

Discussion

Animal Personhood in Mi'kmaq Perspective

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External Editors: Chloe Taylor and Kelly Struthers-Montford

Received: 4 November 2014; in revised form: 24 November 2014 / Accepted: 26 November 2014 /

Published: 3 December 2014

Abstract: The Mi'kmaq are the First Nation people that traditionally inhabited the eastern coast of North America. This article explores the Mi'kmaq cultural view of non-human animals as siblings and persons, including elements shaping the Mi'kmaq relation with animals such as the belief that animals sacrifice themselves for food, that human and animal spirits are eternal, and a belief in reincarnation. The role of reciprocity in the animal–human relationship is examined through the concepts of respect and honor, and the Mi'kmaq value of avoiding scarcity (*netukulimk*) is expanded to include non-human animals.

Keywords: Mi'kmaq; animals; personhood; hunting; respect; reciprocity

1. Introduction

There is no view on animals that is shared by all Aboriginal people. Aboriginal is an umbrella term combining three distinct groups of people—First Nations, Inuit, and Metis—each with different histories shaping their worldview, their food practices, and their relationship with animals. Even among the First Nations in Canada there are over 600 governments or bands with unique histories and geographic locations. For this reason I will focus on my own Mi'kmaq tradition, although our nation is not homogenous either. I approach this work as a Mi'kmaq woman who grew up in the woods of Nova Scotia and now lives in Toronto, an urban city with a population over two million. As a vegan who sees my food practices as deeply rooted in my Mi'kmaq heritage, our relationships with animals are a key concern for me.

What exactly do I mean by Mi'kmaq tradition? Traditional practices are often framed as being pre-contact, as if the absence of colonial forces and their influence denotes a cultural purity. However, the Mi'kmaq culture is a living culture, shaped by interactions with other Indigenous nations and non-Indigenous visitors long before colonialism, and enduring despite ongoing colonial oppression. My definition of Mi'kmaq tradition is highly personal. It is the explicit and implicit teachings I received from my father and grandmother, in their words and actions. It is the values I see reflected in our stories, poetry, and art. It is the history we have collected in books, such as Daniel Paul's *We Were Not the Savages* [1]. As a child growing up in Nova Scotia in the 1970s, my view of Mi'kmaq tradition was also shaped by the resurgence in Indigenous activism, the growth of organized activism and lobby groups, the increasingly savvy defense of our treaty rights, and Indigenous values such as self-government and non-interference.

The Mi'kmaq are the First Nation people that have inhabited the eastern coast of North America for approximately ten thousand years. Mi'kmaq communities exist in the Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Newfoundland, and in the American state of Maine. Prior to colonial interference, our diet included wild fruit, berries, wild potato, and maple sap, and we were known to farm occasionally, but the majority of our diet was animal-based. In the spring we moved to our coastal villages where we caught, killed, and ate salmon, eels, and other fish, clams, mussels, scallops, and other shellfish, birds such as geese and ducks, and occasionally seals, porpoise, and whales [2]. Our hunting methods were relatively sophisticated. Lightweight birch bark canoes enabled hunters to glide noiselessly into a flock of birds, to fish with hook or spear off the coast by day or night, or to pursue large sea mammals [2]. Fish were also caught by weir, a barrier set up within a river to funnel spawning fish through a narrow channel where they can be captured in a basket or net. Some estimate that aquatic animals account for 90% of the traditional Mi'kmaq diet [2]. In the autumn the Mi'kmaq would move to smaller single-family camps inland where we subsisted on mammals such as beaver, porcupine, moose, deer, caribou, and bears, generally killed by pick, bow, snare, or deadfall trap. Mi'kmaq hunters tracked animals through the snow, gaining a tactical advantage with the use of snowshoes and transporting spoils by toboggan [2].

2. Animal Personhood

The Mi'kmaq view of the world is rooted in our relationship with the other-than-human animals that share our territories. For example, half of the Mi'kmaq names for the months of the year refer directly to the behavior of animals during that time. Dr. Joseph Couture, a Cree elder, shares an axiom that encapsulates the worldview I have inherited from my ancestors: "There are only two things you have to remember about being an Indian. One is that everything is alive, and the second is that we are all related" [3] (p. 107). The first point Couture makes, that everything is alive, is foundational to Mi'kmaq cosmology. We are sometimes described as having an animistic outlook, which means that the world around us is imbued with sentient life [4]. Not only animals, but also plants, rocks, water, and geographic locations can have an identity, personality, and spirit. Mi'kmaq cosmology posits a great spirit called *Kisu'lk* (the Creator, pronounced "gee-soolg") who made the universe and imbued it with life. The Mi'kmaq Association for Cultural Studies attaches ethical responsibility to this knowledge: all things—plants, animals, people, and Mother Earth herself—all have the Creator's spirit in them and must be respected. And because everything on Earth is connected, no part should be exploited or

abused. Each part must work in harmony with the rest. This does not mean that people cannot cut down trees, or hunt for food, but it does mean that the proper respect must be shown to the Creator for making these resources available to them in the first place [5].

