

Nipissing Feast of the Dead

Morris Brezinski, attempts to determine the location of where on Lake Nipissing the Feast of the Dead may have taken place and provides the description by Lalemant of a large bay with a sandy beach.¹ Brezinski states that only 4 large bays would fit this description; the Frank, Cache, South or Callander Bays. He concluded that there was a 25% chance that this ceremony could have been at Frank's Bay. He suggested that the archaeological culture material dating to 1640 is interesting and could be interpreted as belonging to that cultural event. This cultural event could very well have taken place on many locations. The Frank's Bay site provides evidence that this site was one location of the Nipissing and this cultural may very well have taken place at this site.

One of four historical accounting of the Feast of the Dead, Father Lalemant, S.J. relating has been cited by Harold Hickerson as the *"most detailed, and is the only one in which the rites were recorded in the order they occurred."*²

To answer questions as to the re-occurring timeframe of this cultural event, Hickerson provides that an analysis of the Huron ceremony in the writings of Champlain in 1615 (Biggar 1929 11:160-163), Sagard in 1623-1624 (Wrong 1939: 211-214), and Brèbeuf in 1636 (JR 10:279-311) the ceremony took place every ten (10) to twelve (12) years.³ In regards to the seasonal occurrence, Lalemant provided that the rites held by the Nipissing were in September of 1641.

Father Lalemant further reported that the feast was by special envoy and an invitation to all the Nipissing Confederates.⁴ These special envoy invitations were to Nations as far as 414 miles (120 leagues).

Lalemant was present at the 1641 ceremony where the Nipissing hosted the Huron and Saulteur as guests at Georgian Bay in eastern Lake Huron. He estimated about 2,000 persons were at this gathering,⁵ This Nipissing hosted ceremony which took place on Georgian Bay has no definite precise location. The writer is hypothesizing but has no evidence that the remains of deceased persons in the care of the Chicago Museum could

¹ Where Eagles Fly, Morris Brizinski, McMaster University, 1980, Pg. 4 references the Jesuit Relations Volume 23, pages 209-229.

² The Feast of the Dead Among the Seventeenth Century Algonkians of the Upper Great Lake, Harold Hickerson, Indiana University, American Anthropologist, Pg. 8.

³ The Feast of the Dead Among the Seventeenth Century Algonkians of the Upper Great Lakes, Harold Hickerson, Indiana University, American Anthropologist, Pg. 88.

⁴ The Feast of the Dead Among the Seventeenth Century Algonkians of the Upper Great Lakes, Harold Hickerson, Indiana University, American Anthropologist (Pg. 89), (JR 23: 209)

⁵ The Feast of the Dead Among the Seventeenth Century Algonkians of the Upper Great Lakes, Harold Hickerson, Indiana University, American Anthropologist, Pg. 88 – 89, (JR 23:209, 215).

have been the remains interred at that 1642 ritual. It is mentioned here to ensure historical evidence requires closer study on those museum holdings.

The 1642 Feast of the Dead was not the only recorded Feast that the Nipissing participated in. In 1683, Beschefer's account provided that the four 'tribes' of Nipissing and the Achilligouan were the only participants.⁶

In 1642, Lalemant observed that the Nipissing were as hosts the only tribe that took part in the interring and the conducting of the pre-burial rites for their deceased. The guest Nations were spectators in this part of the ceremony.⁷

Lalemant observations of the 1642 ceremony provided a description of the activities of this cultural event. The activities for this ceremony began with the invited guests positioning their canoes in a line then awaited their hosts greetings. The host Chief meets them in his canoe and standing in middle of his canoe and states why he has brought the invited guests to the gathering. Each Chief, then tosses some of his goods he has brought to the ceremony for gift giving, out of his canoe, some landing on land others in the water for the gathered to scramble for. Some of the gifts being distributed in this manner were described by Lalemant were mats somewhat like the tapestries seen in France. These may have been weaved matts with designs. He also described beaver skins, hatchet(s), and porcelain beads.

Each of the Nations who were invited were seated in their own areas and displayed their trade good which included beaver robes, skins of otter, caribou, wild cats and moose, hatchets, kettles, porcelain beads are exhibited or displayed. Gifts were presented to the hosting Nation, and dancing and contests for prizes followed the presentation.

Lalemant attempts to describe the singing and dancing that followed this gift giving. He wrote of "*a Ballet danced by forty persons, to the sound the of voices and of a sort of drum; in such harmonious accord that they rendered all the tones that are most agreeable in Music.*"⁸

He observed the dancing that were a part of the ceremony. The dance consisted of three parts. The first a depicting a combat of which he 'he finally overcomes his antagonist, and returns victorious'...Immediately after the first dance, the second dance grows from eight dancers and in increments to twelve, to sixteen, "*ever increasing in*

⁶ The Feast of the Dead Among the Seventeenth Century Algonkians of the Upper Great Lakes, Harold Hickerson, Indiana University, American Anthropologist, Pg. 89, (JR 62: 201)

⁷ The Feast of the Dead Among the Seventeenth Century Algonkians of the Upper Great Lakes, Harold Hickerson, Indiana University, American Anthropologist (Pg. 89), (JR 23:217-219).

