

Geopolitics and Dimensions of Social Complexity in Ancestral Wendake c. A.D. 1450–1600

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During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D., processes of settlement aggregation, population relocation, and geopolitical realignment galvanized Iroquoian communities into formative nations. Socio-political changes were brought about by regional patterns of conflict and migration as well as intra-community reorganization as populations met the social, political, and economic challenges of coalescence. These historical events provided the context for the incorporation of St. Lawrence Iroquoians into the Wendat world. This paper employs a conceptual framework that emphasizes historically contingent and multilinear explanations for the development of social complexity. It is argued that these processes of political development in ancestral Wendat society involved the generation of both consensual and asymmetrical power structures between and within ancestral Wendat communities.

Iroquoian Societies and Cultural Evolution in Anthropological Theory

Northern Iroquoian societies feature prominently in the birth of Americanist anthropology. In the nineteenth century, Lewis Henry Morgan (1963[1877]) used observations of Iroquoian cultures to help him formulate influential theories about the evolution of human societies. In the mid-twentieth century, cultural evolution moved to the centre of mainstream anthropological theory. Sahlins and Service (1960) enshrined the evolutionary typology of bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states in anthropological thought. Within this framework, Iroquoian societies have commonly been labelled as “tribal” and “egalitarian.” Contemporary approaches to social change call for the rejection of evolutionary frameworks and the recognition of the multidimensional nature of power and authority in non-state or middle-range societies (e.g., Blanton and Fargher 2008; Carballo 2013; Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Yoffee 1993). Nevertheless, the older typological classifications continue to restrict our reconstructions of

ancestral Wendat political history, with traditional academic narratives of Wendat socio-politics characterizing their society as “tribal” or “egalitarian,” even though it is generally understood that Wendat socio-political organization was in fact more complex than those classifications permit (e.g., Birch and Williamson 2013a, 2013b; Jamieson 2011; Ramsden 1996; Trigger 1990).

This paper briefly presents a conceptual framework emphasizing multilinear approaches to socio-political complexity. These concepts are then applied to the historical development of Wendat towns and nations in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. Processes of geopolitical realignment are considered within this theoretical framework, including the incorporation of St. Lawrence Iroquoians into Wendat communities and nations. Here, geopolitics are understood as political relations influenced by geographic factors, more specifically, the movement of populations within and between regions, including processes of migration and aggregation.

It is acknowledged that these issues are complex and subject to ongoing discussion and debate (e.g., Fox 2016; Hart et al. 2016; Ramsden 2016a, 2016b). The discussion here is intended as a *précis* and set of suggestions for directions forward as opposed to a definitive statement on this complex topic.

Dimensions of Social Complexity

The general processes through which socio-cultural complexity may develop are multidimensional. Notably, this is the case in middle-range societies—such as the ancestral Wendat—because such a wide range of organizational strategies were drawn upon. Traditional neo-evolutionary approaches to the development of political systems are based on functionalist and materialist arguments and the assumption that the only path to complexity involves the emergence of social inequality (e.g., Carneiro 1981; Earle 1997). However, in many examples of politogenesis, the accumulation of power and structure of governance was not a goal in and of itself, but, rather, a means to solve important problems encountered by the society (Grinin and Korotayev 2011:282). When faced with organizational challenges, human societies develop and institutionalize new political forms. *Sometimes* this involves the emergence of social inequality, but organizational strategies can also favour the promotion of strong horizontal links within a network, weakening tendencies towards centralization (Grinin and Korotayev 2011:285). Alternative models of social evolution require that we consider horizontal and vertical dimensions of social complexity.

Conceptual frameworks informed by theories of cooperation and collective action (e.g., Blanton and Fargher 2008; Carballo 2013) argue that ranked political structures may be generated from the bottom up, whereby power is negotiated in the context of fluctuating relationships and the social, material, and historical conditions of everyday life (see also Brück and Fontijn 2013; Thomas 2002). In collective action theory, individuals and groups are understood to be rational social actors who constantly evaluate the actions of leaders and make decisions about compliance, defection, and other

actions accordingly (Blanton and Fargher 2008:13). These decisions may include granting leaders the power to organize, though not necessarily giving them power over the organization. Through collective action, individuals do not surrender their autonomy and leaders do not become entrenched through unequal access to resources. Collective action theory allows for the recognition that individuals and groups can resolve problems stemming from collective decision making and govern large and complex political bodies effectively in the absence of social inequality.

