

The Passing of the “Red Indians of Newfoundland”. Colonisation and Agency in the Beothuk’s Extinction in the 17th – 19th Centuries: Success and Failure

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Achieving subsequent notoriety as the “Red Indians” for the use of ochre on their bodies, the Beothuk were the main indigenous inhabitants of Newfoundland at the time of contact with Europeans at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The settling of European fishermen along the coast progressively cut the Beothuk off from their traditional resources. They slowly retreated inland and closed in on themselves, coming to the coasts only to steal European items, bringing retaliation from the settlers. The reduction of their territory, access to hunting grounds, environmental factors, the colonists’ persecution eventually had the upper hand on the tribe who dwindled toward extinction. After the death of the captive Shanawdithit on 6th June 1829, the Beothuk were declared a defunct cultural entity. Different reasons have been advanced to explain their demise; however, these all stem from their denied freewill and community agency. This paper will aim at restoring their place in their history; expanding up on their image as a doomed tribe, due to their failure to adequately respond to their victimisation by both colonists and nature. Lastly, a hypothesis will be made that the Beothuk acted according to a taboo whose consequences were both a success and a failure, and accelerated their demise.

Keywords: Beothuk; First Nations; colonisation; agency; taboo;
Red Indian; ochre; middle ground, extinction

Introduction

One of the challenges we are faced with is how to reconstruct the life and agency of extinct First Nations. When a community virtually left no traces, or traces that cannot be interpreted as such, and the main sources of scholarship were written by white men, we are faced with a conundrum that we can only hope to resolve with the help of a variety of different approaches. By combining archival research, archaeological records, anthropological research on neighbouring First Nations, and when available oral traditions, we may be able to reconstruct some part of the Beothuk's disappeared past. As for the "Red men of Newfoundland", it can be argued that their demise was not due to a single factor but a conjunction of events that, together, brought their untimely end.

The Beothuk were the main inhabitants of Newfoundland and were living mainly on the inner coast from marine and riverine resources, they also hunted inland during winter to complement their diet. In the seventeenth century, the arrival of the Europeans changed their environment: the settling along the coast by seasonal fishermen started to progressively cut the Beothuk off from their traditional resources. This Native community slowly retreated inland and closed in on themselves, coming to the coasts only at night to steal European items, and attacking isolated parties, which in turn brought mistrust and retaliation from the settlers. The reduction of their territory and access to their hunting grounds, combined with various environmental factors :diseases, the colonists' technological advantages and the natural ally of all new colonies, lead to the tribe eventually dwindling toward extinction. Where the Beothuk had managed to live from a difficult terrain in a successful way, their encounter with Europeans would prove to be a failure. After the death of Shanawdithit in 1829, the "Red Indians of Newfoundland" were declared a defunct cultural entity.

Although this seems to fit the inevitability and doomed components of extinction stories, this paper hopes to show that this could have been different, had they made different early choices within their agency.¹ The following parts will show the problems linked to the "middle ground", the Beothuk's

¹ The expression 'vanished people', or 'vanished race' has been used to characterise the Beothuk (Pullman, 2018). While in the first acceptance of the term the Beothuk have vanished, a word must be said about this concept. The idea of 'vanishing race' originated in the early twentieth century following two principles. The first was that America's 'Manifest Destiny' was accomplished, and the frontier closed. The second was Social Darwinism: the idea of conflicting civilisations, where one was bound to overcome the weaker that would disappear was fitting the American situation. The country's recent history, the governmental programs of assimilation of Native communities into the American helped to fix the image of First Nations as vanishing, and, as an image of the past, anachronistic pieces not pertaining to the present (Beck, 2001). However, this concept does not consider the fact that the American policy of assimilation was an acknowledgement that Natives Nations had not vanished. North American Native cultures had managed to survive, and are still represented. Moreover, the Unesco's Intangible Cultural Heritage declaration (2003) states that "The intangible cultural heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human

response to it, and argue that a taboo ruled their community, leading to both success in keeping their community together, and failure in their relationship with Europeans.

