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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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When Legends Fall Silent Our Ways Are Lost: Some Dimensions of the Study of Aging among Native Canadians¹

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This discussion of some of the dimensions of the study of aging among Native Canadians leans heavily upon Holzberg (1981). I refer to two dimensions that she has identified (lack of homogeneity in ethnic categories and the situational environment) and indicate how these are relevant in regard to Native people. I discuss urbanization as a third dimension, and present an ethnographic example that can be related to all three dimensions. This example is also shown to be relevant to the modernization theory of aging.

Cette étude où l'auteur examine le vieillissement des Canadiens natifs s'appuie dans une large mesure sur Holzberg (1981). Je mentionne deux des dimensions que Holzberg a reconnues (le manque d'homogénéité parmi les catégories ethniques et "the situational environment") et je montre comment ces dimensions s'appliquent aux Autochtones. Je parle de l'urbanisation comme étant une troisième dimension, et je présente un exemple ethnographique qui se rapporte à toutes ces dimensions. Cet exemple se montre pertinent à ce qu'on a appelé la théorie de la modernisation.

Introduction

During recent fieldwork² to investigate the phenomenon of revitalization as it is taking place among the Ojibwa of Manitoulin Island and the north shore of Lake Huron, I was struck by the involvement of the elders in what is clearly a vital and growing movement.³ This paper examines one of the strongest statements of the movement, the work of local Native artists, and the link between the art and the elders. That link will be shown to be based upon the traditional patterns of aging among the Ojibwa, and thus my ethnographic example can be seen as challenging the validity of the modernization model of aging.⁴ This model, widely used to structure the history of aging, has been summarized by Fischer (1978) as a

... golden age for old people in traditional society, before urbanization and industrialization increased their numbers, diminished their status, reduced their income, disrupted their families, and generally separated them from the great life processes of society. (Fischer, 1978: 230)

In order to set this specific local example into a broader framework, brief reference will be made to three significant dimensions in the study of aging among Native Canadians, lack of homogeneity in ethnic categories, the situational environment, and urbanization. The dimensional framework will be applied to the Ojibwa people, and the historical pers-

pective necessary to evaluate the explanatory value of the modernization model will be supplied by a review of traditional Ojibwa patterns of aging. This historical perspective is also essential in considering aging patterns among urban Natives.

Dimensional Framework

Holzberg (1981) points out that much of the literature on minority aging fails to take into account the heterogeneity of minority groups. This criticism can also be applied to our use of such ethnic categories as "Native Canadians", "North American Native People", etc. These broad categories are in fact made up of many distinct linguistic and cultural groups, and are of little use in Cultural Gerontology studies where we are looking for patterns of aging that are unique ethnic patterns transmitted generationally.

We should also be aware that *within* any one of these various linguistic/culture groups there is a lack of homogeneity. For instance, neither the Iroquoians, nor the Ojibwa can be said today to be culturally homogeneous. There are many factors, most of which can be related to the history of contact, involved in this cultural variability.

The second significant dimension in the study of aging among Native Canadians is the situational environment in which aging occurs. Native people today are aging on reserves, in rural settings, in small town settings, and in the cities. However a significant number of Canada's older Natives come from a reserve background or have spent some portion of their lives on a reserve. Holzberg (1981) warns against confusing situational factors associated with minority culture (chronic unemployment, low wages, lack of property, etc.) with ethnic characteristics. A number of scholars (cf. Dunning, 1964; James, 1970) have pointed out that aspects of the reserve adaptation reflect patterns relating to membership in the culture of poverty. In addition, reserve Natives share patterns that may be identified as coping strategies to the colonial, exploitative aspects of the reserve situation (Patterson, 1972). This situation with its long history of control from outside has affected patterns of aging as well as other aspects of culture. Funding for social service programs has until recently been controlled by non-Native agencies of various kinds, and the effect of this outside control has been felt upon the elders' role. The fact that a special relationship of dependency exists between the individual with Indian status and the Federal government is another part of the situational environment of aging whether in the city or on the reserve.

