

# Malecite Stories: Contents, Characters, Motifs

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The Malecites<sup>1</sup> are a relatively small group of Indians who live along the Saint John River in New Brunswick.<sup>2</sup> One of the names that members of this tribe use to describe themselves is *wolastokwiyok* which means "Saint John River People." They also call themselves *skeejin* which means "Indian" or "Malecite Indian." Their language belongs to a predominantly Canadian Indian language family.<sup>3</sup> Their culture, their folklore, their fascinating stories, and their songs are a valuable part of the Canadian cultural heritage.

During twenty years of linguistic and folkloristic research on Malecite, I have written down twelve volumes of "Malecite Stories," transcribing the Malecite text phonetically and supplying the translation of each story into English. All of my field notes, manuscripts, and tapes have been deposited in the Archives of the National Museum of Man in Ottawa.<sup>4</sup>

My storytellers were old Indians, mostly from the New Brunswick villages of Kingsclear, Oromocto, and St. Mary's. But I also got some stories from a few old people from more distant places in the province, such as Woodstock and Tobique, and from one old woman from Gagetown, a non-status Indian who gave me several fascinating narratives in Malecite, her mother tongue. All of my old storytellers are dead now, but their stories are alive; they are there in the museum in Ottawa, available for readers or students of literature, folklore, linguistics, and education.

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<sup>1</sup> An alternate spelling of Malecite is Maliseet.

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the language, see Laszlo Szabo, "Maliseet: The Language of the Saint John River Indians," in *A Literary and Linguistic History of New Brunswick*, ed. Reavley Gair (Fredericton: Fiddlehead & Goose Lane, 1985) 29-40.

<sup>4</sup> See Laszlo Szabo, "Malecite Stories," volumes I-XII. Ottawa: deposited manuscripts, National Museum of Man, Ethnology Division.

What are the main characteristics of these stories? First of all, deep and frank feelings, love of nature, love of the river, the woods, the plants, the animals. The Malecites very seldom use the words "New Brunswick" or "Canada" in their stories, but this is the land where they live, the nature which they love so dearly, the country about which they tell their stories with so much enthusiasm. The best storytellers—a blind old man from St. Mary's and a lovely old lady from Kingsclear—were strongly emotional. And they were unbelievably energetic. They were able to talk for two hours without interruption. When they told their stories, they forgot about everything; they cried and smiled together with their characters. They really "lived" in the stories while they were telling them.

The old Malecite mythology is practically dead now. But when I worked with my old Indian narrators, it was still alive—at least in their heads. I have noted down several beautiful stories about Malecite mythological characters, particularly Glooscap and Meekkomowess.

Glooscap is a partly supernatural, partly human, giant. We have many stories about Glooscap chasing a beaver. He failed to hit the beaver, but chased it away and saved Saint John from the damage the beaver was doing there. Glooscap was powerful enough to throw large rocks; this can be seen even today in Tobique. His head also can be seen, imprinted on a rock. His head got imprinted on a rock while he was chasing the beaver; this is why the imprint looks as if it were in motion. Even Meekkomowess (another mythological character) was astonished when he saw it, and said that Glooscap had great power.

Glooscap's mother lived in Saint John. Glooscap's relative, Meekkomowess, visited Glooscap several times. They sat down, the three of them—Glooscap's mother, Glooscap, and Meekkomowess—and discussed the problem of the beaver. Glooscap's mother cooked beaver tail for the visitor on the open fire. In another story, we meet Glooscap in his home with his famous, very large snowshoes—the ones he takes off, in several stories, after chasing the beaver along the Saint John River. In most versions, Glooscap throws rocks in vain—he cannot hit the beaver; however, I have a version of the story in which Glooscap hits and kills a large beaver with two rocks, at Tobique. The two big rocks are still there in the water.

Meekkomowess, a little old man who has supernatural power, can foretell the future. He goes to the Indians and gives them warnings, tells them about impending danger. Those who listen to him survive; those who do not follow his advice perish.

He always smokes a lot, and he looks strange. He talks little, and everything he says is true; he never makes a mistake in foretelling the future. He even knows the outcome of Glooscap's chasing after the beaver, whether or not he will be able to kill it.

Alesko is similar to Meekkomowess. Both of them give messages and help. But Meekkomowess is a human being with supernatural power; Alesko is a spirit.

