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THE INDIANS OF THE
WESTERN GREAT LAKES
1615-1760

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three or four fingers wide, made like a horse's girth with all its threads covered up and inserted [in the pieces of shell]. The circumference of these necklaces is about three and a half feet or more, and the women put many of them on their necks, according to their means and wealth. Then they have others threaded like our rosaries, attached and hung from their ears, and some chains of beads as big as nuts of the same porcelain which they fasten to both hips and these are arranged in front in a slant over the thighs or the breech clouts they wear. And I have seen other women who also wore bracelets on their arms and great plates in front over the stomach, with others behind circular in shape and like a card for carding wool hanging from their tresses of hair. Some of them have also belts and other ornaments, made of porcupine quills tinted crimson red and very exactly woven. Then feathers and paintings are never lacking, and each one is devoted to them.⁴⁵

The ornamentation of the men included porcelain beads and necklaces, although not to the same extent that they were used by the women and girls. Sagard had seen a man whose nose had been pierced in the middle, and which had a rather large blue stone hanging from it; but it is likely that this referred to a member of an Algonquian tribe, rather than to a Huron. The methods of decoration peculiar to the men were painting and tattooing. Not only the face but the entire body was painted in various styles and colors: black, green, red, and violet, according to Sagard.⁴⁶ Bressani merely reported black, red, and various colors; but he said that the black was commonly taken from the bottom of pots, and the other colors were of various earths or were derived from certain roots which yielded a very fine scarlet. As to the styles of painting, he said that some appeared artistically bearded, others seemed to wear spectacles, some had the whole face striped with various colors, others only half, but all were shining with the oil or grease which they mixed in their colors. He noted that they painted their bodies so well that at first sight some

⁴⁵ *Le Grand voyage*, pp. 191-92.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

belonged. This seemed very strange and conducive to lawlessness to the visiting Europeans, but most of them admitted that this system engendered more restraint than did punishment by death in Europe. There was another feature that set the code of the Huron apart from that of Europe. Since the crime was punished rather than the criminal, satisfaction had to be rendered for every crime, even if the criminal were not identified. Therein lay the reason for the infrequency of murder. The individual who committed the crime might escape detection, but he would be certain that his family, village, or tribe would suffer as the result of his action.

Satisfaction for a murder was made by presents. These might number as many as sixty, according to Brébeuf, each at least of the value of a beaver robe. Each present was accompanied by a speech, and, consequently, the proceedings attending their presentation might consume several days. The presents, wrote Brébeuf, were of two kinds:

Some, like the first nine, which they call *andaonhaan*, are put into the hands of the relatives to make peace, and to take away from their hearts all bitterness and desire for vengeance that they might have against the person of the murderer. The others are put on a pole, which is raised above the head of the murderer, and are called *Andaerraahaan*, that is to say, "what is hung upon a pole." Now, each of these presents has its particular name. Here are those of the first nine, which are the most important, and sometimes each of them consists of a thousand Porcelain beads. The Captain, speaking, and raising his voice at the name of the guilty person, and holding in his hand the first present as if the hatchet were still in the death wound, *condayee onsaachtoutawas*, "There," says he, "is something by which he withdraws the hatchet from the wound, and makes it fall from the hands of him who would wish to avenge this injury." At the second present, *condayee oscotaweanon*, "There is something with which he wipes away the blood from the wound in his head." By these two presents he signifies his regret for having killed him, and that he would be quite ready to

it swallow the liquid.²⁰⁵ The usual age of weaning is not mentioned.

During the day the child was swaddled upon a small board on which there might be a rest or small strip of wood bent half round under the feet. This cradleboard was set upright against the wall of the cabin. The board was usually adorned with little paintings and strings of beads. An opening was left in the swaddling for urination, and if the child was a girl a corn leaf was inserted between the thighs to conduct the water outside. Down was placed under the child, and this made a very comfortable bed. The same kind of down was used to clean the child. The down was very soft, according to Sagard, and came from certain weeds, which may have been cattails.

The mothers carried their children upon their backs on the cradleboards with the aid of a headband. They were also carried outside of the swaddling within their mothers' robes, above the belt, and either in front or in back, with the child's head outside. At night the child was often laid nude between the father and mother, Sagard reported, with accidents happening only rarely. He also stated that in other nations he had seen children placed in skins suspended by four corners from the poles of the cabins, like a sailor's hammock, and these skins were swung to rock the children to sleep.²⁰⁶

The Huron children were allowed to run about in the winter snows either entirely or almost nude, and they received no hurt from this nor from strenuous exertion in the great heat of summer. On the contrary, according to Sagard, they derived the strong and robust constitutions they enjoyed as adults from this early hardening to ills and pains.²⁰⁷

