

Teaching Lies: The Innu Experience of Schooling

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Abstract

The Innu are the indigenous peoples of the Labrador-Quebec peninsula. Within the last forty years they were coerced by the Canadian authorities to end permanent nomadic hunting in favour of sedentary life in villages in Labrador and Quebec. One of the principal means used to induce them to accept these drastic changes to their way of life has been schooling. In this essay, I examine the history of Innu experiences with imposed education in the two Innu communities in Labrador—Sheshatshiu and Utshimassits or Davis Inlet. Although there have been some bright moments, most Innu have had almost entirely negative experiences with schools and teachers. They have been physically and sexually abused by priests and teachers and made to feel ashamed of their Innu identity. More recently, as a corrective to past insensitivities, the school has introduced ‘culture days’, which, it is argued, merely parody and simulate the Innu way of life. Attempts by the Innu leadership to gain control over the education have been frustrated at every turn by the Canadian authorities and to date they are left with what the president of Innu Nation called, ‘empty promises.’ This article is based on work with the Innu since 1994, including a study of the Peenamini McKenzie school in Sheshatshiu in 1999.

Introduction

‘...if the guiding hand is ill qualified, an instrument is murderous in proportion to its sharpness.’ James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, (1941:267)

This article is based upon research that I have done with the Innu of Sheshatshiu and Utshimassits (Davis Inlet), Labrador since 1994. It focuses on the effects of schooling over the last 50 years since the Innu were sedentarised by the Canadian government, previously having been permanent nomadic hunters. I include findings which were incorporated in a report completed for the Local Education Committee of the Sheshatshiu Band Council in 1999 (Samson, 1999). This study investigated the history of schooling, the experiences of members of the community with schooling, and the teachers’ views at Peenamini McKenzie School in the community.¹ The implications of the study took

on added significance as a result of the concession on the part of the Canadian government to devolve schooling and policing to the Innu communities which came in November 1999 in the aftermath of the widely publicised international human rights report, *Canada's Tibet: the killing of the Innu* (Samson et. al., 1999). However, despite both a Federal retraction and a recent re-commitment to the devolution agreement, no funds have been forwarded for devolution. I start with a brief history of the Innu experience of schooling.

'Indians Must be Taught the Three R's'

The schools now in operation in the two Innu communities in Labrador are heirs to a civilizing mission. The vigorous sedentarisation policy pushed through by the newly confederated Newfoundland authorities in the 1950s was driven by the belief that assimilation was absolutely necessary to the survival of 'the Indians', as the Innu were then referred to in public policies. The Provincial authorities, although aware of difficulties, were not deterred from attempting 'integration' through education. In the 1963–4 Annual Report of the Department of Public Welfare, they maintained that:

Indians must be taught the three R's, and will also need vocational training, but it would be naive to think that this will automatically solve all the problems overnight. As with the Indians elsewhere there are deeply rooted psychological problems to be overcome before the process of integration is complete. (Quoted by Budgell, 1984:47).

While the Innu were still living in tents, a school was set up by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Sheshatshiu in 1954, but it was not until 1956 that government funds were made available for the construction of a building. In 1959 the first professional teachers arrived, and in 1960 the school came under the authority of the Labrador Catholic School Board. At this time, the teachers required 'total immersion' of the Innu students, mandating a standard calendar year in which students were expected to attend continuously from September to June. It was in these imposed institutions that the 'deeply rooted psychological problems' would be addressed.

For officials such as Walter Rockwood, Director of the Division of Northern Labrador Affairs for the Provincial government of Newfoundland from about 1952 to 1964, education was absolutely vital to the 'economic rehabilitation' of the Innu. Their ignorance of the English language had, it was maintained, prevented them from obtaining jobs at Goose Bay airbase. Because the Innu

were regarded as rather intractable semi-nomads—at this time, splitting their time between the interior and the Hudson’s Bay Company posts which were located at North West River, Davis Inlet, and the North Shore of the St. Lawrence—the government was happy to defer responsibility for education to the Oblate missionaries who visited them there. At the posts the Oblates became teachers, doctors, and intermediaries, as well as ministers to the Innu. The establishment of school instruction was directly linked to the discouraging the nomadic way of life.

The correspondence between Rockwood, and other central figures in the sedentarisation drive such as Father Pirson, the Belgian priest at North West River, and Dr. Tony Paddon of the International Grenfell Association, as well as other government representatives in Labrador at mid-century rings through with cries for ‘integration’ of ‘the Indian’ as the only, and perhaps, inevitable, salvation for the Innu. Left to their own devices, the Innu would ultimately become extinct or live a miserable life on the edges of white society. Rockwood provided an evocative rendition of this scenario in a June 1959 memorandum in which he compared the Innu to the extinct Beothucks of Newfoundland, killed off completely by European disease and violence:

For the Indians and many of the Eskimos, there is no easy, short-term solution, unless it be the solution found for the aborigines of Newfoundland more than a century ago. They, the Beothucks, have been no bother since June 6 1829. The writer does not advocate this solution for the Labrador Indians, but it would be almost kinder than to allow them to live off the garbage dumps, and become prey to unscrupulous persons (Roche, 1992).

