

THE MI'KMAQ

Resistance, Accommodation, and Cultural Survival

CASE STUDIES IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
SERIES EDITORS: GEORGE AND LOUISE SPINDLER



HARALD E. L. PRINS

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Resistance, Accommodation, and
Cultural Survival

HARALD E. L. PRINS

Kansas State University



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CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

SERIES EDITORS

George and Louise Spindler

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

THE MI'KMAQ
Resistance, Accommodation, and
Cultural Survival

To Bunny McBride
For the blessings of her companionship

Foreword

ABOUT THE SERIES

These case studies in cultural anthropology are designed for students in beginning and intermediate courses in the social sciences, to bring them insights into the richness and complexity of human life as it is lived in different ways, in different places. The authors are men and women who have lived in the societies they write about and who are professionally trained as observers and interpreters of human behavior. Also, the authors are teachers; in their writing, the needs of the student reader remain foremost. It is our belief that when an understanding of ways of life very different from one's own is gained, abstractions and generalizations about the human condition become meaningful.

The scope and character of the series have changed constantly since we published the first case studies in 1960, in keeping with our intention to represent anthropology as it is. We are concerned with the ways in which human groups and communities are coping with the massive changes wrought in their physical and sociopolitical environments in recent decades. We are also concerned with the ways in which established cultures have solved life's problems. And we want to include representation of the various modes of communication and emphasis that are being formed and reformed as anthropology itself changes.

We think of this series as an instructional series, intended for use in the classroom. We, the editors, have always used case studies in our teaching, whether for beginning students or advanced graduate students. We start with case studies, whether from our own series or from elsewhere, and weave our way into theory, and then turn again to cases. For us, they are the grounding of our discipline.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harald E. L. Prins (Ph.D., New School for Social Research, 1988) was born in the Netherlands in 1951 as one of an anthropologist's nine children. His interest in North American Indians began in childhood, but his first personal encounter did not take place until 1971, when he visited the Passamaquoddy in Maine. As a student, he traveled widely in Europe, the Middle East, Central and South America. After his doctoral (1976) at the University of Nijmegen, he joined its history department as research and teaching fellow. Two years later, he was elected List Fellow at the New School for Social Research in New York. This was followed by training in advanced 16-mm filmmaking and then a year of fieldwork in the Argentine pampas. Upon return to the United States, he was hired as director of research and development by the Association of Aroostook Indians (1981–1982). This led to a decade of work with the Mi'kmaq of northern Maine, which resulted in a successful federal recognition and land claims settlement case for the Aroostook Band of Micmacs. In addition to ethnohistorical research, grass-roots community organizing, and political activism, he also coproduced a documentary on Mi'kmaq basketmakers (*Our Lives*

in *Our Hands*, 1985). In 1986 he accepted a visiting lectureship at Bowdoin College, followed by visiting teaching positions at Colby College and the University of Maine. In 1990, after testifying before Congress as expert witness on behalf of the Mi'kmaq, he joined the faculty of Kansas State University, where he serves as associate professor of cultural anthropology. In 1993 the university awarded him the Conoco Prize for Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching. He has published over sixty scholarly articles, book chapters, essays, and reviews, and coedited *American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture, and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega* (1995). Often collaborating with his wife, Bunny McBride, a writer, he now lives in the beautiful Flint Hills of Kansas.

ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

The Mi'kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation, and Cultural Survival chronicles the endurance of a tribal nation—its ordeals in the face of colonialism and its current struggle for self-determination and cultural revitalization. Inhabiting the northern Atlantic seaboard, Mi'kmaqs were among the first Indians in North America to encounter Europeans, and this book details the historical dynamics that have marked their culture over the last 500 years.

Those who read these pages will glimpse the full nature of the calamities visited upon the Mi'kmaq by the coming of the Europeans. First came the epidemics of smallpox, measles, and influenza that decimated their populations by as much as 90 percent. But the epidemics were just the beginning. As the country of the Mi'kmaq began to fill with Europeans, the relations of the Mi'kmaq to their own land and the relations to their animal kin (as they conceived of them) were profoundly disturbed. Exploitation of fur-bearing creatures broke all customary restraints on the taking of animal life, so that whole areas were “cleaned out” of fur-bearing animals. Mi'kmaq dependency upon imported European goods, including brandy, grew apace, and the Mi'kmaq were increasingly alienated from their lands as European settlement continued.