The boys were early taught to draw the bow and shoot arrows by giving them small ones to play with; of duties they had none. Besides shooting arrows, which was often

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 169-70.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-71.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

wrap in fine new beaverskins and beads and necklaces of porcelain, which the relatives and friends contribute and give, saying: Behold, here is what I give for the bones of my father, my mother, my uncle, cousin, or other relative. And putting them in a new sack they carry them on their backs; they also decorate the top of the sack with a number of little ornaments, necklaces, bracelets, and other embellishments. Then the pelts, hatchets, kettles, and other things that they reckon of value, with a quantity of provisions, are also carried to their destination, and when all are assembled there they put their food in one place to be used in feasts, which are a great expense to them, and then hang up decently in the cabins of their hosts all their sacks and their pelts, while awaiting the day on which all must be buried in the ground.

The pit is made outside the city, very large and deep, and capable of containing all the bones, furnishings, and pelts dedicated for the deceased. A high scaffold is erected along the edge, to which they carry all the sacks of bones; then they line the pit everywhere, on the bottom and the sides, with new beaverskins and robes; then they put in a layer of hatchets, next of kettles, beads, necklaces, and bracelets of porcelain, and other things given by the relatives and friends. That done, the chiefs from the height of the scaffold empty and pour out all the bones from the sacks into the pit among the merchandise, which they cover again with other new skins, then with bark, and afterward they throw the earth back on top and some large pieces of wood. To mark their respect for the place they drive wooden posts in the ground all around the pit and make a covering over it which lasts as long as it can. Then they feast once again, take leave of one another, and return whence they came, very joyous and pleased that the souls of their relatives and friends will have plenty to take from and to make them rich that day in the other life.

Christians, let us reflect a little and see if our fervors for the souls of our relatives confined in the prisons of God are as great as those of the poor Indians toward the souls of their fellow deceased, and we shall find that their fervors surpass ours, and that they have more love for one another in this life and after death than we, who say we are wiser and are less so in fact,

They believe that the Sky is angry, when any one is drowned or dies of cold; a sacrifice is needed to appease it, but, good God! what a sacrifice, or rather what a butchery! The flesh of the dead man is the victim who is to be immolated. A gathering of the neighboring villages takes place; many feasts are made, and no presents are spared, as it is a matter in which the whole Country is interested. The dead body is carried into the cemetery, and is stretched out on a mat. On one side is a ditch, and on the other a fire for a sacrifice. At the same time, some young men chosen by the relatives present themselves, and station themselves around the corpse, each with a knife in his hand; and the protector of the dead person having marked with a coal the parts which are to be cut, they vie with each other in cutting the body, tearing off the fleshiest parts. At last they open the body and draw out its entrails, which they throw into the fire with all the pieces of flesh they had cut off, and throw into the ditch the carcass quite stripped of flesh. I have observed that during this butchery the women walk around them several times, and encourage the young men who cut up this body to render this good service to the whole Country, putting Porcelain beads into their mouths. Sometimes even the mother of the deceased, all bathed in tears, joins the party and sings in a pitiful tone, lamenting the death of her son. That done, they firmly believe they have appeased the Sky.²²⁸

Le Mercier stated that the Huron were accustomed to burn the flesh of any of their people who died outside of their own country and to extract the bones to take with them.²²⁹ Similarly, Bressani wrote that, besides drowned persons, others who died a violent death were either burned or buried immediately. He also stated that the reason the chiefs of a village went through the village to notify everyone of the fact immediately after was so that no one would through ignorance insult the dead or their surviving relatives by speaking of them without appending "deceased," as we would say "the late so-and-so." If another person should perchance bear the

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-65.

²²⁹ *Relation 1637, J.R.*, 11: 131.

fathers, acquired in dreams, or found under circumstances that indicated their supernatural power. Du Peron wrote that nearly all of the Huron possessed amulets, and Lalemant said that all of them did.²⁵⁴ The amulets that were believed most excellent were bought from the neighboring Algonquians. Ragueneau said these were called *omniont* and were a certain kind of charm of great virtue—a sort of serpent of almost the shape of an armored fish which pierces everything that it meets and hence was called *Oky* par excellence. Those who killed it or obtained a piece of it brought good fortune on themselves. The Huron in obtaining small bits of it from the Algonquians paid a very high price.²⁵⁵

Whatever the amulet might be, it was usually carried in the owner's pouch and spoken to when its help was needed. Occasionally, beads or bits of tobacco were put in the pouch for it. It was also the recipient of feasts, which were in the nature of thanksgiving and also to maintain its favor and power. If the efficacy of a charm should be diminished, a feast was necessary to restore it.²⁵⁶ If it should be thrown away for any reason, such as vexation with it or conversion to Christianity, the owner was apt to find it later in his pouch or in his storage chest.²⁵⁷ Some amulets had a general virtue, others a special one, which was learned in a dream. Success in hunting, fishing, trading, and gambling was thought to be dependent upon amulets. Often people were not content to rely on a single amulet, but possessed several, although some of these may have been special ones that were only called upon for specific functions. Sometimes, the amulet or familiar demon changed its shape, for instance, from a stone or a snake to a bean, the beak of a raven, or the claws of an eagle.²⁵⁸ Lalemant remarked that some of the amulets were more efficacious and

²⁵⁴ "Letter from François du Peron," *J.R.*, 15: 181; Lalemant, *Relation* 1639, *J.R.*, 17: 211.

