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# The Iroquois and the Jesuits: Strategies of Influence and Resistance

NANCY BONVILLAIN

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The purpose of this paper is to explore interactional processes between the Iroquoian peoples of the Northeast and French Jesuit missionaries who lived and worked among them in the seventeenth century. The analysis will focus on two interrelated aspects of Iroquoian-Jesuit contact. One is the Jesuits' attempts to bring about specific changes in Iroquoian culture. The other is the reactions of the native societies to these attempted changes. This paper will therefore contribute not only to an understanding of the results of intercultural contact but also to an appreciation of the dynamics of influence, reaction, and resistance.

In its general form, the Jesuit program of change was directed primarily toward altering the social ideology of the Iroquoians, including norms of personal interaction and responsibility. The underlying goal of the missionaries was the Indians' conversion to Catholicism, but they well understood that new religious beliefs could not be successfully forced upon a people. They were astute enough observers to realize that Iroquoian ideologies of the social order provided and expressed a world view very different from the one contained in Christianity. These beliefs, therefore, became their main focus of change.

The Indians, however, had an equally insightful appreciation of the conflict between their own cultural ideals and those which the Jesuits were introducing. This understanding formed the basis of their opposition to Christian teachings. A focus on the ideological clash between the Iroquoians and the Jesuits does not in any way negate or minimize the importance of economic and political conflict, which existed simultaneously. Together all of these factors contributed to the social and historical reality.

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It is relevant to point out the global context in which Iroquoian-Jesuit interaction took place. The worldwide colonization of native peoples by European states was reaching its full stride in the seventeenth century. In addition to economic and political restructuring, the processes of colonial domination entailed the disruption of "traditional" societies by the imperialistic European powers.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, the native societies were incorporated into economic and political systems which were taking on world-wide dimensions. In the "New World" and especially in the Northeast, indigenous peoples became suppliers of raw materials, notably beaver furs, which ended up in the markets and households of Europe. The colonial powers of France, Holland and Great Britain rapidly enmeshed the Indians of the Northeast in trading alliances. The Iroquoians played an essential role as suppliers of fur and as consumers of European manufactures. According to Trigger, the Iroquoians' dependence on European goods was already firmly established by the late 1630s.<sup>2</sup> The French established military and trade networks with the Huron in the early 1600s. The Five-Nations Iroquois were allied in this period with the Dutch and later with the British. French traders also made contact with the Iroquois by the middle and late 1600s.<sup>3</sup> Jesuit missionaries became important agents of influence on behalf of French interests, first with the Huron and later with the Iroquois. They functioned, sometimes purposefully and sometimes unwittingly, as one of the means through which French economic and political objectives were achieved.<sup>4</sup>

The Jesuit role in the French colonial process functioned on several levels. On the surface, the missionaries were motivated by a desire to teach the gospel to native peoples, to enlighten the Indians about the true religion and thus enable them to be rewarded in heaven. Secondly, the Jesuits played an important role in furthering the political aims of the French state, opening the way for further expansion by introducing native peoples to contact, trade, and alliance with the French. And finally, through their teachings, the Jesuits presented an image of humankind and of society which was very different from the one envisioned by native peoples.

To their credit, the missionaries did not want to eradicate native cultures entirely. In fact, they frequently praised personality characteristics such as the generosity, intelligence and bravery

of the Indians. As Trigger states, the Jesuits were actually opposed to much direct personal contact between the Indians and the French other than religious workers because they feared the corrupting effect of French unruly behavior on their converts.<sup>5</sup> However, the missionaries were quite determined to replace certain aspects of native cultures with the ideals of seventeenth-century French society.

In the next sections, I will examine the Jesuits' program of social change and evaluate its effectiveness. I will stress the contrast between Iroquoian and French systems of cultural values. This study can be placed in the context of works by Tooker and Trigger, who have reconstructed early Huron society.<sup>6</sup> Its contribution is the emphasis placed on the ideological clash between Iroquoian and Jesuit notions of social relations. Essentially the Indians were presented with an entirely different world view, one which was at the least confusing and at the most threatening to their own cultural perceptions. I will demonstrate that European colonial penetration had an impact on the core of native society, reaching into the center of the traditional world, into social relations, the family, and individual interactions and attitudes. These changes were strongly resisted by many native peoples, since they well understood the depth of the demands made upon them.

