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## **“THEY ONLY SPOKE IN SIGHS”: THE LOSS OF LEADERS AND LIFE IN WENDAKE, 1633-1639**

Kathryn Magee Labelle

AT AROUND 8 PM ON 4 AUGUST 1638, the Wendat Confederacy called a general council to order. In attendance at this meeting were various headmen representing the nations of the seventeenth-century confederacy, a coalition that included the Bear nation (Attig-nawantan), the nation of the Rock (Arendarhonon), the people of the Cord (Attigneenongnahac), the people of the Deer (Tahontaenrat), and perhaps a fifth group, the people of the Marsh (Ataronchronon). These nations lived in what is now the Canadian Great Lakes region. The region was known to them as “Wendake,” but often referred to by the popularized term “Huronia,” just as the Wendat are often called “Huron” to this day. As these were labels applied by early French newcomers, it is more culturally appropriate to use the indigenous term “Wendat” to describe the people of the confederacy who, along with a number of Jesuit priests, gathered together on that evening in 1638. The atmosphere was solemn and serious, prompting Father Paul Le Jeune to describe the council as follows:

I do not know that I have seen anything more lugubrious than this assembly. In the beginning, they looked at one another like corpses, or rather like men who already feel the terrors of death; they spoke only in sighs, each one undertaking the enumeration of the dead and sick in his family. All that was only to incite them to vomit more bitterly upon us the venom which they concealed within.<sup>1</sup>

This seemingly traditional council was a representation of the devastating reality faced by the Wendat in the 1630s, a symbol of the social changes caused by three epidemics, which during this decade killed up to sixty percent of the Wendat population.<sup>2</sup> Men were lost; leaders were sick; councils were disillusioned. The uniformly “lugubrious” state of delegates representing the various nations across the Wendat Confederacy thus highlighted the destruction wrought by disease.

The impact of disease on Native American communities has not gone unnoticed in recent historiography. There has been important research into demographic depopulation and the impact of European conquest, warfare, religious conversion, and economic changes. Amerindian perspectives and reactions to disease have also had much attention.<sup>3</sup> Studies focused on the Wendat experience consider similar questions.<sup>4</sup> Yet, upon reflection, one is struck by the ironic notion that, although these studies stress the importance of the Native American population and demographics, there is almost nothing pertaining to the

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Native American person. Rather, current scholarship focuses on *overall* reactions, *universal* perceptions, and *general* dynamics of disease-ridden societies. In these accounts, the stories of the individuals who lost their lives are often overlooked, as they are relegated to a numerical statistic or a faceless account. This paper seeks to address this issue by taking into consideration the personal and historical narratives of Wendat civil headmen who died as a result of the epidemics of the 1630s. One of the advantages of shifting from a general to particular focus is that it allows the political and cultural dynamics of a society in crisis to be revealed. Consider what the critical impact might have been upon the nascent United States if George Washington had succumbed to the smallpox epidemics taking place during the American Revolution. To cast aside the political and diplomatic importance of Wendat leaders is to ignore their personal contributions as well as the impact on the confederacy of a loss of leadership during a time that was arguably as critical and socially transforming for the Wendat as the War of Independence was for Americans. Just as Washington and other Founding Fathers chose strategies to guide their disillusioned community towards solutions, Wendat leaders instigated policies to address the cultural disruptions brought on by disease and the precarious position in which their own community consequently found itself.

In his seminal work *The Children of Aataentsic*, Bruce Trigger speculates that the Wendat lost experienced headmen throughout the 1630s. It is also likely, according to Trigger, that many of these leaders would have died before they could transmit their knowledge to their heirs.<sup>5</sup> Although plausible, this analysis remains in the realm of the hypothetical: concrete examples of headmen dying, and the specific effects of their deaths on the Wendat community, are left to the imagination. To address this, the following analysis, with specific emphasis on the lives of headmen Taretande and Aenon, delivers demonstrative examples of Trigger's speculative analysis. Reconstructing the influence of these men and their contributions to society helps to illustrate the complex and intense atmosphere of the 1630s in a more tangible way. This paper seeks to shed light on political divisions, to uncover failed military strategies, to reveal secluded meetings, and to explain shifts in policy. This approach differs from conventional interpretations of the impact of disease on the Wendat. Scholars have typically focused primarily on connections between the loss of religious leaders and an increase in Christian conversions, the loss of young men and consequent lack of warriors to fight the Iroquois, and the increase in economic dependency on the French with the death of many civil leaders.<sup>6</sup> The general narrative is thus transformed through this revision, highlighting previously overlooked transitions in diplomacy as war chiefs replaced civil leaders in the wake of the epidemics. Taken as a whole, the following account explores the agency, activism, and loss of headmen during a period of community crisis and survival. It is through an examination of these leaders that one may come to understand that *sixty percent* is not simply a number, but a symbolic reference to many significant and unique lives.

## **Wendat Leaders**

The political leadership roles of the seventeenth-century Wendat were divided into two categories: civil headmen and war chiefs.<sup>7</sup> Although men traditionally occupied both

these positions, the selection of community political leaders was predominantly in the power of women. The Wendat were a matricentric society, allowing for female authority over kinship, food cultivation and residency patterns.<sup>8</sup> More to the point, women also influenced the selection of male heirs and future headmen.<sup>9</sup> This process usually involved the oldest or most senior woman of a clan nominating a male member of her clan for the position. This was done in consultation with other women. After the “clan mother” voiced her selection, the existing headmen would approve or reject the choice.<sup>10</sup> Following the men’s vote, women still exercised their authority over the power of appointed male leaders. Typically, a feast was held in honour of the newly chosen headman, and if the women did not accept the new headman, his leadership would be doomed to failure. The Jesuits reported that when the song of the dead was sung for the previous headman, “if two women do not come in to pitch the tone, all is lost, and they expect to see only broken heads under a Captain who assumes the name.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, despite the fact that women may not have been eligible to hold political office, they were nonetheless important decision makers throughout the selection process and the subsequent careers of Wendat civil and war leaders.