The Historical Development of Ancestral Wendat Socio-Politics

Through more than six centuries of cultural development, ancestral Wendat settlements grew from small, semi-sedentary base camps to larger, more permanent village communities with populations in the hundreds or thousands (Birch 2015; Williamson 2012, 2014) (Figure 1). Between the 1200s and the early 1400s, ancestral Wendat peoples developed practices and institutions which served to integrate a growing regional population. Archaeologically, these institutions are manifested in semi-subterranean sweat lodges, ossuary burial, an elaborate smoking pipe complex, and widespread homogeneity in ceramic decoration (Birch 2015; Dodd et al. 1990; MacDonald and Williamson 2001). However, the political situation took a dramatic turn within a single generation. After A.D. 1450, evidence for conflict becomes widespread; this includes the construction of defensive palisades and an increase in human remains bearing signs of violent trauma (Birch 2015; Williamson 2007).

After A.D. 1450, within this climate of increased hostility, ancestral Wendat village sites became fewer in number, larger in size, and more widely spaced on the landscape (Birch 2012). This process has been observed in settlement pattern data in the Toronto area, in the Trent River valley, in Prince Edward County, and in the upper St. Lawrence River valley (Birch and Williamson 2013a); analogous processes were also taking place farther south, in upper New York state (Engelbrecht 2003; Snow 1994). It is unknown if

