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### **The Passing of the “Red Indians of Newfoundland”: Colonisation and Agency in the Beothuk’s Extinction in the 17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries.**

#### Introduction.

Easter Eve, 1823, Badger Bay, the north of Newfoundland. An old Native woman is seized by two settlers. Two weeks later, the same settlers come across two younger Native women who voluntarily follow them to the old woman. The young women are sisters, the old woman, their mother. They are Beothuk. The despised and dreaded Beothuk. Yet here there is no fight, no resistance. The three women have walked 130kms to try and find on the coast the sustenance they could not get anymore inland. They are starving and ill. Within a few weeks, both the mother and the older sister die of tuberculosis. Faring somewhat better, the younger one will remain with settlers for a few years before dying from the same illness on June 6, 1829. She was the last of the Beothuk, and her name was Shanawdithit.

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. Violence from settlers, starvation, diseases, and the community's choices in face of these pressures drew a path from which the Beothuk could not escape. Although this seems to fit the inevitability and doomed components of extinction stories, I hope to show that this could have been different, had they made different early choices.

The Beothuk were the main inhabitants of Newfoundland at the time of contact with Europeans at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Living mainly on the inner coast from marine and riverine resources, they also hunted inland during winter to complement their diet. Until 1819 they were known as "red men", "red Indians" or "savages". It was with the capture of Demasduit in that year that their first words were known and understood. "Beothuk" as a designation appeared on the historical scene for the first time but was not used. The captive Demasduit, and later Shanawdithit, translated the term as "Red Indians".<sup>1</sup> The term used by the Mi'kmaq for the Beothuk is *maquajik* which translates as red men or red people.<sup>2</sup> The community were thus called red men long before the Europeans ever reached their shores. The expression 'Red Indians of Newfoundland' was often used before the word "Beothuk" was first uttered in European presence. When did a 'red Indian' become The 'Red Indian'? It is possible, but not proven, that the Beothuk gave all

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<sup>1</sup> I. Marshall, *A history and ethnography of the Beothuk* (Montreal, 1996), pp.434-435.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Paterson, in *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada for the year 1891* (Montreal, 1892), p.124.

Native Americans this stereotypical name and the image attached to them, which later became 'redskins' with a derogatory sense attached to it.

In the seventeenth century, the arrival of Europeans changed their setting: the settling along the coast by seasonal fishermen started to progressively cut the Beothuk off from their traditional resources. The community slowly retreated inland and closed in on themselves, coming to the coasts only to steal European items, which in turn brought mistrust and retaliation from the settlers. The reduction of their territory, their access to their hunting grounds, the various environmental factors, the colonists' technological advantages and persecution of them, and the natural ally of all new colonies, diseases, eventually had the upper hand on the tribe who dwindled toward extinction. After the death of Shanawdithit in 1829, the Beothuk were declared a defunct cultural entity.

While the different schools of interpretation have offered valid explanations for their disappearance, the Beothuk have mostly been denied an aspect of their short presence in the historical record: their free will and community agency. This paper will outline how scholarship can give the Beothuk their right place back in their own history, and complicate their image as a doomed tribe, the victims of colonists and Nature, and unable to adequately respond to either.

### 1. "Middle Ground"?

The "middle ground" originated in Richard White's eponymous book written in 1991. 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 father-like, offering Native communities presents and interceding when conflict broke out. Native nations would engage in trade and accept a degree of European management.

The “middle ground” was thus a place where mutual misunderstanding became something new, 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, linked to a web of allied chiefs, linked 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.<sup>3</sup>

However, it can be argued that, since the balance of power is a 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), mainly due to the different policies of the colonising forces. Being a process, it was applicable to other geographical areas and other periods than White’s in its principal traits. However, what happened in the Great Lakes region did not happen in the same way everywhere. There was not a “middle ground” but some “middle grounds”. In some

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<sup>3</sup> R. White, *The middle ground: Indian, Empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, 1991), P. J. Deloria, 'What is the Middle Ground, anyway?', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 63, (2006), pp.15-22.

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.

The “middle ground”, being described as a balanced act, ended when the colonists had gathered enough power to not need it anymore. 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 had a dire end.

## 2. The Beothuk, Taboos and the “Middle Ground”: Whose Failure?

We know little of the first encounters, the contact moment. 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.