The second half of Couture's point, that we are all related, is traditionally expressed in the phrase "all my relations," which in Mi'kmaq is *msit no'kmaq* (pronounced "mm-sit noh-goh-mah") [6]. What does it mean to be related to other animals? For the Mi'kmaq it means that humans and animals both experience our lives in the first-person, overcoming fears, having adventures, falling in love, raising families, vanquishing enemies, and having a relationship with *Kisu'lk*, the Creator. Anthropologist Anne-Christine Hornborg writes, "I think it is better to talk about personhood as the common essence of both animals and humans. A human is a human, a beaver is a beaver, but they are both persons" [4] (p. 22).

Professor of law Jens David Ohlin notes that "personhood is a talisman that confers status, respect, and moral worth" [7] (p. 211). Ohlin acknowledges the term is difficult to define precisely because it draws upon biological, metaphysical, moral, religious, and legal meanings [7]. Since I am a theologian by training I will frame my views in the words of Immanuel Kant: a person is someone "whose existence has in itself an absolute worth," a rational being who is "an end in itself" [8] (p. 10), rather than a means to an end. Against Kant, who argued that "animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as a means to an end" [8] (p. 11), the teachings I received from my father and from our broader Mi'kmaq culture frame animals as self-aware rational beings whose existence is *for themselves* rather than *for us*. In Kantian terms, they are *persons*.

What the personhood of animals actually looks like is captured in many of our Mi'kmaq legends [9]. In the story "The Beaver Magicians and the Big Fish" [10], a Mi'kmaq hunter follows snowshoe tracks to a wigwam by a lake, where he finds an elderly man and his family. The elder offers him hospitality, feeds him moose meat, and gives him a store of meat to take home. However, when the hunter returns to his own camp his family discovers that the meat is actually poplar bark. The hunter realizes that he has dined with a powerful *buoin* (a person of great spiritual power, pronounced "boo-o-win"). Although actually a beaver and generations of his offspring in a lodge, the hunter had experienced the family as if they were other Mi'kmaq living together in a wigwam. Legends such as this one present human and animal life on a continuum. Our stories feature animals who speak, transform into humans, marry humans and raise children with them. Some human *buoin* are believed to take animal form, and some of our stories feature humans who are changed into animals against their will. This is possible because humans and other animals are related, share the same essence—soul, if you like—and experience themselves as persons.

How does a culture that recognizes other animals as persons and relations reconcile this worldview with a diet that is so heavily animal derived? The answer is in the Mi'kmaq belief that animals willingly sacrifice themselves to become food. A Mi'kmaq creation story, for example, begins with the birth of Glooscap, our cultural hero and the archetype of virtuous human life [11]. The creator formed Glooscap from the red clay of the soil (possibly Prince Edward Island). The Creator then makes an old woman, Nukumi ("noo goo me"), from a dewy rock to be Glooscap's grandmother [12]. The role of a grandmother is important in Mi'kmaq culture, so much so that Nukumi is the first relative Glooscap acquires. She provides him with wisdom and in exchange Glooscap must provide her with food. Nukumi requires meat, for she explains that she cannot live on plants and berries alone

(which presumably Glooscap ate before her arrival), so Glooscap calls upon his friend, Apistanewj (“a-bis-ta-newch”) [12]. This word is Mi’kmaq for the *Martes americana*, or American pine marten, a small furry weasel related to the skunk and mink. Glooscap asks Apistanewj, the marten, to sacrifice himself so that Glooscap’s grandmother may eat. Apistanewj agrees, and to acknowledge this sacrifice Glooscap makes him his brother. Glooscap breaks Apistanewj’s neck and lays his body on the ground [11]. Glooscap immediately regrets his actions, Nukumi intervenes with the Creator, and the marten returns to life [11]. The body of another marten now lies on the ground, available to be eaten without the messy feelings of guilt and loss entailed in the death of a friend [11]. In later stories Apistanewj is sometimes described as an animal and sometimes as a human boy (again showing the fluidity of bodily expression between human and animal), but he is always Glooscap’s companion. To me this story encapsulates a significant concept in Mi’kmaq relations with other animals—the concurrence of death and life. Apistanewj is simultaneously dead as food, and alive as Glooscap’s friend [9]. Glooscap has an ongoing personal relationship with Apistanewj as his brother even as (indeed, perhaps precisely *because*) the marten serves Glooscap’s family as food.

A woman in Lacia Kinnear’s study of the Mi’kmaq at Bear River First Nation in Nova Scotia suggests that a respectful relationship with non-human animals is essential to maintain their willingness to sacrifice themselves [13]. She reports, “If we learn to live in good spirit with the animals they can continue to reproduce and...they will always be offering themselves; there will always be enough. You know, keep a nice cycle going” [13] (p. 71). One of the ways respect is shown to animals is in the careful treatment of their bones, which unless used to create necessities must be returned to the area where the animal lived, treated as a deceased friend, and given a respectful burial. The Mi’kmaq Association for Cultural Studies portrays interactions with our environment as both physical and spiritual:

Because they believe all things are part of nature and must be respected...when they cut down a tree, or dig up plant roots for medicine, or kill an animal for food, there are certain rituals they must follow to pay the proper respect—to give thanks for things they disturb for their own use. Some animals, like moose, give their lives so the Mi’kmaq may have food. They show respect to the moose by treating the remains with respect. The bones of the moose should never be burned or given to household pets, they should be used to make something or buried [5].