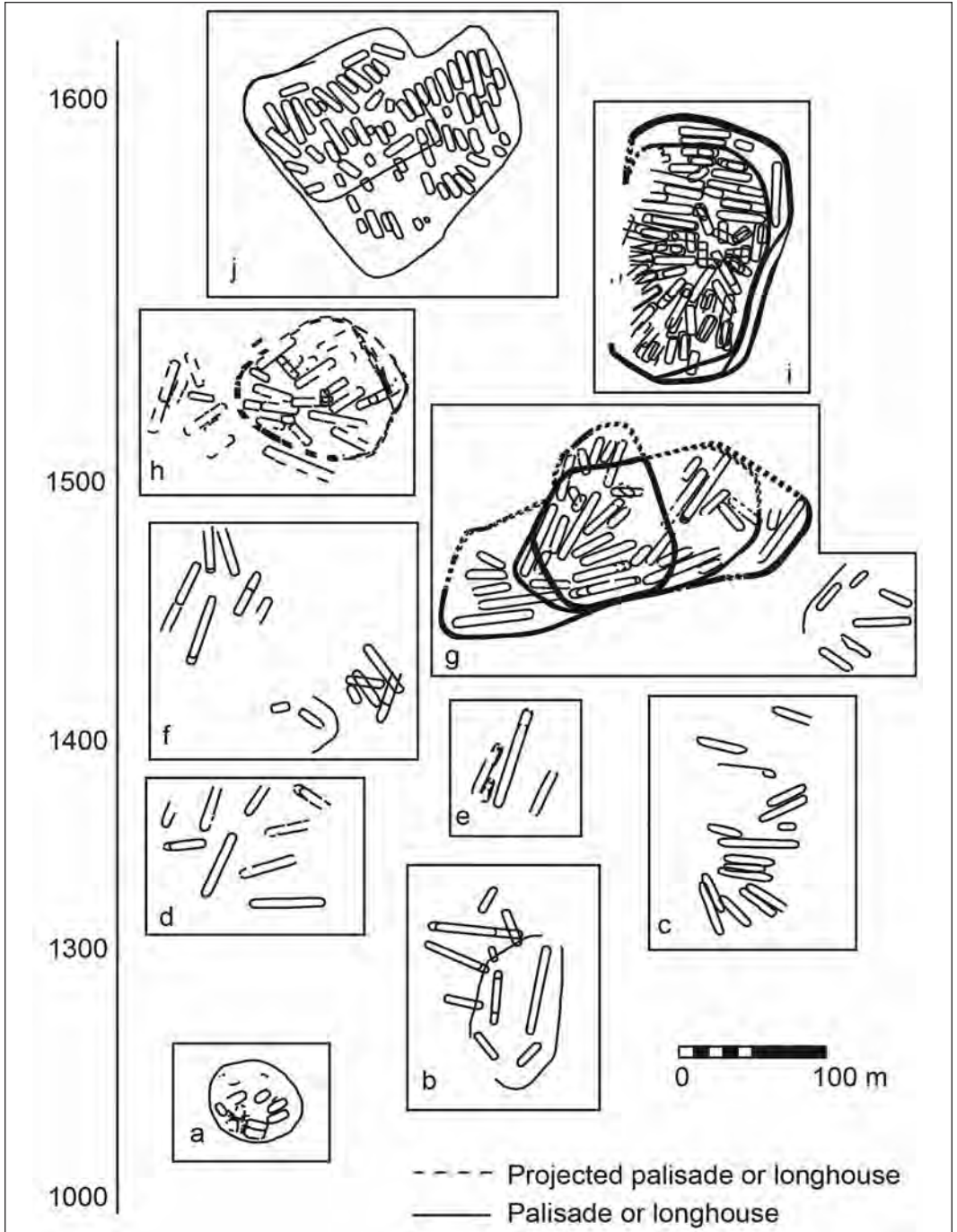


Figure 1. Generalized ancestral Wendat community patterns c. A.D. 1000–1650. Sites dating to c. A.D. 1450–1500 that exhibit palisade expansion and the addition of new longhouses are formative aggregates. Later sites without palisade expansions represent consolidation. Complete or relatively complete village plans selected to demonstrate variability and change over time: a) Miller (Kenyon 1968); b) Myers Road (Ramsden et al. 1998); c) Alexandra (ASI 2008); d) Robb (ASI 2010); e) Baker (ASI 2006); f) Hope (ASI 2011); g) Draper (Finlayson 1985); h) Kirche (Ramsden 1989); i) Mantle (ASI 2014; Birch and Williamson 2013a); j) Ball (Knight 1987).

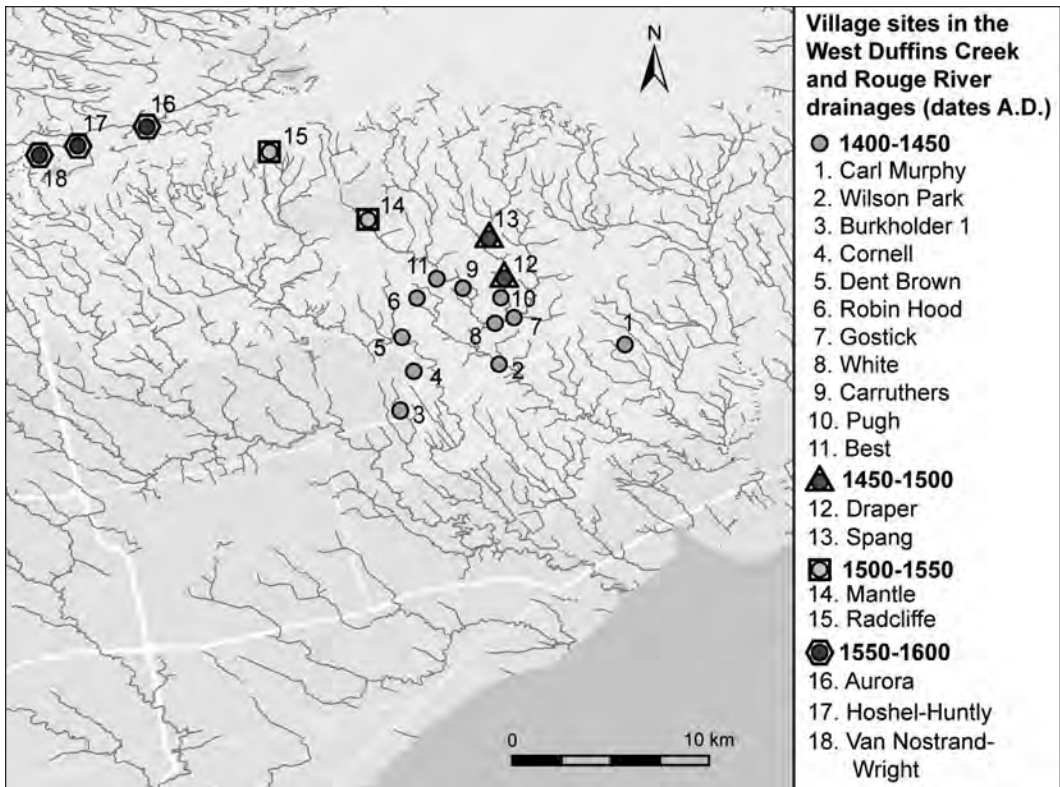


Figure 2. *Coalescence in the Rouge River/West Duffins Creek drainage.*

these same processes were playing out in the Simcoe Uplands, the homeland of the Wendat in the seventeenth century—though in the fifteenth century this region appears to have been home to smaller populations that experienced relatively less conflict (Warrick 2008; Williamson 2014).