The “Europeans” who landed on America's shores were not a homogeneous people. The most important division was between the French and the English. In their struggle against the more numerous English, the French found the Mi'kmaq and other tribes to be most useful allies. They courted the Mi'kmaq with presents and privileges to retain their support. In contrast to the English, they forged a relationship with the Mi'kmaq that was often mutually beneficial. Further, French attitudes toward Indians in general were more acceptant. At any rate, as a consequence of the colonial wars, the fate of the Mi'kmaq was decided by treaties made in Europe.

One can scarcely comprehend the disasters that Europeans wrought upon the Mi'kmaq and other indigenous peoples of the eastern seaboard (and elsewhere in the Americas). Once the Europeans established a foothold, much of what followed seems inevitable, given the cultural and sociopolitical gulf between Indians and Europeans and European power. But conditions were exacerbated by the fundamental racism and ethnocentrism of all Europeans, particularly the English. They regarded

everything native as brutish, foolish, or immoral. This attitude is deep in Anglo-Saxon culture and remains a powerful factor in mainstream-Indian relations in Canada and the United States—where Mi'kmaqs still exist. Most now live in small population clusters on scattered reserves, some as small as a few acres.

Reaching beyond historical chronology, this book describes how the cultural consciousness of contemporary Mi'kmaqs is shaped not only by their own oral traditions but also by knowledge of the past as documented by twenty generations of European observers. Representing opposite sides of the encounter, the text offers many direct quotations from Mi'kmaqs and outsiders, enabling the reader to appreciate the different, sometimes conflicting, points of view.

The author is an ethnohistorian and action anthropologist who spent ten years working on a successful native rights case, helping one Mi'kmaq group gain federal recognition and a financial settlement to establish a land base in northern Maine. Like other tribal nations trying to free themselves from the shackles of internal colonialism, Mi'kmaqs have come to appreciate the practical significance of historical information. Until recently, they quarried their past for great stories, which provided them with a mental escape and emotional comfort in troubled times. Today, they seek knowledge about what happened in their past as a source of cultural identity and as an instrument of justice.

It seems a miracle that the Mi'kmaq should survive this long-term apocalypse, but survive they did. They are currently enjoying both a burst in population and a revitalization of their culture as well as their sociopolitical status.

This case study is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of North America or in Indian-white relations.

George and Louise Spindler
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Acknowledgments

Special thanks must go to my numerous Mi'kmaq friends in northern Maine. It has been a privilege to work with them for a noble cause. With pleasure I recall their generosity and hospitality. They not only tell great stories but are also a terrific audience. Indeed, I fondly remember their uproarious jokes and bursts of laughter. No doubt, in reading this book some of them will recognize subjects we talked about during our Mi'kmaq history seminars in the Aroostook Micmac Council's band offices in Presque Isle. While I cannot mention all, I would like to express special respect for Tom Battiste, a Mi'kmaq who helped found the Association of Aroostook Indians in 1969 before moving on to earn a master's at Harvard University and pursue a career in serving native peoples throughout the United States. Another Mi'kmaq whom I greatly admire is Donald Sanipass, a *meski'k mkamlamun* ("Great-heart"). Perhaps more than any other Mi'kmaq I know, he possesses the natural qualities of a traditional chieftain. Of course, others have aided my understanding—Abraham Harquail, Harold Lafford, Sarah Jacobs Lund, Marguerite Basque McNeal, Beatrice Paul, Frank Paul, Betsy Lafford Phillips, Paul Phillips, Wilfred Sanipass, Mary Lafford Sanipass, Marlene Sanipass, David Sanipass, Richard Silliboy, Tilly Pictou West, and so many others. Likewise, I have benefited enormously from some Maliseet friends, in particular Louis Paul and Dr. Peter Paul, both of Woodstock Reserve.

