



MACKOSI'KWE'S BASKETS: MARKING RELATIONSHIPS

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April 24, 2015

On August 1, 1938, before leaving the Maniwaki reserve in Quebec, Canada, anthropologist Frank G. Speck paid a visit to his old friends, Michel Buckshot and his wife Angelique, better known as Mackosi'kwe (also spelled Meshkosikwe, meaning "Beaver Meadow Woman"). Mackosi'kwe was skilled in pyroscapulimancy, a technique for divining future prospects in and other animals in a fire, and then reading the cracks and marks. In Speck's case, she started with a deer scapula, followed by that of a hare, to predict an unexpected break in the return trip, but an otherwise safe journey home.^[1]



Mackosi'kwe/Angelique/Mrs. Michel Buckshot. Photo taken by Frank Speck.

The River Desert Algonquin Band in Maniwaki was a small group of a few hundred First Nations people; most were of Algonkian ancestry, some had mixed Mohawk or French heritage.^[2] In 1854, under the leadership of life chief [Pakinawtik \(also spelled Paganowatik, meaning "Lightning Hit Tree"\)](#), they left the Mohawk community of [Kanehsatà:ke](#) (also called Kanesatake or Oka, Lake of Two Mountains, near Montreal) to settle in their former summer hunting grounds at the confluence of the Gatineau, Eagle, and Desert Rivers.^[3] There, they practiced subsistence farming, hunting, and fishing, in addition to wage work and craftwork, calling themselves *Tega'zi bi win in iwag* ("farm river people").^[4]

Mackosi'kwe, born around 1862, was an artisan with diverse skills. She did trapping, tanning, and Indian doctoring (herbal medicine), and also made "curiosities" like puzzle pouches and decorated baskets for sale to tourists. She was also a keeper of oral traditions; in 1943, while Speck and his colleague Horace Beck were collecting data on Algonquin medicinal knowledge and folklore, she shared tales of the cannibal spirit *Windigo* and the trickster *Wisekedjak*.^[5]

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animals in a fire, and then reading the cracks and marks. In Speck's case, she started with a deer scapula, followed by that of a hare, to predict an unexpected break in the return trip, but an otherwise safe journey home.^[1]

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During a 1929 visit, Speck's student, Frederick Johnson, commissioned Mackosi'kwe to carve a collection of potato die stamps (called *padaki-wàpigon*, "potato-flower").^[6] In order to show print proofs of the stamps, she also provided two peeled, trimmed, and stamped ash splints harvested from the inside annular rings of black ash (*Fraxinus nigra*).

Ironically, although provided to document the technique of basket-stamping, these objects are now trapped in a form that renders them unusable. If destined for a basket, dyes would have been freshly mixed and stamps freshly cut before use. Prepared ash splints would have been soaked and woven into basket form before stamping. But these potato stamps have been saturated with alcohol, and these pre-stamped splints have now hardened into a permanent coil.



Coiled ash splints from River Desert. Photo courtesy of the Penn Museum.



A selection of trimmed and etched birchbark containers from River Desert collected by Frank Speck. Plate 30 from *Art Processes in Birchbark of the River Desert Algonquin, a Circumboreal Trait*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnography Anthropological Papers 128, no. 17 (1941): 1-60.)

The items in the River Desert collection have been described as "common" and "utilitarian," but they are much more. The objects created by Mackosi'kwe and other Algonquin artisans express Indigenous technology, ecological adaptability, and local aesthetics, woven into every piece of raw material, every stitch, every mark. The birch trees that provided sweet sap for food and medicine also provided bark for containers and canoe coverings. Folded bark baskets were covered with a myriad of elaborately etched and trimmed designs. The ash trees that provided wood for canoe frames also provided an abundance of wood splints for basket-making.

