

**RICH MAN, POOR MAN, DEAD MAN, THIEF:  
THE DISPERSAL OF WEALTH IN 17TH CENTURY HURON SOCIETY**

**Peter G. Ramsden**

*ABSTRACT*

In 17th century Huron society, the distribution of material items associated with the fur trade (beaver pelts, wampum and European metal goods) was a prominent feature of certain ritualised activities, including burial, gambling, dream fulfillment and crime payment. This paper suggests that these activities became elaborated during the historic period because they were capable of redistributing or eliminating new forms and quantities of wealth which would otherwise have had a socially disruptive effect.

*INTRODUCTION*

In this paper, I would like to suggest a common economic function for certain aspects of burial ritual, gambling, dream realization and crime payments in 17th century Huron society. What the members of this list have in common is a strong association with material items relating to the fur trade: beaver pelts, wampum beads, and European goods. Since this association could not have been traditional in Huron society, but must post-date Huron involvement in the fur trade, it is reasonable to ask why the association came about. It maybe that the items named, because of their growing importance in the historic period, took over roles previously played by other materials. On the other hand, it may be that the reason for the association is not related simply to the growing importance of the items named, but grows out of some property unique to those items and the desirability of using or mediating that property in the activities named. A third possibility, that the activities are materially or ritually involved in the fur trade, can be dismissed as sufficiently far-fetched to be implausible.

Before examining the two remaining explanations, let me briefly describe the nature and degree of the association being considered.

*MATERIAL ITEMS RELATED TO THE FUR TRADE*

*Beaver Pelts*

In the 17th century, beaver pelts were obtained in trade with Algonkian groups to the north and west of the Hurons. The bulk of these furs were then taken to Quebec where they were traded to the French. It is recorded that several families had private rights to trade connections, but it is not clear whether this type of ownership applied to the Algonkian connection (Tooker 1967:25).

It is, of course, difficult to assess the prehistoric use of beaver pelts. It is possible to infer from faunal remains and other evidence a late 16th to early 17th century beaver pelt industry at the Sidey-Mackay and Benson sites (Wintemberg 1946; Ramsden 1977: 85), but prior to this time beaver appears to have been used only as a minor food resource.

*Wampum Beads*

Wampum appears to have been a highly prized decorative item and medium of exchange in the 17th century. It was one of the items that Hurons gave to Algonkians in buying furs, and was exchanged on many other occasions (Tooker 1967:25,26,28,50,51,116). The French,

especially the Jesuits, gave wampum to the Hurons as presents, prizes for religious instruction, or in return for services (Tooker 1967:26).

Archaeologically, there is little or no evidence for the extensive use of wampum prior to the 17th century. Discoidal shell beads occur in small numbers on prehistoric Huron sites, but appear in large quantities only after the turn of the 17th century.

#### *European Goods*

It is possible to document archaeologically the appearance of European goods on Huron sites during the 16th century. These usually take the form of scraps of brass, copper or iron, and occasional items such as knives, awls or decorative objects (Ramsden 1978). Again, however, a large increase in the number and variety of European items occurs at the beginning of the 17th century, with heavy Huron involvement in the fur trade.

Using a combination of archaeological and historical sources, then, it is possible to demonstrate an increase in the use by Hurons of beaver pelts, wampum beads, and European items around the beginning of the 17th century, and to infer that this was due to the utilization of these commodities in the fur trade.

### *ACTIVITIES ASSOCIATED WITH FUR TRADE ITEMS*

#### *Burial of the Dead*

Huron burial practices included primary individual burial and secondary multiple burial. During the 17th century both practices were strongly associated with the above-mentioned items (Tooker 1967: 129-139). Immediately following death the corpse was wrapped in beaver robes. At this time the village chief presented gifts to the deceased's relatives, among which are prominently mentioned kettles, axes, beaver robes and wampum collars. During the funeral, contests were held for the boys and girls in attendance, for which the prizes are recorded as being beaver robes or hatchets.

In preparation for the secondary burial, or Feast of the Dead, bodies were exhumed and wrapped in new beaver robes, the old beaver wrappings being burned. Later, after the bones or bodies had been cleaned, they were wrapped with still more beaver robes, as well as glass beads and wampum necklaces. The bodies were then transported to the village hosting the feast, to which the relatives also took food, skins, kettles, tomahawks, and other items to give away at feasts.

The secondary burial pit itself was lined with beaver pelts and robes, and over these was placed a bed of kettles, tomahawks, beads, wampum bracelets and necklaces, knives and sword blades. During the days of the feast, contests of skill were held for which the prizes were porcupine quill belts, wampum strings, axes, knives and beaver robes.

At the Feast of the Dead held at the village of Ossossane in 1636, some of the beaver robes covering the bodies were removed and, following the feast, were cut up and thrown by the host into the attending crowd (Tooker 1967: 137). A rough calculation from the description of the Ossossane feast suggests that as many as 5,000 beaver pelts were either buried or given away at the actual burial ceremony, exclusive of those exchanged before and after. The feast was said to have been attended by 2,000 people.

