

Territorial Precedence in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Huron-Wendat Oral Tradition

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On the basis of research underway at the Bureau du Nionwentsïo, this article highlights the memory of the “St. Lawrence Iroquoians” in the ethnicity and perceptions of the history of the Huron-Wendat Nation, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It begins with a discussion of the Huron-Wendat oral tradition, its credibility, and its formal and informal modes of transmission. It then presents the main examples of traces of the Huron-Wendat’s ancestors in various accounts, including those by the German Friedrich Valentin Melsheimer, dating to 1776; Grand Chief Nicolas Vincent Tsawenhohi (1769–1844), dating to 1824; and Grand Chief François-Xavier Picard Tahourenche (1810–1883), dating to the second half of the nineteenth century. Major parallels are also drawn with the oral tradition of the “Wyandot.” This research underscores the importance of taking into account the perspective of Indigenous people—the Huron-Wendat, in this case—especially in contexts where their history and ethnicity are concerned.

Introduction

The Huron-Wendat Nation has been represented in a specific way in work conducted to date in the field of Indigenous studies. Historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists have done a considerable amount of research on the Huron-Wendat during the “Huronian” period, based on, among other things, descriptions left by missionaries during the early contact period, as well as data derived from archaeological sites discovered in the past. In comparison, contemporary researchers have focused very little attention, oddly, on the Huron-Wendat between the mid-seventeenth century and today.

The Bureau du Nionwentsïo of the Huron-Wendat Nation is currently carrying out historical and anthropological research on the territory of the Huron-Wendat. Based on the work of the Bureau, this article highlights important traces of the “St. Lawrence Iroquoians” in the ethnicity and perceptions of the history of the Huron-Wendat during the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹ Before providing a summary of the main examples, I would like to make a few comments on the Huron-Wendat oral tradition.

¹Although an exhaustive literature review of this subject has not been undertaken, it is important to underscore that Bruce Trigger (1970) discussed some of these ideas as early as the beginning of the 1970s. The Huron-Wendat historian, Georges Sioui, made an important contribution to the research thanks to his books *Pour une autohistoire amérindienne* (1989) and *Les Wendats, Une civilisation méconnue* (1994). More recently, the Huron-Wendat historian Jonathan Lainey (2006) published a reflection on the historical links between the Huron-Wendat and the “St. Lawrence Iroquoians” in which he evoked several elements of the Huron-Wendat oral tradition. This text puts forward a deeper analysis and interpretation aimed at better understanding the implications of the Huron-Wendat oral tradition on territorial precedence.



Figure 1. Grand Chief Nicolas Vincent Tsawanhohi (1769–1844), by Edward Chatfield (1802–1839) in 1825. Nicholas Vincent Tsawanhohi, Principal Christian Chief and Captain of the Huron Indians Established at La Jeune Lorette, near Québec. 1 print: lithograph, hand-coloured on wove paper. Image: 33.100 × 45.800 cm. Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

The Oral Tradition of the Huron-Wendat Nation

Oral tradition plays a major role among the Huron-Wendat, as in all Indigenous societies in North America. Information is handed down from one generation to the next through traditional cultural transmission mechanisms, notably kinship networks. Moreover, among the Huron-Wendat, the Nation's oral tradition and history used to also be transmitted in an official, public manner. This manner was revealed by Grand Chief Nicolas Vincent Tsawenhohi (1769–1844) (Figure 1) in the English translation of his testimony before the House of Assembly of Lower Canada in 1819:

Our Ancestors could not write: we have no books, we have it by tradition. In times of old our Chiefs assembled the nation to hear from its Chiefs the history of the nation: we follow the same customs and relate to our children the affairs of our nation within our own times. The old Chiefs relate what they know of old times (Vincent *Tsawenhohi* 1819).

