

UNESCO RILA: The sounds of integration Episode 56: Visiting Mi'kma'ki (23/08/2023)

[JINGLE]

Esa Aldegheri:

أهلاً وسهلاً, benvenuti, fàilte, titambire, welcome to the podcase series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. We bring you sounds about integration, languages, culture, society and identity.

[JINGLE]

Audio of Mi'kmaw song and drum, performed by Julie Pellisier-Lush

Voiceover: Last month, me and my colleague Brittnee travelled to Mi'kma'ki, the homeland of the indigenous Mi'kmaw people. We were there as part of a project exploring Scotland's global relationships. Mi'kma'ki spans a big geographical area in Eastern Canada, including the area that's also known as Nova Scotia, meaning 'new Scotland'. The Mi'kmaw have been living in the area for at least 11,000 years, and possibly much longer. Most of the Scottish settlers started to arrive about 250 years ago. But it's the name Nova Scotia, not Mi'kma'ki, that you'll usually see on maps.

Voiceover: On the second day of our trip, Cathy Martin, a Mi'kmaw film maker, took us to see a place that's sacred to the Mi'kmaw people.

Audio of forest walk

Cathy: I can't believe how much tobacco is here... When I was coming, you know, I would f- haul people up here – it was really hard to get up, and all that, and – you know, none of this was here. But obviously people are coming. For ceremony, to learn more about this place.

Voiceover: In a forest, near some houses, there's an ancient petroglyph, a sacred symbol carved in rock, and Mi'kmaw people come to this site to do ceremony and make offerings. The relationship to the land is a really central part of Mi'kmaw identity and culture. It's a relationship that's not really about ownership: it's about living with the land, caring for it, and being cared for in return. But as we parked the hire car at the bottom of the hill to go and visit this sacred site, Cathy warned us that some of the people who live in the area get angry about people visiting the site, and might tell us to leave. Ideas of land ownership don't recognise the importance of this site to the Mi'kmaw people, and that causes problems.

Audio of forest walk

Sadie, to Cathy: Talk about stories living in place. This is...

Voiceover: Many of the people who settled this land were Gaels from the Scottish Highlands and Islands. They were a marginalised minority in Scotland, with their own language and culture. Many were very poor, and many had been forced off their land in the Highland Clearances, and had nowhere else to call home. They were a people who suffered under, resisted, and fought against colonialism in Scotland. But

in crossing the Atlantic and settling in Canada, they were becoming part of the British colonial project.

History is a complicated thing. Many of the people we've spoken to have told us that on the ground, the relationships between the Gaels and the Mi'kmaw were often positive. We spoke with Iseabail Munro, whose family moved to Nova Scotia from Ullapool in the Scottish Highlands several generations ago, and her daughter Tausha, who is a Gael through her mum's side of the family, and Mi'kmaw through her dad's side. Iseabail and Tausha told us about the kinship between these two groups.

Audio from Iseabail and Tausha's kitchen

Iseabail: There was one event I went to where we were talking about the Gaelic culture and a few of us during a break just started mapping – kind of mapping some of the key components of it. And when you look at it, it's identical to indigenous way of being, right? Like the ori- you know, the connection to the land, the – the hospitality, always welcoming people...

Voiceover: But despite the many points of commonality between the Gaels and the Mi'kmaw, the arrival of these settlers on their land led to hundreds of years of suffering and loss for the Mi'kmaw – suffering and loss which continues to this day. Iseabail and Tausha told us that despite progress in recent years, the indigenous peoples of Canada are still often treated as less important than the settler communities.

Audio from Iseabail and Tausha's kitchen

Iseabail: If it's a native school, compared to a white school, the government provides so much – so each day the child goes, it's – I – let's just say 3 dollars and 21 cents. For an indigenous kid it was two dollars and fifty cents. So... these disparities. If you were put into, um... foster care, or if you – like, there's all these incidences where the Canadian government paid less for indigenous than for the regular folks?

Sadie, to Iseabail: Is that still the case?

Iseabail: Yeah.

Tausha: Yeah.

