

Unit 5: Video 1 Transcript

Q3: What characterized the European approach to inter-cultural diplomacy?

A: In looking at the negotiation of political relationships between Indigenous peoples and European settlers and colonizers, I've come to think about European approaches in terms of three broad sets of patterns, I guess.

So one set of circumstances to keep in mind is the particular agenda of the Europeans involved. Some Europeans were interested in claiming lands, establishing possession. Some Europeans were interested in commerce, in trade. Other Europeans had perhaps larger geopolitical concerns, perhaps finding allies in a war with another European power. And so those are important to take into account when thinking about European approaches. Those often—those immediate concerns often dictate the approaches that Europeans would use in approaching Indigenous peoples.

A second set of circumstances to think about would be the cultural background of the Europeans themselves. And while this wasn't—this probably shouldn't be—I would hesitate to think of this as the most important factor. It was significant. In other words, French colonizers coming from a particular region of France might have a particular understanding of how diplomacy should work, on what types of symbolic acts are important to “seal a deal,” as it were. And those might differ from the assumptions that, say, an English colonizer might make, or a Spanish colonizer. So that particular specific cultural background of the Europeans needs to be taken into account.

And the third set of factors to take into account would be the experience that Europeans—that a particular group of Europeans might have had in dealing with Indigenous peoples. In, for example, the era of New France, from the early 1600s to about the 1760s, there emerged in different times at different places, groups of specialists. People who acquired considerable knowledge of Indigenous culture. Learned how to speak Indigenous languages, and became well-versed in the diplomatic protocols that Indigenous peoples used. And so those individuals, what some scholars have called “forest diplomats,” maybe not the best term because not—diplomacy often took place in villages and towns. But those—another perhaps better term for these individuals is “cultural brokers.” These were people who were sometimes of European origin. Sometimes of mixed European and Indigenous origin, or Métis people. These were individuals who learned a lot about how Indigenous peoples did business. And so they were—their approach would

often be quite different from, say, someone just off the boat from London or Paris.

One final comment I would like to make about European approaches to diplomacy with First Nations in the Canadian context in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, is that by and large Europeans were quite weak on the ground in terms of their numbers. And consequently they were—out of necessity, were quite willing to acknowledge Indigenous ways of doing things. And in terms of diplomacy, that extended to incorporating Indigenous rituals and practices into the conduct of diplomacy itself. So this could mean, for example, smoking pipes as part of a negotiation or in preparation for negotiation. It could mean acknowledging and taking part in the exchange of gifts. And it could mean using particular items that Indigenous peoples considered valuable and sacred, such as strings and belts made of woven shell beads which for many Indigenous groups in eastern North America were key to diplomacy. Woven belts that were—accompanied the messages that a diplomat wanted to convey. And so Europeans learned how to use these things and took these practices seriously, because it was the way to—well, it was potentially a way to guarantee success in a negotiation.