The Fur Trade and the Frontier: A Study of an Inter-cultural Alliance*

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RÉSUMÉ

Pour entreprendre des relations commerciales, des relations d'alliance sont établies entre des groupes. Les Français et les Hurons ont établi une telle alliance. Les obligations de leur alliance étaient centrées sur l'échange de dons, le commerce, la guerre et la parenté. Au cours des années, cependant, à mesure que la frontière du commerce a été poussée au-delà de leur groupe, les Hurons sont devenus pour les Français seulement un de leurs fournisseurs de fourrure. Les Français n'étaient plus en mesure de justifier le coût de maintenir une alliance avec eux. A la place de cette relation d'alliance, s'est développé un commerce d'exploitation, qui a contribué à la dispersion éventuelle des Hurons par les Iroquois.

In 1640 there were fewer than four hundred Frenchmen in New France. Yet even by this date, these Frenchmen had an impact on the indigenous population far beyond their numbers. They were the intrusive factor that initiated the fur trade in the St. Lawrence Valley. It was this trade which became the effective instrument in upsetting aboriginal economies and creating sedentary and dependent groups out of hunters and gatherers.

In this paper I intend to show that Champlain as the representative of the French entered into relations of total prestation with the leaders or a number of the tribes of the area, particularly

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the Hurons, and that with time there developed a contradiction between the demands of these relations, on the one hand, and the peculiar requisites of the fur trade on the other.

The source of this contradiction is not hard to see: the institution of total prestation, as Mauss has described it, takes the form of an exchange of all manner of goods and services between two groups linked in a moral community; yet the essential requirement of French commerce was a highly profitable good with nominal overhead costs. The contradiction between these two sets of demands only became apparent when the total prestation failed to satisfy the minimal conditions of French commerce. In the context of the French and Huron alliance (or total prestation) the French could hold to the minimal requirements of commerce first by the search for new sources of cheap furs and, second, by the unilateral reduction of their obligations to their allies. I will argue that it was precisely in this manner that the alliance which Champlain had spent years building was drastically changed and that by 1640 an exploitative trade had emerged.

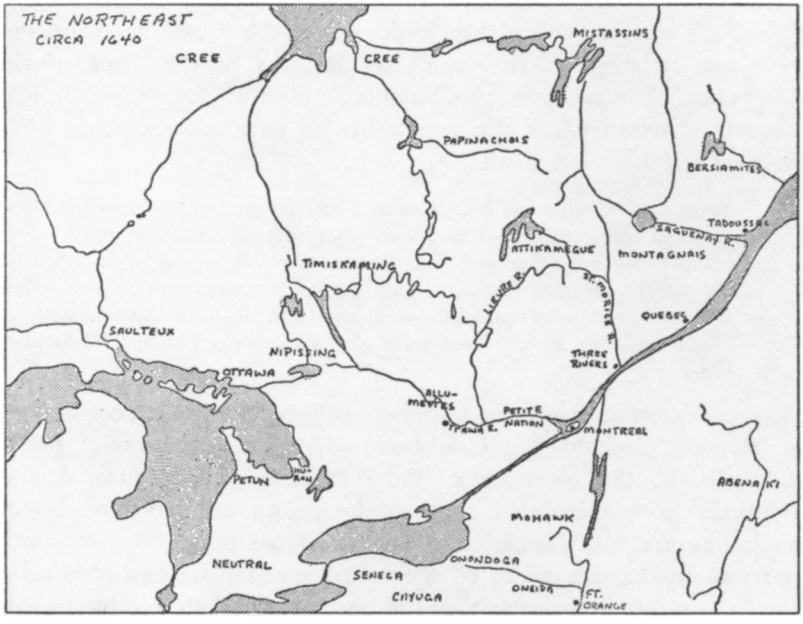
The conflicts to which this contradiction gave rise were mediated by the proselytizing activities of the Jesuits and Recollets. Since their work could be best accomplished among a sedentary population, the whole force of French intrusion into Huronia, even as early as 1634, acted toward the incorporation of the Hurons into the French commercial and cultural system. Once the structure of the alliance wa changed; once the mutual constraints were removed and the frontier was pushed ahead the fur trade was free to run at will in the areas where total prestation had been the rule, halting only to bow to the game efforts of the Iroquois.

