

Native Witchcraft Beliefs in Acadian, Maritime and Newfoundland Folklore – Ronald Labelle

Central Thesis

A detailed examination of the issue of belief in Native Witchcraft, not only in Acadian folklore, but also among Anglophones of the Maritimes and Newfoundland, in order to point out similarities or differences in their traditional belief systems, and also in their attitudes towards Native groups.

Methodology

- Examination of supernatural narratives that reference Maritime Aboriginal population – 350 of 400 pertained to the supernatural
- Narratives are primarily from Catherine Jolicoeurs fieldwork collection
- Comparison of English/French depictions of witchcraft
- Comparison of Atlantic Canadian propensity to witchcraft/sorcery

Patterns and Features of Narratives

- Natives with power to curse or to witch people or animals causing them serious harm
- Natives usually depicted when stopping at houses to sell baskets or wares, or beg for food
- Natives depicted occasionally providing cures, usually as ‘potential’ witches
- Transaction of power for selling of soul common in Acadian Narratives
- Religion as redemption to Mi’kmaq witches / sorcerers who had relational context to Acadians (Lamontagne)
- Eurocentric patterns God vs. Devil or Whites vs. Natives; historical context (Briggs)
- French narratives less condemning than English of Natives; due to Catholicism (Lamontagne)
- English ‘witch’ more gender specific, French less so, both male/female depictions (Jolicoeurs)
- Narratives convey propensity for violence against women by men (Rieti)
- Anglo-Narratives propensity for witches as evil, Acadian less so (Lamontagne)
- Native witchcraft involving possession a priest rarely consulted, Acadian possession almost always
- Acadian narratives include people of status more often than Anglo narratives (Chiasson)
- References to male witches in Acadian narratives often establish connection to Quebec or France (Chiasson)
- In Newfoundland, Mi’kmaq men / women can be witches, also preclusion to secondary status to whites(Rieti)
- Acadian and Anglo narratives convey ambivalence in Western cultural contexts (Lamontagne, Rieti)
- Mi’kmaq peddlers always marginalized in all Maritime narratives
- Acadian narrative as dealing with taboo of interracial relations
- Narratives as explanations to scandal or taboos

Conclusions

- Contemporary explanations for interpretation suggest Native Witchcraft as malevolent power inherent to females but they are not supported in historical, gender, or class specific contexts
- Newfoundland, Acadian gender specificity not always apparent
- Acadian narratives fear / suspicion and belief in supernatural is a crux; Also more Mi'kmaq to Acadian relational contexts in narratives
- Newfoundland narratives often include itinerant Mi'kmaq placing a curse for refusal to purchase basketry or provide food; also consistently involve migratory component of N.S. to Nfld; Socioeconomic status of Mi'kmaq / Whites comparable
- Acadian narratives convey mixture of guilt, respect and fear towards Mi'kmaq
- Acadian concepts of oppression / marginalization less pervasive than Newfoundland and Maritime narratives that provide limited relational contexts
- "In the Atlantic Region members of First Nations considered in the past as potentially dangerous outsiders, and we're this easily identified in White communities as practitioners of witchcraft."

Function

- Maritime narratives of Native Witchcraft or supernatural seemed to reinforce the hegemony of oppressive regime. A less contentious function is the narrative helped to explain the 'unknown or feared'.

Discussion Questions

1. How pervasive are the Mi'kmaq supernatural Maritime narratives?
2. Have conditions significantly changed with regard to the dominant cultures hegemonic doctrines towards Mi'kmaq?
3. Do these narratives become superimposed on different marginalized / oppressed cultures?

Bonus

- I am willing and able to share a quick story about my in-laws and a narrative on this topic.