Mortuary Customs: The Huron-Wendat Approach to Death
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The Huron-Wendat people of the Great Lakes region were a powerful and complex nation with a significant population and a rich history and culture when the Europeans arrived in the early seventeenth century.¹ In early studies of Amerindian-European contact, historians argued that French Europeans radically transformed various aspects of a static Huron-Wendat culture, including in economics, religion, and material culture.² In more recent studies, contemporary historians correctly question this view, as it gives little attention to Amerindian agency. This essay is intended to contribute to the discourse concerning Amerindian agency, specifically as relates to the transformation of Huron-Wendat ‘deathways’ in the seventeenth century.

Upon examination of Huron-Wendat deathways before and after European contact, it would be erroneous to argue that Europeans alone were the cause of significant changes to cultural practices surrounding death. Alterations to these deathways occurred in accordance to previously accepted social situations. Adaption was key to the process. The Huron-Wendat were not static or culturally homogenous, nor did they passively allow their deathways to change in accordance with European ideas.³ Instead, the Huron-Wendat deathways changed naturally,

¹ Jacki Andre, "Contagious Disease and Huron Women, 1630-1650" (master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1996), 16-19. Pre-Contact and early Contact population counts are a matter of constant debate, but estimates between 20,000 and 50,000 are common.
³ For discussion of acculturation and static (or more accurately, non-static) Amerindian culture refer to: Fred Vogel, "Acculturation at Caughnawaga: A Note on the Native-Modified Group," American
according to their own needs. European influences were accommodated, but were not the primary driver of change; instead Amerindian concepts were. While Christian ideas did influence burial practices among some of the Huron-Wendat, the vast majority of people remained traditionalists and rejected conversion. Historians have also cited trade, particularly for grave goods, as a major influence on changes in deathways, but this was also an extension of previously existing practices. Even the rise of epidemic disease was dealt with in ways that coincided with traditional ideas. It was only with the fall of Huronia/Wendake that death practices truly broke down and lost their characteristic qualities. It was at this point that the Huron-Wendat ceased to exist as a unified cultural group, and their deathways died with the nation. Thus, in this paper I will argue that the alterations made to Huron-Wendat deathways were part of a historical trend in death ideology and the related etiquette regarding the treatment of the dead. The presence of Europeans was a catalyst for change, but these changes occurred within the pre-existing Huron-Wendat cultural framework. There was no wholesale replacement of cultural beliefs; burial practices were modified in ways that had precedents within Huron-Wendat society.


Huron-Wendat Death Ideology

The Huron-Wendat traditionally practiced an animist religion, in which humans, animals, plants, and even objects had souls. Humans had between two and five souls, some which would stay with the corpse after death, while others would move on to the Village of the Dead, the afterlife in the far west. Unlike in Christian theology, this afterlife was accessible regardless of a person’s morality or ‘goodness’; rather, how one died influenced one’s afterlife, so that a violent death, for example, would result in that soul being barred from the Village of the Dead.

While one of the individual’s souls stayed in close association with the body after death, that soul was able to wander the village and take part in village life. This gave people an opportunity to breach the barriers between the living and the dead. One example of this is in ‘requickening’ ceremonies performed to resurrect the soul of an important figure in the body of another. This was a communal practice, and was taken very seriously. The Jesuit Relations describes this ritual:

They transfer the name of the dead to some other man, and lo, the dead is raised to life… a present is added…and he who accepts the name and the present binds

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8 Some scholars interpret the Feast of the Dead as releasing the body-soul so it can join the other soul in the Village of the Dead and be made whole; most scholars seem to think only one will go to the Village of the Dead, and the other would stay with the remains forever. Regardless of the particulars, the Feast of the Dead is extremely important to the soul’s journey, as it released the dead to the afterlife. For the former view see: Carpenter, 39. For the latter view see: Bruce G. Trigger, The Huron: Farmers of the North (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1969), 103. Ake Hultkrantz, Soul and Native Americans (Woodstock: Spring Publications Inc, 1997), 206-7.

