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Rivals of the Word: Rumors between Seventeenth-Century Hurons and Jesuits

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RIVALS OF THE WORD:
RUMORS BETWEEN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY
HURONS AND JESUITS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

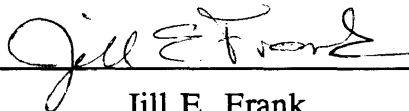
Jill E. Frank

1992

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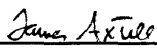
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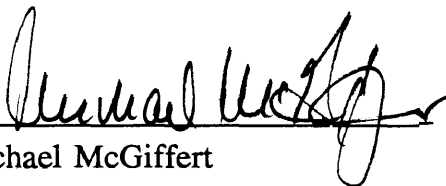


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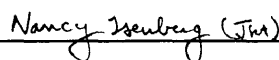
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ABSTRACT

This project examines communication problems between French Jesuit missionaries and Huron Indians in the early seventeenth century. The research is divided into two chapters to examine the effects of rumor on the relationship between these two societies in colonial New France.

The first chapter, *The Rivals*, introduces the sources, explains the theories used, and describes each culture. The main historical source is The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, an extensive series of reports covering Jesuit involvement in colonial New France. Two other seventeenth-century observers and their writings provided insight into Huron and Jesuit culture. Marie de l'Incarnation, an Ursuline nun, wrote of the Jesuit problems from her home in Quebec. Father Gabriel Sagard, a Recollect, wrote of his journey to Huronia and described their culture and society. Several modern scholars' theories provided an essential framework for examining the evidence of rumors. Walter J. Ong's theories of oral communication and Bruce G. Trigger's historical research on Huron culture give the background necessary to understand the unique nature of a culture based on orality. Chapter One concludes by describing the development of the Jesuit mission in Huronia.

Chapter Two, *Rumors of Death and Life*, defines the word rumor, explains the stories labeled rumors in the Jesuit documents, and follows Huron and Jesuit reactions to the information. Rumors can be a useful tool of communication in oral societies. Other researchers have found evidence of this in Venezuela and Bali. Hurons probably used rumors as a means of communication long before Jesuits came. However, the Jesuit presence changed Huron use and interpretation of those rumors. In the end, few of the rumors ever became a reality. Until the Iroquois attacked in the 1640's, no Jesuit died by Huron hands.

This thesis concludes by arguing that rumors expressed Huron fears and confusion while trying to comprehend Jesuit ideas. Jesuits actively tried to initiate changes in Huron culture and that pressure of new alternatives brought strong reactions within Huron society. Interaction was abruptly curtailed by the success of Iroquois attacks against Huronia. Before the dispersal of Huron society, some Hurons were Christian, some adamantly stuck to their traditions, and others had not decided what to do. The transition from oral to literary concepts, Huron traditional religion to Christianity, and Indian to European culture began as a difficult struggle and ended as an unfinished rivalry between two societies.

**RIVALS OF THE WORD:
RUMORS BETWEEN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY
HURONS AND JESUITS**

INTRODUCTION

This thesis explains the importance of rumor in the relationship between a group of Europeans and an Indian community in seventeenth-century North America. The rumors this paper scrutinizes passed between French Jesuits and Hurons. Jesuits initially succeeded in living among the Hurons by 1625, but an abrupt English seizure of French Canadian lands forced them to temporarily abandon their mission. Then, in 1633, Jesuit missionaries intent on converting Indians became permanent guests in several settlements near the southeastern shore of Georgian Bay. When Jesuits arrived in Huron territory in the summer of 1633, both societies had a rough familiarity with each other's language and customs, but their knowledge was incomplete and riddled with misconceptions. Europeans and Indians living together, often in the same dwellings, with an imperfect understanding of each other's true intentions required a certain amount of trust and careful observation. Each group attempted to communicate its expectations, but neither could be sure if the intended message was received.

While Jesuits and Hurons tried to improve relations, or at least to gain pertinent information, another set of communications worked against their efforts to secure a frank rapport. Periodic discouraging rumors circulated among the Hurons and their European

visitors. In letters to superiors in Quebec and France, Jesuits reported hearsay on a variety of topics. Jesuit leaders then published these reports as *Relations of What Occurred in New France*.

The *Relations* chronicle rumors about Jesuits, their Huron hosts, neighboring Indians, and French settlements established along the St. Lawrence River. A few accounts are intriguing explanations of each culture's values. However, most reports describe threats to lives, communities, and souls in both halves of this fragile association. Considering the tenuous association which they had so recently created, neither French nor Huron could immediately dismiss the rumors as idle chatter.

Although rumors were only one aspect of exchanges between Hurons and Jesuits, the struggle to understand unsubstantiated information embedded in these messages clearly illustrates the difficulty of communication between an oral, communal society and a literate, hierarchical one. A closer look at the process of rumor-spreading reveals a complex set of judgments based on social values and personal assessments of the rival society which affected both individual lives and intercultural relations. Recent theories about oral and literate culture, intercultural communication, and individual perception of the communication process help explain the culturally based assumptions behind each community's reaction to an unfamiliar situation. Jesuits' attempts to achieve a shared meaning with their Huron hosts contributed to the destabilization of Huron society. Rumors, along with Jesuit reaction to behavior unique to oral cultures, influenced the development of alternative cultural values in Huronia, which in turn led to a dangerous schism. By trying to understand the Jesuits, Hurons allowed a rift to split their formerly unified society. Division, coupled with the changes in Huron oral culture introduced by

Jesuits, weakened the Hurons during a heightened period of Iroquois attacks. This study shows how rumor influenced the development of a strained dialogue with dubious results between a primarily oral culture and a literate culture. Reactions to that communication exacerbated a tense situation and brought disastrous results for both societies.

CHAPTER I

THE RIVALS

Europeans and Indians did not look at each other and see a pivotal confrontation of North American rivals. Each group saw the other as strangers whose actions seemed beyond comprehension. A distance much greater than the ocean that separated their two continents divided the cultures that met in the early colonial period. When Jesuits encountered Hurons, both groups confronted an alien cultural perspective of the world. Jesuit writings show just how awkward and confusing the contact between two different cultures felt to the individual participants. Frenchmen and native Americans certainly recognized fundamental distinctions between their cultures; however, they failed to understand how specific differences in perspective could cause years of misunderstanding.

The clues to deciphering Jesuit-Huron perceptions hide under two layers of communication. The main source for learning about this seventeenth-century episode in intercultural contact comes from Jesuits. Reports written by these religious men who lived among the Hurons chronicle the progress of their mission for their fellow Jesuits in New France and their superiors in Old France. The letters detail the missionaries' observations and activities, including their efforts to discover the cornerstones of Huron

culture. Printed copies of those letters exist because Jesuit leaders decided to publish the descriptions of life in New France to encourage French readers to donate money to the Jesuit cause.¹

From the Jesuit sources comes the chance to read beyond the first layer of text and to listen to the voices of Jesuits and Hurons in the midst of face-to-face conversations. Since only Jesuits created the documents, the historical record is unbalanced and exhibits the biases of the authors. At the same time, the text offers more than a European impression because a Jesuit education made these men exceedingly diligent reporters. The letters include thorough descriptions of comments made and actions taken by Hurons which baffled the Jesuits. These scenes can be pulled apart to reveal the Huron impressions imbedded therein. The process of disentanglement is not simple, but basic communication theories give us a place to begin.

A communication model identifies the important elements to look for in the Jesuit writings. Many factors surround the words that are actually spoken. Each participant filters words through a personal thought process. To convey an idea, a person translates or "encodes" a mental image into words. The recipient of a message interprets the statements and body language of the speaker or "decodes" the signals to comprehend their meaning. Each participant, busy encoding and decoding the exchange of information, has a unique "personal history" to bring to the conversation. That history's influence on interaction, called an "environment," shapes the unique ways individuals send and perceive messages. Filtering through all these factors, which are geared toward

¹ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 73 vols. (Cleveland, 1896-1901). Hereafter referred to as *JR*.

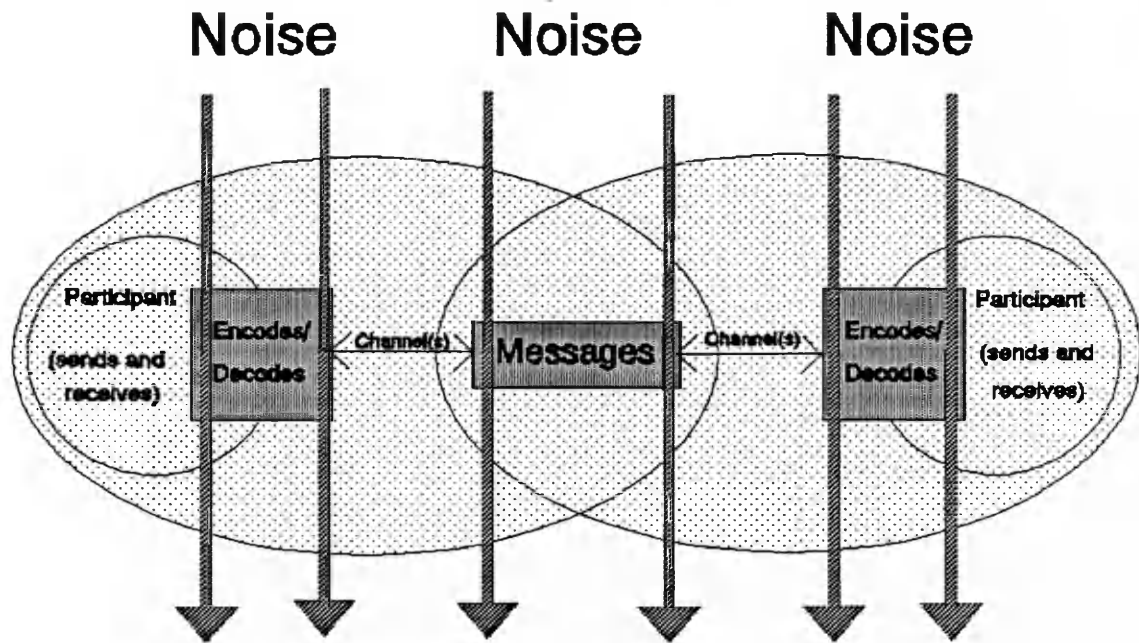


Figure 1

effective communication, lie forces known as "noise" that interfere with those goals. Noise can be external distractions, physical hearing problems, or psychological factors within a person's psyche. The final picture of communication sorts the complex, transactional process into discrete considerations.² Ideally, the two participants achieve a shared meaning. In actuality, the message received is often strikingly different from the meaning intended.

In Jesuit-Huron interaction, the effects of environment and noise became barriers to communication because the participants came from vastly different cultures. The dialogue model is valid whether the exchange is interpersonal or intercultural. When Jesuits and Hurons met, they barely shared a common language, let alone common social

² Ronald B. Adler and George Rodman, *Understanding Human Communication* (New York, 1988), 4-14.

assumptions or cultural foundations. Cultural values determine how people encode and decode messages. Each culture assigns different meanings to subtle signals from facial expressions, body movements, or voice inflection. For these reasons intercultural communication theory distinguishes between what the words in a message mean and how other factors such as cultural context or personal intentions change that message.³ Underlying each society's attempts to satisfy its own needs and comprehend rivals' intentions were centuries of subtle conditions which influenced the individual's thought process. In order to think like each other, Jesuits and Hurons would have to change mind-sets formed in youth. Anthropological linguist Benjamin Whorf studied distinct meanings in languages by culture and concluded that "a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which [that individual] is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematization of his own language . . . every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationships and phenomena, channels his reasoning, builds the house of his consciousness."⁴ Without years of patient learning, a shared meaning would be very difficult to achieve.

