo-Traditionalism in Eskasoni is variously interpreted and practiced. In most instances, the ideological and institutional aspects of “traditionalism,” such as socialization processes, the role of the Grand Council, and particular beliefs about the soul/“spirit” and the afterlife, which are believed to be authentically Mi’kmaq, have been incorporated into Mi’kmaw Catholicism. However, there is another group of neo-Traditionalists who question Catholic beliefs and teachings at a fundamental level. Matt, Mitch and Gordon are neo-Traditionalists who are critical of Catholicism for a number of reasons. Matt and Mitch outrightly reject Catholicism, while Gordon holds a critical, but more moderate view of the Church.

Matt, a man from Eskasoni in his forties, became involved in neo-Traditionalism in the mid 1980's. Matt suggests that many of the forms of neo-Traditionalism currently practiced in Eskasoni are not authentically Mi’kmaw:

There are different groups of Traditionalists here [in Eskasoni]-- different factions. Sioux followers are here. There are Mi’kmaw Traditionalists and then there’s these others. We call them ‘cowboys’ because they want their booze, they want their drugs, they want their party and they want their sweat lodge. They do their stuff, but it’s not right for me to go over there and tell them the’re disrespectin’ because they’re doing that. It’s not right for me to do that. I follow the Mi’kmaw way (taped interview).

His account of the community’s reaction to his adopting “Traditionalism” as his religion of choice gives us some indication of the importance Eskasoni residents attach to personal religious conviction:

Soon as I went Traditional, soon as I started going to ceremonies, people started coming. I’d get calls. It was a rough ride there for awhile. They let go [eventually]—they just stopped...I’m not sure if they feared it [Traditionalism] or [if] it was just me...My kids used

to get beat up at the bus stop...They were beaten up at school. They [the community] turned around on me just because I wanted to be who I am. I'm L'nu. I'm Mi'kmaw. I don't need the Church...They [the community] would've liked it better if I stayed a Catholic and stayed drunk...[In Traditionalism] I was granted a healing...I realized, "there's something there!" (taped interview).

Matt's account of the community's reaction to his turning "Traditional" seems to suggest that there is social bias against "Traditionalism" within the community. Matt believes that within Catholicism, the Mi'kmaw people have developed a narrow cultural, religious and spiritual focus. According to Matt, instead of acknowledging the therapeutic and positive aspects of "Traditionalism," the community continues to uphold faith and allegiance to Mi'kmaw Catholicism.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, Matt aligns his adoption of neo-Traditionalism and his subsequent rejection of Catholicism as essential to his identity as "L'nu," or "Mi'kmaw." Matt feels that Western institutions, like the Church, retain little meaning for him as a Mi'kmaw person. He criticizes the Church as an institution because in his view, it adds to social problems by imposing strict moral rules and by undermining the Mi'kmaw people.

For the most part, Matt's move away from Catholicism and subsequent involvement in neo-Traditionalism was prompted by his own personal dilemmas. Matt experienced a difficult childhood with an alcoholic father who repeatedly physically and mentally abused his family. Matt told me:

My father was one of my biggest critics...I was never man enough. I was never smart

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<sup>17</sup>It is important to keep in mind here that the community's reaction to Matt's conversion to "Traditionalism" occurred in the 1980's. Since that time, some people in Eskasoni have become more accepting of neo-Traditionalist practices, at least to a degree. However, as noted in this chapter, a strong resistance to this particular religious orientation still exists within certain sectors of the community.

enough. I was never good enough. Nothing was ever good enough for him. When I started going Traditional that was another thing. I was gonna go to hell. 'You're leaving the Church,' 'What the hell's wrong with you, you dog-eater?' and all that bullshit (taped interview).

However, Matt also considers the Church to be as abusive and detrimental to his well-being as were his father's personal attacks. Matt claims that the Church fosters social problems by offering negative criticism and by failing to promote a positive Mi'kmaw image:

I had no belief at all. I attended church. I was a so-called good Christian that went every Sunday like clockwork. Take my family, go sit in the front—right in the front—sit there and listen to this priest. Well, he was always criticizin,' puttin' down the people when he spoke...He would read this gospel and then interpret it the way he thought it was and a lot of the time it was all negative. Like, I couldn't relate to that. Being a Native and being in school and listening to the nuns criticize us and put us down through school. I got married and I'm at church and I'm listening to the priest every Sunday puttin' our people down. Never once a positive message! I couldn't understand it...I know that some priests that were here were really racist priests. Hypocrites! I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't go to that church anymore (taped interview).

In Matt's opinion, the Church and its representatives are quick to undermine Mi'kmaw culture and society, therefore encouraging negativity rather than actively working to resolve social problems within the community. Matt feels that prior to becoming a "Traditionalist," there was an excess of negativity in his life, partly fuelled by Catholicism and partly the result of his family situation. Matt suggests that since he saw Catholicism as contributing to his problems, neo-Traditionalism became a viable means of alleviating his anger at himself and others:

I was a very angry man when I started. Through a lot of fasting and soul-searching I worked through all that anger...It's a tough road, the Traditional path. It's a very tough road 'cause you do a lot of soul-searching for the first few years. [It will] take you maybe seven years to really understand yourself...It took a long time just for that to sink in...To figure out how to forgive. How to forgive all these people who tormented me in my life (taped interview).

In Matt's view, his troubled family life is compounded by feelings of insecurity and inferiority resulting from religious and social marginalization. In Eskasoni, the negative views of neo-Traditionalism are fuelled, at least in part, by the very fact that many of those who have found a "healing" within neo-Traditionalist practices are people like Matt who had previously been socially marginalized within the community. Matt admits to having been an abusive person with a drinking problem, who at times, expressed his anger through physical acts of violence. Many, but not all, of the neo-Traditionalists with whom I spoke told me that they have been accused of different social transgressions such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, alcoholism, drug abuse and adultery. Such behaviours are perceived as the cause of serious social strife within the community and most Eskasoni residents are very critical of them. However, many neo-Traditionalists believe that, at base, the Catholic Church is responsible for this type of moral outrage that results in the marginalization of community members. Most of the neo-Traditionalists with whom I spoke see the Catholic Church's imposition of strict moral codes as reinforcing a social hierarchy that encourages the demoralization of those who transgress those social and moral codes. That is, those who remain within the Catholic Church and follow its rules and regulations are looked upon as morally and socially superior, whereas those who do not follow Church teachings are perceived as being morally and socially inferior. Catholicism then, is viewed by some Mi'kmaq as an institution that reinforces a hierarchical social order in a community that subscribes to an egalitarian ethos.<sup>18</sup> In effect, for some

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<sup>18</sup>The point that the Catholic Church disrupts "traditional" Mi'kmaq social structure was also mentioned to me by a female member of the Grand Council who commented that, according to oral tradition, pre-contact Mi'kmaq social convention claimed equality between all community members. However, prior to the late 1980's women did not hold leadership roles



Mi'kmaq, neo-Traditionalism operates as a counter discourse to the authority claimed by the Church and reinforced in the institution of the Grand Council.

In Mitch's case, it was ostracism by the community that forced him to leave the home where he had lived for nearly forty of his forty-six years. Mitch was born and raised in Eskasoni, and as a young man settled there with his wife and family. Now divorced and remarried to a "white" girl, Mitch works and lives in a nearby non-Native community. His reasons for leaving Eskasoni are manifold, but are primarily connected to his separation from his first wife, his subsequent marriage to Marla and his adoption of neo-Traditionalism. Mitch was always a "good" Catholic and regularly attended church from the time he was a young child until approximately eight years ago. Mitch told me:

I was a good Catholic, was involved in the Church and all that, but somehow it all seemed too hollow to me. Even when I was doin' these things I wasn't really into it...I went from being a outstandin' citizen to being an outcast. It started a long time ago...Eight or nine years ago when I was still married to my first wife rumours started that I was having an affair and eventually got to my [Catholic] prayer group who made trouble for me. It was very uncomfortable. It was after this that things started to change for me. I still went to Mass, but I started to get involved in Traditionalism. I went to a few sweats and started to pray in the four directions. The people in my [Catholic] prayer group found out about the sweats and asked me about it. I told them that I'd gone to sweats and found them helpful. One woman in the group started to make fun of Traditionalism...Before I did the sweats I spent a lot of time in the Church, but I never thought I was truly spiritual. I went to church...because it was habit, and it was expected of me. When I did sweats I still went to church and the [Catholic] prayer groups but some people didn't agree with what I was doing and told me so (Fieldnotes, Book V:1001-1003).

Mitch suggests that throughout his life he had always attempted to follow the rules of the

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on the Council. It was only after appealing to the Council on the grounds of equality that female representatives were provided visible roles within the organization (personal communication).

Church and to live a good life. However, he told me that he was “unhappy” in his marriage and only intended to stay married until his children were grown (Fieldnotes, Book V:1001). Mitch also suggested that part of his dissatisfaction stemmed from an unfulfilled religious life. He claims that he did not feel “spiritual” as a practising Catholic, but only found spiritual meaning within “Traditionalism.” Mitch’s disillusionment with the Church and its followers increased when members of his prayer group began to ridicule his new “spiritual” leanings. Like Matt, Mitch feels that for many Mi’kmaq Catholics, alternative religious orientations are rarely encouraged, and, in some cases, are not tolerated. In Mitch’s view, Catholicism imposes restrictive moral and social rules that prescribe a specific code of behaviour that leaves little room for error. Therefore, anyone who moves outside the parameters of the prescribed code to, for example, seek a divorce, live in a common law relationship, or to search for healing within an alternative spiritual community, must be prepared to bear the brunt of ridicule and risk potential ostracism. For Mitch, adopting neo-Traditionalism met at least two of his personal needs: he was now part of a therapeutic religious group that promoted “spirituality” and healing at a fundamental level; and, he was part of a community that accepted his personal lifestyle choices.

