

Feature Articles

Basketmaking, Politics, and Education: A Success Story from the Micmac Community

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A dozen years ago, after finishing an MA in anthropology at Columbia, I moved from New York City to southern Maine. My plan was to continue my career as a writer, focusing on Third World communities, particularly various cultural niches in Africa, where I'd already done a considerable amount of writing. However, I got side-tracked--by an old friend and a band of Indians.

My friend, an educator, was doing community development work with an off-reservation band of 450 Micmac Indians who lived in scattered enclaves across the vast hinterlands of northern Maine. They eked out a living as seasonal laborers—harvesting blueberries and potatoes, cutting pulpwood, and making baskets. According to my friend, this band desperately needed an anthropologist. They had just been excluded from the landmark Maine Indian Land Claims Settlement, which compensated Maine's three other tribes for historical land losses by providing money to buy back some land and gave them the recognition needed for health, education, and housing assistance eligibility through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Micmacs had been excluded from the settlement simply because no one had done the ethnohistorical research necessary to substantiate their claim.

So, would I move to the cold wilds of northern Maine and work as an anthropologist for the Micmacs? I said no. After all, I'd gotten my degree to bring new cross-cultural insight and research methodology to my writing, not to actually *do* anthropology. I suggested that Harald Prins, a Dutch anthropologist who had just retreated to Maine to do some writing, might be interested in the work. Harald's response was very

tentative, but he agreed to an interview and invited me to go along. We made the 4-hour drive north and arrived at council headquarters located in a delapidated former schoolhouse. I sat in on Harald's meeting with the tribal council, and heard in detail the challenges faced by their community.

After the meeting, a Micmac grandmother named Tilly pulled me aside and announced, "We may look and sound defeated, but we're not." Then she said, "You know, the day my daughter was born, I took her tiny little hand, pressed it into a fist, and told her, 'You must fight for your rights.' My daughter has given up--but I'm still fighting."

Tilly's determination was tough to ignore. On the way home Harald and I talked. Concerned that the work would consume the time he needed to write, he proposed we share the job—spending 2-3 days a week up north working with the Micmacs, and the other days down south writing. I said yes. We proposed it to the Micmacs. They said yes. That was the beginning of a real education for us all.

In the years that followed, Harald's exhaustive archival research and, to a more modest degree, my oral history research revealed that Micmac claims for land and federal recognition were, indeed, valid. But winning the support of the public and of state and federal politicians proved to be a formidable challenge, for this Indian community was comprised of several generations of uneducated laborers uncomfortable with and unprepared for stepping onto a public platform to define their cause.

It quickly became clear that federal recognition would not be won without self-recognition and a sense of self-worth. These were sorely lacking in this poverty-struck community clinging to remnants of its traditional culture. The majority of Micmac families survived on less than \$5000 a year. Many lived in houses with dirt floors, tarpaper walls, and no indoor plumbing. The highschool dropout rate was a stunning 95%. Only one Micmac had a college education—she served as director of the tribal council.

The Maine education system had failed this particular group of people, whose reasons for quitting school ranged from pressure to take menial jobs to help support the family to embarrassment over poor clothing to traumas caused by racial slurs. All of them had stories of

being victimized by discrimination and misinformed stereotypes. This fact was driven home by a story told to me by a sociologist who had spent the previous year working with the Micmacs and a neighboring tribe, the Maliseets. One Saturday night he went to see an old cowboy and Indian movie at the local theater. Midway through the film he realized that his Indian companions were cheering for the cowboys. After the show, he asked one of the fellows why. The answer? “Even we get tired of cheering for losers.”

The immediate task at hand was to challenge this notion of being “losers” by finding a position of strength on which the Micmac community could build. To our surprise, the position of strength, the starting point identified by the Micmacs, was basketmaking. For generations Micmacs had made wood splint basket for harvest, storage, and various household uses. Although they were very poorly paid, Micmacs took pride in these beautiful, sturdy containers, and in the skill it takes to find and fell the right tree and to transform a trunk into smooth pliable strips for weaving. Best of all, they felt comfortable talking about baskets to anyone.

So baskets literally became the containers in which they took their cause to the public. We encouraged them to participate in major craft fairs around the state—doing basketry demonstrations alongside a finished basket that held flyers describing their political effort. Talks with onlookers about basketry gradually turned into talks about social injustice and federal recognition. When they attended meetings with local and state political leaders, Micmacs went with a basket in hand, presented it as a gift, talked about their traditional ways of making a living from the woods, and eventually got around to their struggle to gain federal recognition and reclaim lost land. Harald produced a film about Micmac basketmakers. After it appeared on public television, print and broadcast journalists began interviewing community members. Ultimately, many Micmacs became very comfortable speaking on behalf of themselves and their community. Some who were interviewed couldn’t read, and would tap their children or other Micmacs to read the articles to them. Gradually, reading became relevant to their lives.