A third significant dimension to the study of aging among Native Canadians is the increasing urbanization of the Native population. Figures show

that the major factor today in socio-cultural change in this population is the move to urban centres. Urbanization is not a new phenomenon, but it is an accelerating one (McCaskill, 1981).⁵ The urban adaptation involves not only elders who come to the city to take advantage of better health care facilities and social service programs and to maintain ties with urban-dwelling kin, but also elders who have spent most of their working years in the urban setting, returning to their reserve communities only for holidays/festivals, etc. A recent study of family needs done by the Canadian Native Centre in Toronto (Bobiwash and Malloch, 1980) shows that the extended family still found on some reserves does not survive in the city. I am aware of the danger of generalizing from the Toronto data, but there is other research (Maldonado, 1975) suggesting that extended family organization breaks down when a rural population becomes urbanized. It is possible that extended family roles for Native elders may no longer be viable in the city. However Native Centres and other Native organizations in Canadian cities offer opportunities to elders, through membership in voluntary associations, to revive and/or maintain their traditional role and to expand that role in a number of adaptive modes. This point will be developed below.

The Ojibwa, Algonkian speakers with a wide distribution in Canada and the United States, can be related to our three dimensions as follows:

1. In terms of *heterogeneity*, these people occupy a vast area from eastern Ontario to Lake Winnipeg, and from James Bay into Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota (Dunning, 1959). Various scholars (cf. Bishop, 1974; Clifton, 1975; Hickerson, 1970) have documented the westward and northward movements of the Ojibwa, and have described a variety of adaptations to specific ecological niches. Their works also show that the history of contact has varied widely across Ojibwa territory.

2. With reference to the *situational environment*, the time at which the reserve adaptation began varies for the different groups of Ojibwa. Some southern groups were established on reserves by the early 1820's (Graham, 1975), while the reserve at Weagamow Lake was not set up until 1930 (Rogers, 1962). There are, too, great differences in the degree to which the Native language has been retained, with a generally lower level of retention in the south and east. However there are significant generational differences in this regard among the southern Ojibwa (Vanderburgh, 1977: 243-244).

3. In regard to *urbanization*, a large Ojibwa population exists in the Ontario cities of Toronto, London, Windsor and Sudbury. However as far as I know there are no recent systematic censuses of the

Native population in these cities, although the Native Peoples Resource Centre in London does try to keep an up-dated list of names and addresses on file. There have been, that I know of, no attempts to break down any Ontario urban Native population in terms of linguistic/cultural affiliation. Speaking purely on an impressionistic basis, I would say that well over 50% of the Toronto Native community is of Ojibwa origin.

The Traditional Elders' Role Among the Ojibwa

To present an outline of the traditional elders' role I have drawn upon the ethnographic and ethno-historical literature on the Ojibwa (including Brown, 1952; Densmore, 1929; Dunning, 1959; Hallowell, 1964; Landes, 1968, 1969, 1971; Jenness, 1935; Johnston, 1976), and upon my own field data from the Georgian Bay area. The term *traditional* is here more properly understood as *contact-traditional*, referring to Ojibwa culture after the beginning of adaptation to Western culture but before adaptation to the reserve situation.

One of the most important functions of the Ojibwa household was the socialization of children, and in most households lived one or more grandparents. Among those Ojibwa who lived patrilocally, the significant grandparents were paternal, while among those who lived matrilocally they were maternal. Parents were occupied with the daily subsistence round and much of the socialization was in the hands of the grandparents. The grandparent/grandchild relationship was warm and fraternal, contrasting with the authoritarian aspects of the parent/child relationship.

The primary role of the elders lay in the transmission across the generations of *information* and *power* needed for survival. The information included not only pragmatic skills but also what today's Ojibwa call "wisdom", by which they mean the values that are important in Ojibwa tradition. In addition to this information, the elders possessed considerable supernatural power, which they had obtained in part from earlier elders and in part through their own dreams/visions. This power was validated merely by survival to elderhood. The term for "grandfather" was used to refer to both human kin and to supernatural beings, and both kinds of "grandfathers" were important sources of power for the young.⁶

Power was transmitted to the younger generation through the bestowal of names, and through actual teaching of medicine (or magical) skills. Wisdom was transmitted in the telling of stories. Two kinds of oral narratives were employed by Ojibwa elders; the first kind consisted of anecdotal tales about events in the lives of ordinary people; the second narrative was the

myth or sacred tale about the exploits of culture heroes or other-than-human persons. The telling of myths was seasonally restricted. The elders' narratives held many shades of meaning, some immediately apparent to even the very young child, and others that became clear only after much pondering by the more mature individual. Even a middle-aged person would mull over an elder's narrative and find many ways of applying the wisdom thus passed on.

