

Postdoctoral Pathways: From Powwow to Gregorian Chant

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In her field notes Helen Creighton once mused: “Any collector will tell how we often go to a house for one thing and come away with something else” (1956),¹ and surely the same can be said about archival research. On a fieldtrip to document a Mi'kmaw² powwow in Eskasoni, Nova Scotia in 2007, I took a day to visit the Beaton Institute at Cape Breton University.³ Weeks before my visit, I had requested a copy of their finding aid to identify recordings and documents that might be useful to my study of powwow and traditional songs, and I had arranged to have a handful of recordings digitized for my use.⁴

When I arrived at the Beaton Institute on June 22, 2007, I was looking forward to hearing an interview with Sarah Denny in which she discussed how she learned Mi'kmaw songs that had traditionally been sung by men (T-1076), an interview with Don Marshall about the potential for Mi'kmaw tourism (T-1023), and a recording of a gathering in Truro (T-302). I had a long list of documents to pull, including a report on the possibility of developing Chapel Island for tourism (Tennyson 1972) and clippings from *Micmac News*. The final document on my list was a curious item with the following annotation: “Micmac song book; includes music and words in Micmac” (Record no. 869). I filled out the request form and waited for the document, wondering what traditional songs or Christian hymns I might find in it. Throughout my research, I had never seen a song book that included musical notation—usually only the words were reproduced.

The document presented to me was quite unexpected. It was an uncut, unbound copy of *Alasotmapegiatimgeoel* published in Listuguj,⁵ Quebec, in 1923 that would have originally sold for 25 cents. I carefully unfolded the pages and was quite stunned to find it was essentially a miniature (64-page) Mi'kmaw version of the *Liber Usualis*. Chants for the Ordinary and Proper of the Catholic mass appeared in chant notation—a four-line staff with neumes—and the lyrics were written in the Pacifique orthography of the Mi'kmaw language. Certainly, in the context of my doctoral research on powwow and

traditional songs, this “song book” was irrelevant. And yet, I was enchanted by it. Perhaps it was the singer in me (I have a special appreciation for Gregorian chant and early music generally), or perhaps it was the historical musicologist in me (my undergraduate thesis was on German crusade songs), but either way, long after I'd left the archive, I found myself thinking about this hymn book. Who had created it? And why? How many copies were still extant? And just how strong was the Gregorian chant tradition among the Mi'kmaq? Was it a living tradition?



Later that summer I began a survey of the archival recordings of Mi'kmaw music held in institutions across Canada, including the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Ottawa), the Centre d'études acadiennes (Moncton), Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (Halifax),

and the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (St. John's). The Centre d'études acadiennes at Université de Moncton holds a collection of Mi'kmaw songs recorded between 1967-1973, when Gaston Alaire was research officer. Included in it is a set of recordings made at Ste. Anne de Restigouche in 1970. The Chorale Micmac is heard singing Gregorian chant and other hymns (including Christmas carols). Curious about these recordings and the hymn book from the Beaton Institute, I sat down with both to see whether I could correlate the two sets of data. The first audio recording that I matched to the hymn book was an offertory hymn. Then I identified a Kyrie with its corresponding notation.⁶ Soon it became clear that the hymns sung by the Chorale Micmac in 1970 were the same as those found in the 1923 hymn book published in their community. Was the Chorale singing from this hymn book? Could they read chant notation or was this an oral tradition? Were these chants still sung in Listuguj and other parts of Mi'kma'ki? By September 2007 I had made a decision: the Mi'kmaw hymn-singing tradition would be one of three musical genres at the heart of my post-doctoral study (the others being fiddle traditions and popular music).

Titled "Sounds of Contact: Colonial Encounter, Senses of Place, and Musical Expression in Mi'kmaw Communities," my postdoctoral study seeks to address how music embodies the myriad responses to encounter, including cultural resistance, incorporation, syncretism, and maintenance (see Lassiter et al. 2002), specifically in a Mi'kmaw context.⁷ Since postcolonial meta-narratives of contact and colonial encounter are often couched in terms of assimilation and cultural loss, denying the potential for "transfers of knowledge . . . on both sides" (Cruikshank 2005: 9), one of my goals is to document how colonial encounter has been experienced, remembered, and expressed in locally-specific ways through music and sound.

Even as (re)vitalization efforts via traditional music and localized powwow traditions are under way in many Mi'kmaw communities (see, for example, Tulk 2008, 2007), hymn-singing traditions and adherence to the Catholic faith remain strong among segments of the population (Robinson 2004). A recent recording titled *Mig-mag Rosary* (Elsipogtog, NB, n.d.),⁸ in which elders recite the rosary in the Mi'kmaw language, is indicative of the continued importance of Christianity in communities. But I wondered about the status of Gregorian chant singing—a

tradition that even the Roman Catholic Church itself had largely abandoned in the years following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).