Peter Christmas, former director of the Micmac Association of Cultural Studies, notes that if the proper respect were not shown to an animal’s remains then the animal’s spirit would convey this information to its living animal brethren and the animals would not permit themselves to be caught and killed [14]. This both reaffirms the belief that animals willingly sacrifice themselves, and makes such willingness contingent upon human ceremony.

The importance of following protocols for the proper treatment of animal remains also appears in our stories. In “The Invisible Boy” a Mi’kmaq child thoughtlessly smashes the leg bone of a moose that his mother was saving for her husband. When the boy’s aunt sees the smashed bone she realized that her bother is now lying in the woods with a broken leg, indicating that the hunter and his prey are connected on a physical and spiritual plane. At his death the hunter transforms into a moose in order to feed his sister, and then becomes her *teomul*, or animal protector [15]. He is simultaneously physically dead and consumed, but spiritually alive and powerful. In the story “Two Weasels,” two sisters encounter a deserted Mi’kmaq village and enter a wigwam to spend the night. There they find the neck

bone of an animal on the floor. The older sister cautions her sibling to touch nothing, but the younger sister kicks the bone around. Later, as they try to sleep, the neck bone speaks, complaining of the rude treatment and terrifying the girls, the younger of whom attempts to hide in her sister's hair [15]. Mi'kmaq legends communicate the importance of respect by offering warning tales of what happens when that value is breached. However, people may legitimately disagree as to how to put the principle of respect into action. Kinnear notes that some community members in Bear River First Nation spoke disapprovingly about leaving the body of an animal in the woods to rot, while others reported intentionally leaving parts as food offerings for other animals [13].

The importance attached to treating animal bodies with respect emphasizes the sense in which the deceased animals are seen as spiritually alive personalities who may carry a grudge over past mistreatment, and may have spiritual powers to harm, at the very least by reporting their ill treatment to others of their kind who have the personal agency to retaliate by refusing to sacrifice themselves to hunters. Disrespectful behavior on the part of the Mi'kmaq thus results in a type of karmic retribution in which greed and arrogance bring their own punishment in the form of hunger and famine.

Another mark of respect is to take only as many animal lives as are needed for subsistence. In one story Wolverine invites a large number of birds into his wigwam, asks them to close their eyes, and then begins to kill them silently, one after another. His younger brother is distraught at this bloodlust because Wolverine has already killed more birds than they can eat. The younger brother whispers for the smallest bird to open his eyes, at which point the young bird cries the alarm and the remaining birds escape with the help of Wolverine's younger brother [10,16]. Stories such as these represent the Mi'kmaq mindset in which animals are perceived as giving themselves to provide food and clothing, shelter and tools, but must not be exploited, over-hunted, or killed for sport, and must be treated with respect, even (perhaps especially) after death.

Historian Calvin Martin rightfully asks how a group that viewed animals as respected siblings and fellow persons could have driven these same animals to near extinction in the service of the colonial fur trade [17]. Martin suggests that because they were unable to understand the root cause of the diseases that were ravaging them post-contact, Indigenous peoples such as the Mi'kmaq blamed the animals upon whom they relied, and retaliated by engaging in war against them [17]. The explanation I find more likely is partly cultural (as I will address shortly) and partly social. Our relationship with the newly arrived settlers—particularly the French, who made an effort to learn our language and culture—quickly came to hold greater significance to the Mi'kmaq than our relationship with our animal kin. Our relationship with settlers usurped the place that animals had held in our lives and animals eventually came to be treated as objects for exchange rather than as persons in their own right. The view of animals as objects is reflected in our treaties with settler governments, and has codified an instrumental view of animals as if it were an inherent aspect of Mi'kmaq culture.

Whatever the motivations of our ancestors for their participation in the near destruction of entire fur-bearing species, there is no doubt that the change likely occurred swiftly. The first recorded contact between the Mi'kmaq and European explorers occurred in 1497 with the arrival of John Cabot [5]. By the time Jacques Cartier arrived, 37 years later, the Mi'kmaq were reportedly so persistent in their attempt to trade pelts for goods that Cartier's men fired shots to disperse them [4]. Their attempt to engage Cartier's men in Portuguese suggests previous trading experience with Europeans [4]. As European fishing ships became a familiar sight an organized fur trade followed, with as many as

22,000 beaver pelts being shipped to France in a single year [4]. During the seventeenth century settlers and missionaries arrived in Mi'kma'ki and began efforts to alter Mi'kmaq culture. French Roman Catholic missionaries, for example, viewed the Mi'kmaq cosmology in which animals, trees, and rocks had souls as primitive, idolatrous, and sinful [5]. While it is both legitimate and tempting to point to the influence of settler values on Mi'kmaq practices, our present-day food practices are not entirely the result of colonial influence, but remain uniquely our own. While it is true that Mi'kmaq children now eat hamburgers and hotdogs as their settler friends do, there are elements within Mi'kmaq culture that may be responsible for the apparent dissonance between our view of animals as kin and our use of them as food, or even as currency in our relations with European settlers, and it is to these that I would like to turn.