Another Mi’kmaq man in his late forties, Gordon, became involved in neo-Traditionalism in the 1980's. As with Matt and Mitch, it was spiritual healing that Gordon sought and received through “Traditionalism.” Gordon considers neo-Traditionalist practice to be a difficult, but worthwhile, spiritual orientation. He remarks:

My first experience with Traditionalism was incredible. The first time that I went to a praying circle and a sweat I prayed so hard that I didn’t worry about anything. Really, we were sacrificing ourselves. The feelings were so intense it terrified me. When I started out in the

[sweat] lodge I almost had a heart attack. After I was there for awhile, I felt the spirit of my dead brother, my grandfather and my close family. It's hard to explain. You see, we [Traditionalists] don't go to heaven or hell, we go to the spirit world. Our tradition is here, it's not in another land... When we want to know things we fast. We do it by the heart. We don't lie about it. Traditionalists are very strict in their ways. You have to do it in person, You can't have someone do it for you. It is very beautiful though. Easy, and very powerful and tough at the same time (Fieldnotes, Book V:664-665).

Although Gordon is critical of the Catholic Church, he does not renounce it. He explains that he left the Catholic faith for several reasons, among which the reluctance of the Catholic community to accept "Traditionalism" figures prominently. However, Gordon also takes issue with the hierarchical structures reinforced by the Church as well as its fundamental tenets and beliefs about the salvific powers of Jesus:

We ["Traditionalists"] don't renounce the Church, but we'd like to see changes. I don't like this whole idea that Jesus is going to save us. Jesus is a middleman. God is who we have to pay respect to—our Creator. I'd sooner take the more humble and more comfortable approach to being saved and that's through Traditionalism. I think Traditionalism is more in line with Jesus' teachings than what we hear in the Church... For Mi'kmaq [Traditionalists] there is no worship of idols, no churches, priests or nuns. Religion is a matter directly between the person and God—their Creator... I'm offended when people ridicule us when we're praying and sweating for our people... We go to funerals out of respect, but there's a lot of prejudice among our own people. Have you ever walked into a room full of men? Do you know how you feel then? Uncomfortable isn't it? Well, it's like that for me when I go to church. You're an Indian, but you feel that you're a disgrace to your people. There's lots of healers and freaks all over the place around here. That makes it difficult for us... What we do is offer tobacco, but you have to believe first in your heart. If you find yourself in a certain situation, say you are a drunk, you have to ask yourself why you are in this condition. It's a sickness and you have to look for purification and health. We don't emphasize glorification of a God and we don't want wealth—we only use tobacco. Our medicine people will help you if you offer tobacco and you're serious about your request... I go at least once a month. I feel better when I go, better than when I go to church. In the circle we're all one, no one is any better or any worse than the other (Fieldnotes, Book III:663-665).

Like the two previous respondents, Gordon's experiences with neo-Traditionalism reveal

a dimension of spirituality that he had previously not known. Gordon's critique of the Church suggests that its theological principles promote a vicarious route to personal salvation through Jesus Christ, which denies the supplicant direct experience of his "Creator." Alternatively, Gordon proposes that the salvific and therapeutic value of Mi'kmaw neo-Traditionalism is provided through direct encounters with the spiritual world which, rather than emphasizing life in the hereafter, addresses personal and immediate existential concerns.

### **Catholic Traditionalists**

Each year at the Eskasoni Mawio'mi a "lead dancer" is chosen to oversee dance ceremonies. This task is a demanding one that requires a great deal of physical effort in leading several dances per day over a period of five days.<sup>19</sup> In 1999, the lead dancer was Ross, a Mi'kmaw man from Eskasoni. Commenting on the Mawio'mi, Lynn told me that Ross had been a problem drinker before becoming involved in local powwows. She explained that "Since he's been participating [in the powwows] he has cleaned up a bit." Lynn, like others in the community, believes that ceremonial dancing helps Ross with his drinking problem. She told me that "When [Ross] started to dance he had no regalia. He used cheap dime-store cotton scarves that he wrapped around his head, and his arms and legs. After that the people in the community got together and made him a ribbon shirt—the one he's wearing now" (Fieldnotes, Book I: 165-166). Significantly, Ross also

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<sup>19</sup>One woman told me that lead dancers, and others, can lose up to ten or fifteen pounds at these events and often train extensively prior to the powwow.

participates in St. Anne's Mission. He is not a member of the Grand Council and does not have any official capacity at *Se'tte'newimk*, although he often acts as a member of St. Anne's Security.

Ross is a Catholic-Traditionalist, who, like many others in Eskasoni, participates in neo-Traditionalist practices, but also maintains close ties to the Catholic Church. Among those who have adopted neo-Traditionalist practices without abandoning Roman Catholicism are two women; Carrie and Lori. Carrie, a Catholic-Traditionalist, incorporates elements of Catholicism into neo-Traditionalist contexts; Lori privileges neither the Christian, nor the "Traditional" aspects of her faith.

Carrie, an Eskasoni woman in her early fifties, is a devout Roman Catholic, but has participated in the powwow for the past five years. Carrie recalls that she attended her first powwow with a great deal of trepidation, but has since become involved in the event, participating annually. Like, Piel<sup>20</sup> who interprets neo-Traditionalism within the framework of Catholicism. Carrie does not view the powwow as a religious occasion *per se*, but accepts it as a part of Native spirituality, identity and culture. She explains that her appreciation for "Mi'kmaw traditions" evolved over a long period of time and she does not view taking part in the powwow as a challenge to her Roman Catholic roots. Carrie states that:

When I got older I began to understand Mi'kmaw traditions more and more. I came to see that it [tradition] is a spiritual and cultural thing that can't be found in other ways. Native people know that the world is alive around them. There's life in everything. Traditionalism is part of a spiritual awakening. It shows that the spirit is alive and that we have values and cultural pride. It's important for people to speak out as Natives. Spirituality is complicated. We have to listen to others. The seed is there, but where is the seed going? Why are there choices? For me, whatever comes out as good is good—a person who is good is good...I was worried about "Traditionalism" at first. This is an all-Catholic community and I felt that

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<sup>20</sup>Piel is introduced in Chapter One, pp. 30-32.

this was something that I couldn't accept. When they started the powwows I didn't feel too good about it, but I decided to go see for myself. By the second night my toes were tapping. Many of my friends and family were there and some were involved in the powwow. I thought to myself, this is where it is. God wants me to join in. I just love it now. I can smile back at people. I have confidence in myself and my own Indian identity started coming out. I even camp out there now, even though I live in Eskasoni. But, I stay there, sleep there and my friends come by and have a cup of tea and something to eat. I really enjoy being there. I dance and dance and I love it. I feel free, but not as free as I want to. When I'm in the lit side of the arbor I take my time and I dance politely and when I'm on the dark side I break out, I go crazy. So, I still hold myself back, but not as much as I used to. First I was really shy but now I can dance by myself if I want to (Fieldnotes, Book V:831-832).

Carrie's suggestion that the powwow offers a spirituality and culture that "can't be found in other ways" implies that, for her Catholicism is spiritually and culturally limited. Carrie's experiences at the powwow reveal a side of Mi'kmaw life that was previously unavailable to her. Like Piel, introduced in Chapter One, for whom the cultural and spiritual significance of neo-Traditionalism is made meaningful within a Christian frame of reference, Carrie draws a distinction between religion and spirituality. For Carrie, the powwow only becomes spiritually meaningful when Catholic elements are incorporated into the performance.<sup>21</sup>

Carrie, however, is discriminating in her support of the powwow and other aspects of neo-Traditionalism. She believes that the Mi'kmaw people must be cautious about the way in which they incorporate Native "spirituality" into religious practices:

We've got to be careful how we use our traditional ways. We have to understand our own Native spirituality before it's used freely. Many of the elders in our church didn't want those things introduced. They didn't want new things. They wanted to continue on the way we always did in the church. They were afraid for some reason. Maybe they didn't think it was

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<sup>21</sup>The manner in which Carrie understands neo-Traditionalism is similar to the way in which Piel in Chapter One views neo-Traditionalist practices and beliefs.

right. We have to understand what's going on with drumming and dancing. The beat of the drum is like a heartbeat that wakes up mother earth. It wards off evil spirits. It makes you confident and gives you inner peace. When I dance, I dance for my Lord (Fieldnotes, Book V:887-888).

Aside from connecting her to her Native roots, participation in the powwow also affords Carrie the freedom to worship the "Lord" in a specifically Native context. Interestingly, Carrie did not pursue neo-Traditionalism for the purpose of "healing." Rather, it answers to her spiritual needs while reinforcing cultural integrity and Native identity.

Lori, another Mi'kmaw woman from Eskasoni in her 50's, also finds cultural and spiritual significance in neo-Traditionalism. Although Lori is actively involved in prayer circles, sweats and fasts in Eskasoni and elsewhere on a regular basis, she does not see participation in the powwow as a necessary means of expressing her "Traditionalism." However, she does not deny that the powwow is of benefit to some people. Like Matt and Mitch, Lori turned to neo-Traditionalism for healing. Lori recalls her negative experiences in the Shubenacadie residential school, which culminated in a lifetime of physical and emotional abuse. Lori finds that Roman Catholicism alone no longer answers to her spiritual and emotional needs, and to some degree she blames the Church for many of her personal problems. Lori does not reject the religion in which she was raised -- she still attends Church regularly and receives the sacraments -- but she feels that to some degree the Catholic Church denies her her "Indianness". "I feel really good in Church" says Lori "but there are times when I need something more. The Church just can't help me. Usually, it's when I start thinking about residential school and what happened there" (Fieldnotes, Book IV:768). After her experiences at the Shubenacadie school Lori says:

I was a mess...I really thought that I had no spirituality left. I used to pray to understand. I'd get a rush of images and eventually the answers came...I needed to be alone to heal myself. I found healing in Traditionalism...I wanted to pray like an Indian. I wanted to be an Indian. I wanted to pray but my Catholic upbringing held me back. An old woman told me to pray to the four directions. I didn't know how. So, I asked the Creator and then I knew how to pray. I asked in Mi'kmaq. (Fieldnotes, Book IV:705, 709).

