ATTAWAPISKAT--BLEND OF TRADITIONS

by

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It is safe to assume that any eventual classification of types of acculturation will include two extremes: culture contact situations notoriously detrimental to the welfare of at least one of the component parties and contact in which new currents of culture are assimilated to old in such a way that the terminal product is a reasonably successful, new integration of life. Up to the present time such a successful integration has been achieved by the people of Attawapiskat on James Bay, Ontario. They have learned--not without conflict, hard work, and occasional disconcertment--facets of a new way of life and have incorporated these in a configuration that is meaningful and satisfying.

I

The acephalous units making up the aboriginal Attawapiskat population occupied river drainages (it scarcely is fitting to speak of valleys along the flat western shore of James Bay) from which they acquired their names. Such structural units still persist in the way families informally group themselves when they build dwellings in the modern settlement of Attawapiskat. Those people who spend the winter trapping on the Attawapiskat and Lawaaci rivers are located upriver; the Lake River folk camp on a shelf below the main part of the settlement, and the Ekwan people mostly live downriver from the church which stands prominently in the center of the post.

Aboriginally a river drainage unit comprised a number of independent and self-sufficient mobile bands that formed and reformed under the leadership of a resource person of

wisdom and experience. Such chiefs lacked legal power. Today the coming of autumn still sees families, singly or in pairs and threes, dispersing from Attawapiskat to coastal goose camps and inland to more distant trap lines. But commercial trapping in lieu of subsistence hunting and fishing has made the people occupational specialists in a complex international society. They no longer supply all of their needs-tools, clothing, food, containers, and shelter--from the products of the forest but draw on the resources of several continents for steel, woolens, cottons, tea, tinned meats, sugar, cordage, lamps, radios, gasoline, and other goods. In return they pay their bills annually with the furs of the beaver, fox, mink, muskrat, and marten. But furs are not too plentiful, at least not in the country immediately inland from the coastal marshes. Yet people are reluctant to penetrate far up the eastward flowing streams to exploit unfamiliar territory where, they have been told, game is more plentiful. To stay in the relatively unproductive territory near the Bay limits the fulfillment of needs which, it is significant to note, are expanding. A number of families and individuals have been induced to leave Attawapiskat and trapping to work at unskilled jobs on radar installations, air fields, and in the small harbor at Moosonee, the supply depot for the trading posts and military installations of James Bay. The regular remuneration that comes from such work exerts a strong pull for young men who are, however, often in conflict about leaving their homes. Relatively few opportunities for employment are offered by the Hudson's Bay Company and mission in Attawapiskat. Wages there compare unfavorably with those paid outside for unskilled labor.

Will Attawapiskat gradually cease to be a fur post and the Indians become dispersed in Canadian society, their identity lost as a community? In 1947 the resident population consisted of about 467 persons, with a number of families already residing more or less permanently at Fort Albany, Moosonee, and at a few points along the Ontario Northland Railroad.(1)

Government sponsored health examinations followed in a large number of cases by subsequent hospitalization at Moose Factory, Moosonee, and more distant sanitoria made many more people rapidly familiar with the outside world and seem to have been responsible for a stepping up of the rate of external migration. In 1955 a census carefully carried out revealed the Attawapiskat population to have been reduced to 300 people, the colonies at Fort Albany and Moosonee having expanded. On the other hand, counterbalancing forces which integrate the community continue at work, providing a considerable measure of strength and satisfaction. To these we shall turn in a moment.