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.<sup>4</sup> This brings two main conclusions: the Beothuk were not averse

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<sup>4</sup> Manuscripts. No. 250, f.406-12, John Guy's *Journal*, 1612 (British Library).

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.<sup>5</sup> Settlers thus did recognise the need to trade and have the local Natives on their good side, and so did the Beothuk. Also worth mentioning is that, at this time, neither of the aforementioned considered the Beothuk as dangerous.<sup>6</sup> The possibility of trust and trade thus seemed an option.

However, 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 Indians.<sup>7</sup> Not that the Indians had probably not 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 settlers knew and were on the watch for.

By the beginning of the 18th century, the settlers started to expand onto the Indians' hunting grounds. Around 1708, a man called George Skeffington started to catch

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<sup>5</sup> G. T. Cell, *Newfoundland discovered* (London, 1982), p.84.

<sup>6</sup> Letter dated 8 September 1612, Henry Crout to Sir Percival Willoughby. Willoughby Papers, Middleton Manuscripts, Mix 1/20.

<sup>7</sup> R. Whitbourne, *A discourse and discovery of New-Found-Land* (London, 1622).

<sup>8</sup> J. P. Howley, *The Beothucks or Red Indians* (Cambridge, 1915), p.24.

and process salmon in rivers along Bonavista Bay. To facilitate the expansion, the land had been cleared up to 60 km up the rivers.<sup>9</sup> 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 the natives to break 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.<sup>10</sup>

While the Beothuk had engaged in sporadic trade early after contact, they never adhered to full trade relations. They never engaged in full trade because they could steal from the Europeans’ outposts. However, when yearlong settlement began, the Natives had to adapt. The English settlers, not being able to trade for furs, trapped for themselves, which had the double incidence of depriving the Indians of their resource, and bringing the English into territories where pelted animals were found. Missing participation in a middle ground took away from both parties the temporary cushion of intermixing cultures that occurred on the continent. 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.

The Beothuk’s major behaviour traits: physical avoidance, adherence to the community’s ways and beliefs, including the ochring that persisted throughout the historical period and the death penalty imposed on all Beothuk returning to the

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<sup>9</sup> Petition by G. Skeffington, 23 February 1720, Public Record Office CO 194/6, f.332.

<sup>10</sup> Answer to the Head of Enquiries on the Newfoundland Fishery 12 November 1722, Public Record Office CO 194/7 f.115.

community after interacting with Europeans are all examples that can be added to formulate a hypothesis: it can be argued that such behaviours are elements of a taboo that was reinforced and hardened by the contact with English settlers. This taboo was at the core of the community's identity. It was a Beothuk trait, and it was what differentiated the Native community from the English, and the other local First Nations. It is unknown whether the Beothuk had a set of spiritual values linked to physical contact prior to the arrival of Europeans on Newfoundland. However, it can be argued that soon after Europeans started the process of settling on the island, the Beothuk started avoiding them, and over time, this practice only intensified. A taboo on contact.

By invading Beothuk territory, emptying it of its resources, and reacting in violent ways to the Beothuk's actions, English settlers increased their cohesion, reinforced and intensified their Native culture in conflicting ways, strengthening a Native taboo that would cement the community together - but also herald its end. The abandonment of an early attempt at forming a middle ground separated both groups irretrievably and sent them on path of violence and retaliation. Being under armed and less numerous, the Beothuk's numbers dwindled until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3. 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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. I have argued that the main behaviours that the Beothuk exhibited during their short historical presence - avoidance, retreat, and the continuation of ancestral traditions such as ochring - were conscious, communal responses to out-group changes rooted in a taboo. This taboo was not static and changed with the situation: the interdict strengthened as time and events transpired. By avoiding outsiders, the Beothuk may have observed a taboo on contact. The respect of this taboo was at the core of what identified them as Beothuk. Violating it was severely punished.

The Beothuk were never passive beings who merely fell victim to settler violence, or were captive to the limited resources offered by their island. They made choices, and changed in response to the events that were unfolding around them.

In the end, the middle ground did not really fail the Beothuk, everything was there for it to develop. However, the community's choices in its agency contributed to the failure of their involvement and of the relationships with the English, bringing upon them the violence of the settlers. It can be argued that these choices, the evolution of

their behaviour, played against their collective interest, and accelerated their disappearance as a nation.

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