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Report of Jolliet and Marquette's First Encounter with the Illinois Indians

Although the French secured a broad influence over large expanses of North America in the 17th century, they established few permanent settlements to compete with the English colonies. France's main settlements were founded along the St Lawrence River in Canada. In the 1670s, France's King Louis XIV charged his governor general of New France, Louis de Buade, comte de Frontenac, with the exploration of North America and the expansion of French trade networks to the interior and the Gulf of Mexico. To lead an expedition to discover the 'great river' reported by American Indians, Frontenac selected Louis Jolliet, an experienced explorer, and Father Jacques Marquette, a dedicated Jesuit priest who had established a mission at St Ignace at Mackinac on the tip of what would become the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Together, they travelled south from Green Bay on Lake Michigan, down the Fox and Wisconsin rivers, to the junction of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers, and then back to Lake Michigan by the Illinois River. They were the first Europeans to confirm the existence of the Mississippi, the 'great river', and to navigate it. They also reported on the geography and on the animal and plant life of the area. Only Marquette's journal of the expedition, which was published in 1681, has survived. The interior tribes received the explorers peacefully, for French traders, unlike the English, sought to live in peace with the American Indians, and often married native women. Also, French forts were tolerated in American-Indian territories as sources of European goods. Marquette described his and Jolliet's reception by the Illinois as warm and accompanied by 'their usual kind attentions'. Jolliet and Marquette's discoveries, along with Ren-Robert Cavelier de La Salle's exploration of the Mississippi Delta in 1682, strengthened France's hold on the Mississippi Valley and the interior of the continent. In the early 18th century, the English advanced into this area from their colonies on the Atlantic coast; this advance increased tensions between the French and British until Great Britain won the French and Indian War (1754–60) and forced France to withdraw from most of North America.

Here we are, then, on this so renowned river, all of whose peculiar features I have endeavored to note carefully. The Mississippi River takes its rise in various lakes in the country of the northern nations. It is narrow at the place where Miskous empties; its current, which flows southward, is slow and gentle. To the right is a large chain of very high mountains, and to the left are beautiful lands; in various places, the stream is divided by islands.

Finally, on the 25th of June, we perceived on the water's edge some tracks of men, and a narrow and somewhat beaten path leading to a fine prairie. We stopped to examine it; and, thinking that it was a road which led to some village of savages, we resolved to go and reconnoitre it. We therefore left our two canoes under the guard of our people, strictly charging them not to allow themselves to be

surprised, after which Monsieur Jollyet and I undertook this investigation – a rather hazardous one for two men who exposed themselves, alone, to the mercy of a barbarous and unknown people. We silently followed the narrow path, and, after walking about two leagues, we discovered a village on the bank of a river, and two others on a hill distant about half a league from the first. 1 Then we heartily commended ourselves to God, and, after imploring His aid, we went farther without being perceived, and approached so near that we could even hear the savages talking. We therefore decided that it was time to reveal ourselves. This we did by shouting with all our energy, and stopped, without advancing any farther. On hearing the shout, the savages quickly issued from their cabins, and having probably recognized us as Frenchmen, especially when they saw a black gown – or, at least, having no cause for distrust, as we were only two men, and had given them notice of our arrival – they deputed four old men to come and speak to us. Two of these bore tobacco-pipes, finely ornamented and adorned with various feathers. They walked slowly, and raised their pipes toward the sun, seemingly offering them to it to smoke, without, however, saying a word. They spent a rather long time in covering the short distance between their village and us. Finally, when they had drawn near, they stopped to consider us attentively. I was reassured when I observed these ceremonies, which with them are performed only among friends; and much more so when I saw them clad in cloth, for I judged thereby that they were our allies. I therefore spoke to them first, and asked them who they were. They replied that they were Illinois; and, as a token of peace, they offered us their pipes to smoke. They afterward invited us to enter their village, where all the people impatiently awaited us. These pipes for smoking tobacco are called in this country *calumets*. This word has come so much into use that, in order to be understood, I shall be obliged to use it, as I shall often have to mention these pipes.

When we reached the village of the great captain, we saw him at the entrance of his cabin, between two old men, all three erect and naked, and holding their calumet turned toward the sun. He harangued us in a few words, congratulating us upon our arrival. He afterward offered us his calumet, and made us smoke while we entered his cabin, where we received all their usual kind attentions.

Seeing all assembled and silent, I spoke to them by four presents that I gave them. By the first, I told them that we were journeying peacefully to visit the nations dwelling on the river as far as the sea. By the second, I announced to them that God, who had created them, had pity on them, inasmuch as, after they had so long been ignorant of Him, He wished to make himself known to all the peoples; that I was sent by Him for that purpose; and that it was for them to acknowledge and obey Him. By the third, I said that the great captain of the French informed them that he it was who restored peace everywhere; and that he had subdued the Iroquois. Finally, by the fourth, we begged them to give us all the information that they had about the sea, and about the nations through whom we must pass to reach it.