The review presented above of the transmission of cultural information among the Ojibwa is illuminated by reference to Mead (1964) and McFeat (1974). Mead notes that cultural transmission involves a series of interdependent yet analytically separable activities, "the capacity to learn, the capacity to teach, and the capacity to embody knowledge in forms which make it transmissible at a distance in time or space" (Mead, 1964: 38). She suggests that the learning-teaching situation is an important aspect of inter-generational cultural transmission (1964: 93) and, reflecting the evolutionary perspective of this work, she notes that although we have enormously increased the amount of information that can be stored through various recording techniques we have to a significant extent "preserved *all* methods of transmission and *all* degrees of dependence on face-to-face relations, living models, and single custodians of crucial knowledge" (1964: 91; italics in original).

The significant situation within which cultural transmission occurs, according to McFeat, is the small-group. He identifies households as of primary importance in this regard; households are "serviceable, multi-purpose information pools in the community, our only truly primitive institutions" (McFeat, 1974: 43). He distinguishes three prototypes of small-group cultures; the content-ordering group-culture, concerned with processing (transforming, storing, retrieving and transmitting) information; the task-ordering group-culture that transforms information into social action; and the group-ordering group-culture that is involved in the generation of models that "function to endow group life with identity" and "explain the group to itself" (1964: 60-61). McFeat points out that myth is a significant medium of information exchange and transmission in the group-ordering small-group culture (1964: 68-69), and he notes that small-group cultures (including households) are distinguished by the presence of more than one generation:

That generations exist simultaneously in groups... has to do with the possibility of communication among members in which *some* remain predominantly senders while *others* remain predominantly receivers, and *each* has or will experience the other's role. (McFeat, 1974: 114; italics in original)

It is clear from the review of the traditional elders' role among the Ojibwa that the Ojibwa household operated simultaneously in the modes of all three of McFeat's prototypic small-group cultures. However for our purposes it is the content-ordering and group-ordering aspects of cultural transmission that are of particular interest. The actual cultural content of what the elders transmitted in their traditional role need not concern us here, rather we are concerned with their function in transmitting cultural information. It is in the maintenance and expansion of the information transmitting function that contemporary elders continue to play a vital role in Ojibwa society. As an example, we may look at that function as it operates in the programs of the Ojibwa Cultural Foundation (O.C.F.) at West Bay on Manitoulin Island.

The O.C.F. involves twelve reserves, five on the Island and seven on the north shore of Lake Huron. Its board of directors includes the chiefs of these reserves, the director of the Foundation, and a number of concerned elders.⁷ The Foundation has grown in the last decade from the efforts of Island Natives to retrieve and maintain their traditional culture. It is funded federally and provincially, and the bulk of its regular funding goes into the development of curriculum material for local schools, both on-and off-reserve.

The Foundation has developed an impressive number of programs, three of which have involved the elders. These are:

1. the Language Program in the schools
2. the Elders' Program
3. the Art Program

To date the Language Program in the schools has made only limited use of the elders' knowledge of the Ojibwa language, and a few elders are involved in teaching the language in the schools as well as in assembling curriculum material, specifically oral narratives. The Elders' Program for the past few years has concentrated upon the retrieval of information about Native healing practices, largely from male elders, but funding for a broader program is currently being sought. In the proposed program many more elders, of both sexes, will be involved in three ways; in counselling teenagers and young adults, in teaching the language outside of the schools, and in the actual teaching of Native healing practices.

Note that the emphasis of the O.C.F.'s approach to the elders is upon what the elders can do for the community, rather than upon what the community should be doing for the elders. It would seem that the institution of elderhood is gaining a remarkable degree of vitality on Manitoulin Island. There are nativistic and revitalization aspects to the Foundation's program which cannot be detailed here.

However it is the relationship of the institution of elderhood to Native art on the Island that is relevant to our assessment of the modernization model of aging.

