Hygiene, Morality, and Power: The Linen Shift as a Colonial Tool in an Ursuline Convent in Seventeenth-Century Quebec

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Abstract: In seventeenth-century colonial New France, an Ursuline convent was established with a mission to convert Indigenous girls to Christianity and assimilate them into French society. The linen chemise, a simple T-shaped undergarment worn across Europe, played an essential role in the nuns’ efforts towards the goals of French colonization. Laden with cultural ideas of the body, cleanliness, and purity, the chemise was necessary to make a person Christian as well as culturally and physically French. While ultimately unsuccessful in establishing the physical and cultural uptake of the chemise or French culture in Indigenous communities, the efforts of the Ursuline nuns contributed to the groundwork for imperial justification and future attempts at assimilation of the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

Introduction

In 1639, a group of Ursuline nuns from France sailed across the Atlantic to establish a convent in the newly established colony of Quebec. One of their goals was to establish a school to convert Indigenous girls in the surrounding area not just to Christianity but to the French way of life. When French colonists arrived in North America, they encountered Indigenous cultures incredibly different from their own. Seeing these cultures as “less civilized,” French colonists aimed to assimilate them into their own religion and cultural practices including ways of eating, dressing, and behaving. The Ursuline convent contributed to this colonial goal by focusing their efforts on turning Indigenous girls into French citizens and potential wives for French colonists. Though largely unsuccessful in convincing the girls to live according to French culture after leaving the convent, during their time at the school, the students lived and dressed in a French manner. This paper will focus on the use of a specific garment, the linen shift, as a powerful tool...
and symbol used by the Ursuline nuns in their attempts to turn their students from Indigenous to French.

Figure 4.1: French Chemise circa 1750–75.
(Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access Collection)

To understand the importance of the linen shift in French colonies, the role linen undergarments played within the system of French dress culture must be understood. The linen shirt or shift was worn beneath other garments by both men and women and acted as a second skin of sorts. Linen undergarments absorbed the oil and sweat of the skin protecting the garments

worn on top. The linen undergarments were cheaper and relatively simple to create making them more disposable than exterior garments. They could ideally be washed more often and with greater force than the more expensive outer garments. As they lay against the skin, they also played a significant role in French ideas of cleanliness. Linen was important practically to protect exterior garments but also hygienically to cleanse and protect the body at a time when water was increasingly feared for its ability to carry disease. According to prevailing European medical beliefs of the seventeenth century, the capacity of linen to absorb sweat was equated with its ability to also absorb infections and toxins exuded by the body at the same time. White linen indicated clean, well-laundered undergarments but was also a signifier of wealth and status as the materials and maintenance of clean linen could be expensive. Over the seventeenth and through the eighteenth century, linen consumption increased as increased access to water in France simplified laundry practices and the trickle down of the upper classes’ ideas of good manners and hygiene made clean linen a requirement of social decency for all socioeconomic classes. Quantity and quality varied with economic ability, but the use of linen undergarments were ubiquitous in French culture. Cleanliness was socially required for all respectable people because with cleanliness came morality. White linen was an expression of good bodily hygiene, but it was also an expression of virtue. This was in part symbolic but was also a piece of the belief that the exterior influenced the interior. The clothing that a person wore and the values it demonstrated became integral to their identity. In many ways, linen shifts and shirts were the most private of garments as they lay against the skin beneath other clothes. In other ways however they were the most important social demonstration a person made with their clothes. Worn by everyone, linen undergarments were essential to French ideas of morality, decency, and hygiene.

A Colonial Convent

The Ursuline nuns established a hospital and girl’s school along with their convent in Quebec. The nuns served as an important piece of French colonial strategy as they focussed on the conversion of the girls in their school. While there were some French girls in the school, the girls were mostly from Indigenous families. The girls came from a variety of backgrounds including Algonquin, Innu, Wendat, and later Haudenosaunee and Abenaki though this information is not recorded in contemporary sources. The term ‘Indigenous’ used in this paper does not adequately reflect the diversity in Indigenous cultures present but serves to focus on the broad differences between North American and European cultures as well as replace the contemporary

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2. Roche, 373.
use of “savage.”

