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THE MÉTIS – WHO ARE WE!

Let's start with the terms that were applied to mixed blood peoples. They were: Métis, Halfbreed, Halfcaste, Native, Mixed Blood, Voyageur, Coureurs de Bois, Home Guard, Forest Rangers, Country-born, Écossais, Acadian, Mountain Men, Rupertslander Chicot, Pork Eaters and Bois Brûlé. Books and articles will tell you that the word Metis means mixed or mixing. The books will also tell you, that it was applied to people born of mixed Indian and French, blood. That is also true but it does not go far enough to give you any real understanding of even the basic genetic background of Metis peoples. Since I am a Métis from New Brunswick and now living in Quebec, I will concentrate my explanation to the Eastern Métis.

The first clearly identifiable communities of mixed blood peoples in Canada are the Métis – French Acadian which were called “French Indian” of Nova Scotia. There is more than enough hard, written evidence to establish that fact and by the time their communities were developed, they certainly were no longer pure French. Before the ethnic cleansing of 1755 and after the fall of Louisbourg they would not take an oath of allegiance to the English King, and they also refused allegiance to the French King. They claimed their community as an indigenous group distinct from both their original founding nation “Aboriginal and French”

Metis fought battles to assert their rights and defend their territory against any and all comers. Metis were even specifically identified in distinct military encounters in the 1800's; they were painted by Europeans as reactionary savages, or as a pitifully brave but backward people embroiled in a futile struggle to preserve their static way of life against the inevitable evolution of White civilization.

In everyday circumstances I would define a Metis as a person of Aboriginal ancestry who identifies him or herself as a Metis. But I am not going to confine myself to even that definition. Today I will attempt to show you that the term, Metis, as it is used today, would, and should, cover many more groups of people. I am going apply the term Metis to any people of mixed Aboriginal ancestry who can be recognized historically, as distinct from both Aboriginals and Whites in the more conventional uses of those terms. Given the ethno-centric bias of non-Native historians, this oversight is only to be expected, but from a Native perspective this oversight is critical, for it is in the later part of this 400-year period that Metis developed their own culture and their aboriginal relationship to the land.

Although the birth records of a lot of mixed blood children are absent in archives, it can be safely assumed that wherever White men and Native women met, mixed blood offspring resulted. As these meetings occurred on a continental basis in the 15-1600's and with increasing frequency as trade and exploration escalated, and since the resulting Halfbreeds interbred with both White and Natives, the mixed blood populations mushroomed into the 1700's.

At this time in history, with such diverse populations, it was impossible that a single profile could develop, in eastern Canada only the keenest eyes could discern the mixed blood from the Amerindians, and by 1800 in Quebec and Ontario, many could not be distinguished from Whites. In Sault Ste. Marie and in the Red River areas, communities were created totally independent, culturally, of White and Aboriginal. Living in both the Native and White worlds, the mixed bloods developed a unique cultural adaptation providing valuable and critical service to both Aboriginal and White as middlemen in social, economic, diplomatic and military contexts.

The connective element between First Nation and Métis in Eastern Canada is our relationship to the land, as Métis we were raised with a Native perception of the land and its use. Our ancestors as we today; understand that the land is a resource from which one draws the necessities of life, and is not a possession to be exploited.

Although most Canadians have at least an awareness of Louis Riel and the western Metis in this context, the historical writings dealing with earlier periods almost obliterate the crucial role the Eastern Metis

played in the struggles of the colonial period. The Eastern Métis role was and is played down by historians on every side of the issue. For years, it was said that Eastern Métis did not exist, if that is a fact, what are all the Métis in Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland doing in the Eastern Provinces of Canada? Historians have deliberately and grossly distorted the truth about Metis history in Eastern Canada. Sadly Canadian history does not even peripherally describe the critical significance of Metis influences in the historic development of modern Canada.

As the Métis French Acadian was developing their culture, their community and their nation, a similar process was developing further up the St. Lawrence. In fact here we see self-conscious attempt on the part of the French to create a new race. Intermarriage between young Frenchmen and Native women are not only accepted, but were financially encouraged with special dowries or grants of land. The original plan was to make the Aborigines into French citizens. But the reverse happened and French officials became alarmed at the rate their young men were disappearing into the woods with their Aboriginal wives. It was during this period that the word Canadian was first used; it was applied to the mixed blood French Natives around the settlement of Quebec City in 1632.

Shortly before the Confederation, an attempt was made by the Government of Canada to assimilate the Métis into the Aboriginal or French Nation and for this reason we became, the Métis, a forgotten and a hidden Nation with in Canada. The Eastern Métis are not recognized by the Canadian constitution and we are not acknowledged by the government of Canada and the Aborigines in North America. Since the Constitution of Canada recognize and confirms the rights and treaties of the Aboriginal including those of the Métis in Upper Canada, I believe it is right and desirable that Canada, Quebec and the First Nations agree to recognize the contribution made by our ancestors, the French Eastern Métis, As our brothers and sisters of the Métis Nation of Upper Canada we never gave up the fight to assert our position and to be accepted and recognized for what we are and what we have always been... Métis!

Most Metis people today are not so much the direct result of Indian and White intermixing, but rather the direct result of Metis intermarrying with Metis, or Metis with Whites, or Metis with Amerindians or with Inuit. Most Metis today are born of one or more parents who are Metis. It is well known that the last pureblooded Amerindians in New Brunswick were born sometime in the mid 1700's. .

The generalization about Métis was assumes that we were unable to adapt to normal work situation and to the work ethic. Métis do not have their own time concepts and values; we are like others citizen of Canada, we work and pay taxes. Since the attempt of assimilation of Métis, we have lived side by side with others societies. This stereotype does not credit Métis People with the ability to adapt to living with other societies. Many Métis People have not lived for some time, the traditional lifestyle of hunting, trapping, etc, regardless of this fact, we are still Métis and we treasure our Amerindians and French heritage!

.Métis are not asking for special privileges but for means of survival of our language and our ancestral static way of life. Our Métis Ancestors as well as we must be recognized for the role that "they/we" played in the development of the Canadian Confederation. I believe that Métis in Canada are far more disadvantaged than Native people and are as a result, more likely to be hurt by stereotypes. .

Our Métis Ancestors were connected to, but free from the limitations of tribal life; connected to, but free from the dominance of White settlement. Our Ancestors were a new people in a changing world, apparently free to unfold their lives to the limits of their own abilities.

The Métis of Quebec and Eastern Canada are known as the forgotten people and this situation has existed for hundred of years, we always played a fundamental role in the building of this great country, and as Métis we should have our spiritual place in the process of healing and reconciliation between Canada, Quebec and Canada.

Archie Martin

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