9 Richter, 32.
himself to take charge of the family of the deceased, so that his wards call him their father.\textsuperscript{10}

The Huron performed resurrection rites for dead family members as late as 1648, “in order that the orphans may not be abandoned”.\textsuperscript{11} Even among Christian converts, this tradition remained strong; for these individuals, resurrections were merely viewed as a precursor to the ‘true resurrection’ as described in Biblical teachings.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Traditional Burial Practices}

The Huron-Wendat treasured their dead, and as such the dead were given the utmost respect. The \textit{Jesuit Relations} explained: “if there is anything in the world that is Sacred among the Hurons, it is their law of burial.”\textsuperscript{13} Since the Huron-Wendat believed that souls remained among the living until after the Feast of the Dead, the living were required to care for the graves. People were known to have protected cemeteries before their own homes during fires.\textsuperscript{14} The cemetery was sacred, and “nothing could give [the Huron-Wendat] greater offence than to ransack and remove anything in the tombs of their relatives, and if anyone [was] found doing so he [could not] look for anything short of a most cruel and painful death.”\textsuperscript{15}

The rituals surrounding burial were similarly sacred. The dead were interred with their heads facing the west, so they would know where to go to reach the Village of the Dead.\textsuperscript{16} Traditionally, there were two rituals associated with death and burial. The first was a scaffold

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\textsuperscript{10} Thwaites, 16:201-03.
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid.}, 32: 209.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}, 32: 209-11.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, 23: 31.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{16} Thwaites, 16: 207.
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 burial, which was a temporary burial above ground for anyone who had died from natural causes. As ritual resurrection was not uncommon in Huron-Wendat society, some of the souls that did not go to the afterlife—like infants, or the elderly—might eventually be reborn. Since the spirits of the dead stayed close to their remains until after the Feast of the Dead, these resurrection rites had to be done before the Feast, and the scaffold burial provided that opportunity.

The second burial coincided with the Feast of the Dead, a very lavish communal ritual conducted about once per decade. This Feast had two purposes. First, it marked the second, permanent burial of the dead, which would release souls from their physical remains and allow them to make their final journey to the afterlife. Bones were disarticulated before being placed in a massive burial pit, along with a huge amount of burial goods, including those of European origin. The host village would take on a festival air to celebrate this event; feasting lasted days, gifts were exchanged and trade conducted. As such, the Feast’s second purpose was to unite the Huron-Wendat nation, as people came from all corners of Wendake to participate in the ritual and bury their dead together. Given its infrequency, the Feast was vital in solidifying alliances and re-establishing villages as kin.

17 Some were excluded from scaffold burials. Babies were to be buried by pathways, so that they could be reborn in the wombs of nearby women. Those who died by drowning or freezing were eviscerated and burned before being buried in the earth. See: Seeman, Feast of the Dead, 20.
18 Champlain, Sagard and Brebeuf each claimed a different timeframe, increasing from each author from 8-12 years. It is possible that the Feast was performed less often over time, but since the Feast was often held when a village moved, it seems more likely that the fluctuations were caused by the elapsed time between movements. H. P. Biggar, ed. The Works of Samuel De Champlain, 6 vols. (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1922-1936), 3: 161; Sagard, 211; Thwaites, 10: 281; Conrad Heidenreich, Huronia: A History and Geography of the Huron Indians, 1600-1650 (Toronto: McClelland and Steward Ltd., 1971), 150.
19 Sagard, 211-12.
20 Seeman, Feast of the Dead, 64, 67; Biggar, 3: 162.
Trade and Burial Trends

As mentioned, burials were a two-part affair for the Huron-Wendat: temporary burial above ground, and a permanent burial in a communal ossuary. This was the norm in the seventeenth-century, when the French first visited Wendake; however, archaeological work indicates this was not always the case. Rather, patterns in permanent burial seem to have changed over time. For centuries, burials were in isolated graves and small ossuaries, a practice continued as late as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By the fourteenth-century, mortuary customs were expanding. Villages now reburied their dead about once a decade; there might be hundreds of individuals buried together at once, all from the same village. Upon migration to the Wendake area, when the different Huron-Wendat peoples began to unite into a confederacy, they started burying the dead of different villages in single, large ossuaries, now with plenty of grave offerings. It was at this point that the Feast of the Dead took on the unifying, political quality noted by the French missionaries upon their arrival in Wendake in the early seventeenth-century.

