Volume 2: Chapter 4

Source 4.1

A French Missionary Describes the Mi'kmaq and a Speech from an Indigenous Elder (1691)

In the seventeenth century, in the context of Europe's wars of religion and rising absolutism, France established its "New France" colony in the St. Lawrence Valley of upper North America. Despite the French Crown's efforts to send French peasants to the colony, only a few thousand settlers arrived in that period. French settlers included fur traders and missionaries, many of whom lived in Indigenous villages and learned the local Algonquian languages. The fur trade transformed Indigenous societies in the eastern woodlands, as European trade goods, including firearms and alcohol, spread through the region. Between 1611 and the mid-eighteenth century, hundreds of Catholic missionaries traveled to New France, including Jesuits and Franciscans. Their aim was to convince Indigenous Americans to convert to Christianity, and they often wrote extensive reports about the peoples they encountered. In 1673, the Franciscan missionary Chrestien Le Clercq led a mission on the Gaspé peninsula, located on the southern shore of the St. Lawrence River. There, he encountered the Mi'kmaq Indians, an Algonquian-speaking nation that Le Clercq called the "Gaspesians." When he returned to France, he published New Relation of Gaspesia: With Customs and Religion of the Gaspesian Indians*, a book that detailed the origins, religious views, laws, warfare, hunting practices, medical ideas, and other cultural attributes of the Mi'kmaq. In this excerpt he describes their housing and living conditions and includes his translation of the testimony of a Mi'kmaq elder.*

On the Wigwams and Dwellings of the Gaspesians. Since these people live without society and without commerce, they have neither cities, towns nor villages, unless, indeed,

one is willing to call by these names certain collections of wigwams having the form of tents, very badly kept, and just as badly arranged.

Their wigwams are built of nothing but poles, which are covered with some pieces of bark of the birch, sewed one to another; and they are ornamented, as a rule, with a thousand different pictures of birds, moose, otters and beavers, which the women sketch there themselves with their paints. These wigwams are of a circular form, and capable of lodging fifteen to twenty persons; but they are, however, so made that with seven or eight barks a single one is constructed, in which from three to four fires are built. They are so light and portable, that our Indians roll them up like a piece of paper, and carry them thus upon their backs wheresoever it pleases them, very much like the tortoises which carry their own houses. . . .

But however that may be, the Indians esteem their camps as much as, and even more than, they do the most superb and commodious of our houses. To this they testified one day to some of our gentlemen of Isle Percée, who, having asked me to serve them as interpreter in a visit which they wished to make to these Indians in order to make the latter understand that it would be very much more advantageous for them to live and to build in our fashion, were extremely surprised when the leading Indian, who had listened with great patience to everything I had said to him on behalf of these gentlemen, answered me in these words: “1 am greatly astonished that the French have so little cleverness, as they seem to exhibit in the matter of which thou hast just told me on their behalf, in the effort to persuade us to convert our poles, our barks, and our wigwams into those houses of stone and of wood which are tall and lofty, according to their account, as these trees. Very well! But why now," continued he, "do men of five to six feet in height need houses which are sixty to eighty? For, in fact, as thou knowest very well

Thyself, Patriarch—do we not find in our own all the conveniences and the advantages that you have with yours, such as reposing, drinking, sleeping, eating, and amusing ourselves with our friends when we wish? This is not all," said he, addressing himself to one of our captains, "my brother, hast thou as much ingenuity and cleverness as the Indians, who carry their houses and their wigwams with them so that they may lodge wheresoever they please, independently of any

seignior whatsoever? Thou art not as bold nor as stout as we, because when thou goest on a voyage thou canst not carry upon thy shoulders thy buildings and thy edifices. Therefore it is necessary that thou preparest as many lodgings as thou makest changes of residence, or else thou lodgest in a hired house which does not belong to thee. As for us, we find ourselves secure from all these inconveniences, and we can always say, more truly than thou, that we are at home everywhere, because we set up our wigwams with ease wheresoever we go, and without asking permission of anybody. Thou reproachest us, very inappropriately, that our country is a little hell in contrast with France, which thou comparest to a terrestrial paradise, inasmuch as it yields thee, so thou sayest, every kind of provision in abundance. Thou sayest of us also that we are the most miserable and most unhappy of all men, living without religion, without manners, without honour, without social order, and, in a word, without any rules, like the beasts in our woods and our forests, lacking bread, wine, and a thousand other comforts which thou hast in superfluity in Europe. Well, my brother, if thou dost not yet know the real feelings which our Indians have towards thy country and towards all thy nation, it is proper that I inform thee at once. I beg thee now to believe that, all miserable as we seem in thine eyes, we consider ourselves nevertheless much happier than thou in this, that we are very content with the little that we have; and believe also once for all, I pray, that thou deceivest thyself greatly if thou thinkest to persuade us that thy country is better than ours.