²⁵⁵ *Relation* 1648, *J.R.*, 33: 211-15.

²⁵⁶ Lalemant, *Relation* 1639, *J.R.*, 17: 207-9.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159; Ragueneau, *Relation* 1648, *J.R.*, 33: 211-15.

gances, that, to explain them and make them better understood, I do not know if I ought not to compare them, either to the most extravagant of our maskers that one has ever heard of, or to the bacchantes of the ancients, or rather to the furies of Hell. They enter, then, everywhere, and have during the time of the feast, in all the evenings and nights of the three days that it lasts, liberty to do anything, and no one dares say a word to them. If they find kettles over the fire, they upset them; they break the earthen pots, knock down the dogs, throw fire and ashes everywhere, so thoroughly that often the cabins and entire villages burn down. But the point being that, the more noise and uproar one makes, the more relief the sick person will experience, they have no concern for anything, and each one kills himself to do worse than his companion.

Our cabins that are in the villages are not exempt from the results of such a feast. The door of the cabin of the Residence of Saint Joseph was broken down three times in a like ceremony. As for this residence where I am, that of la Conception, we have been more quiet during such storms, because we are about a musket-shot from the village. This, then, is the third act; let us come to the fourth.

The next day's Sun having risen, every one prepares to go again through all the cabins where the sick woman has passed, and particularly to that one in which she is harbored. This is for the purpose of proposing at each fire each person's own and special desire or "ondinoc,"—according as he is able to get information and enlightenment by dreams,—not openly, however, but through Riddles. For example, some one will say, "What I desire and what I am seeking is that which bears a lake within itself"; and by this is intended a pumpkin or calabash. Another will say, "What I ask for is seen in my eyes,—it will be marked with various colors"; and because the Huron word that signifies "eye" also signifies "glass bead," that is the clue to divine what he desires,—namely, some kind of beads of this material, and of different colors. Another will intimate that he desires an Andandet feast,—that is to say, many fornications and adulteries. This Riddle being guessed, there is no lack of persons to satisfy his desires. . . .

As soon, then, as the Riddle is proposed, they immediately

Champlain, by Radisson, who said that a straw about a foot long was inserted therein,⁴⁰ and by Cadillac, who wrote:

I shall only mention that the word Ottawa means Nation of the Pierced Noses because they pierce their noses and attach to the nose a small prettily ornamented stone which comes to the middle of the mouth between the lips. It is a fashion with them, they would not think themselves properly decked out if that were wanting. There are, nevertheless, some old men who maintain that it is a protection against medicine, that is to say, against the fires and spells that their enemies and other malicious persons might cast on them to poison them or make them die.⁴¹

Champlain reported that the Ottawa had their ears fringed with beads, which presupposes piercing them.⁴² Radisson also reported the piercing of the ears, which he described as follows:

Their ears have ordinarily 5 holes, where one may putt the end of his finger. They use those holes in this sort: to make themselves gallant they pass through it a skrew of coper with much dexterity, and goe on the lake in that posture. When the winter comes they weare no capes because of their haire tourned up. They fill those skrews with swan's downe, & with it their ears covered; but I dare say that the people doe not for to hold out the cold, but rather for pride, ffor their country is not so cold as the north, and other lakes that we have seene since.⁴³

ECONOMIC LIFE

The Ottawa depended on agriculture, hunting, and fishing for their livelihood. With the advent of European traders and their demand for furs, hunting increased in importance in supplying the needs of the family. Manufacture of such articles as earthen vessels, stone knives, bows, and arrows, was gradually discontinued when the Indians were able to obtain European objects to take their places. Hunting sup-

⁴⁰ *Voyages*, p. 146.

⁴¹ MS "Relation on the Indians."

⁴² *Voyages*, 3: 44.