3. Cultural Elements Shaping Mi'kmaq Relations with Non-Human Animals

One element I see at work is the concurrence of death and life demonstrated in the story about Glooscap and the marten. In that story the Creator creates a double for Apistanewj—a dead marten whose presence enables Glooscap to be simultaneously hunter and friend to animals. The status of Apistanewj as both dead (and therefore available for eating) and alive (and available for friendship) seems important to me. In the Mi'kmaq cosmology animals may exist simultaneously as actual living beings (e.g. *this* beaver, *that* marten), and also as spiritual beings with whom one may forge relationships (e.g. *The Beaver*, *The Marten*). The killing of any *specific* marten might be acceptable within this worldview, provided it is done according to the protocols of respectful hunting, since the death of any given marten does not impact the ongoing kinship relationship we have with *the* marten. Indeed, frequent hunting of a given species may make the animal more spiritually significant. Some participants in the study conducted at Bear River First Nation reported considering the animals they hunt and eat to be more personally important than other animals [13].

In the story of Glooscap and the marten we might say that the Creator's actions enable Glooscap to achieve psychological distance from the body of the marten in order to view it as food rather than mourning the death of his friend at his own hand. Glooscap does not experience guilt since his relationship with Apistanewj has not been breached; on the contrary, the sacrifice entailed cements the relationship between Glooscap and Apistanewj. It seems to me that a similar psychological mechanism might be at work more generally, enabling the Mi'kmaq who understand themselves to have kinship relationships with particular species to kill and consume those animals without feeling they have breached that connection.

A second element I see shaping the Mi'kmaq relationship with animals is the belief that humans and animals alike receive our life from *Kisu'lk*, the Creator, and are eternal. If the essence that animates life is a spark from the Creator, then while our bodies may die, the spirit does not. Animals, and all life forms, are in some sense then, immortal. Some Mi'kmaq stories feature Glooscap conquering the giant beaver, an extinct genus (*Castoroides*) that lived in North America during the Pleistocene epoch. In one story the giant beaver's dam caused widespread flooding, interfering with human and animal life. Glooscap is said to have transformed the beaver into Sugarloaf Mountain. If the mountain, too, can be said to have a spirit, then the giant beaver, though extinct, is not actually gone in the Mi'kmaq cosmology. The death of an animal, or even the extinction of an entire species, may be seen as less catastrophic if it is viewed as a personalized spiritual energy cycling through various embodiments.

The death of an animal's *physical body* may be separated from the death of the animal *person*, whose spirit is believed to go to *Waso'q*, the Land of the Souls, an afterlife in which human and animal souls coexist in harmony, with all their needs fully met [4,14]. From this perspective, those animals who willingly permit themselves to be caught and killed to provide for their human relations have led a successful life. Just as our essence may remain when shifting from a physical existence to a spiritual one, our stories also suggest that fluidity is possible in our physical embodiment. Writing in the 1950s, Wallis and Wallis report the belief among their Mi'kmaq interview participants that elderly animals transform into other species, with whales, for example, becoming moose or vice versa [18]. This belief, in which all living beings exist on a continuum of potential transformations, made possible by their shared life force from the Creator, could undercut anxieties about the death of a particular animal, or the decline or loss of any particular species.

A third element that may shape the Mi'kmaq view of animals as food is our belief in reincarnation. As Jean Augustine-McIsaac and Dan McIsaac explain, "If we make it through an entire lifetime without accomplishing the things we need to accomplish, we simply come back in a new body to try again. In most cases, the return is virtually immediate" [6]. The belief extends to animals as well, who are reincarnated in the next generation, or revived from their mortal remains. After sharing the story of Wolverine killing all the birds recounted by Whitehead [19], Mi'kmaq elder and poet Rita Joe adds: This story contains one of the most important lessons a Micmac child must learn: to treat with respect the Animal Persons that give themselves to him for food. He must not kill more than he needs. He must treat their bones with respect, placing the bones of fish or beaver back in the water, and the bones of moose or bear in trees or up on scaffolding like a human's bones, so that not only will the animal want to reincarnate in the neighborhood, but its bones will be there so it can reanimate them [16] (p. 34).

In the story "Bringing Back Animals," a character named *Waisisk Ketu'muaji Ji'nm* (Man Singing For Animals) uses a magical song to raise moose, caribou, and other animals from the dead [19]. Given this view, having consumed the flesh of an animal may not be seen as a barrier to the reemergence of that animal alive again. Whitehead connects the "ability for the part to become the whole" with teachings on the respectful treatment of animal bones [20]. "Thus not only will the animal wish to re-enflesh itself in the immediate vicinity, but it will be able to do so, because the bone is there—a channel through which it can come once more into matter" [20] (p. 11). There is also some suggestion that the parts of a deceased animal may gain new life in their use by the Mi'kmaq. Peter Christmas refers to a belief among the Mi'kmaq that different parts of animals such as the skin or the bones acquire a soul when they are transformed into clothes, tools, or weapons [14]. This form of ensoulment strikes me as another type of reincarnation, undercutting the finality of animal death.