In the seventeenth century, France had established a number of colonies across North America including present day Quebec, Nova Scotia, Illinois, and Louisiana. While the establishment of colonies was largely economically motivated to access the resources of North America, the assimilation of surrounding Indigenous populations was officially portrayed as religiously motivated and justified. The Indigenous people were described by the French as savage but through official colonial policy of conversion, “frenchifying” (francisation) or assimilation to French cultural customs, and intermarriage of Indigenous women with French men, they could become “fully civilized” French citizens. Importantly through this process, Indigenous converts would come to submit to the authority of the French Crown and the Catholic Church increasing both’s access to North American land and resources. This policy focussed on gentle conversion rather than force and largely rested on the paternalistic notion that once exposed to “superior” French ways of life, Indigenous people would assimilate of their own accord.

The Ursuline convent school played an important role in this policy by introducing Indigenous girls to French ways of life and converting them to Christianity in preparation for their assumed marriages to French men that would cement them as French themselves. The mother superior at the convent, Marie de l’Incarnation, wrote hundreds of letters back to France that detail life at the convent allowing insight into the goals of converting the girls to Christianity and assimilating them permanently into “la politesse Françoise dans laquelle [elles] les élèvent” (the French politeness in which the nuns raised them). While at the school, the nuns instructed students in religion, French language, and domestic skills. Some of the girls would live at the school while others only came for the day. At the school, the girls were dressed in French clothing and expected to maintain French hygiene standards that included the wearing and washing of linen shifts. In a remarkably flexible institution compared to later assimilation efforts, the wearing of a shift was an area where the nuns refused to compromise, reinforcing its importance to their mission. Despite its unassuming appearance, the shift played a vital role in the Ursuline convent’s attempts to evangelize and colonize.

Once they entered the Ursuline convent school, Indigenous girls were forced to dress in the French fashion and take up French habits. Though the nuns were laxer in their regulation in their North American schools and allowed girls to retain some of their cultural practices and language, clothing and hygiene were the areas where they were the least flexible. Every time the girls returned to the school from home, they had to bathe and put on clothes that included a linen

shift. In 1640 while writing to “une Dame de qualité” (a lady of quality), Marie de l’Incarnation mentions that the change in cleanliness practices enforced at her convent requires large amount of linen.

“All of the linen our founder gave us for ourselves...was used in cleaning and covering [the girls]...we prefer to have nothing than to leave our girls in the unbearable dirtiness that they bring from their cabins. When we get them, they are as naked as a worm and we must wash them from head to toe because of the grease their parents anoint over their whole bodies.”

In this letter, linen along with bathing is presented as a necessity that only the nuns can provide. As well, it is made clear that supplying the girls with linen and baths is a convent priority. When the nuns ran out of linen fabric to make shifts, they gave their own garments to the girls. Marie writes that she puts the cleanliness of the girls in the school above everything else including her own comfort. The logic of the coat of grease is not questioned but simply assumed as unhygienic and wrong. According to the French ideas of health where linen acted to absorb and remove impurities from the skin, the nakedness of the Indigenous girls meant that that grease applied on their skin as well as any other impurities were not being removed, likely causing disease. Marie follows this logic when she blames the constant return of vermin on a greasiness that returns despite changing linen and washing suggesting that the girls’ skin is emitting a buildup of grease from their life before the convent.

The Indigenous practice of spreading grease on the skin was conducted for practical purposes important to life in North America. It served as insulation, protection from water, and from biting insects common in the Eastern Woodlands. Rather than attracting vermin, the grease acted as a method for protecting a person from insects. In fact, the writing of William Wood in 1634 in New England suggests that Indigenous communities had the same reaction to European linen as Europeans had to their practices. They saw linen garments as attractive to lice and difficult to clean compared to the body, making them the dirtier choice. Within the

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9. Marie de l’Incarnation, *Correspondance*, 97:

“Tout le linge Madam notre Fondatrice nous avoit donné pour nos usage...été consumé à les nettoyer et à les couvrir...nous aimèrions mieux manquer de tout, que de laisser nos filles dans la saleté insupportable qu’elles apportent de leur cabanes. Quand on nous les donnes elles sont nues comme un ver, et il les faut laver depuis la tête jusqu’aux pieds, à cause de la graisse dont leurs parens les oignent par tout le corps:”


convent however, French hygiene practices dominated despite the different environmental demands of North America making clear the nuns prioritized the colonial mission of spreading French culture even when it came at the detriment of comfort or practicality.