When I had finished my speech, the captain arose, and, resting his hand upon the head of a little slave whom he wished to give us, he spoke thus: ‘I thank thee, black gown, and thee, O Frenchman’, addressing himself to Monsieur Jollyet, ‘for having taken so much trouble to come to visit us. Never has the earth been so beautiful, or the sun so bright, as to-day; never has our river been so calm, or so clear of rocks, which your canoes have removed in passing; never has our tobacco tasted so good, or our corn appeared so fine, as we now see them. Here is my son, whom I give thee to show thee my heart. I beg thee to have pity on me, and on all my nation. It is thou who knowest the great Spirit who has made us all. It is thou who speakest to Him, and who hearest His word. Beg Him to give me life and health, and to come and dwell with us, in order to make us know Him’. Having said this, he placed the little slave near us, and gave us a second present, consisting of an altogether mysterious calumet, upon which they place more value than upon a slave. By this gift, he expressed to us the esteem that he had for Monsieur our governor, from the account which we had given of him; and, by a

third, he begged us on behalf of all his nation not to go farther, on account of the great dangers to which we exposed ourselves.

I replied that I feared not death, and that I regarded no happiness as greater than that of losing my life for the glory of Him who has made all. This is what these poor people cannot understand.

The council was followed by a great feast, consisting of four dishes, which had to be partaken of in accordance with all their fashions. The first course was a great wooden platter full of *sagamite*, that is to say, meal of Indian corn boiled in water, and seasoned with fat. The master of ceremonies filled a spoon with sagamite three or four times, and put it to my mouth as if I were a little child. He did the same to Monsieur Jollyet. As a second course, he caused a second platter to be brought, on which were three fish. He took some pieces of them, removed the bones therefrom, and, after blowing upon them to cool them, he put them in our mouths as one would give food to a bird. For the third course, they brought a large dog, that had just been killed; but, when they learned that we did not eat this meat, they removed it from before us. Finally, the fourth course was a piece of wild ox, the fattest morsels of which were placed in our mouths.

After this feast, we had to go to visit the whole village, which consists of fully three hundred cabins. While we walked through the streets, an orator continually harangued to oblige all the people to come to see us without annoying us. Everywhere we were presented with belts, garters, and other articles made of the hair of bears and cattle, dyed red, yellow, and gray. These are all the rarities they possess. As they are of no great value, we did not burden ourselves with them.

We slept in the captain's cabin, and on the following day we took leave of him, promising to pass again by his village, within four moons. He conducted us to our canoes, with nearly six hundred persons who witnessed our embarkation, giving us every possible manifestation of the joy that our visit had caused them. For my own part, I promised, on bidding them adieu, that I would come the following year, and reside with them to instruct them. But, before quitting the Illinois country, it is proper that I should relate what I observed of their customs and usages.

When one speaks the word 'Illinois', it is as if one said in their language, 'the men', as if the other savages were looked upon by them merely as animals. It must also be admitted that they have an air of humanity which we have not observed in the other nations that we have seen upon our route.

They are divided into many villages, some of which are quite distant from that of which we speak, which is called Peouarea. This causes some difference in their language, which, on the whole, resembles Algonquin, so that we easily understood each other. They are of a gentle and tractable disposition; we experienced this in the reception which they gave us. They have several wives, of whom they are extremely jealous; they watch them very closely, and cut off their noses or ears when they misbehave. I saw several women who bore the marks of their misconduct. Their bodies are shapely; they are active and very skillful with bows and arrows. They also use guns, which they buy from our savage allies who trade with our French. They use them especially to inspire, through their noise and smoke, terror in their enemies; the latter do not use guns, and have never seen any, since they live too far toward the west. They are warlike, and make themselves dreaded by the distant tribes to the south and west, whither they go to procure slaves; these they barter, selling them at a high price to other nations, in exchange for other wares. Those very distant savages against whom they war have no knowledge of Europeans; neither do they know anything of iron, or of copper, and they have only stone knives. When the Illinois depart to go to war, the whole village must be notified by a loud shout, which is uttered at the doors of their cabins, the night and the morning before their departure. The captains are distinguished from the warriors by wearing red scarfs. These are made, with considerable skill, from the hair of bears and wild cattle. They paint their faces with red ochre, great quantities of which are found at a distance of some days' journey from the village. They live by hunting, game

being plentiful in that country, and on Indian corn, of which they always have a good crop; consequently, they have never suffered from famine. They also sow beans and melons, which are excellent, especially those that have red seeds. Their squashes are not of the best; they dry them in the sun, to eat them during the winter and the spring. Their cabins are very large, and are roofed and floored with mats made of rushes. They make all their utensils of wood, and their ladles out of the heads of cattle, whose skulls they know so well how to prepare that they use these ladles with ease for eating their sagamite.

They are liberal in cases of illness, and think that the effect of the medicines administered to them is in proportion to the presents given to the physician. Their garments consist only of skins; the women are always clad very modestly and very becomingly, while the men do not take the trouble to cover themselves. I know not through what superstition some Illinois, as well as some Nadouessi, while still young, assume the garb of women, and retain it throughout their lives. There is some mystery in this, for they never marry and glory in demeaning themselves to do everything that the women do. They go to war, however, but can use only clubs, and not bows and arrows, which are the weapons proper to men. They are present at all the juggleries, and at the solemn dances in honor of the calumet; at these they sing, but must not dance. They are summoned to the councils, and nothing can be decided without their advice. Finally, through their profession of leading an extraordinary life, they pass for Manitous, that is to say, for spirits, or persons of consequence.