Many scholars have argued that it was only after the arrival of the French that large amounts of grave goods were habitually placed in ossuaries. Such scholars have assumed that the presence of European goods prompted a major alteration to Huron-Wendat deathways; this explanation is too simple though. Certainly, there was a dramatic increase in burial goods and mortuary ritualism in the seventeenth-century in comparison to earlier periods—and European

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22 Seeman, Feast of the Dead, 60.
items did become quite prominent in the mortuary context; however, it would be very inaccurate to attribute the changing nuances of the deathways solely to European influences.  

First, if the idea of European cultural displacement were to be believed, one would expect total dominance of European goods in these burials; however, this was not the case. Items of Amerindian manufacture, with increasing complexity, were also being deposited in graves by the seventeenth century. The Huron-Wendat interred large amounts of clay pipes, beaver robes, shell beads, ornamental combs, stone effigies, tomahawks, wampum chains, and other goods of native manufacture, as well as European metals and cloths. Further, trade goods had had a long association with burials, because of their perceived otherworldly attributes. An item that was of unusual colour, shape, or texture might be considered an item of spiritual nature, which would explain why traded items such as copper, quartz and marine shells were continually used as grave goods. European iron certainly would have coincided with the category of ‘unusual’, and consequently could be expected to follow the dead into the afterlife. Further, metal was especially important because it could be used in the creation of other items. Thus, European goods had physical attributes that made them appropriate to include in burials.

Secondly, the incorporation of European goods in burial practices and rituals, like the Feast of the Dead, also fits with pre-Contact political ideas, including alliance establishment. Accepting and giving gifts was considered an honour, and giving gifts at the Feast of the Dead in

23 Trigger, Aataentsic, 427.
24 Seeman, Feast of the Dead, 61; Biggar, 3: 163.
25 Huron-Wendat believed items gained souls via manufacturing, and thus could go to the afterlife. Using metal tools, it became possible to create increasingly complex items, which would logically increase their soul power. Thus, European tools helped to reinforce and reinterpret the pre-existing Amerindian ideas of soul theory and death ideology. See: Carpenter, 1609-1650, 42; Bruce M. White, "Encounters with Spirits: Ojibwa and Dakota Theories About the French and Their Merchandise," Ethnohistory 41, no. 3 (1994): 371.
particular—including gifts intended for the dead themselves—was venerated.\textsuperscript{26} Inviting the French and other allied Amerindian tribes to the Feast to take part in the gift-giving festivities thus corresponds with established ideas of diplomacy. As anthropologist Bruce Trigger has argued, “the final elaboration of this ritual, under the influence of the fur trade, was therefore the florescence of a traditional feature of Huron culture rather than a radical departure from it.”\textsuperscript{27} As such, it is evident that the physical changes to the Huron-Wendat deathways in the contact period incorporated European trade goods but remained true to traditional Huron-Wendat purposes.

**Impact of Christianity and Epidemic Disease**

Many historians rightly observe that changes to burials and burial practices did occur in conjunction with new Christian ideas, particularly in the later 1640s.\textsuperscript{28} However, Christianity’s influence was mitigated by the low number of Huron-Wendat converts. For decades, the Jesuits had had a lot of trouble gaining Huron-Wendat converts, not only because the Wendat feared ‘Black Robe sorcery’, the believed cause of the epidemics that had killed thousands of Amerindians\textsuperscript{29}, but also because of the fundamental differences in their religious customs and beliefs, especially concerning the afterlife.\textsuperscript{30} Estimates vary, but by 1639 the Jesuits believed

