

Seventeenth Century Dutch-Indian Trade: A Perspective from Iroquoia

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The intent of this paper is to survey a number of aspects of the trade carried out between the Dutch and the Indian populations making up the Five Nations Iroquois resident in what is today New York State. For all intents and purposes, this trade took place during the period of 1609 to 1664, when, except for a fourteen month repass following their victory over the English in 1672, the Dutch lost New Netherland.

Dutch-Indian trade inland was initiated during Henry Hudson's exploration of the river that would eventually bear his name. Although many of the contacts he and his crew had with what were undoubtedly Algonquian-speaking groups during his sojourn upriver were friendly, there were a number of incidents that must have marred what was otherwise a pleasant early fall voyage. Several Indians were killed, along with at least one member of Hudson's crew, in these confrontations. At the same time, however, a brisk trade took place. Indians brought to the ship foodstuffs such as corn, tobacco, beans, oysters and currants, along with "Bever's skinnies and Otters skinnies" which were purchased by the Dutchmen with knives, beads, hatchets and other "trifles".¹ Both of these activities—the sometimes hostile and possibly unprovoked behavior of the Indians and the apparent ease with which trade took place—seem to indicate that the Indians had had previous experiences with Europeans and harbored mixed feelings toward them. Certainly, the fact that the Indians "knew of and had on hand a supply of exactly the pelts which were in greatest demand" upon the arrival of the Dutchmen suggests strongly that they had done all this before.² Whether or not the Mohawk Iroquois traded with Hudson at this time is unknown. What is known, however, is that the Mohawk, and following close behind, other Iroquois groups, were soon very much involved in a trade relationship with the Dutch that would last for a number of decades.

The issue of Dutch-Indian, or precisely, Dutch-Iroquois trade, can be approached in a number of ways. Initially, trade or the activities associated with trade were

not new to the Iroquois or for that matter, Algonquian-speaking groups in the Northeast. Archaeological research demonstrates that both long distance and local trade or exchange have considerable time depth in Iroquoia and the surrounding region. This is evidenced by the appearance in the archaeological record of raw materials and finished objects that had been transported from or manufactured in areas outside of the Iroquois homeland. For example, objects made from exotic lithic materials, the sources of which can be traced to Ohio, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and elsewhere, have been recovered from sites throughout New York State. At the same time, native copper, derived from the Great Lakes region, and marine shell beads from the Atlantic coast, have been found. It is also likely that meat, skins, and plant products were part of the fare of prehistoric exchange networks.

This activity is echoed in the early seventeenth century, where Oneida Indian women were seen in Mohawk villages carrying salmon from their fishing grounds at Oneida Lake and the Oneida and Oswego Rivers.³ Thus, prehistoric trade had long been a part of indigenous cultural systems prior to the advent of European explorations of the New World. As such, it had its own forms of protocol and customs, and functioned as an important social and cultural institution for American Indian populations. Along these lines, trade also served as a vehicle of communication. Ideas, knowledge, new subsistence techniques, crops, and many other cultural features spread from one region to another along trade routes. In addition, trade binds large and diverse areas (culturally, ecologically, and ethnically) into single interrelated economic systems.⁴

However, the introduction of a non-indigenous trade system, carried by an alien culture and replete with its own protocol and conventions, not to mention motivations, had a significant impact on aboriginal populations. From the outset, Indian populations undoubtedly reacted to the incursion of European explorers and their attendant trade activities by reorienting their own world view; that



Fig. 45. Wampum beads in situ, Fort Orange. Courtesy of NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Bureau of Historic Sites.

is, they most likely modified, reconciled, or otherwise reintegrated their cultural and ideological systems so as to make known, comprehensible, and thus, acceptable, what they may have perceived as “mythical man-beings” or perhaps “returned culture heroes” in the guise of Europeans.