Diverting the Innu, or Montagnais-Naskapis as they were then known to Euro-Canadians, from another Final Solution required education. Rockwood, here assuming the inevitable transformation of the Innu through a kind of cultural evolution, continues:

The Montagnais and Nascaupi Indians, very largely because of the efforts of the Oblates and the Grenfell Mission, have even given up their propensity to die out. The correct solution, and it is a long term one, is to prepare them for the kind of world they must live in, and this must begin with children. Or, to quote from a report on the Greenland administration, published by the Royal Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs in 1952: ‘The foundation of any social evolu-

tion truly democratic in character, in Greenland or anywhere else, is public education' (Roche, 1992)

Following the dire sentiments expressed by Rockwood and others, the Oblates established schools as the very cornerstone of settlement life at Davis Inlet and North West River, which came under the Diocese of Labrador, Schefferville. Similar institutions were established in the 1950s and 1960s in the new settlements for the Innu in Quebec. From the outset, schools were conceived as a means to both salvage and transform the Innu. *Principles for a Theory of Instructing Adult Nascappie Indians*, a document produced by the Protestant school authorities in Schefferville in the mid 1960s, concerns itself with adults who, because they were children before settlement, are often 'socially retarded' and in need of 'social recuperation.' It positions the education of 'the Indians' within the overall process of regional 'progress':

If Quebec is to develop well, we must stress the fullest education possible for all our Indians, no matter what the cost or sacrifice. No Province can be socially, politically or economically secure and progressive in the long run until all the Indian segment of the population is constantly improving, developing, and strengthening their ideas, ideals and minds. Minds are golden. No gold 'mine' can be compared in value to the golden mind of an individual. For those who think only in dollars and not in 'sense' I make the plea for the complete development of the golden minds of the Nascappie Adult Indian Student which can be developed at eventual great profit and benefit to Quebec. (Slesar, nd:1)

Schools for native peoples all across North America were premised on these kinds of beliefs (see Adams, 1995). The school would illustrate to the native children the vast gulf between 'civilised' and 'savage' ways. Natives may have been 'backward,' but in the inelegant metaphors of the authorities, they were 'gold mines' that if tapped correctly could yield fledgling Euro-Canadians.

Thus it was with great speed that the sedentarisation of the Innu was accompanied by moves to educate the younger generation, for it was the youth whom the authorities banked on as being in the vanguard of 'integration'. Many people in the communities now say that the priests made grandiose promises to the generation of parents just after settlement that education would help their children become important and productive adults. They would be doctors and lawyers. Thus far, this promise has yet to be realised. There are no university-educated professionals in Sheshatshiu or Utshimassits, and only one Labrador

Innu that possesses a university degree. Seeing through these false promises, Jean-Pierre Ashini, remarked:

My kids don't go to school. I don't force them because it was like a nightmare to me. We were supposed to be doctors and lawyers, but we ended up in jail, committing suicide and being drunks and bums. Nowadays, that's called progress.

While adult education would eventually be put forward for the hunters, it was important to the authorities that the first generation to live in the community on a permanent basis would be educated into the world-views of Euro-Canadian settlers. If they were to function in the society of those that brought about such drastic changes to them, the socialisation of children could not be left up to Innu parents, the hunters, who were deemed to have an insufficient grasp on the skills, attitudes and knowledge which the Euro-Canadian world demanded. The first generation to be exposed to formal schooling was coerced into it. Schooling represented an unwanted change in their lives.

In the years when schooling was first imposed and the Catholic clergy presided over teaching, Innu students who are now adults, remember the beatings and physical punishment that were administered at the school. The most notorious perpetrator of this kind of terror was Father Pirson, who taught in the community for 22 years from the 1950s until the early 1970s. People with whom we spoke indicated that he treated them very harshly, commonly using a stick, ruler or leather strap to beat students across the palms of their hands or knuckles. Some people said that Father Pirson also beat them on the buttocks with a large stick that resembled a shepherd's staff. It appears that the priest used any implement that came to hand—leather straps, rulers, belts, and even broomsticks. Others said they were kicked when they did not know the subjects that were taught. One man said that he was even hit over the head with a Bible, and after that incident he questioned the 'loving God' about whom the priest had subsequently lectured.