During the first few decades of the nineteenth century, public assemblies continued to be held in keeping with this custom. The existence of this fairly formal mechanism sheds considerable light on the context in which the components of the Huron-Wendat Nation's oral tradition, particularly those related to its history, were preserved and transmitted. It reinforces the credibility of this tradition by making one of its principal modes of transmission explicit.

In addition to accounts that can be gathered from the Huron-Wendat, their oral tradition is currently accessible to researchers in two main forms: the oral tradition set down in historical records between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, and recordings of research interviews conducted with members of the Huron-Wendat Nation, usually elders. The work of anthropologist Marius Barbeau in the early twentieth century, as well as that of Georges Boiteau (1954), made a significant contribution to the study of Huron-Wendat oral tradition. The earliest information on



Figure 2. *Un Huron et une Abénaquise du Canada*, anonymous watercolour dating to before 1776. This anonymous watercolour was painted prior to 1776, probably by a German taking part in British military activities aimed at thwarting the American Revolution. This painting is housed in the German museum, Braunschweigisches Landesmuseum (Phillips 1988). Several of the elements representing the Huron-Wendat correspond to the description provided by the German chaplain Melsheimer (Phillips 1988).

the question of territory in that oral tradition is set down in historical records. It consists, for example, of elements derived from the archived testimony of Grand Chief Nicolas Vincent *Tsawenhohi* (1819, 1824), dating to the first few decades of the nineteenth century, or from the testimony of Deputy Grand Chief and War Chief Michel Sioui *Tehashendaye* (1766–1850) during the council at Trois-Rivières in 1829 (Juchereau-Duchesnay 1829).

Territorial Precedence

The idea exists that the Huron-Wendat Nation represents “migrants” in present-day Quebec because its members came for the most part from Lake Huron's Georgian Bay, in Ontario. However, this view does not correspond to the Huron-

Wendat's traditional perception of themselves and their people. In fact, certain observations can be made on the links between the Huron-Wendat of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their ancestors based on the study of oral tradition. Research shows that the Huron-Wendat had a precise perception of their territorial precedence. They saw themselves as originating in the valley and estuary of the St. Lawrence River, as well as in the extensive forests bordering this immense river. And this view is still the case today.

In his *Journal of the Voyage of the Brunswick Auxiliaries from Wolfenbüttel to Quebec*, dated 1776, the German Friedrich Valentin Melsheimer related several pieces of information that are useful for better understanding the culture and practices of the Huron-Wendat Nation. Melsheimer was the chaplain of a regiment of German mercenaries that backed the British during the American Revolution. As shown by his journal, he was a man with an inquiring mind, as well as a careful and skilled observer. He met with the Huron-Wendat in their village of Lorette, which corresponds to present-day Wendake. His journal includes many details about their material culture, clothing, aesthetic sense, intellectual abilities, morality, governance, and war ceremonies (Figure 2). This information was obtained through observation of and conversations with members of the Huron-Wendat Nation (Melsheimer 1927).

In the following excerpt from his journal, Melsheimer reported that he had asked the Huron-Wendat about their ancestors. In his opinion, the members of the Huron-Wendat Nation that he had talked to knew very little about the subject, although they did claim to be descendants of the "Hurons":

We were desirous of obtaining some information concerning the fate, costumes, customs, habits and religion of their forefathers; but they seem to know nothing whatever regarding these things, except that they are descended from the Hurons, and that they have, by many and bloody wars with the neighboring Indian nations and with Europeans, lost all their

land....Formerly, their land extended from the Island of Orleans, on the St. Lawrence, to Montreal (Melsheimer 1927:167).

On the basis of information obtained apparently through his interviews with the Huron-Wendat, Melsheimer sheds useful light on the Huron-Wendat's perception of their collective identity. As the above quote attests, according to the Huron-Wendat their territory used to extend from Île d'Orléans in the St. Lawrence River, to the site of present-day Montreal. This information gathered by chaplain Melsheimer in the 1770s shows that, at the time, the Huron-Wendat considered that they were directly related to the occupants of the St. Lawrence Valley, particularly in the sixteenth century, at the time when Jacques Cartier arrived. Indeed, the historical data concerning the limits of the Huron-Wendat's territory from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century confirm that the period covered by Melsheimer's accounts actually corresponds to an earlier period that includes the sixteenth century. These limits concern essentially the region between the Saint-Maurice and Saguenay rivers and the south shore of the St. Lawrence, rather than Montreal, farther upstream.