As Marie was writing to a potential patron, her language reflected her feelings on the Indigenous practices she saw but was also chosen carefully in hopes of securing funds for her convent. In this letter, the dirtiness of the girls is emphasized as an ongoing struggle that required constant bathing and laundering of their linen and clothes. Marie writes, “no matter how diligently we do [bathe them] or how often we change their linen and clothing, we cannot rid them for long of the vermin caused by their abundance of grease” (et quelque diligence qu’on fasse, et quoi qu’on les changes souvent de linge et d’habits, on ne peut de long-temps les épuiser de la vermine causée par l’abondance de leurs graisses). This led easily to the need for more funds as new linen and clothing was a constant requirement. It was also an issue that would be an easy connection understood by her reader. By positioning her school as bringing hygienic practices to Indigenous girls, Marie very quickly created the narrative of necessity for her convent in North America. The convent was being positioned as better suited to care for the girls than the parents because the parents kept their children and house in “intolerable dirtiness” (salleté insupportable). Intolerable here suggests that the changes she made to the girls must inevitably happen as the alternative was unbearable. Hygiene was effectively a trump card of seemingly obvious correctness that the convent could play to justify the necessity of their school whether it was to themselves, the community they lived in, or their financial supporters back in France. The necessity and degree of education in needlework, language, and religion were somewhat more nebulous than the need for good bodily and spiritual health. By establishing Indigenous practices as unhygienic, the French nuns asserted their cultural superiority and the necessity of assimilation, which placed these religious sisters within larger efforts of French colonization.

Cleanliness, Purity, and Religion

Linen undergarments became a symbol of Christianity in the French North American colonies, for European ideas of religion and cleanliness often went hand in hand. Moral and literal uncleanliness were often equated with one another with one inevitably leading to the other. White linen fabric played a significant role in symbolizing purity within the Christian church where women wore white veils for the spiritually cleansing ‘churching’ after childbirth and the dead were wrapped in white linen for burial. It is not surprising therefore that colonial efforts at conversion were often accompanied by a preoccupation with getting converts to wear European-

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style clothing.\textsuperscript{17} Reports of successful conversions within communities mentioned the number of Indigenous people in churches but also frequently cited the clothing of the converts as well. The sight of a person in French clothing was a powerful indication that they were following the French religion.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Figure 4.2: Depiction of Saint Catherine Takakoüita by Father Claude Chauchetière, circa. 1696}
\end{figure}

In a highly circulated woodcut print of Haudenosaunee saint Catherine Takakoüita (1656–80), she is depicted wearing a long white garment that resembles a shift.\textsuperscript{18} There are other elements of her clothing that are distinctly Indigenous such as the leggings and moccasins she wears. Those elements however are more difficult to see than the white shift and cross she holds at the center of the image. Multiple depictions of Takakoüita show her fully covered in clothing and often in white. Takakoüita was renowned for her humility, modesty, and faith and in images of her, her clothing was chosen to demonstrate those qualities to the viewers. As clearly as the cross she holds, Takakoüita’s clothing was a demonstration of her faith. In the colonies, French clothing and French religion were inextricably linked and conversion could not happen without the adoption of linen undergarments.

Marie de l’Incarnation used this language, equating cleanliness and holiness when she wrote of the students in her school. When describing her successes in converting Indigenous girls,

\textsuperscript{18} DuPlessis, 102. She is also known as Kateri Takakwitha
Marie frequently described baptism as washing and purity of the converts afterwards. Prior to baptism, she describes the Indigenous girls as arriving poorly dressed and smelling badly. However, “They lose all that is savage about them as soon as they are washed in the sacred waters of baptism” (elles perdent tout ce qu’elles ont de sauvage si tôt qu’elles sont lavées des eaux saint baptême).\(^{19}\) Cleanliness and wearing linen were one and the same within French culture and the connection between clothing and hygiene, both physical and spiritual, is visible through Marie’s words. It is clear that Marie saw her mission of converting the Indigenous girls as indistinguishable from covering their bodies in linen. In 1640, she spoke of how dressing the girls in the convent in linen was a priority of the nuns so much so that they ran out of this fabric and began using their personal stores of cloth to dress the students within two years of their arrival.\(^{20}\) This letter to a donor emphasizes the need for linen as a necessary expense required to save more souls through her work. The message is clear that the conversion to Christianity required a person to be wearing linen and that its lack would invoke an emotional reaction in those in France. French ideas of moral pureness meant the Ursuline could not achieve their goals of Indigenous conversion without physical cleanliness through the white linen shift. Though not ever directly mentioned as such, encouraging the adoption of the linen shift was one of the primary goals of the Ursuline convent because it was part and parcel of their religious mission.