These punishments, which would now be considered forms of physical abuse, were dealt out for minor infractions of school protocol such as not paying attention to the lesson and arriving late. Even when students tried to avoid school by staying at home, the priest would visit the house and persuade the parents to force the truant child to go to school. Some people who migrated to Sheshatshiu from Davis Inlet had similar experiences. One man remembered the priest there hitting the students with a metal curtain rod. Because of the enormous respect accorded to the missionaries at the time, many children did

not tell their parents about the beatings. Several of those who did tell their parents said that their parents refused to believe them.

Perhaps the mildest form of punishment that Father Pirson used was verbal chastisement. Many people reported that he raised his voice to the children, became impatient with them, and shouted at them. Many Innu students were too scared to absorb anything that Father Pirson taught them. One middle-aged woman said that if the priest had not hit her she would now know how to read and write. She cannot write any English and can only speak a little. She feels even that has now been lost. Part of the problem was that the priest's punishments were done in front of other children and this brought to the victim a sense of shame. Thus, one woman told us that she was sitting in the front row when she was asked a question that she could not answer. Father Pirson then kicked her so hard that she fell over with her desk. She became very embarrassed because the other students laughed at her. Some older women who we interviewed experienced sexually embarrassing punishments such as being spanked on the buttocks, kicked on the buttocks and having their skirts lifted up by the priest. Partly as a result of the terror inflicted on young Innu people by Father Pirson and others, virtually a whole generation is now illiterate in both English and *Innu-aimun*. It is entirely reasonable that the harsh punishment dealt out to young Innu has had other negative effects that have lasted well into adulthood, and this is obviously one of the reasons why so many adults in Sheshatshiu are distrustful of the school.

Father Pirson was a key figure in coercing the Innu to settle at Sheshatshiu and to accept assimilation. He believed that, for any 'progress' to occur, the Innu, needed to be subjected to the regularity, discipline and control of European-style schooling. Once in the school, the task that the Pirson and other authorities set for themselves was to assimilate the Innu as rapidly as possible. This meant not only exposing them to European forms of knowledge, but discouraging nomadic hunting and adapting them to the rhythms of an industrial society. Thus, punctuality was a value that was strictly enforced. One method that Father Pirson used to discourage parents from taking their children hunting in the interior of the Labrador-Quebec peninsula (known as 'the country') and keep them in the community was to threaten parents that their Family Allowance would be discontinued if they did not send their children to the school. Hence, for the many parents who were dependent on these funds, the continuation of Family Allowance came at the cost of subjecting their children to Father Pirson's reign of terror and foregoing the opportunity to pass on the Innu way of life in the hunting camps.

There are also stories of parents being scolded and even beaten for taking their children into the country when, as the priests maintained, they should have been in school. Not only was schooling an excellent means of compelling village life, but for the Oblates, without education, the Christian message could be dangerously mixed with other beliefs, thought to be superstitious at best and the work of the devil at worst. Such beliefs associated with shamanism, the Animal Masters and the shaking tent or *kutshipatshikan*, of course, were nurtured by nomadic hunting life. While the priests concentrated on indoctrinating young Innu into the Christian world-view, they also discouraged the older generation from such spiritual practices as playing the drum and respecting the bones of the animals.

Even those students of a younger generation who attended Peenamini McKenzie School in the 1970s and 1980s have similar memories. For these generations, the punishment may have been less painful, but it was nonetheless equally humiliating. Punishment such as ear twisting, kicking on the backside and verbal chastisement was commonly experienced. Many also remember not being allowed to go to the washroom when they requested it, and several people said that they occasionally had to urinate or defecate in their clothes in the classroom. Some people indicated that this happened also in fairly recent times either to themselves or their children. Past students remember being hit with a belt or strap by Sister Coffey, a nun who became principal of the school. Others said that they were asked to stand in the corner or leave the classroom for not listening to the teacher. One young man said that he was whipped with a ruler for speaking *Innu-aimun* with a friend. At the time he was confiding about his parents drinking at home which was bothering him. Other young students were told to stand in an empty room or in the corner of the classroom for what was deemed misbehaviour. While these punishments might be considered appropriate in Canadian society, they are largely alien to the Innu who have almost always avoided verbal chastisement and physical punishment and who have valued consensus above authority. Certainly, formalised humiliation was never an Innu method of teaching or controlling children.

In the face of all this evidence of maltreatment and abuse, one obvious question is why did Innu parents do nothing about it? There are several explanations for this. In the 1950s and 1960s, the older generation had great respect for priests and teachers. The missionaries were the main mediators between them and the government that had been instrumental in abruptly curtailing their nomadic way of life. This was done under the banners of Christianity, progress and civilisation, which the Innu were told were the way of the future. Some were so affected by this that they became ashamed of the Innu way of

life. Shortly after settlement, confused and disoriented by life in the settlement, many of the older generation became heavy drinkers. As such, they were in no position to challenge the authorities. Added to that, they had little facility in the English language.