THE STARTING MECHANISM

When people have no great knowledge of each other and when suspicions may provoke violence, trade can be a precarious undertaking. Despite the fact that it may be advantageous for both parties to trade, there is no necessary peace of trade. Exchange and war are the flip sides of an encounter between strangers. Cartier fired upon an Indian trading party which

seemed to threaten him. Champlain was attacked by Indians with whom he had been trading in New England. Consequently, some mechanism is necessary which will bridge mutual hostility and ensure trust, or at least mitigate the moral savageness of the other (see Bailey 290-295).

> In the absence of external guaranties, as of a Sovereign, peace must be otherwise secured: by the extension of sociable relations to foreigners — thus the trade-friendship or trade-kinship — and, most significantly, by the *terms of exchange themselves.* The economic ratio is a diplomatic maneuver (Sahlins 1965 b, 104. author's italics)



Diplomacy in this respect takes on the character of vying for amity. Initially, the relations between two groups hinge on their mutual satisfaction after each individual transaction. These exchanges are therefore balanced. But in the overview, balanced exchanges do nothing to overcome brittle relations.

> ...the relations between people are disrupted by a failure to reciprocate within limited time and equivalence leeways... for the main run of balanced exchange, social relations hinge on material flow (Sahlins 1965 a, 148).

As the two sides become a little more familiar with each other, as they become a little more cognizant of the potential of their relationship, time and equivalence leeways expand. Each side gives a little more until the exchanges tend to the generalized pole while the relationship as a whole becomes balanced (Foster chp. 11; Sahlins 1965 b).

> The savages showed a marvellously great pleasure in possessing and obtaining these iron wares and other commodities... they bartered all they had to such an extent that all went back naked... they made signs to us that they would return on the morrow with more furs (Biggar 1924, 53).

Such exchanges quickly broke down the initial hostility and reticence between Cartier and the Indians of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. By the time of Champlain, eighty years later, it had become customary for the merchants to treat inaugurating gifts as part of their overhead.

> Several of these people had come to Three Rivers, as they had promised, some to trade, others to find out what sort of treatment they would get at our hands. Our people welcomed them all with gifts provided by the agents for the purpose. This seemed to have the desired effect and many of them came forward and offered to swear an oath of friendship. We for our part were glad to strike a bargain (Champlain 125-126).

Gouldner has pointed out that reciprocity of this sort is only a "starting mechanism" (Gouldner). It is hurried, lacks etiquette and all but the most basic understanding. He argues that a relationship will stabilize only if the rough indeterminancies of exchange are transformed into explicit rights and duties for both parties. In the movement from starting mechanism to stable relation, the rights and duties that the parties intend to live by appear as points to be negotiated.

THE ALLIANCE

The French and Huron alliance was generated through a deliberate step-by-step process during which the French came to understand and ultimately assent to obligations placed upon them with respect to gift-exchange, trade, warfare and kinship. The French first had an alliance with the Montagnais leader

Anadabijou. Through him, they were brought into contact with Tessouat of the Algonquins of Allumette Island and he in turn introduced them to Iroquet, leader of the "Petite Nation". In 1609, Iroquet, in response to Champlain's promise to aid all the allies in their war against the Iroquois, brought Ochateguin a leader of the Ahrendarrhonon tribe of the Huron confederacy down to the St. Lawrence to meet Champlain. Prior to this all Huron contact with the French had been indirect and mediated by the Algonquins (Biggar 1922, 1:164). As was expected of him, Champlain accompanied the allies on their raiding expedition. In the following year, Champlain and Ochateguin undertook to place their relationship on more solid ground. Champlain consented to taking an Ahrendarrhonon back to France so that the latter could receive the hospitality of the French and be able to make some report to Ochatequin. In 1611, a Frenchman — Brulé — spent the winter in Huronia and four years later Champlain himself went there. During this interval it would seem that the French made contact with other tribes of the Huron confederacy: the Atignawantan, Tohotaenrat and Ateanghonac. Following this, the exchanges between the two people became freer. Priests, traders and soldiers moved into Huronia and Hurons were welcomed at Quebec (Biggar 1922, 5:100-108, 207; Wrong; Thwaites 4:197).