Although both the civil headman and war chief positions involved similar responsibilities in terms of guiding their respective communities, there were clear differences as well. On the one hand, war chiefs usually attained their position through demonstrations of bravery and military might. They were responsible for leading a small and distinct faction of Wendat society—the warriors. Their role was to see that the community’s men were prepared and trained for battle if the need should arise. They did not have the power to reward or penalize anyone within the community, not even the warriors.<sup>12</sup> The war headmen were also called upon by the women of their community to lead and organize war councils and to deliberate on military campaigns during times of conflict. In brief, these men held a very specialized role within the leadership ranks of their societies. They did not engage in civil affairs, instead conserving their influence for battle strategies and war councils.

In contrast, civil headmen, or *Hatiywannens*<sup>13</sup> (*Haywannen* in singular form), were responsible for affairs of state and foreign relations, as well as for organizing feasts, dances, games, and councils of peace. While they did not take charge of war councils or military campaigns, their duties included a variety of other jobs. The *Hatiy-wannens* were representatives of community villages, individual nations, and, at times, the confederacy at large. Although this position was most often hereditary, a *Haywannen* still had to prove himself worthy of the position. Individuals were expected to demonstrate intellectual superiority, diplomatic skill, bravery, and support from their community.<sup>14</sup> Wendat villages often had more than one civil leader, although no one *Haywannen* was any more powerful than another.<sup>15</sup> They did not receive presents or gifts for their appointments, but they did command respect and obedience from their constituents. Significantly, while these men held great power, they were not arbitrators of political decisions. Samuel de Champlain took note of the Wendat system of civil leadership, observing that “the older and leading men assemble in a council, in which they settle upon and propose all that is necessary for the affairs of the village. This is done by a plurality of voices.... They have no particular chiefs with absolute command.”<sup>16</sup> In the

practice of what has been called “forest diplomacy,” civil leaders had to facilitate productive communication and achieve formidable consensus in order to instigate foreign policy, and to shape domestic policy as well.<sup>17</sup> The skills these tasks required were constantly in demand, becoming even more critical during times of social insecurity. Consequently, the intense atmosphere invoked by a series of epidemics in Wendake throughout the 1630s made the *Hatiywannens*’ role all the more crucial. It was during this time that the Wendat were seeking solutions to the problems of a dwindling population and unstable political networks. Thus, the innovative leadership and diplomacy of certain *Hatiywannens* became critical as attempts were made to guide the Wendat in their struggle against disease.

### The Atmosphere of Disease

In the autumn of 1633, smallpox made its first decisive attack on the confederacy,<sup>18</sup> and by 1640 the total population had been reduced by half.<sup>19</sup> Following the initial introduction of smallpox in 1633, the Wendat experienced a major epidemic in 1634. It began in the summer and continued to debilitate the population throughout the winter months.<sup>20</sup> The Jesuits, who observed this epidemic first hand, made notes on the symptoms of the disease, describing a “sort of measles and an oppression of the stomach.”<sup>21</sup> According to Jesuit Jean de Brébeuf, it usually began with a high fever and ended with a bout of diarrhoea. This was followed by a rash that looked like “a sort of measles or smallpox, but different from that common in France.” Some victims also suffered blindness or blurred vision for several days. The epidemic of 1634 was so severe that communities were unable to harvest food for subsistence during the winter.<sup>22</sup> The exact number of people affected by this disease is uncertain, but Bruce Trigger argues that “there can be no doubt that many were stricken.” Brébeuf noted that he did not know anyone who had escaped the epidemic and that a large number had died.<sup>23</sup>

Jesuit records indicate that the death rates within Wendake remained uncharacteristically high in comparison to previous years, although the epidemic subsided after the winter and during the early months of 1635. The state of relative remission did not last, however, and another epidemic, more devastating than the last, attacked Wendat villages in the spring of 1636. It began in May and persisted for the next six months.<sup>24</sup> The symptoms of this disease were much more drawn out than those of 1634, and victims were often bedridden for long periods of time before they began to recover, or passed away.<sup>25</sup> The death rates were unprecedented. In the span of eight days, the village of Ossossane lost ten individuals. By the end of the epidemic, this same village had lost fifty people in total.<sup>26</sup> Based on the total deaths from Ossossane, Trigger estimates that roughly five hundred Wendat died during the 1636 epidemic.<sup>27</sup>

A third epidemic, which some scholars suggest was scarlet fever, hit the Wendat in the summer of 1637.<sup>28</sup> The illness lasted well into the fall, as the Jesuit accounts depict the disease at its most extreme state from 10 to 12 November. The Jesuit missionaries were filled with anxiety, and frequently wrote during this period that they were constantly

surrounded by the sick and dying.<sup>29</sup>

While the Jesuit accounts provide good data on death rates and the physical symptoms of disease, the true devastation of the epidemics is best illustrated through accounts of the personal experiences of those who suffered in this hostile environment. Father Le Jeune, for instance, was so struck by the loss of an eleven-year-old boy named Arahkie that he omitted any account of this subject in his original records, including it only when he “was ready to write about it, [feeling] its strong hold upon [his] heart...[hardly able to] keep the tears from falling from [his] eyes.”<sup>30</sup>