### The Clothes Make the (Wo)Man

Linen garments became symbols of Christianity but also of distinguishing characteristics of ‘Frenchness’ when identities in colonial spaces began to blur. The material trappings a person gathered throughout their life spoke to their adherence to a particular set of cultural practices with clothing being a publicly visible example. This is seen clearly in the case of Jean Saguinguara, a voyageur from the (French) Illinois territory who had written into his contract with a fur trade merchant in 1739 a clause for the laundering of his garments where the cost of laundering his linen would be covered by the merchant when Saguinguara arrived in New Orleans.\(^{21}\) This clause declared Saguinguara’s cultural inclination to French customs despite being from a mixed French-Indigenous heritage. It presupposes he had shirts and that illuminates that he valued their cleanliness enough to put an unusual clause into his contract. Importantly, his father’s will years earlier implored Saguinguara’s mother “that she does as much good as she can to the little Saguingora [sic], and to ensure that he not give himself over to the Sauvages.”\(^{22}\) The use of shirts for men (as with shifts for women) was a distinctly French, not Indigenous, practice and suggests that he was indeed raised within French culture. “Saguinguara’s employ-

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22. White, 182.
ment contracts positioned him, unambiguously, in the ranks of French or Canadian, not Indian voyagers.”

The use of linen and other French cultural practices, more than biological heritage, made a person definitively French. Beyond cultural transformation, the wearing of linen was seen as a literal transformation of the skin. In the view of the French in eighteenth century North America, Indigenous people were believed to be born with lighter skin and only became darker due to sun exposure and the application of grease to their skin. The belief was therefore that skin colour was mutable, and the wearing of linen would have kept Indigenous children white skinned. While biological theories of race would grow increasingly rigid in the eighteenth century, during the earlier era, wearing linens was believed to transform a person, making them not just culturally but physically French. This plays an important role in French colonial policy in the seventeenth century in which the Ursuline convent participated.

The French government in the seventeenth century was reluctant to send members of its population to Quebec. Instead of relying on immigration to populate their colonies, there was an official policy to ‘frenchify’ the Indigenous population. Through conversion, intermarriage, and the spread of French customs, the French and Indigenous populations of New France would become one people, albeit one with a distinctly French way of life. The Ursuline convent along with other French schools aimed to teach Indigenous girls not just about religion so they would become French members of the community and marry French men. Anxieties around the mutability of identity through clothing and marriage could be seen in the role of gender in these policies. French men could incorporate some elements of Indigenous clothing such as moccasins and were encouraged to marry Indigenous women; however, French women were not encouraged to marry Indigenous men or change their clothing. Within French ideas of authority, a woman was assumed under the authority of her husband and became part of his culture as would her children whereas men were assumed to be more resilient to assimilation. The gendered nature of the intermarriage policies make it clear that the goals to which the Ursuline nuns contributed hoped for conversion in only one direction and that the Indigenous populations would diminish while the French grew.

Cultural exchange happened both ways in seventeenth century Quebec. Some items of clothing became places of cultural hybridization and compromise, but some became lines in the sand. Clothing was laden with meaning, but different pieces have different connotations. For the French settlers in North America, they were flexible on the cross-cultural exchange of certain items of clothing, but linen undergarments were the exception. When faced with different weather conditions and cultural expectations in North America, Indigenous clothing items

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23. White, 187.
24. White, 204.
were adopted for practical reasons. Moccasins and skin coats were worn instead of European style shoes or wool coats as they were easier to come by and more practically suited to the environment. The episodic wearing of Indigenous clothing was socially permitted in spaces where it was practical to do so. The wearing of linen, though, was not abandoned even when it was practically unsuitable. Indigenous practices of applying grease to the skin and bathing more frequently would have been logical in an environment where attacks of mosquitoes was ranked by the governor of Trois-Rivieres as the second worst part of life there and access to clean water was easier than it was in Europe. According to the French perspective, just as one could become French, one could also become Indigenous, so restrictions on adopted practices had to be enforced. This suggests that the wearing of linen was more personal and defining of being French than other clothing items. The French conflation of linen with the body can be seen here as the need to wear linen and the identity imparts triumphs over practicality.