By 1626, an alliance had been welded between the French and the Huron, the basic terms of which centered about a) gift-exchange, b) trade, c) warfare and d) kinship.

a) *Gift-exchange*

Gift-exchange became a highly ritualized part of all important transactions between the French and the Hurons whether they occurred in Quebec or Huronia (Thwaites 5:249-253; Herman 1048-1049. The fact that these exchanges did occur in both Quebec and Huronia is significant, for to properly engage in reciprocity a person must be both a host and guest. Thus, the French passed out food to the Hurons in Quebec while the Hurons were liberal to their guests in Huronia (Thwaites 8:95, 127-129, 10-59). Moreover, as Sahlins has pointed out, just as significant of the fact of exchange are the terms of the exchange. On nu-

merous occasions the Indians recognized their alliance with Champlain by giving him larger gifts than they gave other traders at Montreal (Biggar 1922, 2:208-210, 4:142-144). Gift exchange was the minimum condition of all French and Huron relations. Therefore, in the course of time it was least effected by change.

b) *Trade*

Champlain was a trade-partner of Ochateguin. This meant that the involvement in the fur trade of the mass of the Ahrendarrhonons on the one hand and the French traders on the other was contingent on the relationship between Ochateguin and Champlain. These leaders were intermediaries having exclusive rights to trade. For example, Champlain found that after he had established relations with the Algonquins and Hurons he had the power to prohibit these Indians from trading with other Frenchmen on the St. Lawrence (Biggar 1922, 2:203, 304). Conversely, Champlain learned that if he was going to introduce other Frenchmen to the trade, it would have to be done through gift-exchange and feasting (Thwaites 8:50-51). Sagard reported that only with the permission of their chiefs could the Attingnawantan go to the Saguenay and Quebec to trade (Wrong 99). According to the Jesuits only a few chiefs held such positions of influence and it was necessary for the Hurons to give presents to these "trade masters" to gain their consent before setting out to trade (Wrong 99; Thwaites 10:225).

A trade master seems to have been a person who had a large number of trade-partners and therefore a trade-route. There is some evidence to suggest that a trade master could call upon the resources of his kinsmen to provide him with goods for trade with his trade partners. He would take these goods (maize, tobacco, nets) and trade them for furs as he proceeded along his route, arriving, after a journey of four to six weeks, at Montreal, Three Rivers or Quebec. Upon returning to Huronia, the trade master would discharge his accumulated debts through the distribution of French trade goods.

Evidence for this interpretation comes from descriptions of transactions at Montreal and Quebec (Biggar 1922, 4:138-141,

336-337; Thwaites 6:7-11). Sagard's account of the tough trade practises of the Algonquins and Montagnais would seem to support the idea of a series of trade partnerships — if we suppose that these groups had alliances with the Hurons (Wrong 255, 266, 268). Finally, redistribution seems to have been a general rule among the Hurons (Thwaites 8:127; Herman 1054).

Trade, of course, was the primary reason for the French presence on the St. Lawrence. By accepting exclusivity as a condition of trade, Champlain had assured himself of a supply of furs. But being tied to one source of supply did not auger well for continuously high profits and hence this aspect of the alliance was to change radically.

c) *Warfare*

Warfare was endemic between the Iroquois and the tribes of the trading circle north of the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence. Aid in warfare, then, was extremely important to the nascent relationship between the French and the Hurons. On returning from the battle in 1609, Champlain wrote,

> ...the Algonquins returned to their own country, and the Ochateguins [i.e. the Ahrendarrhonons] also with some of the prisoners, all much pleased at what had taken place in the war, and because I had gone with them readily. So we separated from each other with great protestations of friendship, and they asked me if I would not like to go to their country and aid them constantly like a brother. I promised them I would... (Biggar 1922, 4:103).