A belief in reincarnation among the Mi'kmaq is not limited to the pre- or early-contact past. I remember my surprise as a child when my father, who had been raised a Roman Catholic like most Mi'kmaq of his generation, expressed the belief that his cat, Buffy, had returned to life in the body of a crow which now followed him around. Belief in reincarnation may serve to reduce the grief, guilt, and fear we feel when faced with animal death, and serve as a buffer against the awareness of our own mortality. The Mi'kmaq view both human and non-human animals as part of a broad web of inter-dependence. This perspective is sometimes used to justify hunting as a natural expression of the cycle of life and death [16]. As one woman in the Bear River study said, "a lot of the animals will eat

other animals, right. So it's just, it's like a cycle and to break that cycle then everything comes unbalanced" [13] (p. 85). From this perspective, humans are simply one animal predator among others within a repeating cycle of birth, life, death, consumption, and rebirth. I would argue that even if humans are seen first and foremost as animals, then surely moral constraints on hunting—namely the subsistence limit—should apply to us just as they did to Wolverine.

Cyclic repetition also features prominently in the Mi'kmaq view of time. Mi'kmaq Evan Pritchard notes that there is no word for time in our language:

There are words for day, nagwew, and night, depkik, one for sunrise, sunset, for one lunar cycle, one yearly cycle, youth, adulthood, and old age, but no word for an absolute time which measures the universe outside of it [21] (p. 11).

The belief in reincarnation may be but one expression of a broader belief that life and death form a balanced whole through which all people cycle. Indeed, we do not have a word for "goodbye" in Mi'kmaq, only *ne'multes*, which means, "be seeing you again" [22], perhaps reflecting a cycle in which we separated temporarily and regrouped again later in our yearly migration patterns and in our shared cosmology. Given the movement of spirits across the barrier between life and death, this principle may apply to human and other animal persons in the sense that no one we have known is truly gone. The cyclical timescape, the spiritual afterlife of animals, and the belief in reincarnation may undermine the finality of death in ways that shape our relation with other animals.

The Mi'kmaq language seems to affirm a distinction between animals as persons and animals as food. Just as other languages gender nouns as masculine, feminine, or neutral, Mi'kmaq categorizes nouns into animate and inanimate. This is not indicative of whether the object in question is dead or alive; some suggest that inanimate nouns are best viewed as temporarily dormant [23]. Many items not generally considered living, such as mountains, snowshoes, fridges, and prayer pipes, are animate in Mi'kmaq, and many items that might reasonably be considered to be animate, such as the hand and foot, are not categorized as such [24]. Stephanie Inglis, Associate Professor of Mi'kmaq Studies, proposes that the essential difference between animate and inanimate can be understood as connectedness or wholeness (animate) versus disconnection or fragmentation (inanimate) [24].

In relating our language structure to food, I notice that the word for moose, *tia'm*, is an animate noun, while the word to describe moose meat, *tia'muei*, is an inanimate noun [25]. From my perspective as a non-Mi'kmaq speaker, this difference suggests that in death the meat of the moose becomes separated from the concept of the Moose as a person, whose spirit no longer occupies the body, but lives elsewhere. Carol J. Adams argues that the concept of meat requires the erasure of the animal whose body is re-defined as food. [26] Adams argues that the erasure of the animal functions "to keep our 'meat' separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal, to keep the "moo" or "cluck" or "baa" away from the meat, to keep *something* from being seen as *someone*" [26] (p. 14). It is certainly true that the meat industry's packaging encourages us to forget that the pink chicken breast resting on pristine white Styrofoam is actually someone's pectoral muscles. Yet while the Mi'kmaq language seems to distinguish between the Moose as a person and the moose as food, we may also have a cultural investment in keeping our *something* (i.e. meat) connected with the *someone* that it used to be, framing it as a gift from one friend to another, and as a sacrifice that cements rather than breaches the animal-human relationship.

4. Reciprocity in Mi'kmaq Relations with Non-Human Animals

Kinnear describes the relationship between the Mi'kmaq of Bear River and the animals around them as one of “reciprocal obligation” [13] (p. 71). If the animals are believed to willingly sacrifice themselves for human consumption, then we might rightly wonder what the animals receive in exchange. Our stories imply that the answer is kinship, and Kinnear suggests that the answer is honor and respect [13]. We have already explored the way that respect is embodied in the treatment of animal bodies, and in restrained hunting practices in which hunters kill only those animals they require for subsistence. The importance of killing only for food was demonstrated to me early on, when my younger brother received an air-powered pellet gun as a present, and promptly killed a squirrel with it. My father forced him to skin, gut, cook, and eat the squirrel, something in which neither of them had any expertise. The smell of burned squirrel meat filled our small shack, and I watched with curiosity and revulsion as they ate while my father wondered aloud whether it would make them sick. My father used the squirrel pelt in his craftwork, and my brother never attempted to hunt again. Killing for fun is looked down upon in Mi'kmaq culture, with one participant in Kinnear's study objecting that sport hunting “goes against the spirit of the relationship between humans and the animals” [13] (p. 78).