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\item Thwaites, 10: 303-5.
\item Trigger, Aataentsic, 427.
\item Seeman, Death in the New World 136; Trigger, Natives and Newcomers, 256.
\item The epidemics are generally considered to have had at least a 50-60% mortality rate, with the majority of deaths reported in the 1630s and 1640s. Refer to: Gary Warrick, "European Infectious Disease and Depopulation of the Wendat-Tonontate (Huron-Petun)," World Archaeology 35, no. 2 (2003): 263; James C. Riley, "Smallpox and American Indians Revisited," Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences 65, no. 4 (2010): 475.
\item For example, people tended to reject conversion for fear of going to heaven and being separated from loved ones in the Village of the Dead. See: Thomas Worcester, "A Defensive Discourse: Jesuits on Disease in Seventeenth-Century New France," French Colonial History 6(2005): 5; Seeman, Feast of the Dead, 89, 92.
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they had only a hundred sincere Christian converts in Wendake; by the mid- to late-1640s this number had increased to perhaps a few hundred converts.31

While this small pocket of converts had a significant impact on the social life of the Huron-Wendat nation, the large-scale effect on the culture of the deathways was limited. Christian ideals conflicted with traditional concepts of the deathways, and as such alterations to these practices occurred only on a small-scale, case-by-case basis; traditional burials remained the default practice. When Christian influence did show, it was usually in context of a hybridization of practices. For example, Jesuits preached that Christians should be buried in consecrated ground, separate from non-believers, and some Huron-Wendat converts did indeed follow with this new burial practice.32 This meant that converts would abandon communal ossuary interment and the associated mortuary rituals. However, even after conversion, grave goods continued to be left in cemeteries, even at major missionary settlements. At Sainte-Marie, for example, these goods included the expected Catholic rosaries, but also shell beads, pipes, and pottery. The latter items had been prominent in Feast of the Dead ossuaries as well as the primary scaffold burials as noted above, indicating that the Huron-Wendat were not abandoning their previous practices. Interment styles were similarly hybridized: while all of the individuals were buried in European-style wooden coffins, some were buried in the foetal position commonly seen in the primary scaffold burials, and some of them were oriented to face the west. At Sainte-Marie—where all graves were Christian—there was evidence of several graves

31 In the early 1640s, population of the Huron-Wendat had dropped approximately 60% due to smallpox and other epidemic diseases, so population now numbered around 9,000. For details on conversion and statistical information, refer to: Seeman, Feast of the Dead, 99, 106, 14, 21.
32 However, Brébeuf notes in the 1636 Feast of the Dead that several converts were being interred in communal ossuaries alongside ‘infidels’, so this new practice was obviously irregular. Thwaites, 23: 31 and 10: 301.
holding more than one individual. One such grave held two skeletons; one was in the foetal position, while the other was a disarticulated bundle of bones reminiscent of those in the Feast of the Dead. Such mixed burials indicate selective application of traditional and Christian practices.33

It is also notable that Christian burials in single graves, separate from the large ossuaries of the traditionalists, do not seem to have been very common in Wendake. While there was some need for separate cemeteries for converts, especially after the 1640s, Conrad Heidenreich argues that the large numbers of single burials found in central and eastern Wendake were likely not Christian burials, but part of the earlier tradition that was eventually replaced by use of large communal ossuaries.34 Since the ideological impact of Christianity involved more hybridization than replacement, the effects of Christianity on the Huron-Wendat deathways appear quite minor.

Despite the massive numbers of dead, the sources do not indicate many definitive, long-term changes to the deathways in association with epidemic disease. One isolated incident of discriminatory burial for disease victims is noted in Erik Seeman’sFeast of the Dead, in which people were buried in the ground in a manner that was normally only associated with those who drowned or froze to death.35 This, however, was a singular event, and did not become common practice.