Arahkie—the name means “closing day”—was a young boy who was like “a little Sun which arose before the eyes.” He was physically fit, both taller and stronger than any of the other boys his age. He was also intelligent beyond his years, often described as if he were on an equal footing with the adults of his community. The Jesuits characterized him as “sedate, grave, obliging and of agreeable conversation. He was polite, and took pride in appearing serious in the midst of the insolence of his companions.... He was wonderfully docile, and, as he had a very happy memory, he learned easily all that was taught him.” Despite his exceptional qualities, Arahkie could not escape the disease. He was the first in his family to fall ill, followed quickly by his grandmother, mother, and four or five others within his household. Eventually, disease immobilized this boy and his family, who isolated themselves from their community out of fear that they might spread their illness to others. Arahkie lost his will to speak, and refused to converse with anyone. Thus, the transformation from an exuberant and articulate boy to a sorrowful, weak soul had begun. After several days of seclusion, Arahkie’s family members began to recover, but the young boy was not so lucky. Hours before his death, this boy, who was known for stimulating conversation and superior intelligence, mumbled his last word: “*chieske*,” which the Jesuit fathers translated as “What do I know?”<sup>31</sup>

Arahkie’s story is significant for several reasons. First, the sense of loss and sadness felt by those around this young boy is a vivid demonstration of the severe devastation experienced by those dealing with an atmosphere of rampant disease. This despair would impair the ability of the survivors, who were mired in personal grief, to organize and maintain a functioning society. In addition, Arahkie was not only loved but respected by his community. Already, at the age of eleven, this young Wendat possessed the leadership qualities associated with a talented *Haywannen*. He is, then, a prime example of a future Wendat leader who never had the chance to reach his potential. Finally, Arahkie is not an isolated case. In fact, young men and future leaders like this boy were the ones most susceptible to disease.<sup>32</sup> Historian Daniel Richter asserts that “the most severe reactions and the highest mortality rates directly attributed to viral infections occur among those in the prime of their life.”<sup>33</sup> Those claimed by disease were arguably some of the most physically and politically active individuals within their society. Those who died, therefore, did not just include potential leaders, but current leaders as well. Throughout the 1630s, there were many instances where the energy and accumulated wisdom of respected *Hatiywannens* was cut short. As headmen died, leadership was lost and policies were forgotten, disrupting diplomacy, domestic politics, and the security of the Wendat Confederacy.

## The Hatiywannens

The influential *Haywannen* Taretande serves as a case study that demonstrates the impact of the loss of leadership on the Wendat during the 1630s. Taretande was a civil headman of the southern Bear nation, a Bear clan member, and belonged to the village of Ihonatiria.<sup>34</sup> Since the coming of Christian missionaries and, more specifically, the arrival of the Jesuits, Taretande had maintained a policy of resistance and rejection. At first, Taretande's resistance came in the form of public mockery. The Jesuits had taken up residence in Ihonatiria, often holding religious ceremonies and inviting the Wendat to attend. They offered catechisms throughout their stay in order to instruct the natives in the Catholic faith, and even enticed them to attend by offering tobacco to all those who participated. Taking advantage of this situation, Taretande would accept the invitation only to make jokes about Christian rituals and beliefs once he arrived. He would then take the tobacco and declare for all those present that he had come for the sole reason of obtaining it.<sup>35</sup> By chastising the Jesuits in a public forum, Taretande demonstrated a number of aspects of his leadership. One, he exhibited a lack of fear of the French by showing that he was comfortable confronting them publicly. Two, Taretande's conduct demonstrated that he was not convinced of the superiority of the Christian faith and remained loyal to Wendat traditional practices. Finally, his public displays suggest that he was supported, at least to some extent, by other members of his society, and this encouraged him to continue this type of mockery on other occasions.

As the epidemics became more severe and the death rates increased, so too did Taretande's resistance to the Jesuits. In addition to the informal displays of hostility at Christian ceremonies, the civil leader took action during official councils throughout the mid 1630s. In a meeting that took place in 1636, for example, Taretande lashed out at the Jesuits in attendance by throwing burning coals from the council fire at them. He followed this physical display of anti-Jesuit sentiment with verbal threats at a general council on 4 January 1637.

It was at this meeting that *Hatiywannens* had gathered to discuss the popular belief that the Jesuits were to blame for the diseases afflicting the confederacy. Addressing the council, Taretande was adamant that the cause was strictly related to the missionaries. He went to great lengths in his condemnation of the Jesuits, and concluded his oration with a public declaration that if anyone in his family should die, he would "split the head" of the first Frenchman he saw.<sup>36</sup>

Following the January council, Taretande sought to put his words into action by proposing a policy of eradication. His request gained support from at least six other Bear nation *Hatiywannens*, and resulted in a meeting between Taretande, his brother Sononkhiaconc, and the Jesuit missionaries. This private meeting took place at the Jesuits' cabin on the evening of 4 January, the same day as the general council. Once again, Taretande hounded the Jesuits to admit their guilt in the epidemics. He accused them of sorcery, which could be punishable by death. After deliberations, however, Taretande confessed that the council would not agree unanimously on a death sentence, but that a number of headmen had resolved to expel the Jesuits from the Wendat country

and send them back to Quebec in the spring.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the Jesuits were made aware that Taretande's attitude was not unique. Rather, it was representative of a growing faction within the Bear nation that desired the complete removal of the missionaries from Wendat society. Moreover, Taretande had shown himself to be a formidable opponent, passionate in his convictions and motivated to implement his policy.