Since the 1950's three artists from the Island's Wikwemikong Reserve (Francis Kagige, Daphne Odjig and Angus Trudeau) have been gradually developing a national and indeed, in the case of Odjig, an international reputation. Currently there are eighteen Native artists from Manitoulin actively involved in an art career,⁸ some in the urban setting and others in their home communities. All but four of these artists are under thirty.⁹

In 1975 the O.C.F., building upon a core of young artists who had attended summer sessions on nearby Schrieber Island under the auspices of an earlier cultural program, instituted the Summer Art Program. Young people from participating reserves who wish to attend are sponsored by their local Band Councils. As the Summer Art Program became solidly established, the O.C.F. involved elders in teaching myths and local history to the attending artists. These elders had heard (from *their* elders) about some of the old religious ceremonies that flourished on the Island in the last century, although they had not themselves been involved in the practice of such ceremonies. However they knew about elders in other Ojibwa communities to the north and west who were still practicing, for instance, the sweat lodge ceremony and the pipe ceremony. And they knew that some of the Cree elders still practiced the sweet grass ceremony. The Foundation began to import elders who were functioning as traditional spiritual leaders in these other areas to conduct various ceremonies for the students at the Summer Art Program, and a number of local elders became deeply involved in this ceremonial revival.

Anyone who is familiar with the work of the Manitoulin artists who have attended these summer sessions will realize how much that work reflects the stories and sacred tales that the elders, both local and imported, have passed on during those sessions (cf. Cinader, 1978; McLuhan, 1978). The artists themselves speak freely about the influence of the elders upon their work, and even the older artists who have not attended the summer sessions have emphasized to me that socializing experiences with elders have had a major influence on their work. The link between the elders and spiritual power is also reflected in this art, and the artists stress the significance of spiritual power in artistic inspiration. They are all relying upon dreams/visions as sources of inspiration, either their own dream experiences or those of their elders.¹⁰ The Native art of Manitoulin Island springs from a strong revitalizing spirit and the attempt to revive and maintain the elders' role is part of the expression of revitalization.

Many of us are aware of the tremendous interest that contemporary Ojibwa-Cree art in general is arousing, both in Canada and abroad. The lives of the artists are not well-documented, either from an art historian's or an anthropologist's viewpoint. However a review of the limited published material (Hughes, 1979; *The Native Perspective*, 1978; Sinclair and Pollock, 1979) and field data (my own and Southcott n.d.) shows that almost without exception these artists have had *close socialization experiences with elders*, elders who had in their youth been on the receiving end of the institution of elderhood. We may list in this regard such well-known artists as Norval Morrisseau, Carl Ray, Jackson Beardy, and Francis Kagige and Daphne Odjig from Manitoulin Island, as well as a host of less-well-known artists.

Whether the significant elders in the lives of the artists are related or imported is really not especially important. What is important is that the institution of elderhood is functioning in a new medium, new to Ojibwa-Cree culture at least. This art has stylistic and functional roots in the sacred aspect of the traditional culture, but it has been "secularized" (McLuhan, 1978) in the lifetime of these artists. The institution of elderhood is functioning to transmit information from the past to the artist and, note, *to all those who view the artist's work*, Native and non-Native. All the viewers are receiving vital information from the Native elders.

The significance of the link between the institution of elderhood and Ojibwa-Cree art is missed by art historians and critics, who evaluate and criticize this art with no reference to its cultural context. One of the more prestigious of these scholars, in referring to the whole field of Ojibwa-Cree art, says:

they are not creating *within* their traditions (most of which are no longer valid); instead they are creating *about* their traditions... and... when they communicate as Indians... they do not do so to their own people... but for an international art market. (Swinton, 1979: 3; italics in original)

The Native artist who, like Morrisseau and Beardy, experiences his people's traditions through the oral teaching of an elder is thus understood, with reference to the Euro-Canadian cultural framework of the art historian, to be experiencing them second-hand, which makes them no longer "valid". However this point of view ignores the cultural context within which the elders and the artists are relating. It is the artists' reliance upon their elders as transmitters of information and knowledge from the past that gives us the all-important clue. Insofar as the artists and the elders relate to each other in terms of the traditional institution of elderhood, it seems to me that these artists are operating in the deepest sense *within* their cultural traditions.