My analysis relies heavily on records of the Jesuit missionaries who worked among the Iroquoian peoples in the seventeenth century, now contained in the *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, 1610-1791*.<sup>7</sup> The actual processes of interaction, the motivations of the missionaries and the reactions of the Indians, are most clearly revealed by the words of the Jesuits themselves. The missionaries were quite frank in assessing their role and in portraying the resistance they encountered, expressing not only their actions but most importantly their attitudes toward Indian culture.

The major Iroquoian-speaking peoples in the Northeast were the Huron and the Five-Nations Iroquois. The Huron were located north of Lake Erie and east of Lake Huron and in 1634 numbered approximately 30,000 according to Jesuit estimates (JR(6):59). The Five-Nations Iroquois were closely-related groups living in what is now New York State. They were situated in separate territories spread out from east to west, beginning in the east with the Mohawk, and followed by the Oneida, Onondaga,

Cayuga, and Seneca. The *Relations* do not give population estimates for the Iroquois, but they were said to be much more numerous than the Huron.<sup>8</sup> The Huron were trading allies of the French and were in fact enemies of the Five-Nations Iroquois, who were economically allied to the Dutch and British. However, these various alliances were flexible and subject to maneuvering by the Iroquoian and European parties. The Jesuits worked to stabilize friendship between the French and the Huron and encouraged the same relationship with the Five-Nations Iroquois.

Although the Huron and the Five-Nations were geographically and linguistically divergent, they shared a broad range of basic cultural configurations. Both groups were village-dwelling, horticultural peoples whose primary subsistence consisted of the corn-beans-squash complex typical of farming peoples in North America. These products were obtained by the labor of the women, while men's economic roles included clearing land, hunting, fishing and trading.

Both groups were organized into matrilineal exogamous clans and were primarily matrilocal. The clans provided the basic structure of political organization, clan leaders being chosen by the leading women of the lineages. Political activity, though, was achieved through consensus, and unanimity in decision-making was the ideal.

The underlying principles which directed social interaction were personal integrity and freedom from coercion. These principles affected child-rearing practices, adult social behavior and marriage. As we shall see, the Jesuits reacted negatively to many of these patterns of behavior because they were antithetical to French social values.

A major element in Iroquoian religious beliefs was the focus on disease causation and curing. Special practitioners could diagnose the cause of an illness or other misfortune and could prescribe a cure, often consisting of rituals and gift-giving. Frequently the specific cure for any given case was suggested by an analysis of the dreams of the patient. Beliefs about the importance of dreams and their interpretation were especially important in the interactions between Jesuits and the native groups.<sup>9</sup>

The Jesuits began work with the Huron in 1634, with the visits and subsequent residence of Jean Brébeuf. Although the Jesuits had intermittent contact with the Five-Nations Iroquois during the first half of the 17th century, missionary work with them did

not begin until 1654. In that year, Father Le Moyne made the first journey to the Onondaga and Mohawks. At various times, both the Huron and the Five-Nations expressed an interest in having the Jesuits visit and live amongst them, no doubt seeing the priests as linked to the French state and desiring the economic advantages friendship could sponsor. They also hoped to enhance their position vis-à-vis other native groups. In the end, these maneuvers did not insure cultural survival. In fact, closeness to the Europeans often directly resulted in death, due to the spread of infectious diseases against which native peoples had never developed natural immunities.

The beginning of Jesuit work among the Huron coincided with increasing dependence of the Indians on European trade and with increasing political and military instability in the area.<sup>10</sup> These historical factors are important in understanding the reactions, both accepting and rejecting, of the Huron and Iroquois to Jesuit presence. The willingness of the Iroquois to listen to and, in many cases, adopt missionary teachings was, in part, due to their perception that trade benefits and protection would result from adherence to Christian practices. They were quite right, since Christian Indians did receive better prices for their furs and after 1641 were given guns in trade.<sup>11</sup> The role of these economic practices in providing motivation for conversion cannot be overlooked, especially given competition among the Indian groups as well as among the Europeans. Increased intertribal hostilities at the time provided parallel motivating factors.