In addition to the encouragement he received from other civil leaders, Taretande was also supported in his position by his family. Jesuit records indicate the missionaries' extreme annoyance, for instance, with the fact that Sononkhiacnc, Taretande's younger brother, made fun of the catechisms in the same manner as the headman. Equally troubling was the refusal of the children in Taretande's house to listen to the Jesuits' teachings. The Jesuits had visited the home on several occasions, trying desperately to instill Christian education in the youth. This, however, was met with so much opposition that the Jesuits eventually gave up altogether, ceasing their visits to the home entirely. Significantly, the single member of Taretande's family who was most effective in agitating against the Jesuits was his mother, the so-called "renegade Christian." This woman was baptized in 1635, making her one of the first converts by the Jesuits. This, however, seems to have been a superficial conversion, in that she often denied her ties to Christianity, choosing to support Wendat traditional practices when the occasion pleased her.<sup>38</sup>

The conflict between the missionaries and Taretande's family persisted even as they faced their own collapse in the wake of disease. Only a few days after Taretande's private meeting with the Jesuits, three members of his family fell ill. This was followed by his mother, Sononkhiacnc, and finally the *Haywannen* himself. The entire household was cut off from society, isolated so that they would not infect others. The illness quickly took its first victim, a sixteen-year-old sibling of Taretande. Unfortunately, with little time to grieve this loss, the family realized that their mother, the "renegade," was also dying. Then, like a game of dominos, one after another, brothers and sisters all fell. Left alone, Taretande spent his last hours in meditation, trying to escape the insufferable physical pain that engulfed his body. On 12 January 1637, Taretande joined the rest of his family in the land of the dead.<sup>39</sup>

Despite their weakened condition and the hypothetical chance that Christian baptism might cure their disease, no one in Taretande's family converted during their illness. In fact, Taretande's mother used the last of her energy to insist that she regretted her earlier baptism and did not believe in the Christian faith.<sup>40</sup> The persistence of anti-Jesuit sentiment, led by Taretande and supported by his family, must have made a strong impression on those within the wider community. It was a clear demonstration of resistance and rejection of the Jesuits during a time when not only the fate of the missionaries was uncertain, but the fate of the Wendat as well. Taretande's skill and determination provided a response and strategy to deal with the turmoil faced by the Wendat. He had persuaded a number of civil headmen to support his endeavours, and had executed his plan by meeting with the Jesuits and communicating the coalition's desire to have them removed by the following spring. Despite Taretande's apparent success in securing agreement in his community for a policy of expulsion, he did not live long enough to put this policy into effect, and the Jesuits did not, in fact, leave Wendake the

next spring. This suggests either a purposeful or unconscious lack of engagement by the surviving Wendat leaders in implementing the plan. In any case, it would seem that Taretande's death signified not only the loss of an important leader, but of his policies as well.

Taretande was not the only *Haywannen* responding to the intense atmosphere of unrest in the 1630s. For certain, many other leaders took up the call for guidance and strategy. Of particular significance was the influence of another Bear clan headman from the Northern Bear nation, Aenon.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to Taretande, Aenon spent the 1630s campaigning in support of the Jesuits and the French. This *Haywannen* was involved in all aspects of Wendat diplomacy, as well as being an active participant in the developing fur trade economy.<sup>42</sup> He had the talent to persuade and the confidence to put his plans into action. In fact, the Jesuits believed that no other headman could prevail over Aenon.<sup>43</sup>

Much like his contemporary Taretande, Aenon was prolific. He was creative, with original ideas that he shared openly and often with all those around him. He also made frequent references to his positive relationship with the French. In a speech to Father Brébeuf, Aenon explained:

The French have always been attached to me, and have loved me; I have always assisted them in every way I could, and they have not found in all this land a better friend than I. This has not been without incurring the envy of others throughout the Country.... Whatever may be said, I shall, all my life, love and serve the French, in every way I can.<sup>44</sup>

It was Aenon's utmost desire that the French and Wendat would maintain an alliance, facilitated through Wendat diplomats and French missionaries. In his view, the nature of this alliance was to be mutually respectful and supportive. He acknowledged the differences in religion and culture, but asserted that both parties should accept these differences and that they should not be a stumbling block to diplomatic relations.<sup>45</sup> Aenon also placed great importance on the military alliance between the French and the Wendat. He emphasized the Wendat need for firearms and, equally, the French need for able bodied men to protect themselves. According to the *Haywannen*, this type of reciprocal exchange would allow for both parties to combat the Iroquois effectively and continue to live in Wendake.<sup>46</sup>

Aenon, however, did much more than talk about his aspirations for an alliance. Finding Father Brébeuf alone in his cabin, the headman took the opportunity to have a private conversation with the missionary. During this conversation, Aenon asked Brébeuf what the Wendat must do to get aid from the French and their God. The question was asked with extreme urgency as the Wendat were simultaneously being attacked by the Iroquois and disease. Brébeuf answered promptly that it was of the utmost importance for the Wendat to pray during these difficult times, and Aenon agreed to do so.<sup>47</sup>

On 21 July 1635, Aenon once again acted on his own initiative in an attempt to bring



the French closer to the Wendat. This time he met with several French missionaries at Trois Rivières for the purpose of arranging an escort for Fathers Chastelain and Garnier, who were travelling into Wendat territory. Initially, the exact destination of the priests was undecided, but Aenon seized the opportunity to make a case for his own village, and proposed to take Father Chastelain to reside with him. Despite the fact that there were six other Wendat headmen present at this meeting, all expressing a desire to keep the two missionaries at a village other than that of Aenon, it was Aenon who left Trois Rivières with Chastelain in his canoe.<sup>48</sup> In this case, Aenon's wish to have Chastelain reside within his village, and the successful negotiations of his request, demonstrate the leader's ability to act on his own, while still working towards an overall alliance between the greater Wendat community and the French. By having Chastelain close by and living among his people, Aenon secured an easily accessible correspondent to the French.