Archaeological data from 17th century ossuaries support the historic descriptions. The Ossossane ossuary produced over 1400 wampum beads, over 534 European items (including kettles, knives, awls, rings and beads), and something more than 61 items of native manufacture (Kidd 1953: 364-367). In addition, several fragments of European cloth and beaver hide were identified as shrouds. Similarly, at the early historic Kleinberg ossuary, probably dating to the early 17th century, there were over 2000 wampum beads, 60 or more European items (including axes, knives, beads and rings) and 19 native items (F.J. Melbye

and D.H. Knight, personal communication).

Thus, 17th century Huron burial practices included the lavish consumption or distribution of beaver pelts, wampum beads and European items, among other things. While we cannot ascertain what commodities were exchanged or distributed at prehistoric burial ceremonies, we should be able to determine whether a similar pattern of grave inclusions was present prior to the 17th century. Included within the protohistoric Sopher ossuary were only three objects, of which one was an iron celt (Noble 1968: 120). The prehistoric Fairty ossuary produced a scraper and a shell bead. The Sopher ossuary also produced fragments of the pit lining and shrouds, and these were identified as pine bark (Noble 1968: 111). Apparently the inclusion of lavish grave goods in ossuaries was not a traditional practice, but a new behaviour in the contact period, associated with European goods and wampum. At the same time, the traditional practice of lining ossuaries and shrouding bodies was continued but with the substitution of beaver pelts, the third commodity in the fur trade group, for the bark material customarily used at an earlier time. In burial practices, then, the newly acquired abundance of fur trade items not only produced modifications of existing behaviour patterns, but produced behavioural innovations as well.

#### *Gambling*

French observers often noted the frequency and intensity of Huron gambling. It was observed that the stakes were very high, and people would gamble away all they had, even unto parts of their bodies (Tooker 1967: 116, 117). Of the games said to have been frequently played, the majority appear to be games of chance, where the outcome over a large number of games is likely to be random. Very often, gambling was done under ritualised or institutionalised circumstances. Significantly, games were played between kin groups, villages and nations (Tooker 1967:57, 109, 114, 116).

Stakes were very high, and might extend to all of a person's possessions. More important, the most frequently mentioned stakes are wampum belts and beaver skins. In one contest, for instance, a village lost 30 wampum collars of 1000 beads each to another village (Tooker 1967: 116). In another, a Mohawk, who had brought a large quantity of wampum to another nation to buy beaver pelts, gambled it all away (Tooker 1967: 116).

Taken together, these observations indicate that frequently large quantities of wampum and beaver pelts were changing hands in a more-or-less random fashion, and crossing kinship, village and even national boundaries.

Evidence for the time depth of gambling is extremely tenuous. Modified plum and cherry stones that could be part of an historically described gambling game are common on pre-contact sites. Of possible significance are so-called gaming discs, which *may* be gambling pieces. If they are, their distribution in time and space suggests an association of gambling with the fur trade.

#### *Dream Fulfillment*

A great deal of significance was attached by the Hurons to the contents of dreams. Particularly with regard to the prevention and curing of disease, it was believed that dreams were the expressions of the soul's desires, which were disregarded at peril (Tooker 1967: 86-87). Thus, if a person dreamed that he would fall ill unless given presents, every effort was made to procure the necessary items. The goods which changed hands as a result of dreams were numerous and varied, and in a number of cases included beaver robes and wampum (Tooker 1967: 83, 86).

#### *Crime Payments*

Retribution for many kinds of crimes was made by giving presents by the relatives of the

criminal to the relatives of the victim (Tooker 1967: 52, 54). The payment might be made between families, between villages, or between nations. Of importance is the fact that in the 17th century payments seem overwhelmingly to have been composed of wampum and European goods. For example, in reparation for killing a Huron, one group of Algonkians paid 50 wampum belts, 100 fathoms of wampum, plus many hatchets and kettles (Tooker 1967: 52). Needless to say, it is impossible to determine the prehistoric nature of crime payments.

### *DISCUSSION*

In this paper I have tried to show that the beginning of the 17th century saw the appearance of large quantities of three commodities in Huron society: European items, wampum beads and beaver pelts. I have also tried to demonstrate that once these items became plentiful, they became closely associated with activities in which they were "consumed" (i.e., destroyed or buried) or given away, and in particular I have noted their association with burials, gambling, dream fulfillment and crime payments. I would like now to return to my original aim of explaining the association of these three commodities with the four activities.

The first explanation I proposed at the outset of this paper was that as the three commodities concerned grew in quantity and importance due to their role in the fur trade, they took over roles previously played by other items. While this may be true in the case of crime payments and dream fulfillment, it is demonstrably untrue in the case of grave furnishings since there were almost none prehistorically, and it may not be true of gambling inasmuch as there is a suggestion that gambling became widespread only with the proliferation of these commodities. In other words, in at least some cases, rather than the new commodities fitting into existing behaviour patterns, the patterns changed to accommodate the new commodities — a role was created for them.