One influence more complex than language differences between Jesuit and Huron dominated each culture's view of the world. Literate or not, a European child lived in a world surrounded by letters. Books held the words of God, the king, and other men

³ John C. Condon and Fathi S. Yousef, *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication* (Indianapolis, 1975), 13.

⁴ Benjamin Whorf, *Language, Thought & Reality* (New York, 1956), 252.

and women. Papers could define property, record debts, describe one's wishes, or determine a one's fate. Few, if any, Europeans imagined living in a world without written language. The Indian perspective was just the opposite. Until Indians met Europeans, they did not even dream of forming words on paper. Hurons knew words only in an oral form. Words **happened** to a Huron. Speaking was an action full of physical power and magical potential. The sound of a voice brought words into existence and demanded the attention and respect of listeners, for when the sound ended, so did the word. Only the memory could hold those words for future use. Words to a Huron had a delicate, ephemeral quality which Jesuits never appreciated. Writing added dignity and convenience to communication for the Jesuits, while it baffled the Hurons. Regardless of these distinctions, early colonial relations brought Jesuits and Hurons together and left them to figure out how to communicate through seemingly insurmountable cultural barriers.⁵

Oral culture, was just as foreign to Jesuits as a literate culture was for Hurons. The Hurons had no immediate need for written words, because they had developed their own intricate systems of maintaining traditions and communicating. Memory and word association skills are by necessity much stronger in oral societies. Priorities for remembering information are different in a face-to-face oral culture than in a word-to-word literate written culture. A story told in an oral tradition will tend to have strong themes which are frequently repeated, standard phrases for description, flashbacks, or other means to double back and present any previously forgotten or skipped information.

⁵ James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial America* (New York, 1985), 14-15; Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), 31-45.

A literate person might assume that a story told in this manner would be unique with each teller, but the content remains very consistent. Flashbacks might alter the organization but the repetition and phrases are ingrained in the story-teller's mind. Oral people know exactly which parts of a story cannot be changed and would not take it upon themselves to alter those parts. A listener would immediately know and correct the speaker if necessary. Oral culture relies on a very conservative, inflexible attitude toward information. Traditions remain intact and maintain their strength because the entire community knows the same information, passes it on to the children, and frequently reviews ideas to keep them fresh in everyone's mind. Words and the transmission of ideas in an oral context are taken very seriously in a society like Huronia, because speaking is part of the fabric which holds the community together.⁶

As Jesuits and Hurons tried to communicate through their cultural barriers, confusion led to persistent rumors capable of influencing or scaring either side. Suspicion, lack of trust, and despair combined to create "psychological noise" that interfered with both participants' "ability to express or understand a message accurately."⁷ Only practice in interpreting another culture's words alleviates the tension. Rumors involve assumptions based on culture or methods of interpreting the motives of an alien culture. Until communicants gain knowledge, listeners fill in the blanks with personal expectations. At first, neither Jesuits nor Hurons had the advantage of significant insight into the rival culture, but they both had previous exposure to outsiders.

Far from being isolated in the American woodlands, Hurons had extensive

⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 57-69.

⁷ Adler and Rodman, *Human Communication*, 14.

experience with strangers before Frenchmen came to Huronia. By the seventeenth century, Hurons had developed successful skills for meeting new neighbors. Huron traders traveled throughout the northeastern woodlands to find trading partners, create treaties to allow passage through foreign territory, and form alliances against violent challengers. Huron ambassadors established an extensive network of friends, enemies, and acquaintances. Each summer Huron men journeyed to other areas to acquire varieties of furs, stones, shells, or minerals not available in Huronia (see Map 1).⁸ Instead of each Huron trader painstakingly learning all the languages of their partners, Hurons established one tongue for their transactions. The Huron language became the common form of communication or *lingua franca* among Huron trading partners.⁹

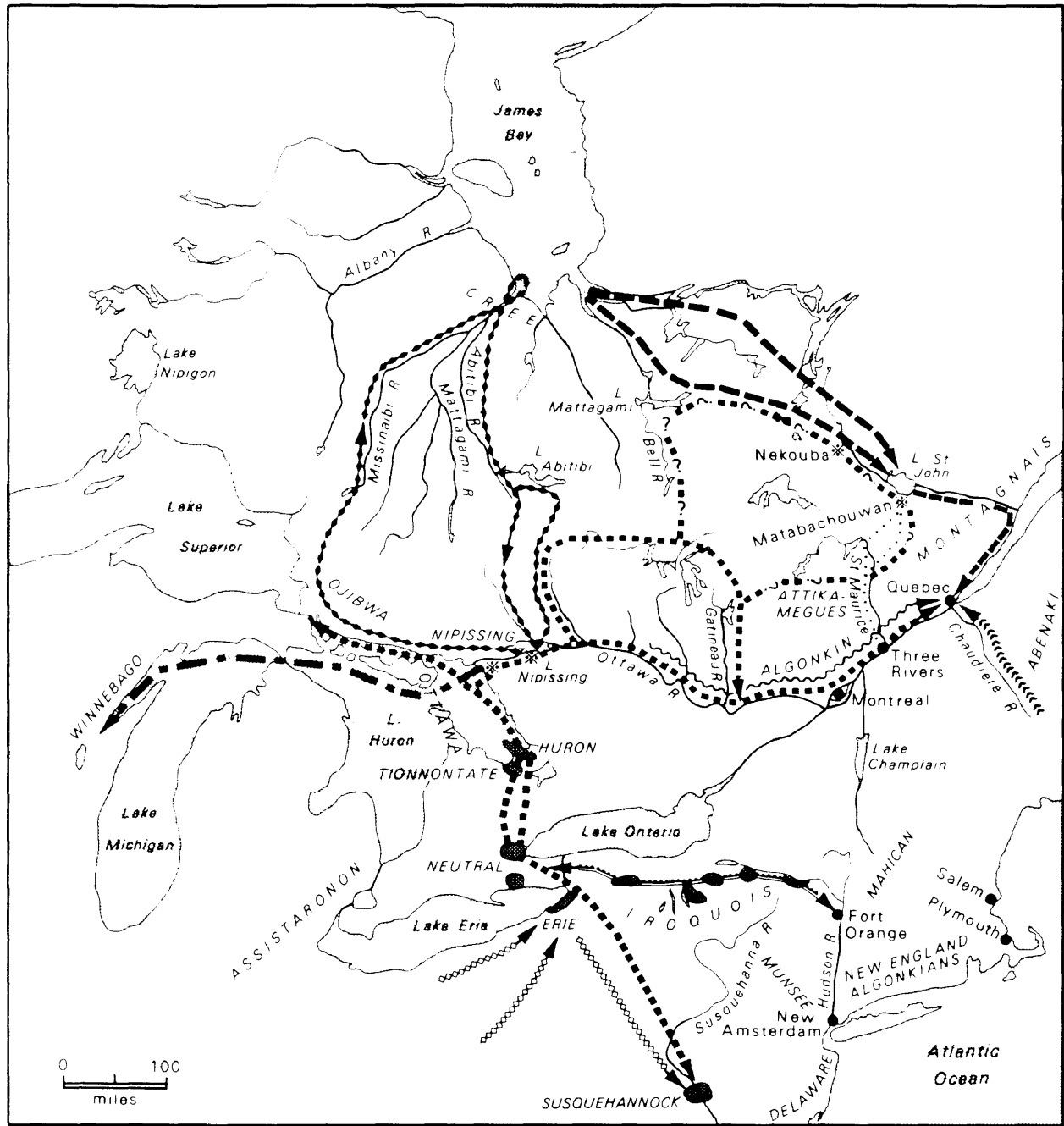
The Hurons' linguocentric attitude supports the conclusion that Hurons preferred their society over any other possibilities they encountered and felt superior to other Indian cultures. Over several centuries Hurons developed into a society with a strong sense of communal identity, a clear understanding of individual rights and group expectations, a viable economy, a protective social structure, an effective government, and a fulfilling set of religious practices. Seventeenth-century Huron society had not finished changing but had reached a point where the conditions suited individual and community needs quite well.¹⁰

Huronia's location conformed to the inhabitants requirements so well that Hurons

⁸ Bruce G. Trigger, *The Huron: Farmers of the North* (Fort Worth, IN, 1990), 43.

⁹ Trigger, *Huron*, 44.

¹⁰ Trigger, *Huron*, 2; Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, 2 vols. (Montreal, 1976), 841.















-  Iroquoian people
-  European settlement
-  Indian trading station
-  Nipissing trade routes
-  Algonkin trade routes
-  Huron trade routes
(? uncertain before 1640)
-  Ottawa trade routes
-  Attikamegue trade routes
-  Montagnais trade routes
-  Abenaki trade routes
-  Iroquois trade routes
-  Probable Erie-Susquehannock trade routes

Figure 11. Major Indian trade routes in the first half of the seventeenth century.

must have carefully picked that advantageous spot. Ethnohistorian Bruce Trigger argues that Hurons chose their territory to successfully mesh their agricultural livelihood and their trading opportunities.¹¹ By locating their communities near Georgian Bay north of present-day Toronto, Hurons found a convenient location between two different kinds of soil which supported very different subsistence patterns. Huronia's land and growing season supported crops sufficient to feed the communities and to produce a surplus.¹² Just north of Huronia lay the territory of Algonkian hunter-gatherers. These societies followed game and other food sources along the southern edges of the barren, rocky lands of the Canadian Shield. Huronia supported too many people to be a good home for many animals. Before 1600, probably 20,000 to 30,000 Hurons lived on the 700 square miles between Lake Simcoe and Nottawasaga Bay. Even the smaller estimate, which Trigger supports as the best approximation, contains enough people to over-hunt the deer and other animals which provided clothing and meat.¹³ Hunters could travel south and east of Huronia to obtain more animals, but to clothe their families for the winter Hurons needed supplies from the northern tribes. The waters just to the east of Huronia provided the ideal access between the two business associates. By trading surplus Huron corn for extra Algonkian hides, two cultures exchanged supplies which the other lacked.¹⁴

Ironically, in order to maintain their sedentary agricultural system, Hurons

¹¹ Trigger, *Huron*, 5.

¹² Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 36.

¹³ Trigger, *Huron*, 15-19, 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42-48; Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 132, 168-176.

depended on their wandering Algonkian trading partners, who followed a life cycle which Huron ancestors had abandoned. Archeological evidence suggests that before 500 A.D. Iroquoian-speaking people hunted game, harvested fish, and gathered plants throughout the region south and east of Lake Huron.¹⁵ Around 1500 years ago a few groups began planting a hardy crop of corn with a short growing season. Subsistence patterns gradually changed until corn and beans became the staples, with additional nutrients from fish, squash, gathered plants, and small quantities of red meat.¹⁶ Settlements of long-term farming multiplied until most Iroquoian peoples adopted the sedentary practices. However, not all the settled peoples of southwestern Ontario became culturally Huron.

The ethnic label Huron actually refers to at least four peoples who collectively identified themselves as Wendat, which translates to "Islanders" or "Dwellers on a Peninsula." According to Huron legend, two peoples, the Attignawantan or Bear People and the Attigneenoughnac or the Cord People, combined to form the first Huron society around the middle of the fifteenth century. These communities gradually incorporated other small bands until bringing the Arendahronon, perhaps meaning Rock People, into their association in the late sixteenth century and allowing the Tahontaenrat or Deer People to join in the early seventeenth century. The new Huron culture mixed degrees of interdependence and independence. Although each Huron division had its own council, customs, and specific history, all four peoples spoke similar Iroquoian dialects and shared the same basic social, governmental, and religious traditions--including the

¹⁵ Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered* (Kingston, 1985), 119.