Settlement data make it clear that coalescence primarily involved groups sharing drainage-based territories (Birch 2012). Figure 2 presents an example of settlement aggregation after A.D. 1400 in the Rouge River and West Duffins Creek drainages. However, heterogeneous ceramic assemblages suggest that aggregation also included people from farther afield (e.g., Birch et al. 2017; Ramsden 1978, 1990, 2016a, 2016b; Williamson, this volume). In some cases, these towns were 10 times the size of earlier villages.

Formative aggregates have palisades that were extended to accommodate new clusters of longhouses (Figure 1). The extension of palisades

suggests that aggregation occurred rapidly, within the average 15- to 30-year lifespan of settlements. Later, at least some of these formative aggregates consolidated into towns with more organized settlement patterns and complex internal and external socio-political relations (Birch et al. 2017; Birch and Williamson 2013a, 2013b). These processes have been explored most extensively in the community relocation sequence on West Duffins Creek. Here, over the course of two to three generations, 1800 people came together to form a single community at the Draper site before relocating to the Spang and Mantle sites and, later, to sites in the Holland River drainage (ASI 2014; Birch and Williamson 2013a, 2013b; Finlayson 1985).

Lineages or sub-clans with longer-lived ties to settlements may have achieved elevated status due to their relative emplacement within towns and associated territories (Birch 2016). In the context

of population relocation in the U.S. Southwest, local resources, rights, and decision making were controlled by relatively stable individuals and groups, rather than by the community as a whole (Schachner 2012:24). It is possible that the same process played out in coalescent communities, whereby the groups that first occupied sites and territories retained the balance of political influence. This outcome was certainly the case among the seventeenth-century Wendat, whereby the first-come residents of Wendake—the Attignawantan (Bear)—retained the balance of power in the confederacy (see discussion, below).

Political Evolution in Coalescent Communities and Nations

Within Iroquoian communities, there are multiple organizational levels at which decisions may have been made: the household, sub-clan, moiety, village or town, nation, confederacy, or any combination thereof. For this reason, the formation of political communities would have involved a great deal of negotiation and social “work” (Kowalewski 2013). For each village community, political organization may have involved very different articulations of social segments as they met the organizational challenges of coalescence. This process also may have included the incorporation of peoples from farther afield into multi-ethnic, multilingual communities.

Coalescent communities gave rise to an increase in organizational complexity. Prior to A.D. 1450, villages with smaller numbers of people would have included fewer decision-making units. Political action was likely dominated by lineages or clan segments (Birch 2012; MacDonald 1986). The larger populations of coalescent communities would have necessitated more complex decision making, negotiation, and coordination between community segments (Birch and Williamson 2013a, 2013b). This process would have included organization for collective defence; decisions about land tenure; maintenance of community infrastructure and waste management; the scheduling of simultaneous labour; trade and exchange; alliance formation; and the scheduling and hosting of ceremonial events and feasts.

The Political Apparatus and the Political Community

In considering political development within ancestral Wendat society, we must remember that polities typically have two components: the political apparatus and the political community (Roscoe 2013). In Wendat society, the political apparatus included influential leaders who represented political communities of various sizes. Many historic documents attest to the profound influence of Iroquoian political leaders in matters of diplomacy and international affairs. In many cases, the political communities that these leaders represented overlapped (Steckley 2014).

Group members often recognize that they have a better chance of stability and increased quality of life with better organization of labour and management of resources; as such, they may grant leaders the power to organize, which is not the same as having power over the organization (Hastorf 1990:149). For the Wendat, power was gained by consensus building, rather than structural or wealth-based inequality. Some individuals who attained leadership positions possessed characteristics which met the requirements of the position or the community at particular moments in time.