Lori, like Matt, Mitch and Gordon, mentioned earlier, is a Mi'kmaw person who felt that the help she needed to repair her life could not be found within Catholicism. It is significant that most of the neo-Traditionalists that I interviewed have found spiritual fulfillment and emotional healing within neo-Traditional religion.

### **Catholicism and Neo-Traditionalism**

The idiosyncratic nature of neo-Traditionalist practices draws attention to discrepancies between individual autonomy and social convention. For many Mi'kmaq, neo-Traditionalism represents a break with contemporary Mi'kmaw social convention. In Eskasoni, the dominant discourse which defines acceptable moral behaviour is informed by the beliefs and values associated with Mi'kmaw Catholicism. For instance, in Eskasoni, views on common law unions and divorce<sup>22</sup> are consistent with Roman Catholic teachings.

As noted throughout this thesis, Mi'kmaw Catholicism is important to the majority of

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<sup>22</sup>It is commonly accepted in Eskasoni that if you are "shackin' up," that is, living in a common law relationship, then you are unable to receive the sacrament of communion. This prohibition is not part of Church law but is a social restriction generally upheld by the Mi'kmaw people themselves. Likewise, Mi'kmaw views on divorce are similar to those held by the Catholic Church. As we saw in Mitch's case, his divorce and subsequent remarriage caused him to be socially marginalized within the community (personal communication).



Mi'kmaw people. However, some Mi'kmaq argue that Western ideologies and the institutions that embody them encourage negative responses to neo-Traditionalism. The Mi'kmaq, like most North American Native groups, have yet to escape from the negative impact of colonial racist discourses that maintain an invisible, but a very real, barrier between themselves and their non-Native neighbours. For many Mi'kmaq, especially Mi'kmaw Catholics, along with the development of, and continued involvement in, non-Christian Native religions, there is the attendant fear of being labelled "pagans," "heathens" or "non-believers" by non-Native Christians, the dominant religious and social group in Nova Scotia. Among Mi'kmaw Catholics, one strategy of the defence against such labelling results in social and ideological distancing which finds expression in a critique, and the concomitant marginalization, of neo-Traditionalism. Once, when I asked a Mi'kmaw elder what he thought about Mi'kmaw "Traditionalists," he responded, "Who, the born-again savages?"<sup>23</sup> At the time I was taken aback by his answer, but as my fieldwork progressed, I began to understand his reaction to my question. Pan-Indian movements and the rise of neo-Traditionalism have been widely disparaged by Mi'kmaw Catholics who believe that the Catholic Church is a fundamental part of existing Mi'kmaw culture and society. As mentioned earlier,<sup>24</sup> apologists for Mi'kmaw Catholicism argue that Catholicism is more traditional than many of the pan-Indian or neo-Traditionalist practices and beliefs that have been adopted by some Eskasoni residents since the 1970's. Associated with the practice of Mi'kmaw Catholicism is the notion that the Mi'kmaq are a "civilized" people, who prior

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<sup>23</sup>Interestingly, Tom Parkhill remarks that among the Mi'kmaw and Abenaki, those opposed to "extreme neotraditionalists" label the group "born-again Indians" (Parkhill 1997:141)..

<sup>24</sup>Refer to Chapter Three, pp. 66-68.

to European contact, “knew God.” According to this perspective, the acceptance of Catholicism among the Mi’kmaq is merely a means through which Indigenous belief is upheld. Similarly, several Mi’kmaq assured me their ancestors were never “sun worshippers” as the Catholic missionaries supposed, but that the Mi’kmaq understood the natural world and saw the sun as necessary to the process of creation. Within this particular discourse the sun was seen as the source of all life, but was not deified (taped interview, January 2000).

In addition, as discussed in Chapter Three, there is a strong attachment to the Catholic faith, especially in Eskasoni among the middle-aged and elderly. James, a man from Eskasoni in his early sixties who comes from a devoutly Catholic family, told me that “in the final stages of his life, my father made a simple request. He said ‘When I die don’t let them throw tobacco at me and get on with their noise. I don’t want any of that’” (Fieldnotes, Book III: 699). James’ father belonged to a generation that is generally sceptical about neo-Traditionalist practices. When I asked James how he felt about the “Traditionalists,” he said:

I don’t mind them. They do their own thing. Sometimes they come to the church on certain occasions. When the Traditionalists started they butted into things. Now they have the good sense to ask people what they want. If someone is sick and dying they’ll ask the family if they want drumming and chanting. They didn’t do that at first (Fieldnotes, Book III:699).

A similar position is taken up by Ron, a middle-aged Mi’kmaw man from Eskasoni. Ron is a Catholic who is not involved in neo-Traditionalism, but he normally attends the annual Eskasoni Mawio’mi. Aside from being a social occasion, Ron views the powwow as having little value for Mi’kmaw people:

The powwow is the Traditionalists’ attempt to be spiritual, but they have no real leadership. There’s no one with the fortitude to lead “those things.” It’s a time for them

[“Traditionalists”] to “do their thing,” whatever that may be. People involved in the powwow are those who haven’t made an impression on us in our everyday lives. These are people who made mistakes in their own lives. There’s an outward appearance of restitution, but inwardly there’s no change. It’s like those people walked into a different room because most of us believe that they haven’t really changed. If you walk into another room you’re only changing places. The powwow is an attempt to prove that they’re renewed people. We don’t see ourselves following the people who make a show of drumming, chanting and dancing. Other Mi’kmaq besides the Traditionalists do go to the powwow, but this is a social thing and doesn’t have anything to do with any real belief in what’s going on. The Mi’kmaq people have made judgements about the “Traditionalists,” but they are not good ones (Fieldnotes, Book I:11).

For Ron, the drumming, dancing and chanting performed at the powwow is not objectionable. Rather, it is the context and manner in which these practices are carried out that he calls into question. In Ron’s opinion, to “make a show” of one’s beliefs is exploitative and distances the experience from a profoundly felt spirituality or a genuine appreciation for Mi’kmaq culture. Ron sees powwows as arenas in which specific neo-Traditionalist agendas are set and as social settings in which culture, religion and spirituality are decontextualized and used for purposes for which they were not intended. Ron’s suggestion that the powwow has a political dimension is supported by one specific “non-event” at the Eighth Annual Eskasoni Mawio’mi. Each previous year the local parish priest was invited to say Sunday mass at the powwow grounds. Interestingly, at the Eighth Annual Eskasoni Mawio’mi, powwow organizers did not extend an invitation to the local priest and no mass was performed. This was seen by some Mi’kmaq Catholics as a retaliation against the Grand Council which had refused to allow a powwow to be performed at Potlotek during the St. Anne’s Mission<sup>25</sup> (Fieldnotes, 1997).

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<sup>25</sup>Significantly, in connection with this point, at the entrance to the sacred circle at the powwow grounds there is an avenue of flags representing different nations, bands and groups

For some community members, “Traditionalist” practices are closely aligned with spirituality and culture, but must be distinguished from “religion.” In addition, there is the understanding that neo-Traditionalists are often indiscriminate in the expression of their spirituality. As Mara, a Catholic woman in her early fifties from Eskasoni, commented:

Traditionalists are those who have discovered their spirituality. You have to see the difference between spirituality and religion. Some grab onto whatever they can get, but we try to live our culture and spirituality everyday—it’s the Mi’kmaw way. It’s easier for people of my generation because we know our language. It’s not so easy for others. It’s harder for them to grasp... You have to apply Traditionalism to the individual. It’s an individual thing and not all people present it in a favourable light. [For instance, Mark] is not a good role model. He’s a rapist and people don’t like that. When they want to teach “Traditionalism” at the school for whatever reason, they won’t ask [him] because too many parents don’t want him near their kids (Fieldnotes, Book IV:728).

Mara’s comments about spirituality, religion and “Traditionalism” exhibit some deeply held convictions about Mi’kmaw society and culture that have been touched upon throughout this thesis. Mara believes that people like herself, who grew up speaking the Mi’kmaw language and were socialized in Mi’kmaw culture, hold a privileged position within Mi’kmaw society. She does not endorse neo-Traditionalism because she perceives it as a feeble attempt by those who do not “live our culture and spirituality everyday...to grab onto whatever they can get.” Like many people from Eskasoni, Mara believes that Mi’kmaw culture, religion and identity are maintained by speaking and thinking in the Mi’kmaw language and by living in accordance with the “Mi’kmaw way.”

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participating in the powwow. However, the Grand Council flag, which is generally accepted as the official flag of Mi’kma’ki, was noticeably absent in 1999.

## Conclusions

Conceivably, during the 1970's and early 1980's, for those Mi'kmaq who had been born and raised within the Catholic faith, neo-Traditionalism was an unfamiliar religious orientation. However, since the 1990's, the increased interest in neo-Traditionalism among a certain sector of Mi'kmaw society has led to a general familiarity with neo-Traditionalist practices. This acceptance may result in part from Pope John Paul II's publication of *Missio Redemptoris* in 1991, which calls for the incorporation of "Traditional" rituals into the Roman Catholic liturgy.<sup>26</sup> At the turn of the twenty-first century, there are many Mi'kmaq who view neo-Traditionalism as spiritually meaningful and culturally relevant. However, as mentioned in Chapter One, many Catholic Mi'kmaq can only accept neo-Traditionalism as spiritually meaningful with the caveat that it is practiced in accordance with, and not exclusive of, the Catholic faith. I use the term "spiritually" here, because although I consider neo-Traditionalism a religious orientation according to Geertz's (1973) definition of religion, Mi'kmaw practioners of neo-Traditionalism and Mi'kmaw Catholics alike rarely refer to neo-Traditionalism as a religion, but almost exclusively refer to it as a form of spirituality. This reluctance to classify neo-Traditionalism as a religion may be grounded in popular understandings of the definition of religion. In common usage, "religion" is often used a referent for institutionalized religion which, of course, excludes non-institutionalized religious practices like neo-Traditionalism. Further to this perspective, some neo-Traditionalists may be reluctant to assign the Western category of "religion" to a non-Western faith.