It was this aid in warfare, as the Indians themselves said, that set Champlain apart from the other traders on the St. Lawrence (Biggar 1922, 2:120-121).

But again it is not merely a matter of what you do but also of how you go about doing it: Champlain not only helped the Hurons and their allies but went to Huronia to do it. And then, as was typical of alliance relationships, he spent the winter there. This aspect of the alliance was by no means one-sided.

> I should perhaps explain that on earlier expeditions I had visited a number of tribes previously unknown to us and unknown even to the savages living at the habitation [Quebec]. I had made treaties with most of these tribes that bound them to trade with us if we helped to

> defend them against their enemies — for you must remember that no tribe, except the Neutrals, lives at peace with its neighbours (Champlain 125).

As with gift-giving, trade and (as we shall see) kinship, aid in warfare was intimately bound to the whole balanced relation between French and Huron. Thus, a change in trade has repercussions here as well.

d) *Kinship*

Trade-kinship or fictive-kinship (Trigger, 23) was created by the exchange of relatives, usually male, between leaders of different groups with the expectation that both of these young men would marry and take up residence in their adopted group. Ties such as these were initiated between Champlain and Ochateguin in 1611.

In this regard, there are many reports of Frenchmen marrying Huron women (Thwaites 14:19). Sagard wrote in 1623 that:

> one of the chief and most annoying ambarrassments they caused us at the beginning of our visit to their country was their continual importunity and requests to marry us, or at least to make a family alliance with us (Wrong 125).

The Jesuits have given additional examples of the operation of trade-kinship.

> When the savages give you their children to be seminarians they give them as naked as the hand — that is, as soon as you get them you must have them dressed and give their beaver robes back to their parents. They must be well lodged and well fed; and yet these Barbarians imagine that you are under great obligation to them. I add still more; generally presents must be made to their parents, and if they dwell near you, you must help them to live part of the time i.e. gift-giving (Thwaites 12:47).

On the other side of the relationship, a Huron chief expressed

> ...his great satisfaction in the treament accorded to our Seminarists at Quebec, and, especially to his own nephew... As for him, he now esteemed himself as one of our relatives, and in this capacity he laid claim to being one of the trade-masters of the great river ([i.e. the Ottawa-St. Lawrence] (Thwaites 13:125).

Here we have rearrived at the connection between fictive-kinship and trade. The Jesuits did not understand that these Indians had every reason to claim the French as relatives and to derive certain rights from this relationship. For their part, the Hurons were quite solicitous for the welfare of the French in Huronia (Biggar 1922, 4:275; Wrong 175, 194; Thwaites 10:101).

Obligations focusing upon gift-giving, trade, warfare and kinship were basic to the French and Huron alliance during the period 1609-1629. These obligations were held by the French because they saw the balance of power as being in the Hurons favour. For this reason, Champlain did not punish an Indian who had killed two Frenchmen (Champlain 118-119) and Sagard was immensely relieved that the Hurons took justice into their own hands and recompensed the French for goods stolen (Wrong 46). But the Hurons also perceived themselves as dependent. This is clearly the case in 1616 when a Huron murdered an Algonquin. Immediately the possibility of war between the Algonquins and the Hurons arose. It never materialized for the Hurons realized that

> ...none of them would ever again come down to the French, if war began with these Algonquins, regarding us as friends of the same (Biggar 1922, 2:103).

This time it was a matter of whoever threatens the Algonquins, threatens the allies of the Algonquins. Some years later when Brulé was murdered in an Attignawantan village it became a matter of whoever threatens the French, threatens the allies of the French, for the Algonquins moved to close the Ottawa to these Hurons (Thwaites 8:99; 10:307-311; 12:89). In the end, after thirty years of mutually advantageous relations, the French and Huron alliance broke down.