The Native artists are also communicating to their own people. Their work is viewed with pride in their own communities, where it hangs in council halls, arenas and schools. The original works are expensive and beyond the reach of the general public, both Native and non-Native, but reproductions are available at reasonable prices and these can be seen in many reserve homes on Manitoulin Island as well as in homes in the Toronto Native community. In addition this art is displayed in many of the Native Centres in Ontario's cities where it is a source of enormous pride to the urban Native as well.¹¹

In these cities there is a whole generation of urban Natives who have never lived on a reserve, and who do not relate to their past and to their Native identity through ties to the reserves. However they do relate to that past and to that identity through the art, which is passing on messages ultimately derived from the elders. The institution of elderhood is being expanded as it reaches beyond the traditional person-to-person oral transmission, to find expression in the widely disseminated and permanently fixed visual messages of the artists. One may speculate that when today's elders have gone, their wisdom and power will have been rather rigidly codified and preserved in the artists' work; the artists may take on, in a sense, the role of the elders as transmitters of cultural content.¹²

The institution of elderhood is still flourishing in some of the more northern Ojibwa communities,¹³ and as this example has shown is being consciously preserved and strengthened on Manitoulin Island. I have suggested that in the urban setting the institution will be expanded in new adaptive modes, and here we may list alcohol/drug counselling, and the teaching of "Indian" crafts, legends and languages to a generation of city born and bred Native children.¹⁴ In the Toronto Native Centre the elders also play an important role in teaching Native languages to those adults who have lost their linguistic heritage and who seek some kind of symbolic reinforcement of their Native identity.¹⁵ The information that will be transmitted by urban elders will inevitably include pragmatic skills for coping with the urban environment.

Conclusion

While it has been possible here to draw a relatively homogeneous picture of aging patterns among the Ojibwa in traditional times, there are today many factors that mitigate against such homogeneity. However I have shown that the central feature of the traditional role of the elders, the transmission of information across the generations, has been maintained and given new vitality among some contemporary Canadian Ojibwa. It would seem that the modernization model of aging does not apply to this

ethnographic example, and we may well question the value of that model in understanding aging in any pluralistic situation. The link between the elders and the contemporary art of the Ojibwa and Cree is seen here not only as central to our understanding of that art, but also to our understanding of past and future aging patterns among these people. It is to be hoped that future investigations of the art will include a close look at the significant elders in the artists' lives.

The dimension of urbanization in the study of aging among Native Canadians remains to be fully explored. However in at least one Ontario city not only is traditional cultural information being transmitted by the elders, but their experiences in coping with addiction problems are being transmitted as they participate in alcohol and drug counselling. This suggests that the institution of elderhood is flexible enough to accommodate to the transmission of new information, information that derives from experiences with modernization. To return to McFeat's concept of the small-group culture we may look at the urban Native Centres, and possibly other urban Native organizations as well, as analogous to (although not necessarily replacing) the traditional households as the primary content-and group-ordering small-groups of the urban Native community.

NOTES

1. The title "When legends fall silent, our ways are lost" comes from a poster designed by Blake Debassige and published by the Ojibwa Cultural Foundation on Manitoulin Island.

2. Short field trips of between four days and two weeks duration took place in August and September, 1978; March and July 1979; and June 1980. In addition, artists from Manitoulin Island have been interviewed in Toronto, and June 1981 was spent working with the artist Daphne Odjig in British Columbia. Travel funds for 1978, March 1979, and June 1981 were provided by Erindale College, University of Toronto.

3. This movement not only exhibits many of the characteristics used by Wallace (1956) to define revitalization movements, but in addition has certain millenarian aspects. Any further discussion of the movement here would be premature. However in the following discussion of the link between art and the elders, the revitalization aspects of the local situation should be born in mind. As well, we should note that both the local movement and the development of a strong Native art tradition among the Canadian Ojibwa and Cree occur against the background of the increasing Native awareness and Pan-Indianism that have swept all of North America during the past two decades.

4. In his useful bibliographic essay Fischer (1978: 232-269) notes that the history of aging has been almost

entirely concerned with the single issue of the validity of this model. His review of the research leads him to conclude that the modernization model of aging has only limited value when applied to the modern period (1800-1945), and is "fundamentally wrong" in regard to the early modern (1500-1800) and contemporary (1945-present) periods. In his view the critical issues in relationships between the generations in both Europe and America have always been "the authority of one generation over another, and the autonomy of individuals within them" (Fischer, 1978: 231).