Iseabail: Yeah, it's just been a court case that's just been won, the government has been fighting it. I would love to know how many millions -

Tausha: They spent fighting it –

Iseabail: - they have spent on lawyers, but it's just been – I believe finally friggin' settled. Um... that they have to pay out a massive amount of money, because they lost, because when children were put in foster care the payments were uneven to white kids. They had to do a payout for – like - Healthcare.

Tausha: Yeah.

Iseabail: Right? Because, um...

Tausha: Even schooling.

Iseabail: Even schooling –

Tausha: Like, I can guarantee – like - well not guarantee *now*, but when *I* was a kid, the schoolings weren't the same.

Voiceover: On the fourth day of our trip, we visited the Millbrook Cultural Centre – a museum about Mi'kmaw history, curated by Mi'kmaw scholars and told from a Mi'kmaw perspective. The journey around the museum starts with a film, in which a Mi'kmaw woman speaks about her time in a residential school. The residential schools were boarding schools for indigenous kids, and indigenous families were often tricked or even forced into sending their children away to them. The children were removed from their communities and forced to let go of their indigenous cultural practices, their languages and their identities. The conditions were horrific. Many children died and were buried in

unmarked graves – thousands of these unmarked graves have recently been discovered at the sites of former residential schools, sending shockwaves across Canada and the rest of the world.

Audio from Iseabail and Tausha's kitchen

Iseabail: You know, I think in some ways the finding of the graves at residential schools have shook up mainstream society – so th-

Tausha: There's no somew- someways about it.

Iseabail: Yeah, it shook them up, and so, there's some shifting of "oh my god". Right? But there's still "well that's in the past". Rather than realising the impacts are still existing today.

Tausha: Well that's just like, you know, like you said, when – when all the children were found, and people are on Facebook, and they're – you know, "Well why didn't I know about this? How didn't I hear about this? Must not have been that big a – uh, ordeal, if I didn't know about it", and all this stuff. And I'm sitting there "because you didn't have your eyes open". You didn't know about it because you weren't listening.

Brittnee: You're waiting to be fed, and no need to bother then. Yeah.

Iseabail: Right?

Tausha: Because we have survivors who have gone on the news. We've – we've done demonstrations, we've done workshops.

Iseabail: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Tausha: Come on people! And they're sitting there trying to say, like "oh well why didn't I know about this?" Well, because you weren't listening.

Voiceover: The woman in the film talks about being at residential school, and being caught speaking in Mi'kmaw. She wasn't supposed to speak Mi'kmaw any more, only English, and she was beaten for it. She tells us that as she was being beaten, she realised that she was still thinking in her language, and that the people beating her couldn't get inside her head. They couldn't take her thoughts away from her. The woman looks defiantly at the camera. She doesn't look that old at all.

The story reminded me of stories I'd heard before, from Gaelic-speaking communities in Scotland, where many people were beaten for speaking Gaelic in school, until not that long ago. Although that brutality wasn't as extreme as that of the residential schools in Canada, it was traumatic enough that many people didn't want to pass this stigmatised language onto their children, and its use declined massively as a result.

The use of Gaelic was stigmatised in Nova Scotia too. But despite that, it's somehow managed to survive against the odds. Thousands of miles from Scotland, across the ocean, the Nova Scotia Gaels have managed to hold onto their Gaelic heritage for many, many generations now – their language, songs, traditions, and their cultural beliefs. They've held onto these things because they know that they matter. The tenacity of minoritised languages and cultures always amazes me, and it's a powerful point of commonality between the Gaels and the Mi'kmaw – two cultures and identities that have refused to be extinguished, despite the best efforts of the people in power.

So we left the film in the Millbrook Cultural Centre and moved into the rest of the museum. The next information board I looked at was about what happened to the Mi'kmaw people in the immediate aftermath of colonisation. It said that within 100 years of the arrival of the Scottish settlers, 75% of the Mi'kmaw people had died, mostly from European diseases brought by the settlers. And I thought, when 75% of your people have died, does it really matter who brought the diseases, how much you have in common with them, and whether or not they were to blame?