THE FRONTIER

Such an alliance could not have remained stable for long. The contradiction inherent in it was too large. While the Hurons were dependent upon the French alone for their trade goods, the French were never entirely dependent upon the Hurons or

any other single tribal group for their furs. Once the French had located a new source, the Hurons became less of a commercial frontier and more of a religious one. That is, the relations that characterized French and Huron interaction changed from alliance to prozelytization (see Trigger).

The progress of the frontier can be measured by the condition of the tribes left in its wake. In 1609, the year Champlain met Ochateguin, the Montagnais were the chief allies of the French. At that time they led a hunting and gathering existence (Thwaites 2:71). Ten years later a number of these Indians were living at the Habitation at Quebec. By 1622, the French had such an impact on their political processes that Champlain was in a position to appoint a successor to Anadabijou (Biggar 1922, 5:60 ff). The following year the Montagnais at Quebec tried to enforce their trade rights with the Huron by demanding food stuffs from them (Wrong 266, 268). Presumably they intended to use these food stuffs to trade for furs with the indians living around the headwaters of the St. Maurice and Saguenay rivers. In further attempts to maintain themselves in the trade, from 1636 onward the Montagnais consistently refused to allow the Abenaki the right to trade at Quebec (Thwaites 12:187; 28: 215; 24:57). By 1642 however, the Montagnais at Quebec had been by-passed. Tribes such as the Papinachois, Bersiamites and Mistassins now traded at Tadoussac (Thwaites 22:219) — something which the Montagnais had tried to prevent seven years previously (Thwaites 8:41) — while the Attikamagues traded at Three Rivers (Thwaites 29:109, 121). Once new sources of furs had been located, the Montagnais had very little leverage on the course of the trade. They could insist on their trade rights, but not being in a secure enough position to isolate themselves through enforcing them, they lapsed into a dependent relation on the French.

So it was that the first flush of the trade moved rapidly through any given area. While the Montagnais were trying to impose their trade rights on the Hurons, French traders were already among the Neutrals, Petun and the tribes north of Georgian Bay (Wrong 135, 194). This rapid expansion of the commercial frontier was not due primarily to the Indian demand for French goods. According to Innis,

> ...the task of continuously supplying goods... of maintaining the depreciation of those goods and of replacing the goods destroyed was overwhelming... this demand for European goods was persistent and cumulative since penetration of European goods was relatively slow (Innis 13-14).

Although a strong and persistent demand could be stimulated in a relatively small group, the fact that such a small group could never supply a sufficient quantity of fur means that this is not a sufficient explanation of the expansion of the trade. The key factor seems to have been the cost of establishing institutions which could support a stabilized trade.

> French capitalists were interested only in obtaining the maximum profit with the minimum investment. They could not be expected to provide troops for the colony's defense or to invest large sums for settlement... All that was needed for the trade was a warehouse, a plentiful supply of trade goods and the maintenance of communications between France and Quebec on the one hand, the trading post and the Western Indians on the other. For this purpose there was no need for large numbers of French to be stationed at Quebec; in fact the fewer there were, the lower the costs and the higher the profits (Eccles 34).

As the cost of maintaining the trade with any particular group increased, interest in that group correspondingly decreased. As the furs in any one area became relatively depleted, the surrounding tribes who had a further lien on furs were incorporated into the trade. There simply wasn't enough capital available to permit the trade to stabilize (see Innis 12). Only furs easily obtainable and in huge quantities could turn a profit for the merchants in France. When too many ships arrived with too much in the way of goods, it quickly became a seller's market and the French took a loss (see Biggar 1922, 2:46). This was the primary reason for the continuous attempts of the French to establish a trading monopoly on the St. Lawrence.