Aenon was also responsible for creating and presenting the idea of a "Centre Lieu," or central location. This plan involved the amalgamation of five villages into a massive fortified community. The main impetus for this fort was the need to defend the Wendat against pending Iroquois attacks. For six months, Aenon lobbied the French to join the Wendat in this endeavour. Throughout this time, he delivered numerous speeches, held meetings, and continuously stressed the need for full commitment from the French to join the "Centre Lieu." Aenon's determination only grew stronger as time progressed. In the spring of 1636, he sent a message to Jean de Brébeuf requesting a meeting with the missionary. Brébeuf agreed, and the two met soon afterward. Brébeuf was so impressed with the headman's speech that, although he felt his own transcription of it could not do it justice, he recorded it nonetheless.<sup>49</sup> Aenon's words demonstrate his role as an effective liaison during the negotiations over the "Centre Lieu":

Echon [the Wendat version of "Jean"], I have sent for you to learn your final decision. I would not have given you the trouble to come here, had I not been afraid that I should not find at your house the opportunity of speaking to you. Your Cabin is always full of so many people visiting you, that it is almost impossible to say anything to you in private; and then, now that we are on the point of assembling to deliberate regarding the establishment of a new Village, this inter-view might have aroused the suspicions of those who wish to keep you.<sup>50</sup>

As a shrewd diplomat, Aenon assessed the situation and took into consideration all factors that might influence the missionary's decision. He understood that in order to present his case he needed to eliminate outside interference. Urgently needing a final commitment from the French, he appealed to the missionary's desire to feel wanted. He knew that Brébeuf would be pleased by his acknowledgment of the fact that there were other villages interested in having the French priests live with them, and would thus be more inclined to listen to his appeal. While Aenon was lobbying for the French to join the "Centre Lieu," the Wendat villages of Arendorronnon, Attignenonghac, and Ossossane were expressing similar interest in having the French live among them.<sup>51</sup> Brébeuf delightedly noted that "we have to praise God, that he gives us the favor to be loved and sought after throughout the Country.... but, if we have regard to importunities, assuredly [Aenon] will prevail."<sup>52</sup>

In light of Aenon's affection for the French and his role as a leading correspondent between the Wendat and French, he was often forced to mediate between those who resisted the Jesuits' presence and those who supported them. In his speeches, Aenon frequently called upon the Wendat to maintain and confirm their alliance with the French. On one occasion, he was asked by the men of his village to represent the council at an assembly with Father Brébeuf, and he sought to explain their feelings to the French. Aenon asked the French to "think no more of what had passed... [and to forget] the evil designs that [the Wendat] had had upon [the Jesuits'] lives." Brébeuf responded by saying that he forgave them, although he was disappointed in them.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, through Aenon, the Wendat were able to make amends with the French, thus preserving the possibility of an official alliance for the future.

Aenon played a similarly important role during the meeting in which Taretande had threatened to "split the head" of a Frenchman. In response to Taretande's overt hostility towards the Jesuits, Aenon attempted to smooth over the situation by defending the missionaries and stressing the importance of the French alliance. He spoke to Taretande, expressing his belief that threats towards the Jesuits would only lead to the "destruction and ruin of the country."<sup>54</sup> Aenon then turned to the Jesuits, adding that the missionaries "should have no fear." If they were to settle down in his village, they "should always be very welcome there."<sup>55</sup> The outcome of this mediation is unclear, but the attempt by Aenon to mend the divisions between the Bear nation and the French missionaries is obvious. Rather than fighting the arguments put forth by Taretande, Aenon tactfully focused on the overall future of the community. He attempted to calm the fears of the Jesuits by demonstrating that Taretande and his supporters did not represent all the *Hatiywannens*, offering the welcoming atmosphere of his own village as proof.

Aenon's role as a mediator took on even greater significance as he was able to save several missionaries' lives. Although the public threats towards the missionaries at the meeting on 4 January 1637 were serious, it is not clear to what extent they would have been carried out. That said, there was at least one occasion on which a series of threats were initiated and supported by an entire council. At this council, the *Hatiywannens* discussed and agreed on a plan of killing Jesuit priests. Aenon attended this meeting and listened carefully as the decisions were passed. After the other men had said their part, Aenon had the last word, and expressed extreme displeasure about the council's decision. According to Father Le Jeune, Aenon continued to harangue his fellow council members "in such a way that they came and begged the Fathers not to write any of these evil thoughts to [the superiors], lest they should be badly treated in the places where [the] French are."<sup>56</sup> Apparently, Aenon's speech had a significant impact on the council's decision, and the plan to slay the priests was immediately put on hold.

Aenon's actions throughout the 1630s were not only persistent, but consistent with his unwavering belief in a French-Wendat alliance. His speeches, military strategies, and diplomatic ventures were all shaped by a policy that was in stark contrast to the equally passionate views held by Taretande. Yet, despite the crucial differences between these two *Hatiywannens*, both suffered the same fate: their lives were cut short in exactly the same way, within the same year. And, as with Taretande, the events surrounding Aenon's

death further reveal his perspectives and policies in life.

In early August 1637, Aenon made a trip to Trois Rivières to meet with the governor to discuss the likelihood of confirming an alliance. Upon arrival, Aenon was afflicted with the disease he had evaded for almost a decade. Despite his weakened state, the *Haywannen* called for interpreters and asked to see the governor. A meeting took place, at which Aenon presented the governor with a present, begging him to favour the Wendat.<sup>57</sup> Following this, he turned his attention to his Wendat kin and pressed them “not to do any harm to the French in his country.”<sup>58</sup> The poor condition of Aenon’s health worsened, and these two initiatives proved to be the final acts in his influential life. Since his death was understood to be near, he spoke to those who surrounded him, and a record was made of his words. He eloquently encapsulated his dedication to solidify an alliance once again: “I have been requested to come to the French, I am here; it is well that, since I must die, I die near them.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, even at the point of death, his belief in the importance of the French to Wendake never wavered.