“Middle Ground”?

The “middle ground” concept originated in Richard White’s eponymous book written in 1991.² White considered the “middle ground” as being a geographical location (the ‘pays d’en haut’ in the Great Lakes region, in the period 1650-1815) and a process between the various colonising nations and Algonquian tribes, in which they practiced mutual compromises. There were ‘creative misunderstandings’, in which people tried to create commonly acceptable processes. He stated conditions under which this might happen. The “middle ground” needed a place with minimum nation-run authority, a balance in the scale of power between the forces present, preventing one from overcoming the other, and finally the desire to meet and interact with each other. White leaders would be paternalistic, offering Native communities presents and interceding when conflict broke out. Native nations would engage in trade and accept a degree of European management. The French were good at establishing and maintaining the “middle ground”. The English were not, preferring enforcement to negotiation.³

The “middle ground” was thus a place where mutual misunderstandings created new meanings. To be able to work, a “middle ground” needed a series of events and places, related to each other: colonies linked to outposts, to a web of allied chiefs, to series of rituals understood and accepted by all. The people in presence of each other created a complex network of economic, political, cultural, and social alliances, congregating to meet the requirements of a particular historical context. This was adaptation and creation of cultures. To use a popular term, these people were ‘in-betweeners’.⁴ Jay Gitlin also put his print on the “middle ground”. Gitlin argued that the “middle ground” was the place where history was happening. People would hold several titles, representing their community and that of the colonial force they were allied with when dealing with a third party. It is away from colonial centres that events would unfold, because it was there that men were accommodating each other’s’ cultures.⁵ This ideal “middle ground” narrated by White represents a success in inter-communities’ relationships.

creativity”. While there are no texts or reports mentioning that intermarriages occurred between Beothuk and Europeans, and the behaviour exhibited by the Native community would have prevented them, we know that Beothuk and Mi’kmaq intermarried: Santu claimed to be of such lineage. While modern Mi’kmaq do not claim any descendancy, they acknowledge their common past and have been instrumental in keeping Beothuk culture alive and in the repatriation of Beothuk artefacts and bones to Newfoundland (Pullman, 2018). The concept of ‘vanishing people’ has thus to be used carefully.

² WHITE, R., 1991. *The Middle Ground: Indian, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ *Ibid.* pp.50-53.

⁴ WHITE, R., 1991. *The Middle Ground: Indian, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; DELORIA, P.J., 2006. What is the Middle Ground, Anyway? *The William and Mary Quarterly*, **63**(1), pp. 15-22.

⁵ GITLIN, J., 1993. On the Boundaries of Empire: Connecting the West to its Imperial Past. In: W. CRONON, G. MILES and J. GITLIN, eds, *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*. New York: W. W. Norton, pp. 71-89.

However, it can be argued that, since the balance of power is the crux of the “middle ground”, the amount of times and places when the elements met for the concept to have worked could have been relatively limited (and maybe was), due to the difference in technologies between Europeans and Natives, and the different policies of the colonising forces. Since the “middle ground” was a process, it was applicable to other geographical areas and other periods than White’s. What happened in the Great Lakes region did not however happen in the same way everywhere. There was not a “middle ground” but some “middle grounds”. In some instance it did not happen at all because, if the process of mediation is, to a degree, common, building a historical space where it becomes actual relationships between people is harder to obtain. If one of the components happened to be missing, this fragile balance would not appear, or would be controlled by the more powerful of the two, which was not a “middle ground” anymore. Nevertheless, the “middle ground” remains important because it puts natives at the front of this history due to its implication of the creation of new cultures even when the balance of forces is absent.

The “middle ground”, being described as a balancing act, ended when the colonists had gathered enough power to make the system unnecessary. What happened to Native communities after that is history. However, for some the “middle ground” did not exist, or stopped after a period. The consequences were often difficult, sometimes radical and for at least one tribe, the Beothuk, it was devastating.