For if France, as thou sayest, is a little terrestrial paradise, art thou sensible to leave it? And why abandon wives, children, relatives, and friends.? Why risk
thy life and thy property every year, and why venture thyself with such risk, in any season whatsoever, to the storms and tempests of the sea in order to come to a strange and barbarous country which thou considerest the poorest and least fortunate of the world ? Besides, since we are wholly convinced of the contrary, we scarcely take the trouble to go to France, because we fear, with good reason, lest we find little satisfaction there, seeing, in our own experience, that those who are natives thereof leave it every year in order to enrich themselves on our shores. We believe, further, that vou are also incomparably poorer than we, and that you are only simple journeymen, valets, servants, and slaves, all masters and grand captains though you may appear, seeing that you glory in our old rags and in our miserable suits of beaver which can no longer be of use to us, and that you find among us, in the fishery for cod which you make in these parts, the wherewithal to comfort your misery and the poverty which oppresses you. As to us, we find all our riches and all our conveniences among ourselves, without trouble and without exposing our lives to the dangers in which you find yourselves constantly through your long voyages. And,
whilst feeling compassion for you in the sweetness of our repose, we wonder at the anxieties and cares which you give yourselves night and day in order to load your ship. We see also that all your people live, as a rule, only upon cod which you catch among us. It is everlastingly nothing but cod—cod in the morning, cod at midday, cod at evening, and always cod, until things come to such a pass that if you wish some good morsels, it is at our expense; and you are obliged to have recourse to the Indians, whom you despise so much, and to beg them to go a-hunting that you may be regaled. Now tell me this one little thing, if thou hast any sense: Which of these two is the wisest and happiest—he who labours without ceasing and only obtains, and that with great trouble, enough to live on, or he who rests in

comfort and finds all that he needs in the pleasure of hunting and fishing? It is true," added he, "that we have not always had the use of bread and of wine which your France produces; but, in fact, before the arrival of the French in these parts, did not the Gaspesians live much longer than now? And if we have not any longer among us any of those old men of a hundred and thirty to forty years, it is only because we are gradually adopting your manner of living, for experience is making it very plain that those of us live longest who, despising your bread, your wine, and your brandy, are content with their natural food of beaver, of moose, of waterfowl, and fish, in accord with the custom of our ancestors and of all the Gaspesian nation. Learn now, my brother, once for all, because I must open to thee my heart: there is no Indian who does not consider himself infinitely more happy and more powerful than the French." He finished his speech by the following last words, saying that an Indian could find his living everywhere, and that he could call himself the seigneur and the sovereign of his country, because he could reside there just as freely as it pleased him, with every kind of rights of hunting and fishing, without any anxiety, more content a thousand times in the woods and in his wigwam than if he were in palaces and at the tables of the greatest princes of the earth.

No matter what can be said of this reasoning, I assert, for my part, that I should consider these Indians incomparably more fortunate than ourselves, and that the life of these barbarians would even be capable of inspiring envy, if they had the instructions, the understanding, and the same means for their salvation which God has given us that we may save ourselves by preference over so many poor pagans, and as a result of His pity; for, after all, their lives are not vexed by a thousand annoyances as are ours. They have not among them those situations or offices, whether in the judiciary or in war, which are sought among us with so much ambition. Possessing nothing of their own, they are consequently free from trickery and legal proceedings in connection with inheritances from their relatives. . . . They

live in very great harmony, never quarrelling and never beating one another except in drunkenness. On the contrary, they mutually aid one another in their needs with much charity and without self-seeking. There is continual joy in their wigwams. The multitude of their children does not embarrass them, for, far from being annoyed by these, they consider themselves just that much the more fortunate and richer as their family is more numerous. Since they never expect that the fortunes of the children will be larger than those of their fathers, they are also free from all those anxieties which we give ourselves in connection with the accumulation of property for the purpose of elevating children in society and in importance. . . .

Source: Chrestien Le Clercq, *New Relation of Gaspesia: With Customs and Religion of the Gaspesian Indians*. Translated by William F. Ganong (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1910): 100; 103-107.

- What does this account reveal about French attitudes towards the Indigenous peoples who they encountered in upper North America?
- How do you interpret Le Clercq's translation of the Mi'kmaq elder's response to the French missionaries who said that it would be "advantageous" for the Indians to live like the French? Why do you think he included this in his book?
- Broadly, how should we critically evaluate early European accounts of Indigenous nations and cultures? What can we learn from these texts?
- Specifically, what does Le Clercq's account reveal about the goals, motivations, and biases of European colonists? What does it tell us about early Indigenous perspectives and responses to colonization?