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**Beads and Medals to Any Amount: Indigenous  
Gambling Games and Missionary Activity in the  
Western Subarctic, 1870-1930**

Although missionary activity among the indigenous Athapaskan (Indian) people of the Canadian subarctic began as a contest between missionaries of the Anglican Church and the Oblate order, the opposing missionaries soon found themselves united in their antagonism towards one of the core aspects of indigenous culture. Most missionaries displayed an implacable hostility towards the power and authority of aboriginal medicine people, or "shamans," and to what the local population considered to be the use or public display of such power. Although the missionaries were erroneous in identifying the system of cultural practices centered around the concept of medicine power, as formalized religion, suppression of this system was a fundamental prerequisite for the projection of missionary religious authority within the region.

One of the arenas in which this conflict came to be played out, was the area of traditional gambling games, in particular the "Stick-Gambling Game." This game drew the missionaries' ire for several reasons: they were opposed to gambling in principle; secondly, the game kept the people, as the missionaries saw it, away from more important and useful activities; and, lastly and most importantly, success in the "Hand Game," according to the local understanding, was greatly dependent upon the judicious use of medicine power on part of the players. In consequence, the Hand Game was the one traditional recreational activity that the missionaries sought to suppress with considerable vigor.

For the indigenous people, this opposition amounted to an inexplicable attack not only on one of their favorite recreational activities, but on a cultural tradition that served to bring into focus important elements of the social order, be they gendered relations, intercultural relations between different bands, or the fundamental importance of medicine power itself. It speaks to the resilience of

the traditional form that the missionaries ultimately failed to suppress it. Stick Gambling is as important today as it was over a hundred years ago, and some of the traditional understandings concerning medicine power may still be expressed through the game. This paper examines the development of this conflict as it affected indigenous recreational activities, without seeking to provide a detailed explication of the local understanding of medicine power. The source material used consists of archival documents and oral history collections.

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