Specific information on the Huron-Wendat's territorial precedence was provided by Grand Chief Nicolas Vincent *Tsawenhohi* (1769–1844) when he testified before the House of Assembly of Lower Canada in 1824. His comments shed valuable light on this nation's perceptions of history. When the Grand Chief was asked whether hunting and fishing provided a sufficient economic base for the Huron-Wendat Nation, he replied that even though this means of subsistence was precarious, partly because of the progress of colonization, the Huron-Wendat did not really have any other choice but to make do with what they had (Vincent *Tsawenhohi* 1824). He spoke about the past, sharing some of his traditional knowledge about the history of his people. His eloquent and detailed account is deeply rooted in the Huron-Wendat perspective. In the following excerpt, from the English translation of his testimony, the Grand Chief refers to two separate chronological periods:

The Huron Nation had formerly for their Hunting and Fishing Limits, from the Arm of the River Chicoutimy, as far as the Mouth of the River St. Maurice. That Nation used also to Hunt and Fish on the South Shore of the River St. Lawrence as far as the River St. John. Before that time the Hurons had no limits for Hunting and Fishing: they were Masters of the Country as far as the Great Lakes: Our Ancestors permitted no one to Hunt and Fish on their Lands, and in former times if a Nation came to Hunt upon the Lands of another Nation, their so doing became a cause of War [Vincent *Tsawenhohi* 1824].

The first period mentioned by *Tsawenhohi*—indicated by the use of the word “formerly”—refers to the time when the “Arm of the River Chicoutimy” and the “Mouth of the River St. Maurice” formed the “Hunting and Fishing Limits” of the Huron-Wendat Nation. The rest of Vincent *Tsawenhohi*’s testimony demonstrates that this period covered the years 1770 to 1824, when other First Nations hunted indiscriminately on Huron-Wendat land, as well as in previous years (Vincent *Tsawenhohi* 1824).

The other period referred to by *Tsawenhohi* was discussed after the description of the territory used by the Huron-Wendat Nation on the north and south shores of the St. Lawrence River. The Grand Chief said that the “Hurons” used to have no hunting and fishing limits. They were “Masters of the Country as far as the Great Lakes.” A detailed analysis of Grand Chief *Tsawenhohi*’s testimony regarding, among other things, the chronological periods that he was referring to, makes it possible to specifically associate this other period called “former times,” not with the eighteenth century and the better part of the seventeenth century, but with previous years at the time of the first contact with the Europeans. This part of his testimony reveals and illustrates the Huron-Wendat’s perception of collective identity at that time. In other words, Grand Chief *Tsawenhohi* said that the Huron-Wendat considered themselves to be directly related to the occupants of the St. Lawrence Valley during and

prior to the early sixteenth century.

In the nineteenth century, through their oral tradition among other things, the Huron-Wendat maintained this perception of their collective identity, which placed their origins in the valley and estuary of the St. Lawrence. An account by Chief *Mandorong*, also called Joseph White, gathered by the American anthropologist Horatio Hale (1883) on the Wyandot² reservation in Oklahoma in 1872, is particularly relevant in this regard. Chief *Mandorong* said straightaway that his people represented themselves as having originally dwelt in the east, particularly near Quebec. He told Hale the “legend of King *Sastaretsi*,” which was set in very ancient times. The “Hurons” or “Wandat” were then living in the east, near Quebec, where their ancestors first came out of the ground. As pointed out by anthropologist Hale, the Baron de Lahontan, who left descriptions of New France in the period between the years 1683 and 1694, explained that the name *Sastaretsi* had been handed down for 700 or 800 years, that is, since about the year 900 (Hale 1883:479-482).