Church of Ste. Anne de Restigouche, Listuguj

I made my first trip to Listuguj in the fall of 2008. During my twelve days there, I attended language classes led by Mary Ann Metallic, met with Brenda Murray, who currently ministers to the church in the absence of a resident priest, made my interest in the Mi'kmaw hymn-singing tradition known to members of the community, and attended both Sunday mass and Remembrance Day celebrations. Through observation and informal conversations I found that there are few hymns still sung in Mi'kmaq at Ste. Anne de Restigouche today. Three in particular are used on a regular basis: an offertory hymn, a communion hymn, and a Kyrie. Only the Kyrie is in a musical style similar to that of Gregorian chant. Other hymns are selected from the *Catholic Book of Worship II* and *Glory and Praise*, both of which are in use in Catholic churches throughout the world.

Indeed, the existence of a Mi'kmaw hymn book in Gregorian chant notation was a surprise to some (though I anticipate that others I've not yet spoken with would have owned copies at some point). While known copies of this singing book are found in the Beaton Institute, Yale University, the New Brunswick Legislative Library, and Dalhousie Centennial Library (in New Brunswick), the parish at Ste. Anne de Restigouche, which published this singing book, does not have any copies. I was told that in the 1970s all of the books, records, documents, and other archival materials were removed from the church and sent to several different institutions, including Chapel of the Reparation and the Quebec Provincial Archives, which later gave Father Pacifique's materials to the National Archive at Rimouski (see Chiasson and Landry 1992: 57).

As the church hopes to establish a museum and increase awareness of Ste. Anne de Restigouche as a pilgrimage destination, they are interested in repatriating a copy of this book.

Though the hymn book is relatively unknown in the area and Gregorian chant is no longer the primary musical expression in the context of a mass, the Gregorian chant tradition does live on in Listuguj. Several people in the community alerted me to the fact that a fine chant singer lives about an hour away from Listuguj, and that the radio station has recordings of the late Alphonse Metallic, who was an important chant singer in the community. I was also told that the old Mi'kmaw choir had been recorded by the community radio station and that these chants can be heard over the airways at Christmastime. Certainly, interest in Gregorian chant repertoire still exists in this community.

I returned to Listuguj for the St. Anne's Day celebrations in July 2009. My choice to visit Listuguj instead of Potlotek (Chapel Island, Nova Scotia) was met with great surprise by many community members. They explained that St. Anne's Day traditions had changed greatly in the past thirty years and that the celebration at Chapel Island would be better-attended and more elaborate. My decision to focus on the Listuguj celebrations was motivated by the hymn book published in the community, the audio recordings of the Chorale Micmac, and stories of great chant singers in the area. However, another factor in the decision was that the majority of scholars interested in St. Anne's Day celebrations have focussed on those in Chapel Island (for example, Wilson 1892, Parsons 1926, Howard 1965, Hornborg 2002). Listuguj, the site of a statue commemorating the 300th anniversary of the baptism of Chief Membertou in 1610, seemed to have been important in the history of Mi'kmaw Catholicism, and I was curious as to how its traditions would differ from those described at Chapel Island. To that end, I attended St. Anne's Day events in the community, documenting the masses via audio and video recordings with the permission of the church. I joined the Mi'kmaw choir and sang with them during the masses, and by the end of the Sunday services, I had learned three Mi'kmaw hymns and a Kyrie. In the days that followed, I had an opportunity to speak with two noted singers in the community: Simon Dedam and Harry Condo.

Simon was described to me by several individuals at the Listuguj Education Directorate as a "second generation" singer. He has a powerful, clear voice, and I was told that it isn't Christmas

until he and a few other men are heard singing "Nujo'taq'tiaq," a song sung for a bell procession before midnight mass on Christmas Eve.⁹ While Simon is known for singing this "old" hymn, the majority of songs in his repertoire fall into the category of "new" hymns. In this context, "new" doesn't necessarily refer to those that are recently composed; rather, it refers to hymns that have been translated into "modern" Mi'kmaq. Examples include "How great Thou Art," "Prayer of Saint Francis" (also known as "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace"), "The Lord is my Shepherd," "Amazing Grace," "O Holy Night," "O Come All Ye Faithful," and "Il est né le divin Enfant" (Simon Dedam, personal communication, July 28, 2009). While Simon no longer sings with the choir at Ste. Anne de Restigouche, he will often join them for funerals.



Church of Ste. Anne de Restigouche, Listuguj

Simon and the language instructors at Listuguj Education Directorate insisted that the best person to talk to would be Harry Condo in Maria on the Gaspé Peninsula, as Harry sings the "old" hymns. The "old" hymns, also referred to as "traditional" by Simon, are Gregorian chants in Mi'kmaq – the songs of Father Pacifique, a Capuchin who was the parish priest at Ste. Anne de Restigouche from 1894 to 1931. Fluent in Mi'kmaq, Pacifique developed his own orthography and it is likely that he was the driving force behind the publication of the 1923 hymn

book (for he also translated and published several prayer books). Harry told me that these “old” hymns have been sung in Mi’kmaq for a long time: “Before there were priests in our reservation, the elders, the old people were praying at the church in Mi’kmaq . . . The elders would sing hymns in Mi’kmaq and all the prayers would be in Mi’kmaq” (Harry Condo, personal communication, July 29, 2009). Harry is referring to the fact that such chants were brought to the Mi’kmaq by early missionaries and that even during times when there were no priests available to say mass, Mi’kmaq maintained the tradition on their own.