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Several great teachers have contributed to my theoretical understanding of how Mi'kmaq culture is historically articulated within the dynamic context of a wider field of force. Of special note are Eric Wolf and Ton Lemaire. Their encompassing knowledge and moral integrity continue to inspire me. Among those who share my intellectual interest in Mi'kmaq culture, I particularly thank my colleagues, Ms. Ruth Whitehead of the Nova Scotia Museum and Dr. Charles Martijn of Québec's Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, as well as Dr. Peter Christmas of the Micmac Institute for Cultural Studies. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge also the competent assistance from the Maine State Library's reference specialists and the warm ambience of the Hubbard Free Library in Hallowell.

Of course, I express my gratitude to my mother, P. A. C. Prins-Poorter, and my father, Dr. A. H. J. Prins, emeritus professor of cultural anthropology at the Rijks-universiteit Groningen, who nourished my early fascination with America's indigenous cultures.

Finally, my wife and collaborator, Bunny McBride, deserves more praise than anyone else. It was she who first brought the Mi'kmaqs of northern Maine to my attention. In the past fifteen years, we have shared labor and love. Without her unswerving support and editing skills, this book could not have been written.

Contents

Foreword	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
1. Introduction: Quest for Cultural Survival	1
2. Problems and Challenges: The Politics of History	7
Internal Colonialism and Domestic Dependency	7
Hegemony and Alienation: Endangered Heritage	7
The Mi'kmaq as Ethnic Group	11
Reconstructing History	12
Political Significance of History	13
3. Aboriginal Baseline: A Historical Ethnography	19
Natural Habitat	19
Mi'kmaq Origin Legends	20
Klu'skap as Culture Hero	21
The Prehistoric Past: Archaeological and Linguistic Evidence	22
Personal Appearances: Dress, Hairstyle, Tattoos	25
Demographics	26
Mode of Production at the Time of Contact: Subsistence Foraging	27
Portable Material Culture	30
Social Structure: Family, Band, Tribe	32
Social Division of Labor	33
Political Organization: <i>Saqmaq</i> and <i>Nikmanaq</i>	33
Grand Chief and District Chiefs	35
Ideology: Worldview, Dreams, Guardian Spirits, and Shamanism	35
Social Niche: Mi'kmaqs and Their Neighbors	37
Intertribal Conflicts	39
Conclusion	41
4. First Contact: Europe's Advent and Klu'skap's Exit	43
European Culture on the Eve of the Invasion	43
<i>Wenuj</i> : Strangers on the Coast	44
The Portuguese of Cape Breton: A Lost Colony (1525)	45
Cartier's Explorations on the Mi'kmaq Coast (1534–1536)	45
Cod Fishers and Fur Traders	47
Mi'kmaqs as Fur Trade Middlemen	49
Mi'kmaqs Discover Europe	50
Mi'kmaq Perceptions and Attitudes Toward White Newcomers	52
The "Great Dying": Epidemics on the Mi'kmaq Coast	53
5. Moving In: European Colonists in Mi'kmaq Country	55
International Linkages	56

Colonization and the Seignorial System in Mi'kmaq Country	57
The Early Colonizers	59
The Company of New France as Feudal Overlord (1627–1663)	63
The French Crown Takes Over Seigneuries from New France Company	65
Seigneuries in Acadia and Gaspesia	65
Acadia's Indian Seigneuries	66
Mi'kmaq-Acadian Intermarriages	67
Conclusion	69
 6. <i>Christianizing the Mi'kmaq: "Black Robes" and "Bare Feet"</i>	71
French Catholic Missions	72
Jesuit Priests and Franciscan Recollets: Missionary Perspectives and Policies	73
The Arrival of "Black Robes" in Mi'kmaq Country (1611–1613)	73
The "Bare Feet" Spread Their Gospel (1619–1624)	74
Capuchins: Other "Bare Feet" Priests in Mi'kmaq Country (1632–1654)	75
"Black Robes" Return to Mi'kmaq Country	75
Recollet Mission at Gaspé (1673–1690)	77
Baptism as Alliance Ritual	80
Cultural Resistance: Persistence of Shamanic Beliefs	82
Cultural Accommodation: From Guardian Spirit to Patron Saint	84
Mi'kmaq Hieroglyphs: Writing as Religious Agency	85
 7. <i>Accommodation and Resistance: Mi'kmaq Life in the Colonial Period</i>	89
Commercial Fisheries	89
Mi'kmaq-French Symbiosis: A Dual Society in Colonial Acadia	91
Cultural Mélange: Blending the New with the Old	92
The Fur Trade: Mi'kmaq Market Hunting	95
Decline of the Fur Trade: The Problem of Indian Alliances	98
Sea Mammal Hunting	99
Mi'kmaq Critiques of Europeans	100
 8. <i>Cultural Stress: Alcoholic Rage and Beaver Wars</i>	103
Alcohol: Agent of Self-Destruction	103
Game Depletion	105
"Beaver Wars": Intertribal Conflicts	106
Mi'kmaq-Stadaconan War	108
Mi'kmaq-Abenaki War	108
Mi'kmaq-Maliseet War	109
Mi'kmaq-Massachusetts Wars	110
Mi'kmaq-Montagnais War	111
Mi'kmaq-Inuit Wars	112
Mi'kmaq-Iroquois Wars	112
Intertribal Diplomacy and Peace	114