Chief *Mandorong*, who was an elder at the time, told the anthropologist that he had once travelled as far as Quebec, where he had met with the Huron-Wendat in the village of Lorette-Wendake:

[*Mandorong*] assured me that the traditions of his people represented them as having originally dwelt in the east, near Quebec. He had once journeyed as far as that city, and had then visited the remnant of the Hurons at Lorette. Though they had lost their ancient language...they had not forgotten this primitive tradition of their race. They took him, he said, to a mountain, and showed him the opening in its side from which the progenitors of their people emerged, when they first ‘came out of the ground’ (Hale 1883:479).

² It is possible that the Wyandot of today share the perceptions of history and ethnicity described in this paper. However, since no information has yet been found to confirm this idea, the present discussion focuses more specifically on the Huron-Wendat Nation.

Thus, the Huron-Wendat who had settled in Lorette–Wendake had preserved this tradition about the origin of their people. When they saw that their oral tradition converged with the account by Chief *Mandorong*, they even took him to a mountain and showed him the opening from which their ancestors had first emerged.

In his book entitled *The Lost Atlantis and Other Ethnographic Studies*, anthropologist Daniel Wilson (1892) confirmed that the Huron-Wendat

of the second half of the nineteenth century still maintained this tradition about the early origins of their people. Wilson (1892) was familiar with the work of anthropologist Hale on Chief *Mandorong's* account and his visit with the Huron-Wendat in the region of Quebec. Wilson asserted in his book that the same ancient tradition about the origin of the Huron-Wendat had been communicated to him by François-Xavier Picard *Tahourenche* (1810–1883) (Figure 3), who was



Figure 3. Grand Chief François-Xavier Picard Tahourenche (1810–1883), ca. 1876. Anonymous, no date, Residence of Indian chief, Paul Tahourenche. Photo Lot 90-1 number 243. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Grand Chief from 1870 to 1883. *Tabourenche* explained that his people had come out of the side of a mountain that he said was situated between Quebec and the “great sea.” He shared with the anthropologist accounts of events that converged with the tradition to the effect that the Huron-Wendat Nation had originated on the north shore of the downstream portion of the St. Lawrence River. Grand Chief *Tabourenche* also recounted other ancient events dating from the time when his people lived beside the “big sea” (Wilson 1892:252). This Huron-Wendat story about emergence from the side of a mountain is clearly linked to the Huron-Wendat creation myth, at the end of which humans came out of a cavern.³

Other examples from the oral tradition of the “Wyandot,” presented by anthropologist Marius Barbeau, place the origin of this nation in the east. For instance, in an account dating to 1837, Chief *Oriwahento* said that his people had been created in a place called “Mountains,” located to the east, near the St. Lawrence (Barbeau 1915:296-300). The oral tradition contained in the works of William E. Connelley (1899) and Peter *Dooyentate* Clarke (1870) is also very interesting in this regard. According to Clarke, traditional accounts said that the “Wyandotts” once lived in the northeast, at the “mouth” of the St. Lawrence River, before they first met with the Europeans (Clarke *Dooyentate* 1870:4).

When the similarities between the oral tradition of the Huron-Wendat in the region of Quebec and that of the “Wyandot” are placed in a historical framework, they show just how old this tradition about their origins is. Apparently the period concerned encompasses the sixteenth century and the years prior to it. As noted by Hale (1883:482) and Wilson (1892:252), there is a reference to this tradition in the *Relation of what occurred in the Country of the Hurons in the year 1636* by the Jesuit Father Jean Brébeuf. In describing the costumes of the Huron-Wendat, and particularly their songs and dances, Brébeuf mentioned that the Huron-Wendat ascribed the origin of “all these mysteries” to a certain giant who had been wounded in the forehead by one of the members of their tribe, for not having answered “Kwai,” the usual response to a greeting.