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<sup>26</sup>See also Pope John Paul II's remarks to *Kji-Saqamaw* Donald Marshall in Chapter Five, p. 164 of this thesis.

Throughout this chapter, I have presented the ways in which neo-Traditionalists perceive their religious choice(s) and the responses to these choices within the community at large. Neo-Traditionalism has two specific consequences for the Mi'kmaq of Eskasoni. First, involvement in neo-Traditionalism provides its practitioners with an alternative therapeutic community in which healing is realized, and in which equality of social status and personal self-worth is reaffirmed. Second, the practice of neo-Traditionalism is a contentious issue around which divergent views on what constitutes "authentic" Mi'kmaw tradition emerge and are called into question.

I have suggested in previous chapters that the negotiation of personal and collective Mi'kmaw identities ultimately rests on the ways in which "religion," "spirituality," "tradition" and "culture" are constructed and maintained within Mi'kmaw society. Catholic Mi'kmaq subsume Mi'kmaw Catholicism under the rubric of tradition while most non-Catholic Mi'kmaq challenge this claim to "authenticity." For non-Catholic "Traditionalists," "authentic" Mi'kmaw practices and beliefs originate within a pre-Christian past. In addition, the argument promoted by many neo-Traditionalists, including Catholic-Traditionalists, that Catholicism is culturally and spiritually limiting is circumvented by the Mi'kmaw Catholics who claim that spirituality and religion are discrete categories that should not be confused.

In this chapter, I have also provided a number of possible explanations for the prominence of anti-"Traditionalist" discourses expressed by Catholic Mi'kmaq. First, as noted above, many adherents of Catholicism, the dominant religious orientation in Eskasoni, clearly distinguish it from "spirituality." Conversely, many Mi'kmaw Catholics view neo-Traditionalism, not as a legitimate religion, but as a form of "spirituality." Second, in North America, the persistence of negative colonial

attitudes continue to desacralize Indigenous religions, contributing to their continued marginalization even within the Native communities in which they are practiced. Third, the move toward neo-Traditionalism is viewed by some Mi'kmaq as a contravention of commonly accepted Mi'kmaw social and cultural norms and values.

In summary, the rise of neo-Traditionalism and local opposition to it in Eskasoni is one of the internal struggles with which the Mi'kmaq, like many other Native groups in North America, are forced to contend. The competing discourses which emerge from such struggles, the "politics of identity" which they embody, and the claims to "authenticity" negotiated within these divergent views become manifest in complex local religious expressions that remain culturally meaningful and historically emergent.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusions

*Meaning resides in the journeying, not the destination, and the authenticity of ethnographic knowledge depends on the ethnographer recounting in detail the events and encounters that are the grounds on which the very possibility of this knowledge rests.*

From Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World*.

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In his 1966 account of the Mi'kmaq of Restigouche, Québec, anthropologist Philip K.

Bock claims that,

There is general agreement that for more than two hundred years, virtually all Micmac were devoted Roman Catholics...The aboriginal faith is dead: any survivals are better treated as fragments of folklore (ref. Wallis and Wallis, 1953). Until recently there has been no serious 'rival doctrine':<sup>1</sup> many people are apparently 'firm in their faith'" (Bock 1966:55-56).

Bock's description of Catholicism and the "dead" aboriginal faith is indicative of the way in which Mi'kmaw religion has typically been portrayed by scholars. While this image of Mi'kmaw religion

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<sup>1</sup>The "rival doctrine" to which Bock refers is the beliefs and teachings of a local Christian group in Restigouche commonly referred to as "the Jehovah's." This particular group was "composed of members of five families who have broken with the Roman Catholic Church and set up their own mode of religious belief and practice" (Bock 1966:62). "The Jehovah's" was founded by a man who, while recovering from an illness in New York, began to read the Bible. His "personal literal interpretation of the Old and New Testaments, paired with a radical anti-clericalism" and a contentious political philosophy, formed the basis of the group's primary tenets and doctrines (Bock 1966:62).



may appear to be somewhat dated, interestingly, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, most discussions of Mi'kmaw religion continue to resemble the views expressed by Bock. Generally, academic discourses on Mi'kmaw religion tend to centre either on the primacy of Catholicism among the Mi'kmaq, or deal to exclusively with what Bock refers to as the "aboriginal faith."<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship commonly refers to the Mi'kmaq as Roman Catholic. However, in the latter part of the twentieth century, as myself and several others have noted, Mi'kmaw religion cannot be categorized so succinctly (Campbell 1998; McMillan 1996; Reid 1995).

In the preceding chapters, I argue that the specific categories ascribed to local belief and practice, such as Roman Catholicism and "Traditionalism," are reductionist terms which obscure the variety and complexity of Mi'kmaw religious traditions. Accordingly, Mi'kmaw religious expression can be likened to the multidimensional and diverse forms of popular, or local Roman Catholicism studied by anthropologists and historians elsewhere (Badone 1990, Brandes 1990, Stirrat 1992). I maintain that, like these "intricately patterned and highly elaborated" forms of popular Roman Catholicism, Mi'kmaw religion did not emerge from a fixed pattern, but developed, and continues to develop, "in response to an infinite variety of social, economic, political and cultural circumstances" (Brandes 1990:185).

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<sup>2</sup>Although Bock uses this term specifically to refer to pre-Christian, or non-Western religious concepts, practices, as noted in Chapter Three, many Mi'kmaw Catholics would argue that Catholicism is indeed part of their "aboriginal faith."

I also argued against the dominant notion in scholarly discourse that there exists a “passive acceptance” of Roman Catholicism among the Mi’kmaq (Bock 1966:56). Historically, scholarship relating to Mi’kmaq Catholicism tends not to treat the Mi’kmaq as autonomous human agents who contribute to the basic ideological and philosophical principles that help shape their lives, but rather as persons who have little control over the construction of cultural meaning and religious significance in their communities. In many cases, the persistence of Catholicism among the Mi’kmaq is attributed to the efforts of the missionaries (Bock 1966; Johnston 1960; Krieger 1989). For instance, Bock suggests that by translating prayers, hymns, and catechisms into the Mi’kmaq language and by encouraging particular devotions, “especially to St. Anne,” the missionaries Christian LeClerq and Abbé Maillard initiated and sustained “a version of Catholicism...suitable to the Indians”<sup>3</sup> (Bock 1966:55). Bock, however, makes no mention of the roles played by the *Sante’ Mawio’mi* (Grand Council) and the Mi’kmaq people in constructing and maintaining Mi’kmaq Catholicism. In this dissertation, I offer evidence which suggests that, through time, the Mi’kmaq were reflective members of the religious community to which they belonged: they continually made choices and took action based on their assessment of the various sets of circumstances that made past and existing (re)constructions of Mi’kmaq religion possible. Local interpretations of Christian and non-Christian religious orientations are manifest in such diverse expressions as: Mi’kmaq Catholicism; existing and emergent hybridized forms of Catholicism and

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<sup>3</sup>Ironically, this statement contradicts Bock’s observation that the general Mi’kmaq attitude toward Catholicism “seems to be one of passive acceptance” (Bock 1966: 56).

neo-Traditionalism; and locally defined ritual performances like *salites* and St. Anne's Mission (*Se'tta'newimk*) observances.

Finally, I suggest that, for many Mi'kmaq, notions of autonomy and cultural identity are closely associated with religious affiliation.<sup>4</sup> My research indicates that the primary concern for many Mi'kmaq people is the continued survival of the Mi'kmaq as a socially and culturally distinct group. While most Mi'kmaq are unified in this cause, responses vary regarding the role of the Catholic Church in achieving this goal. For many Catholic conservatives, being Mi'kmaq and being Catholic are synonymous. From this conservative perspective, the Catholic Church, in addition to being an institution that is historically, socially and culturally significant, is seen as the only viable religious orientation for the Mi'kmaq. The strongest opponents of Mi'kmaq Catholic are those whose primary goal is to rid Mi'kmaq culture and society of all perceptible Western influences (and in some cases all non-Mi'kmaq influences). Most dissenters from the Catholic faith view the Church's ideological structure and institutional authority as a persistent threat to both Mi'kmaq autonomy and the preservation of "authentic" Mi'kmaq culture and society. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, especially in Chapters Two, Three and Six, in addition to the Mi'kmaq

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<sup>4</sup>As noted in Chapter One, pp. 23-24, the three religious categories, Catholicism, neo-Traditionalism and Catholic-Traditionalism that I have identified in this thesis are not rigidly bounded and separate. Rather these terms refer to the most prominent and readily identifiable religious groups existing in the community. These specific religious groups are made up of individuals who participate to different degrees in these religious affiliation(s). For instance, a Catholic-Traditionalist may prefer non-institutionalized practices to routine church services, or conversely, may prefer regular church services over prayer circles.

who have rejected the Catholic Church on the basis of philosophical, ontological and epistemological differences, others voice opposition to the Church for personal reasons. For instance, some former students of the residential schools claim that the emotional, sexual and physical abuse received while at the schools makes it difficult for them to remain members of the Catholic faith.