The explanation I propose for this phenomenon is that two properties of these commodities, their quantity and their routes of entry into Huron society, posed unprecedented problems of distribution, and that the four activities I have described were ideally suited for mitigating these problems.

It can be gleaned from the 17th century records that the redistribution of goods was a valued process among the Hurons. Gift exchange was a feature of virtually every institutionalised interaction (Tooker 1967:28, 29, 44-45, 46, 47-48, 49, 50, 51). Similarly, at the frequent feasts that the Hurons held, large quantities of food were exchanged, much of which was taken away for later consumption (Tooker 1967:34,75). After a battle, the spoils were given to the village elders to be distributed among the population. Upon returning from a summer of hunting, fishing and trading, the products of these activities were exchanged as gifts; if a man had a particularly good 'take' he gave a feast, and was lavish with his distribution of food and presents. These few examples suggest a tendency for Hurons to equalise the distribution of some commodities, particularly if certain people, because of skill or social status, had preferential access to them. It is my contention that the nature and source of the commodities discussed here threatened to compromise this process of equalisation.

First, I believe that the fur trade produced these commodities in unprecedented quantities. It is, of course, difficult to estimate with any accuracy the quantities of pelts, wampum or trade goods involved, but the quantities in which they were given away provides a strong impression of an embarrassment of riches. I submit that the sheer volume of goods made their dispersal through traditional means inconvenient or impractical. McPherron has suggested a similar reason for the nature of the Huron and Algonkian Feast of the Dead in the historic period by

postulating that the feast served "to reduce the quantity of goods through simple destruction, and through redistribution of the proceeds of the fur trade, serving as a mechanism to forestall the social disruption that was occurring as a result of the enormous change in economic relations" (McPherron 1967:293).

A second feature of the fur trade commodities made their redistribution highly desirable, in spite of the volume involved; this was their means of acquisition, which was biased in favour of some segments of society at the expense of others. Being elements of the fur trade, these items would normally enter and leave Huron society through trade, and at least some trade connections were controlled by kinship groups, even though access to them could be shared (Tooker 1967:25). Some quantities of European goods were introduced by Jesuits as presents or payments for work. It may be reasonable to suppose that when work was needed, it would be Christianised rather than pagan Hurons that the Jesuits would hire. Thus, at least initially, the commodities under discussion might not be entering Huron society on a broad front, but through certain kin or other social groups. The dilemma confronting the Hurons, then, would be that of finding an acceptable means of distributing goods which were present in large quantities, which were not readily 'consumable,' and which were initially restricted to select segments of society.

I suggest that the four activities I have discussed constituted one solution to this problem in that they were capable of handling large quantities of goods, or, perhaps more importantly, of accommodating whatever quantity was available at the time, and furthermore, that the passage of goods through these activities was random, or at least independent of kinship, religion, social status, trading skill, etc.

At burial ceremonies, the items were distributed as prizes to the children, or thrown into the crowd. Large quantities were also removed from circulation through burial. Presents made in fulfillment of dreams, while presumably not independent of the dreamers' conscious or unconscious wishes, cross cut kin and social class lines. Furthermore, dream fulfillment carries the possibility of adjusting the quantity of goods according to the amount available, as in the case of one dreamer who demanded, among other things, a large quantity of beaver robes, but thought her soul could be satisfied with less when it was found out that there were only a few robes in the village. The case of gambling is more obvious, since large quantities of goods can change hands on the outcome of a game of random chance, and these games were played between kin groups, villages and nations. The case of crime payments may be less than ideal since the direction of goods depended on the identity of criminal and victim, and criminal activity may well follow other patterns in society. However, crime payments were made between kin groups, villages, and nations, and moreover there is potential of adjusting the payment demanded in accordance with the criminal's ability to pay.

#### SUMMARY

This paper suggests that commodities associated with or obtained through the fur trade presented a redistribution problem to the Hurons because of the unprecedented quantities, differential access to these goods, and the absence of adequate traditional means by which to disperse or dispose of them.

Other societies have faced similar situations, and have responded in a variety of ways. Perhaps a notable example is the elaboration of ranking and potlatch behaviour on the west coast in the historic period. It may be that many aspects of 17th century Huron behaviour were, in part, attempts to cope with an embarrassing socio-economic situation. I have tried here to show that four activities, burial, gambling, dream fulfillment and crime payment, were particularly suited to mitigating this situation by virtue of their capacity for eliminating or randomly dispersing the

newly abundant forms of wealth. It is suggested that one reason for the apparent elaboration of these activities in the historic period was that the redistribution of fur trade items became one of their major functions.

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Department of Anthropology  
 McMaster University  
 Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4L9