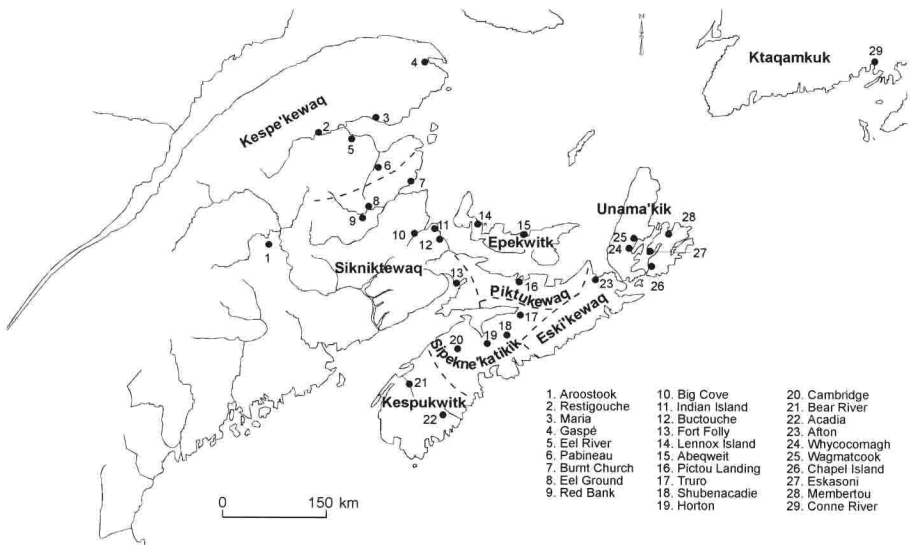
9. Colonial Wars and Alliances	117
Mounting Anglo-French Rivalries	117
Indian Involvement in European Rivalries	118
The Wabanaki Confederacy	119
Alliance Ceremonial Practices	119
Kinship Terminology and Alliance	120
French Missionaries as Warrior-Priests	121
The Introduction of Commercial Scalping	122
The First Anglo-Wabanaki War (1676–1678)	123
The Second Anglo-Wabanaki War (1688–1698)	123
The Rise and Fall of New England's Fort Pemaquid (1692–1696)	125
New England's Counterattack and Termination of War	128
The Third Anglo-Wabanaki War (1703–1713)	129
Losing the Fight for Acadia	130
Treaty of Utrecht (1713): Making Peace and Dividing Wabanaki Lands	131
 10. Colonial Wars: Losing the Armed Struggle for Independence	133
Aboriginal Title: French Opportunism in Acadia After 1713	133
Cape Breton as the New French Political Center	135
French Proxy Warfare: Mi'kmaq Seafighters	135
Mi'kmaq Missions and French Warrior-Priests	136
The Fourth Anglo-Wabanaki War (1722–1726)	137
Uneasy Peace and New Missionaries	140
The Fifth Anglo-Wabanaki War (1744–1748)	141
Mi'kmaqs in Exile	142
Cease-Fire	143
Halifax (1749) and the Changing Power Balance in Nova Scotia	143
Treaty of 1752	145
Keeping Anger Alive: France's Ongoing Need for Indian Allies	147
The Sixth Anglo-Wabanaki War (1755–1760)	148
Ethnic Cleansing: Expulsion of the French Acadians	148
Fall of French Canada (1758–1759)	150
 11. More Treaties and Broken Promises	153
The Royal Proclamation of 1763: Dispossession by Default	153
Settling Mi'kmaq Lands	155
The American Revolution (1775–1783)	156
Wabanakis Join the Revolution	156
Treaty of Watertown (1776)	157
Warriors at Machias (1777–1780)	157
Julian's Treaty (1779)	160
Diplomatic Betrayal: The Treaty of Paris (1783)	161
International Border-Crossing Rights: Jay Treaty (1794)	162
The Demographics of Dispossession	163
Conclusion	166