Ashamed to be Innu

This study has found that the legacies of past school experiences are deeply inscribed upon many collective and individual memories of growing up in Sheshatshiu and Utshimassits. Furthermore, those painful recollections extend to worryingly recent times and serious disquiet about their children's formal education continues to pervade local attitudes. Almost everyone in both Innu communities of Labrador is alarmed about what the school system may be doing to their children. Not only do they think that little is learned in school about who the Innu are, but for them the school itself is a tool of cultural assimilation. Not only does it provide both misinformation and disinformation about who they are, but it trains children to adopt values and sensibilities that run counter to those which have sustained the Innu for generations. Although there are some exceptions, many Innu parents admit that, in one form or another, the school is transforming their children into white children. 'The school has done a lot of damage to our culture and our children', opens the discussion of the school in Davis Inlet in *Gathering Voices*, a collection of reflections of people in the community in the aftermath of a number of very public tragedies including a house fire that killed six children in 1992. It continues:

It has really changed our lives. The school is not working as it is supposed to. The biggest problem is that our children are not learning their culture in school. They are learning the white culture. This is a foreign culture. The school has prevented us from learning our own history. Too many of our children are dropping out (Innu Nation, 1995:65).

This refers to the 1990s, but a similar theme is echoed by Apanam Pone, an interviewee for the 1999 Sheshatshiu Innu Band Council study. Speaking of his school days thirty years earlier:

Instead of being proud of my grandparents, I learned to be proud of the Queen. She doesn't even live in Canada... I learned to disrespect the elders. It was more important to listen to white teachers and priests than to the elders. They were to be respected as knowledgeable. The priest was 'a man of God'. I thought that what I had to

know was what the school taught me. Kids today are the same, they think the elders are not educated.

Several people made the point during interviews that the school strips young Innu of their identity. Formal schooling instructs children in the subjects that are seen as important in the wider Canadian society. It therefore socialises them primarily as Canadians, and reinforces an image of them as ‘minorities’ in Canada, under the all-embracing authority of ‘the Queen’, whose dated portraits festoon public buildings in Labrador. For several decades little or nothing was taught about Innu history, the geography and features of *Nitassinan*, ‘our land’, the material and spiritual culture of the Innu. Rather, the school was heavily biased towards the teaching of subjects that were deemed important in Canadian society. The comments of this *Tshenu* (‘elder’) are typical:

Because education was forced upon us, we have lost our heritage and culture. The school has had a damaging effect because of the lack of Innu teachers. There’s a lot more white teachers teaching the white way. Because of this the language is being lost, and we’re losing it fast.

The first days of school were remembered by several people that we interviewed for the Sheshatshiu Innu Band Council study as a kind of ‘culture shock’. Suddenly Innu children were placed in a strange environment, their freedoms were curtailed, they were removed from their parents and they were addressed in a foreign language. Soon they discovered that they would be physically punished for behaviour that was accepted and tolerated in their homes. The objective of Father Pirson and other authorities was to inculcate Euro-Canadian beliefs and values as rapidly as possible. This meant that it was not simply academic knowledge that had to be conveyed, but European manners. Thus, non-Innu ideals about hygiene, cleanliness and appearance were enforced upon the Innu children in a number of ways. Several people remember being told to drink a foul-tasting brown liquid in bottles issued to them every morning. It was not explained to them at the time, but this was probably cod liver oil. Others remember being given pills, probably vitamins, and powder for lice, each morning. Some former students said that teachers would remark on how bad they smelled, and this was at the time when very few households had any running water.

One of the most important ways in which 'heritage and culture' has been lost is through the teaching of history. For most of those that we spoke with history, as taught to them, consisted of heroic tales of European discoverers such as Christopher Columbus and John Cabot. This supplemented the more local history of Newfoundland where they were taught the finer points of fishing lore, the design of schooners, the sale of cod, the tune and lyrics to the 'Ode to Newfoundland', and the rather parochial accomplishments of former Newfoundland Premier, Joey Smallwood. In effect, they were, as one woman put it, 'taught a lie'. She continued, 'my grandchildren are still taught about John Cabot, even though we teach them differently. The kids find it confusing.' For several decades, Innu children were taught that their descendants were merely 'discovered' and that the most important events of the past were the heroic dramas of settlers. The message students derived from the absence of Innu history, the Innu way of life, Innu views of the world, and Innu achievements in the curriculum was that their ancestors were barely worthy of consideration. As a result of this denial, students found it difficult to connect their own background as Innu hunters with the contradictory messages implied in history lessons.