¹⁶ Trigger, *Huron*, 30-39, 119.

same creation story. Their self-identity as "Islanders" may have stemmed from the belief that a giant turtle supported the world, in the shape of an island, on its back with Huronia in the center.¹⁷ This common foundation with possibilities for variation allowed the co-mingling of several peoples with similar expectations without destroying any group's integrity.

Social tolerance extended to the personal level, as well. Hurons did not perceive any need to insist on uniformity and shunned coercion from anyone other than a family member. Public criticism constituted a humiliation that each Huron feared. No one dared speak negatively of someone else's beliefs or presume to suggest that another could not make his or her own personal decisions. Any needed corrections started on a subtle or unobtrusive level. A Huron detecting a problem would first try to overlook or covertly correct another's mistake. Next, the concerned observer would try encouraging the offender to change the troublesome behavior. Relatives' attitudes and the community's opinion went a long way to help Hurons realize that their actions or statements were out of line. Huron happiness, as well as security, depended on the respect of the rest of the community. Each Huron could form his or her own opinions while earnestly trying to contribute to the community's welfare.¹⁸

Along with Huron culture's strong emphasis on individual liberty came a universal acceptance of rule by consensus. Huron organization guarded against individuals (be they young, old, strong, rich, or powerful) gaining enough control to determine Huron laws based on whim or personal interest. The chain of command began with the

¹⁷ Ibid., 12, 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., 50, 97-98, 144-45.

extended family household, then worked its way through the clan, the community, the nation, and finally, the confederacy. On each level the members had to choose leaders, or chiefs, to represent them in the higher ruling bodies.¹⁹ Strength and unity depended not on the obedient following of the higher authority, but smaller units supporting the chief. Any chief who tried to be overly manipulative would offend his supporters terribly and force them to question his judgment.²⁰

In both internal affairs and external matters, no decision was final until it had unanimous consent at each governing level. The members met as a council to discuss current issues. Each person had the opportunity to state his opinion or to ask others for advice. Once the possibilities and major preferences were established, the group tried to find a solution that everyone wanted. Since absolute agreement was difficult to arrange, many meetings reached a makeshift consent and dissenters agreed not to contradict the majority decision. This system attempted to combine the strength of universal communal enforcement and the flexibility of changing with the times. Should conditions or majority opinion shift, councils could adjust their resolutions at the next meeting and establish a new mutually-agreeable policy.

How often a governing body convened depended on how frequently the community needed group rulings and when the council could come together. Village councils might meet daily to coordinate local affairs. A confederacy meeting occurred only once a year unless a pressing matter called for immediate attention. At each level the individual's responsibility remained the same. A chief brought the support and

¹⁹ Ibid., 80.

²⁰ Ibid., 84.

wishes of his people to the meetings with other communities. Between all those desires and opinions, leaders worked to find the most stable decision and convince everyone to acquiesce. Communities appraised representatives for larger councils by assessing their character and ability to withstand the rigors of office. Once a chief earned the respect of his people, he maintained the support and respect of his community through his wisdom, courage, success, and generosity.²¹

Huron religious beliefs and activities were also structured to accommodate the spiritual needs of the individual and the community. A village did not have a central site assigned for all religious services or one person to guide community beliefs. However, Hurons had certain common assumptions. In the Huron world, a spirit inhabited all things, animate or inanimate. Powerful spirits, much like humans, could either help or hinder Huron endeavors. Souls of the Huron dead traveled to an afterworld to live with deceased relatives. Hurons also recognized specifically prescribed rules of behavior for rituals. Beyond those basic principals Hurons had freedom to develop personal religious practices.

Hurons felt that spiritual and physical health were intertwined. A Huron soul had needs and could get sick just like the body. A soul did not require tangible sustenance like food or water, but had a compelling urge to satisfy a desire. The medium the soul used to communicate wishes to the individual conscience was dreams. In a dream the person saw what the soul wished. The soul could request a specific item, such as tobacco, or could ask that a specific act or ritual be performed. If the desire was not fulfilled, the person could become seriously ill. Community members helped each other

²¹ Ibid., 81-90, 142-43.

in any way they could to satisfy those desires. Sometimes the need was hard to identify. In cases where dreams were difficult to interpret, Huron society had talented religious men or shamans who could use their spiritual powers to help find the soul's desire and direct the community toward satisfying it.²²

Shamans who specialized in different areas also helped the community. In addition to healing, other kinds of shamans controlled the weather, made predictions, or found lost objects. A shaman's power came from his *oki*, a guardian spirit, and the community's faith in his pronouncements. Hurons turned to shamans in times of doubt and trouble. Shamans looked to their *oki* to reveal the problem and the solution. If a drought damaged the crops the weather-controlling shaman might discover that a particular spirit felt neglected and proscribe an offering of tobacco to help bring rain. Hurons listened to his advice. When a shaman failed, Hurons assumed that his *oki* had left him and followed a new shaman. Each new shaman renewed the channel between the natural and supernatural worlds and helped Hurons feel they could influence the forces of the universe toward the good of Huron society.²³

Hurons who were not recognized shamans also had access to magic and the spirit world. The community took responsibility for ensuring that Hurons used spirit power only for good purposes. If community members felt that someone used spirit powers to injure or kill another Huron, and the accusers could prove this to the satisfaction of the community, the transgressor was labeled a witch and could be executed. A witch caused an illness or disaster either by learning powerful spells from an evil spirit or by

²² *Ibid.*, 132-40.

²³ *Ibid.*, 134.

magically placing charms in the victim's body. Hurons believed jealousy to be the main cause for a witch to turn against someone. Huron society idealized social equality, and successful, prosperous, or lucky individuals were expected to share their wealth. Most Hurons were meticulously careful to keep the good opinion of the community and to avoid the wrath of any undiscovered witches by regularly distributing surplus property. A witch was a dangerous, unpredictable, and unproductive force in Huron society which encouraged leaders to act quickly and decisively to eliminate the perpetrator. Use of evil powers against fellow Hurons threatened the security of the entire community and Hurons watched carefully for evidence that illnesses or communal problems had an origin in witchcraft.²⁴ An accusation of witchcraft effectively discouraged most Hurons from straying far from social norms.

Huron society depended on the persuasive capabilities of group opinion, the ability to come to communally accepted decisions and the maintenance of tradition and communication through oral culture for stability. History and laws passed through communal memory and understanding. News traveled with people as they visited other villages or traded with other societies. Oral transmissions kept the society together. Huron society identified itself and its organization orally. Orality affected all people and systems within that society. On the other hand, Jesuit society depended on literacy just as much. Jesuits consciously acknowledged their need for writing while Hurons never knew anything but oral transmissions. Neither society realized that with a knowledge of literacy comes a change in thought-process and cultural possibilities so profound that it can disrupt societies.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 101-105.

The Huron path changed course the day that news arrived about men unlike any others who had come to North American soil. The first recorded Huron reaction to aliens from across the sea entailed sending men to form a trading alliance.²⁵ Archaeological sites contain small amounts of European goods which arrived before Europeans traveled to Huronia. Native American trade networks which carried goods from all over America also brought European supplies from Indian groups that had earlier contact with the Europeans.²⁶ Early Huron knowledge of the foreign goods probably did not include an understanding of the motives or distinctions between the various European countries searching for American wealth. Hurons cared about the new goods that trade would bring, as well as the honor and wealth that contact brought to the clan who met them first. Huron traders from the Arendahronon introduced themselves to men who called themselves French about the same time that the Tahontaenrat people joined the Huron nation.²⁷

By 1615 Huron traders had established a formal alliance with the men from the new continent. Early relations brought many new items and uncovered common expectations. Frenchmen had metal tools, glass beads, copper pots, wool blankets, and effective weapons which fascinated and confused the Hurons.²⁸ The French traded almost everything except European weapons. Europeans used guns which required technology and skills which the Huron did not have. Guns also brought unprecedented

²⁵ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 246; JR 39:49.

²⁶ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 242-43.

²⁷ Ibid., 246; Trigger, *Huron*, 44.

²⁸ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 358-360.

power. Although the French were wary of giving guns to Huron men, French leaders did agree to aid Huron warriors in attacks on enemies by lending armed French soldiers.²⁹ While soldiers and traders stayed in Huron villages, many of them lived in Huron homes, ate Huron food, participated in Huron activities, wore some Huron clothing, and established personal relations with Huron women.³⁰ With French men practicing the same basic habits as Huron men, the visitors probably did not seem completely foreign.

Soon after the French traders and adventurers came to Huronia, an altogether different type of Frenchman decided to visit. These men would not live with Hurons, could not speak the language well, kept their distance from many forms of Huron hospitality, and refused offers of marriage from Huron women. These men in gray robes who called themselves Recollects were much harder to comprehend.³¹ These friars were similar to Huron shamans or men who possessed great supernatural powers.³² Several Recollects proved this assumption to be true when their praying seemed to stop a devastating rain.³³ These Frenchmen also spoke of Christ and offered to sprinkle water on some Hurons as part of a ritual that the recipients did not understand.³⁴ The

²⁹ Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 262.

³⁰ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 365-66; Trigger, *Huron*, 94-95.

³¹ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 387; Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York, 1976), 71-72.

³² Trigger, *Huron*, 134-35.

³³ Father Gabriel Sagard, *The Long Journey to the Country of the Hurons*, trans. by H.H. Langston, edit. by George M. Wrong. (Toronto, 1939), 78.

³⁴ Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 201.

Recollects, who usually numbered only four at one time in Huronia, did not threaten or add much to Huron life besides satisfying some curiosity until Father Joseph de La Roche Daillon tried to trade with an Indian group to the south known to the French as the Neutrals. That betrayal of Huron interests and of the two cultures' trading alliance made Huron leaders insecure about future relations with the visiting Frenchmen.³⁵

In the midst of controversy over Recollect transgressions during the winter of 1627-28, another group of Frenchmen, this time dressed in black robes, arrived in Huronia. One "Black Robe" stayed for many years to learn the Huron language and to earn respect for his shamanistic powers.³⁶ Instead of calling this man by his French name, Jean de Brébeuf, the Hurons named him Echon after a "tree with medicinal properties."³⁷ After a few years Echon left abruptly, along with most other Frenchmen, and stayed away for three trading seasons. Another group of Europeans, the English, forced the Frenchmen to leave in 1629. The English tried to trade with the Hurons, but relations quickly broke down. Normal trade did not resume until the French returned in 1632 to contract a new agreement with the Hurons.³⁸ This time French leaders insisted that more "Black Robes" be allowed to live in Huronia as part of the trade alliance.³⁹ The Recollects did not return.

Hurons had guardedly allowed Frenchmen, no matter how strange they seemed,

³⁵ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 399-401.

³⁶ Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 202.

³⁷ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 83-84.