This lack of flexibility around the wearing of linen was also seen in the attempted assimilation of Indigenous people into French culture. In the Ursuline convent school, girls were allowed to retain many elements of their culture such as singing in their native languages. The nuns themselves learned the Indigenous languages of their students, their traditional decorating techniques such as quillwork, and cooked meals with distinctive North American ingredients. These changes within the convent life were not seen as threatening to the nuns’ French identities or as compromising the assimilation of the girls as they could be used as vehicles of ideas of assimilation. The songs they sang promoted Christianity and the incorporation of European designs such as florals into quillwork was seen as “positive evidence of progress toward Christianization, civilization, and assimilation.” However, wearing linen was not given the same flexibility because there was no alternative vessel for the values it represented. The core elements of embroidery or song could be expressed in a different medium but there was no Indigenous object or practice that the French would understand as conveying the same ideas as linen undergarments and the ideas were too important to their identity to be compromised. Whenever the girls entered the convent, they were required to bathe and dress in the French way including linen shifts because this practice was essential to the mission of the Ursulines. Wearing linen made a person French and made them Christian so to be flexible on their requirements for wearing shifts would be to endanger the very purpose that the Ursuline established their convent.

27. White, Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians, 228.
29. Marie de l’Incarnation, Correspondance, 103.
32. Marie de l’Incarnation, Correspondance, 97, 220.
Rejection of the Chemise by Indigenous Communities

The Indigenous uptake of the French practice of wearing linen lacked enthusiasm where it was not required. There was an expressed interest in the garments as they were gifted and traded with French communities, but the cultural implications of the garments did not translate over with the physical donning of the garment. Louis Hennepin, a priest in New France, wrote that in the 1680s, Indigenous men trading with the French wore shirts but over their traditional hide garments. The garments were recognized as symbols of French culture and may have been worn to signal friendship or out of aesthetic value. However, by wearing the shirts over other clothing, it shows that the garments were being worn decoratively rather than as a skin by proxy as the French did. Use of linen in this way was foreign and seemingly unattractive to most Indigenous people who found it inconvenient, unhygienic, and difficult to maintain. The Indigenous nations around Quebec had ideas around body hygiene that focused more on bathing frequently and openness to the air. While the French tried to have a protective layer from bugs that they washed as much as they could, Indigenous bug management was more focused on removing the insect’s hospitable environment. The layer of linen then was the antithesis of their conception of cleanliness. While they would put on European clothing while trading from politeness, diplomacy, or symbolism, actual assimilation of European dressing practice was largely unappealing.

What elements were brought into Indigenous cultures were those that already aligned with their cultural values and aesthetics. In 1657, the French Jesuit Paul Ragueneau described how Indigenous people would wear French clothing but in a much different way. Indigenous use of European fashions prioritized reds and blues, tassels and fringe, a looser fit, wearing shirts over other clothes, and shorter skirts for women as they “would make fun of a dress that came down much below the knees.” Sherry Farrell Racette demonstrated how European trade goods could become indigenized and their use naturalized within a community. “Critical to their acceptance was their conformity in some way to an indigenous item.” Linen undergarments had no analogous counterpart within Indigenous cultures, so their use was not indigenized. As such they were worn symbolically or as decoration, but the French were not nearly as successful in transferring the cultural values of the garment as they were the physical object because the values were even more foreign than the garments.

Within the Ursuline convent, the nuns faced this same problem imparting the cultural values attached to the physical object of the chemise to their students. Marie de l’Incarnation men-

34. Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 75.
tions that once they completed their education at the convent, most of the girls returned home, stopped wearing the shift, and took up their own cultural customs again. She wrote nearly 20 years after the school was established; “in the many years that we have been in this country, we haven’t civilized more than seven or eight who became frenchified; the many others all returned to their parents.”

The French values that were attached to the shift meant there was shame in its removal so French girls would not find it so easy to change their dressing customs with a change in lifestyle. For the Indigenous students to remove the shift so easily meant they were not integrated into the value system that would have punished that choice with humiliation and embarrassment. For the Indigenous girls at the Ursuline convent, “[la] vie sauvage leur est si charmante à cause de sa liberté” (the savage life is so charming for them because of its freedom).