II

The history of acculturation on the west coast of James Bay goes back to 1685 when Fort Albany succeeded the establishment of Ruperts House and Moose Factory farther south.(2) But the ensuing two centuries were relatively quiet years as far as concerns culture change, particularly for Attawapiskat. It is likely that during the eighteenth century Attawapiskat Indians began to transform their material culture with goods secured from the Hudson's Bay Company outlet at Quichitchouanne (Fort Albany). Other areas of life scarcely remained unaltered. With time spared from manufacturing stone tools, weapons, and garments trapping increasingly came to replace hunting. Strangers swelled the local population as inland people moved coastward to be near the trade center. The Indians' outlook seems to have been optimistic. Some of the new things were puzzling and, like guns and ammunition, even dangerous but their mastery came with time. Old men built the shaking tent (kosapatcikan) and after communion with their helpers reported confidently that the new traits would be helpful to the people. The new way of life would not bring disaster. This positive attitude toward culture change, devoid of any nostalgic clinging to the past, persisted when ideological innovation intensified following contact with the Oblates of the Immaculate Conception.

Actually, missionary contact at Fort Albany goes back to the brief interlude when the Fort (renamed after Ste. Anne de Beaupré) (3) was a French post (1686-1693). But the Jesuits left after the English reconquest and no further serious attempts at Christianization occurred until 1848. In that year the Oblates began to make annual visits to the Company's establishment. In 1892 they instituted a permanent setup that included a boarding school after 1902. The Anglican missionary began to call at Fort Albany in 1852. Both organizations made contact with the more northerly Attawapiskat Indians, notably those who visited Fort Albany during the summer trading season. It was not long before the Oblates penetrated northward. They constructed a church at Attawapiskat in 1893 and a missionary residence in 1912. The Hudson's Bay Company followed with a summer trade center in 1894 and was followed by Revillion Frères, the "French Company" as it is locally known, in 1902. Only in the early twenties was an Anglican church erected in Attawapiskat, the congregation of which includes only one indigenous family and that of the Hudson's Bay Company interpreter.

Precisely how the Attawapiskat Indians interpret Catholic dogma would make an interesting topic for further inquiry. But no question exists regarding the satisfaction they obtain from that religion. The aboriginal past is reinterpreted as a time of sorcery and evil, when the devil helped certain men (shamans) to extend their ordinary human power. People do not doubt the efficacy of shamanism in general nor have they lost their belief in sorcery. Evil men still exist and may utilize these channels to effect revenge for wrongs committed against them. But no longer do individuals seek spirit helpers. The older faith in a vaguely conceived pool (manitu) has been replaced by belief in a Supreme Being. Many people, but probably more women than men, regularly go to confession and communion. The High Mass on Sunday is attended by practically the entire community and is participated in actively. Most adults have received liturgical instruction during one or two years of residence at the

Fort Albany boarding school and their education has prepared them to sing Gregorian chants of the Mass and other services as well as to join in hymns.

The mission occupies a strategic position in the social structure of the community. While the manager of the Hudson's Bay Company exerts economic power, the Mission wields intellectual and moral power. The priest is a councillor, the nuns are teachers and nurses. Through the hospital the mission channels medicine to the sick. Missionaries try to keep families informed about members who are hospitalized in southern Ontario sanitoria. Community policy, difficult to arrive at in an acephalous group unaccustomed to formally coordinated action, is often formulated through the leadership of the mission director. Thus, the layout for houses to be built with government assistance, clearing the bush for the dwelling sites, draining paths, and instructing workers were all undertaken by the Mission. Labor is employed by the mission, the workers being paid off in tokens used to buy goods from the small store which that organization operates. The inclination of the mission staff is to suppress impatience and hostility when frustrated in relations with natives. In this behavior they parallel the Indians' attitude. Sometimes, however, tempers break through. The Indians are quite able to distinguish two kinds of missionary roles. The role of the priest as mediator between God and man is highly respected and not challenged. The roles of manager, employer, community organizer, and the educational functions of the mission personnel are criticized more readily.

The mission gives unity to this community in which the chiefs and councillors possess practically no power and display little effective leadership. In the first place, the Church and its activities--morning Mass, evening services, the rites of holy days--represent social values. The major passage rites of life, marriage and baptism, are celebrated in Church. However individuals may feel personally about the significance of these events, attendance at them testifies publicly to the importance that they hold

for everyone. Regularly to express the importance of these events gives the people a basis of unity that far transcends anything present in the aboriginal river drainage units. Participation is not a passive thing. Indians in Moosonee also attend High Mass but in contrast to Attawapiskat the service there does not appear to spring from the community. Participation in Attawapiskat symbolizes a community founded on common values as much as on territoriality and ramifying bonds of kinship.