³⁸ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 458, 472.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 480-481; Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 227.

to stay in their homes. Hurons could comprehend the French traders' motives and tolerate their ugliness, even though facial hair and curly locks were ill-favored and considered a sign of intellectual inferiority.⁴⁰ But the Hurons were perplexed as to why the black-robed Jesuits would want to live in Huron villages. Jesuits did not hunt or fight, as any Huron knew men should, and they stayed home and fixed their own food like women. Celibacy as a lifelong, honored ideal did not make any sense to Hurons either.⁴¹ On top of all that came the perplexing stories Jesuits told of their home across the sea. Frenchmen came from a land where craftsmen had powerful skills to make the axes, pots, beads and other goods that Hurons wanted. Along with the splendor came the contrasting information that poor Frenchmen begged for food since they had no relatives or clansmen to take them in.⁴² Yet French leaders insisted that these men who could not defend the village with guns, who could seldom carry their own weight by paddling a canoe, and who had no obvious purpose in life must be given a place to stay and their safety must be guaranteed. Under these circumstances, Hurons were wary of French negotiators' and Jesuits' intentions.

The Jesuits who made the journey to Huronia were eager to tell any native listeners the messages they brought. These Frenchmen came as Catholic emissaries to spread the Word of Christ to a region untouched by the religion of the Bible. The knowledge that New France held untold thousands who would die without the benefit of Christianity propelled the seventeenth-century religious missions. A Jesuit dedicated his

⁴⁰ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 432; Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 24.

⁴¹ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 80; Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 72.

⁴² Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 431-433; Sagard, *Long Journey*, 89.

life to securing souls to the Catholic Church and offering converts the rewards of Heaven. According to seventeenth-century Catholic belief, when people died without the rite of baptism to wash away original sin, their soul spent eternity in Hell.⁴³ Travels across the Atlantic Ocean carried the Jesuit training to a new audience who seemed to be in grave need of help.

Extensive education, research, and practice prepared the Jesuits as soldiers for the army of God. The Society of Jesus started as a vision of a Spanish warrior, Ignatius Loyola, who wanted to turn his talents to spiritual endeavors. The Catholic Church sanctioned Loyola's quest in 1540 and began an order of priests sworn to teach the followers of Christ and augment the number of believers. The Frenchmen who chose to leave secular society gave up their personal possessions and marital prospects in exchange for membership in an exclusive society of men devoted to serving God. The rigorous training for these future missionaries included years of formal secular and religious studies, as well as combat duty as teachers. By developing their own classes, Jesuits integrated the knowledge from their schooling and strengthened their argumentation skills. Before trying to persuade non-European peoples, Jesuits started by working to keep the attention of young French secondary students.⁴⁴

While preparing their minds for a life working as spiritual guides, Jesuits read about the successes and setbacks of their brothers around the world. Jesuit readers absorbed from those accounts valuable knowledge and fierce determination. Many young French Jesuit hearts were inspired by Énemond Massé and other early missionaries who

⁴³ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 503.

⁴⁴ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 71-76, 91.

returned to France to teach after working with the native peoples of New France.⁴⁵ Students heard just how difficult it was to convert natives and how sorely those efforts were needed. From the Jesuit perspective, Indians lived on the edge of survival and committed many sins in the process of daily existence, not realizing the consequences of those acts. When Father Paul Le Jeune described natives in 1632, he supported the general Jesuit impression that Indians were essentially innocent and thoroughly impressionable, needing only Jesuit "education and instruction" to fill their open minds with the Word of God.⁴⁶ New France included different nations with distinct languages and cultures, of whom Hurons comprised a comparatively small number, all needing Christian attention. Many Jesuits listened to the call for missionaries, and a few were selected to direct their skills toward Huron souls.

Until 1626, Jesuit knowledge of the Hurons came from a rival religious order--the Recollets. In his book, *The Long Journey to the Country of the Hurons*, Father Gabriel Sagard chronicled his group's attempts to learn the language, understand the culture, and begin the process of converting Hurons. However, Recollet theories of mission policy left little leeway to accommodate differences between European and Indian culture. Jesuits reading about Huron life saw great potential for change if slightly milder methods were employed by missionaries with better training and resources than the Recollets commanded. Fortunately for the Jesuits, a French nobleman with interests in New France and deep devotion to Catholicism, Henri de Lévis, Duc de Ventadour, agreed

⁴⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁶ JR 5:33; Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 41.

with the Jesuits' analysis and offered to fund passage for three fathers.⁴⁷ Once they landed at Quebec in 1625, the Jesuits wanted at least one of their number to proceed to Huronia and work with the few remaining Recollects. Father Jean de Brébeuf worked for several years in Huronia learning the language and slowly collecting important data about the Huron nation.⁴⁸

The English takeover of Quebec interrupted French activities in America--religious, economic, or otherwise--between 1629 and 1632. When England relinquished control of New France, only Jesuits returned. The French government decided to give Jesuits exclusive authority of Indian conversion policy. Three Jesuits returned that year, with more soon to follow, ready to start working among the various native peoples, including the Hurons.⁴⁹ However, when French leaders asked their Huron trading partners to transport the fathers, the Hurons seemed willing but could not accommodate them. The visiting traders feared that an enemy ambush on the return journey might endanger missionary lives and Huron leaders suggested that the following year might be better. Even though the French insisted that trade relations depended on this request, the Hurons would not relent. This stumbling block did not stop the determined Jesuits who successfully bribed some young Huron traders to take Brébeuf, several fathers, and hired men, plus their luggage, into Huron territory.⁵⁰

When the fathers stepped into Huron canoes, the writings about travel on New

⁴⁷ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 37-38.

⁴⁸ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 402-408.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 472.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 480-485.

World rivers became painfully real. Jesuit missionaries resoundingly agreed that persevering under repugnant, degrading conditions while traveling with Indians was a grueling test of their faith. All mission writers continually emphasized how different Huronia would be for grown men used to an ascetic but thoroughly European life. After crouching in a canoe by day, sleeping on the ground at night, and watching Huron men use the bowls they had urinated in as vessels to prepare dinner every day for several weeks, Jesuits finally arrived in Huronia to only minimally improved conditions.⁵¹ When these returning Jesuits appeared in a Huron village, without the sanction of Huron leaders, the community still offered to feed and house them during their stay. Amenities included sleeping in smoky, crowded longhouses with the uncomfortable presence of women and children and eating food that seemed only slightly cleaner, fresher, and more appetizing than the traveling food. While enduring stomach aches, horrible smells, culture shock, and moral outrage, Jesuit missionaries in Huronia had to figure out how to convince Hurons to become Christians.

When the Jesuits finally got to Huronia, they pulled together their years of education, unquestioning belief in their goals, and firm desire to succeed and started to form a base structure for their mission network. How the Jesuits proceeded depended largely on power and chance. The Society of Jesus operated with a typical, European hierarchical system from the lowest uninitiated helpers to the Superior General of the entire organization. The father whom the Society assigned to lead the Huron mission owed obedience to his superior in Quebec, who in turn reported to Jesuit leaders in France. The Superior of the Huron mission had immediate power to determine Jesuit

⁵¹ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 72-74.

actions within the guidelines or orders established from higher up. The distance between the various powers hindered frequent interference. Beyond all the decisions of man lay the force of chance. To the Jesuit mind the supreme source of authority was the will of God, which humans could not predict, only follow. The Jesuits, who started coming to Huron missions in 1634, trusted their futures to the divine hand and devoted their lives to His church.⁵²

Over the next fifteen years the missionaries organized a handful of men to learn the Huron language, establish residences in several villages, discover the individuals and customs to focus their efforts on, and plan the most efficient manner for reaching thousands of Hurons. At first, information-gathering and basic adaptations occupied all Jesuit time. Every Jesuit had to tackle the language before he could do much good. Besides confronting the fact that middle-aged men had trouble acquiring a new language, the Jesuits needed to devise innovative methods for teaching Christian concepts.⁵³ Jesuits discovered, as had fellow priest Pierre Biard among the Micmacs, that orally based Indian concepts were essentially "limited to sensible and material" matters.⁵⁴ Missionaries may not have recognized the cause, but the effects of oral culture made the Huron language a struggle to learn and a difficult medium in which to convey Western culture experiences. Without abstract categories and constrained by the Hurons' literal view of the world, Jesuits needed to use Huron experience and lengthy metaphors to

⁵² Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 503.

⁵³ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 81-82.

⁵⁴ *JR* 2:11.

explain basic Christian lessons.⁵⁵ Before teaching, Jesuits needed to understand the culture they were infiltrating.

Jesuit missionaries traveled throughout Huronia to contact new people and to learn the extent of their mission. Through these visits the fathers tried to win respect from various villages while practicing language skills and observing Huron behavior. Jesuits knew that much of their battle entailed gaining political savvy in the Huron ranks. Once they learned who had influence, Jesuits knew from whom to curry favor and on whom to concentrate their persuasion skills.⁵⁶ Even in good times, Jesuits numbered under twenty fathers to minister to an entire society.⁵⁷ A center of operations helped alleviate the overwhelming ratio. The first Huron mission Superior, Brébeuf, began the mission in a longhouse converted into a crude Jesuit residence in an influential Huron village.⁵⁸ By the time the mission ended, Jesuits had a European-style stockade as a central headquarters and smaller residences in various villages.⁵⁹ From these carefully dispersed locations, Jesuits could hold masses and give lessons in a permanent structures and send missionaries to other sites (see Map 2).

The strongest force outside the Jesuit sphere that influenced mission decisions was the fact that the entire Christian operation existed for the sake and by the cooperation of Hurons. Although Jesuits had lay assistants to perform manual labor or housekeeping

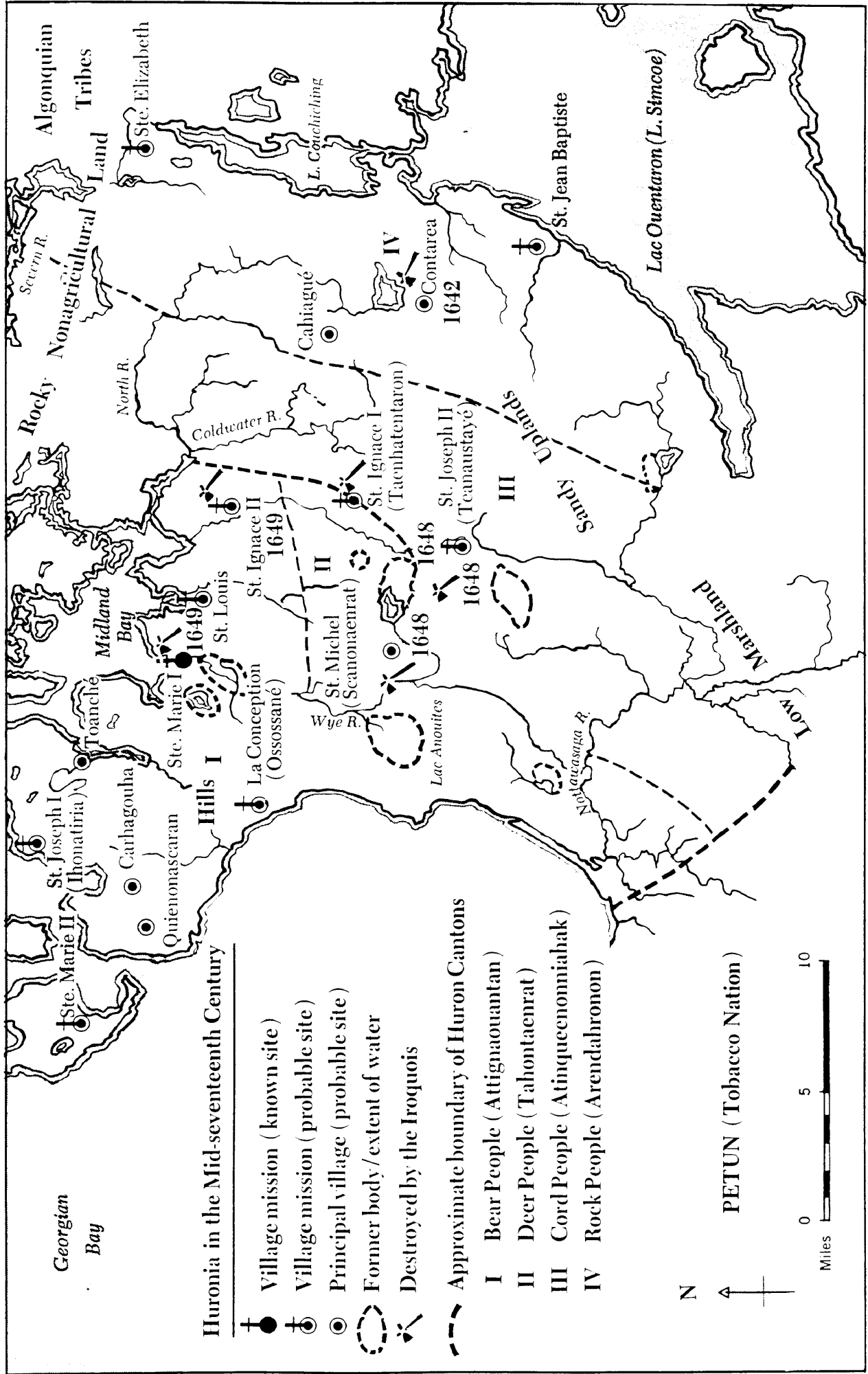
⁵⁵ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 108-109.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁷ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 665.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 495; *JR* 8:113-18.