5. McCaskill (1981) cites a Statistics Canada estimate that by 1970 there were 24,000 Native people living in Toronto. In 1979 various social agencies serving Native Canadians in Metropolitan Toronto were estimating figures as high as 30,000 (Vanderburgh, 1979).

6. Old men and women could and did use their supernatural power for evil purposes, as well as in helping the young. Respect for the elders was sanctioned in part by fear of their power, although this aspect of elderhood tends to be glossed over by modern Ojibwa writers such as B. Johnston (1976) and P. Johnston (1970).

7. I have been present as an observer at Board meetings, and have noted that the elders are invited to speak first on every issue. The chiefs speak next, and finally the Foundation's staff speak.

8. These artists are: Carl Beam; Leland Bell; Blake and Blair Bebasige (cousins); Don and Bernard Ense (brothers); James Jacko; Francis Kagige; Eleanor Kanasawe; John LaFord; Melvin and Robert Madahbee (brothers); Daphne Odjig; Stanley Panamick; Tim Restoule; James Simon; Angus and Randy Trudeau (distant relatives). We should also note a nineteenth artist, the deceased Martin Panamick, older brother of Stanley. Martin was a close friend and mentor of Bell, Blake Debassige, Don Ense, Kanasawe, Simon, and Randy Trudeau.

9. The four artists over thirty years of age are Carl Beam, Francis Kagige, Daphne Odjig and Angus Trudeau.

10. The association of creativity in any field of endeavour with dreams/visions is well documented for the Ojibwa. See especially Landes (1971: 8-9, 19-20, 130; 1969: 111) and Densmore (1929: 80-82).

11. For example in 1978 I saw Native art on display when I visited the Ojibway and Cree Cultural Centre and the Ojibway-Cree Resource Centre in Timmins, the Native Peoples Resource Centre in London, the Woodland Indian Cultural Educational Centre in Brantford, and the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto.

12. The impact of changing the medium of cultural transmission among the Ojibwa from the *oral* (involving face-to-face contact) to the *visual* (involving both art and the printed word) remains to be investigated. Mead suggests that "... the need for material forms probably plays an important part in making a culture rigid and in consolidating the position of the practitioners", and she notes that "Freedom to change the design is quite different when the design lies before one" (Mead, 1964: 102-103). McFeat's discussion of the medium of myth (McFeat, 1974: 64-70) is also pertinent to this problem. He reminds us that uncertainty is a "by-product" of the oral tradition. Certainly the younger generations of Ojibwa have more and more access

to books in which their oral traditions are preserved (cf. Black, 1970: 12). I questioned Odjig (June 1981) about the possibility that the visual coding of oral information might result in the immutability of formerly flexible messages, but she did not agree. She pointed out that no two of the Ojibwa-Cree artists have formulated the same image of Nanabush, the trickster culture-hero of the Algonkians whose exploits have always been important teaching devices in the traditional culture.

13. I was told in 1978 at the Grand Council of Treaty Nine Chiefs (Timmins) that Treaty Nine elders have retained their advisory role and accompany the chiefs to Grand Council meetings in that role.

14. An example of this would be the involvement of the elder Joe Solomon in addiction counselling at both the Native Centre and the half-way house, Pedauban Lodge, in Toronto. Elders also participate in the children's programs sponsored by that same Centre, as they did in the now-defunct Ahbenoojeyug ("our children") program in Toronto.

15. The oral Ojibwa classes taught at the Centre in 1978 by the elder Casper Solomon were attended by equal numbers of Native and non-Native learners.

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ERRATUM

Dans le Volume I, numéro 2, il fallait lire à la page 34 de l'article de Stanley Aléong (« Discours nationalistes et purisme linguistique ») :

Le Conseil anima notamment le Congrès de la Refran-
cisation à l'Université Laval en 1957. Signalons aussi
la création de l'Académie canadienne française en
1944 sous l'impulsion de Victor Barbeau. (Avant-
dernier paragraphe, deuxième colonne.)