

Sound and Music, Movement and Dance: Exploring the Relationship between Mi'kmaw Expressive Culture and the Environment

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Abstract: The Mi'kmaq are an Indigenous people in northeastern North America. In their culture, sound, music, and the environment are inextricably linked. Mi'kmaw conceptions of music encompass a much broader range of sounds than common in Western conceptions of music, including storytelling and other sounds, natural or otherwise. Some Mi'kmaq assert that their traditional songs were learned from birds, while others today look to animals to inspire new musical creations. In Mi'kmaw legends and myths, creatures of all orders communicate by singing. In this paper, I demonstrate through Mi'kmaw legends that all orders of animals sing or make music, describe musical sharing between animals and humans, and consider how environmental change may impact traditional Mi'kmaw genres and the creation of new songs.

Résumé : Les Micmacs sont un peuple autochtone du nord-est de l'Amérique du Nord. Dans leur culture, le son, la musique et l'environnement sont inextricablement liés. Les conceptions micmaques de la musique comprennent une gamme de sons beaucoup plus étendue que celle qui est couramment incluse dans les conceptions occidentales de la musique; cette gamme inclut notamment les contes ainsi que d'autres sons, naturels ou non. Certains Micmacs affirment que leurs chants traditionnels leur ont été appris par les oiseaux, tandis que d'autres comptent sur les animaux pour inspirer des nouvelles créations musicales. Dans les légendes et mythes micmaques, les créatures de tous les ordres communiquent par le chant. Dans cet article, je démontre à travers des légendes micmaques que tous les ordres d'animaux chantent ou font de la musique, je décris les échanges musicaux entre animaux et humains, et j'envisage l'impact possible des changements environnementaux sur les genres traditionnels micmacs et sur la création de nouveaux chants.

The Mi'kmaq¹ are an Indigenous people in northeastern North America. Their traditional territory, called *Mi'kma'ki*, encompasses the southwest

coast of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and the Gaspé Peninsula in Canada; and parts of northern Maine in the United States. Though the name Mi'kmaq (formerly Micmac) is now in common usage, Mi'kmaq refer to themselves as *L'nu'k*, a word in their language meaning "the people." In the Mi'kmaq language, there is no word for music. Rather, the word most commonly used in relation to music is *welta'q*, which means "it sounds good" or, according to Silas Tertius Rand's (1888) dictionary, "to sound well" (meaning pleasant or musical). It refers to the quality and experience of sound, rather than a particular means of producing it (von Rosen 1994). *Welta'q*, then, is a broad term encompassing any sound that is pleasing to the ear, including chants, songs, instrumental music, and storytelling. A flexible notion, it can also extend to other sounds, natural or otherwise. The term *welta'q*, a verb that suggests interaction between a sound producer (whether human or not) and a sound experiencer, guides my interest in the way that intertribal contact and colonial encounter reconfigured the sonic landscape of Mi'kma'ki and the way in which the sonic and physical environment may have shaped modes of expressive culture.² This paper focuses on the latter and serves as a preliminary exploration into the possible relationships between Mi'kmaq expressive cultures and the environment.

My methodology draws inspiration from R. Murray Schafer's writings on the study of soundscapes, which advise: "while we may utilize the techniques of modern recording and analysis to study contemporary soundscapes, for the foundation of historical perspectives, we will have to turn to earwitness accounts from literature and mythology, as well as to anthropological and historical records" (Schafer 1994:8). With this in mind, I began surveying "earwitness accounts" of Mi'kmaq culture and the environment written by explorers, missionaries, and early settlers, as well as Mi'kmaq myths and legends recorded by the same, in an attempt to identify possible connections between expressive culture and the environment. I also reviewed the work of anthropologists and ethnologists, such as Stansbury Hagar, Frank G. Speck, and Wilson D. Wallis, for accounts of sound, music, movement, and dance in Mi'kmaq culture, paying particular attention to the words of their informants. I include dance in this exploration because, in many traditional genres, the act of singing and dancing are linked.³ Finally, having worked in and with Mi'kmaq musical communities for the past decade, I draw upon my own experiences of Mi'kmaq music and dance as a participant-observer and interviews with Mi'kmaq singers, both to understand the oral histories of particular songs and dance genres, and to learn about contemporary compositional practices. This paper is an attempt to synthesize some of the data emerging from these diverse sources to suggest ways in which the music and dance of Mi'kmaq

expressive culture is interconnected with the sound and movement found in the natural environment in which Mi'kmaq live.