We're so used to thinking in binaries: were our people on the right side of history, or the wrong side of history? Were they the victims or the oppressors? The colonisers or the colonised? Good or bad? But really, both can be true at once, and often are. Really, there's always more than one story. It can be

hard to hold multiple stories about yourself and your people at the same time, but I think that's something that many people need to learn how to do – me included.

Julie Pellisier-Lush knows about the importance of the stories we tell. She's a Mi'kmaw knowledge keeper, storyteller, and our cultural consultant for this project. You heard her singing a traditional Mi'kmaw song at the beginning. She told us about why storytelling is such an important part of Mi'kmaw culture, and such an important part of her work.

Audio from interview with Julie

Julie: For us stories were a way to pass down who we were. Uh, we didn't have a whole lot of written information, we would write stuff on birch bark scrolls, but if you know anything about the bark of trees, the – it doesn't take long for them to deteriorate, so a lot of those birch bark scrolls have been lost over time. But our stories were a way for us to gather, traditionally, a millennium ago, in front of the fire, every night of the winter, and be able to share our stories, and pass them down to the next generation. And then hoping that when they grew up they would be passing it down to their next generation. And a lot of these stories protected who we were as people, a lot of our traditional knowledge, a lot of the things that have happened to us, and it is – it was a safe way to be able to make sure that who we are as a people survived, by passing it down. Now there was some dark times after colonisation where a lot of our storytellers stopped sharing their stories, but a lot of them also survived, because a lot of them would go underground and they would still share their stories in the – the darkness of their homes, and make sure that those stories survived, and we're very blessed with those people that made sure that a lot of our stories continue to – to be able to flourish and to be able to be shared. And as Chief Justice Murray Sinclair, who was part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission here in Canada, he says that the main thing that every child has a right to know is where they came from. And there's a lot more things, but that's the first thing that always sort of struck my heart, that they have a right to know where they came from. What is their creation story? Where did we come as a people? They need to have that to be able to move forward in a good way.

Voiceover:

She also told us about Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As you've heard in the episode so far, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission came up a lot in our conversations with people. It's based on the idea that in order to heal and move forward together, we need to tell untold stories, and acknowledge the painful parts of our pasts. Through a difficult and painful process, Canada is beginning to tell different stories about itself and its history.

Audio from interview with Julie

Julie: The Truth and Reconciliation Committee is a committee that was put forth to go around Canada, and to talk to survivors of residential school, to hear their stories, to – to document so that, you know, the past, we'd have a – a better understanding of it, because every month, every week, almost every day, we're losing one or two or more of our elders who've experienced it, and this is one of our truths that has not been, like, hidden, but not talked about. Um, when I talk to our elders, it would be, like, when they were younger and they would try to talk about it people would say "The government wouldn't do that to you. The" – you know, "This could not have happened." And when there was the discovery of the 215 in Kamloops BC a couple of years ago, we knew that it was finally time to tell our truths, to share our stories of, uh, being resilient and being able to survive because a lot of us didn't. They weren't able to come home from residential school. They weren't able to – to grow up and have a life that – that everybody should have the opportunity to enjoy. So the TRC went and collected stories, and created recommendations for the government, for the justice system, for the health system, for all these different things that were put in place almost to – to sabotage the indigenous people, to put

recommendations to change it so that we could move forward together in a really good way of reconciliation, which means coming together equally as partners and – and moving forward in a good way.

Voiceover: The stories that we tell about ourselves, and that we tell about our countries, do matter. We do need to acknowledge Scotland's colonial past, and we also need to think about what might come next, and what truth and reconciliation might look like for us, as part of an ongoing process of healing.

We met Iseabail and Tausha because we were chasing down a story that we'd heard in Scotland. In the 1990s, Alastair McIntosh, an activist and academic from the isle of Lewis in Scotland, reached out across the Atlantic to the Mi'kmaw people in Nova Scotia, to ask for help with a common cause. Both communities were trying to protect their land from destructive mining practices.

Audio from Iseabail and Tausha's kitchen

Iseabail: But it was Alastair that made the connections, because he was trying to save Mount Roineabhal –

Brittnee: Oh, that's – we were wondering how –

Sadie: How it began, yeah.