In a recent important and provocative paper, George Hamell presents an argument that challenges anthropologists and ethnohistorians to examine again the very earliest days of contact—that fine sliver of time connecting protohistory with the early historic period.⁵ In his argument he notes that the Indian’s initial reactions to and obvious desire for European trade items, so-called trifles, baubles, or ornamental goods, have been perceived largely as non-rational behavior. On the other hand, the slightly later adoption by Indians of functional or utilitarian trade goods such as iron axes, brass kettles, scissors and knives, is considered both expected and rational. This latter response of Indians is what has been emphasized in anthropological and historical studies, while the former is often ignored. This situation may have arisen because of the singularly empirical or materialistic bent of most researchers; nonetheless, an important question has been raised—why did Indians at first prefer and trade for mere “trifles?”

Hamell’s explanation of this phenomenon revolves around a “symbolically-charged” link between the ideological value of prehistorically available exotic siliceous stones, shell, crystal or quartz, and native copper and the introduced but isomorphic European glass beads, copper and brass wares, and other so-called trifles. Simply put, in order to make sense of the appearance of the Europeans and their trade, Indians effected a transference from their own value system and its symbolic elements to those objects proffered by the Dutch which were perceived as similar in form and evocative power. In Hamell’s words:

Shell, crystal, and native copper were their owner’s assurance and insurance of long life (immortality through resuscitation), well-being (the absence of ill-being), and success, particularly in the conceptually related activities of hunting and fishing, warfare, and courtship. The archaeological, ethnological, and historical data strongly suggest that at least some of the earliest analogous European trade goods, such as glass and copper/brass wares, were annexed to this value system.⁶

In my opinion, the value of Hamell’s work is that it offers an emic or folk perspective of what is otherwise regarded as a purely economic issue—the participation of the Iroquois in trade with the Dutch. Instead of explaining the initial rapid involvement of the Iroquois in this trade as mere capitalism,⁷ which it soon enough

became, Hamell provides us with a model that isolates certain cognitive properties which made the trade not only possible, but acceptable. Nonetheless, from my own theoretical perspective I stand by the maxim articulated by Marvin Harris that ideology is best conceived as a means to insure that a dominant set of economic interests is served. This does not, however, obviate Hamell's structuralist approach which is both viable and appropriate since it does not lie, in this case, beyond materialist models. Metaphors don't move mountains, but they explain them, and therein lies the strength of Hamell's thesis.

Change in Iroquois culture resulting from trade with the Dutch was fast in coming. Clearly, the most obvious change took place in the area of technology. Given the presence of the developing fur trade networks with the Dutch, the Iroquois very quickly modified, altered or replaced many of their tools and other utilitarian items with those of European manufacture. Although Indians had previously invented or otherwise obtained essentially all of the tools they required, which, in most cases, were very similar in form and function to those of the Europeans, they soon discovered an advantage in having the European equivalent. In general, this is because they were made of superior material—metal.

European trade items recovered from archaeological sites in the Mohawk Valley and elsewhere in Iroquoia follow a definite pattern. In discussing sixteenth century Mohawk Iroquois sites, Lenig notes that the small amounts of European material excavated from occupation areas and refuse deposits is invariably non-utilitarian in character.⁸ This is in contrast to sites from the early seventeenth century where both utilitarian and non-utilitarian items, in considerably greater frequency, are found. James Bradley has described a similar situation for the Onondaga region.⁹

By the 1630s, the Mohawk and other Iroquois had been able to obtain a rather diverse assortment of European technological items. In a journal kept during a trip into the Mohawk Valley in 1634–35, Harmen Myndertsz van den Bogaert, the barber-surgeon at Fort Orange, noted that in some of the Indians' houses he saw ironwork including hinges, iron chains, bolts, harrow teeth, iron hoops, and spikes, which he claimed had been stolen from the Dutch settlers.¹⁰ Although these materials do not, for the most part, represent the normal fare of trade goods, nails (spikes), hinges, and bolts were being manufactured in Rensselaerswijck at about this