Greg Pastitchi, now in his thirties, said that he was "made to feel ashamed to be Innu." His schooling led him to believe that there was something shameful about being Innu simply through the over-riding importance attached to foreign places and forms of knowledge. It was the history and development of fisheries that Greg recalled as being important to his teachers. He now looks back on the absurdity of being given exercises in which he had to describe a schooner in 100 words or less, for example, but given no opportunity to learn the history of his parents. Only some years later when the Innu put on an Innu history course at a local college, did he learn from a student that attended it, the significant genealogy of the families in Sheshatshiu. Many people in the first generation who grew up in the settlements now look back regretfully at how their education concentrated on the Newfoundland and Labrador settlers' experiences at the expense of Innu history. In effect, this first generation missed out on knowing their history simply by omission, while, as I will describe, the second generation, currently in the schools, is learning Innu history as spectacle and simulation.

As Innu children are increasingly exposed to the school it is certain that they have lost language skills, as well as confidence in the Innu way of life and values. Many people now in their thirties and forties cannot read or write *Innu-aimun*. Members of the younger generation who have recently finished their schooling or who dropped out also expressed similar sentiments, feeling that

they would have liked to have learnt more subjects relevant to the Innu way of life. One young man said that he got the distinct impression at the school that the Innu way of life was hardly worth living and that it was much better to stay in the community than in the country.

Only when the students are teenagers do some realise that they have lost things that are valuable to them. If they did not go to the country—referred to as *nut-shimit*, the vast expanses of the Labrador interior where, forsaking the school, many Innu still spend several months of the year in hunting camps—their continued exposure to the English-speaking world, in the school and elsewhere, created a bewilderment as to who they were. As this exposure continued, they began to feel increasingly removed from their parents' generation and their ability to speak *Innu-aimun* was compromised by not being able to go to the country where the language is most vital. Thus, one man in his twenties said, 'I am ashamed to say that I went to the school at all...I wasted my years in school.' Another man, now in his late 30s said that it changed the way he thinks. It made him 'think English' and gave him 'white thoughts', leading him to prefer the non-Innu way of life with its technologies and conveniences. He found this regrettable, saying that; 'I lost part of my life.' The sense of losing something of one's history and identity that can never be reclaimed was an overwhelming sentiment among the people that we interviewed in Sheshatshiu. For many people, the end result of this process has not been a smooth 'integration' into Canadian society, but a kind of psychological confusion. One young woman expressed this as a conflict between the *Akaneshau* ('English') way of thinking and the Innu leading to a constant struggle within, as if she constantly had to switch between two identities.

The school itself professes to alleviate this by concentrating on competence in both Innu and the Euro-Canadian languages and knowledges. The first Principal I interviewed was the Newfoundlander, Cynthia Fleet, in 1995. Like most of the *Akaneshau* involved in a professional capacity with the Innu, she is upbeat. She manages a positive impression. While there were problems of attendance and motivation, she was presiding over a move to make the Roman Catholic run school "more Innu" by incorporating the Innu language in teaching and bringing in the *Tshenut*, the elders, to talk to the children about "culture". Her story line was one of gradual improvement, as small changes and innovations to the curriculum were made to mark out the milestones of progress. The Principal recognised that the school was alien to the parents—"the white man's culture" she called it. But the task at hand was to improve the school so that more Innu parents would be enticed into sending their kids there. Nonetheless, there was a certain sense, which has grown with every

subsequent visit I have made, that the optimistic exterior harboured doubts, not just about the integrity of the school in its own terms, but the very concept of education for the Innu youngsters. If the school is improving, what is it now that it is an improvement upon? If the line is an upward ascent, what is this cultural, social, political space to which it is headed?

If these doubts remain unarticulated among the teachers, they are not for the Innu. In the communities, a deep scepticism about the professed aim of teaching children in the ways of both cultures pervades. Some say it is only *Akaneshau* knowledge that is being taught. For example, the Innu teaching aides, themselves part of the 'more Innu' strategy in the school in Sheshatshiu observed that the school, despite the professed aims of the former Principal, helps children only in the ways of one culture. For them, whatever Innu content the school had was only a corrupted distortion, a representation of something that exists only as a celebration of the death of the Innu. It does not and cannot represent what it is to be Innu. Even those, like the *Tshenu*, Tshenish in Utshimassits, who say that the school is trying to impart both Innu and Euro-Canadian knowledge, are utterly pessimistic. For Tshenish, the very visible trauma of the young Innu, plagued with gas sniffing, drinking, teenage pregnancy and suicide, is ample evidence that this approach does not work. The 'culture day' expresses the banality and destructiveness of these strategies.

The Redemption of Culture Days

Since the schools in Utshimassits and Sheshatshiu have been controlled and run by the Roman Catholic church, the same institution that played a central role in ending permanent Innu nomadic life, profound spiritual and cosmological conflicts continue to come to the fore. These have been addressed by the school fashioning itself as 'more Innu', a self-assurance that it represents a native-Canadian syncretism. The 'more Innu' programme as pursued by Fleet's successor, Steve MacDonald, meant soft pedalling on Catholicism, especially in the wake of the expulsion of the local priest after allegations of child sexual abuse in 1996, and promoting more native spirituality in the school. Tapping into what is now a popular and widespread New Age appropriation of Native American and Asian images, MacDonald envisioned dream-work, creation stories, and energy chakras in his arsenal of spiritual tools for the young Innu. Perhaps the new 'Native Christian School', could start each day with meditation, he mused.