The French way of life was certainly more restrictive. The shift itself brought with it many small ends of freedom. Once worn, freedom of movement would be restricted by the garment. The shift also brought with it the obligation to be washed. The main purpose of the shift was to enact French ideas of bodily and spiritual purity and as such had to be washed frequently. This dictated a chore new to Indigenous cultures. Socially, the shift represented a restriction of the body caused by new ideas of modesty. Within French culture, there were parts of the body that had to be covered regardless of comfort or preference. The shift was part of a system of morality and purity that could be judged by the linen and had to be maintained constantly. More than a garment, a shift was an idea laden with cultural values. The Ursuline nuns were successful in getting their students to wear the garment, but they were not able to transfer the values. Along with familiarity, “[i]mproved function was another important factor leading to acceptance and indigenization.”

The shift did not gain purchase among the Indigenous girls because their cultural values and ideas around the body and its care were very different. There was no equivalent or even a cultural need that the shift filled for them; it only restricted the freedom they loved.

Wearing linen was deeply intertwined with French conceptions of hygiene, which itself was closely tied with ideas of cleanliness, purity, and morality. This in part accounts for the French insistence on continuing the custom but also played a role in a rhetoric of cultural superiority. Cleanliness narratives appeared (and would continue to appear) in justifications for national pride and imperialism. The unwanted or unpowerful in settler societies were looked down upon as being unclean.

Fears of corruption emerged around diseases and vermin but also around ethnicities. Explanations of a colonizing nation’s superiority often praised their hygiene compared to those of the “savage” Indigenous people. Cleanliness narratives appeared (and would continue to appear) in justifications for national pride and imperialism. The unwanted or unpowerful in settler societies were looked down upon as being unclean.

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38. Marie de l’Incarnation, Correspondance, 828:

“Depuis tant années que nous sommes établies en ce pays, nous n’en avons pu civiliser que sept ou huit, qui aient été francisées; les autres qui sont en grand nombre, sont toutes retournées chez leurs parens.”


41. Brown, Foul Bodies, 153.
to those they were colonizing or their competition. For the treatment of Indigenous people in cleanliness narratives, there was a change in rhetoric as colonies became more established. Early European accounts of encounters with Indigenous people in North America focus on their cleanliness, smooth skin, and frequent bathing. Later accounts however were “rife with pejorative comments about filthiness and beastliness, the stock language for communicating savagery.” The language surrounding body cleanliness mirrors the path of European colonialism. Early contact explorers used words that glamourized Indigenous men and especially sexualized Indigenous women at a time when Europe was looking to seize North America, both land and people. Later more fervent narratives of “savage uncleanliness” came when Europeans were living in North America and justification was needed for their colonial establishment at the cost of Indigenous communities. As was seen in the letters of Marie de l’Incarnation, claims of uncleanliness quickly served as evidence of French cultural superiority and perhaps more importantly, of French control over Indigenous bodies. She continuously explains the need for her convent to exist in Quebec to her donors through anecdotes of Indigenous girls made clean and given clothes. The linen shifts she imposed on her students are vessels of paternalistic justification. They were a material testament to the French ideas that Indigenous hygiene practices were wrong and French intervention was the necessary solution.

The Ursuline convent was not successful in their attempts to make Indigenous girls become French women. The girls preferred their own cultures and customs, so they largely returned to them once they had a choice. Marie de l’Incarnation allowed her students a fair amount of freedom, certainly more than was customary in convent schools back in France. In the schools in France, students were expected to remain at the convent until their education was completed; whereas in Quebec, the girls left whenever their parents wanted them to return home. Even in the least negotiable area of clothing, the girls had opinions of their own about the garments they wore. Marie de l’Incarnation wrote to a donor in France that red wool specifically was very necessary in Quebec. Her need for this particular fabric can be seen when her students expressed to a visitor that their old, faded dresses made them sad and Marie attempted to mitigate this with pieces of red wool fabric. Red had often been documented as one of the most popular colors among Indigenous communities when buying fabric and wool stroud fabric had gained among many Indigenous communities an “enthusiastic and deep acceptance.” The naming of stroud in both Cree and Anishinaabe transferred the animate qualities of skin on this new material with some similar but some improved qualities. The girls may have been wearing French style clothing