The Beothuk and the “Middle Ground”: Whose Failure?

Being hunter-gatherers, the Beothuk used the resources from most of the island. Despite its large area, Newfoundland has relatively few terrestrial species to be hunted, the main one being caribou. On the other hand, the marine species represent the real richness of the island. The Beothuk owed their subsistence to caribou and beaver during the winter time, and a wider diet of birds, eggs, seals, shells and salmon in spring and summer. The camps were following this seasonality, and most were found along the inner coast, allowing access to both coastal and inland resources.⁶

We know little of the first encounters, the contact moment between the Beothuk and Europeans. The waters surrounding Newfoundland were extremely rich with fish, especially cod, marine mammals and birds. In the first years before and after discovery some captains and whalers were reluctant to divulge their fishing spots, and at the time most of the crews were illiterate and did not leave any written indications. We know that Basque whalers were amicably trading with the different tribes they interacted with very early in the sixteenth century, perhaps before. Their main hunting area being the Strait of Belle Isle, it is likely that some were Beothuk.⁷

⁶ PASTORE, R.T., 1989. The Collapse of the Beothuk World. *Acadiensis*, 19(1), pp. 52-71.

⁷ MARSHALL, I., 2001. *The Beothuk*. St. John's: McGill-Queen University Press, pp.3-4.

The first account of amicable trade and encounter came from John Guy in 1612. Accompanied by a few men, he was the first to report on the meeting and trading he undertook with Beothuk men. The event itself, while very important, brings forth elements that are more noticeable even. John Guy raised a white flag to show his friendly will. To this the Beothuk responded with a fire, inviting the Europeans to join them on the land.⁸ This brings two main conclusions: the Beothuk were not averse to trade, and they knew how to. And while there are no traces of any agreement to meet again, we know by one of Guy's followers, Henry Crout, that he intended to come back the next year and had a cabin built that would be used for this purpose.⁹ Settlers thus did recognise the need to trade and have the local Natives on their good side, and so did the Beothuk. It is noteworthy that at this time neither of the aforementioned considered the Beothuk as dangerous.¹⁰ The possibility of trust and trade thus seemed an option, and future relationships were considered with a good chance of success.

In his "*A discourse and Discovery of New-Found-Land*" in 1622, Captain Whitbourne was the first to report an incident, the theft of a ship's gear and provisions by Natives, while it was in Trinity Bay.¹¹ The Beothuk had probably pilfered before, however no mentions of this survived. The second report to appear dates from 1639. This time the Beothuk had not stolen anything, and were probably gathering to trade. A passing European ship, thinking they were up to no good, shot to scare them away, and they scattered in great hurry.¹² While short in their descriptions these two early primary sources indicate an important element: the Beothuk were prone to take what they needed. They could only be encouraged to do so by the fact that European fishing was transient for about a century after contact, and no Europeans were there to assert control for about half of the year. A fact that settlers knew and were thus on the watch for. Moreover, stealing by natives seemed to have started earlier and/or may have been a cultural trait as it was already reported by Cartier in the 16th century.¹³

By the beginning of the 18th century, the settlers started to expand onto the Beothuk's hunting grounds. Around 1708, a man called George Skeffington started to catch and process salmon in rivers along Bonavista Bay. To facilitate the expansion, the land had been cleared up to 60 km up the rivers.¹⁴ The posts installed along the banks denied the Beothuk to access their usual fishing grounds, salmon being an important part of their diet. These measures led to the natives to breaking up the fishing weirs. Skeffington reported that his fishery had been "obstructed by the Islander Indians, killing some of his men, breaking some of his dams". Thereafter the Beothuk would come two times a year and break all the dams they would find, stealing the metal in the process.¹⁵

⁸ GUY, J., 1612. *Journal*. British Library, Manuscripts. No. 250, f.406-12.