Throughout this thesis I have outlined the distinctive features of Mi'kmaw Catholicism in particular, and I have sought to draw attention to the complexity and diversity of Mi'kmaw religion more generally. In addition, I have addressed the tensions between conservative, moderate and rejectionist views of Mi'kmaw Catholicism. In the introductory chapter, I presented the main foci of my thesis and introduced several Mi'kmaw people whose voices express key aspects of Mi'kmaw Catholicism, Catholic-Traditionalism and neo-Traditionalism. Chapter Two delineated Mi'kmaw life-worlds and lifeways and offered a number of perspectives on the Mi'kmaw ethos as it is understood by devotees of Catholicism, Catholic-Traditionalism and non-Catholic religious orientations. Chapter Three centered on Mi'kmaw perceptions of the Catholic Church and the role of the Church within Mi'kmaw society. In Chapter Four the significance of St. Anne, *Se'tta'newimk* (St. Anne's Mission) and Potlotek for the Mi'kmaw people is discussed. Chapter Five explored approaches to death and dying in Eskasoni and other Native communities throughout Mi'kma'ki with specific emphasis on the *salite* and funeral feast as central features of local Mi'kmaw funerary practice. The penultimate chapter is primarily concerned with neo-Traditionalism as a religious choice, and presents diverse responses to that choice within the

Mi'kmaw community at large.

In this thesis, I have paid particular attention to the transformative effects of cross-cultural exchange on religious beliefs and expressions. These findings contribute to theoretical perspectives which resist the notion that Indigenous peoples are “presumed to be *either* primitive and untouched, *or* contaminated by progress” (Clifford 1997:157). Commenting on the Wahgi of Papua New Guinea,<sup>5</sup> James Clifford observes that the Wahgi are “both tribal and modern, local and worldly. They cannot be seen as inhabitants of an enclosed space, either past or present, a paradise lost or preserved” (Clifford 1997:157). In the Mi'kmaw case, as with the Wahgi, “we are thrown into the midst of transformations” in which present-day realities cannot be “portrayed on a before/after axis, with a ‘traditional’ baseline preceding the arrival of ‘outside’ influences” (Clifford 1997:154). Instead, we are faced with “hybrid productions” wherein perceived “pre-contact” artifacts, motifs and rituals interact with those of the present (Clifford 1997:154-157).

In the introductory chapter I draw attention to the fact that, in the Mi'kmaw case, rigid boundaries between Western and non-Western frameworks of meaning and significance cannot be sustained--all boundaries, either real or imagined, are permeable. Presently, modern communication devices such as satellite dishes, motor vehicles, televisions and internet connections are availed of by many Mi'kmaq. However, in the midst of all that is modern, there is also a perceived need to establish and maintain a certain amount of community insularity, whereby the

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<sup>5</sup>Clifford's observations are based on a Wahgi exhibit at the Museum of Man, London, England.

community becomes a crucible for the preservation of Aboriginal culture and society. Writing about the Mi'kmaq in the mid 1980's, anthropologist Tord Larsen remarks that:

Indians employ elements in their universe—among other things, elements of their aboriginal culture, the history of Indian/White relations, the ways in which they see themselves different from whites—in order to construct a statement which is intended to make whites see things differently. In doing so, Indians give new import to old facts, juxtapose ideas that have not been related previously and endow forgotten events with new significance (Larsen 1983:39).

However, the “elements” of which Larsen speaks are not necessarily confined to “authentic” aspects of a pre-contact Mi'kmaw “universe.” Instead, these elements are prone to the “processes of selective appropriation and change” (Clifford 1997:152-153) and may be drawn from a plethora of diachronic artifacts, motifs and occasions. For instance, my research clearly shows the ways in which multiple and simultaneous influences of two divergent, but apparently reconcilable, religious orientations appear in hybridized forms. For instance, Eva, a middle-aged Catholic woman, claims that the Mi'kmaq were “a nation of cross-bearers” prior to contact, and had an awareness of Jesus and the Christian God. Eva is careful to point out that by following Christianity the Mi'kmaq are not abandoning “authentic” Mi'kmaw beliefs, but, in fact, are preserving them.

Beginning in the 1960's, a cultural renaissance has ushered in changes that have prompted renewed pride and interest in Mi'kmaw language, culture and history. However, with this period of revitalization a number of contentious issues have arisen relating to notions of identity and authenticity. In Eskasoni, and throughout Mi'kma'ki, conflicts arising from different perceptions of the role of the Catholic Church are symptomatic of the ongoing process of (re)constructing national

and personal identities.

Throughout this dissertation, the role of religion as it pertains to constructing Mi'kmaw identity is emphasized, primarily because religious and spiritual views help shape subjectivity and the social environment. Within Mi'kmaw society and culture specific religious orientations and their respective ideologies and expressions both shape and are shaped by personal and social identities. The reciprocal nature of this relationship between religious affiliation(s) and individual and collective identities is evident in the varied and highly nuanced perceptions of culture, spirituality and religion found within Mi'kmaw society.

For some Mi'kmaq, spirituality finds its expression in the lived immediacy of day-to-day existence which may, or may not, include religious observances. For instance, Jonal, introduced in Chapter Two, claims that,

You can be spiritual without being religious...spirituality is how you live your life and religion is just one way of making contact [with] or praying to the Creator. You can be spiritual without being religious You really don't need religion, but spirituality is a completely different matter. You must be able to strike a balance between mind, spirit and body and too much of any one is no good...I go to church...because it is part of my upbringing and there are good points to the church (Fieldnotes, Book I:199).

Clearly, for Jonal, spirituality is closely aligned with a society's ethos, whereas religion is not. Jonal's conditional acceptance of the Church rests on its pragmatic function within Mi'kmaw society, but he does not see it as being a necessary part of spirituality. Spirituality, for Jonal, is essentially a means through which the balance between "mind, spirit and body" is maintained. However, among Mi'kmaw Catholic conservatives, spirituality is perceived differently and is often

equated with religion and culture. As Chapter Two illustrates, many devout Mi'kmaw Catholics view Catholicism as an institution that helped to preserve and protect Mi'kmaw culture during a period when the Mi'kmaw people and their way of life were under serious threat. However, this particular view is vehemently opposed by those who are critical of Catholicism and who claim that the Church, as an institution, enacted "culturicide" on the Mi'kmaq by subverting original Mi'kmaw beliefs and values and replacing them with conceptions of the world that are alien to the "true Mi'kmaw mind."

Anti-Catholic arguments, like those proposed by Bern and Tanas in Chapter Two, suggest that the Catholic Church has historically promoted and continues to promote a worldview and ethos that is inimical to pre-contact Mi'kmaw beliefs and values. Arguments for the primacy of language in revitalizing authentic Mi'kmaw systems of thought and expression, free from Western bias, claim that etymological analysis of the Mi'kmaw language can uncover seminal pre-contact beliefs and values. The particular discourse about identity shared by Bern and Tanas suggests that the very structure of the Mi'kmaw language provides insight into Mi'kmaw lifeworlds and life-ways. Bern maintains that Mi'kmaw culture and society is firmly embedded within a language which is characteristically fluid and adaptable. Because the Mi'kmaw language is verb-based, he argues, it exhibits a flexibility that can readily accommodate change, and thereby reflects the Mi'kmaw understanding that the universe is active and ever-changing. This fluidity and adaptability also conveys a particular cosmology along with the spiritual philosophies and patterns of socialization that emerge from such a view. According to Bern and Tanas, this view runs counter to the teachings



of the Roman Catholic Church which rely on “nounified” conceptions of God, creation and the universe. Clearly, those who consider Catholicism a threat to Mi’kmaq autonomy and identity fear their culture and society will be so eroded by Western influences that the Mi’kmaq will lose their distinctiveness as a group.

The ongoing process of negotiating identity and establishing autonomy is not restricted to the Mi’kmaq of Nova Scotia. Rather, it is a common experience for the majority of Native Americans. Clifford points out that, in the case of the Wampanoag Natives of Mashpee, Massachusetts, who sought through a lengthy court case to validate their legal status as a “tribe,”<sup>6</sup> the process of documenting “certain underlying structures governing the recognition of identity and difference” was really an “experiment in translation, part of a long historical conflict and negotiation of ‘Indian’ and ‘American’ identities” (Clifford 1988:289). As Clifford documents, the court’s insistence that the key factors of race, territory, community and leadership must be continuously present (Clifford 1988:333-334) to legitimate Wampanoag claims is an externally imposed constraint that undermines Wampanoag autonomy and identity, and endorses the notion that “Native American societies” cannot “by definition be dynamic, inventive, or expansive” (Clifford

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<sup>6</sup>Clifford offers a detailed description and critical commentary on the legal suit launched by the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council, Inc. against the U.S. federal court for a tract of land constituting 16, 000 acres in the town of Mashpee, Massachusetts. This law suit resulted in an unprecedented trial “whose purpose was not to settle the question of land ownership but rather to determine whether or not the group calling themselves the Mashpee Tribe was in fact an Indian tribe, and the same tribe that in the mid-nineteenth century had lost its lands through a series of contested legislative acts” (Clifford 1988:277-346).

1988:284). Because Mashpee Natives do not follow specific codes of dress and behavior which are consistent with non-Native stereotypes of “Indianness” Wampanoag identity is questioned at a fundamental level. Further to this point, the court demanded that Mashpee Natives conform their political, social and cultural identity to a narrow prescription of “Indianness,” as defined by the court.

Paradoxically, the essentialist views that Clifford attributes to dominant North American culture bear close similarities to the perspective of those Mi’kmaq who wish to discredit Catholic influences in order to revitalize “authentic” Mi’kmaq culture and society. The positivist politics of identity which emerge in both the non-Native enterprise of distinguishing between “Them” and “Us” (Fabian 1983) and in the Mi’kmaq project of reestablishing integrity, autonomy and culture become manifest in identity characteristics that are deemed to be socially and culturally distinctive. For instance, the performance genre of the powwow, while not originally Mi’kmaq, does involve a specific style and content that is definitively non-Western, and as such is often recognized and mistakenly understood by many non-Natives (and some Natives) as a typical Native religio-cultural performance. Although some Mi’kmaq are actively involved in promoting and performing in the powwow, most Mi’kmaq look upon the occasion as a form of entertainment. Generally, the majority of Mi’kmaq recognize that the dominant society’s views of the Mi’kmaq people are cast in terms of stereotypes broadly attributed to Natives which show little regard for regional, cultural and social variations between Aboriginal groups. The Mi’kmaq who wish to revitalize “authentic” Mi’kmaq culture and society are specifically concerned with establishing Mi’kmaq distinctiveness

from all other groups, both Native and non-Native. However, most Mi'kmaq, whether Catholic, Catholic-Traditionalist or neo-Traditionalist agree that the type of pan-Indianism promoted by occasions such as the powwow has little to offer in terms of (re)establishing distinctively authentic Mi'kmaw beliefs and values.