For the Mi'kmaq, animal death comes with obligations. Animal parts must be used if at all possible, and meat, hoofs, hides, feathers, bones, teeth, claws, fur, and antlers are often traded among community members to maximize their use. As one young Mi'kmaq said, “You should only take what you need, but then use everything that you can from what you kill. What you can't use you should give away and share, so that nothing is wasted and everyone gets what they need” [13] (p. 82). As a child I remember a taxidermist coming to the house with bobcat skulls, from which my father harvested bone and teeth for use in the Mi'kmaq craftwork with which he supplemented our household income. Respect is additionally expressed when the Mi'kmaq give thanks for animal sacrifice, generally in the form of prayers (to the animal spirit and/or the Creator) or offerings. Offerings may include sacred medicines (e.g. sage, cedar, tobacco, and sweet grass), food, or even jewelry, and are given at the time the animal is killed and at other times deemed appropriate [13]. One Bear River woman reported making an offering when she collected porcupine quills from animals whose bodies were found by the side of the highway [13]. I must admit, while my childhood included gathering quills from porcupines killed by vehicles on the nearby road, dyeing them, and using them to decorate birch bark baskets, my education did not include any ritualized thanks to the spirit of the porcupine. It did, however, include a general sense of solemn appreciation and respect, both for the animal whose quills we used and for the crows, who prior to consuming the porcupine body would pull out each quill and stack them on the edge of the road according to size—saving us from the dangerous and time-consuming work of de-quilling the porcupine.

Another element of reciprocity for animal sacrifice is the human responsibility to provide the conditions necessary for animals to thrive. Kinnear notes that the present-day Mi'kmaq community at Bear River First Nation practices principles of “environmental stewardship,” including “never taking more than is needed, taking care of nature for the generations yet to come, and not being wasteful” [13] (p. 68). In addition to offering prayers for animals taken in hunting, individual Mi'kmaq people may feel drawn to, in the words of one Mi'kmaq woman, “take that spirit on...be the protector of that animal” [13] (p. 72). Given our socially subordinated position in Canadian society, our ability

to direct environmental policy is limited, but as Indigenous people experience a resurgence in political activism and form alliances around environmental conservation efforts, this may be changing. The Mi'kmaq Warriors Society, for example, has been active in its opposition to the incursion of the logging, mining, oil, and gas industries into our traditional territories, allying themselves with settler allies such as The Council of Canadians, a social group that “advocate[s] for clean water, fair trade, green energy, public health care, and a vibrant democracy” [27].

5. Netukulimk: Avoiding Not Having Enough

The Mi'kmaq word *ntuk* means “provisions,” and *netukulimk* has been variously translated as “the act of gathering these provisions by hunting, fishing, picking plants and berries and cultivation” [28] (n.p), “the use of the natural bounty provided by the Creator for the self-support and well-being of the individual and the nation” [29] (p. 8), and “the skills and sense of responsibility required to become a protector [or some say hunter] of other species,” [30] (p. 146). Davis and colleagues suggest that *netukulit* is related to the prefix *nutqw-*, indicating insufficiency, and is closer to the idea of “avoiding not having enough” than to accumulating abundance [28].

Given the changes that have taken place in our traditional territories, it is animals that are now at risk for not having enough—enough space to live, enough food to eat, enough uncontaminated water to drink. We might extend the concept of *netukulimk* to our animal siblings, ensuring that they do not live in scarcity. In recent years the Mi'kmaq have taken a lead role in opposing the environmental destruction caused by industrial processes such as fracking [31], highway construction [32], clear cutting, or strip mining [4], which threaten animal habitats, the enspirited landscape, and the cultural history that the land carries. This seems to me to be a good expression of our relational responsibility.

Mi'kmaq philosophical and ethical traditions frame our relationship with animals as one of dependence and friendship. Fyre Jean Gravelin describes our connection to life in the world around us: That which the trees exhale, I inhale. That which I exhale, the tree inhales. We live in a world of many circles; these circles go out into the universe and constitute our identity, our kinship, our relations [33] (p. 57).

Forced moves, land expropriation, and government legislation have quickly changed Mi'kmaq food traditions, making seasonal migration impossible and reducing the ability to hunt and fish. Today Mi'kmaq food practices are shaped by consumer culture and by multigenerational urban living, since half of Canada's Aboriginal population lives in urban areas [34]. Hunting, which once formed the basis of our food practices, is so impacted by industry that some complain that animals “don't taste right” [13] (p. 86) as a result of contamination. Clear cutting, the practice of cutting large swathes of forest in order to harvest wood, has reduced livable animal habitat, pushing animals onto populated reserve land, where they are sometimes perceived as posing a danger [13].