Myths and Legends: Communication Through Song

Two of the largest collections of extant Mi'kmaw myths and legends are those of missionary Silas Tertius Rand (1810-1889) and folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland (1824-1903). In the introduction to *Legends of the Micmac* (1894), Rand explains that the narratives were told to him in Mi'kmaq and recorded by him in English. He then confirmed his translations by reading them back to his informants, but also reconstructed some stories from notes he had made (Rand 1894:v). Just how faithful Rand was to his informants' original telling is, of course, uncertain, for only his translations remain. However, it is clear that he had a high degree of proficiency in the language. His orthography is still in use by Mi'kmaq today and his dictionary and related writings are valued resources. Leland, on the other hand, worked among the neighbouring Peskotomuhkati (Passamaquoddy) and Penobscot people and corresponded with Rand and others in Wabenaki⁴ territory to produce his collection titled *The Algonquian Legends of New England; or Myths and Folk Lore of the Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot Tribes* (1884:7). Leland has been criticized by Thomas Parkhill (1992) for the way in which he compiled and edited sources, as well as his misrepresentation of one legend as a foundational creation story. However, Leland's work is valuable for its comparative nature, providing annotations for stories that share similar motifs in other culture groups. It should be noted that both sources use the term "legend," but contain a variety of narratives that could be classified more precisely as myths, legends, and other tales. Recorded myths and legends, then, may provide one source for the study of the relationship between Mi'kmaw expressive culture and the environment, but they must be read with the circumstances of their collection and presentation in mind. Here they are treated as only one avenue of inquiry into this subject.

Looking at these collections, it becomes clear that the sounds produced by many, if not all, animals are described as singing. Singing, and musical expression more broadly, serves as a means of communication between human and animal worlds. For example, hunters sing or play flutes to call animals, such as whales, to them while on an expedition (see "Tumilkoontaoo (Broken-Wing)" in Rand 1894:361). It is through song that Kluskap, a cultural hero featured in many narratives, is able to communicate with other creatures:

[Glooscap] went down to the shore and sang; soon his obsequious servant, the whale, made his appearance, and awaited his pleasure.

He descended and tried him; but the whale, being too small, sank under Glooscap's weight. Glooscap then called another, a larger one, which came alongside; knowing her to be sufficiently strong, he stepped off on her back. She pushed on until she began to mistrust that the land was near. She had no wish to run ashore; so she called and asked, *Moonastabâkunkwijcanook?* ("Does not the land begin to show itself in the form of a bowstring?") Glooscap replied that they were still far from land. So on she went, until the water was so shoal that they could hear the clams singing. She could not understand what they said; but they were exhorting her to throw Glooscap off and drown him, as they were his enemies. Bootup asked Glooscap what the clams were saying in their song. "They tell you to hurry me on as fast as possible," said Glooscap. So the whale put on all steam, and was suddenly grounded high and dry. "Alas, my grandchild!" said she, "you have been my death. I can never get out of this." "Never you mind, Noogumee," said Glooscap; "I'll set you right." So on leaping ashore he put the end of his bow against the whale, and with one push sent her far out to sea. (Rand 1894: 284-85)

In this narrative, told to Rand by Mi'kmaw Thomas Boonis of Cumberland on June 10, 1870, Kluskap calls Whale to him with his singing, while the clams try to encourage Whale to drown Kluskap with their singing but Whale only understands the vocalizations of Kluskap. In Leland's version,⁵ Whale asks Kluskap what the clams have said, and he replies to her in song. Then, trapped in the shallow water, she sings a song of lament: "Alas, my grandchild (*noojeech*), Ah, you have been my death; I can never leave the land, I shall swim in the sea no more" (Leland 1884:34). Kluskap then sings to her, "You shall swim in the sea once more" (Ibid.) as he frees her. At the conclusion of the story, Leland provides an annotation: "In a Passamaquoddy tale of Pook-jin-skweess the Witch, the Clams sing a song deriding the hero. . . . The large Clams sing this in a bass voice, the small ones in falsetto" (Ibid.).