The mission acts as host to government parties which visit the settlement for administrative purposes and to give medical examinations. Over the public address system, which reaches the community through a loudspeaker planted in the church steeple, people are called for examinations or summoned to meet officials. Such mediated communication organizes the community quite directly. On Sunday afternoons in summer there is usually a concert of recorded music, sometimes accompanied by an organ and vocal recital of semipopular music rendered by the brother who is also organist for services ("Mocking Bird Hill" is one of his favorites). The ritual significance of this music lies in how it emphasizes the central position of the Church in the contemporary social structure. Wedding feasts for which people prepare food at home are celebrated in the school basement while the Indian Agent's feast (beans, bread, tea, and pie) is cooked in the hospital kitchens and served by the nuns, brothers, and their native assistants. Attawapiskat would be a far less tightly knit community without the mission. The ritual nature of many of these activities should not be overlooked. But it is now clear that ritual plays a paramount role in integrating clusters of sedentary folk and enriching the satisfactions of group living.

III

The Hudson's Bay Company and free trader's establishment are the economic pivots of Attawapiskat. Practically speaking their roles are not less important for maintaining the social system

than are the leadership, communications, and ritual activities of the mission. Government communication not infrequently is mediated through the radio facilities of the Company and often the airways' pilot drops his bags of mail at the store to be sorted. Government relief and family allowances are distributed through the Company.[4] The overall importance of the traders is not less than that of the mission personnel (who, of course, also assume economic roles). But the quality of interpersonal relations in the two channels contrasts strongly. Although the local representative of the free trader is linked by kinship to many Attawapiskat families, the business organizations tend to be specialized in their dealings with the Indians. The manager of the Company and even the interpreter play a limited part in local affairs. The store, warehouse, and other premises are given over to few functions apart from business. One of these, dancing in the Company's carpenter shop, actually is illicit as far as the official values backed by Church sanctions are concerned.

IV

An integrative role also is played by government. Economically speaking Attawapiskat is a poor post, although how it ranks relative to all other Canadian Indian posts cannot be gauged at all precisely. A considerable measure of the livelihood is provided by the Federal government, particularly through family allowances and relief. Welfare is furnished to the old, women whose husbands are away in hospitals, and to young adults working on houses for themselves and, therefore, unable to hunt for meat in the summer. The explanation for this dependence on external support, of course, lies on the poverty of fur-bearing animals on the same factor, that is, which seems to be instigating emigration. In this connection the program of the Department of Lands and Forests, Province of Ontario, is of considerable significance. The restocking program of the Department, if successful, will replenish the supply of beaver and, perhaps, certain other animals and fish. Instructions in conservation will help

to maintain the animal population. These measures may stabilize the people around their traditional forest orientation and counterbalance the centrifugal forces noted above.

From the standpoint of the Attawapiskat Cree Indians government is primarily a source of welfare. It would seem, though, that from the Indian point of view government has never played its role adequately, not even during 1946 and 1947 when almost every family drew some assistance and nearly a third of the community's income derived from family allowances and relief. People cite the treaty of 1905 and maintain that by it the federal Government promised to care for the Indians. The promise has not been kept, for in the lifetime of living informants cases of fatal or near fatal starvation have occurred. The people plead poor and lack of resources for realizing needs. Such attitudes are hard to meet in a mutually satisfactory fashion. The result is that a pretty constant undercurrent of resentment and suspicion accompanies relations in this sector of life. Face-to-face contacts between officials and people are infrequent. When they do occur the object often is to learn about, or to satisfy, pressing needs of the population. Hence the Indians have little opportunity to become familiar with other administrative roles. The image of the government as a provider constantly is reinforced.