A long time ago, when the Malecite Indians had to fight for their lives, they had heroes like Majalmood, a boy who made bows and arrows for the self-defence of the Indians. He had magic power. When he pointed his finger, the arrows went that way. The other Indian boys followed him. His power was connected with Alesko, the good spirit who came to warn him about danger.

There are many medicine and witch doctor stories in my collection. There were several old people among my storytellers who could cure people, knew many wild roots and other natural medicines, and knew what they would cure. They presented their valuable information in the form of stories. Somebody was sick, or the belly button of a baby was bleeding. They called an old Indian who knew how to heal. Then, the narrative usually continues, this person went to the woods, found the medicine, and cured the baby or sick person.

In addition to witch doctors, there are also other witches in the Malecite stories. Some of them are good; others are bad. It is typical that a good witch and a bad witch fight against each other. The good witches protect ordinary human beings, the Malecite Indians. The bad witches do harm to them, make them sick, or even kill them. If two witches fight against each other, then, in many cases, the reason is that both of them want to get a certain medicine to cure somebody or to prevent the curing of somebody. In several stories, the bad witch himself or herself is sick, the good witch having caused the illness in an attempt to stop the bad one from getting the medicine.

The "little men" are wonderful dwarfs who walk on the water without clothes on. They can make a great variety of clay objects—knives, pipes, axes, canoes, and men—just like the original ones. The clay canoe is on the surface of the water for some mysterious reason. The "little men" are not bad magicians; they do not hurt anyone. But they will take a person's knife if it is left on the bank and will make a perfect clay imitation. Some people get frightened and pale when they see them, like the man who was fixing a bridge. He threw away his hammer in fright and ran

home. But nothing happened to him. Many old Indians thought that it was a bad omen to see the "little men" and something bad would happen to a member of the family.

Human culture, in its various manifestations, is sometimes more powerful, in the Malecite stories, than supernatural phenomena. The power of a cultivated garden, for example, is stronger than the power of spirits, devils, or ghosts. Walking on plowed ground, you can escape if you are followed by such evil creatures. Music is also a part of culture that can influence or overpower the spirits. In some stories, it can force them to dance.

Be it human or superhuman, everything is mysterious; there are ghosts and spirits all around, particularly if the story tells about Indians of old. Around old wigwams, spears, stone tomahawks, stone swords, an old leather suit, moccasins, and so on—objects used by Malecite Indians a long time ago—the ghosts of ancestors are assumed to linger, so no-one must come to see these objects at night for ghosts might fight them off.

Dreams and reality are not strictly separated. Someone comes to a person when he or she is sleeping and reveals where a fortune is hidden. This might be a spirit, a ghost, an old woman, a little old man, or any mysterious person, who tells you for some reason where you have to dig to find "yellow money"—gold. You find it sometimes under a house or on the top of a hill where a big tree is standing.

The ghost is the most common character in the Malecite stories. Their ghosts are mostly real people, someone whom they knew very well while he or she was alive—for instance, "The Tall Woman in the Woods." Another scary old woman was "transparent and ugly" when they met her spirit after her death, even though she had been a kind old lady while she was alive. Her spirit was standing by the bushes. Her dress was tied up. She was shining, and one could see through her. She grabbed for the children while they were playing nearby. The spirit usually appears in the area where he or she died. This shiny old woman died in the woods. She got lost. This is why she haunted that part of the woods, appearing and scaring the people there.

The ghosts like to interfere with living people's everyday life, as in the story "The Spirit Upset Our Canoe." Some Indians turned over their canoe on the shore, and they lay under the canoe, feet outwards. They made a fire outside to keep their feet warm. They had a very bad dog. Before going to sleep, they made tea. It was a very nice, calm, mild evening—a "muskrat"

night was the way our storyteller described it. Suddenly they heard someone coming. They saw that their "cheepplaak-waagun" (a six foot stick to boil water on) was moved a little bit by someone, and some water got into the fire from their teakettle. One of the Indians told the dog "Get it!" But the dog only growled, and it forced its way under the canoe where they were lying together. The dog would not bother a spirit. Then somebody rubbed his hand along the canoe, the full length of it. There was a little boy among the Indians whose father told him "It was the wind," because he did not want to scare the boy. Then the spirit turned their canoe over. When they put it back, the same thing happened again. They could not sleep. They left and paddled up-river. While they paddled away, they saw the spirit. It was a scary looking person. Fire was coming out of his eyes and his mouth.