⁹ CELL, G.T., 1982. *Newfoundland Discovered*. London: The Hakluyt Society, p.84.

¹⁰ CROUT, H., 1612. *Letter Dated 8 September 1612, Henry Crout to Sir Percival Willoughby*. Willoughby Papers, Middleton Manuscripts, Mix 1/20.

¹¹ WHITBOURNE, R., 1622. *A Discourse and Discovery of New-Found-Land*. London: Felix Kinghow.

¹² HOWLEY, J.P., 1915. *The Beothucks or Red Indians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.24.

¹³ MICHELANT, M.H. and RAME, A., 1865. *Voyage de Jaques Cartier au Canada en 1534 (Jaques Cartier's voyage in Canada in 1534)*. Paris: Librairie Tross, p.56.

¹⁴ SKEFFINGTON, G., 1720. *Petition by G. Skeffington, 23 February 1720*. London: Public Record Office CO 194/6, f.332.

¹⁵ *Answer to the Head of Enquiries on the Newfoundland Fishery, 12 November 1722*. CO 194/7 f.115. Public Record Office.

While the Beothuk had engaged in sporadic trade early after contact, they never adhered to full trade relations. The Beothuk had never fully committed because they could steal from the Europeans' outposts. However, when year-long settlement began, the Natives had no say in the Europeans' ways. The English settlers, not being able to trade for furs, trapped for themselves, which had the double incidence of depriving the Native community of their resource, and bringing the English into territories where pelted animals were found, which were also the Beothuk's hunting grounds. Missing participation in a "middle ground" took away from both parties the temporary cushion of intermixing cultures that occurred on the continent.¹⁶ This took the Natives out of the economic equation, but entered them in the access to resources contest for which they were ill equipped. The Beothuk's adherence to traditional codes of conduct, values, could be a reason for this. Having their own way of seeing and judging men and their actions, they may have understood early on that these white men, their economic individualism would destroy their culture and way of life. They may have thought that it would damage their traditional social bonds, and perhaps knew what was going on in nearby Labrador, that trading fur would soon deplete the landscape of game. They could also have wanted to limit the impact of European diseases.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the failure by the Beothuk to interact in a "middle ground", and the colonists' economic reasoning calling for retaliation of Native stealing separated both groups irremediably and sent them on path of violence.

Ochre and Taboo

The Beothuk, like many other tribes of the north-east, used red ochre to adorn their bodies and artefacts. Their specificity was that they covered their whole body, where other communities would use it on parts of their bodies. Ochre was given a ritual place, highlighted by the use on the dead and the burial places.¹⁸

A woman named Santu, born of a Beothuk father and Mi'kmaq mother, told ethnographer Franck Speck that the ochring process was a sign of their identity. The dye was applied on each and every member of the tribe, application that was renewed yearly during a ceremony. Santu also mentioned that de-ochring was considered as the worst possible punishment.¹⁹

John Guy, in 1612, mentioned that the Beothuk were "red with okir, as all their apparel is, and the rest of their bodie".²⁰ Several Jesuit who wintered with Montagnais and Mi'kmaq bands reported that

¹⁶ During the same period, the neighbouring Mi'kmaq developed a successful relationship with the French, creating a working "middle ground" that lasted until the English takeover of the area in 1713. See WALLIS, W. D., WALLIS, R., 1955. *The Micmac Indians of Eastern Canada*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁷ MARTIJN, C.A., 1990. 'Innu (Montagnais) in Newfoundland. *Archives of the Papers of the Algonquian Conference*, **21**, pp.231-234. From the onset of the eighteenth-century French settlers in Labrador started attracting Montagnais to their lands to help with work, and mostly to trap. The rarefaction of pelted animals brought the French to ask the Montagnais to cross the Strait of Belle Isle and trap in Newfoundland. The Beothuk probably learned of the situation through communication with the Montagnais. Also, UPTON, L.F.S., 1977. The Extermination of the Beothuks of Newfoundland. *The Canadian Historical Review*, **58**(2), p.138.