⁵⁹ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 669-670.



tasks and hired men to wield guns for French and Huron protection, fathers frequently depended on Hurons for basic necessities. Huron canoes brought Jesuits to Huronia. Huron houses took care of the fathers while visiting or before Jesuits had built their own residence. Huron women grew much of the food that Jesuits ate, even when the fathers had very little to offer in return.⁶⁰ Most important, Huron traders transported letters and supplies between Quebec and Huronia. Without the supply line to French settlements, Jesuits would have been cut off from the orders and information from superiors and from European foodstuffs, trade items, and other essential goods.⁶¹

To ensure their usefulness and the continued toleration of their hosts, Jesuits had to create a place for themselves within Huron society. First-hand experience taught them that previous French visitors to Huronia were wrong in deciding that these people had no religion or governmental organization.⁶² By asking questions and watching, Jesuits slowly realized that Hurons had a government, complex religious beliefs entrenched in daily activities, and distinct sub-cultures aligned by common territory and leaders. Jesuits never seemed to understand the consensual nature of Huron government but assumed that a roughly hierarchical system operated in Huronia. Father Francois-Joseph Le Mercier reported in 1637 that a village leader had the power to dictate his community's conversion to Christianity by sending a Huron man to loudly proclaim the change through the village. Later assessments proved this to be inaccurate. The announcement may have done little more than announce the Jesuits' presence and desire

⁶⁰ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 89.

⁶¹ *JR* 21:231.

⁶² Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 301.

to speak with Hurons.⁶³

By listening closely to Huron councils, Jesuits learned that persuasive language and a specific manner of speaking greatly influenced Huron thought. Jesuits were amazed that Hurons could hold their histories, stories, laws, and entire speeches within their memories. Hurons, who had no written language, used sticks with notches or strings of beads to aid their recall.⁶⁴ A woman teaching several fathers a language closely related to Huron "dictated...entire narrations" as a means of introducing new vocabulary.⁶⁵ But the power of Huron speeches lay in more than the words. Effective communication in a primarily oral culture involves the use of gestures using the entire body, melodic voice rhythms, and frequent repetition of key phrases. For Jesuits who learned the tenets of rhetoric from some of the finest teachers in France, mastering the Huron council oratory style was a relatively simple exercise.⁶⁶ Learning the correct metaphors to invoke and the proper words to use took considerably longer. Eventually, Jesuits tried to gain respect by using a speech style that mimicked the Huron pattern.

Reforming native religion began as an uphill battle because Huron society did not recognize the Euro-Christian distinctions between religious and social practices. Jesuit sensibilities could not tolerate nudity. In the villages, Huron children ran naked and adults wore little more.⁶⁷ Open sexual relations and divorce contradicted the Catholic

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 517; *JR* 13, 187.

⁶⁴ *JR* 30:61; Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 14.

⁶⁵ *JR* 21:225-231.

⁶⁶ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 87-88.

⁶⁷ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 502.

Church's teachings on human pleasure and marital relations. Wars, ritual tortures, and sacrifices ran directly counter to the major tenants of Christianity. Perhaps the worst offense against God was the Huron belief in the spiritual powers of shamans and rituals. From the Huron perspective, all these practices were part of the normal functioning of society and Jesuit complaints were trivial. Jesuits saw in those shamans and social rituals a niche in Huron society from which to correct Huron spirituality.

One Jesuit power which the missionaries used to overthrow the shaman was literacy. Through European contact, Hurons had seen many fascinating technologies unprecedented in North America. Jesuits brought clocks which looked like boxes that occasionally made noises, and French traders used guns much louder and more damaging than native arrows. While bizarre technologies could amuse or scare Hurons, nothing sparked awe like words on a piece of paper. Sagard wrote of the Hurons' utter amazement at literacy since script as a communication form had no precedent in Huron society. Apparently, some creative Huron saw a vague similarity between the action of marking on paper and the imprint of a snowshoe. When Hurons asked Sagard to write, they told him to "bring snowshoes and mark it."⁶⁸ Hurons had just as much difficulty describing the purpose of writing. When Hurons would take a note from Sagard to another Recollect, they believed that the paper literally spoke to the recipient and relayed the information. Having the ability to repeat word-for-word the speech of another father without ever hearing his conversation, European religious men appeared to have powers deserving careful attention. Hurons believed that paper was a living object aware of its surroundings. Jesuits encouraged this misinformation by warning the Hurons carrying

⁶⁸ Sagard, *Long Journey*, 73.

letters to Quebec that the documents would tell the receiver if anyone mistreated or stole the papers.⁶⁹

Hurons respected the mystery of literacy, and Jesuits used that attitude as ammunition against traditional Huron ways. Since Huron traditions remained only in the memories of individuals, Jesuits thought their rituals could be altered by the person who recalled them. Jesuits felt that the flexibility of Huron rules and religion damned the society's traditions to follow the whims of each generation. The messages of the spirits and practices which held Huron society together had nothing like the immutable, official Word of God contained in the Bible.⁷⁰ Hurons countered Jesuit calls for change by pleading that "every country has its own fashions" or customs, including religion, Jesuits could return to a book purported to contain the religion for all peoples in all times.⁷¹ Jesuits could slow down, teach with Huron metaphors, manipulate Huron traditions, mimic Huron speakers, and find ways to work within the Huron system, but the ultimate goal remained convincing Hurons to practice Christianity and to believe the true **written** Word of God.

Jesuits found a hostile, capricious environment in which to mold a Christian paradise. The situation made Hurons nervous as well. Both communities trod the path of communication with caution. Miscalculation could mean death or war. Of course, Jesuits and Hurons willingly participated in the conversations. A Jesuit was as ready to

⁶⁹ JR 21:231; James Axtell, "The Power of Print in the Eastern Woodlands," in *After Columbus: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York, 1988), 90.

⁷⁰ JR 30:63; Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 103.

⁷¹ JR 8:113.

become a martyr for his cause as a Huron was ready to die, or kill, to protect his community. Neither society knew enough to understand precisely what actions would force the other to a violent response. Hurons repeatedly commented that Jesuits "had no sense" and Jesuits reciprocated that opinion. According to the communications diagram, messages passed between Jesuits and Hurons are best understood as filtered through channels burdened with an atmosphere of misunderstanding and distrust. But these and all cross-cultural messages were decoded through an atmosphere of distrust. How does one evaluate the truth when the speaker does not consistently make logical sense and seems malicious? In their search for answers, Jesuits and Hurons kept hearing rumors.

CHAPTER II

RUMORS OF DEATH AND LIFE

Rumors helped mold this bi-cultural exchange before Jesuits could even leave for their second visit to Huronia. When Frenchmen returned to Quebec in 1633, the Hurons had information that suggested that other native groups wanted to kill any missionaries and their Indian helpers who traveled into the interior. Huron leaders weighed this information and decided not to refuse to transport Jesuits to Huronia but merely to wait a year. The Jesuits and French officials did not give much credence to the Hurons' information that Algonkian enemies wished to attack Huron traders and kill their French guests. But Hurons owned the canoes and knew the waterways which were the only means of transportation, and Hurons had the power to decide when Jesuits could come along. Jesuits reacted to this situation by ignoring the warning and finding any means they could to get to a Huron village. Jesuits were so eager to resume their mission that they overlooked native protocol. Since the missionaries chose to arrange passage by bribing young traders, the new Jesuit mission arrived in Huronia without the official sanction of Huron leaders. More than one French traveler noticed that first impressions meant a great deal to the Hurons, and this first Jesuit action laid an unsure foundation for communal relations.

As Jesuit and Huron reactions demonstrate, rumors call for a personal judgment. Even labeling information a "rumor" is an individual choice. In modern American

society, rumor, hearsay, and gossip all fall into the same category. These bits of communication consist of unsubstantiated ideas that are generally not worthy of note or trust by serious-minded listeners. Sociologists study rumor transmission and the effects on American businesses and other workplaces. Communication specialists write guidelines for supervisors and owners to tell them how to dispel and prevent rumors. At worst, a rumor takes control out of the normal, straightforward channels of society, and funnels it into the dark reaches of half-truths, lies, and fears. Lighter-hearted rumors spread unnecessary or embarrassing personal information.⁷² One researcher, Tamotsu Shibutani, concluded that rumors gained their strength when people are "caught together in an ambiguous situation" and they feel the need to "construct a meaningful interpretation . . . by pooling their intellectual resources."⁷³ For Shibutani, "rumor" boiled down to "collective problem-solving," and the experts advised their readers to eliminate the problems before potential "rumor-mongers" felt the need to solve them.

Other historians and anthropologists have encountered rumors in their studies of oral cultures. Jan Vansina had to cope with theories about rumors in his study *Oral Tradition As History*. His research focused on using information that had passed through generations of memorizing and retelling, and, over time, rumors became part of the facts in those histories. Vansina agreed with Shibutani that rumors, when uncontradicted, become collective interpretations. However, with oral traditions as his source, Vansina

⁷² Ralph L. Rosnow, "Rumor as Communication: A Contextualist Approach" *Journal of Communication* 38, no.1 (Winter 1988): 12-28; Ralph L. Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine, *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay* (New York, 1976); Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News; a sociological study of rumor* (Indianapolis, 1966).

⁷³ Shibutani, *Improvised News*, 17.

was more concerned with the validity of rumors. "Many rumors have a basis in fact," according to Vansina's findings, "especially in a society without writing or mass media, where speech is the medium of information." But rumors are also as often false, "especially when rumors serve practical purposes such as to dishearten opponents or galvanize supporters."⁷⁴ Two anthropologists working with an oral culture in Venezuela, the Yānomamö, came face-to-face with the effects of rumors and reached the same conclusion. Napoleon Chagnon, the first of the two visitors, found that Yānomamö groups used rumor as a political strategy, with both allies and enemies. By spreading rumors about another group's courage, rivals effectively forced each other to prove their "sovereignty and willingness to fight."⁷⁵ In this case, the researcher found himself in the midst of a violent chestpounding contest. Several years later Chagnon's student, Kenneth Good, discovered himself to be the subject of false rumors among the people he came to learn from. Good took Chagnon's conclusion one step further and asserted that "among the Yānomamö lying is pervasive. Rumors and tall tales are the region's lifeblood." But as Good searched more for the impetus behind Yānomamö rumor-spreading, he decided that besides being a political strategy lying could "just as well be done for entertainment or for no reason at all."⁷⁶ In both situations, rumors proved to be a valuable means of appreciating Yānomamö culture.