It seems clear from Leland's introduction that his version is based on Rand's. His additional references to singing may have been an attempt to emphasize the literary effect of personification or to distinguish his version from Rand's. Looking at Rand's version, Kluskap and the clams sing as a mode of communication. It is important to note that in Rand's dictionary there is a clear distinction made between the words for singing and speaking, and so it is possible that Rand's distinctions in the above legend are both deliberate and accurate (meaning, true to his source).⁶ Considering the fauna characterized

in the legends is also instructive. In these excerpts, even those creatures that are not normally thought of as producing sound at all – shellfish – have the ability to vocalize. Other Mi'kmaw legends feature the singing of a variety of animals, including for example the squirrel in “The Badger and the Star-Wives” (Rand 1894:310). While a modern reader might expect to find references to bird and whale songs in Western literature, it seems less likely that the sounds of clams or squirrels would have been described as such in the late 1800s, even as a literary device. It may be that fauna of all classifications, then, have the ability to communicate, somewhat supernaturally, through song in Mi'kmaw expressive culture and, by extension, worldview.

Narratives also tell of particular natural phenomena that are heard or felt but not seen, such as thunder being able to dance. Mi'kmaw Germain Bartlett Alexis, better known as Doctor Jerry Lonecloud, recounted legends to journalist Clara Dennis (1881-1954) in English. In the story titled “The Great Powers,” he explained that when Kluskap suggested that Earthquake marry Thunder’s daughter, Thunder insisted they dance first: “‘We must have a dance.’ They had it, and as Earthquake stepped around the island, the mountains fell level with the sea. Whirlwind came, and Heat Lightning destroyed the sky over them” (Whitehead 2002:142). As ethnologist Ruth Holmes Whitehead has noted, “The Mi'kmaw cosmos saw animacy, actual persons, in mountains, lakes, winds, seasons, or directions, and in many other things which western science definitely did not consider alive” (2002:85).⁷

While the previous legends point to the ability of animals to communicate by singing, and more generally to the animacy of natural elements, there are also legend cycles that explain how animals, particularly birds, came to make their distinct sounds. According to Lonecloud,

Kluskap presented a wooden music made of sticks [whistle] to each bird, so they can have their songs from those. The most beautiful one is the Brown Wren. It has only one note and is the best singing bird. The second best is the Swamp Robin – white way of calling it is the North American Thrush. It is the second best. It has three notes and is very remarkable. The other birds were given the same whistles to render their songs. But the songs of the different birds, loons, and ducks was all different. Kluskap made the promise to them, “When I come again, all those songs sung here should be sung in that great happy land I have prepared for you. There we shall be all together forever.” (Whitehead 2002:118)

Just what Lonecloud meant when he said that the wren had “one note” is unclear. The songs of wrens draw on a more diverse pitch range than “one note.” Among the Mi’kmaw singers I have worked with, the expression “note” has been sometimes equated with “tune” or melodic motif and sometimes with a particular quality of sound (as opposed to pitch); however, wrens also appear to employ more than one tune or motif. While there is more work to be done on this terminology, the explanation of how birds were given songs by Kluskap is significant. Given that Kluskap presented “the same” whistle to each bird, but that each bird has its own unique song, this narrative suggests the possibility that the differences arise not from the physical limitations (and resulting musical parameters) imposed by the instruments themselves, but from the creative processes of the birds.

Studied as a body of literature, it would be easy from a Western viewpoint to analyze the representations in these legends and myths as examples of personification – a “literary device” of the storyteller. These narratives, however, are living stories in Mi’kmaw culture that reflect and contribute to the development of worldview. Further, when one considers accounts of how particular songs were learned from other creatures and traditional song repertoires (below), a literary or metaphoric interpretation does not account for the active processes and functions of inter-species communication. The notion of *welta’q*, when taken seriously, suggests a different interpretive lens and conclusion: that such creatures and natural phenomena may in fact possess communicative (perhaps artistic) capabilities normally conceived of as distinguishing humans from other classifications of animals.