The potatoes were reshaped from a utilitarian food source into a tool that could transform plain baskets into marketable tourist objects. The dyes were made from local plants; among Algonquin artisans, the making of these dyes and mordants were closely kept secrets.^[7] The marks made by stamping, etching, and trimming are more than just decoration; they constitute a richly expressive language that Frank Speck identified as a symbolic ecology, evoking local plant medicines, fauna, and rock-art pictographs, with meanings that escape those who only see flowers and leaves.^[8]

Collectively, these objects also represent what was once a productive relationship between the River Desert Band and researchers from the University of Pennsylvania, woven together by partners who collaborated on the collection of data and materials over the course of several decades. The travel went in both directions. Speck and his students made multiple trips to Maniwaki, and, in 1942, Mackosi'kwe's adopted grandson, Jean Paul Bras Coupe, spent the winter in Pennsylvania with Speck. Income from the sales of tourist objects and ethnographic collections kept the Buckshot family from starving in the midst of the Great Depression, at a time when their lands were under increasing pressures from sports hunters and fishermen, and the boundaries of their homelands were being constricted by Canadian authorities.

Perhaps to highlight the artistry of Algonquin people, Speck saw to it that ethnographic materials from River Desert were dispersed into multiple museums, including the National Museum of Canada, the Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of Denmark, and the Denver Art Museum. Yet, when the traveling and collecting stopped, each of these objects were frozen in time, locked in museum cabinets, far from their places of origin. Now, these objects offer opportunities to reconnect with the people who created them and the stories embedded in them. This research calls for a return to [Maniwaki](#), now identified as the [Kitigan Zibi Anishnabeg](#) (“people of the garden river”), a place where people still speak about those anthropologists from Philadelphia who came to visit and walked away nearly a century ago.

Footnotes:

[1] Michel Buckshot (born c. 1860) and his wife Angelique (born c. 1866) are listed in the census records as Catholic Algonquin Indians living at Maniwaki; Michel’s occupation is “Chasseur” (hunter). See *Fourth Census of Canada 1901: Maniwaki*, Wright, Quebec; Page: 21; Family No: 168. For brief biographical details, see Frank G. Speck 1939. “More Algonkian Scapulimancy from the North, and the Hunting Territory Question.” *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 4(1): 21-28.

[2] The cultural term *Algonkian* denotes a common cultural grouping for northeastern Native peoples including Anishinabe, Wabanaki, and Wampanoag, among others. Culturally and linguistically, they are distinct from Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) peoples. The historic term *Algonquin* is used here to distinguish a particular grouping of Algonkian Indian First Nations bands located in the eastern Ontario and western Quebec provinces, sometimes collectively called the Algonquin Nation.

[3] The Province of Quebec is home to Algonkian, Iroquoian, and Inuit nations. For more information, see [“The Nations,”](#) a detailed map with the present-day locations of Indigenous nations and bands in Quebec, on the website of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Government of Canada.

[4] Speck, Frank G. 1927. “River Desert Indians of Quebec.” *Indian Notes* IV(3):240-252. Also see Speck 1929. “Boundaries and Hunting Groups of the River Desert Algonquin.” *Indian Notes* VI(2):97-120. Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation.

[5] Beck, Horace 1947. “Algonquin Folklore from Maniwaki.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 60(237):259-264.

[6] McGregor, Ernest 1987. *Algonquin Lexicon (Algonquin-English)*. Maniwaki, Quebec: River Desert Education Authority.

[7] Clément, Daniel and Noeline Martin 1996. “Algonquin Legends and Customs from an Unpublished Manuscript by Juliette Gaultier de la Vérendrye,” pp. 123-154 in Daniel Clément, *The Algonquins*. Hull Quebec: The Canadian Museum of Civilization.

[8] Speck, Frank G. 1941. [Art Processes in Birchbark of the River Desert Algonquin, a Circumboreal Trait](#). Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnography Anthropological Papers 128(17):1-60.

NOTE: For more information about these stamps and splints, see the related blog article— [“Potato Stamps and Ash Splints: A Narrative of Process and Exchange”](#)—by Elizabeth Peng.