Iseabail: Yeah. So he came over here and was trying to – and then he learnt about Glooscap mountain and about – um, that the McAskills wanted to mine the sacred – mine the sacred mountain of the Mi'kmaw.

So we testified – so there was a Mi'kmaw man that testified at the hearings, um, I also testified, um, at the hearings. And testified more from the position of speaking to the people who were there, rather than the commissioners. Right? Like I just, you know, talked to them and said "Look, I know what it's like for your children to have to move away to get a job and the pain that that causes. And this is also what going to happen to you if you go through with this." Right? And we've had the same pressures here. In Nova Scotia. And so they ended up stopping it.

And we had – and I can't remember who did it for us... But we had the people of Scotland write a letter to the McAskills, in Gaelic, and, um, and then we took it to the Gaelic college to have it translated and sent to the McAskills. But it was a powerful letter, talking about "remember how your people were Cleared from here, you know, because of industry, and now you're doing the same thing to the indigenous people in Nova Scotia." And it was a powerful, powerful letter. And so both mountains were saved. Now some of the – one of the things that happened at that point was, a number of elders – and this always gives me goosebumps – went up to the top of Mount Roineabhal in the night, and chipped off the top of the mountain. And they gave it to the Mi'kmaw man to bring to Nova Scotia. And they said as you accepted and protected our people when they were sent there, we're asking you to protect our mountain.

And so we were like "oh my god". You know? And so we brought this piece of rock back, and we're like, well we can't just sit with this in our living room, we need to do something. So we went to the Hector Quay in Pictou. And asked if, um – if they would want it as a part of their display, 'cause their display is all about the Highland - you know, how people were shipped out, and – that's what it's all about, and so at the end of the display we had the piece of the mountain, and talking about that, and Colin carved a beautiful stone eagle, which we also – it was massive – also presented to the Hector Quay. And he put it in, um – um, a crate that had a beautiful carving of a Hebridean ship on it. It was just absolutely gorgeous.

And then when – um – so when we presented that we did a healing ceremony at the Hector. And we invited the indigenous people from Pictou Landing, so the chief came, there were some elders that came from Cape Breton. Um, there were Scottish elders, there were Mi'kmaw children, there were Scottish children, you know, it was the descendants – somebody from Scotland happened to be walking

by and kind of “what the heck?”, and came in. Um, but it was powerful. And the local townspeople apologised to the Mi’kmaw people. And said, you know, you treated us amazing when we arrived here, and, you know, we’ve become strangers to each other and – and they apologised. And, um, it was a powerful event, and we sang some songs and, um, the Mi’kmaw man who went had been presented with a sword when he was there, so he actually passed that sword to a Scottish descendent elder here, and it was just this powerful exchange and healing.

After it was over we went down to Pictou landing and I asked the chief, “So, how does it feel?”, you know? And he said “Well it was good to get an apology.” He goes “it’s about effing time!”
Laughter

Voiceover: After our trip to Mi’kma’ki, me, Brittnee and Julie travelled to Montreal and spoke about our project at the North American Gaels conference at Concordia University. Me and Brittnee spoke about what we were doing and what we’d learned on our travels, and Julie spoke about her perspective as a Mi’kmaw knowledge keeper, and the importance of heritage and storytelling to her and her community. Julie closed our presentation by singing The Strong Woman’s Song by Lisa Muswagon and Raven Hart-Bellecourt, and so that’s how I’ll close this episode.

Audio of The Strong Woman’s Song, performed by Julie Pellisier-Lush

We’re massively grateful to everyone in Mi’kma’ki who welcomed us and shared their stories with us, and especially to Julie, Iseabail, Tausha, and Cathy, whose voices you heard in this episode. Thanks to the School of Education at the University of Glasgow, who funded parts of this work. We work as part of the team of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts, Professor Alison Phipps.

[JINGLE]

Esa Aldegheri:

شكراً, grazie, tapadh leibh, totenda, thank you for listening to this episode. For the full show notes and for more information about our work, please visit bit.ly/UNESCO_RILA.

[JINGLE]