On 6 August 1637, Aenon was laid to rest. Significantly, the headman’s bones were not buried in Wendat country, but alongside the French in their cemetery at Trois Rivières. Considering the Wendat concept that a person’s soul must rest in death in the same way that he lived in life, Aenon’s burial seems to have been one last symbolic attempt toward a renewed Wendat-French alliance.<sup>60</sup>

Despite Aenon’s hard work and creative diplomacy throughout the 1630s, his vision would never become a reality. Just as the anti-French policies of Taretande died with him, Aenon’s “Centre Lieu” was never established, nor was the French alliance solidified within this period.<sup>61</sup> It is hard to resist the temptation to undertake a brief counterfactual analysis to consider how history might have been altered had these policies been successful. The 1640s saw an increase in Iroquois-Wendat warfare, leading to an ultimate dispersal of the Wendat Confederacy in 1649. Perhaps if a “Centre Lieu” had been formed, the Wendat would have been better able to defend themselves against the Iroquois. Certainly it is conceivable that if the French had agreed to Aenon’s alliance and provided guns, as the English and Dutch had done with the Iroquois, the ability of the Wendat to compete militarily would have been significantly strengthened.<sup>62</sup>

In light of the considerable losses sustained through the deaths of *Hatiywannens* such as Taretande and Aenon in 1637, one may begin to understand the particular ways in which the Wendat Confederacy was transformed by the epidemics. These specific case studies represent individual initiatives, community policies, and political divisions, all made in response to the circumstances brought on by disease. Many scholars explain the Iroquois victory over the Wendat in 1649 by emphasizing the detrimental effects of disease on the Wendat population in the decade preceding their dispersal.<sup>63</sup> These interpretations, for the most part, are expressed in general terms; Ian K. Steele asserts, for instance, that “due to a weakened population [the Wendat] were unable to resist the Iroquois.”<sup>64</sup> The examples of Taretande and Aenon serve to bolster this popular argument. They demonstrate the very real way that the loss of real leaders weakened the confederacy in the years leading up to 1649.

## The Replacements

Bearing in mind the significant loss of life suffered by the Wendat, one is faced with the perplexing question of who replaced the civil leaders. *Hatiywannens* were in charge of a community's trade, politics, and security; who took over these responsibilities when people like Aenon and Taretande died? Although it seems likely that both war headmen and civil leaders died throughout the 1630s, there is evidence to suggest that the community's war leaders began to take on the roles of civil headmen. Consider, for instance, the words of a war headman at a 1638 peace council:

My Brothers, you know well that I hardly ever speak except in our war councils, and that I concern myself only with the affairs of arms; but I am obliged to speak here, since all the other [*Hatiywannens*] are dead. Now before I follow them to the grave I must free my mind; and perhaps it will be for the good of the country, which is going to ruin.<sup>65</sup>

Another example of this shift in leadership took place a few months earlier, in the summer of 1637, when an influential war chief named Ondesson, a prominent member of the Hawk clan and the village of Angoutenc, engaged in civil diplomacy.<sup>66</sup> His community was one of the hardest hit by the epidemics, leaving the survivors agitated and in search of answers. The Jesuits visited this village twice during the summer of 1637, and found that the majority of the community blamed their desperate situation on the presence of the French in Wendake.<sup>67</sup>

On 8 July 1637, Ondesson personally invited French missionaries to an upcoming civil council. The war chief explained that many, including himself, felt afraid of the Jesuits, and that this fear might be assuaged if the Jesuits clarified their purpose at the council. The war headman's diplomacy was a success: the Jesuits agreed to Ondesson's request, and a civil council was held later that week.<sup>68</sup> Similar progress was made at the council itself. After the traditional rituals of speeches, smoking, and introductions, the Jesuits explained their good intentions towards the Wendat. This was followed by much deliberation by Angoutenc leaders. Upon conclusion, the Wendat delegates decided to welcome the Jesuits into their community and encouraged future visits by the French.<sup>69</sup> Although Jesuit records of the council proceedings are not explicit about Ondesson's participation, it seems clear that his efforts were critical to the outcome of the event. Ondesson's diplomatic overtures towards the French were a determining factor in ensuring that the council would take place. Moreover, his role as an ambassador for the village's civil matters highlights the ways in which war leaders were becoming more familiar with civic duties, especially duties that were concerned with international relations.

The Jesuits made specific reference to the phenomenon of Wendat war headmen becoming more involved in French-Wendat affairs in their 1642 report. In particular, the missionaries remarked on the increased number of baptisms of war leaders, linking the "marked degree" of increase in Wendat Christian converts to the number of Christian war

chiefs.<sup>70</sup> Reflecting upon this apparent shift in conversions, Father Le Jeune noted that, during the 1630s, “hardly could one find, hitherto, among our Christians two or three warriors” but, more recently, “we have counted in a single band as many as twenty-two Believers—all men of courage, and mostly Captains or people of importance.”<sup>71</sup> Of particular interest to the Jesuits were the leaders Thomas Sondakwa from the Wenro nation,<sup>72</sup> and Mathurin Astiskwa and Martin Tehoachiakwan, both from the Cord nation. It was the baptisms of “persons of such importance,” according to the missionaries, “that brought about many others.”<sup>73</sup> Martin Tehoachiakwan, for instance, expressed his clear desire for his people to follow him in the Christian faith. In a public plea to his community, the war chief asserted:

the enemies are at our doors.... I withdraw from misfortune, let who will, follow me; our affairs are in a desperate state.... I do not fear the Iroquois; I dread the more inhuman cruelties of the devils in hell, in a fire that is never extinguished. I abandon you, without abandoning you, or rather I abandon your follies; I abandon our evil customs; from this moment, I renounce all kinds of sin, and know ye that tomorrow I shall be a Christian.<sup>74</sup>