12. <i>Survival under Internal Colonialism</i>	167
Birth of the Reservation	168
Spiritual Resort: Return of Catholic Priests	170
Saint Anne: Mi'kmaq Patron Saint	172
Mi'kmaq Chiefs: Political Organization and Indirect Rule	174
Mi'kmaq Districts	176
Changing Subsistence Strategies	177
Porpoise Hunting in the Bay of Fundy (c. 1815–1895)	179
Changing Material Culture: Fixed Dwellings and Common Dress	180
Political Paternalism: Indian Agents	182
Federal Guardianship: The Indian Act (1876)	183
Indian Residential School of Shubenacadie	185
Magic Heroes in the Enchanted World of Imagination	186
Conclusion	187
13. <i>Mi'kmaq Cultural Survival: A Tribal Nation in the Modern World</i>	189
Mi'kmaq Personhood and Indian “Status”	189
Mi'kmaq Bands Today: Federal Hegemony	190
Reserves: Places of Refuge and Government Dependency	191
Mi'kmaq Mobility and the Tribal Network	192
Caroline Sark Copage: Oral History	193
Donald and Mary Sanipass: Oral History	195
Counterculture and Revival in Indian Country	198
Political Resistance: Indian Unions and Self-Determination	199
Radical Politics: AIM and the Killing of Anna Mae Pictou	200
Cultural Renaissance	202
The Paradox of Imprisonment: Discovering Indianness in Jail	202
<i>Sante' Mawio'mi</i> and the Paradox of St. Anne	203
Language: Key to the Survival of Mi'kmaq Culture	207
Political Revitalization: Mi'kmaq Native Rights	209
Land Claims	209
Treaty Rights: Hunting and Fishing	210
Challenging Sex Discrimination	211
Boston Indian Council: Resurrecting the 1776 Watertown Treaty	212
Rebirth of the Wabanaki Confederacy	212
Beating the Melting Pot: Federal Recognition of the Aroostook Band in Maine	213
Mi'kmaq Sovereignty	214
Sovereignty and the <i>Sante' Mawio'mi</i>	214
Conclusion	216
Glossary	219
Bibliography	221
Credits	235
Films on the Mi'kmaq: An Annotated List	237
Index	239

1 / Introduction: Quest for Cultural Survival

Numbering about 25,000, the Mi'kmaq are the largest of the surviving Algonquian-speaking groups in northeast America. Along with the closely related St. Francis Abenaki, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot, they belong to a cluster of eastern Algonquians known as the Wabanaki ("Dawnland") Indians.

Most Mi'kmaqs hold membership in one of 29 communities known as bands. Only one, the Aroostook Band of Micmacs, is situated in the United States (northern Maine). The others are linked to reserves in Newfoundland (one), Quebec (three), and Canada's Maritime Provinces (Nova Scotia, thirteen; New Brunswick, nine; Prince Edward Island, two). Mi'kmaqs share certain fundamental cultural characteristics and values that identify them ethnically as members of the same tribe or nation, called the *Mi'kmaq Nationimow*. For instance, many still speak their ancestral tongue, which belongs to the eastern Algonquian language family, once spoken from Labrador down to North Carolina.



Mi'kmaq Country: traditional districts and modern bands.