Rumors can be confusing and confrontational. A textbook on intercultural

⁷⁴ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition As History* (Madison, WI, 1985), 6.

⁷⁵ Napoleon A. Chagnon, *Yānomamö: The Fierce People*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1983), 169.

⁷⁶ Kenneth Good(with David Chanoff), *Into the Heart: One Man's Pursuit of Love and Knowledge Among the Yānomama* (New York, 1991), 153.

communication described information exchange as a dance. An image of intricate movements with complex patterns and subtle nuances that shape the expression is an apt metaphor for rumors in seventeenth-century North America. Rumors passed between Jesuits and Hurons hold the evidence to explore what cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls "thick description." Behind each word that a Jesuit reports lie scores of other ideas and numerous scenes in a process of communication. At first, the information may seem sketchy, confusing, and beyond compressing into a cultural analysis, but scrutinizing history makes it possible to examine people's actions and "[render] them accessible." Jesuit descriptions contain plenty of material, if combined with knowledge of both Jesuit and Huron culture, to "[dissolve] their opacity" and find the assumptions obscured by values which previously only the participants understood. Like Geertz's view of Balinese social priorities through cockfights or Chagnon's glimpse of Yanomamö balance of power from chestpounding duels, this study entails "guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing conclusions from the better guesses."⁷⁷ The final picture theoretically explains why Jesuits mentioned rumors so often and were so anxious about their effects.

Unlike Geertz or Chagnon, we have to contend with two societies with distinct sets of values who met over 350 years ago. Hurons and Jesuits were just learning to adapt to each other at the point where we try to understand them. Both cultures more explicitly described their values than they would normally since the presence of an alternative called their own ideas into question. On the other hand, this historic environment did not reveal the stable, established habits of independent societies. Each

⁷⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 20.

society had its own means of dealing with unsubstantiated information. However, contact between the two systems brought elements which had the potential to change values and, in the process, to violate rules and thwart expectations. Rumors became that much more powerful since the entire situation was full of unknowns.

The rumors that fill the Jesuit documents have to do with future events or the elusive motives and actions of rival groups. The two most common sources of speculation were possible foreign attacks on Huronia or the traveling trading parties, and the causes of violent epidemics that ravaged the Huron population soon after the Jesuits arrived. Less frequent problems, but with just as serious consequences, came from rumors about missionaries' impending doom by Huron or other Indian hands. Rumors even extended to the fate of Jesuits and other Frenchmen not living in Huronia. Jesuits mentioned their fears about rumors which reported conditions and events within Huronia itself. In all cases, the information was unclear to the Jesuits but vital and had the potential to influence their or the Hurons' course of action.

Every season, between the full growth of spring to the last leaf falling of autumn, "fresh rumors of massacre" passed between native societies. Hurons worried about native intelligence reports that mentioned either an Iroquois or Algonkian nation attacking a village or a trading party on the way down to Quebec.⁷⁸ More often than not, the attack never came. Jesuits were surprised to learn that "the old men and most influential in the country are often the authors of these false alarms." Practical motives fueled the self-inflicted rumors so Huronia always had "a good part of the young men capable of bearing arms" in the villages and to "prevent them from going away, all at the same

⁷⁸ JR 14:39, 23:105, 26:179, 29:251; Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 497.

time, to do their trading."⁷⁹ The Recollect visitor to Huronia, Father Sagard, recorded several years earlier that Huron leaders assembled a special council each year to determine the number of men who could go trading "so as not to leave them unprovided with warriors." Sagard also added that "anyone who wish[ed] to go away without this authorization [could] do so . . . but he [would] be blamed and thought foolish and imprudent."⁸⁰ Both the "due consideration" for "permission" and the rumors served to control the Huron flow of trade and people living under partial siege conditions.

Occasionally, threats reached a point where Hurons decided not to make a summer fur trading trip to Quebec. From the first to the last Jesuit writer in the Huron mission, rumors occupied the reports which depended on traveling Hurons for their delivery. In 1636, Father Paul Le Jeune speculated that the Hurons would not come down to Quebec that year "on account of the great rumors of war."⁸¹ Father Francois Joseph Le Mercier mentioned that rumors threatened travel in 1637, and, eleven years later, Father Paul Ragueneau reported that the rumors actually prevailed and the Huron chose not to go to Quebec.⁸²

One rumor passed through both Quebec and Huronia. Le Jeune was relieved to note in 1644 that the rumor that the French government would prohibit trade with the Indians never came true. If that policy had gone into effect, the Jesuits believed that their mission and their lives would be in jeopardy, since the end of trade would mean a

⁷⁹ *JR* 14:39.

⁸⁰ Sagard, *Long Journey*, 99.

⁸¹ *JR* 9:245.

⁸² *JR* 13:7, 33:69.

halt to spreading the Gospel and the Hurons would "no longer be restrained from massacring [them] all for fear of losing their trade with the French."⁸³

Jesuits tried to spread their own unsubstantiated information and use it as evidence to convince Hurons to become Christian. Jesuit rumors invoked fear, curiosity and interest which might convince Hurons to question their own belief and consider Christianity.⁸⁴ However, when Jesuits suggested that a man died because he spoke blasphemy against the Christian God, Hurons did not immediately believe that divine wrath punished the man for his transgression. Hurons recognized the possibility that another powerful force may have taken his life. Since Jesuits felt the death was justified, Hurons thought that perhaps the missionaries killed him through what the Hurons understood to be the power of a guardian spirit. Hurons interpreted Jesuit power in terms of their own shamans' abilities. Jesuits encouraged rumors about Christian supernatural power further in their efforts to supplant the native shamans for communal support. When Jesuits prayed for rain or a Huron's recovery, the missionaries believed that the outcome was God's choice, but the Hurons put the responsibility in the spiritual power of the Jesuits.

While Jesuits tried to emulate the native shamans and to replace hedonistic aspects of native spiritual practices with Christianity, Hurons slowly began to suspect that Catholic missionary talents fell in the category of witchcraft. Once Jesuits established that they were powerful beings, Hurons did not assume that those powers were

⁸³ *JR* 22:307, 28:57.

⁸⁴ W. J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier 1534-1760*, rev.ed. (Albuquerque, N.M., 1983), 52.

benevolent. Historian Cornelius Jaenen argues that Hurons believed that "the supernatural invoked for good could also be invoked to produce harmful effects."⁸⁵ On top of that, who knew what aspects of Catholicism powered or aided the Jesuits' spiritual abilities? Before Europeans came, natives had not heard of Jesus, seen Catholic rituals, or used the visual images and objects that accompanied mass. Hurons only had the Jesuits' word to teach them about these mysteries, and Hurons did not easily trust Jesuit statements--especially when they contradicted native belief and logic. Hurons tended to fear individuals who had the power to use magical spells since those skills could be used against anyone the witch envied or hated. Victims would know they had been a witch's target if they got sick and neither natural treatments, such as sweat baths or herbal remedies, nor finding their soul's desires cured them.⁸⁶ The only way to find a witch was to watch for abnormal, antisocial behavior and then to put pressure on the perpetrator to cease the spells.⁸⁷ Huron society killed witches who were beyond communal pressure either openly in a village council or by more devious means. Lalement regretfully reported that the missionaries' prize Huron pupil, Joseph Chihouatenhoua, was murdered by two Iroquois raiders while he worked in the fields outside his village. Bruce Trigger does not accept that conclusion but believes instead that fellow Huron villagers probably killed Joseph as a witch and traitor to the welfare of Huronia.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 61.

⁸⁶ Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 245.

⁸⁷ Trigger, *Huron*, 101-104.

⁸⁸ *JR* 20:79; Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 249.

Joseph's crimes included wanting to acquire the powerful skills of the Jesuits. Joseph converted to Christianity and wanted to learn how to read and write. Writing was fairly easy for him, but reading was much more difficult, noted an amused Le Mercier.⁸⁹ The entire idea of literacy fascinated Hurons because writing could record events that the reader had not seen.⁹⁰ "Reading" another Huron's thoughts was not unprecedented in Huron culture, but the native shamans could only perform that feat infrequently and by having their souls travel into another's body.⁹¹ Huron recognition of the missionaries abilities only strengthened the mystique surrounding Jesuit talents. Hurons associated "breviaries, inkstands, and writings . . . as instruments of magic" and the prayers that accompanied those objects equaled sorcery.⁹² Eventually, the Hurons believed that the Jesuits' writings and books caused the severe epidemics that hit Huronia.⁹³

Approximately half of the Huron population died between 1634 and 1640 from the European diseases that assaulted Indian societies through trade contact. Lalement identified one contagion as smallpox, but measles, whooping cough, influenza, typhoid, diphtheria, colds, chicken pox, scarlet fever, tuberculosis, and strep infections all found their way from Europe to the American continent. Fur traders, explorers, soldiers, missionaries, fishermen, and even other Indians and trade goods carried the infestations

⁸⁹ *JR* 15:111.

⁹⁰ *JR* 15:121.

⁹¹ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 103.

⁹² *JR* 21:215, 219.

⁹³ *JR* 20:31-33; Axtell, "Power of Print", 91-2.

from one community to another.⁹⁴ When Hurons first became sick, the community tried to cope with the widespread illness by traditional methods, but when the disease kept coming and taking a greater toll, Hurons looked for a human agent behind the epidemics.

Hurons began by searching their own ranks for culprits. Huron leaders suspected fellow villagers of poisoning the population and accused enemies of sending the illness.⁹⁵ Yet the diseases continued and gained strength suggesting a very powerful source. The next logical suspects were the Jesuits and Frenchmen who came just before the diseases and seemed to be unsusceptible to the deadly affects. In 1635, Le Jeune received word that Hurons had abandoned several fathers on the way to Huronia by tying them to trees because the French brought illness to native communities. Later, Le Jeune found out that the missionaries safely continued their journey. Huron communal opinion focused on the Jesuits and their mysterious motives. Le Mercier found out that when one man accused the fathers of introducing the epidemics, the whole village believed him.⁹⁶ Hurons carefully judged the Jesuits, and when a reasonable explanation appeared, entire communities quickly agreed.

Next, the Hurons began blaming specific objects and actions. A porcelain necklace, the images of Christ and the Virgin Mary, or the Jesuits' robes all seemed likely candidates for holding the contagions.⁹⁷ One rumor spread that a Frenchman

⁹⁴ *JR* 19:89; Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 98-101.

⁹⁵ *JR* 13:155.

⁹⁶ *JR* 13:211.

⁹⁷ *JR* 13:209, 15:19, 31.

admitted on his deathbed that the priests held the diseases in their cabin. When the man recovered and refuted the accusation, he put a halt to that tale.⁹⁸ A Huron man dreamed that the true Huron Jesus, named Iouskeha, came to him and asserted that the "black robes" caused the Huron deaths.⁹⁹ By visiting Huron villages the Jesuits spread smallpox, which would be followed by colic until entire communities died, insisted the spirit. In the dream, Iouskeha provided a two-part remedy for their plight. The spirit first ordered a ritual performed by the whole community, followed by the expulsion of the offenders. The Hurons chose not to carry out the second part of the instructions. Contrary to Iouskeha's request, the village threatened but did not expel the Jesuits.