Oral Histories: Sources for Song and Dance

There are Mi’kmaq who believe that they learned their songs from the animal world. John Newell, a Mi’kmaw from Pictou Landing, Nova Scotia, explained to Wilson D. Wallis that,

The Micmac [*sic*] learned songs from birds. . . . The Indians did not understand what the birds were saying, and hence the words in these Micmac songs have no meaning. They learned them especially from the wild turkey and the sea gull. “Ka ka ka kwi’t,” sings the wild turkey to herald a storm. Gulls which fly around together and herald a storm or high wind for the following day furnished inspiration to the Micmac composer. The gull sings “ka’ni! ka’ni! ka’niak! ka’niak! ka’niak!” three times, then flies

away. One old Indian listened to the gull until it had finished its song. Thus he learned its song, and said to the others: "If you people care to dance to it, dance. If not, then merely listen to me." He then took a stick and beat time. But as he sang he wanted to put some words into the tune. He was thinking about a woman who was hunting for something, and accordingly he sang about this. (Wallis and Wallis 1955:118-19)

Newell went on to say that Mi'kmaq also learned songs from owls and now end their songs the same way an owl does, with the syllables *wi ya'* (Ibid.:119). Similarly, other syllables were learned from owls and other birds, possibly explaining why many traditional Mi'kmaq songs are composed of untranslatable vocables. Trudy Sable has observed that many Mi'kmaq songs "mirror the sounds, rhythms and features of nature, both with words and onomatopoeically" (1996:259). Songs and dances which draw upon the sounds produced by and movements of animals and birds are common in Mi'kmaq culture as in many other indigenous cultures.⁸ Two examples serve as illustrations: the serpent dance and the partridge dance. Note that in the discussion that follows, both music and dance are addressed. The imitative movements of dancers are important to the broader issue of the relationship between human expressive culture and the natural environment. Further, to consider music without the dance that accompanies it would create an artificial distinction that is not appropriate in this context.

The Serpent Dance

The serpent dance, referred to by ethnologist Stansbury Hagar in 1895 as *choogichoo yajik*, is a dance in which participants "act like a snake" (Mi'kmaq Margaret Johnson, quoted in Sable 1997:332). This dance remains a part of the musical-dance repertoire of the Mi'kmaq in the present and is commonly referred to as *mte'skmuey*.⁹ Hagar suggested that this dance was "suppressed by the missionaries" and therefore was little known among Mi'kmaq with whom he worked (1895:36). Its religious or "medicine" associations appear to have been lost; however, as Sable (1997) demonstrates, it may have been somehow related to the harvesting of *meteteskewey* – the rattling plant (possibly golden club) – and the changing of seasons.

An early account of the snake dance by Hagar describes it as beginning with a type of circle dance, symbolizing a snake "waking from his winter sleep," and then proceeding to a sort of line dance that mimics the movements of the snake:

In performing the serpent dance the male and female participants, in no fixed number, formed a circle, at the center of which stood the head man, who did the singing. The circle of dancers moved first to the right three times around the head man. The dancers then turned their backs to the head man and repeated the revolution three times; next the two sets turned their backs to one another and again moved thrice around the circle; finally, in the same position, they reversed the direction of the motion and moved backward around the circle three times. This figure was completed in four positions and twelve revolutions, and, according to Newell Glode, signifies the rattlesnake waking from his winter sleep.

The head man now left the circle through the space made for him, simulating a serpent coming from its hole; he led the dancers around the field, making many snake-like twistings and turnings. In one hand he held a horn filled with shot or small pebbles; with this he rattled the time for the step and the song of the other dancers. After they had advanced some distance the last dancer remained stationary and the others moved around the leader in a constantly narrowing circle until all were closely coiled around him. The head man then reversed the direction of the motion and the dancers came out of the circle in line as before. This represented the coiling and uncoiling of the rattlesnake.

Again, the line twisted and turned around the field until at length the head man remained stationary and the last dancer led the line around him as a center, coiling and uncoiling as in the preceding figure. Then the head man resumed leadership, there were more twistings and turnings, and a third time the line coiled and uncoiled again around the last dancer. Three times, they say, the rattlesnake must coil before it can shed its skin; therefore, after the line came forth from its third coil the head man led it back toward the point whence it started, and as soon as he moved in that direction the dancers dropped out of line one after another at regular intervals, beginning with the last dancer, until the head man only remained; then the music ceased and the dance was ended. (Hagar 1895:36-37)

Hagar suggests that, because rattlesnakes were not found in northeastern North America, this dance originated among Indigenous peoples to the southwest and was transported to Mi'kmaw territory (see also discussion in Sable 1997:331-35). Alternatively, it may have originated among Indigenous peoples farther west, since rattlesnakes have been found in Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia (Sable 1997:335; Parks Canada 2009; Province of British Columbia 1993). Certainly, there are a number of possible explanations for its origins. While it is not the purpose of this paper to trace the dissemination of such songs between First Nations, which is an almost impossible task, it is important to recognize that any number of intertribal relationships could have served as sources for this dance even if the performance of it was related to the harvesting of the rattling plant as identified above.¹⁰