As our eating practices become increasingly colonized, the Mi'kmaq connection with animals may continue to undergo drastic change. As one participant in the Bear River study explained, “I'm afraid that our next generation, we're going to have to teach them how to hunt in Superstores and Sobeys [local grocery chains] and stuff like that, which is a sad thing” [13] (p. 86). The shift from a subsistence hunting culture to one reliant on store-bought food is doubly troubling, since the factory farming system is wildly at odds with the Mi'kmaq value system around the treatment of animals, and

since hunting is the milieu in which many traditional Mi'kmaq values and skills are shared with the younger generation [13].

Ecologist Fikret Berkes notes that Indigenous people are often portrayed as if we must choose between living exactly as our ancestors did or assimilating completely into settler society [29]. Berkes proposes a third option in which “culturally significant elements” of our traditions are retained, and combined with new ways “that maintain and enhance” our identity, and provide space for our culture to “evolve” [35] (p. 168). This accurately describes my own experience of Mi'kmaq cultural identity. From my apartment in downtown Toronto I hold Mi'kmaq values close to me and strive to live them out in my urban context. In choosing not to consume animal products I honor our relationship with non-human animals expressed in concepts such as *m'sit no maq*. Given my access to plentiful non-animal food, it runs counter to my cultural values to ask my animal friends to sacrifice their lives for me. Living as I do in a territory that is not my own, my vegan practice is a way to live my Mi'kmaq values, even if the way I do so is at odds with our historical food practices. The Mi'kmaq attitude toward animals has been described as “a mixture of kinship, awe, and the pragmatic” [18] (p. 106). It strikes me as sensible and appropriate to express my kinship and awe in this way.

6. Barriers and Facilitators of an Indigenous Veganism

As I have noted elsewhere [9], one of the barriers I face in practicing an *Indigenous* veganism is that abstaining from animal products has been portrayed as a White practice by both Indigenous and settler commentators [36–39]. Krystalline Kraus, a member of the Saami people of Scandinavia, frames vegans as evangelists, part of a colonial system that aims to convert traditional Saami culture and traditions, such as their reliance on hunting reindeer [40]. Kraus quotes Saami elder Atja as asking, “in your veganism, how many of you are actually farmers, pickers of berries or wild mushrooms? Or do you buy your vegan righteousness through a store?” [40]—the implication being that consumerism is a lesser form of relationship than cultivating and gathering food oneself. I don't know that I disagree. The commercial food industry distances the consumer not only from the animal whose body is sold as meat, but also from the growth processes, natural appearance, and cultivation practices of our non-animal-based foods. I remember my surprise the first time I saw Brussels sprouts being sold on the stalk, and realized that they did not grow, as I had assumed, on the ground like tiny cabbages. Recent articles pointing to vegan complicity in the impoverishment of Peruvian and Bolivian farmers (and one could add, migrant harvesters and other people oppressed in the fresh produce industry) underscores the issue of how the commercial system distances us from our food [41].

Indigenous culture is frequently portrayed as opposed to vegan practices. In her acceptance speech for the Polaris Music Prize, Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq portrayed veganism as colonial when she encouraged the consumption and wearing of seal as a “sustainable resource” and then added “Fuck PETA,” referring to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [42]. On a Tumblr channel dedicated to “whites educating whites (so POC don't have to)” a poster identified as DD argued that speciesism (the elevation of humans over other animals) did not exist, citing the large number of animal shelters compared to shelters for battered women and children, and claimed that White vegans perpetuate racism when they point out similarities between the oppression of animals and that of racialized people [43]. “Sitting on my privileged white ass and eating a hamburger,” wrote DD, “is not now and will never be the same as racism” [43]. Such a view uses assumptions about relative privilege to

denounce vegan practices and identity without examining them for content. Framing veganism as a uniformly White colonial practice requires depicting Indigenous people who refrain from eating animal products as cultural inauthentic. This presents a challenge for people like me, who view our veganism as an expression of our Indigenous identity, rather than a source of identity conflict. I vigorously object to the idea of being told what is and is not appropriately Indigenous by White settlers, however well intentioned they might be.

One solution to such challenges from settler allies or other Indigenous people is to form alliances with the increasingly visible movement for critical studies about animals and food among racialized and colonized people. Access to nutrient-rich foods is an issue of food justice that Indigenous communities share with other economically oppressed people [9]. Konju Briggs Jr., for example, explicitly connects vegan food practices among the racialized working class with class warfare: Thus it is up to grassroots universal vegan workers of color, aware that existence in a human society configured such as ours means lifelong class war, to promote healthy lifestyles, to strive and struggle to increase access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables in our communities, and to speak loudly and widely on the benefits of non-meat consumption and the fallacies of the meat prestige and meat addiction [44].

Dr. Breeze Harper's Sistah Vegan Project "focuses on how plant-based consumptive lifestyle is affected by factors of race, racisms, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other social injustices within the lives of black females" [45] (n.p.). Harper's book, *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*, explores food and identity politics, including ways that racialized bodies are marginalized within vegan discourse [46]. Harper makes key connections between the experience of marginalization and receptivity to the concept of speciesism. She wonders if "women of color who are marginalized within their community sympathize with ethical eating more frequently than those minorities who are not marginalized?" [47]. Harper's instinct may be right. As an Indigenous woman who identifies as bisexual and queer, vegan identity is possible for me in part because I have experiential knowledge of oppression, but it is also possible because, having done so much internal identity work already, I have the psychological resources to cope with being marginalized and erased by portrayals of veganism as White and colonial, even if doing so is often a lonely business.