time and may have been exchanged with the Indians.¹¹

A by-product of trade concerns social relations and in this sense, Dutch-Iroquois trade was without doubt a factor in altering the very fabric of Iroquois society and that of other Indian populations. The Iroquois are generally regarded to have been, at the time of contact, a ranked society. Ranked societies are said to result from the ability of a group to amass storable surpluses, as in the case of the Iroquois, horticultural products such as corn, beans, and squash. The control of these surpluses, in the form of their accumulation and redistribution within the group, promotes the evolution of a limited number of status positions. In general, there are fewer status positions available than people who might fill them. Among the Iroquois some of these offices or positions were achieved, while others were restricted to a particular clan, matrilineage, or possibly some other type of subgroup affiliation within the society.¹² I would like to suggest a not altogether original thought or hypothesis—that individuals or groups of individuals involved in trade with the Dutch constituted an additional type of subgroup affiliation within Iroquois society.

Not all Iroquois individuals directly participated in trade with the Dutch, and given models of trade as they are understood by anthropologists and others, such behavior is not expected. From the earliest available European documents, it is clear that only handfuls of individuals actually took part in trading ventures.¹³ Thus, it is not unrealistic to assume that only certain individuals or restricted groups of individuals exercised some form of control over trade and trade goods.

In discussing Huron trade, Heidenreich¹⁴ notes:

Once trading relations had been established with another group, not all Huron could take advantage of these relations. Trade was in the hands of the person ("master of the route") who pioneered the route and established the first contacts.¹⁵ The only people who could share in this trade automatically were the children of the "master" and members of his lineage and perhaps clan segment...

Fenton¹⁶ observes that civil chiefs among the Iroquois functioned as entrepreneurs in trade, which involved elaborate arrangements of external affairs, hence the aphorism: "Trade and Peace we take to be one thing..."¹⁷

Citing studies of trading systems among horticulturalists, Gary Wright notes that prestige or status can be gained through successful trading. But it is not the accumulation of trade goods or profits that is important. Prestige is gained through redistribution to a man's

followers, friends, and kinsmen. It is the generous man and not the accumulator who is admired.¹⁸

The ethic of sharing and generosity is a central theme in Iroquois culture,¹⁹ and fits well the issue of redistribution as expressed in the trade relations of ranked societies. Thus, it is fair to conclude that participation in trade, leading to the control of certain aspects of this activity, e.g., gaining and maintaining access to goods, the redistribution of goods, etc., had considerable impact on the dynamics of Iroquois social structure. It is easy to envision individuals contending for the limited number of status positions or attempting to establish additional or new and different positions on the basis of their involvement in trade. Trade was more than the acquisition of utilitarian items; it was a means by which social ambitions could be realized.²⁰

Standing in the shadows during the early years of Dutch-Iroquois trade was disaster—European introduced diseases. As one of a number of issues that accompanied the largely economic thrust of Dutch-Indian trade, this was the most insidious. The first recorded epidemic among the Mohawk Iroquois was in 1633, persisting into 1634, which was identified as smallpox.²¹ It is certain that other diseases struck these populations as well, although there is no way to know if there were earlier epidemics.

Mortality rates for smallpox and other diseases striking epidemiologically pristine Indian populations were appallingly high. A conservative estimate of disease mortality, based upon data from the Huron, is set at 55%.²² Others have provided estimates ranging up to 95% elsewhere in the Northeast, which, although they may appear to be excessively high, are nonetheless accurate when applied to specific cases.²³ For the Mohawk Iroquois, this translates to a loss in population from about 10,000 in the immediate pre-epidemic period, to approximately 4500 following the initial smallpox epidemic in 1633.²⁴

While such catastrophic losses are indeed sobering, the point to be taken concerns their effect on the Mohawk Iroquois cultural system. Many factors are associated with epidemic disease besides the obvious fact of high rates of mortality:²⁵ ideological systems are stressed, fertility drops precipitously, the socialization process is hobbled given the loss of people who had carried cultural information and taught it to others, and it becomes difficult to carry out even the most routine tasks. In

addition, because of the high death rates, leadership positions were opened up, ones that could probably not be filled in the traditional way.