At the time of Hagar's research, his interviewee, Mi'kmaw Newell Glode, was able to identify the appropriate context in which the dance might be performed (such as the election of a *saqmaw* or chief), but was unable to recall the song. It may also be that his informant could recall the song, but was not able to share it given its medicine associations. A few decades later, in 1911, a version of the snake dance song was collected by Wallis and Wallis from Mi'kmaw Peter Swason, and it is entirely composed of vocables: "e'du gwe dug' edu'gwa" (1955:193). Similarly, Frank G. Speck recorded a version of the song in the early 20th century. In the 1980s, Speck's recording served as source and inspiration for the lead singer of the Birch Creek Singers: "After listening to [Speck's recording] a few times [Tom Paul] created his own version of the song because the quality of the old tapes was so poor that he could not make out the song entirely" (von Rosen 2009: 60).¹¹ When the Birch Creek Singers performed the snake dance, it was accompanied by a rattle that mimicked the sound of a rattlesnake.¹² It was through the efforts of Tom Paul and the group Birch Creek Singers, as well as Sarah Denny and the Denny Family who revived many Nation-specific songs, that the Mi'kmaw snake dance survived into the 21st century.

Today, the snake dance is common during powwows, particularly as a children's dance. As I have observed it, the opening circle figures described by Hagar are no longer part of the dance (see also Sable 1997:331). Children, often led by an adult head dancer, form a single line that moves around the dance grounds like a snake, each person placing his or her hands on the shoulders or waist of the person ahead of him or her. Sometimes there are two lines of dancers, with girls lined up behind the female head dancer and boys behind the male head dancer. When this occurs, they sometimes coil around each other or cross through each others' lines. The song used for this dance begins at a moderate tempo, slowly increasing in speed, until it is extremely

fast at the end with those at the “tail” of the snake struggling to hold on to the person in front. It may be sung by an individual and accompanied by a rattle, *ji'kmaq*,¹³ or hand drum, or it may be sung by an entire drum group and played on the powwow drum. Still, most versions retain a dance style mimicking the movements of a snake in its natural environment and an accompaniment mimicking the sound of a rattlesnake.

The Partridge Song

The Partridge Song falls into the broader category of songs and dances referred to as *ko'jua*. According to Rand's dictionary, *ko'jua* is a noun meaning “Mi'kmaw dance”; however, George Paul's suggestion that it is “the dance of vigour” is much more descriptive of the dance style and the tempo employed when performing many *ko'jua* songs (Eagle Call Singers 1991). Given that “elders today have said they learned it from their parents and grandparents,” Sable and Sable (2007) state the *ko'jua* style of song and dance has existed since at least the 1800s. Mi'kmaw singer Michael R. Denny, however, believes it is much older than two hundred years, asserting it was “definitely pre-contact” (2009). There are at least sixteen songs that are referred to as *ko'jua* and/or employ the *ko'jua* dance style. New versions are constantly being created while older versions are recreated, as Mi'kmaw chanter Beverley Jeddore has explained:

Kuju'a [*sic*] has a unique dance to it. You can sing different variations, different songs but it is still Kuju'a. If you say Kuju'a people will know what it means. . . . You will have the complete celebration when you have Kuju'a. It is like repeating: Jiwa luket jijuo, jiwaluket jijuo – it means bring your little sister over, bring your sister over, bring your family or bring the one you love over and let's dance together. But I sing it differently with different variations of Kuju'a just so we have a variety, not just the one song. (Jeddore 2007)

Similarly, Michael R. Denny noted that it was possible to create new *ko'jua* songs based on certain chants and syllables, though he has not yet done so (2009). The sheer number of versions of *ko'jua* songs indicates its cultural importance. As Beverley Jeddore states, “Kuju'a [*sic*] is like a signature for our culture, for the Mi'kmaq. It is the most unique dance” (Ibid.).