In several ghost stories something happens with a coffin, as in "The Coffin Was Getting Heavier and Heavier." In another case, the coffin starts moving by itself while the dead body is lying in it quietly. In yet another case, the coffin opens and the dead person sits up in it or gets off, and even threatens or eats up living people. One of my excellent informants travelled a lot, both in New Brunswick and in Maine. He had many "adventures" with ghosts during his trips. He tells about his adventures, in the stories "A Spirit as a Hitchhiker," "I Gave a Drive Again to a Dead Person," and "A Tall Ghost Near the Train." He believed in ghosts, but he was never scared of them.

In the same way as Malecite witches can be good or bad, their ghosts also can be good or bad. The bad ones are more numerous than the good ones in the stories I have collected. There is another way to categorize them, depending on whether they can be seen, heard, or touched. Some can be only heard, not seen or touched. This type of ghost is very common in Malecite folklore. They hear a noise, and their lively imagination creates a ghost who must be the source of that noise. In other cases, they see a shiny "person" or something similar. That must be a ghost. Again, in other stories, they can touch and feel the ghost; in one instance, it is called the "ice-cold devil in the bed." Ghosts can be so real that they even eat up living people.

There are several stories on old Indian habits and lifestyles: how to haul a canoe on ice, how to do trapping and fiddleheading, how to use a wooden spout to get the syrup out of the maple tree and into a birch bark container. We get detailed information about Indian handicrafts, particularly basketmaking, as they were done a long time ago, and about how things were

made, stored, hauled, and even marketed. We also get information about work, such as picking "sweet hay" to make a living.

They were always ready to move, and they moved with their belongings. When they moved by canoe, they could pile up things about three inches lower than the top of their canoe. They knew how to pile it up and still leave room for members of the family. Their canoe was usually 16 to 18 feet long.

We learn from the stories how the old Malecite Indians traded with the farmers—getting bread, butter, pork, and all kinds of food. They preferred trading to using money. We are informed of where they travelled to trade, getting place names like Gowessk ("Pine-Tree Place," an old name for Upper Gagetown, N.B.), "Public Landing," and others.

A long time ago, the Indians had habits such as dancing around and trading from house to house or from tent to tent. One would cut off a little bit of pork or deer meat, another had some other food, and they traded. Someone killed an owl and used the dead owl for a mask. He looked really scary. Then he started singing a song which did not have any understandable words, but only syllables like these: *o-vi-ha-ha*. Then the singer told the others to come closer, but they were afraid. Then he sang again. This time some of his words made sense. He sang something like this: "Oh, ah, ah, look, I brought it!" By singing these words, he wanted to let them know that they should not be scared. He was not a spirit or a devil; all he wanted to do was to trade with them.

A long time ago, too, there was a large clearing in every Malecite village where they danced. The chief danced around this place, shaking a cowhorn. It was like a rattle. The cowhorn was loaded with pebbles or bird shot, then covered at the base to hold the pebbles in. Sometimes they hit the floor with the horn to keep time for the dance. They danced and sang at certain occasions. The songs they sang are included in the stories about dancing; they are part of the stories. My best storytellers sang beautifully. Their singing is there on the tapes which I have deposited in the National Museum of Man in Ottawa.

How did a feast happen according to the oral tradition of the Malecites? One family killed a moose. They called all their neighbours and relatives. At first the men ate. The women were not in the circle; they were inside, working. After the men, the women would eat. The oldest one of the Indian men would give a speech, telling a story, praising the grandfather of the person who gave the moose meat. Then he would tell them how they hunted in the old times. Then another one, usually the next oldest

Indian man, would walk back and forth, telling a similar story of the same grandfather, and he would start dancing. Then the next one. The last one in the circle would praise the man who killed a moose or gave a feast for some reason.

In one of the stories, we find an interesting description of a very easy way to get married. A long time ago, if a Malecite boy and girl wanted to get married, they had to call the chief. The chief immediately stopped doing his own work, put on his cape, came to the place, and drove his hatchet deep into a tree. And this was all; the young couple were married.

Most of this social history—even small details about Indian life or housekeeping—is given in the form of a story. A man comes and asks: "How do you cook moose meat?" The other Indian shows him, and, at the same time, he teaches us how to do it; he does it by telling a story. Someone made a fire, put the pieces of meat on a stick, put it on a fire, and so on. We learn the names of the different kinds of sticks. *Cheehplaahkwaakon* is the name of a stick with a handle for turning. And the story goes on. The man wants to eat bread with the meat. We learn how to make bread outside, on a branched stick, on the open fire. Some people make bread between two tins. They put them under live coals. While speaking about preparing food, the storytellers use many old words—technical terms for Malecite cooking which are not used any more in modern life.