Huron speculation about why Jesuits wanted to contaminate Hurons evolved around themes of political gain and revenge. Hurons related rumors that Echon (Brébeuf) said when he first came that he would exterminate the native population until he "ruined that whole land."¹⁰⁰ Jesuits intercepted other stories that claimed that heaven and hell were just fables or that Jesuits were actually devils, trying to attract souls to torment in hell as the Hurons tortured their enemies.¹⁰¹ A village among the Bear people claimed they heard from a "reliable source" that the maternal uncle of a murdered French interpreter wanted to destroy the whole country as revenge for his nephew's death.¹⁰² The Jesuits could refute that accusation but not discredit what seemed to the

⁹⁸ *JR* 19:97, 115.

⁹⁹ *JR* 20:29.

¹⁰⁰ *JR* 21:209.

¹⁰¹ *JR* 30:25, 29-31.

¹⁰² *JR* 14:17.

Hurons to be a reasonable cause. If a neighboring tribe killed a Huron man, his relatives would call for the enemy's death. Huron leaders gradually got the impression that their people were victims of an extermination attempt and they ardently searched for any way to gain information to understand the threat and prevent its success.¹⁰³

Hurons suspected that the French missionaries plotted to commit native genocide. Anything suspicious a Jesuit did became a possible method of destruction. Hurons believed that Jesuits had a corpse in their cabin at the Huron village of Ossossané which spread the disease throughout the community. The corpse was actually a small piece of a saint's bone which Catholics revered as a religious relic. When the Jesuits closed their cabin doors in the morning for matins, lauds, and morning mass, the Hurons thought the privacy was for sorcery.¹⁰⁴ Hurons also pegged the blame on baptism and forced the missionaries to make one of their primary functions a clandestine act. The Jesuits did not want to baptize healthy Hurons unless they had been properly trained and honestly prepared to lead a Christian life. If a Huron was about to die, a firm commitment to Catholicism was irrelevant and the missionaries would do whatever was necessary to complete the ritual and to save an eternal soul. Since at least one third of baptized Hurons died soon afterwards, Hurons logically began to associate the Christian rite with death. To Hurons, preventing baptism and curtailing Jesuit involvement seemed a possible cure for halting or slowing the rising death rates.¹⁰⁵

Hurons resoundingly accused Jesuits of mysteriously murdering their people, and

¹⁰³ Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 102.

¹⁰⁴ JR 15:33; Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 103.

¹⁰⁵ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 123; Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 503; Eccles, *Canadian Frontier*, 53.

continually suggested death as the punishment for their crime. The Jesuits felt that their "lives depended on a single thread" and learned to "expect death every hour." Within the first years of living together, Brébeuf reported that "the malice of the Savages gives especial cause for almost perpetual fear." Apparently taking the role of a native shaman was a heavy responsibility and Brébeuf complained that if a Jesuit could not "make rain, they [Hurons] speak of nothing less than making away" with the missionaries' lives.¹⁰⁶ Until the epidemics took hold, these rumors were "words and threats of people of but little importance." As Huron health worsened, the talk became threats of consequence.¹⁰⁷ More fingers began pointing at the Jesuits, and two missionaries even tried publicly to refute the accusations.¹⁰⁸ "These barbarians nearly all desired our death," announced Lalement to his French superiors, "as passionately as they craved the preservation of their own lives."¹⁰⁹ With the strength of deep devotion in a time of trials, the Jesuits firmly related that "for all these reports and all these threats" they resolved, "in prudence and discretion, not to abate a whit from [their] usual functions and occupations." However, sometimes the dangers were too great and native beliefs forced Jesuits not to "open a book or write anything" except in private.¹¹⁰

Jesuits did not have a high opinion of native means of transmitting information or trust its veracity. Experience and the difficulties of translation taught Jesuits to

¹⁰⁶ *JR* 10:93-95; Eccles, *Canadian Frontier*, 51.

¹⁰⁷ *JR* 15:13.

¹⁰⁸ *JR* 20:35.

¹⁰⁹ *JR* 20:73.

¹¹⁰ *JR* 14:55, 18:41.

analyze Huron words carefully. When Brébeuf heard that work on a cabin at another mission site, Ossossané, had stopped, he decided to investigate. Later, he discovered that construction had only been delayed.¹¹¹ In another episode, Le Mercier indignantly reported that a Huron man told him that a child was dead when Le Mercier later discovered the little one was actually alive.¹¹² Le Mercier related the next year that Huron leaders publicly retracted rumors that they had "invented" against Father Antoine Daniel.¹¹³ This announcement seemed to confirm the Jesuit idea that Hurons were hostile and deceitful enough to lie.

The main reason that Jesuits got this negative impression was also one of the important differences between the two cultures. Lalement complained that Hurons had "no knowledge of letters, no Historical documents and no idea of a Divinity who created the world and who governs it".¹¹⁴ Since oral cultures stored their knowledge by constantly repeating narratives, Jesuits felt that native methods were seriously deficient compared to their own literate culture. Jesuits recognized mnemonic devices and appreciated Huron memory, but they missed much of the structure behind Huron thoughts which scholar Walter Ong called the "fixed, formulaic thought patterns [that] were essential for wisdom and effective administration."¹¹⁵ Ong notes that "there will be as many minor variants of a myth [an oral transmission] as there are repetitions of it"

¹¹¹ *JR* 14:69.

¹¹² *JR* 14:7.

¹¹³ *JR* 15:139.

¹¹⁴ *JR* 28:49.

¹¹⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 24.

but that changes would be praised only if they fit in with the established traditions. Oral cultures encourage a meticulously conservative approach to the spoken word.¹¹⁶

Another native characteristic probably did not help Jesuit opinion of Huron honesty. Ong found that oral cultures tend to enlist a "fulsome expression of praise" in their discourse which would have seemed insincere to someone as literate as the Jesuits.¹¹⁷ Of course, that is assuming that the Jesuits accurately understood what the Hurons said. Historian James Axtell emphasizes how much trouble Jesuits had learning native languages. A "great diversity of native inflections, accents, breathings and changes of tone" confused Jesuit speakers. The slightest variance in sound could completely alter a word's meaning.¹¹⁸ Beyond spoken language, only after years of practice and keen observation could a Jesuit hope to successfully interpret the non-verbal signals which elucidated the messages. But no Jesuit could get over how they, as literate Europeans, looked at words.

The Jesuit system of knowledge clung to written words to maintain its integrity. Nothing proves this better than an example of how Jesuits dealt with rumor in their own culture. In the *Relation* of 1642-43, the Jesuits printed a declaration intended to put to rest rumors about missionary involvement in New World commerce. Apparently some people suggested that Jesuits went "to the end of the world in order to make traffic of skins of dead beasts." The Jesuits then offered a "genuine and impartial testimonial . . . drawn from the lips of honorable persons, who have stamped it with their names and

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹¹⁸ Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 82.

confirmed it with their signatures" avowing the mission's non-involvement in economic ventures. The statement insisted that "Jesuit Fathers are not associated in the said Company of New France . . . and have no part in the traffic of merchandise which is carried on by it."¹¹⁹ For the Jesuits, printed words affixed with a seal of truth were the only trustworthy way of verifying second-hand information.

Each year the missionaries waited eagerly for letters to come from their colleagues and friends in colonial settlements or France with travelers from Quebec. The journey was dangerous for flimsy paper carried in canoes which could come under attack or be damaged at any time. Lalement reported in his 1643-44 entry the day the first news of the year arrived with two Hurons who wintered in Quebec.¹²⁰ When letters did not arrive, Lalement lamented that the mission's only news would come by word of mouth that year.¹²¹ Sometimes a letter was not good enough even for the Jesuits. In 1637, Brébeuf decided to send a father to confer by "word of mouth" with Le Jeune.¹²² The next year several Jesuits had little choice but to trust the words of a Huron. When a Huron "friend" came to warn the fathers that he had heard rumors of approaching invaders, the Jesuits "thought it wise, however, not to disregard this information, seeing that there was some probability of its truth."¹²³ Jesuits weighed carefully any information they received through Huron rumors. Besides questioning Huron honesty

¹¹⁹ *JR* 25:75-79.

¹²⁰ *JR* 26: 43-44.

¹²¹ *JR* 21:231.

¹²² *JR* 14:109.

¹²³ *JR* 15:57-9.

and abilities, the missionaries wondered about native critical judgment. "Among these barbarians," concluded Le Mercier, "less than half proof . . . suffices to have one's head split" after an accusation of witchcraft.¹²⁴

Rumor-spreading alerted Jesuits to something a Christian would see as a serious moral deficiency. Jesuits knew the rumors circulating about themselves and the spread of disease were false. A conclusion as horrifying as a corpse holding diseases was a simple misunderstanding of a newly-introduced culture. With the knowledge that the rumors were wrong, Jesuits surmised that someone lied and started the tales. If a Huron could lie about the Jesuits and the diseases, they could probably lie about numerous other topics, or so the Jesuits assumed. Hurons did not judge evidence and recognize the truth according to Jesuits' criteria. Jesuits believed that the Huron tendency to spread rumors throughout a group quickly and then rapidly come to a community consensus was a characteristic of fear and deceit. Once Jesuits labeled Hurons dishonest, the missionaries could focus on tactics that destroyed Hurons' faith in native systems of judgment.

When Jesuits attempted to replace the shamans, the missionaries also tried to eliminate a source of rumors. With the defeat of shamans, Jesuits could then attack the sources of rival information such as dreams, native traditions, and religious practices.¹²⁵ All these components of Huron society seemed to the Jesuits to be based on superstition. Each of the Huron traditions that Jesuits chose as first points of attack were potential sources of rumors. Destroy the cause and the problem is eliminated.

After destroying faith in the old Huron system, the second step of the Jesuit plan

¹²⁴ *JR* 14:37.

¹²⁵ Axtell, "Power of Print," 87.

entailed offering Christian alternatives. While Jesuits taught their Huron students how to live the life of Christians, they also pressed their catechumens to leave behind the seemingly ignorant practices of a pre-literate culture.¹²⁶ Joseph Chihouatenhoua was a successful recipient of this technique. He stopped trusting Huron ways and began to learn to read and write. Bruce Triggers allegation suggests that the Hurons killed Joseph before he had a chance to acquire many Jesuit skills. Jesuits reported other slow inroads into Huron society. With rampant fear of baptism as a form of murder, any Huron willing to speak about the rite and being saved was hailed a dramatic achievement. By 1646 the Jesuits could record a public confrontation between a Christian student and tradition-abiding leaders. A "good Christian" tried to convince fellow Hurons at a council meeting that history and traditions told from memory have "no foundations but lies" since there are no "writings which give us faith" in the elders' reports.¹²⁷ The Jesuits could not have articulated their goals any better themselves. The council was not convinced, but the Huron Christian's testimony proved the efficacy of the Jesuit method and that, to some Hurons, literacy gave credence to the Christian message.

Hurons also made decisions about Jesuits based on rumors. In a highly conformist, intensely communal society like the Hurons, a rumor is not an interesting piece of gossip but a collective interpretation. To Hurons the existence of an object similar to a charm or a ritual that seemed to be a magical incantation was sufficient evidence for guilt. The accusations brought against the Jesuits were based on Huron beliefs of cause and effect involving dreams, the advice of shamans, and the influence

¹²⁶ Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 254-6.