While its original performance contexts are unknown, until very recently *ko'jua* was a regular feature of community celebrations, such as

weddings, and *ko'jua* socials were held. For example, Michael R. Denny recalled that in Eskasoni, Nova Scotia, *ko'jua* socials were held until about fifteen years ago. Today the most common context in which a *ko'jua* dance occurs is a Mi'kmaw powwow, though it may be danced elsewhere for enjoyment as part of festive occasions. Each dance normally lasts less than a minute (sometimes only about thirty or forty seconds) due to the quick tempo, and often several *ko'jua* songs are sung in succession. Having a tempo similar to that of an Iroquoian smoke dance, Michael R. Denny said there are also similarities in the footwork employed between smoke dances and *ko'jua* dances, though the possible connections between these two genres have yet to be traced. *Ko'jua* is danced in a counter-clockwise direction. Female dancers take three small (shuffling) steps with one foot while dragging the other behind, and then switch to do the same with the other, and so on throughout the dance. Male dancers employ a similar pattern, but their steps are higher and exert more force, creating a stomping style. In each, arms are bent at the elbows and swinging back and forth, and there is upwards shoulder movement. Variants of the *ko'jua* dance exist from region to region and from family to family, so much so that Michael R. Denny said, "When I dance, you can tell which family I'm from, from the way I dance" (2009).

Perhaps the best known song in the *ko'jua* genre is "*Jukwa'lu'k Kwe'ji'ju'ow*" or "Bring Your Little Sister." Michael R. Denny refers to this as a "gathering song" with an easy two-beat.¹⁴ Another popular song by Sarah Denny which falls into this category is "*Wapikatji'j*" or "The Little White-Footed Dog." Michael R. Denny notes that it is about a white dog with a limp who drags his back paw as he walks and, thus, this song may serve as one explanation for the *ko'jua* dance style: that dancers are imitating the dog with the limp.¹⁵ There are also *ko'jua* songs that Michael describes as war dances, such as those that employ the word *ajine'* ("go after them"). It implies more than simply a call to war, telling Mi'kmaq that they should stand up for what they believe in. Important for our purposes here is the *ko'jua* war dance known as "Plawejuey" or the "Partridge Song."

The "Partridge Song" is both a war dance and a hunting song. Michael R. Denny explained, when you are hunting partridge in the bush, if you drop the partridge while trying to catch him, you have to sing a song for him (2009). Mi'kmaw chanter Joel Denny has joked that singing this song is a humble way of acknowledging you aren't a very good hunter, but also points out that when the partridge scurries away he dances for the hunter and so the song must be sung as a sign of respect (2009). His comments highlight the nature of the relationship between the hunter and the hunted.

Ethnomusicologist Beverley Diamond has observed that "the fast

tempo and changing rhythmic groupings [in the song] mimic the quick and unpredictable movements of the partridge” (2008:88). However, I would suggest that it is also possible to observe similarities between the *ko’jua* dance and the movements of a partridge. Because the *ko’jua* dance is in 3 while song itself is metreless and to Western ears often counted in 4, the same unpredictability in movement emerges. Thus, sound and movement, song and dance, may be borrowed from creatures in the surrounding environment.

In the past, *ko’jua* songs would have been accompanied by a *ji’kmaq*n or a rattle, but in the present they are sometimes played on a hand drum. Only the version that is used for Grand Entry, which is significantly slower than the other versions, is normally played on a powwow drum. *Ko’jua* songs were popular among Mi’kmaq as fiddle tunes, thanks in large part to the playing of Lee Cremona, and people would dance the *ko’jua* style accompanied by fiddle as part of Christmas celebrations (Sable and Sable 2007). In the present, *ko’jua* dancing occurs within the context of the powwow as a Nation-specific special which serves to localize the event (Tulk 2012, 2008), and *ko’jua* songs have been treated to more modern musical settings in popular styles, such as country (Tulk 2007).

Conversations: One Singer’s Experience

While the two examples in the previous section demonstrate an important relationship between humans and animals, and music, dance, and sound traditionally, it is important to note that such relationships are meaningful in the present for the current generations of singers. Mi’kmaq Pauline Isadore of Wagmatcook, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia is one such singer. Pauline explained to me that for her the process of “writing” songs is actually a process of receiving songs from ancestors, as well as birds and animals that share the environment with her. She spoke at length:

If you go to a powwow, you’ll hear somebody go, [*demonstrates sound*]. That’s imitating a bird, and the chanting . . . Actually, . . . I’ll go into the woods sometimes and listen to birds and I’ll listen to the animals that are in the woods, and they’ll give us songs. You know, like that bird “Chick a dee dee dee dee.” I’ve made up songs about that. [*Sings*] And then you can go on into something else. You know, you can take a note from that and, if you really listen, they have really great notes. And there

are other birds that come to my mother's bird feeder. . . . I buy as much bird feed as I can, and I feed those birds. I sit outside and I listen to them. So, sometimes they give you notes, and they inspire you. You can listen to animals – even a cat. Dogs don't sing that well. Cats do. They have this meow and a mother cat calls her babies. I've learned how to call her babies. She names them. My grandmother, who passed away, taught me that. She taught me that animals will speak to you, as long as you speak to them gently and in Mi'kmaq. English words are too sharp. Mi'kmaw words are smooth. . . .

