Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Setting

Peenamin Mackenzie School in Sheshatshit is a large brick building on the northeastern edge of the community. When not occupied by teachers and children it appears to be a deserted institution, a ghost from the past, barren and exposed in blowing sand or blowing snow. Despite the school's marginal location and image, it is one of the most influential institutions in the community, since it provides an educational foundation, albeit a controversial one, for its Innu students[1].

Shortly after my arrival in the community in August of 1992, I attended the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Innu Nation[2] which took place at Northwest Point, four kilometres by road from Sheshatshit. Several Innu families had set up camp here for the summer to get away from the intensity of

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[1] The population of Sheshatshit is over 1,000. There are approximately 19 families in Sheshatshit, out of maybe 150, which have one non-Innu parent. All these families have children attending the school. In addition there are 3 non-Innu families living in the community with some children attending school. These racial differences are at times targets for teasing and bullying. Though I will describe the community and students as Innu, this is a generalization.

[2] The Innu Nation is the political and administrative organization which represents the Labrador Innu. Its head office is located in Sheshatshit.

village life. The Point is surrounded by long sandy beaches and abundant with berries. A large canvas tent was set up by the Innu Nation, the floor covered with boughs, and a sound system installed for better acoustical coverage. The tent sides were open and people came and went, or stood around outside chatting; children moved freely between playing with friends in the sandy shrubbed landscape and the comfort of sitting on the knee of a parent or relative in the tent. Here, as in many aspects of life in Sheshatshit, tradition and modernity co-exist.

Outside the tent, children playing with plastic guns and bow and arrow sets from Woolco provided a metaphor for the changes occurring in their world. Trips into the country are now done in bush planes which carry in skidoos, boats with outboard motors, television sets and nintendo games. The old ways are changing, some traditions are being revived, while new technologies and skills are being adopted.

A discussion on strategies for securing full control of the local school was on the agenda for the AGM. The year before representatives of the Innu Nation had bolted the school doors in protest, demanding that the provincial department of education transfer school control from the Roman Catholic School Board in Happy Valley to the Innu Nation (Cleary, Evening Telegram, October 19, 1991:3). Following this protest, community control seemed to have been assured by the

provincial government. However, the Innu Nation later rejected the provincial government's proposal which was to transfer administrative control to an "Innu Education Authority", but required it to be financially accountable to the Roman Catholic School Board. The Innu Nation insisted that the Innu Education Authority, to be established, must have comparable status to a school board and be solely accountable in all areas of administration to the provincial department of education. Community members present at the AGM were asked by Innu Nation leaders if they would support radical action like blockading the school again if control was not transferred through bureaucratic means. Everyone present agreed to resume a blockade if necessary. The blockading strategy has been effective for the Innu in the past and has resonance for them: it is non-violent, direct, and makes a strong, definite statement.

Over the last ten years, direct action for change has been a consistent political strategy for the Innu. Throughout the 1980s, in response to a proposed NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) training base in Goose Bay, 30 kilometres away, the Innu, along with peace activists and supporters from Canada and abroad, launched a campaign to stop low-level military flight testing over Nitassinan (meaning "our land" in

Innu-aimun)[3]. Through their protests against low-level flight training, the Innu have come to represent what Tanner described as a "striking example of indigenous nationalism turned against the modern state" (1993:75). Collective political action in opposition to legislation by the provincial and federal government has provided a catalyst for community solidarity and acts of resistance over the past ten years.

Though support was expressed at the aforementioned meeting for community school control, many people were not well informed on school related issues. Nevertheless, the symbolic act of taking control of the school seemed to hold powerful connotations for people at the meeting. Publicly Innu school control is portrayed as an important step towards greater community autonomy and self-government. In the course of my research however, it became clear that the majority of people within the community lacked a clear, and cohesive idea of what an "Innu" education would involve. The school, like so many aspects of life in Sheshatshit, is infused with a pervasive dilemma that lies at the core of every issue; the dichotomy between country and community values. This dichotomy brings to the fore questions of what it means to be Innu in

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[3] Ashini (1989), Armitage (1989), Crump (1988) and Wadden (1991) have written about the Innu struggle to halt military expansion in Nitassinan.

the modern world and where the emphasis of an Innu education should lie.

1.2 The Dilemma

In doing field work one tries to anticipate the problems to be encountered in the course of the study, but an anthropologist going into the field never knows what the central issues really are until he or she gets established in the community. Prior to my arrival, the proposed focus of my research had been to look at the way Innu culture and political ideology would be expressed in the take-over of the school and the establishment of an Innu curriculum. Because the school was scheduled to open under Innu control in September 1992, I had anticipated being able to examine how Innu culture would be integrated in the school system and what form community participation might take. However, I arrived in the village to discover a stalemate in negotiations over school control. Though participants at the AGM had agreed to support protest action, in the months following the AGM no one in the community or the school was informed as to what stage the negotiations were at or what strategy the Innu Nation was employing in these negotiations. The Innu and non-Innu staff at the school continued working, not knowing from one day to the next what the future held.