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42. Brown, 55.
43. Brown, 57.
45. Marie de l’Incarnation, Correspondance, 117.
but their preferences for the colour of their clothing remained Indigenous in nature. While the girls had to dress according to French culture when they were at the school, they never lost touch with their homes and own culture in the process. The French colonists had falsely assumed that Indigenous people would naturally want to behave as the French did once they understood how French culture functioned. Instead, the girls at the school fit the requirements of their school within their own cultural values and while they may have looked French in dress, their values remained intact so they could easily transition back to their own communities.

**Conclusion**

Centuries later, the Canadian residential schools would operate with the same goal as the Ursuline convent but with a much more brutal approach. Rather than leaving the choice up to the students to remain at home or to continue living in settler ways, children were forced into the schools and the goal of the education was not to convince but to erase.\(^{48}\) By the nineteenth century, it was clear Indigenous communities would not assimilate to settler cultures by choice so residential schools aimed to take children away from their communities and sever their link to their cultures by force. Clothing was again used as a powerful tool of assimilation. Most survivors of residential schools recall the traumatic removal of their clothing upon arrival as the loss of the last link they had to their families, cultures, and homes. Though by the nineteenth century, many Indigenous communities were wearing clothing more similar to European style dress than they had in the seventeenth century, school uniforms remained an important part of the colonial schooling system because “replacing [their clothes from home] with unfamiliar clothing is forcing a new way of life beyond body techniques, introducing a new worldview that is vastly contradictory to Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.”\(^{49}\) Clothing remained an important vehicle for assimilation by imposing not just new cultural items but alien values onto Indigenous children. By the end of the seventeenth century, the number of French students began to outnumber the Indigenous students and in 1720, the Ursuline convent school removed the education of Indigenous girls from its vows.\(^{50}\) The Ursuline school in Quebec did not therefore operate as a residential school for assimilation as they are understood in Canada today. However, in many ways the practices of the school laid the groundwork for the schooling system that emerged later. The Ursuline nuns aimed to convert Indigenous girls to a French and Christian lifestyle and by marrying them to French men, assimilate them fully into the French community. The difference lay in that the girls at the Ursuline convent school were permitted

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\(^{49}\) Ottmann, 8.

to maintain connections with their culture that allowed them to return home after their schooling. Perhaps the failure of schools like the Ursuline convent to assimilate informed the decisions of the future residential schools as they learned that Indigenous children would return to their own communities and cultures so long as they had a choice.

During the sixteenth century at the Ursuline convent school in colonial New France, the linen shift was not simply a linen shift. It was a vessel of French values and a colonial tool. In many ways, it was the heart of the Ursuline nuns’ mission in Quebec. The Ursuline nuns forced the girls in their schools to wear linen shifts in an attempt to assimilate them into French understandings of the body. While the nuns were successful in getting their students to wear the physical objects, the attached values did not transfer as easily. Very few of the girls from the school joined the French colony. They returned home and returned to their own cultural practices. This quick reversion to their old clothing and bodily practices strongly suggests that the girls who left the school did not consider the shift a moral or hygienic necessity. Some French materials and practices were naturalized into Indigenous communities but the shift was not one of them. The values it represented did not fit within Indigenous ideas of the body, so the garment was either not understood or simply not wanted. Though the Indigenous uptake of the shift was unenthusiastic, the determined French imposition of the shift on the girls spoke eloquently of European paternalistic imperialism. The language used by the Ursuline nuns and other French settlers was a justification of their intervention into the raising of Indigenous children and the control of Indigenous bodies. The Ursulines’ goal of the slow absorption of Indigenous girls into French society was part of a long-term plan to eliminate Indigenous cultures entirely. Over the next few centuries, the colonial rhetoric would change in tone as ideas of racial purity developed and steered settlers away from intermarriage and condemned cultural hybrids like floral beadwork as “degenerate.” The ideological seeds planted earlier however would grow to bear fruit and the control of Indigenous children and their clothing only increased in frequency and cruelty. Ideas about the body and its display through dress are deeply important to any culture and with that importance comes power. Power that in this case that was eventually used to advance colonialism and further an attempt at cultural genocide.

Bibliography


Figures