For example, the office of civil chief or sachem among the Iroquois, of which there were fifty, was hereditary and vested in a restricted number of lineages. If, upon the death of one of these office holders, a suitable replacement could not be found in the lineage, a man might be chosen from another lineage within the same clan. If the clan, a larger social unit, did not have a suitable candidate, the name might be loaned to another clan for a specified period of time.²⁶ There were also other status positions among the Iroquois including Pine Tree Chiefs, War Chiefs, and village chiefs of much greater number than that of sachem. Thus, I would hypothesize that the vying for status positions, already affected and modified by the Indian's involvement in the fur trade, was heightened by the opening up of additional and possibly new positions resulting from disease mortality. Further, it is reasonable to assume that this level or degree of conflict—or if not actual conflict then significant change—in the sociopolitical arena recast the structure and form of Iroquois polity. Unfortunately, there is little direct evidence that this occurred. Certainly, there was much more change and shifting about in Iroquois political organization at both the tribal and League level than some have supposed. The ideal form of government described by Lewis Henry Morgan and others²⁷ may be just that, while the real structure and operation of the system continues to elude us. However, there are some hints of such change having taken place.

In an examination of the 14-volume set of *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York* I have collected over one thousand names of individuals, recorded from 1664 to the eighteenth century, many of whom either claimed to be or were identified as sachems or chiefs of similar stature. Theoretically, the fifty sachem offices I previously mentioned were each provided a distinctive name, and given the hereditary nature of the office, one man succeeding another as sachem would take the name of his predecessor. Accordingly, names of sachems should persist through time even though the office holders changed. I did not find this to be the case in my research. In fact, I was able to associate less than ten names in the documents with the standard lists of sachems compiled since the nineteenth century.²⁸ It is possible that the lack of agreement between the names I collected and those found on the standard lists reflects changes that were taking place as

a result of the effects of trade and disease mortality I have discussed here, along with the vicissitudes of the political scene.

However, other explanatory hypotheses must be considered. For example, there may be a discrepancy between the "ideal" League structure and the "real" League structure. Also, it is possible that Europeans recording information found in the *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York* were unfamiliar with the Indian political system and were misidentifying Indians, calling them sachems when, in fact, they were not, or that the Indians were misleading the colonial officials. I would think the latter two alternatives unlikely, and that instead, what is being reflected is some sort of change in the entire political system over time. Further research is warranted.

The participation of the Iroquois in 17th-century trade has a number of other far-reaching implications, only one of which I would like to touch upon here. It concerns the Mohawk-Mahican war of 1624–28 and its aftermath.²⁹ Prior to the 1620s, the Mohawk Iroquois, although having access to trade with the Dutch, did not claim as their own nor control the area surrounding Fort Orange.³⁰ Instead, it appears as if the Mahican acted as middlemen, regulating the Indians trading at the fort and subjecting the Mohawk to a form of taxation on trade profits.³¹ Following close on the heels of a truce made between the French and their Indian allies, the Mohawk commenced a war with the Mahican, defeating them in 1628.

As a result of this war, the Mohawk acquired rights of passage over trade and other forms of contact between the Dutch and the tribes living to the north. The Mohawk determined not to allow groups who were or even potentially were their enemies to have dealings with the Dutch and insisted on being friendly intermediaries between the Iroquois tribes to the west and the Dutch to the east.³² Although other wars would be fought between the Mohawk and the Mahican, the Mohawk maintained control of the trade at Fort Orange up to and following the change from Dutch to English rule in 1664. The firm grip maintained by the Mohawk on the trade at Fort Orange produced less than amicable relations between themselves and their Iroquoian neighbors to the west, not to mention the Dutch. In 1633, Kiliaen van Rensselaer complained:

Are not the contrary minded well aware that their course will never increase the trade because the savages, who are now stronger than

ourselves, will not allow others who are hostile and live farther away and have many furs to pass through their territory, and that this would be quite different if we had stronger colonies? Yes, that the *Maquaas* (Mohawk), who will not allow the French savages who now trade on the river of Canada . . . to pass through to come to us, . . .³³

Such control by the Mohawk over access to trade goods at Fort Orange continued unabated to the end of the Dutch period and beyond. Indeed, the positioning of Mohawk villages adjacent to the river in the early decades of the century has been interpreted by some as a response to trade and the need to monitor traffic on this important trade route,³⁴ although there may be alternative ecological explanations.³⁵

The reason why, in 1634, trade was going badly with the "Sinnekins," Iroquoian groups west of the Mohawk, may have been due less to better prices offered by the French than to access being limited to Fort Orange by the Mohawk. This is suggested in one of Van den Bogaert's entries when Indians at Oneida, although claiming to have received six hands of wampum for a beaver skin from the French, were willing to trade with the Dutch if they raised their price to 4 hands of wampum per skin.³⁶ Is it possible that they were also seeking assurances from the Dutch that such trade could occur without Mohawk interference?

As late as 1656, the Mohawk continued to harass other Iroquoian groups attempting to trade at Fort Orange. In a missive from New Netherland, signed by Stuyvesant, Silla, and La Montagne, comes information that the Onondaga, having to travel sixteen to eighteen days to the Mannhattans in order to avoid going through Mohawk country to trade with the Dutch, are requesting that a trading house be erected farther up river to cut the distance they must travel.³⁷ In 1656–57, the Jesuits in Canada reported that the Mohawk "sometimes treated them (the Onondaga) roughly when they passed through their Villages to go and trade with the Dutch . . ."³⁸ It is certain that the Mohawk harassed and demanded tribute from any group bold enough to pass through their territory on their way to Fort Orange.

Thus, trade between the Dutch and Iroquois was much more than an exchange of furs for trifles and utilitarian goods. It ushered in cultural change in terms of shifts in technological, economic, ideological and political systems. It disrupted delicate political and trade alliances that had been struck between a number of Iroquoian and Algonquian populations. And it brought death and

devastation in the form of disease epidemics from which the Indians had no protection. At the same time, subterfuges and intrigues operating between the Indians,

French, Dutch and eventually the English, became the order of the day, all inextricably linked to the early history of the region.

Notes

¹Robert Juet, "From 'The Third Voyage of Master Henry Hudson'" In: *Narratives of New Netherland* Edited by J.F. Jameson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 11–28.

²Donald Lenig, "Of Dutchmen, Beaver Hats and Iroquois" In: *Current Perspectives in Northeastern Archaeology: Essays in Honor of William A. Ritchie*. Edited by R.E. Funk and C.F. Hayes III, 71–84. New York State Archaeological Association, Researches and Transactions 17(1). (Rochester and Albany: NYS Archaeological Association, 1977), 73.

³*A Journey into Mohawk and Oneida Country, 1634–1635: The Journal of Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert*. Translated and Edited by Charles T. Gehring and William A. Starna (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 6; hereafter cited as *Van den Bogaert Journal*.

⁴Gary A. Wright, *Archaeology and Trade* Addison-Wesley Module in Anthropology No. 49 (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1974), 3.

⁵George R. Hamell, "Trading in Metaphors: The Magic of Beads," In: *Proceedings of the 1982 Glass Trade Bead Conference*. Edited by C.F. Hayes III. Rochester Museum and Science Center Research Records No. 16. (Rochester: Rochester Museum and Science Center, 1983), 5–28.

⁶*Ibid.*, 25.

⁷Cf. George T. Hunt, *The Wars of the Iroquois: A Study in Intertribal Trade Relations*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1940); Allen W. Trelease, *Indian Affairs in Colonial New York: The Seventeenth Century*. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1960); Francis Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1984).

⁸Lenig, "Of Dutchmen, Beaver Hats and Iroquois," 78.