Through my contact with the Innu Nation I was informed that meetings with the provincial government had resumed in

September 1992. A new agreement was reached between the Innu Nation and Premier of Newfoundland. By early October, the Innu Nation was led to believe that the transfer of school control would take place in January 1993. The Innu Nation then decided that a community protest and blockage of the school would not be necessary. However, the expectation that control would be transferred to the Innu Nation in January 1993 was not made public and the status of the decision remained somewhat precarious.

The Charlottetown Constitutional Accord put forward to the Canadian public in late August (see Globe and Mail, August 28, 1992:A1, A10) recognized the inherent right to Native self-government, but was voted down in the October, 1992 National Referendum. In response to the failure of a slim Canadian majority to support the Accord, Native groups across Canada who had backed the Accord began protest actions. The Innu Nation's spontaneous response to the failed Accord was to remove hydro meters from several Innu houses. Later this action was also portrayed as a means of denouncing the proposed Lower Churchill Hydro Development project. In what became a year long protest, the Innu Nation demanded from the provincial government a compensation package for Innu elders who had lost belongings in the flooding of the Smallwood Reservoir. This area had been an important hunting territory and the Innu had not been properly informed when the Churchill

River hydro electric dam was constructed. In 1973, 1,300 square kilometres of forest went under water (Wadden, 1991:46-50). When the removal of hydro meters began to draw extensive media coverage, the momentum of the protest accelerated. Soon meters were removed from all Innu houses. Everyone was excited by the symbolic implications of this action (which had now changed from being a reaction to the failed accord to a protest against inappropriate resource development strategies taken by the provincial government without informing or consulting the Innu). In brief, many people held the view that the Newfoundland Government had flooded traditional Innu hunting grounds, taken unlawful control of Nitassinan and was now making a profit. If the government would not pay for its wrongs, the Innu were not going to pay for electricity generated through unlawful expropriation of their lands. The hydro meter protest led the provincial government to suspend all negotiations with the Innu. School control was put on hold and remained that way for over a year.

In light of these protest actions, my research focus had to be altered. School control remained a central interest for me, but it was soon evident that school control was only one of several issues concerning people in Sheshatshit. In the interviews I conducted, the issue of school control nevertheless raised important concerns for community members. One of the dominant concerns at the heart of the community is

the perplexing question: Where does the past fit into the present? I began to see that the take-over of the school was in part an attempt to institutionalize an answer to this question.

Generational differences in the perceptions of what Innu culture is today and how it should be expressed in the curriculum create divisions and obstacles to the establishment of a "community" school. Several people I spoke to expressed concern regarding the political implications of having the Innu Nation control the school and others wondered how a locally run school might reflect the changing expectations for cultural knowledge, and white and blue collar jobs.

This thesis then sets out to examine the historical period prior to settlement, the predicament of community life and the rise of ethno-nationalism. It then analyzes the institutional, cultural and political dimensions of school control from the perspective of community members. The concept of change in Sheshatshit is laden with ambiguity. The majority of Innu are acutely aware of the negative impact change has had on their community. Attitudes towards the school and its potential role as a propagator of Innu culture highlight the diversity which exists in Sheshatshit and reflect the divergent and dynamic expressions of Innu identity today.

The questions raised in this thesis are also part of a larger and more general issue which has been a classic focus

in anthropological literature: How does an aboriginal society, thrust into the modern world, survive and adapt? Are the actions being taken by the Innu and the ensuing political and cultural changes acts of resistance, adaptation or survival?

The Labrador Innu are one of the last aboriginal societies in North America to be settled and the trauma of settlement continues to reverberate. Now the marrow of the cultural past is being replaced with the values of industrial society. The material changes are evident but the question of identity continues to haunt the people.

1.3 Notes on Fieldwork and Methodology

In my childhood and youth I had spent over ten years living in the North. While living in Labrador, Sheshatshit had struck me as a depressing and confused place. In my late teens and early twenties I eagerly left Labrador to work in East Africa and travel in India and Nepal. Now, more than ten years later, after having spent several years living and working in Africa and Asia, I found myself returning to this familiar yet foreign place. African and Asian cultures had always seemed so much more "exotic" and unusual, but I was now coming back to an old home to find in the familiar and ordinary one of the strangest and most inaccessible societies I had ever come across. It was surprising to find myself in a geographically familiar setting but in a community in which I felt totally alienated from everyone. I was clearly "the

other" in this place. I sensed this was going to be difficult.