V

Many more data remain to be analyzed before a full account can be given of the general Indian personality. People in Attawapiskat give the impression of following a disciplined and somewhat compulsive style of life. The discipline is internal, not external. Adults are not readily spontaneous and cling to safety. For example, they are reluctant to move to new trapping grounds, fearful to venture too far into the bush in winter lest they become sick or starve, ambivalent about seeking new opportunities in the wider society, and insistent on the protection of stronger agencies,

like government. Perhaps some of these attitudes also underlie the way they conceive of the Church and mission. Although evidence on this point is unavailable, it is quite likely that this cautious and wary orientation to life existed in aboriginal times, expressing itself through different channels. It is not a product of culture contact. It should also be clear that the insecurity which marks the Attawapiskat personality in no sense is crippling. The people are resourceful in meeting familiar problems of existence. They are ready to laugh and by no means can be considered pathologically unhappy.

The net gains of acculturation outweigh inevitable problems. A new way of life grew up around trapping and came to encompass the Church. Missionaries gave direction to culture change. The native culture grew in terms of offering people more control over their environment and a richer variety of elements with which to satisfy impulses. In achieving these rewards the people in turn had to surrender a measure of individual autonomy to traders, missionaries, hospitals, and to a less visible government. They entered a position in which they could be frustrated and disappointed by those agencies which linked them with a world-wide society. The attempt to exploit that society for a larger measure of satisfactions, for example, has been frustrated by the refusal of the outside world to give without some return. Yet the poverty of fur resources does not allow the Indians to pay for all the imported goods they desire. The satisfactions of group living in the settlement are being tested severely by constantly expanding wants in the face of inadequate resources.

Two somewhat negative factors making for the continuance of Attawapiskat as a community remain to be mentioned. First, the people are little prepared to win jobs and hold their own in a heterogeneous Canadian society. Only one or two men command English. Skills are limited and few men are equipped to compete for other than unskilled jobs. Second, men who have been outside or served the Canadian Army as woodcutters during

the First World War shed their idiosyncratic experiences to a large extent after they returned to Attawapiskat. They did not become teachers or leaders but reassumed the modalities of the group. Hence there are no outstanding deviants in the population. There also is no schism between progressives pressing for change and conservatives resistant to innovation.

Attawapiskat presents no colorful or dramatic culture. Many of the elements of behavior, like the tools, dress, and religion, scarcely strike the North American visitor as exotic. But it has proven to be a satisfying culture for the writer to study, a warm and friendly community in which to work. Of course, most anthropologists become attached to people with whom they spend extended periods of time. The satisfactions derived from field work in Attawapiskat must, however, be kept in mind when assessing the reliability of the picture which has been sketched in the present paper.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Honigmann, John J., Foodways of a Muskeg Community. Unpublished manuscript. Microfilm available from Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

2. Historical accounts include Cooper, John, "The Northern Algonquian Supreme Being" (Primitive Man, 1933, Vol. 6, pp. 42-111); Saindon, Emile, En missionnant (Ottawa, Imprimerie du Droit), and Soeur Paul-Emile, Amiskwaski, La Terre du Castor (Ottawa, Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa). Data were also provided from the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company through the courtesy of the Winnipeg office of that concern and the author has drawn on information provided by the Right Reverend Henri Belleau, O.M.I.; Reverend Arthur Bilodeau, O.M.I.; Reverend Jules Leguerrier, O.M.I.; James Faries; William Loutit, and others. For a comprehensive account of precontact Attawapiskat culture see Honigmann, John J., "The Attawapiskat Swampy Cree, An Ethnographic Reconstruction" (Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska, 1956, Vol. 5, pp. 23-82).

3. The name persists for the present-day Roman Catholic mission settlement at Lac Ste. Anne, a short distance upriver from Fort Albany post.

4. In 1955 checks began to be issued to Indians in place of paying family allowances in kind. These can be cashed or spent anyplace.