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the Subarctic Fur Trade, 1750-1850 *Mary Black-Rogers*

Beyond Everyone's Horizon Stand the Naskapi *José Mailhot*

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Book Reviews

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demics—and possibly fur traders—must be dealt with, each season, in a delicate balancing of calculated risks (Rogers and Black 1974, 1976). The hunter must plan his party's itinerary, composition, specific equipment, and backup measures. This would be so even in the absence of the fur trade, which only added more factors with which he must deal, as described by Krech (1983: 131-35; see Tanner 1979: 133 on economy of planning and information gathering).

Indian perceptions of this syndrome may entail cultural differences, particularly regarding the concept of "being in control." The Indian's conception of his relation to the natural and social environment involved notions alien to the European. The description that follows is based on personal ethnographic work with Ojibwa Indians, and on others' field data with the Cree and other Algonquians. It does not refer to Athapaskans, but may apply to them in part.

In Ojibwa belief systems, events and conditions beyond one's control had special rules for handling, manifested by behavior referred to as 'respect'. The Indian perception did not separate natural and social environment; all of nature's things were living, and humans interacted with them. There was no accidental or nonpurposive event; all were caused by "persons" whether human or other-than-human (to use the language of Hallowell 1960). The natural elements and the animal, botanical, and mineral species had their own modes of 'power'. Power resided in all living things, but not with equal strength; the measure of every interaction was an assessment of *relative power*, which could change from day to day although a general continuum existed from the most powerful spirits to the lowest of insects, with humans scattered through the middle. Human beings, however, were dependent upon gifts of power in the form of 'blessings' from their individual spirit helpers, with whom a private 'respect/bless' relationship obtained. It was not good policy to speak of one's own powers (boasting and competitive motivations were frowned upon), and it was bad policy to try to control others against their will (coercive powers were recognized, but considered 'bad medicine'). Individual autonomy and self-sufficiency were revered, but the facts of dependence and interdependence were not neglected. One had the most 'respect' for those upon whom one was most dependent.

It is not surprising to students of northern Algonquian belief systems that center stage is generally occupied by the relationship of men to the major game animals (see Note 9). This is probably the deepest and oldest level of the religion of Ojibwa and Cree people, the core aspects of which are too sensitive and important to be spoken of except ritually. Perhaps for this very reason they did not frequently surface in trading-post documents. (See, however, HBCA B.198/a/71 fo. 10d and Long 1791: 113). We assume that these beliefs and practices found in the mid-twentieth century do represent something "Indian," whether or not aboriginal or changing over time. The aspects of this system that may have affected communication between traders and Indians will be noted in what follows.¹⁰

At the transition from Literal to Technical usage are the cases where trappers were reported to have "singd and eaten their furs"—an ironic situation (though nutritious, see Note 6). From an outpost at Duck Lake (east of Lake Winnipeg), here is part of a 1799 journal entry:

... on approaching ny ye House [he] called out starving. . . . *he informed me that his Children has Singed and eaten above 20 Br in furs* (HBCA B.54/a/1 fos. 12-12d; emphasis added)

This is a double-barreled kind of communication: a Literal message in that furs would not be eaten except in the absence of other food, and a Technical message in that *if* furs have been singed and eaten then they are *lost to the trader* . . . sometimes only a few hours before they could have been delivered to his door. What better evidence that the hunter's reason for not paying his debt in furs lay in his having allocated too much of his season's pursuit to trapping, leaving too little for the procuring of food? Literally (and miserably) he has eaten up the profits.

Technical Usage

The technical definition of the term /STARV-/ that is proposed here will not be found in a standard English dictionary. It belongs in a specialized glossary of fur-trade language. There it might read: "A condition in which primary attention must be directed to the food quest, allowing little leeway for other activities." Or, in fur-trade language, "hunting for the belly and not for furs." A goodly number of data cases can be analyzed as Technical and many more are partly Technical (Table 1). The fur-trade meaning of /STARV-/ in the pure cases does not necessarily involve hunger. On the other hand, it is not divorced from food: "Most of them has not payd their Debts upon the Account of Starvation in the winter" (HBCA B.198/a/70 fo. 11d); "a poor hunt indeed . . . they have been looking for Deers which prevented them hunting fur animals . . . now going to a rabbit ground where they can hunt nothing except them" (HBCA B.155/a/38 fo. 14d); or simply "they Say we must Strive to Live not to hunt" (HBCA B.155/e/11 fo. 3). (Note Technical use of "hunt"; see Glossary.)

The trapper who reported that he had to subsist on his fur catch was giving the Technical message that he had not brought pelts sufficient to pay his debt because food became a first priority. It was a statement based on a business transaction. The Indian was recognizing the trader's priority, which was to obtain furs. Sometimes he added the message: *if you send some food out to my brother's tent (where they are singeing their furs) you may yet save his catch for your business*. Basically, however, the Indian Technical message conveyed the necessity of hunting food, as expressed by William McKay at Trout Lake: "[they] complain of starving hard which prevents them from hunting furs" (HBCA B.220/a/16 fo. 29d). Saying they had been starving did not, in these cases, refer to present hunger. Some, in fact, brought food rather than furs,