In contrast to the Wampanoag case, among the Mi'kmaq, discussions relating to the constitution of authentic Mi'kmaw identity are internally generated. As mentioned, many non-Natives hold stereotypical views about Aboriginals which ignore the heterogeneity of Aboriginal culture and society. Moreover, discussions about authentic versus inauthentic Mi'kmaw constructions of identity take place primarily with reference to ongoing dialogues and negotiations among the Mi'kmaw people themselves rather than with representatives from "mainstream" North American society. For many Mi'kmaq, debates on issues of autonomy and identity revolve around perceptions of the manner in which religion has transformed "authentic" Mi'kmaw beliefs and values. On the one hand, among Mi'kmaw Catholics, the Church is seen as a vehicle for the transmission of aboriginal culture and as an institution which, historically, has granted power and autonomy to the Mi'kmaw people. On the other hand, however, the power structure introduced by the Church and adopted by the Mi'kmaw people (as witnessed in the role of the *Sante' Mawio'mi*)<sup>7</sup> is seen by critics of Catholicism as an institution that reinforces unwarranted social and cultural change. Critics of Catholicism, including some Mi'kmaw Catholics and Catholic-

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<sup>7</sup>Refer to references and notes in Chapter One, pp. 18-19.

Traditionalists, voice disapproval of the “Westernized” structure of the council. A number of Mi’kmaq assert that the original form of the Grand Council emphasized the equality of all Mi’kmaq people. However, in its revised role in partnership with the Catholic Church it has adopted aspects of the hierarchical structure of the Church and does not give fair representation to all Mi’kmaq people, especially women, non-Catholics, non-Christians and neo-Traditionalists. Therefore, the *Sante’ Mawio’mi* is perceived by some Mi’kmaq as an elitist group that, in conjunction with the structures of power and authority ceded through the Catholic Church, serves to undermine Mi’kmaq society and culture. Moreover, for many non-Catholic Mi’kmaq, the introduction of Roman Catholic hierarchical structures into Mi’kmaq society is considered antithetic to Mi’kmaq autonomy, and to the principles of equality inherent in Mi’kmaq cosmology, philosophy and socialization processes.

Adaptability and fluidity as features of “authentic” Mi’kmaq ethos and language are also reflected in the process through which aspects of Catholicism and neo-Traditionalism are recontextualized and transformed. This is particularly evident among Catholic-Traditionalists who integrate elements from one set of rituals and beliefs with those drawn from another set. Catholic-Traditionalism is a highly innovative and individualistic religious orientation in which diverse and competing religious discourses are accommodated in a multiplicity of forms. Essentially, Catholic-Traditionalists participate in combinations of neo-Traditionalist and Mi’kmaq Catholic practices of their own choosing. For example, Piel, introduced in Chapter One, is a Mi’kmaq man who identifies prayer in the four directions with “praying the [Christian] cross.” For Piel, Native practices

are only made meaningful within a Christian context. Conversely, in Eskasoni, use of the referent “our Creator” to substitute for “God” or “Father,” can be construed as the interpretation of a Christian concept within a neo-Traditionalist framework.

In the majority of cases, any given Mi’kmaq religious expression cannot be pigeon holed into the neat analytical categories of either a Catholic or a neo-Traditional frame of reference. Rather, practices must be understood as hybridized forms involving each of these two foundational systems, as exemplified in one of the most religiously complex and socially significant occasions in the Mi’kmaq calendar, the annual *Se’tta’newimk* (St. Anne’s Mission) at Potlotek. This is one event that most Mi’kmaq, regardless of religious affiliation, attempt to attend. Although *Se’tta’newimk* is often perceived as a religious event, to refer to it exclusively as such obscures the multiplicity of reasons that motivate participation in the gathering. People attend *Se’tta’newimk* for a combination of purposes which may include the veneration of St. Anne, offering prayers to St. Anne for special favours, showing respect for present and past ancestral traditions, or community bonding and socialization.

As noted in Chapter Four, attendance at the Potlotek gathering has a dual aspect from which different definitions of sacredness are derived, and which has given rise to conflicts between Catholic and non-Catholic Mi’kmaq. On the one hand, because Potlotek is widely recognized as a pre-contact annual gathering site, pilgrimage to the island can be viewed as a form of “persistent peregrination” (Morinis 1992). That is, travel to Potlotek is seen as an enactment of, and a statement of respect for, long-standing Mi’kmaq religious traditions and patterns of socialization

that are understood to have their origins outside of Mi'kmaw Catholicism. On the other hand, the performance of St. Anne's Day observances and rituals is considered by many Catholic Mi'kmaq and Catholic Traditionalists as maintaining legitimate ancestral religious traditions.

Culturally, *Se'tta'newimk* and Potlotek retain meaning and significance for the Mi'kmaw people on a number of levels. As mentioned, Potlotek is historically relevant and traditionally meaningful because, purportedly, it has continuously operated as a Mi'kmaw gathering site since the pre-contact era. In addition, although many of the religious observances performed during *Se'tta'newimk* were introduced by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church,<sup>8</sup> the fact that most of the liturgies, hymns and prayers are said in the Mi'kmaw language is a culturally significant marker of identity.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, specific rituals associated with the Mission, including *Lapa'tko'tewimk*, the annual Grand Council meeting and public address, the bathing of St. Anne's statue and the dispensing of blessed cloth are understood by the Mi'kmaw people to be practices unique to *Se'tta'newimk*.

The occasion of *Se'tta'newimk* is also a time when the Mi'kmaw people come together

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<sup>8</sup>Many of the ritual observances performed at *Se'tta'newimk* in honor of St. Anne are consistent with similar types of celebrations found throughout North America and Europe because a number of these celebrations are arguably local, a- or pre- Christian in origin (Refer to Badone et al.1990).

<sup>9</sup>For those Mi'kmaq who reside outside Mi'kmaki or on reserves where English is the *lingua franca*, *Se'tta'newimk* may be the only time during the year that many Mi'kmaq hear their language so widely spoken. It may also one of the few occasions when a large group of Mi'kmaq are publically addressed in the Mi'kmaw language.

to discuss matters of political and social importance.<sup>10</sup> Although, political, economic and social issues are not central to *Se'tta'newimk* celebrations, such matters are commented on and discussed formally in Grand Council meetings, and informally on a social level. The multidimensional aspect of St. Anne's Mission contributes to its status as an important event for most Mi'kmaq. At Potlotek itself, there is also a tangible sense that the various political, religious and personal conflicts about the significance of the annual gathering, and about issues of identity, authority and authenticity, are neutralized on the island by the sense of *communitas* encouraged within the ritual context of the occasion.

The death of a community member<sup>11</sup> constitutes another notable social context in which political, religious and personal differences are held in abeyance. Among the Mi'kmaw people, locally held funeral feasts and *salites* parallel *Se'tta'newimk* celebrations in that the occasion of death is a time when social and familial relationships are highlighted. While many aspects of Mi'kmaw deathways involve rituals based in Roman Catholicism, community solidarity and the offer of "food and friendship" are also at the centre of Mi'kmaw funerary observances. As observed in Chapter Five, there are several overarching social, cultural and religious factors

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<sup>10</sup>At the annual meeting of the Grand Council many political, social and economic concerns are taken up, but these meetings are closed to the general public. Individual concerns brought to the attention of district *Keptins* are discussed at council meetings by the *Keptins* and other Grand Council officials. It is believed that prior to the arrival of resident priests and the election of Band Councils, Mi'kmaw assemblies of district and local chiefs served to address political and social concerns, such as "[m]atters of treaties and alliances, trade, births, deaths, marriages and the general welfare of the people..." (McMillan 1996:40).

<sup>11</sup>Or, as noted in Chapter Five, p. 142, upon the death of a non-Native person who made exceptional contributions to Mi'kmaw society.

informing Mi'kmaw deathways that mitigate against the overt contestation of funerary rituals.<sup>12</sup> More so than at *Se'tta'newimk*, there is general agreement that differences between individuals, families and social factions are to be overlooked in the event of death. Among the Mi'kmaq there is the expectation that community members, regardless of age, socio-economic status, political stripe, or religious affiliation will attend local wakes, *salites* and funeral feasts, and with very few exceptions this expectation is met.<sup>13</sup>

In Eskasoni, the profound emotions associated with bereavement are mediated through the post-interment ceremonies of the *salite* and funeral feast. Essentially, the performance of post-interment ceremonies is an attempt on the part of the community to provide emotional, spiritual and practical support to the family and friends of the deceased. The communal feast and auction (*salite*) are occasions perceived as a means of collectively “healing” a community of mourners. Of all Mi'kmaw events, post-interment gatherings and *Se'tta'newimk* are considered by community members to be among the most expressive of Mi'kmaw beliefs and values. For most Mi'kmaq, these occasions, although formally linked to Catholicism, derive their significance and meaning from non-Christian contexts which are believed to have their genesis in pre-contact ritual observances,

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<sup>12</sup>In Chapter Five I noted that funerals are rarely, if ever, loci of dispute among members of different religious groups for several reasons: first, most Mi'kmaq have been baptized into the Catholic church and are entitled to a Catholic burial; and, in many cases, the immediate and extended families of many neo-Traditionalists, and others who have left the Catholic church, maintain close ties to the Catholic faith. Typically, funeral arrangements are made and carried out in compliance with the wishes of surviving family members. Refer to Chapter Five, p.150.