There remains no more, except to speak of the calumet. There is nothing more mysterious or more respected among them. Less honor is paid to the crowns and sceptres of kings than the savages bestow upon this. It seems to be the god of peace and of war, the arbiter of life and of death. It has but to be carried upon one's person, and displayed, to enable one to walk safely through the midst of enemies, who, in the hottest of the fight, lay down their arms when it is shown. For that reason, the Illinois gave me one, to serve as a safeguard among all the nations through whom I had to pass during my voyage. There is a calumet for peace, and one for war, which are distinguished solely by the color of the feathers with which they are adorned; red is a sign of war. They also use it to put an end to their disputes, to strengthen their alliances, and to speak to strangers. It is fashioned from a red stone, polished like marble, and bored in such a manner that one end serves as a receptacle for the tobacco, while the other fits into the stem; this is a stick two feet long, as thick as an ordinary cane, and bored through the middle. It is ornamented with the heads and necks of various birds, whose plumage is very beautiful. To these they also add large feathers – red, green, and other colors – wherewith the whole is adorned. They have a great regard for it, because they look upon it as the calumet of the Sun; and, in fact, they offer it to the latter to smoke when they wish to obtain a calm, or rain, or fine weather. They scruple to bathe themselves at the beginning of summer, or to eat fresh fruit, until after they have performed the dance, which they do as follows:

The calumet dance, which is very famous among these peoples, is performed solely for important reasons; sometimes to strengthen peace, or to unite themselves for some great war; at other times, for public rejoicing. Sometimes they thus do honor to a nation who are invited to be present; sometimes it is danced at the reception of some important personage, as if they wished to give him the diversion of a ball or a comedy. In winter, the ceremony takes place in a cabin; in summer, in the open fields. When the spot is selected, it is completely surrounded by trees, so that all may sit in the shade afforded by their leaves, in order to be protected from the heat of the sun. A large mat of rushes, painted in various colors, is spread in the middle of the place, and serves as a carpet upon which to place with honor the god of the person who gives the dance; for each has his own god, which they call their Manitou. This is a serpent, a bird, or other similar thing, of which they have dreamed while sleeping, and in which they place all their confidence for the success of their war, their fishing, and their hunting. Near this Manitou, and at its right, is placed the calumet in honor of which the feast is

given; and all around it a sort of trophy is made, and the weapons used by the warriors of those nations are spread, namely: clubs, war-hatchets, bows, quivers, and arrows.

Everything being thus arranged, and the hour of the dance drawing near, those who have been appointed to sing take the most honorable place under the branches; these are the men and women who are gifted with the best voices, and who sing together in perfect harmony. Afterward, all come to take their seats in a circle under the branches; but each one, on arriving, must salute the Manitou. This he does by inhaling the smoke, and blowing it from his mouth upon the Manitou, as if he were offering to it incense. Every one, at the outset, takes the calumet in a respectful manner, and, supporting it with both hands, causes it to dance in cadence, keeping good time with the air of the songs. He makes it execute many differing figures; sometimes he shows it to the whole assembly, turning himself from one side to the other. After that, he who is to begin the dance appears in the middle of the assembly, and at once continues this. Sometimes he offers it to the sun, as if he wished the latter to smoke it; sometimes he inclines it toward the earth; again, he makes it spread its wings, as if about to fly; at other times, he puts it near the mouths of those present, that they may smoke. The whole is done in cadence; and this is, as it were, the first scene of the ballet.

The second consists of a combat carried on to the sound of a kind of drum, which succeeds the songs, or even unites with them, harmonizing very well together. The dancer makes a sign to some warrior to come to take the arms which lie upon the mat, and invites him to fight to the sound of the drums. The latter approaches, takes up the bow and arrows, and the war-hatchet, and begins the duel with the other, whose sole defense is the calumet. This spectacle is very pleasing, especially as all is done in cadence; for one attacks, the other defends himself; one strikes blows, the other parries them; one takes to flight, the other pursues; and then he who was fleeing faces about, and causes his adversary to flee. This is done so well, with slow and measured steps, and to the rhythmic sound of the voices and drums, that it might pass for a very fine opening of a ballet in France. The third scene consists of a lofty discourse, delivered by him who holds the calumet; for, when the combat is ended without bloodshed, he recounts the battles at which he has been present, the victories that he has won, the names of the nations, the places, and the captives whom he has made. And, to reward him, he who presides at the dance makes him a present of a fine robe of beaver-skins, or some other article. Then, having received it, he hands the calumet to another, the latter to a third, and so on with all the others, until every one has done his duty; then the president presents the calumet itself to the nation that has been invited to the ceremony, as a token of the everlasting peace that is to exist between the two peoples.

Father Jacques Marquette

1673



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