As I have argued elsewhere, not only is vegan eating frequently presented as a White practice, but it is also presented as the practice of the economic elite [9]. The poor, we are told, have no room for food ethics. Having grown up in poverty, I know from experience that being hungry does not mean that food preferences or ethics are abandoned. The argument that veganism (or indeed any ethical stance) is an indulgent luxury ignores the heavily subsidized economic and environmental cost of meat, and also ignores the vegan or vegetarian food practices of some of the most impoverished peoples of the world.

The Mi'kmaq relationship with animals as food has been heavily impacted by colonization and economic oppression. Several researchers have identified the reserve system, which isolated Mi'kmaq people on land unsuitable for fishing, hunting, or farming, as having fostered a diet high in fat, sugar, and carbohydrates and low in protein and fiber [48–51]. Professor of human ecology Kim Travers identifies low income, lack of transportation, and lack of natural resources on reserves as factors impacting Mi'kmaq diet and health [49]. Travers notes that most people on reserves obtain their protein through peanut butter or processed meat products. As a result of long use over time, the foods

with which poor Indigenous families make do come to have emotional content, and eventually may even be valued as expressions of cultural tradition. Any responsible Mi'kmaq scholar must, it seems to me, challenge the Indigenization of food practices that are not only unhealthy, but that are also impositions of colonialism that actively clash with our basic cultural values.

Cultural ecologist David Abram frames western culture as estranged from the non-human environment, which he argues diminishes our humanity. "Humans," he writes, "are tuned for relationship," and Abram suggests that it is only in our relationship with the non-human that we become fully human [52] (p. ix). This viewpoint strikes me as compatible with our Mi'kmaq creation story, in which we become a human family through our relationship with the animals around us. Adam advocates an epistemology in which truth is not fixed, but is made truth relationally [52]. This brings to mind the relational nature of knowledge in Indigenous cultures, such as when Elders share teachings whose detail, timing, and content vary depending on where the seeker is in their life, their personality and temperament, and their capacity to understand. Given the relationship with animals portrayed in Mi'kmaq legend and cultural practices, the truth that emerges for me is best expressed through veganism. While this is not the choice made by my family members or by the vast majority of other Mi'kmaq, the Indigenous value of non-interference means that I am rarely questioned about this choice and have never been challenged on it.

Researcher L. Daniel Myers argues that myth is "a cultural mode of symbolic expression" and "a repository of knowledge," "manifesting both content and context by which to gain access to the cognitive processes underlying a culturally prescribed system of thought and knowledge" [53] (p. 32). Since ongoing colonialism has erased so much of our Mi'kmaq culture, I value our mythology as a touchstone for our traditional values. Mi'kmaq legends provide not only principles by which to live, but as a narrative they also offer a fictional world in which we can experience the source and meaning of such principles through a personal relationship with our animal siblings. I have never seen a marten in person, but I feel I understand the character of the marten that lives in our oral traditions, and that I have relational obligations to the marten (and to other animals) by virtue of my Mi'kmaq identity. Our legends tell me that we have entered into a covenant with other animals, and if I am to take that seriously I must acknowledge that our agreement does not permit participation in the commercial fishery, in sport hunting, in the fur industry, or in the meat and dairy industries. Certainly any individual Mi'kmaq is free to choose to do those things, but such a choice is not compatible with my reading of the values of our ancestors, nor with my own reading of the relationship we are called to have with other-than-human animals. On the contrary, my Mi'kmaq values inspire me to offer my own sacrifice (in this case, the eating of animal products) to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our animal kin whose habitats and very lives are imperiled by industry and human encroachment. While the Mi'kmaq have a treaty right to hunt and fish and to sell produce for profit, this issue is distinct from whether it is appropriate to do so under the present circumstances. While the value of non-interference prevents me from denouncing the choice of others, being public about my own choices, and the values that led me to make them, allows me to teach by example, a suitably Indigenous method of communication.

Having different protocols than other Indigenous people can be difficult, since sharing food is a powerful symbol of belonging. I once attended a feast at Six Nations of The Grand River where one dish, a venison stew, was meant to be consumed by everyone, and I had to enlist a friend to eat my

share. Indigenous protocol around menstruation sometimes requires that others prepare a plate for me at social events, which can be tricky since we are expected to eat what we take. There is a general lack of knowledge about veganism within Indigenous circles, perhaps the result of associations of veganism with Whiteness. At a recent meeting for an Indigenous university program, the organizers special-ordered a non-dairy quiche for me from their caterer (made with an egg base and thus decidedly not vegan), and gluten-free food (which they conflated with veganism). I still struggle with how to participate in Indigenous culture given that so many of our cultural articles (such as drums, clothing, and regalia) are made from animals. I take comfort in the fact that adaptation to new cultural circumstances has been one of the strengths that have carried the Mi'kmaq through to the present day.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Melissa Marie for her assistance with this paper and the Ontario HIV Treatment Network and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research for their funding support.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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