'Culture days' and 'life skills' programmes fortify the aim of the school to be 'more Innu'. While the school does recognise Innu knowledge on these occa-

sions, the way in which it is conveyed is ultimately confused and confusing. The events connected with such programmes aim to teach the necessary skills of the hunter in the country. This conscious ‘teaching’, however, takes place in the community, primarily on the school premises. Knowledge of the hunting life is at once removed from its physical and spiritual context. Children learn about it in the same way they learn about mathematics, grammar and science. It simply becomes a parallel ‘subject’ of institutional instruction, domesticated and, denuded of experiential significance, it is as abstract as MacDonald’s energy chakras.

The ‘culture days’ at Peenamini McKenzie that I observed were co-ordinated by Frank Phillips, a representative from the local Forestry department, with the help of Dominic Pokue, a *Tshenu* who speaks very little English. One ‘life skills’ classroom session for teenage pupils was on trapping and furs. It was conducted entirely in English. A video aided the presentation. As well as factual information on the seasonal variations in types of pelts and where animals are located on the map of North America, the video emphasized how pelts are measured and graded. Several computer-generated graphs presented the Innu students with ‘primeness curves’, indicating the times of the year when pelt values peak and trough. A shot of men in suits bidding at an urban auction room is accompanied by the commentary—“grading guarantees that pelts will be sold at their true value.” The ‘true value’ was marked out in units of money, not use, spirituality, hunting life or anything else that Innu hunters would recognise. To help the Innu students grasp the concept of ‘true value’, an analogy was given by the teacher. “When you go to a supermarket there is a difference between buying hamburger meat and a T-bone steak,” he asserted, “the T-bone steak costs more, but it tastes better.” Like the consumer goods and meat of domesticated animals in supermarkets, there are natural hierarchies within nature and these are reflected in the monetary value for which the products of nature sell. The strong implication of the presentation, conveyed as an unstated assumption, is that the relationship that people have to the animals is mediated through cash. Like all commodity relationships, it is a materialistic connection.

The ‘culture day’, then functions not to reinforce Innu pride in their history and world view, but to upstage it—to impose a materialistic conception of nature and to allow the Animal Masters, dreams, shamans, and other forms of spirituality to recede into the background like Dominic, an expert hunter himself, watching the video without being able to understand the commentary. Echoing this incomprehension, some of the pupils amused themselves with graffiti on the chalkboard at the back of the room. Comments such as “Bor-

ing”, “You won’t understand nothing in here” and “You crazy Indian girl” juxtaposed themselves against the stolid Canadian earnestness of the ‘primeness curves’, the four grades of fur from XXL to 5 and the method of measuring the pelt from the tip of the snout to the base of the tail.

Following the video presentation on pelts, instruction was carried out in the tent that Dominic and his wife Philomena had erected outside the school. While Philomena prepared caribou stew and ‘Innu doughnuts’ on the sheet metal stove, instruction on skinning actual pelts was provided in a mixture of *Innu-aimun* by Dominic and English by Frank Phillips and another *Akaneshau* instructor. Although Dominic’s skinning was skillful and laced with jovial bantering with the students, most were going about their tasks in a half-hearted way. As they took turns to remove the fur from the animals, it seemed as if they were not trying to do anything well or to copy Dominic’s assiduous precision. Some attempts were made to impose structure, but these were largely unfocused, as knives flew about and boys and girls chased each other in and out of the tent. The scant attention paid to the lesson was broken when one of the teachers lifted up the door flap and announced ‘recess’, taking orders for pop, candy and potato chips. These were duly delivered and soon the tent was littered with aluminium cans and junk food wrappers. Hardly anyone besides Dominic, Philomena and I touched the caribou stew.

‘Culture days’ both simulate and parody. The gulf between abstract classroom knowledge and lived and living experience, not lost on the students, makes the exercise one of institutional self-presentation, rather than native knowledge. In simulating Innu knowledge, ‘culture days’ are post-Innu. That is, they do not honour the Innu, but mark the sedentarisation of the people and the domestication of nomadic hunting and its banishment to the past. To learn about the country one must physically be in the country. To know the power of the elements, the tracks of the animals, the techniques of killing and other skills requires accumulated experience, not a representation of that experience in a classroom or in a tent specially constructed outside the school. Knowledge of the legends, stories and Animal Masters, sometimes imparted to children by older people who have been asked to participate, is patently out of context and abstract in a school building in the community, far removed from the areas of importance to the Innu. The participation of the *Tshenut*, as personifiers of this way of life, fixes Innu hunting in the past tense.