Although Tehoachiakwan’s desire to encourage conversion may well have had a spiritual element, the fact that the French began to give European weapons to converts may also have played a role in his newfound Christian zeal.<sup>75</sup> Support for this hypothesis can be found in Father Le Jeune’s remarks that “the use of arquebuses, refused to the Infidels by Monsieur the Governor, and granted to the Christian Neophytes, [was] a powerful attraction to win them.”<sup>76</sup> The need for French military support had not diminished since Aenon’s quest for a Centre Lieu; thus conversion represented an alternative attempt to obtain weapons from the French. War headmen sought to strengthen the French alliance with an acceptance of the Christian faith, which allowed for a relationship that had not existed before and led to an increase in contact between the French and the Wendat war chiefs. In order to be baptized, war leaders were forced to converse with the missionaries, and subsequently they began to act as Christian emissaries to their Wendat followers in order to encourage conversion.

The participation of former war headmen in civil initiatives and foreign affairs represents an important development in Wendat diplomacy and leadership. In 1638, a war chief expressed regret that, despite his traditional role as a war leader concerned exclusively with the “affairs of arms,” in the aftermath of the epidemics and the deaths of so many civil headmen, he was forced to partake in civil matters for which he had little background. Of particular concern was his lack of familiarity with international diplomacy, and he especially had reservations about dealing with the French. In an attempt to explain his situation, as well as to justify his involvement in a civil council, this war headman further asserted, “I neither hate nor love the French; I have never had anything to do with them, and we see each other for the first time to-day.”<sup>77</sup> As has already been suggested, it seems that, for Ondesson and other Christian war chiefs, interaction with the French was a departure from their traditional roles. These cases, furthermore, demonstrate that war leaders were not only coming into contact with the French on a more frequent basis, but were key negotiators in terms of Wendat-French relations. With the loss of civil leaders in the epidemics, the confederacy was forced to

reorganize its polity, replace its leaders, and develop new strategies and forms of leadership.

### **Consequences: Warfare and Women**

A shift in Wendat leadership led to a change in policy. In 1634, just before the first epidemic hit Wendake, the confederacy had made a peace treaty with the Seneca nation. The Seneca lived in the closest proximity to the Wendat, and were therefore the most threatening of the Five Nations Iroquois. This peace agreement was essential in diminishing the frequency with which the Wendat Confederacy went to war. Four years later, however, nearing the end of the third epidemic of the 1630s, the Wendat made the decision to break the treaty and wage war on the Seneca once again.<sup>78</sup> Although the argument might be made that this desire for conflict was consistent with a traditional mourning war—a form of war typically waged to fill the void created by deaths by adopting captives into the community—the circumstances of 1638 point to an alternative explanation.<sup>79</sup> During the same year that the confederacy instigated war with the Seneca, the Wendat incorporated a group of six to seven hundred Wenronon refugees who had migrated from their homeland in what is now up- per New York State.<sup>80</sup> Given their recent adoption of hundreds of Wenrononians, it is questionable that the Wendat would wage war for the purposes of repopulating their society. More convincing, perhaps, is the connection between a renewal of war and the increased involvement of war headmen in civil matters. Less familiar with negotiations of peace, war leaders began to shape Wendat society and policy towards situations that they had more experience in orchestrating. Unlike Taretande and Aenon, who sought diplomatic solutions to the dire circumstances of the confederacy, these new leaders resorted to strategies more in line with their role as war headmen. Conflict and warfare became a viable means for the confederacy to retaliate against the devastation experienced in the 1630s. Consequently, Iroquois-Wendat conflicts dominated the confederacy for the next ten years.

The status of women in Wendat society was also transformed by changes in civil leadership. Although scholars have typically explained the loss of power and prestige of Wendat women as the result of the fur trade and Christianity, the effects of disease should not be overlooked.<sup>81</sup> With the loss of so many current and future male leaders, women lost their ability to choose headmen. Rather than being able to select the most appropriate candidate, clan mothers were forced to make do with the men who had survived the epidemics. The process for selection became superficial, as choices were few to non-existent.<sup>82</sup> Women's power was uprooted and rearranged, essentially weakening their former influence on Wendat politics. Furthermore, although religion played an important role in the decline of women's status, the Christian conversions encouraged by war chiefs only became a significant factor once war chiefs had taken on civil responsibilities. Political reorganization within Wendat society was therefore a crucial prerequisite to the spread of Christianity. It was only after this shift and with the support of new Wendat civil leaders that the Jesuits' work was made more marketable and popular throughout the confederacy.