Even owls, “Who, who, who, who.” You can make a song with that. I'm very sure somebody made a traditional song out of that. The deer: they have that high pitched noise. . . . Every time I would sing and drum by the fire, every couple of nights, [the coyotes] wouldn't be very far. And they would sing with me. They would! I'm trying to make a song about the moon. I was having a really hard time with that you know, so they were coming out to help me, I guess. (Personal communication, 4 June 2009)

The notion, then, that the natural environment “gave” songs to the Mi'kmaq is not only a legend as John Newell recounted for Wallis and Wallis (1955:118-19), or a belief relegated to ancient times. Rather, it is clear from Pauline Isadore that these human-animal interactions occur in the present and continue to be an important source for musical creation. I am not suggesting that Pauline is representative of all or even most Mi'kmaw singers today; rather, I believe conversations with a number of singers and song-makers throughout Mi'kma'ki are needed to determine how prevalent these beliefs are in the present and to identify the role that a variety of factors, such as language proficiency and life experience, play in such an understanding of the relationship between expressive culture and the environment. This suggestion for future study does not diminish the fact that, for Pauline, singing, drumming, and the natural environment are intricately linked.

Given this complex relationship, it is perhaps not surprising that Pauline has created an honour song for Mother Earth called “*Kiju' maqamikew*.” This song has served as a commentary on environmental change. She explained,

I make sure when I'm singing the song that people feel the song. And at the end of it I always tell people, "Take care of Mother Earth." She's dying and who's hurting her? We are. Look at our waters, look at our air, everything, the greenhouse effect. Plant something, a tree, anything. Help her. She needs it. Anywhere you go and touch that earth, it's not moist like when I was a little girl. You don't know what's in your water. You don't know what's in your fish or animals. . . . Cape Breton is so beautiful, but if people don't take care of it, it's going to end up being like a desert. I have driven to places in the woods where I used to drive all the time, you know? Get away from the stress part of my life and whatever. I would go to these areas and they're being chewed apart. It's like somebody came with big teeth and just chewed on Mother Earth. And it hurts. It really hurts me. My heart, look what they did to this. It's all scrawny little trees. There's no spruce there anymore. . . . It's awful. It's terrible. (Personal communication, 4 June 2009)

From Pauline Isadore we learn that songs are important vehicles that carry messages about environmental change to community members. They can be used to elicit discussion about changes to the landscape of Mi'kma'ki and beyond, and serve as a call to action. Isadore certainly isn't the first to express concerns about environmental change and its implications for communities in this way; however, given that she composes songs with nature, a particularly salient question emerges: what is the cultural and musical impact of environmental change?

It stands to reason that changes in the environment which impact animals and birds, causing the decline of particular populations or the elimination of particular species, will impact the creative process and output that is indebted to such interactions and sound exchanges. Likewise, the soundscapes of more urban environments may provide additional or alternative sources for expression. However, further study is needed to determine exactly how culture and musical expression will be impacted by environmental change, both in rural and urban contexts. One approach might be to identify songs and dances that have disappeared from particular Indigenous repertoires and then determine the environmental reason(s) for such change. It may also be instructive to conduct similar surveys to identify and document the relationships between expressive culture and the environment in other Wabenaki and Aboriginal cultures.