Although the triumph over nomadic hunting is incomplete, by simulation and parody, ‘culture days’ anticipate a closure. The process, like many other simulations of Indians is redemptive of Euro-American acts of destruction.

‘The tragic wisdom that was once denied is now a new invention’, as Gerald Vizenor (1994:7) remarks of the film, *Dances with Wolves*, is equally applicable to the ‘culture days’. The difference is that the school system in Canada is taking no chances, anticipating the need for redemption, well before there has been time to reflect on the decimation of a way of life. The funerary plaudits are being mouthed while the body is still warm.

This is ontologically significant for the younger generation. In his memoir, *The Names*, N. Scott Momaday (1976:97) reflects on time, not as separate from, but as passing through people. The past and the future give shape to the present. Thus, ‘...an idea of ones ancestry and posterity is really an idea of the self.’ If what is unique about the Innu, their nomadic hunting life, is merely a dying ancestry, fit only for simulation, and the future, as equally fantastic as the simulated past, is lining up in supermarkets to buy T-bone steaks, then what is it to be a young Innu today? What is celebrated in the culture day is the absence of hunting through its banal simulation in classrooms. The students’ lack of interest and derision mark the parody of Euro-Canadians instructing them on themselves. The miscreants in the classroom and tent gesture towards a refusal to be mocked and to, at least momentarily, mock the mockery.

The Absence of the Innu

How might this confusion be engendered in the social institution of the school? In combination with the gradual phasing out of Christian religious education, schools across the Western world, and those in Sheshatshiu and Utshimassits are no exception, increasingly promote a kind of technophilia. The computer is displacing the Bible and the blackboard, rendering knowledge increasingly disassociated from context. In fact knowledge itself is often seen as synonymous with ‘computer literacy’ and the ability to manipulate digital technology. At a more immediate level, the use of computers in the school creates an addictive desire in young people for the pleasures of machines. This is nurtured by the teachers, whose mastery of computers is a badge of their own competence in the wider Euro-Canadian society.

Early one morning in the school’s computer lab, Miguel a teacher from Goose Bay, is instructing a group of seven students at the ‘lowest’ literacy and educational level. The lab is well equipped with the latest computers, software programmes and printers. The students, varying by perhaps five years or more in age, are using the paint programme. They are drawing pictures and writing their names on the screens. After learning the most basic skills imaginable through ‘painting’ animals and landscapes, they are allowed, individually of

course, to play computer games. This is one of the only classes that I have been in where I have witnessed no 'discipline' problems. Transfixed, the mood of the students is one of dull compulsion.

The contrasts between the technocratic world presupposed by computers and 'the old world', as Miguel refers to it, is striking. The 'old world' appears, abstracted from context, rendered only through the lens of materialism, at the occasional 'culture day' and through the pervasive visual representations that mark the death, not the persistence, of a way of life. Framed photographs of long dead Innu in the country, women making bannock or sewing moccasins in tents, and men checking their nets adorn the walls. The museum-like presumption in the phrase 'the old world' is made real in the glass cases which house snowshoes, tea dolls and moccasins. But, of course, it is not real, like the myriad representations of Native Americans in North American popular culture, it celebrates an absence not a presence (see Vizenor, 1998). Children know it is decor. It is simulation, symbolic of the *Akaneshau* authorities' redemptive efforts to make the school 'more Innu'. What is being taught day in and day out as 'real' is the computer, whereby progress is measured out by marks that can be made on the screen, the manipulation of keys and mouse, the 'programmes' that are painstakingly slowly learnt and which have no echo in their lives or homes.

The Innu school-children are presented with a very confusing picture of who the Innu actually are. This not only occurs through the staging of culture days and visual displays of the past, but perhaps more insidiously when the *Akaneshau* teachers fumble around to present a picture of the Innu to the Innu. Due to a lack of textual material on the Innu in English (there is a great deal more in French produced by the Innu schools on the Quebec North Shore), images, stories and legends from other peoples, often Iroquois or Plains Indians is produced. While there are similarities between these peoples, the many differences are overlooked—an analogy would be to depict Euro-Canadian stories as Americans, Mexicans or British. Thus, certain perversities occur, such as when children are asked to complete exercises in which Innu are shown as Plains Indians wearing feather war bonnets.

Although Innu parents are often not able to fully evaluate the Euro-Canadian content of the curriculum, many believe that it is inadequate in its own terms, and nearly everyone regards the presentation of Innu reality as bizarre and distorted. This distortion follows not only from learning in the abstract, that is, away from lived experience, but because the juxtaposition of European visions of the world and Innu realities tends to render the latter inferior. As

Greg Andrew, a former chief of Sheshatshiu told me, “the only thing that kids are able to learn in school is to be embarrassed by our culture.” Similarly, Simeon Tshakapesh, another former chief, of Utshimassits recalled that, “I was ashamed of who I was. I didn’t want my parents to come to school wearing moccasins.” Because school teachers act as models of adulthood for children, their manners, dress and sensibility impress themselves making the differences between the *Akaneshau* teachers emblematic of the inadequacy of the Innu adults within the world that their children are operating within.