⁸ Jesuit Relations, Father Lalemant, 1642, Of the Mission of the Holy Ghost Among the Algonquins, The nearest to the Hurons, Vol 23, pp. 205-233; Nipissing Library Jesuit Journals, pg. 5.

proportion, who quicken or checked their steps according to the voices that gave the measure.” The Women suddenly appear and join the dancing as “*the Third Part of this Ball*”.⁹

Of the games played Lalemant described ‘*a pole of considerable height*’ stripped of its bark and set in the ground. The pole was very smooth and greased up to make ‘*it more difficult to grasp*’. He goes on to describe two prizes, a kettle and a deerskin were tied to the top of the pole. It was a game of agility.¹⁰

The election of Nipissing Chiefs was a prominent part of this ceremony. Chiefs were bestowed beaver skins and moose hides were distributed to newly elected chiefs. Lalemant relates that ‘*the election of the Nipissirinen Chiefs took place. When the votes were taken, the Chief Captain arose, and called them each by name. They made their appearance, clothed in their finest robes.*’¹¹ Prior to the imposition of the Indian Act in 1867 Nipissing selected its Chiefs by headmen of families. These head men who were reaffirmed by their families (doodem) then chose or reaffirmed their head Chief. Shabogestic was probably the last Chief selected in this manner by the Nbisiing headmen.

Internment of the Nipissing deceased was a part of these ceremonies. A ritual or ceremony takes place where those of importance who died since the last Feast had their names transferred to living relatives as “*to perpetuate their memory*”.¹²

On the following day, the women were occupied in “*fitting up a Cabin with an arched roof, about 100 paces*” (76 metres; 250 feet) “*with height proportionate*”.¹³

A gift giving on this day by the Nipissings to other Nations “*alone would have cost in France forty or even fifty thousand francs.*”¹⁴

The women prepared the placed the remains in bark caskets covered with new robes of beaver skins and ‘enriched collars and scarfs’ of porcelain beads.¹⁵

The women seated themselves in two opposing lines facing each other among the caskets and were served a feast by the “Captains who acted as Stewarts’. Lalemant

⁹ Jesuit Relations, Father Lalemant, 1642, Of the Mission of the Holy Ghost Among the Algonquins, The nearest to the Hurons, Vol 23, pp. 205-233; Nipissing Library Jesuit Journals, pg. 5 & 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jesuit Relations, Father Lalemant, 1642, Of the Mission of the Holy Ghost Among the Algonquins, The nearest to the Hurons, Vol 23, pp. 205-233; Nipissing Library Jesuit Journals, pg. 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, (JR 23:217)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jesuit Relations, Father Lalemant, 1642, Of the Mission of the Holy Ghost Among the Algonquins, The nearest to the Hurons, Vol 23, pp. 205-233; Nipissing Library Jesuit Journals, pg. 7. (JR 23:217)

wrote that “*this Feast is for the Women only, because they evince a deeper feeling of mourning.*”¹⁶

There was singing. “...*about a dozen men with carefully selected voices entered the middle of the Cabin, (lodge?) and began to sing a most lugubrious (mournful) chant, which being seconded by the women in the refrains, was very sweet and sad*”. Fires were set up at either end of the lodge. Most attendees were silent.¹⁷

On the next morning the women who prepared the deceased for burial ‘*distributed corn, moccasins and other small articles that were within their means and products of their industry*’. They chanted and cried and sped the Souls of the deceased on their way by “*continually waving branches that they held in their hands.*” Lalemant described a mock battle with ‘*frightful cries and yells, running around at first in a circle, then in an oval; and, at last, after a thousand other figures they rush upon the Cabin*’ and take control of the lodge “*the women having yielded the place to the Warriors*”. “*These warriors became the dancers after this victory.*” After the dancing, the Algonquin Captains entered and prepared a feast for the Hurons guests. The Algonquins seated themselves separately from the Huron as their language was entirely different.¹⁸

Two meetings were held after the internment feast ceremony. The Algonquin guests invited to the Feast were given presents of precious robes and collars of porcelain beads ‘*according to the extent of the Alliance that existed between the Nipissiriniens and them*’. The second meeting was the Huron Nation whom the Nipissiriniens gave ‘*the highest seat, the first titles of honour*’ consideration for their Confederacy with the Nipissing. The Hurons were lavished with gifts ‘*that not a single Captain withdrew empty-handed.*’¹⁹

The Feast of the Dead ended with more contests where men and women competed for prizes given for agility, physical strength, and skill.²⁰ The description of activities within the Nipissing Feast of the Dead ceremony provides a small glimpse of the life of our ancestors during the 17th century. Political affirmations, ceremonial rituals

¹⁶ Jesuit Relations, Father Lalemant, 1642, Of the Mission of the Holy Ghost Among the Algonquins, The nearest to the Hurons, Vol 23, pp. 205-233; Nipissing Library Jesuit Journals, pg. 8.