The French did not have far to look for new sources of supply. In 1633, the first trading fleet of Ottawa Indians arrived at Quebec. These Indians had sometime earlier forced the Winnebago to participate in the trade (Hunt 48). At this time too, the Nipissings, with whom the French traded directly, were in contact with the Cree (Wrong 86; Thwaites 21:123-125). French trading alliances were also being extended around Lake Huron to the Saulteux (Thwaites 10:83). Moreover, the traditional

Ottawa-St. Lawrence route was becoming impassable owing to the depredations of the Iroquois. The effect of this was to swing the trade across the headwaters of the Lievre, St. Maurice and Saguenay rivers. Hence, the Hurons not only had more difficulty in completing their trading circle but also some of the tribes of that region were brought into direct contact with the French (Thwaites 31:209).

By the latter part of the 1630's, the Hurons had become acutely aware of the position they were in. As one Huron chief put it:

> ...if they should remain two years without going down to Kebec to trade, they would find themselves reduced to such extremities that they might consider themselves fortunate to join with the Algonquins and to embark in their canoes [when the latter left Huronia in the spring] (Thwaites 13:217).

In 1644 and again in 1647 the necessity of obtaining French trade goods brought the Hurons down to Quebec despite the presence of the Iroquois on the St. Lawrence (Thwaites 27:63; 32:179).

The Hurons also realized that if they were to maintain their position as middleman — the Hurons had never really depended upon their own supplies of furs — they would have to prevent the free movement of Frenchmen in their trading areas. Prior to the coming of the Jesuits, Frenchmen had travelled unhindered in Petun and Neutral territory (Biggar 1922, 4:278, 282; Wrong 194; Thwaites 21:203); but by 1640 the Hurons had closed this area to the French. The result was that the Petun and Neutrals no longer recognized any relationship with the French (Thwaites 21:177, 217-221).

These actions do not indicate that the Hurons were considering a commercial war with the French: on the contrary, they were making every effort to buttress their alliance. Although the Hurons charged that the Jesuits were the bearers of a smallpox epidemic no violence was done to them for it was "contrary to the rights of the alliance" (Thwaites 17:117-119; see also 12:89, 13:217, 14:17). In 1641, in a move paralleling Champlain's naming of Anadabijou's successor, the Ahrendarrhonons asked the Jesuits to resurrect and bestow the name of Atironta (or

Darontal as the name appears in Champlain's writings) upon a man of their choice (Thwaites 23:167). The significance of this move was that the Hurons were attempting to re-establish their alliance with the French, for Atironta had been Champlain's leading Ahrendarrhonon ally after Ochateguin's death. Eight years later, while under severe attack from the Iroquois, the Ahrendarrhonon took the extreme step of unilaterally bestowing the name of Atironta upon a Jesuit (Thwaites 34:157) hoping thereby to secure immediate French aid.

For their part, the French sent troops into Huronia in 1644 and 1648 to protect the fur fleets but took no effective action to fourstall the destruction of Huronia. In 1650, the Hurons were dispersed by the Iroquois and it was not until 1654 that the Ottawas were able to re-open the Ottawa-St. Lawrence river system and trade from that quarter could resume (Thwaites 41: 77).

CONCLUSIONS

Certain ecological and economic factors restricted the alliance relationship to the commercial frontier. First among these factors was the Indian's demand for trade goods — primarily capital goods of iron and copper such as hatches, picks, knives, awls, pots and nets. The desirability of these goods stemmed from the decrease in productive effort which they represented (see Salisbury). The combination of high utility with rapid depreciation and low level of supply of these goods created the necessary conditions for conflict and competition for their possession among Indian groups. The regulating factors were: 1) the rights and duties of the alliance system, and 2) the very fact that they were trading for labour saving capital goods meant that the overall cost of providing furs to the French could be reduced. Hence, many tribal groups could be swiftly involved with a minimum of friction.

The French on the other hand, given their enormous overhead expenses plus the fact that they were trading for a consumer commodity, could afford an alliance only if it were rewarded by an increase in quantity of furs. These conditions could be met

only by extending the frontier. Thus the alliance, representing an inter-cultural equilibrium, was peculiar to the commercial frontier. Inside that frontier, where the balance of economic power lay in the favour of the French, an exploitative trade could be established. The French were the sole source of supply and over a generation the Indians had become quite dependent on them.

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