The simplest action that happens in an Indian village becomes an interesting story when a talented Malecite storyteller talks about it. If we say "the old chief Peter Bear died walking into a water hole on the ice," this does not catch the attention of the reader. But when an old Indian woman from Kingsclear told me the story, she did not say a word about the process of death. Instead she described a search of the tracks on the ice, several months after the chief's death. This makes her narrative lively and interesting, and we learn that the Malecites really know how to track. I noted down "criminal investigations" told by other narrators, showing the Indian instinct of tracking, the hunter's wonderful ability for searching, whether for wild animals, a murderer's crime, or a dead body.

The old Malecites also made many articles for trade—bows and arrows, snowshoes, axehandles, and many other things. We get interesting descriptions of the procedures for making and selling. We are informed about the use of plants (their bark, roots, or dried leaves) for different purposes—for instance, for making a pleasant smell. They cut branches from the bush of red willow and scraped off the bark. Then they dried it on the stove,

crumbled it using their hands, and mixed it with tobacco, giving an agreeable aroma to the tobacco. When it was smoked, it left a good smell in the room.

The old Indians could predict the weather, as we learn in the story "Sundogs and the New Moon." What are the sundogs? When it is a little bit cloudy, on the left and right of the sun there are reflections. They are called sundogs. They predict wind, rainstorms, and other phenomena, according to the old Indian observation. For instance, if the left side goes out first, the wind will come from the left side.

They knew what the new moon indicates when it is facing south or north, or lying on its back. Facing north indicates cold weather; lying on its back means dry weather; lying a little bit on its side means wet and warm weather.

Most of the Malecite narratives have a serious content, but sometimes we meet in them healthy folk humour as well. Their humorous stories are not really jokes. Interesting elements of Indian life and Indian folklore are also present in these tales, but they contain some ridiculous element, a point where the reader would smile. Two Indians went to hunt porpoise and seal. They made an outdoor fire, wrapped themselves in blankets, and went to sleep on two sides of the fire. Suddenly one of them saw a person on the other side of the fire. He was all white, and he was facing him. He jumped up. The other Indian, too, saw a mysterious white person facing him across the fire. One of them jumped over the fire, and they grabbed each other. Both of them thought they had seen a ghost because they were lit up by the fire, standing on both sides of it. When they grabbed each other, both were surprised, and both of them said: "Where is he?"

In Malecite children's stories, as in children's stories of any nation, the characters are kings, princesses, princes, their servants, and so on. Borrowed from European fairy tales, these characters have become Malecite in these stories; their way of life, their actions, their whole character is similar to the Indian character, at least at one point: they believe in supernatural powers, witchcraft, and ghosts. The maid has the power to emulate the prince's wife and to take the prince from her. The wife and her three sons must be buried under horse manure. But they, too, have some power. The children turn into sheep, and, later, again into boys. The mother, too, survives as a result of her superior knowledge and her ability to make wonderful paper flowers just like real ones. She can tell them from the real ones (although nobody else can) with the help of a little bee.



Everything is bewitched in some way, and justice prevails at the end of the story, as is usually the case in children's stories.

In Malecite children's stories, too, there are many animals. They are like human beings. In many cases they are animals that really exist in New Brunswick wild life. These animals may have supernatural power, however, in Malecite folktales. So it is in one of our stories, "The Caribou Predicted It: He Killed His Parents." There are two morals to this tale: a person should not judge others too quickly or superficially; and a hunter should not kill animals without a good reason, but only for food or clothing, or else he will not be lucky.

To summarize, then, three chief features have fascinated me in the stories of the Malecites during my almost twenty years of noting them down. First is the focus on the realities of Indian life. Second is the focus on the supernatural. The stories cannot be divided neatly into two separate categories, however, according to their emphasis on the natural or the supernatural. In many cases, these two elements are mixed in the same story; even the most imaginative witch stories present happenings on "real" Malecite ground. On the other hand, the "real" Indian way of life is often presented in a mysterious or supernatural atmosphere. Third, and most important, the central element which sustains all these stories is their deep human wisdom.

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