Multiple political offices—both civil offices and those related to war and external affairs—were held by men, and these were inherited matrilineally within the clan segment. While positions of leadership may have preceded coalescence, leaders who could build consensus and manage community affairs may have been especially important in towns and nations, and in linking those political communities into confederacies. Women also wielded significant power in Wendat affairs (Brown 1970; Lafitau 1724:I:66-67). Senior women of the clan selected and unseated leaders. They arranged marriages, binding clans and communities together. Domestic structures, property, field systems, and the harvest all belonged to women, who were in command of the domestic economy. Women’s status may have been asymmetrical in the same way that men’s was. As consensus builders, mediators of conflict, transmitters of skills, and those who were in control of the domestic

economy, women had power that was exerted in domains not always considered to be explicitly political.

Nation Formation

Coalescence and conflict in the fifteenth through sixteenth centuries contributed to the growth of complexity as it pushed communities to establish alliances. The formation of nations offered multiple benefits, including increased security, territory, and enhanced socio-political and economic networks. Within a nation, settlements were able to come together and fission as necessary (e.g., Engelbrecht 2003). This flexibility meant that during relatively peaceful times, nations could live in smaller settlements that placed less strain on local resources. During times of conflict, groups could come together into larger, more defensible settlements. An example was the Attignawantan, who, in the early seventeenth century discussed amalgamating into a single fortified settlement in response to perceived threats of Iroquois raids, a plan which was abandoned when those threats diminished (Trigger 1969:17).

The importance of landscape features is reflected in the endonyms of seventeenth-century groups (Hart and Engelbrecht 2012:335), linking the crystallization of socio-political identities to the formation of towns and site clusters and in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Each nation was emplaced in its own territory, composed of ancestral landscapes marked by abandoned villages and ossuaries (Birch and Williamson 2015).

From Nations to a Confederacy

It has long been established that the Attignawantan and the Atingeennonniyahak (Cord) were the earliest inhabitants of Wendake (Trigger 1976). While both groups may have migrated to the region in the mid- to late 1300s, the Attignawantan were numerically superior. The Arendarhonon (Rock) likely developed a nation-based identity in the Trent valley and relocated to Wendake around A.D. 1590 (Biggar 1929-1936). The origins of the Tahontaerat (Deer) were on the

northwest shore of Lake Ontario, possibly as the Draper-Mantle community, or possibly as that group together with others who occupied the Humber River valley in the late 1500s (Birch and Williamson 2013a). The Tahontaerat joined the confederacy by A.D. 1610 (Thwaites 1896-1901:10:11).

While strong network ties existed among Wendat nations, political influence was not equal within the confederacy council (Thwaites 1896-1901:10; Trigger 1976). The Attignawantan, having the greatest antiquity in Wendake, retained the balance of power in council, where they sat on one side of the longhouse, whereas the representatives of other nations sat on the other. The headman who presided over the proceedings was also Attignawantan and spoke for the nation in proceedings with foreign nations and confederacies. While the precise governance structure of the confederacy council is unclear, the second most-populous nation, the Arendarhonon, did have seats on the council, whereas the Tahontaerat did not appear to have seats as late as A.D. 1636.

Adoption and Incorporation in Iroquoian Societies

This model of politogenesis and asymmetry in Wendat political relations has implications for the amalgamation of St. Lawrence Iroquoians into ancestral Wendat communities and territories. The historian James Lynch (1985) provides the useful concepts of “assimilative” and “associative” adoption in his discussion of how Wendat populations were incorporated into Five Nations towns and territory in the context of the seventeenth-century depopulation of Wendake. Assimilative adoption involved the shedding of an individual or group’s identity and complete incorporation into a new household and clan—the best known example being captive adoption. Associative adoption involved the incorporation of larger groups of newcomers into Iroquoian nations without the total shedding of previous identities. This type of adoption often included larger populations and fragments of displaced nations. In some cases, the incorporated Wendat

groups resided in separate settlements from Haudenosaunee populations, as was the case for members of the Attignawantan and Tahontaerat who settled in Mohawk and Seneca territory, respectively, in the seventeenth century. While Lynch argues that associative adoption only developed in the contact era, it may be that both patterns of incorporation were a direct continuation of precontact practices.

Implications for the Amalgamation of St. Lawrence Iroquoians

The presence of palisades and earthworks at most St. Lawrence Iroquoian village sites in Jefferson County (upstate New York) and along the St. Lawrence River in Ontario suggests that these populations also experienced violent conflict in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, although the directionality of this conflict is debatable (Abel 2002; Engelbrecht 1995; Pendergast 1985). It would appear that St. Lawrence Iroquoian communities in Jefferson County may have been unsuccessful in forming strong intra-ethnic political alliances (Engelbrecht 1995). Distributions of ceramic types and other forms of material culture in ancestral Wendat sites suggest that St. Lawrence Iroquoian populations were incorporated into Wendat towns and nations through both assimilative and associative processes.