This sequence of events had significant repercussions for Wendat women. Baptism was

an attack on Wendat matricentric structures, bringing with it patriarchal regimes and male-dominated social systems. Many Wendat women outwardly rejected the entire notion of Christian baptism, creating obstacles to the new policies promoted by war/civil leaders. Arahkie's mother, for instance, had been deemed a "wretch" by the Jesuits for her adamant objection to Christian practices.<sup>83</sup> On several occasions, the missionaries tried to convince this woman to allow her sick son to be baptized, but she unequivocally denied their request. She maintained that baptism was not the solution to her son's illness and forced Arahkie's mouth shut anytime he began to speak otherwise. This mother was so strong in her conviction that when the Jesuits persisted in campaigning for a Christian conversion she became infuriated, picking up a burning brand and threatening to throw it at the priests if they did not leave immediately.<sup>84</sup>

Taretande's mother was of a similar disposition. As mentioned previously, she had been baptized but later regretted it. In light of her outward support for traditional spiritual practices, the Jesuits deemed her a "renegade." She often made public displays of her dislike for Christian beliefs. When she was asked to teach fellow Wendats the missionary mysteries she refused, and when asked to make the sign of the cross she began yelling and screaming at the priests, scolding them for not respecting Wendat traditions.<sup>85</sup> Her "renegade" stance did not soften when she became sick. Despite numerous visits by the local missionaries throughout her illness, when the priest asked her if she was not in the least bit appreciative of her baptism, she yelled with full force "No!"<sup>86</sup>

Just as they had limited choice when seeking to select experienced and trained *Hatiywannens*, women had very few options to prevent their loss of power by the 1640s. Either they could openly declare their anti-Christian sentiment and hope that the legacy of a matriarchal heritage would continue to maintain its influence on community members and leaders, or they could convert with the belief that the new religion would bring strength and rejuvenation to a dwindling population. Neither of these choices could be taken lightly, for both required a woman to take a gamble on not only her own life but those of her kin as well. By the late 1630s and well into the 1640s, if a woman whose village and/or kinship network was not predominantly Christian chose to convert nevertheless, she faced a life of isolation and lack of aid in times of distress.<sup>87</sup> The Wendat convert "Anne" serves as a prime example of the devastating repercussions arising from a decision to be baptized. In 1640 Anne was seventy years old and a woman of high rank. She had two daughters and a niece, all of whom had been baptized, and Anne herself was also baptized in the wake of the epidemics. The conversion of Anne and other members of her household meant that her entire family was chastised by the rest of the villagers who were traditionalists.<sup>88</sup> While this isolation would have been difficult in its own right, the loss of Anne's daughters and niece due to disease left the household paralysed. The aged clan mother was left alone to care for three orphaned grandchildren. She was sickly, weak and blind.<sup>89</sup> In normal circumstances, women from the rest of village would have come to Anne's aid, but in light of her conversion and the tensions between Christians and traditionalists, no one came to help. As a result, Anne was unable to collect firewood, her weak eyesight made it nearly impossible to make food or clothing, and she had neither milk to feed the children nor anyone to nurse them. Starvation set in and at least two of the three infants did not survive.<sup>90</sup>

Considering the devastating consequences of Anne's decision to convert, the adamant rejection of the Jesuit faith by the mothers of Taretande and Arahkie seems all the more understandable. These women, like Anne, were faced with insurmountable odds. Death was all around them, and choices needed to be made. Yet, what options did they have? Before they could adjust to the transformations affecting their disease-ridden society, Iroquois attacks and incessant warfare engulfed the confederacy. Just when stable, effective leadership was most needed, both male and female leaders were lost. When male war chiefs took on unfamiliar civil duties in a bid to find solutions, their inclination towards Christian conversion undermined the formerly central role that women played. This exacerbated the crisis by diminishing female power and prestige, thus depriving Wendat society of an important source of leadership and authority.

## Conclusion

The 1630s represent not only a time of great loss but, simultaneously, a period of creative strategizing and active diplomacy. Wendat leaders were not merely passive bystanders to disease, but active agents attempting to find solutions in order to save their people. Roles and responsibilities were transformed, while traditional policies and people were replaced with new ones. These changes are more indicative of Wendat adaptation and resilience than they are a signal of their destruction. Thus, this alternative interpretation challenges the defeatist paradigm so often imposed on Native American nations struck by disease. Bruce Trigger has raised this very point, asserting that by portraying Amerindians as constant victims, historians fail

to acknowledge the tenacity with which native peoples, in the face of increasingly unequal odds, continued to defend their lands, customs, and personal dignity.... This behaviour constitutes a record of continuing resourcefulness and adaptability under conditions of stress that had never been paralleled in North America in prehistoric times or at any time in the history of most other peoples.<sup>91</sup>

The case studies of individuals such as the leaders discussed in this paper reveal several insights into not only the seventeenth-century Wendat world but other Native American histories as well. Most significantly, the stories of Taretande and Aenon are important in their own right, as they have yet to be the main focus of any academic study. Just as the history of the American Revolution would be incomplete without the inclusion of George Washington, the history of the Wendat is enriched and made more explicable through an understanding of these influential *Hatiywannens*. In addition, these historical biographies promote a degree of empathy that is difficult to obtain through a mere study of numbers and statistics. By attaching names, stories, and lives to just a few of the thousands of people who died during the 1630s, one comes to a more immediate understanding of the personal loss experienced by the community. Daniel Richter has remarked on the lack of research into individuals within Native societies, noting that it "is much easier to reconstruct the abstract forces that constrained the seventeenth-century Native world than it is to recover the personal experiences of the people who struggled to give the world human shape."<sup>92</sup> Thus, this study has sought to more directly examine the effects of disease on Wendat leaders and their communities. It serves as a reminder that



people like the young Arahkie, whose potential we will never know, and like the “renegade” mother who watched helplessly as her children collapsed around her, are not just statistics, but human beings. The experiences of these two, along with those of such figures as Taretande and Aenon, cannot be captured in studies that simply note the loss of sixty percent of the population to disease. In this study, these individuals become the medium by which those in the present are exposed to the anxiety, sadness, and despair that engulfed the Wendat Confederacy in the 1630s.