Traditionally Mi'kmaqs called themselves *L'nu'k* (or *Ulnoo*), meaning "humans" or "people" (Rand 1888:143). Today this Mi'kmaq word connotes native people in general. Early colonial records referred to Mi'kmaqs by an assortment of names (Souriquois, Gaspesiens, Miskoutins, Acadiens, Tarentines, Cape Sables, etc.), a practice that has caused some confusion among scholars. The name Mi'kmaq, itself, variously spelled, took precedence in European records in the late seventeenth century. Most accepted among various etymologies for the name is the belief that it derives from *nikmaq*, a greeting that translates as "my kin friends" (Lescarbot 1:79; Whitehead 1987:20).¹

The Mi'kmaqs' geographic position on the northern Atlantic seaboard singled them out for the dubious honor of being among the very first indigenous peoples in northeast America to encounter the European vanguard. First they met Breton fishermen, who began frequenting the coasts of Mi'kmaq country in 1504. In 1525, a group of Portuguese men founded a short-lived colony at Cape Breton Island. Soon afterward, European fishermen began offering Mi'kmaqs a variety of commodities in exchange for furs, opening the door to a massive international fur trade. By 1600, the majority of Mi'kmaqs had died of diseases born of contact with Europeans, and survivors were transforming from seacoast foragers into market hunters and middlemen in the fur trade. By this time, some had acquired Basque sailing boats, which enabled them to range with relative ease from Newfoundland to Cape Cod. A few years later they obtained their first firearms, becoming one of the earliest American Indian groups to use this new weaponry. Meanwhile, some adventurous Mi'kmaqs even explored Europe. A chieftain named Messamoet, for instance, sailed across the Atlantic in the 1570s and lived in southern France for two years before returning to Nova Scotia.

European fishers and traders led the way to a full-scale colonization competition, between France and England in particular. For two centuries these newcomers battled for Mi'kmaq trade, land, and souls. When the smoke cleared, Mi'kmaqs and other Indian groups along the Atlantic seaboard found themselves landless or confined to small reservations. In the years that followed, they emerged as an impoverished and powerless underclass of artisans and seasonal laborers.

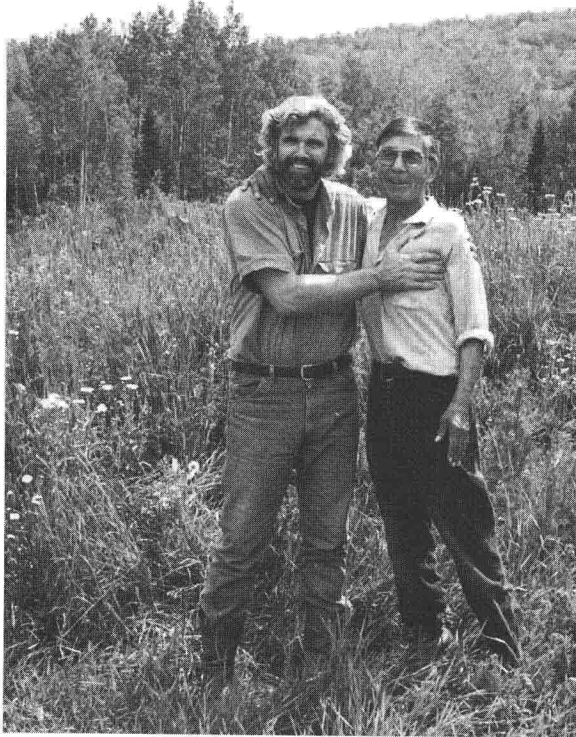
Today, Mi'kmaqs represent a tiny portion (about 0.6 percent) of the population inhabiting their ancestral domains. And their reservations comprise but a fraction (0.25 percent) of their original 40,000-square-mile territory—just a few acres per individual.

This book provides a concise description of Mi'kmaq culture on the eve of the European invasion and traces the changes that have taken place in that culture over the last 500 years. It chronicles the endurance of the Mi'kmaq as an indigenous nation, its ordeals in the face of colonialism, and its current struggle for self-determination and cultural revitalization. These pages also explore indigenous reactions to Europe's "New World discovery" and the cultural transformations it set into motion, revealing the complex historical dynamics that resulted in the Mi'kmaqs' remarkable, if tenuous, survival in contemporary society.