¹⁸ MARSHALL, I., 2001. *The Beothuk*. St. John's: McGill-Queen University Press, pp.287-288, p.405.

¹⁹ SPECK, F.G., 1922. *Beothuk and Micmac*. New York: Museum of the American Indian, pp.62-64.

²⁰ CELL, G.T., 1982. *Newfoundland Discovered*. London: The Hakluyt Society, p.75.

they did not paint their bodies, but did use colour on their utensils and clothing, mainly lines.²¹ This does not mean that all Native communities had stopped painting their bodies, but some may have abandoned the practice after European contact or could have had their own tribal variant, some may have stopped for decades. Nevertheless, this hints at the fact that the Beothuk were the last to use red ochre as a reflection of their identity, and that this practice was a singular trait within the north-eastern Native communities. This also implies that the use of ochre was an act of social unity, recognising their identity in the face of European invaders and other Native communities.

The Beothuk exhibited some particular behavioural traits: strict following of rules and beliefs (such as ochring) that remained throughout the colonial period and the death penalty pending all individuals who had had contact with Europeans. These are instances that can be put together to articulate a theory: this paper argues that these behavioural traits are the visible part of a taboo that got strengthened and augmented by the prolonged presence of English colonists. This represented the heart of the community's individuality. This was a taboo on contact.

This taboo, and the behavioural pattern that it implied, represent both success and failure within the Beothuk's agency. Holding on to their traditions and beliefs in the face of the advancing colonists successfully kept the small community together. However, it provoked the failure of the budding relationship within the "middle ground", and sent both parties on a path that heralded their demise.

Conclusion

The relationships between Native Communities and European settlers took many forms, from the ideal "middle ground" to open hostilities. While the "middle ground" could have been reached theoretically everywhere, its success or failure resided ultimately in the two groups' ability and desire to enter the "middle ground", or to stay within that "middle ground".

The Beothuk started the process during the 16th century, probably through contact with transient Basque whalers. When colonists appeared on their eastern shores, they continued this "middle ground", adapting its ways to fit their need. However, the nature of the Newfoundland fishery gave the Beothuk the opportunity to live on the side lines, and outside of the "middle ground" by sacking the deserted outposts. The settlers soon realised the island was more than just cod, and started fishing salmon, hunting for pelts, entirely bypassing the Natives who had not only ended the "middle ground", but by acting against the advancing colonies were putting themselves in the role of the 'bad Indian' who needed to be tamed, or for the Newfoundland settlers, to be eliminated. The Parliament knew about this violence, and despite reasonable warnings did not act or try to enforce any solution, enabling a massacre to continue. However, in the end, the "middle ground" did not really fail the Beothuk, everything was there for it to develop. The community's choices in its agency contributed to

²¹ LEJEUNE, P., 1635. *Relation De Ce Qui S'Est Passe en la Nouvelle France en l'Année 1634*. Paris: Sebastien Cramoisy, Imprimeur, pp.100-101.

the failure of their involvement and of the relationships with the English, bringing upon them the violence of the settlers and accelerating their demise.

This paper has also put forward that the attitude that the Beothuk developed post-contact, namely their avoidance, retreat inland and enhancement of spiritual practices such as ochring, were the visible part of their answer to external alterations brought by Europeans, and that these were grounded in a taboo. This taboo emphasised their resolve and held the community together successfully.

The Beothuk were thus an active and reactive community, not the tribe described as apathetic in the face of violence or environment. The Beothuk did make choices, although it can be argued that these decisions went against the community's benefit, did not meet the expected success, and spurred the march towards extinction. However, it would be wrong to assert that the Beothuk's choices only led to failure and extinction. The choices made, the strengthening of a tribal taboo, were visible acts of resistance. They were successful evidence of a community full of awareness and respect for itself, bound to do everything possible to remain who they were: the Beothuk.

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