<sup>13</sup>The fact that many friends and family members travel long distances to attend *salites*, funerals and wakes attests to the social significance of participation in funerary rituals.



and as such are believed to represent “authentic” Mi’kmaw culture and social organization.

In describing Mi’kmaw deathways I have also drawn attention to several terms, concepts and understandings including *apiksiktatimk* (an act of mutual forgiveness); “letting the spirit go”; Mi’kmaw distinctions between spirit and soul; Mi’kmaw understandings of sin; and Mi’kmaw concepts of the after-life.

The local practices of *apiksiktatimk*, and “letting the spirit go” take place during the dying process, and help to promote the emotional well-being of survivors and the dying person. For survivors, *apiksiktatimk* relieves feelings of remorse and acrimony. For the deceased, the acts of mutual forgiveness and “letting the spirit go” have a similar function: they facilitate the transition of the deceased’s spirit into the after-life free of personal burdens, and unencumbered by the grief of surviving family members and friends.

It is also noteworthy that many Mi’kmaq understand the concept of death, or *nept* as moving into a different state of being which is not necessarily permanent.<sup>14</sup> Conceptually, *nept* is best understood as dormancy, or a state of existence inconsistent with life as we know it. Many Mi’kmaq also believe that it is possible to maintain communication with the dead in both the temporal and other-worldly realms of existence. Much like invocations to St. Anne, many Mi’kmaw Catholics, neo-Traditionalists and Catholic-Traditionalists appeal to deceased family members and friends for assistance in personal matters and in healing. And, like St. Anne, the deceased are believed to respond to the requests of the living. Interestingly, it is the “spirits,” not

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<sup>14</sup>See Chapter Five, pp.166-168.

the “souls” of deceased ancestors that commune with the living, suggesting that, for the Mi’kmaq, there is a clear distinction between the concept of soul and spirit.

The nuanced understandings of spirit and soul as they are conceptualized in Mi’kmaq society share commonalities with the Nunamiut notion of soul (*inua*). Daniel Merkur observes that, among the Nunamiut, *inua* has a dual aspect: it can mean an in-dweller in nature or life-force, or can be used to refer to the postmortem soul, or name-soul (Merkur 1991:6-7). The Mi’kmaq concept of spirit is akin to the understanding of in-dweller, whereas the name-soul is more in line with the Mi’kmaq concept of soul.

Also discussed in Chapter Five is the notion of sin as it is understood by many Mi’kmaq. For most Mi’kmaq, “sin” is not so much an act against “God”/our Creator as it is a reflection of personal failings and/or a transgression against others. In most cases, the person who acts irresponsibly (or “sins”) is as adversely affected as the person or persons “sinned” against. Part of the Mi’kmaq socialization process includes reinforcing the idea that individuals are free agents who must bear responsibility for their actions. Interestingly, most behaviours deemed inappropriate within Mi’kmaq society tend to coincide with transgressions of the biblical “Ten Commandments.” However, many Mi’kmaq argue that basic pre-contact Mi’kmaq beliefs and values render the “Commandments” redundant teachings.

Although many pro-Catholic Mi’kmaq emphasize commonalities between Roman Catholicism and pre-contact beliefs and values, anti-Catholic Mi’kmaq accentuate the differences between these two orientations. At base, the respective arguments for or against the legitimacy of neo-Traditionalism and/or Mi’kmaq Catholicism ultimately rest on claims of authenticity. As

mentioned, most Mi'kmaw Catholics and Catholic-Traditionalists hold that Mi'kmaw Catholicism is a legitimate Mi'kmaw tradition. Conversely, many non-Catholic Mi'kmaq counter this claim by insisting that "authentic" Mi'kmaw practices and beliefs are drawn from traditions that originate within a pre-Christian past.

Among the Eskasoni Mi'kmaq, the dominant discourse on issues of religious validity promotes the primacy of Catholicism and embraces an anti-"Traditionalist" rhetoric. In Chapter Five, I provided a number of possible explanations for the negative assessment of neo-Traditionalism in the community. First, Mi'kmaw Catholics and Catholic-Traditionalists, the principal religious groups in the community, tend to view "Traditionalism" not as a religion, but as a form of "spirituality." Second, throughout North America, the persistence of negative colonial attitudes continues to desacralize pre-contact religions, contributing to their continued marginalization even within the Native communities in which they are practiced. Third, some Mi'kmaq view the move toward neo-Traditionalism as a contravention of commonly accepted Mi'kmaw social and cultural conventions, including appropriate life-style choices.

The contested ground of authentic as opposed to inauthentic Mi'kmaw religious expression is simply one dimension of the relationship between Christian and non-Western religious beliefs and values as they are articulated and experienced among the Mi'kmaq of Eskasoni. As noted throughout this dissertation, Mi'kmaw religion is a diverse and complex phenomenon through which various cultural, political, spiritual and existential concerns (which are not necessarily at variance) are mediated.

While the research materials used in this thesis are based on my own fieldwork enquiries,

the work of previous scholars informs my analysis of the data collected in the field. The following discussion contextualizes the contributions my work may make to the study of Native American religion, hybridized forms of religious expression, “local” religious practices, and the influence of the colonial encounter on Mi’kmaw religion.

Generally, this ethnography adds to our knowledge base about religions in Canada, and more specifically, it contributes to the growing field of scholarly literature on Native American religion. In the latter part of the twentieth century, studies of Native American religion, notably by Alan Morinis (1992) and Kenneth Morrison (1981, 1990), have advanced the notion that rather than being passive recipients, Native Americans have influenced the ways in which Western ideologies and institutions have been accepted into Native social contexts. Alan Morinis observes that, among the Plains Indians, the practice of sacred journeying (or pilgrimage) has been continually enacted “through eras of cultural and social upheaval” (Morinis 1992:101). Morinis notes that, although recent contexts for pilgrimage centre on Christian shrines, ritual gathering has always been “an important feature of [Plains] cultural tradition” (Morinis 1992:111). Likewise, in his study of seventeenth-century Montagnais religion, ethnohistorian Kenneth Morrison (1990) maintains that, although the seventeenth-century Montagnais accepted Catholicism, they did so within the context of traditional religious understandings. Morrison concludes that by innovatively combining key aspects of traditional religion and Jesuit teachings, the Montagnais accommodated Euro-American religious ideologies and practices while maintaining their own values and perceptual orientations (Morrison 1990:418). Morinis and Morrison offer critical perspectives that help to elucidate the ways in which Native North American religions have emerged. The Mi’kmaw voices that appear

throughout this dissertation and the complexity and diversity of Mi'kmaw religion that I have presented further substantiate the idea that, rather than being a people who were "acted upon", Aboriginal peoples have always actively negotiated the social, cultural and religious aspects of their lives. Moreover, this study also promotes the idea that the "perceptual, cognitive, and value orientations" (Morrison 1981:257) of Native peoples did not systematically disappear, but are foundational, at least in part, to the existing and emergent traditions initiated by the colonial encounter.

Moreover, following, among others, James Axtell's work on the "contest of cultures" in colonial North America (1985), Jean and John Comaroff's treatment of the impact of Christian missionization on the Tshidi of South Africa (1990), Åke Hulkrantz's commentary on northern Algonkian eschatology (1979), and Sergei Kan's studies of the Tlingit of Alaska (1985, 1991), this ethnography draws on, and contributes to, a field of research that reinterprets the role of Aboriginal peoples in situations of colonial encounter. My research indicates that, as with many Indigenous religious systems (See Goulet 1982; Gualteri 1984; Morinis 1992; Morrison 1981, 1990), the colonial encounter has had a remarkable and irrevocable influence on Mi'kmaw religious expression. As social phenomena, Mi'kmaw religious beliefs and expressions speak to the social-cultural milieux from which they emerge, often appearing as hybridized forms of Roman Catholicism and Indigenous knowledge. Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated the ways in which diverse personal and collective religious practices act as media through which multiple interpretations of Mi'kmaw culture and society are articulated and evaluated.

This dissertation also draws on the work of anthropologists studying the interaction between

forms of popular and official religion. Scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod (1993a), Caroline Brettell (1990) and William Christian (1981a, 1985, 1996) suggest that ongoing conflicts between the religious experiences of ordinary people and the religious practices sanctioned by officials of religious institutions are relatively common. Writing about the Islamic case, Abu-Lughod observes that historically, scholars have tended to devalue local religious practices by drawing distinctions between “popular and orthodox religion, local and universal belief and practice...or, in the worst case, between ignorance and the knowledge of true religion” (Abu-Lughod 1993a:189). She states further that anthropologists are astutely aware of these distinctions and normative claims and now examine “without judgement the interaction of the complex of practices” which make up religious contexts (Abu-Lughod 1993a:189). Similarly, William Christian comments that in order to understand the intricacies and complexities of contemporary Catholic practice, it is necessary to understand the distinctions between “religion as practised” and “religion as prescribed” (formal church dogma) as they exist in local contexts (Christian 1981a). Much of Christian’s work is concerned with the ways in which the religion of the people is at variance with official Catholic Church teachings (Christian 1981a, 1985, 1996). From a slightly different vantage point, Caroline Brettell recognizes that the rootedness of local Catholic practice is “such that manifestations of religious practice (embodying both belief and behavior) are neither of the orthodox institution (represented by its priests) nor totally of the people. They are, more often than not, an accommodation between the two” (Brettell 1990:55-56). In line with these perspectives, I argue that many of the devotional observances and occasions discussed in this thesis depart from mainstream Catholic traditions and are more in keeping with “local” Mi’kmaw religious expression.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to deal with the key phenomenological and theoretical aspects of Mi'kmaw religious beliefs and expression as they have been presented to me and as I understand them. Although most dissertations strive to be as comprehensive as possible, research invariably uncovers areas of study beyond the scope of the research project. Some suggestions for future avenues of study are offered below.