Conclusions

My paper complements other studies that consider how Indigenous peoples have conceptualized the natural environment.¹⁶ Through the myths and legends, oral histories, and conversations referenced above, interconnections emerge between Mi'kmaq conceptualizations of sound and music, and movement and dance. The myths and legends collected by Rand and Leland, among others, are living stories that provide guidance and explain features of the natural environment. They are foundational narratives of Mi'kmaw culture that reflect worldview and shape interactions. Mi'kmaw songs may be learned from or inspired by birds and animals, while the instruments that accompany them are made of animal and plant materials. Some traditional songs and dances embody sonic and physical features of particular species, as evidenced by the snake dance and partridge dance. Humans may even be obligated to perform in an expressive mode (singing or dancing) for animals to acknowledge their relationships (recall the story of hunting partridge). The relationship between expressive culture and the natural environment, then, moves beyond one of mimicry or inspiration. Indeed, it suggests a particular way of knowing and being in the world. Perhaps clams do sing and thunder can dance. 🍄

Notes

This research was conducted during my tenure at Cape Breton University as a postdoctoral fellow funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2008-2010). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2011 meeting of the International Council for Traditional Music. This version has benefited greatly from feedback provided during that session and the comments of reviewers. To the Mi'kmaw singers who shared their knowledge with me: *Wela'liq*.

1. In the Smith-Francis orthography, adopted as the “official” orthography by the Grand Council in 1982, Mi'kmaq is the plural noun for and the name of the language spoken by this Indigenous group, while Mi'kmaw is the singular noun and the adjectival form. Several other orthographies are also in use throughout Mi'kma'ki, including Pacifique, Listuguj, Rand, and Lexicon.

2. Much of my research in the past ten years has focused on a variety of musical genres (particularly traditional song, powwow, liturgical chant, and popular music), their localized histories, and their contemporary meanings in Mi'kmaw culture. The current project is grounded in that work but focused on a new dimension.

3. There are notable exceptions, such as canoe songs and lullabies.

4. Wabenaki refers to five Indigenous groups inhabiting northeastern North

America: Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet), Peskotomuhkati (Passamaquoddy), Penobscot, and Abenaki.

5. See “How Win-pe the Sorcerer, having stolen Glooscap’s Family, was by him pursued, and how Glooscap for a Merry Jest cheated the Whale. Of the Song of the Clams, and how the Whale smoked a Pipe” in Leland (1884:31).

6. In Mi'kmaq, the verb “to sing” is *ketapekiemk* in the Smith-Francis orthography (see Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey 2007:68) or *kēdabēgeā'* in the Rand orthography (Rand 1888:237). The verb “to speak” is *kelusit* (Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey 2007:69) or *kēloose* (Rand 1888:246).

7. Sonic cosmologies have been studied extensively in indigenous contexts. See for example, Stobart (2006), Baumann (1996), Clunies and Wild (1982), and Seeger (1987).

8. Imitation of bird and animal songs has been studied by many scholars of Aboriginal music in the Americas, among them Keeling (1992), Nattiez (1983), and Seeger (1987). Mimicry is also at the heart of the Sámi joik tradition. See, for example, Graf (2011).

9. See, for example, *Mi'kmaq Chants* by the Denny Family recorded in 1995.

10. Dances that imitate animals, such as the snake dance, are common among many Indigenous groups. For example, the snake dance is found among the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) of Wisconsin (Densmore 1947:76), the Choctaw (Howard and Levine 1990:59-60), and the Peskotomuhkati (Fewkes 1890:262).

11. The Birch Creek Singers were one of the first powwow drum groups in Mi'kmaw territory in the 1980s. They played an important role in the dissemination of traditional and powwow songs throughout Mi'kma'ki with members from a number of communities in the Atlantic provinces. They still sing at eastern powwows.

12. A recording of their snake dance is available on *Welta'q “It Sounds Good”: Historic Recordings of the Mi'kmaq*, track 20, page 20-21 (Tulk 2009).

13. The rattle referred to as *ji'kmaq*n is an idiophone made of split ash that is slapped against the hand. This instrument is still common in Mi'kmaw territory today. In contrast, the square, dish-like instrument carved from wood and held in the palm of the hand and struck by a pencil-thin stick, which is also called *ji'kmaq*n, is relatively unknown today (see Diamond, Cronk, and Von Rosen 1994:75-76).

14. A recording of Sarah Denny singing this song is available on *Welta'q “It Sounds Good”: Historic Recordings of the Mi'kmaq*, track two, page 7 (Tulk 2009).

15. A recording of Sarah Denny singing this song is available online (Denny 1978).

16. Work on animal and bird sound as communication systems by biologists and others is quite separate from work by ethnomusicologists who focus more often on the way humans make sense of the natural sound worlds they inhabit. Our work does, however, suggest areas of mutual interest.

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