I spent four months doing fieldwork in Sheshatshit from August to December 1992. The first few weeks were spent house-sitting, being entertained by children with warm smiles and faces bursting with an enthusiasm for life, wandering around town, trying to meet people and just generally "hanging out". I was confronted with what seems to be an unavoidable and difficult trial of fieldwork. To be a stranger in a strange place is hard, but when you do not have a defined role to play, the beginning is made even more awkward. Trying to look as though you are doing something when you are not sure what to do is challenging, especially under public scrutiny. I wonder if it is this often painful process that for many fieldworkers produces a humility which later becomes an asset to doing sensitive research.

After I had been in the community for a few weeks I was invited to come and live with a family. This was a great blessing. Basile and Angela were close in age to me though at times I think they regarded me more as their daughter because of my relative naivete. I learnt a great deal about the challenges confronting the Innu of my generation through them.

The Innu approach outside visitors to the community with an air of reservation and caution. Trust in others is not quickly granted. I soon realized that this was a community in

which many people were suffering and spent a lot of time just "being", trying to survive the emotional trauma, poverty, addictions and abuse that has permeated their lives and identities since permanent settlement.

Participant observation in the first month was hampered by the fact that there was not much going on. Many people had left town by car and plane to go to an Innu folk festival and visit friends in Mingan, on the Quebec North Shore. August was a bad month for drinking and many possible informants were either out of town or out of commission. After some reflection on how to approach my research, I concluded that for the first month or so I should just be present. This seemed to produce a momentum of its own.

Upon my arrival, I quickly discovered that I was following a stream of researchers who had spent time in the community collecting data for their M.A.'s and Ph.D's. Being a Euro-Canadian anthropologist, conducting yet another study in their community, my presence provoked a combination of respect and cynicism from both Innu and non-Innu residents. However, I also encountered a degree of honesty and a willingness amongst some people I met to share, on a fairly intimate level, their thoughts and experiences. From the beginning I had hoped that, since I was studying such a current and important issue, my research might serve some purpose. To this end I sought to work in conjunction with the

Innu Nation, and the affiliated Innu Resource Centre, on a survey of eighty adults. Broadly, the survey was aimed at finding out what parents wanted for their children's education, what role culture would play in a community run school, and whether or not people supported the Innu Nation's take over of the school and the establishment of a local board separate from the Roman Catholic Board currently in control (see Appendix B).

Upon my return to St. John's, I organized and compiled the interview data into a report which was sent back to the community. In June of 1993, I returned to Sheshatshit for 10 days to discuss the survey results. During this follow-up visit, I broadcast on the local community station a summary of my experience of living in Sheshatshit and provided an overview of the survey responses. This was followed by an evening meeting to discuss the survey results. That evening about a dozen people attended the meeting held at the Alcohol Centre where the concerns and expectations people had for a locally controlled school were discussed.

In addition to the interview project: I worked as a volunteer at the Innu Nation; participated in meetings held regarding school control; observed classes in each of the primary and several of the elementary and high school grades; attended community meetings and women's gatherings; visited families and spent a weekend with an elderly couple in their

road-side tent. While four months of participant observation and extensive interviews enabled me to gather a sufficient base of information from which to weave together a thesis, it also raised more questions than I am able to answer. The survey results, in conjunction with my fieldnotes and profiles of local institutions, comprised the majority of my own data. However, relevant sources on Innu history, politics and culture are used throughout the thesis.

My own cultural heritage has undoubtedly served to limit my ability to both see and understand many aspects of Innu society. It is with this knowledge of my own limitations that I struggle to be honest and clear about the data. A great limitation was my inability to speak Innu-aimun. English is widely used in Sheshatshit, but Innu-aimun is still the first language of most of the inhabitants and through it much of Innu reality is expressed.

For a long time I felt trapped by the confusion and contradictions which constantly scratched me like the wild raspberry bushes and the broken glass in Sheshatshit. Upon my return, I could not write. How was I to make sense in a social-scientific form, of the turmoil that I witnessed in the lives of so many people. Explanations are hard to find. Once you step outside the safety of the empirical world, the dance of multiple truths begins. My hope is that this study will be a resource for people in Sheshatshit, in so far as it

describes some of the contradictions and dilemmas people are facing and, to some extent, tries to explain them.

Truth, in this context, is nothing more than an honest reflection, another representation of the Innu by the "other". But at best, this thesis may shed a little light, from a different angle, on the complexity of the changes facing the Innu.