¹²⁷ *JR* 22:309-311.

of the supernatural. Hurons repeated the same suspicions about Jesuits that they would spread about a fellow countryman. In the winter of 1637, Ossossané villagers accused an old man of poisoning several dying Hurons with sorcery. "People talked of nothing else then of going to break his head," reported Father Le Mercier. The report went on to explain that witchcraft was a common cause of death in Huron eyes and that "these people are very suspicious, especially when life is involved."¹²⁸ Since witchcraft rumors about Jesuits circulated so frequently and with such similar details, Jesuit guilt had probably become accepted as fact in Huron society.

However, Hurons never carried out their traditional punishment for witchcraft against Jesuits. Many rumors focused on the actions of Brébeuf. Between 1640 and 1643 so many stories circulated that Brébeuf collaborated with enemy nations and wanted to destroy Huronia that the Jesuits had Brébeuf return to Quebec for several years.¹²⁹ Jesuits and their Huron allies feared for Brébeuf's safety. Both societies knew that the threats were real, but the Huron accusations against Jesuits never reached their logical conclusion.

Jesuits liked to suggest that providence had a hand in Hurons' failure to execute any missionaries. Whenever Hurons tried to attack or convince another tribe to finish the task, Jesuits believed that God interceded and thwarted Huron plans. Father Le Jeune admitted that trade benefits often held back Huron hands.¹³⁰ Jesuits stayed alive because enough Hurons believed that maintaining trade relations with the French was

¹²⁸ *JR* 13:155-7.

¹²⁹ *JR* 21:209-11, 23:35-7.

¹³⁰ *JR* 22:307, 28:57.

essential. Hurons felt they could no longer do without the French goods.¹³¹ Hurons also knew from previous negotiations that the French demanded that Jesuits live in Huronia as an essential term of an agreement.¹³² The Hurons had to weigh their fear and distrust of Jesuits against the need for French goods.¹³³ The Huron traders and Christians repeatedly won the argument, so common decision notwithstanding, no Huron had the right to execute a Jesuit witch.

Not all Hurons remained in the undecided middle ground concerning Jesuits. Many Hurons choose to be either dead set against or solidly for the Jesuit presence. Bruce Trigger calls the anti-Jesuit faction Traditionalists. These Hurons believed that the old Huron ways were best and that any Jesuit influences, including French goods, were harmful. Some Hurons stopped using French goods because they feared that contact with French items spread contagions.¹³⁴ Other Traditionalists claimed that Huron society was dying because the "old customs are neglected" in favor of Christian practice.¹³⁵ Jesuits also blamed Traditionalists for instigating many of the false rumors spread about missionaries. Converted Hurons sought to reduce the influence of Traditionalist fears of Huron society and they succeeded. Although council members periodically discussed stopping trade with the French and kicking out the Jesuits, it never happened. The Christian Hurons were never a majority during the mission years, but they had power.

¹³¹ Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 247; W.C. Eccles, *France in America*, rev. ed. (East Lansing, MI), 46.

¹³² Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 480-5.

¹³³ Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 247.

¹³⁴ *JR* 15:21.

¹³⁵ *JR* 29:273.

Christians and Jesuit allies found many advantages to their new positions. Having French goods to trade with Hurons and other tribes brought higher status in Huron society. Prosperous Huron traders could redistribute that wealth and gain respect from the community, and trading with the French could be very lucrative. Christian Hurons also had the advantage of being the only Hurons able to buy guns.¹³⁶

The conflicting interests of Jesuits allies and enemies damaged Huron unity. In a society based on consensus decisions and group acceptance for self-identity, Jesuit demands created opposing factions. Huron citizens certainly had differences of opinion before the Jesuits came but Hurons with dissenting opinions agreed to follow group wishes or they moved elsewhere. Hurons generally had similar goals but disagreed on how to achieve them. Christian factions introduced entirely new sets of goals. When a Huron listened to the message of Christ and decided to believe in the Christian God and practice the Catholic faith, several other conditions came with that promise. Christian Hurons could no longer listen to the soul desires revealed in their dreams, participate in ritual friendships, practice native rituals, own charms, or be buried along with their relatives.¹³⁷ While these Jesuit rules created a new Christian community, they also divided a community which had largely known unity. Since Christian practice required breaking Huron traditions, conversion made Christian Hurons outsiders among their own people.¹³⁸ Jesuits successfully convinced some Hurons to question their beliefs. The introduction of Christian beliefs in Huron society also prompted a Huron

¹³⁶ Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 255.

¹³⁷ Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 257-8.

¹³⁸ Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 56, 65.

identity crisis.

In 1648 Father Paul Ragueneau abruptly ended his *Relation* entry while explaining the details of Traditionalist objections, conversion triumphs, and the bizarre native beliefs. He had much more information he wanted to report, but he knew that the converts and Traditionalists had a long battle ahead before the Hurons became a Christian community and his observations could "await another year."¹³⁹ Unfortunately, he was dead wrong. The competing segments of Huron society never resolved their differences because the Iroquois Confederacy launched a successful campaign of almost total destruction against Huronia. Around 1645 the Iroquois nations began attacking Huron settlements and traders more aggressively, and by 1649 the Hurons were "a people wiped off from the face of the earth."¹⁴⁰ The extent of Iroquois destruction was so extensive that historian W. J. Eccles could write the epitaph, "Only ashes and charred corpses marked where the Huron confederacy and the great Jesuit mission had endured."¹⁴¹

Dissolution as well as massacre destroyed Huronia. The Iroquois attacks and mysterious diseases took lives, but they also drained the Hurons of confidence. Although casualty numbers are difficult to calculate, ethnohistorian Bruce Trigger's findings suggest that more Hurons abandoned villages than died in them.¹⁴² Some Hurons turned to the Jesuits. The Hurons who joined under Jesuits protection moved from Huronia to a fortified island in 1649. But the Jesuits could not support so many

¹³⁹ *JR* 33:223.

¹⁴⁰ *JR* 35:205.

¹⁴¹ Eccles, *France in America*, 48.

¹⁴² Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 271.

followers and a majority died of disease or starvation. Perhaps 600 people who left Huronia with the Jesuits survived the winter of 1649-50 and eventually stumbled their way to a safe haven outside Quebec.¹⁴³ Many other Hurons choose to risk their life by surrendering to the attackers or fleeing to Iroquois villages. Huron families could appeal to Iroquois tribes who had adopted a Huron relative. Adoption was a common practice for both societies. Instead of killing a prisoner, the captors could replace a relative who had died. Hurons asked for this protection from the Iroquois, and quite often they received it.¹⁴⁴

When faced with destruction, both Traditionalists and Christians chose to abandon their society. Certainly the instability caused by rumors was not the only factor that led to this decision. Disease ravaged their population and robbed Hurons of the wisdom of elders and the promise of youth. Droughts and several years of poor harvests weakened Hurons.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, the Iroquois attacks successfully ruined villages, killed Huron soldiers, and terrorized the Huron population.¹⁴⁶ However, Huronia had faced Iroquois attacks before and had repelled them or intimidated them by attacking Iroquois villages in retaliation. During previous Iroquois attacks Huronia had made a unified effort - after 1645 they did not. We cannot look back and compare Huron and Iroquois strengths and weigh those against their weaknesses and then decide who would have won if the Hurons had fought back effectively. The Hurons were weakened but not completely helpless.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 271.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 268-9.

¹⁴⁵ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 662, 766.

¹⁴⁶ *JR* 34:79-235.

The Iroquois were strong and confident, but not indestructible. We will never know because the Hurons gave up. Hurons weighed the costs against the advantages of holding their ground and decided it was not worth the effort anymore. Rumors might not have been the only factor in Huron destruction, but their influence added one more weight to the side that tipped the scale.

Several Hurons did find a way to resolve some of the rumors about Jesuits and witchcraft. Father Brébeuf, the focus of so many rumors, as well as Father Gabriel Lalement, were captured by invading Iroquois in March 1649. In both Huron and Iroquois traditions, the appropriate treatment of an enemy as notorious as the Jesuits was torture until death. Brébeuf and Lalement were treated like any other Iroquois victims with two exceptions. Some of the Iroquois who helped torture the Jesuits were adopted Hurons. These Hurons added a new method of inflicting pain appropriate for the witches who helped destroy Huron society. Along with the burns and cuts normally used to hurt a prisoner, the Hurons decided to baptize the missionaries with boiling water and adorn them with "rosaries" of red-hot hatchet blades.¹⁴⁷ These expatriate Hurons finally carried out the proscribed sentence for using supernatural forces against Huronia.

¹⁴⁷ Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic*, 764.

CONCLUSION

Both a modern and a seventeenth-century scholar agree that the Jesuits tried to force European ideas into a very different world. Father Charles Lalement complained that there could be no place more difficult than Huronia to "subject to the Laws of Jesus Christ."¹⁴⁸ Historian Cornelius Jaenen concluded that no two peoples "could have differed more in their conceptual framework than did the European and Amerindian."¹⁴⁹ The differences between a primary oral culture and a literate culture are not insurmountable, but for the Jesuits and Hurons the two cultures were incompatible.

Jesuits and unconverted Hurons, or Traditionalists, fought by word and deed to shape Huron culture. Jesuits complained that "infidels" used rumors to threaten the Christian Hurons into renouncing the Jesuits and the new religion. In this case a rumor expressed the honest opinion of the traditional Huron community that Christianity was a destructive choice for a Huron, and the transgressor could pay the same price as a witch for his or her deviation. The rumors were not idle threats but expressions of real fear and deep conviction against Jesuit goals. Hurons did not tell a lie when they suggested that Jesuits meant to destroy Hurons by secret, torturous methods. But many Hurons also believed that the Jesuits were innocent or a necessary evil and Huron society

¹⁴⁸ *JR* 28:49.

¹⁴⁹ Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 194.

split along this decision.

As Hurons left their society they followed what they believed. The Christian Hurons who left with the Jesuits were convinced that the ways introduced by the missionaries were better than Huron traditions. Converts listened to Christian words and chose to leave behind the community and traditions of Huron society. Conversion did not transform a Huron mind from orality to literacy, but it disrupted former thought patterns and assumptions enough to set Christians and Traditionalists at odds. The Hurons who fled to Iroquois territory also followed their beliefs. The traditions of Iroquois and Hurons were not dissimilar. For many Hurons the similarities between the two native societies outweighed their differences from French Catholicism. To join Iroquois society, Hurons did not have to radically change the way they thought or communicated. Iroquois society also appealed to Traditionalists because it was not yet infested with a Christian faction and did not depend on the French for trade. The fleeing Hurons believed that those Jesuit and French influences had succeeded in destroying Huron society.

The Jesuit missionaries failed to convert all Hurons to Christianity. The priests never clearly explained themselves and what Hurons did understand they usually did not accept. The Christian message appealed to some and appalled others. Hurons communicated their fears and misunderstandings to the Jesuits in rumors. Rumors led Jesuits to assume that Huron culture and religion made their people deceitful. Jesuits then focused on showing Hurons the power and mystery of literacy and the deception and weakness of orality. Jesuit actions in turn encouraged many Hurons to believe the missionaries to be sorcerers. At the same time, Christians and trading allies of the

Jesuits prevented their fellow Hurons from murdering Jesuits as they would have done to any Huron believed to be a witch. This issue was one point of dissension which forced Huron society into factions. Rumors helped propel already strained relations into serious conflicts. The Hurons lost faith in their own society under the stress of coping with the Jesuits. The Jesuits set out to Christianize, not destroy, but their attacks on Huron cultural ways were partially responsible for the end of Huronia.

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