On the whole, resistance to Jesuit teachings came from two major sources. One was the increasing fear the Indians had of the missionaries, since the latter were suspected of being the cause of epidemic diseases, especially measles and smallpox, which ravaged the Northeast after the 1630s. Second was the fear that their culture and their way of life were being destroyed.

From the very earliest periods, the Jesuits spoke of the necessity of changing aspects of native cultures so that the Indians would be more receptive to missionary work. One major goal was the establishment of permanent settlements. In 1634, Le Jeune suggested encouraging the Indians to settle near mission sites by sending French workers who would build houses, clear land and help cultivate the fields. Such aid would be offered to Indians who agreed to settle down and participate in this lifestyle (JR(6):145). In 1639, Le Jeune further linked the goals of residence

and education. Once settled, the Indians would, he hoped, allow their children to be educated by the priests and other religious personnel (JR(16):33). This would lead to and solidify long-term changes.

The missionaries also referred to favorable actions on the part of French traders who recognized the importance of permanent, stable nearby settlements for the advancement of their own interests. As Le Jeune reported in 1639, the directors of the Company of New France, ". . . in order to induce the Savages to settle, have granted the same favor in their store to the sedentary Christians as to the French" (JR(16):33). They also agreed to give land as wedding gifts to Huron women and to provide presents to Christian Hurons.

When contacted by the Jesuits in the 17th century, the Iroquoian peoples were living in semi-permanent villages. Locations were subject to change when fields became over-used or when the nearby supply of firewood was depleted. These movements usually occurred every ten or twenty years (JR(62):55). The Jesuit program of permanent settlement influenced only the relatively small number of Indians who had become Catholic converts. These people moved away from their native communities and lived in various mission villages, prompted in part by the priests' urging and in part by the animosity expressed toward them by those Indians who rejected conversion.

The establishment of seminaries was another part of the planned program of conversion and culture change. The direct benefits would be the separation of potential converts from native communities and the increased control which the Fathers would have over the direction of these children's lives and the content of their attitudes. The Jesuits thought of their recruits as potential leaders of the native groups. They assumed that these children would grow up to be intermediaries between the French and the Indians and would function as carriers of culture change. The importance which the Jesuits placed on education and social refinements would, they thought, be imitated in time by native leaders. Therefore the very small groups of children directly involved in these projects were seen as much more significant than their numbers might suggest. The few families which sent children to the seminaries probably did so because they recognized the strategic advantage of such a link. As Le Jeune wrote in 1637, one of the Huron ". . . spoke so eloquently in favor of

the Seminary, and of the benefit they might expect from the alliance with the French'' (JR(12):43).

Le Jeune pointed out the burdensome necessity of giving feasts and gifts to the relatives of children who were sent to the schools. He noted the Huron pattern of exchange and mutual obligation. Although the Jesuits ultimately wished to affect religious and attitudinal changes in Indian societies, they well understood the importance of adapting themselves to native practices. Their frequent use of gift-giving is an excellent example of their adoption of Iroquoian patterns of etiquette in order to make themselves acceptable and influential.

Le Jeune expressed hope for future changes as the young seminarians became leaders in their own communities. He expected that these men would assume positions of prestige and influence, becoming agents of change. No doubt they did bring back technological innovations and comforts which came to be highly prized. Their knowledge of French and their association with the French could also be of benefit in power struggles with the Iroquois and other Indian groups. However, their example of religious conversion was in no way immediately copied, nor much appreciated.

In the long run, the seminaries did not produce the desired effects. The difficulties in converting the native populations were rooted not so much in the methods of the missionaries as in aspects of Iroquoian society which contradicted the principles the Jesuits tried to introduce. Writing in 1645, Lalemant presented a detailed discussion of the major societal characteristics which impeded the conversion process, namely ideas of personal freedom, methods of social control, flexibility of marriage alliances and belief in the importance of dreams. The necessity of achieving stability in marriages was a fundamental part of the Jesuits' program of change. According to Lalemant, the Huron attitude directly contradicted Christian values. Though critical of native marriage and divorce practices, Lalemant accurately described Huron ideas:

The result is, truth to tell, that in the closest of their marriages, and those which they consider most comfortable to reason, the faith that they pledge each other is nothing more than a conditional promise to live together so long as each shall continue to render the



services that they mutually expect from each other, and shall not in any way wound the affection that they owe each other. If this fail, divorce is considered reasonable on the part of the injured one, although the other party who has given occasion for it is blamed (JR(28):51-53).