Of necessity, my study has concentrated on "local" religion and has not dealt with Aboriginal religion on a North American level, nor does it offer an in-depth comparison of Mi'kmaw Catholicism with hybridized forms of Indigenous religion in global contexts. A more elaborate examination of hybridized forms of Native religious expression in Canada, and abroad, would require resources beyond the scope of this present work. However, illuminating comparisons can be drawn between contemporary Mi'kmaw religious expressions and those of other groups throughout the Americas, Africa and Asia where colonial encounters have impacted upon existing pre-contact philosophical, ideological and institutional structures (Abu-Lughod 1993; Kan 1991; Stirrat 1992).

Throughout this dissertation I have discussed several historical, political, social, and cultural claims for religious preferences among the Mi'kmaq. However, I have been unable to exhaustively explore seminal aspects of the rise of neo-Traditionalism throughout Mi'kma'ki. As mentioned in Chapter Six, "Traditionalism," or neo-Traditionalism, is becoming increasingly popular within Mi'kmaw society at large and is indicative of similar local movements throughout North American Native communities.

Finally, I would also like to mention another key area for research that I feel has considerable potential. While discussing religious practices I was struck by respondents' numerous references to

“healing” and the multiple levels of meaning that the Mi’kmaq associate with this term. For many Mi’kmaq, causes and forms of “illness” and concepts of “healing” do not fit neatly into the restrictive categories of Western biomedical models, but are better understood in holistic terms. Mi’kmaq notions of illness and healing cannot be understood without taking into consideration a number of political, cultural, sociological and especially spiritual perspectives.

In closing, I would like to re-introduce Piel, a middle-aged Mi’kmaq man who considers himself a Catholic-Traditionalist. Piel insists that although he has respect for, and a strong devotion to Catholicism, he also sees “value in material and traditional things” (Fieldnotes, Book IV:803). Piel is very active in church administration at the local level and regularly attends Catholic functions. However, Piel is also a pipe-carrier who is often called upon to perform “Traditional” ceremonies in the Catholic Church and at other formal and informal functions.

Piel maintains that his devotion to the Catholic faith does not detract from his respect for non-Christian Mi’kmaq traditions, but actually enhances their significance and meaning. Piel’s “selective appropriation” of diachronic elements of religious meaning and expression reconciles Catholicism with non-Christian beliefs and practices. For instance, Piel associates prayer in the four directions with the Christian Cross. He also suggests that Catholicism is an important and necessary factor in maintaining a balance between spirituality, material goods and tradition.

When I asked Piel about his views on neo-Traditionalism, he commented,

...I can see why people become fanatics about their traditional culture. I’m a Traditionalist, but I’m not a fanatic. I try to strike a balance between culture, religion, and the material aspect [of culture]. I have all three...Our people have prayed and meditated for thousands



of years and we had our colours and the cross. When you think about it, when you bless yourself you pray in the four directions. We are a very spiritual people. Many times others [non-Natives] ask us to pray for them because [they think] our prayers are stronger, and in a way they are—we've been praying longer... I support the Church, but material things and traditions are also important... My people are like the salmon going up river to spawn... The river has changed, and the salmon are confused and disoriented. It is ingrained in the salmon to return to certain red [spawning] areas, but if the environment is changed, they can't return there because they are confused... Our people are like the salmon. We are attached to the earth and a certain way of life. It is ingrained in us just like the salmon, but things interfere with this ... We can't go back five hundred years, we have to adapt to what exists... We really can't go back. (Fieldnotes, Book IV:801-803).

Although Piel's analogy evokes an image of the Mi'kmaq as a displaced, "confused and disoriented" people, his key message is not one of loss and despair. Rather, it is one of hope and possibility. Like Piel, most Mi'kmaq consciously aware that they "really can't go back," that the past can never be faithfully recovered. Nevertheless, most Mi'kmaq also have faith that a confluence of the past and the present continues to flow into newly recreated "ways of believing."

Appendix 1:

Tord Larsen's outline of the "Chapel Island Festival" (Larsen 1983:113-114).

**Friday, July 26:**

- 7 p.m. Traditional crossing to Chapel Island by canoe. Flag Raising Ceremonies (accompanied by Eskasoni Players, a guitar band from Eskasoni).
- 8 p.m. Church services (Mass).
- 9 p.m. Registrations close for entering competitions in waltzes, jigging, canoe races, and Princess Pageant.
- 9:30 p.m. Waltzes competitions (on stage).

**Saturday, July 27:**

- 9 a.m. Waltzes competitions and canoe races.
- 11 a.m. Church services (Mass).
- 2 p.m. Edgiuiguom (Grand Wigwam Ceremonies, with Eskasoni Players).
- 3 p.m. Waltzes competitions and canoe races.
- 6 p.m. Princess competitions (judging).
- 7 p.m. Church services (Mass).
- 8 p.m. Traditional dancing, songs and games.

**Sunday, July 28:**

- 9 a.m. Church services (Mass).
- 11 a.m. Church services (Mass).
- 12 noon Micmac competition (Princess, judging).
- 1:30 p.m. Church services (outdoor Mass).
- 2 p.m. Procession of St. Anne.
- 3 p.m. Kissing of the relic.
- 4 p.m. Crowning ceremonies of Indian Princess Micmac
- 5 p.m. Traditional dancing and jigging competition.
- 7 p.m. Church services (prayers for the sick).

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8 p.m. Canoe finals.

9 p.m. Waltzes finals.

**Monday, July 29:**

- 9 a.m. Church services (Mass).
- 10 a.m. Stations of the Cross.

Appendix 2:

Copy of Schedule of Events for *Se'tt'anewimk* 1999.

**Santeoi' Mawiomi Schedule  
July 29<sup>th</sup> to August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1999  
St. Anne's Mission, Potlotek, N.S.**

Thursday, July 29, 1999

12:00 noon-Migamaoi Gtapeiagan, Nepsatonetj oli Mtaoegen: singing and raising of the Mi'kmaq Grand Council Flag near the church.

5:30 to 6:30 PM: There will be Confessions before mass and the Holy Rosary recited before St. Anne.

6:30 Evening Mass: Mission priest will explain the meaning of mission, schedule and guidelines.

Friday, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1999

9:00 AM: Volunteer for the garbage pick up near the church grounds.

10:00-11:00 AM Confessions and Holy Rosary recited before St. Anne

11:00 Morning Mass for the children and youth.

5:30-6:30: Confessions and Holy Rosary recited before St. Anne

6:30: Evening Mass

Saturday, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999

9:00 AM - Volunteer for the garbage pick up near the church grounds.

2:00 PM- The priest will give a blessing of all the woman who have given birth to children followed by the preparation of the statue of St. Anne.

5:30 PM to 6:30 PM.-Confessions and Holy Rosary recited before St. Anne.

6:30 Evening Mass.-Invocations for the sick. There will be a Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and it will be exposed for an hour.

Sunday, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999 St. Anne's Day

9:00 AM-Volunteer for the garbage pick up near the church grounds.

11: 00 AM-General Absolution Service for the Sacrament of Penance.

2:00 PM.-St. Anne's Feast Day with the blessing of the bread and followed by High Mass (Mesgig Alames) with the Induction of the new Keptin(s).

Procession of St. Anne (Elemeg)

*Getapegiemgeoel: O Sapeoin Ana, O Mali, Mailen aqq Mali, Sent Ann Alastomelseoin, etc...*

Kji-Sagamaw Ben Sylliboy welcomes everyone and introduces the guests then Kji-Keptin Alex Denny speaks. (Gelusit)

Invocations of Ste. Anne at the church with the Veneration of the Relic of Ste. Anne and Grand Chief's medal.

5:00 PM. Grand Council Meeting

Monday, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1999

11:00 AM-Morning Mass followed by the Way of the Cross (Glotjeioie Aogtigtog)

The Prayers for the Living and the Dead - please give names to Natalie Stevens.

*Getapegiegmgeol: O Sosep-aposigigen, Gemetginag and etc..*

\*There will be a restricted area with volunteer supervision for all the children for safety reasons on the south east side of the island between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. daily.

\*There will be an area for the people who wish to play horseshoes on the island between 2:00 and 4:00 p.m. daily.

\*There will be *Waltres aqq A'tukaqnn* every evening between 7:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. daily.

\*There will be Bingo daily in the afternoon. Times will vary and will be announced on the island.

\*There will be Kareoke on Sunday Night at the stage area.

Mission Rules

We wish you to please observe the following rules:

1. No Alcoholic beverages or drug abuse will be allowed on the island. Anyone known to be in possession of either will immediately be removed from the island.

2. At 10:30 p.m. all radios, CD/Tape recorders and ghetto-blasters must be turned down to an acceptable level so that elders and children can get some rest. If not turned down, they will be stored until the mission is over. Any children from the age of 10 and under will have to be in their tents or cabins unless accompanied by their parent(s) or guardian(s).

3. At 12 a.m. or midnight, "Quiet Time" starts on the island. Anybody from the ages of 12 and under must be in their tents or cabins.

4. Very important! During religious services such as masses, processions, etc., all canteen outlets will be closed and may re-open only after the services are finished.

5. Anyone causing a disturbance will be removed from the island.

6. There will be no over-charging by the ferry operators during the mission. Official ferry operators will be recognized by a colored Mi'kmaq Grand Council flag on their boats. We recommend the bigger boats because they are usually the safer and also have permits.

**Attention ferry boat operators!!** Please help the security and police by not allowing anyone on your boats who is under the influence of alcohol and drugs, no matter how much is being

offered.

7. There will be no tents beyond the point of the stage, not even in the woods.]

These guidelines should be followed accordingly, so that the mission will be successful and enjoyable to all. Any person who is considers the mission to be a picnic should remain off the island until the mission is over. The Island is a sacred place and a mission is a time of reflection, friendship and prayer.

Security services will be provided by volunteer security who will be wearing white jackets, and the Unama'ki Tribal Police during the mission.

**Thank you for your co-operation.  
Sincerely, the Mi'kmaq Grand Council.**

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