Harry learned the old hymns from the singing of his grandfather, who was a member of the church choir, and from the singing of his father, who sang at home while making baskets. Encouraged by all those who heard him sing and recognized that he had a “good voice,” Harry continued to learn hymns from elders throughout Mi’kma’ki. Recordings, such as those made by the late Alphonse Metallic (Listuguj) and the late Wilfred Prosper (Eskasoni), have also become important sources.

Today, Harry sings at funerals and funeral processions, as well as cultural events, when asked to do so, but he told me that many people don’t want these old hymns anymore. He explained that they are very powerful songs; they are sad and meaningful, and the words “really hurt.” When I asked whether the tunes to which the words are sung added in any way to the power of these songs, he said that they might a bit, but that the power derives primarily from the words. “The words they were using,” he explained, “go right to your heart. And if you know the words and the meaning of the words, it’s like reading a Bible.” The Mi’kmaw Gregorian chants include old Mi’kmaw words that aren’t used in the language anymore. Harry said that in the present there is a tendency to simplify the language. This is the “modern” Mi’kmaq of which Simon spoke, that Harry says doesn’t “mean as much.”

Harry has tried many times to teach these songs to younger generations, but they are very difficult to learn, especially since Mi’kmaw communities are increasingly experiencing language loss despite efforts to stabilize and revive it. Simon’s explanation for why these chants are so difficult to learn also focussed on the language, as opposed to the music: the words are difficult to pronounce because they are written in an orthography that is a French priest’s version of the Mi’kmaw language. Further, he said jok-

ingly, the “words used to be about two feet long.” It should also be noted, however, that there are other forces acting here. In Catholic communities around the world young men and women are struggling to see the relevance of the church in their daily lives. Fewer people are attending mass and joining church choirs, and the mission church in Listuguj is no different. With no one poised to take over the musical responsibilities, it appears inevitable that the tradition will fade over time.

In 1966, having conducted fieldwork in Listuguj, Philip Bock wrote that while few of the old (traditional) songs were known and old-time music was the choice for dances and parties, “For most of the people, [. . .] Indian music means the Gregorian chants to which Abbé Mailard, Father Pacifique, and others set Micmac words” (85). Since this commentary was published, there has been a resurgence of Nation-specific traditions, powwow traditions have been borrowed and localized, and popular genres like country, pop, and rock have emerged as favourites. However, Christian hymns translated into “modern” Mi’kmaq, making them easier to sing than the “old” hymns, are also part of the musical landscape of the Mi’kmaq.

While my research on this topic is still quite preliminary, I am able to answer a few of the questions that emerged after seeing this book of Mi’kmaw Gregorian chants for the first time. It seems likely that Father Pacifique, who was at Ste. Anne de Restigouche at the time of its publication, would have created this singing book, given that he had the necessary language skills to do so. However, it remains unclear whether he would have also been the one to set the text to the chant notation. The chants themselves appear to have been popular for the time period: several of the chants come from the Messe Royale de Henri du Mont, 2e ton as found in the 1920 edition of the *Liber Usualis*.¹⁰ With the exception of a few additional pitches, primarily passing tones, the Mi’kmaw version is faithful to that in the *Liber Usualis*. While I know of only six extant copies of this singing book, it seems likely that several more exist in private collections of Mi’kmaq throughout Mi’kma’ki.

Though no longer sung for Sunday masses, these hymns are heard from time to time in the context of Mi’kmaw funerals, and though they are not as well-known as they appear to have once been, the “old” hymns live on through the chanting of a few remaining well-respected singers. As my research continues, I hope to probe further singers’ ways of categorizing types of

hymns, the history of the hymn book itself and what motivated its creation, and what role it

played in the dissemination of Gregorian chants throughout Mi'kma'ki.

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Notes

- ¹ Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, MG 1 Vol. 2805 no. 18.
- ² In 1982, the Mi'kmaw Grand Council adopted the Smith-Francis orthography of the Mi'kmaq (formerly Micmac) language. In this orthography, Mi'kmaq is the plural noun referring to the people, as well as the name of the language they speak. Mi'kmaw is the singular noun, as well as the adjectival form. "Micmac" is retained here only in proper nouns and quotations from historic sources.
- ³ This fieldtrip was generously funded by the J. R. Smallwood Foundation at Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- ⁴ My thanks to Jodi McDavid, former archivist at the Beaton Institute.
- ⁵ Listuguj is the name now used to refer to the Mi'kmaw community at Restigouche (also Ristigouche) on the Gaspé Peninsula.
- ⁶ This Kyrie and its notation can be found in Tulk 2009: track 17, pages 18-19.
- ⁷ This study has been generously funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- ⁸ I purchased this recording at the 2006 powwow in Elsipogtog, NB.
- ⁹ A recording of this song performed by Simon Dedam and Roger Metallic can be heard on Mi'gmaq-Mi'kmaq Online (<http://www.mikmaqonline.org/songs.html>, accessed 18 October 2009).
- ¹⁰ See page 5 of a separately paginated section at the end of the book.