The negative attitude toward Iroquoian marriage instability is re-echoed throughout the *Relations*. In some cases, the priests offered ideas for solidifying marriages. In 1641, Lalemant suggested giving economic aid to needy couples. In his view, the French authorities ought to provide funds to purchase food and utensils; that would enable couples to stay together since, he argued, marriages frequently were dissolved due to poverty and lack of goods (JR(21):135).

However, this plan was never implemented. The Jesuit stress on marriage stability was, in fact, one of the obstacles to converting the native peoples. Iroquoian ideas about marriages were consistent with their emphasis on personal freedom. In their view, people should not be compelled by external demands which contradicted their own integrity. Actually, the Jesuits misunderstood the nature of Iroquoian social structure and marriage alliance. By condemning what they saw as immoral sexual behavior, they were emphasizing an aspect of the marriage relationship which was not crucial in the native system. Iroquoian social structure insured stability not through marriage, but rather through the matrilineage and clan system. Every person belonged to their mother's lineage and clan, a membership which, except in rare cases, never changed and provided complete social stability. This system also gave each individual a firm sense of social identity. Marriages, then, were primarily economic and social alliances but since children belonged automatically to their mother's lineage, the stability of the mother's marriage itself was not crucial in directing social relations.

The Christian converts, of course, were influenced by Jesuit beliefs about marriage and made attempts to live accordingly. But this was a very trying process. In 1668, Bruyas complained of the difficulties involved and could report of only one success (JR(51):127).

However, Le Jeune's report on the progress of conversion among the Onondaga in the *Relation* of 1657 gives evidence of the direct role of Christian converts in influencing their fellow tribes-

men. He reports the speech of one Onondaga convert to the other people of his village:

Courage, my nephews, courage! Let us all believe; let there not be a single Infidel among us. And, since all that is needed to be a good Christian is to give up sin, you, young men, must cease to divorce yourselves; and you, young women, must no longer be unfaithful to your husbands. Let us hear no longer, of larceny, of murder, or of sacrilege among us (JR(44):37).

Although this is probably a fanciful recollection of the speech, there is ample evidence that converts did attempt to persuade their relatives and friends to adhere to Christian beliefs and values. One wonders whether the proselytizing efforts of the Christian Indians did not in fact make them less welcome in their own communities.

Later, when mission villages were well established, the converts took an even more active role in change. In 1672, Lamber-ville reported that in the Christian village of La Prairie, "it was soon found necessary to appoint captains to govern the village, and especially for the preservation of the Faith." Public declarations were made to admonish the residents to ". . . abstain from three things, namely: the idolatry of dreams, the changing of wives, and drunkenness." People continuing in these activities would be expelled (JR(58):77).

Another major difficulty for the Jesuits was the Iroquoian ideal of personal freedom, reflected in what the priests saw as a lack of social control. In fact, the Jesuits had an inconsistent attitude toward Iroquoian norms. On the one hand, they condemned the lack of direct individual punishment for wrongdoings, but on the other hand, admitted that antisocial behavior was relatively rare. In 1645, Lalemant, for instance, outlined the Huron method of social control which consisted primarily of the recognition of group, rather than individual, responsibility for offenses. Lalemant discussed the exchange of gifts as tokens of remorse from the family of an accused murderer to that of his victim. His concluding remarks are most enlightening:

Now although this form of justice restrains all these peoples, and seems more effectually to repress disorders than the personal punishment of criminals does

in France, it is nevertheless a very mild proceeding, which leaves individuals in such a state of liberty that they never submit to any Laws and obey no other impulse than that of their own will. This, without doubt, is a disposition quite contrary to the spirit of the Faith, which requires us to submit, not only [to] our wills, but our minds, our judgments, and all the sentiments of man to a power unknown to our senses, to a Law that is not of earth, and that is entirely opposed to the laws and sentiments of corrupt nature (JR(28):49-51).