⁹James W. Bradley, *Evolution of the Onondaga Iroquois: Accommodating Change, 1500–1655, A Study in Acculturative Change and its Consequences* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

¹⁰*Van den Bogaert Journal*, 4.

¹¹New York State Library, Albany, *Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts . . . 1630–1643* Translated and edited by A. J. F. van Laer (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1908), 351; cf. Bradley, *Evolution of the Onondaga Iroquois*.

¹²Gary A. Wright, *Archaeology and Trade*, 4–5; cf. William N. Fenton, "Northern Iroquoian Culture Patterns," In: *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 15, Northeast. Edited by B.G. Trigger (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 296–321; and cf. Elisabeth Tooker, "The League of the Iroquois: Its History, Politics, and Ritual," In: *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 15, Northeast. Edited by B.G. Trigger (Washington: Smithsonian Institution), 418–41.

¹³Cf. *Narratives of New Netherland*, edited by J. Franklin Jameson. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909).

¹⁴Conrad E. Heidenreich, *Huronian: A History and Geography of the Huron Indians, 1600–1650*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 221.

¹⁵*The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*. 73 vols. Reprint (New York: Pageant, 1959), Vol. 10: 223–225.

¹⁶William N. Fenton, "Northern Iroquoian Culture Patterns," 315.

¹⁷Peter Wraxall, *An Abridgement of the Indian Affairs Contained in Four-folio Volumes, Transacted in the Colony of New York, from the Year 1678 to the Year 1751*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1915), 195.

¹⁸Wright, *Archaeology and Trade*, 8.

¹⁹Lewis Henry Morgan, *League of the Iroquois* (New York: Corinth Books, 1962).

²⁰Cf. Heidenreich, *Huronian*, 226

²¹*Van den Bogaert Journal*, 4; Dean R. Snow and William A. Starna, "Sixteenth-Century Depopulation: A Preliminary Review from the Mohawk Valley" (Paper presented at the 49th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Portland, OR, 1984).

²²William A. Starna, "Mohawk Iroquois Populations: A Revision." *Ethnohistory* 27/4 (1980):371–82.

²³Dean R. Snow, *The Archeology of New England*. (New York: Academic Press, 1980); Henry F. Dobyns, *Their Numbers Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America*. (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1983).

²⁴Starna, "Mohawk Iroquois Populations" and Snow, *The Archeology of New England*.

²⁵Kim Lanphear, "Biocultural Interactions: Smallpox and the Mohawk Iroquois," Masters Thesis, Department

of Anthropology, State University of New York, Albany, NY, 1983.

²⁶Tooker, "The League of the Iroquois," 426.

²⁷Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*; cf. Tooker, "The League of the Iroquois".

²⁸William A. Starna, "Iroquois Sachems: Their Names and Number" (Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Iroquois Research, Rensselaerville, NY, 1977); cf. Tooker, "The League of the Iroquois".

²⁹Francis Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1984).

³⁰William N. Fenton and Elisabeth Tooker, "Mohawk," In: *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 15, Northeast. Edited by B.G. Trigger (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 466-80; Donald Lenig, "Of Dutchmen, Beaver Hats and Iroquois"; T.J. Brassier, "Mahican," In: *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 15, Northeast. Edited by B.G. Trigger (Washington:

Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 198-212; cf. Bruce G. Trigger, "The Mohawk-Mahican War (1624-1628): The Establishment of a Pattern." *Canadian Historical Review* 52/3 (1971): 276-86.

³¹Brasser, "Mahican," 202.

³²Fenton and Tooker, "Mohawk," 468.

³³New York State Library, Albany. *Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts . . . 1630-1643* (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1908), 248.

³⁴Lenig, "Of Dutchmen, Beaver Hats and Iroquois."

³⁵Cf. Snow and Starna, "Sixteenth-Century Depopulation".

³⁶*Van den Bogaert Journal*, 15.

³⁷New York Public Library, Bontemantal: New Netherland Papers, Extract from a letter from the director-general . . . 11 August 1656.

³⁸*The Jesuit Relations*, 44:151.