The other notable impact epidemics had on the deathways relates to mourning wars, which were performed by Iroquoians to replenish their population after a significant loss of

34 Heidenreich, 151; Trigger, Natives and Newcomers, 256.
35 Seeman, Feast of the Dead 91.
life—traditionally, this practice was the main reason for intertribal warfare. After the introduction of European-associated diseases, huge population drops were closely followed by an increase in intertribal conflict in the 1640s between the Iroquois and the Huron-Wendat. Some of the captives from these battles were the focus of the “requickening” rituals mentioned above, through which a dead person would be resurrected in the body of the captive. This person would take the name of the deceased man, as well as all of his social duties. Thus, the Huron-Wendat dealt with epidemics by turning to their traditional means of dealing with population decline: mourning wars and resurrection rites. While the epidemics certainly were responsible for a lot of changes to Amerindian society, the Huron-Wendat and their neighbours demonstrated flexibility with traditionalisms in the ways they adapted the deathways to accommodate this new problem.36

The Destruction of Wendake

The Iroquois assault upon Wendake culminated in the spring of 1649, when the major villages of the nation were vanquished, and survivors of the attacks scattered. Many Huron-Wendat assimilated into the Iroquois nation; others “merged with neighbouring tribes…[and] one small band of Catholic Hurons followed the Jesuits down to Quebec City.”37 The Huron-Wendat nation was gone, and its people, as a cultural collective, no longer existed. With this shift in cultural association and identity, the deathways changed dramatically, or disappeared entirely. For example, the Iroquois have no ossuary burials,38 and consequently associated rituals like the Feast of the Dead would have been abandoned after adoption into the tribe. Likewise, those who went to join the Jesuits were staunch Catholic converts who were beginning to adopt different

36 Richter, 32; Seeman, Feast of the Dead 80, 121.
37 Allan Greer, ed. The Jesuit Relations: Natives and Missionaries in Seventeenth-Century North America The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s,2000), 112.
38 Seeman, Feast of the Dead, 136.
burial practices and significantly different spiritual ideologies. The impact of Catholicism—and other factors of European presence—on the deathways were therefore strongly felt only after the Huron-Wendat Confederacy dissolved.

After Wendake’s fall, thousands of Huron-Wendat refugees joined the Jesuits at Sainte-Marie and Gahoendoe, hoping for protection from the Iroquois. Hundreds died from starvation and disease in the ensuing months. By 1650, the famine resulted in cannibalism, which was against one of the Huron-Wendat’s strictest taboos:

Everywhere, corpses have been dug out of graves; and now carried away by hunger, the people have repeatedly offered, as food, those who were lately the dear pledges of love… the teeth of the starving man…do not recognise in the dead body him who a little before was called, until he died, father, son, or brother.

Given that desecration of graves had been punishable by death, cannibalism was vivid evidence of the rapid deterioration of deathways’ customs. Cemeteries were held as sacred places in Huron-Wendat society; that this was no longer sacrosanct marked the complete deterioration of traditional cultural values after the fall of Wendake. Yet it is clear that this downfall occurred as a result of Amerindian warfare, not European cultural pressures.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

While there remain many gaps in our knowledge about Huron-Wendat mortuary customs—largely due to the difficulties intrinsic to the resources, such as limited historical documents still extant, and the physical limitations inherent in archaeological studies—there are many things that we do know. The mortuary practices and death-related ideology were a rich and integral aspect of Huron-Wendat cultural heritage, and they were well documented in historical

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40 Thwaites, 35: 21.
sources like the *Jesuit Relations*. As demonstrated in this paper, these practices changed over time in response to localized social development. There was a progression in burial types, from single burials to large ossuaries. There was also an evolution of sorts in the rituals associated with burial, particularly the Feast of the Dead, which became increasingly elaborate and continued to change after European contact. The ideological foundation for these rituals and practices, including the concepts of dual souls, reuniting with ancestors in the afterlife, and the possibilities of resurrection, remained central to mortuary practice and were not at all replaced by ideas brought by the Christian Europeans. Even when conversion began to make headway in Huron-Wendat society, only a minority of people deviated significantly from the traditional deathways; for the most part, Christian practices were incorporated into older concepts. After the destruction of Wendake many of these practices disappeared altogether, while others were diluted by other influences.

Though change occurred, changes to the deathways exemplified the Huron-Wendats’ role as agents in their own lives; they selected and adopted cultural features that had meaning to them, while rejecting those that conflicted with established beliefs. As long as the Huron-Wendat remained a people with their own independent culture, they were active participants in the way that culture was structured.
Bibliography


