



Aniaq: Mi'kmaq and Basques

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Before contact with the Europeans, the Mi'kmaq people called themselves Lnu'k. The word mi'kmaq means "my friends," the term they used to address the European seafarers who visited them. In any event, it should be pointed out that the Basques did not only have contact with the Mi'kmaq. They also had encounters with the Innu people (Montagnais) from the northern shore of the St. Lawrence and the now extinct Beothuk in Newfoundland, and more sporadically with the Etchemin (now the Maliseet and Passamaquoddy tribes).

It has traditionally been said that the relationship between our ancestors and the Inuits (Eskimos) was much worse than the friendly relations they enjoyed with the Mi'kmaq people. Mistrust and confrontation appear to have marked the relationships with the Inuit people. In fact, written accounts by French Jesuits blame the general feeling of resentment against all Europeans on the abduction of a group of Inuit women carried out by Basque sailors. However, it can hardly be said that relations with other groups were always idyllic. In 1611 Father Biard wrote that a group of Mi'kmaq had flaunted their band's boldness and courage by trying to kill Basques and Malouines (Normand sailors from St. Malo). There are also accounts in letters written by Jesuit missionaries saying that in the first decades of contact there was a Basque captain who refused to approach the natives, spitting on the ground and telling them to keep their distance because of their foul odor. This, of course, would have provoked a negative reaction. Needless to say, the grease the natives often spread on their bodies to keep the thick swarms of mosquitoes away probably did not have a particularly pleasant smell. But then again our seafaring forefather surely did not smell like roses.

United by trade lingo

What has clearly been demonstrated is the fact that the Mi'kmaq distinguished the Basques, whom they called Bascuaq, from the French, Spanish or other nations. A number of witnesses, particularly Marc Lescarbot, pointed out that a pidgin trade language had spread through the Gulf

It's a well-known fact that the Basques were pioneers in whaling and cod fishing in Newfoundland and the Gulf of St. Lawrence since the early part of the sixteenth century, working the waters before other countries arrived. Champlain himself, forefather of what is now Québec, defined us as protagonists in fishing and trade in the area before other nations. Therefore, it is not unrealistic to assume that the first outside contacts with the native peoples in the region came from Basque sailors.

If there is one thing above anything else that the Basques and the Mi'kmaq have in common it is the survival over the centuries of our culture and language despite the vicissitudes of history and being surrounded by nations far superior in number.

The Mi'kmaq lived and still live in what are today the Canadian provinces of Québec, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, and the U.S. state of Maine. Their territory was divided into seven districts, their most important center being Onamag, on today's Cape Breton Island. Their nation spoke an Eastern Algonquian language and had no organized political structure. They were divided into semi-nomadic bands grouped in a number of extensive families. Even today no common organization exists; the Mi'kmaq Nation now consists of a total of 27 small reservations, all located in Canada, except for one in the USA, which was not officially recognized by the federal government as an indigenous nation until 1991.



Apaizac Obeto crewmembers with a group from the Mi'kmaq community.

of St. Lawrence, Newfoundland and Acadia, based on a mixture of Mi'kmawisimk (the Mi'kmaq language's native name) and Euskara (and almost surely Innu, a similar Algonquian language). Clearly, it was a limited trade jargon, of which we know only a few words today: the word for brother is *ania*; *kessona* means man; a *makia* is a stick; *origna* means elk, and *pilotoy* (*pilotua* is skipper in Euskara) is what the Mi'kmaq people call their medicine men.

It has even been said that *Souriquois*, the name used by the French for the Mi'kmaq people, was of Basque origin. Theoretically, it came from the word *zurikoa*. I personally have serious doubts about this claim, since the term was applied exclusively to the southern Mi'kmaq bands (Maine and central and southern Nova Scotia), a region that was much less frequented by Basque fishermen than the north. Moreover, the ending *quois* is commonly found in names coined by the French for indigenous groups far from the area of Basque contact. And curiously enough, the Basque ending for plurals, *ak*, is the same as the formula used in the Eastern Algonkian languages *aq* (hence, Mi'kmaq as opposed to the singular Mi'kmaw). So, by the same logic, the name for the tribe would have been *Souriquoiaq*.

In any event, Basque contact with the Mi'kmaq must have been more intensive and long-lasting than with other peoples. The desire to collaborate with the Mi'kmaq prompted a number of Basque crews to leave one of their members with the natives during the winter months. Generally one of the *txos*, the youngest among the crewmembers, was selected to stay behind and learn the language. Some of them met tragic fates. In 1635 Jesuit missionary Paul LeJeune gave an account of an incident that occurred on the Gaspé Peninsula, in which a young man was killed and devoured by the natives during a harsh cruel winter that gave rise to more than one case of cannibalism.

Collaboration between Mi'kmaq and Basques went beyond mere trade relations. In fact, revealing information shows that the natives worked shoulder to shoulder with our ancestors in cod fishing and whaling. In 1626 López de Isasti said that the Montagnais people in the Strait of Belle Isle could speak a little Euskara and that they worked together with the Basques processing fish on dry land. And recent research has suggested that Pierre Desceliers' 1546 world map depicts a Basque chalupa whaling boat along with a native. The picture shows Basque sailors wearing their traditional pointed hats. Curiously, the traditional costume for Mi'kmaq women today (and certainly not in the sixteenth century) features a colorful wool cap with the same pointy shape.

A century-long relationship would surely have resulted in mixed marriages. A little known fact is that the last name "Basque" is quite common among the Mi'kmaq, especially in the northern part of New Brunswick and in Listuguj (Restigouche band), where the northernmost reserves are located. During those years of close contact, the Mi'kmaq also traveled to Euskadi. For example, we know from an account by Lescarbot that a *sagamore* (leader) named Cacagous visited Baiona, where he was baptized.

Some of the Mi'kmaq people still wish to acknowledge their shared past with the Basques. In fact, we were not the first ones to tighten bonds by launching the "Apaizac Obeto" expedition. In 1996 a group of Mi'kmaq people from Gespegewagi (Gespegeoag) on the Gaspé Peninsula sent a letter to the Basque Government requesting the establishment of formal relations. This group, called the Mi'kmaw, had the closest contact with the Basques and, curiously enough, their dialect has more peculiarities than any of the other dialects. Unfortunately, that first attempt did not get off the ground. We hope that these small steps taken by both sides will promote better understanding between two nations that once considered each other *aniaq*.