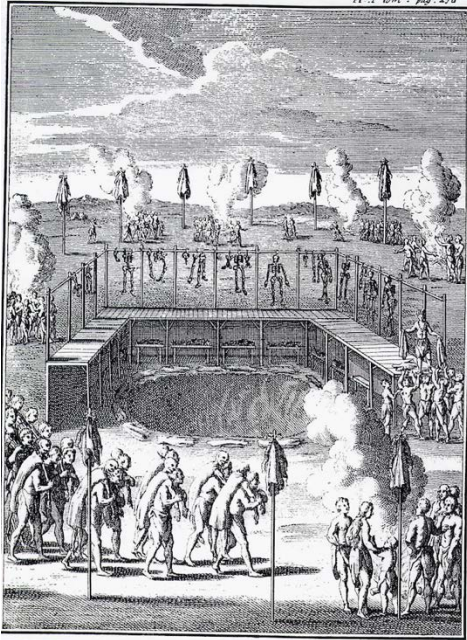
¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jesuit Relations, Father Lalemant, 1642, Of the Mission of the Holy Ghost Among the Algonquins, The nearest to the Hurons, Vol 23, pp. 205-233; Nipissing Library Jesuit Journals, pg. 8 & 9.

¹⁹ The Feast of the Dead Among the Seventeenth Century Algonkians of the Upper Great Lakes, Harold Hickerson, Indiana University, American Anthropologist, Pg. 89, (JR 62: 201) Jesuit Relations, Fr. Jerome Lalemant, Vol XXI, pp. 293-299.

²⁰ Jesuit Relations, Father Lalemant, 1642, Of the Mission of the Holy Ghost Among the Algonquins, The nearest to the Hurons, Vol 23, pp. 205-233; Nipissing Library Jesuit Journals, pg. 9.

surrounding interment, immemoration through the naming ceremony, the gift giving, games, singing and dancing were of equal importance.



On the actual Feast of the Dead preparation of the deceased. On the inset is an artist's depiction of the Huron Feast of the Dead. The Nipissing ceremony would in all probability be the same. The writer must make another assumption here. We must remember depictions by artists at that time in our history were sometimes embellished. His practice by an artist was a result of dependence on patronage funding. Patrons were probably requiring their artists to provide interesting depictions so some embellishment may have been a probability.

It has been written that the possible reason for the loss of this important cultural event was the disruption of the trade and our encounter with the Haudenosaunee. After the Haudenosaunee, the thirty years of not controlling our Nipissing Territory most likely pushed our Feast of the Dead ceremonies outside of our Territory. The European trade takeover of our trade as middlemen also changed our Nation's trade economy. Upon returning to prominence on Lake Nipissing and our territory our reliance on fur trade and European goods caused our economy of the pre-contact days never to recover. The Nipissing became the supplier and were removed from our superiority as the middleman trader. The colonizer became entrenched and the Nipissing not returning to prominence in trade forever changed the alliances between Nations.

In present day, Nipissing is known as a generous Nation for gift giving. Some of the remnants of the Feast of the Dead still exist today. Funeral feasting is a part of our culture. In the last century, food provision to grieving families was an important part of our grieving process. Traditional revivals honouring our ancestors and following the teachings of our ancestors and cultural and heritage revitalization are important tenets for our Nation.

It is important to attempt to translate the Feast of the Dead into our language. We must remember the teaching provided by our fluent linguist Muriel Sawyer, Ban. She provided an interpretation for the word 'history' into our language, 'Nbisiing Mii yi edebwetmaang' which translates to '*This is what we believe*'.

The following suggestions are provided to our fluent speakers as a challenge to translate Feast of the Dead into Nibisiing Nishnaabemwin. The writer provides the following definitions from Ojibway language dictionaries for our fluent speakers review and discussion.

The Barraga dictionary provides 'magoshewin' for 'religious feast'; Barraga also provides 'nibo' for 'dead'; the Eastern Ojibway dictionary provides 'maawnjidwaad' and 'maawndooshkaawaad' for 'gather as a crowd'; Eastern Ojibwa Dictionary provides 'pagigendamowin' for 'burial'. It would be of great assistance that a translation for Feast of the Dead be provided.

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