Alongside the political effort was an economic one to turn basketry into a viable livelihood. Ten years ago many Micmacs were trading their baskets for food, as their ancestors had done. Those who sold them for

cash received meager sums. Indian baskets were little appreciated in rural, northern Maine where they were seen first and foremost as a harvest tool used to bring in the potato crop (about 15 percent of the crop is still brought in by hand, using Indian baskets). Few Micmacs owned cars to transport their wares to the better paying markets of New England.

After extensive discussions with basketmakers about their marketing challenges, we worked with the council to establish a *Basket Bank*--a tailor-made, tribal-owned marketing and distribution center where they could sell their work for fair prices. The basketmaker elected to head up the Bank was a bright, common-sense man who had quit school after the 4th grade to help his family make a living. He soon discovered that his enthusiasm and basketry knowhow were not enough to make the Basket Bank succeed. But they were a starting point on which he could build--they were his position of strength. Suddenly, education had a tangible purpose in his life. Of his own volition, he went for his GED and then took accounting and business courses at the local college. Today, the Basket Bank operates without the federal subsidy that helped launch it. Several other Micmacs who came to work in the Bank's office and store have gone back to school to get the skills needed to do their jobs well.

Last year, the day before Thanksgiving, President Bush signed legalization granting the band federal recognition and money to buy back native land. In the years leading up to this, several adult Micmac drop-outs returned to school, seeking skills that they determined were needed to help them reach their goals--and beyond.

Not long after the Basket Bank was on its feet, I attended a meeting of Micmac elders who were lamenting the fact that museums owned all surviving examples of the crafts of their ancestors. We decided to approach the Maine Arts Commission and another local foundation to remedy this off-kilter situation. We won funding which went toward securing a tribal-owned collection of the works of contemporary Micmac basketmakers, along with photographic and biographical documentation of the artisans. I had the honor of writing the biographies, the profiled Micmacs edited them, and Micmac basketmaker-photographer Donald Sanipass took the photos. The work resulted in a book and an exhibit that has been touring New England museums since winter 1991--along with

tribal members who demonstrate their craft and talk to onlookers about it and other aspects of Micmac culture.

There have been quite a few stories of individual and collective gain within the Micmac community during the last decade--some of them modest, all of them meaningful. The point is that growth has taken place by tapping into the unique cultural strengths of this community; leaders and mentors have emerged within the band; education, made relevant, has been sought, found, and applied; and dialog with the mainstream community has begun to happen on a more equal footing. Nagging stereotypes of Indians are being chipped away, and a measure of appreciation of positive diversity is evident as Micmacs are increasingly invited by schools and other institutions to speak of their culture, tell tribal legends, demonstrate their crafts, or discuss small business strategies.

Surely, there are many ways to close the gap between our academic institutions and cultural niches outside the mainstream, be they Indian reservations, migrant labor communities, or immigrant ghettos. Whether the gap is closed by attracting members of these communities to the institutions by making the institutions offerings relevant to community members' lives or better preparing adult education and other practitioners who will go out and work in these communities, it's clear that an awareness, understanding, and respect of diversity is essential—not because it's politically correct, but because every culture holds a unique set of keys to open up answers to life's challenges.

It has almost become cliché to say that we live in a shrinking, ever more interactive world where cross-cultural understanding and cooperation are vital, but it's true. And it is vital that our institutes of higher learning better prepare practitioners for such a world by awakening and sensitizing them to cultural differences and commonalities and by weaving respect for national and international diversity into the fabric of education.

One basketmaking friend of mine, a grand hulk of a man known as Talking Moose, is a philosopher of sorts. He often uses basketry metaphors when talking about life. One night, as we sat in his workshop surrounded by wood strips and shavings, he spoke of how important it is to understand the distinct nature of one's own culture and those of others.

He held up a stick of the ashwood he uses to make his basket—a cross-section of a tree trunk that had been squared off and pounded with the butt of an axe until it split along its year rings into strips used for weaving. Showing me where he had overpounded the stick and caused it to smash rather than separate into clean strips, he said, “Culture is like this piece of ash; if you don’t understand its nature, you can easily smash it.”