This statement reveals the basis of opposition between Iroquoian ideals and those of the Jesuits. It demonstrates that although many of the missionaries were keenly observant of native behavior, they were unable to grasp the full import of the fundamental contradictions which their teachings provoked.

In contrast to French notions of individual punishment, the Iroquoian system of social sanctions emphasized the role of kin group and community responsibility for any member's behavior. What Lalemant describes as a "very mild proceeding" was in fact a powerful means of social control. The guilty party was made to feel that his/her actions had direct consequences for the larger group and that the burdens of responsibility fell on many people rather than on a single individual.

Lalemant does include the other side of the picture of native social control, *i.e.* the lack of antisocial behavior. He comments:

In truth, their customs are barbarous in a thousand matters; but after all, in those practices which among them are regarded as evil acts and are condemned by the public, we find without comparison much less disorder than there is in France, though here the mere shame of having committed the crime is the offender's punishment (JR(28):63).

The Jesuits paid particular attention to Iroquoian norms about the treatment of children, understanding the importance of socialization and the differing societal values expressed in Iroquoian culture. According to Le Jeune, writing in 1657, the methods of child-rearing were very mild, since children were allowed to follow their own will with little restraint. Le Jeune offered two reasons for this attitude—one, Iroquoian social behavior was in

general free from force and second, parents feared that a child who was punished would resort to suicide (JR(43):271).

The missionaries had hoped to focus the conversion process on the education of children, but found this to be an unsuccessful approach due to the freedom children enjoyed in Iroquoian society. The goal of marital stability therefore increased in importance since the entire family unit could be influenced. As Lalemant observed in the *Relation* of 1639, the stable Christian family would result in the proper upbringing of children who would, in turn, establish Christian households (JR(16):251), leading to an ever-widening network of devout people.

As with other aspects of attitudinal change, the Jesuit program was effective only among the converts. The schools established in mission villages were the locus of re-orientation for norms about individual behavior and punishment. In 1654, Le Mercier described one method of discipline, such that if a child committed an offense, not only he, but also his companions would be punished. This would, Le Mercier felt, lead to group pressure for each child's good behavior (JR(41):141). Evidently the priests were quite willing to take advantage of Iroquoian customs when they could be used to achieve the goals of conversion and change.

Later, in 1673, Dablon commented on the usefulness of presenting the model of French behavior to the Christian Huron as a means of influencing attitudinal change. The method of control he devised consisted of encouraging Huron parents to report the misbehavior of their own children so that the schoolmasters could mete out public punishments (JR(57):61). These displays were quite effective, relying on Iroquoian attitudes toward public shame.

Another major obstacle to conversion, according to the Jesuits, was the importance the natives placed on the occurrence and interpretation of dreams. Briefly, the Huron and Iroquois believed that dreams were of two types and therefore had two kinds of interpretations and outcomes. One type consisted of the foretelling of future events. These dreams were interpreted by special practitioners or "fortune-tellers" who also recommended ways of bringing about the events, if desired, or of evading them, if undesired. The second type of dream, and the one which seemed to most annoy the Jesuits, was an expression of the dreamers' innermost wishes. The dreams, or rather the wishes indicated in

them, had to be satisfied in life. Iroquoian peoples believed that disease was frequently caused by thwarting the desires of dreams. Therefore, when a person became ill, another type of practitioner was consulted in order to supervise the public satisfaction of the patient's dream, often consisting of performing communal rituals or giving the patient an object about which they had dreamed. The Jesuits completely misunderstood Iroquoian beliefs about dreams and disease, and saw in these practices the workings of the devil. They consistently attacked the rituals performed in order to cure illness.

In altering these beliefs, the Jesuits had success only among the Christians. Le Mercier, writing in 1656, commented on change among the Huron mission converts:

Formerly their dreams were the God of their hearts, but now God is in their dreams; for the greater number dream only of God, Paradise, or Hell, and of the Angels, who in their sleep invite them to come to them in heaven (JR(41):143).

Evidently the missionaries did not object absolutely to dreams but rather to their content. Once the converts showed a change in images expressed in their dreams, the form was completely acceptable.

It is clear that the Jesuit program of change had extremely limited success. The only people who were effectively influenced were the small number of Christian converts who agreed to live in mission settlements. In their lives, the process of conversion had more than religious significance. Converts accepted not only new religious ideas, but also a whole array of attitudes about social interaction. This made their behavior extremely unacceptable to the great majority of their tribesmen and contributed to their need to re-settle.