As punishment, the giant cast among the Huron-Wendat “the apple of discord” and recommended to them war feasts, *Ononharoia* and the “refrain” of a song before he buried himself in the earth and disappeared. According to the Huron-Wendat, these events took place “when they dwelt on the shore of the sea”⁴ (Brébeuf 1897:183).

Links between the Huron-Wendat of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries and Their Ancestors

The members of the Huron-Wendat Nation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even earlier had preserved the memory of the people referred to by archaeologists as the “St. Lawrence Iroquoians,” who were once an integral part of their society. Far from representing an insignificant part of the ethnicity of the Huron-Wendat of “Huronnia,” the traces of these Iroquoians in the ethnicity and perceptions of history of the Huron-Wendat Nation were still apparent more than 300 years later, in the late nineteenth century, and they can still be observed today. As mentioned by the historian Georges Sioui (1994:23-29), the fact that this information has been transmitted over such a long period shows just how important it is to the Huron-Wendat.⁵

These findings show that the Huron-Wendat’s perception of themselves is different from the “traditional” ideas that have been put forward, particularly by archaeology. In the context concerned here, ethnicity goes beyond the material culture of a people (e.g., their pottery styles). That being said, archaeological research in recent years has corroborated important aspects of the Huron-Wendat oral tradition with regard to ethnicity (see, among others, Ramsden, this volume).

³ With respect to the Huron-Wendat creation story, see, in particular, the long version of *Huwennuwanenhs* by Louis-Karl Picard-Siouï (2016).

⁴ An analysis of Brébeuf’s account shows that the word “sea” does not refer to the Great Lakes.

⁵ It should be noted that a recent book by Beaulieu et al. (2013) dealing with Huron-Wendat identity does not discuss this important aspect of the ethnicity of the main parties concerned.

The study of the oral tradition and oral accounts of the Huron-Wendat in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries poses major methodological problems because it is conducted primarily through historical sources. Therefore, present-day researchers work with information that is only partial. However, the Huron-Wendat oral tradition, as well as the oral traditions of other Indigenous groups, notably the Iroquoians, can be investigated in order to gain an understanding of the various perceptions about the origins and ethnicity of the Huron-Wendat. The study of this nation's oral tradition must be linked to knowledge derived not only from archaeology but also from linguistics, anthropology, and history. Researchers must constantly ask themselves critical questions about the cultural affiliation of the Indigenous groups they study, especially as far as their ethnicity is concerned (see Gaudreau and Lesage, this volume). Although the perspective of Indigenous peoples—in this instance, the Huron-Wendat—must, like historical sources, undergo rigorous critical assessment, it must also be given adequate recognition, particularly when it concerns the Huron-Wendat's perception of their history and ethnicity.

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Basé sur des recherches en cours au Bureau du Nionwentsïo, ce texte met en évidence le souvenir des « Iroquoiens du Saint-Laurent » dans l'ethnicité et les conceptions de l'histoire propres à la Nation huronne-wendat, en particulier aux 18e et 19e siècles. Des remarques sont d'abord apportées concernant la tradition orale huronne-wendat, sa crédibilité et ses modes de transmissions formels et informels. Il est ensuite question des principaux exemples d'empreintes des ancêtres des Hurons-Wendat, notamment avec les témoignages de l'allemand Friedrich Valentin Melsheimer de 1776, du Grand Chef Nicolas Vincent Tsawenhohi (1769–1844), daté de 1824, et du Grand Chef François-Xavier Picard Tabourenche (1810–1883), recueilli dans la seconde moitié du 19e siècle. Des parallèles significatifs sont également établis avec la tradition orale des « Wyandot ». Ces recherches soulignent l'importance de tenir compte de la perspective des Autochtones, en l'occurrence celle des Hurons-Wendat, d'autant plus lorsqu'il s'agit de leur propre histoire et de leur ethnicité.

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