Small groups of St. Lawrence Iroquoians may have arrived in ancestral Wendat villages and towns as individuals, households, or some combination thereof, prior to the sixteenth century. These groups may have been fully incorporated into Wendat communities, which is why their distinctive material culture sometimes disappears from a site sequence after a generation or so, as was the case in the West Duffins Creek sequence (Birch and Williamson 2013a; Williamson, this volume). For whatever reason, these individuals were no longer employing distinctive St. Lawrence Iroquoian motifs on pipes or pots as social signals. It may have been that these populations retained other linguistic or cultural markers of their eastern origins. If so, they are not identifiable in the archaeological record.

Later, in the mid-sixteenth century, larger numbers of St. Lawrence Iroquoian peoples joined the Arendarhonon (Ramsden 1990, 2016a, 2016b). Warrick (2008) suggests that at least 800 St. Lawrence Iroquoians settled in the Trent valley between A.D. 1530 and 1580, possibly through processes of associative adoption. It is unclear whether or not St. Lawrence Iroquoian groups become incorporated into the political apparatus of the Arendarhonon. They may have initially had little political autonomy for the same reasons that the first-come residents of coalescent communities may have retained a political advantage and Wendat nations who had recently joined the confederacy did not exercise the same political authority as did the first-come residents of Wendake. However, the incorporation of newcomers into village councils may have occurred differently within and between communities. Ramsden's recent (2016b) analysis of a distinctive barred ceramic motif identified on pipes and pots at sites in the Trent valley suggests the increasing incorporation of St. Lawrence Iroquoian men and women into Arendarhonon communities. Interestingly, he suggests that this may have been accomplished, in part, by the shedding of distinctive St. Lawrence Iroquoian motifs from material culture employed by men (pipes) and the transfer of signals of St. Lawrence Iroquoian identity to the necks of ceramic vessels. Ramsden's (2016b) study provides a sophisticated analysis of the materiality of identity politics and processes of incorporation at the Benson site. This construct includes the possibility that the incorporation of populations originating from, or with ties to, the east, caused or exacerbated tensions which ultimately resulted in the fragmentation of this community (Ramsden 2009). This fragmentation may have been a non-violent solution to disagreements between residents. While each group may have ultimately considered themselves Arendarhonon, co-residence in a single village seems to no longer have been considered desirable. This is not to say that the incorporation of the new, eastern group was not based on a history of mutually beneficial interaction and shared interests, but that the new

experience for all of living in larger residential contexts created new stress.

While political asymmetry within communities surely existed, the strengthening of horizontal links between settlements would have been necessary to prevent conflicts, perform reciprocal functions, and cross-cut kinship and settlement systems. This kind of dense network interaction is suggested by recent social network analyses by Hart and colleagues (2016; Dermarkar et al. this volume).

Conclusion

The mis-categorization of Wendat society as “tribal” or “egalitarian” is based in part on approaches that fail to appreciate the complexity of Wendat social and political history. Any analysis of Wendat political organization based on a particular ethnographic present will result in only a partial understanding of Wendat political structure. The complexity and asymmetry of political relations in Wendat society can be explained only through a historicized approach which considers the social histories of communities, nations, and confederacies, as well as their constituent parts at multiple, intersecting scales of analysis.

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Durant le quinzième et le seizième siècle après Jésus-Christ, des processus de regroupement d'établissements, de relocalisation de population et de réorganisation géopolitique ont poussé les communautés iroquoïennes à former des nations fondatrices. Certains changements sociopolitiques ont été provoqués par des conflits régionaux et des migrations régionales et par des réorganisations à l'intérieur de communautés puisque les populations étaient confrontées à des défis de coalescence au point de vue social, politique et économique. Ces événements historiques ont entraîné l'intégration des Iroquoïens du Saint-Laurent au monde wendat. Cet article utilise un cadre conceptuel qui met l'accent sur des explications historiquement contingentes et multilinéaires quant au développement de la complexité sociale. Il semble que ces processus de développement politique au sein de la société ancestrale wendate aient impliqué les générations des deux structures du pouvoir consensuelles et asymétriques entre et au sein des communautés ancestrales wendates.

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