The teachers, by their personal example, are not merely exposing everyday Innu manners as inferior. The most revered aspects of Innu cosmology may, by comparison with what is taught in the school, be sensed as profoundly lacking. The indoctrination of both Christianity and that which has largely supplanted the Christian view of the world, a faith in itself, science, highlight Innu world views, which are presented chiefly in simulation, not just as different, but as primitive, backward and prior.

Conclusion: Empty Promises

Although there are opposing tugs such as an experimental alternative school, *tshiskutamashun* and a new initiative created by an Innu Foundation called Tshikapisk to educate young people in the country, the pull, disastrous as it has already proved to be, for many of the young generation is towards accommodation to the settlement. Utshimassits people are currently relocating to Natuashish, a community which will have vastly improved facilities and amenities. Sheshstshiu gradually urbanises. With each visit I make there are more signs of permanence—new houses, bigger trucks, more satellite dishes, street lamps, a baseball field and hockey rink, a brand new high technology Band Council building high atop a hill overlooking the houses and Lake Melville, and tellingly numerous new ‘treatment’ centres. Some parents even send their children to the school in the settler community, North West River, because they believe it maintains a higher standard of education. The momentum seems to be leaning towards a future of more ‘integration.’ Under the pressure of all these developments, even an avid hunter such as Etienne Pone, is resigned. “We can’t turn back,” he told me at his tent at Camp 41 on the Churchill road, “it doesn’t work. The only way to do it is to kill the culture and make the kids *Akaneshau*.”

Gradually, more Innu have been trained to take teaching roles, and in 1999, Francesca Snow, the first Innu school Principal in Labrador started her new post at Peenamain MacKenzie school. Cynthia Fleet’s promise to make the

school 'more Innu' is coming along through changes of personnel as well as by simulation. The persons who control it, however, the Labrador School Board, are still non-Innu, but there are moves to make the school Band Council-controlled through the government process of devolution. It is generally felt that Innu control of the school would help to remedy some of the destructive patterns of the past. These aspirations were given a boost in November 1999 after the release of *Canada's Tibet* (Samson, et. al., 1999) when the Federal government agreed to provide funds for community control of education along with policing. The agreement for the release of these funds was signed on 24 November 1999, just two weeks after the launch of the report. However, by March 2000, no funds had been released and it was announced that the promised funding was for negotiations for community control of policing and education, not control itself. The President of Innu Nation, along with the two chiefs, issued a press release indicating that their efforts to achieve 'equivalency' had been frustrated. As President Peter Penashue said at the time, "Federal officials have not taken seriously the spirit or intent of the agreement... in fact, they have taken previously offered implementation options off the table. We are left with empty promises." In the wake of a well-publicised epidemic of gas sniffing among children in the community in November 2000, the authorities re-committed to these minor concessions, but it remains to be seen whether they will also be 'empty promises.'

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Colin Samson is Lecturer in Sociology and Director of American Studies at the University of Essex. In 1999, he was awarded a Strategic Research Grant from the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Memorial University Newfoundland to complete his forthcoming book on the Innu, *A Way of Life That Does Not Exist*. He thanks the Sheshatshiu Innu Band Council for supporting this work and for creating a convivial environment. Louis Rich helped immensely with sharp insights and thoughtful translations. Anthony Jenkinson and Jean-Pierre Ashini gave him some astute commentaries and Basil and Angela Penashue provided him with a wonderful family home to live in while he was working for the Band Council. All interpretations and any errors remain his responsibility.

Notes

- ¹ The bulk of the research for the Band Council study involved interviewing community members. These interviews took place in a number of locations—in houses in Sheshatshiu, at the school, and at camps on the

Churchill road and at Crooks Lake. Interviews were in-depth, lasting from between 30 minutes and three hours with the majority lasting at least an hour. Louis Rich, an Innu researcher and translator for the project, and I interviewed people across the age ranges from 19 to over 70. Altogether 55 people were interviewed. In addition to these interviews, a large number of informal conversations with community members about schooling were conducted and I sat in on numerous classroom sessions in both communities prior to the study itself. Most interviews recorded information on the experience of the interviewee with schooling, their views on how Peenamin McKenzie is currently operating, and the *tshiskutamashun* or alternative school, an Innu-run school which had been established to teach Innu skills, history, and language. In addition to this, we asked people what kind of education system they would like to see in the future, and what changes, if any, they would like implemented.

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