As this text illustrates, Mi'kmaqs have not been just outnumbered by European newcomers or overwhelmed by their powerful technology. They have also become victims of a European ideology that condemned indigenous nations in North Amer-

ica as inferior. A principal component of this colonial ideology is the construct of “history” as the progressive development of humanity in stages of gradual growth. As far as Europeans were concerned, there was no doubt that they were in the lead. Envisioning themselves as having reached the most advanced stage of human development, they presumed that cultures that most radically differed from their own were the most behind. Situated on the extreme end of an imaginary time line, the Europeans represented their own cultures as highly developed civilizations in contrast to the primitive lifeways of wild savages. Using the concept of “progress,” they conjured up the idea that indigenous peoples such as the Mi’kmaq were ignorant. Stuck at an inferior stage of human development, as if they were children, the Mi’kmaq were seen as quaint or backward folks who required “improvement.” If they refused to change their primitive ways, they were considered obstinate and in need of discipline. Europeans saw themselves as the chosen improvers and disciplinarians and called their task the “white man’s burden.” In fact, the real burden—subjection to domination—belonged not to the colonizers, but to the colonized.

Closely tied to this hierarchical construct of history is the European idea of “prehistory.” Referring to the Western Hemisphere as the “New World,” they have taken their own “discovery” of America as a chronological baseline. This event,



Aroostook Mi’kmaq tribal elder Donald Sanipass, the “Great Heart” (meski’k mkamlamun), and the author; Chapman, Maine, Summer 1992.

some five hundred years ago, has become accepted as the moment for American history to actually begin. It is as if it took a white man to push the magic button of the historical chronometer. Once the clock began to tick, local events were recorded as historical “facts” to be placed on a worldwide time scale. Events that took place before the arrival of Europeans were dubbed “prehistory” and viewed as nebulous and static, despite the vivid and dynamic pictures hinted at in native myths and legends.

These ideological constructs enabled European newcomers to Mi'kmaq country to legitimize conquest, rationalize political domination, justify cultural repression, and, finally, to excuse our ignorance of what really happened in the past. Today, however, Mi'kmaqs are keenly aware of the ideological significance of historical information and employ this knowledge as a political instrument in their ongoing struggle for native rights. Aware that voiding their past represses their prospects as a tribal nation with a viable future, Mi'kmaqs refuse to be omitted from texts that describe what happened in history. This new awareness is illustrated by the following incident. In 1984, three years after I began working on a native rights case with the Mi'kmaqs in northern Maine, their cry for justice was still ignored by federal and state authorities, and the general public remained unaware of the band's precarious survival as off-reservation Indians. Working out of the band's headquarters in the center of Presque Isle, I was midway through collecting the historical documentation needed for their case when a historical booklet celebrating the city's 125th anniversary (1859–1984) was published. Remarkably, the booklet's “Chronology of Historical Events” noted absurdly incidental events, such as the 1982 visit of the rock band Dr. Hook, but did not include a single word about the still-existing aboriginal inhabitants of the area. When I asked one of the authors why the Mi'kmaq had not been even mentioned in the booklet, he responded that “Indians were prehistorical [and] don't form part of history.” In reaction, local Mi'kmaq leaders Paul Phillips and Richard Silliboy published a letter of protest in the regional newspaper: “Apparently the facts that we maintain an office in Presque Isle, that our fellow tribespeople performed stoop labor in the potato fields, and above all, that Indian people were the original proprietors of all the lands in Aroostook County, including Presque Isle, were not sufficient proof of our place in history” (*The Presque Isle Star Herald* 12 Dec. 1984).

It is ironic that Europeans who were responsible for diminishing Mi'kmaq life documented much of what they were destroying—in explorers' logs, trade records, missionary letters, colonial records, and so forth. Equally ironic is the fact that present-day Mi'kmaqs seeking to understand their cultural identity turn to these exogenic records as a key resource. On one hand, such chronicles do not objectively reflect what really happened in Mi'kmaq history. They are profoundly colored by the author's ideological lenses, and they touch upon Mi'kmaq life primarily as it intersected with European activities. Yet they often provide the only direct view of past Mi'kmaq life, and therefore influence the way the contemporary Mi'kmaqs understand and act upon their own history.

This given, the current cultural consciousness of Mi'kmaqs is shaped not only by their own oral traditions but also by knowledge of their past written by twenty generations of European observers. A survey of these “external” sources, coupled with the tribe's “inside” tradition, provides us with a rare opportunity to develop