The failure of the Jesuits to achieve widespread conversion was attributable to many factors. At the most basic and obvious level, the Jesuits' religious ideas made no sense to the Iroquoian peoples. Added to this was the missionaries' insistence on fundamental changes in social relations. The Iroquoian beliefs and patterns of behavior contradicted the ideas which the Jesuits tried to introduce. And, of course, the native beliefs were compatible with their own system of values and norms of interaction.

The Jesuits were probably dismissed as outsiders who represented an alien and in many cases dangerous way of life. The native peoples were impressed with French technological innovations and no doubt were also attracted by the possibility of improving their own economic and political position in the area. However, the potential benefits of accepting the missionaries and their beliefs were in general far outweighed by the desire to maintain the Iroquoians' own cultural system.

A further, and extremely important, element in the rejection of the Jesuits by Iroquoian peoples was the recognition that the missionaries were somehow responsible for the spread of epidemic diseases which decimated native populations. The Indians attributed these diseases to the evil magic of the Jesuits. Although this was not the biological cause, they were correct in their analysis of the situation, understanding that more frequent and prolonged contact with missionaries resulted in a greater incidence and deadliness of illness. The more astute of the Jesuits conceded the logic of the Indians' assessment of the connection between contact and disease. Lalemant, writing in 1640 on the mission among the Huron, presented a clear and deeply disturbing image of the times:

No doubt, they said, it must needs be that we had a secret understanding with the disease (for they believe that it is a demon), since we alone were all full of life and health, although we constantly breathed nothing but a totally infected air.

Wherein truly it must be acknowledged that these poor people are in some sense excusable. For it has happened very often, that where we were most welcome, where we baptized most people, there it was in fact where they died the most; and, on the contrary, in the cabins to which we were denied entrance, although they were sometimes sick to extremity, at the end of a few days one saw every person prosperously cured. We shall see in heaven the secret, but ever adorable, judgments of God therein (JR(19):91-93).

Taken as totalities, the ideological worlds of the Iroquoians and the Jesuits were fundamentally different. The norms for social interaction differed sharply, both in their particular manifestations

and, more importantly, in their basic orientation. For the Iroquoians, these norms coalesced around ideas of personal freedom and integrity balanced with kinship and communal responsibility. For the Jesuits, adherence to externally imposed demands and obedience to authorities were paramount. These opposing attitudes were not reconcilable within a single system. The Indians' fear of cultural destruction if they adopted Christian beliefs was certainly well-founded. Obviously, historical factors of economic and political tension and conflict also played an essential part in determining the attitudes of the Indians. However, underlying views of the world and of peoples' values were integral parts in the experience.

#### NOTES

1. For excellent discussions of these global processes, see for example Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and Andre Gunder Frank, *World Accumulation, 1492-1789* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978).

2. Bruce Trigger, "Early Iroquoian Contacts with Europeans," *The Northeast, Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 15 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 352.

3. *Ibid.*; 349.

4. For a discussion of the Jesuit link to French expansion, see Nancy Bonvillain, "Missionary Role in French Colonial Expansion," *Man in the Northeast*, No. 29, 1985.

5. Trigger, "Early Iroquoian Contacts With Europeans," 351.

6. Elizabeth Tooker, *An Ethnography of the Huron Indians, 1615-1649*, (Midland, Ontario: Huronia Historical Development Council, 1967); and Bruce Trigger, *Children of Aataensic* (Syracuse University Press, 1976).

7. Reuben G. Thwaites (ed.), *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, 1610-1791* (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers), 1897, 73 volumes. All citations from the Jesuit writings came from this source. They will be referred to in the text as (JR(vol.):page).

8. See, for example, JR(7):225, 1634; JR(42):271, 1642.

9. For a detailed analysis of Iroquoian dreaming and curing beliefs, based on the Jesuit records, see A.F.C. Wallace, "Dreams and Wishes of the Soul," *American Anthropologist*, 60: 234-248, 1958.

10. Trigger, "Early Iroquoian Contacts With Europeans," 352.

11. *Ibid.*, 351.