⁴³ *Voyages*, p. 146.

might even displace it and cause its death. The same prohibition was in force for nursing mothers, for they said that intercourse spoiled their milk and that if they should become pregnant, the nursling could not be saved because they had no other food to give it. All the women did not observe this custom, but many did out of affection for their offspring.¹⁰⁷

The purification period lasted thirty days if the child was a boy and forty if it was a girl, according to Lahontan.¹⁰⁸ Perrot said that the Indian woman spent a month without entering the husband's cabin, and without eating with men or eating food prepared by men.¹⁰⁹ Charlevoix gave the period of separation after a birth as forty days, but added that he thought he had heard it said that this was never done except at the woman's first lying-in.¹¹⁰

All of these general accounts agree that the women usually were delivered without pain or trouble and often without the attendance of anyone. Some, like those of Raudot, said that when a woman had given birth, she went to wash the child in the water and did not discontinue doing the housework as usual.¹¹¹ Such statements can be reconciled with the period of purification mentioned by Cadillac, Lahontan, and Perrot, by accepting the report of Charlevoix as correct.

Children

Speaking of the tribes around the Great Lakes, Perrot said that each child had for a cradle a very light piece of board, which was ornamented at the head with glass beads, bells, and round or long porcelain beads, and with these only, if it was a girl; but if the child was a boy, a bow was attached to the cradle and, if the father was a good hunter, all his ornaments were also placed on the cradle.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ MS "Relation on the Indians."

¹⁰⁸ *Voyages*, 2: 458.

¹⁰⁹ *Memoir*, ITUM., 1: 48.

¹¹⁰ *Journal*, 2: 51.

¹¹¹ "Memoir," Letter 25.

¹¹² *Memoir*, ITUM., 1: 77.

Death Customs

The most complete account of the death customs of the Ottawa is that given by Perrot:

When an Outaoüas, or other savage [of that region] is at the point of death, he is decked with all the ornaments owned by the family—I mean, among his kindred and his connections by marriage. They dress his hair with red paint mixed with grease, and paint his body and face red with vermilion; they put on him one of his handsomest shirts, if he has such, and he is clad with a jacket and a blanket, as richly as possible; he is, in a word, as properly garbed as if he had to conduct the most solemn ceremony. They take care to adorn the place where he is [lying] with necklaces of porcelain and glass beads (both round and square), or other trinkets. His weapons lie beside him, and at his feet generally all articles that he used in war during his life. All his relatives—and, above all, the jugglers—are near him. When the sick man seems to be in agony, and struggles to yield up his last breath, the women and girls among his relations, with others who are hired [for this purpose] betake themselves to mourning, and begin to sing doleful songs, in which mention is made of the degrees of relationship which they have with the sufferer. But if he seems to be recovering, and to regain consciousness, the women cease their weeping; but they recommence their cries and lamentations whenever the patient relapses into convulsions or faintness. When he is dead (or a moment before he expires), they raise him to a sitting position, his back supported, [and he looks] as if he were alive. I will say here, in passing, that I have seen some savages whose death-agonies lasted more than twenty-four hours, the sick man making fearful grimaces and contortions, and rolling his eyes in the most frightful manner; you would have believed that the soul of the dying man beheld and dreaded some enemy, although he was lying there without recognizing us, and almost dead. The corpse remains thus sitting until the next day, and is kept in this position both day and night by the relatives and friends who go to visit the family; they are also assisted from time to time by some old man, who takes his place near the women who are relatives of the dead man. [One of them] begins her mournful song, while she weeps hot tears; all

does not please, or her brother, who wishes it was another who has been intriguing with him for a long time for the same purpose. It happens sometimes that the presents are returned without any comment, and that is the sign of refusal. In this case the father, who knows the love that his son has for the girl, adds to them and carries them back to the cabin of this girl and says to her father that he wishes to warm himself only at his fire. Sometimes also he carries them to another cabin where there is a girl he has heard esteemed by his son.

When the girl and her parents give their consent to the marriage they carry back in place of the presents made them, things very similar. The girl walks in front well decked out with belts of beads of all colors, of porcelains, and of bells. As soon as she arrives, the betrothed is seated on a skin of buffalo or deer spread in the middle of the cabin, and her relatives go back. In the evening the relatives of the boy lead her back with some gift. These comings and goings continue during four consecutive days, but on the last day the girl remains always in the cabin. They wait usually until the boy comes to make the last visit. The women are sometimes a long time without wanting to consummate the marriage, and it has often happened that the men, angry at not being able to get the consent of their wives, have left them to go to war without being able to say they were husbands. That comes usually from the fact that they do not love the men they marry, others claim by that to do themselves credit, wishing to avoid the reproach that would be made them of having loved their husbands before marriage if they were confined within nine months.

When one of these men is killed at war, the wife is indeed to be pitied. The relatives are always after her to reproach her, saying that the severity she showed her husband is the cause of his death. She dares not comb her hair nor attend a dance, and still less get married. She must shed tears in spite of herself, in order that her sadness in the end may