

Chapter 7

The Country\Community Dialectic

7.1 Three Dimensions of Country

The distinctions experienced between the country and the community reflect differing generational perceptions of what it means to be Innu and the appropriate means by which this knowledge should be passed on to younger generations. Culture, for the two older generations of Innu, is predominantly equated with the country and notions of the past. Concepts of Innu-ness for the younger generation tend to be inclusive of traditional experiences of country life as well as values associated with more modern ways of living.

The following descriptions of country are an attempt to illustrate three forms in which concept of country manifests itself among three generations of Sheshatshit Innu. The categories of "real country" , "country as metaphor" and "country as past" are broadly generalized to illustrate the variations in how country is conceived and experienced and how these variations determine, to a degree, the perception of the school as cultural transmitter.

Real country is employed here to describe what the elders and those who continue to spend several months of the year in the country experience. The elders have maintained a relatively strong sense of their identity as Innu. For them

the essential meaning of life in the country has not changed dramatically despite the accumulation of new technologies. In the village, they do not seem to be as concerned with the ambiguities of community life and modern values because the country continues to define their core values and remains integral to their existence and lifestyle.

Country life prior to settlement represents more of a contrast than an opposition to community life for the elders. The elders see the past as having been good because people ate wild meat, were much healthier and could walk long distances. They now see that people are lazy and want to fly, take skidoos or motor boats wherever they go. In the community the elders feel sad to see the loss of sacred practices, and social organization. In former times, these cultural practices would have assured that they would be provided for in their old age. They would have been viewed as educators of the younger generations and accorded respect from everyone.

The elders remember the past as a time when they were proud and independent, and able to survive without government assistance. They resent the dependency that characterizes Innu society today, a dependency in which they find themselves entrenched. On the whole, the elders have a more balanced and somewhat less romanticized view of the past than Innu of the following generation, most of whom never lived year-round in the country. The elders will talk about the hardship,

diseases, starvation and abuse that existed in the past. They remember times when people did not share. Many of the elders feel isolated from their own people in Sheshatshit as they experience the changing values and the accompanying disregard shown towards them by the young people.

For the elders I spoke to, school control was not perceived as a priority. They were not against school control but nor was the school regarded as an effective means for the transmission of a culture that is lived and experienced. The elders felt that as long as people are still able to teach Innu culture by taking their children and/or grandchildren into the country, this is where Innu culture should be taught. They advocated that more stress be put on bringing children into the country as an integral part of any education. The elders also criticized the school for its role in holding students and families back from the country.

From the interviews conducted with elders, it is evident that their concerns about the school were limited. This generation of elders (aged 45 - and up, most people over 60 do not know their exact age) received no formal education and regret their inability to speak English and therefore to communicate with the wider society.

As the younger generation become less fluent in Innu-aimun and the old ways, they communicate less with their elders. The elders feel isolated from the "community"

generation as their traditional role as educators is diminishing. One elder was hired for five days to teach snowshoe-making at the community college in Northwest River. He was indignant at the way Innu culture was viewed both by his white employers as well as the Innu students attending the course.

Why do White people think that this can be done in 5 days? In White culture it takes 5-6 years to be a lawyer. To be able to teach kids about the culture and country - to be able to know everything about the country it will take 5-10 years. I was hired by the community college for 5 days to teach [Innu] kids how to make snowshoe frames. It is crazy to expect this. There were so many things missing that I didn't have a chance to explain that they were all interrelated (Survey P:4).

The elders see the limitations in the ability of formal education to adequately transfer Innu skills and knowledge. At the same time many recognized the need for Innu youth to be integrated into both cultures.

Country as Metaphor The country represents an idealized state of being, in varying degrees, to the majority of people around the ages of 20-45, the first generation to grow up in the settlement. In addition to an idealization of country experience among this middle-generations there is also an articulated experience of country life which reveals some degree of continuity between the ideal and the actual. Village life lies in opposition to the country; here the ideals of the country are not realized. The country

represents a clarity of purpose and existence, a place in which one can experience and express his or her ideal self. For this group country has come to represent a world in which an idealized identity exists. In the country there is sharing, hard work, cooperation within the family, and a sense of the sacredness of life is revived by just being in nature and eating wild meat.

Presently, when funding is available approximately one third of the families in Sheshatshit go into the country for several months in the late fall and early spring of each year. The experience of country life has little connection with the way people of this middle-generation live their lives in the community. The grounding in Innu country life does not transfer into the community. Here, their identity is predominantly linked to community life and its corresponding values. Village life is not able to replace what is lost from a grounding in country life. The country has come to represent the utopian ideal which, when realized, provides a cohesive sense of identity. Yet the motivation to go into the country is often thwarted by the pressures of community life, such as school and work: in some cases people are held back by their bingo or alcohol addictions. In other cases people just get out of the habit and stop going.

Country excursions are heavily subsidized by the Band Council. Old ways of hunting and paying respect to animals and

the animal masters are seldom practised by people of this generation. Their dependence on a cash economy has further eroded old values of caring and sharing. Yet the country continues to be revered as a symbol of their Innu-ness. It is this idealized Innu image of themselves which they portray to the media and use to represent themselves in their political and environmental campaigns. Though this ideal reflects some of the actual practices and beliefs of the Innu, current processes of change are transforming these images into symbols which now have little to do with the everyday reality of village life. For this generation, the first to grow up in the community, the elders continue to be held in reverence in word, but in practice, life in the community does not always involve the elders in a meaningful way.

The middle-generation tends to be more supportive of local school control. School control is seen as a legitimate way to preserve traditions by institutionalizing them. Ironically, this generation was the first to go through the education system and it is they who seem to have the most confidence in the school's ability to instill cultural knowledge and identity. Culture as it is being defined in this new framework is now held up as a panacea for the social problems and the violence in the community. "If the Innu way of life was taught in the school more, I don't think they would have any problems" (Survey B:11). Having a strong sense

of identity and self-esteem seems to take precedence over being qualified for employment.

I don't know if I benefited very much. I do have a job now. I don't have a degree yet. I am able to read and write. I am able to do a lot of things for myself, but the sad part is that I have lost a large part of my culture going through a program that didn't take into consideration me as an Innu person, it didn't teach me that. That's the saddest part about me (Survey, 1993:F79).

The elders, parents of people from the middle-generation did not receive formal education, yet they embodied a rich sense of identity and history. The history, language and cultural identity of the elders was denied validity in the school system the middle-generation were brought up in. Thus, the current emphasis on Innu education will be significant if it is able to provide credibility to a contemporary Innu identity.

There is a strong desire among this middle-generation for a locally run school to provide Innu students with a history which empowers youth and instills a healthy sense of pride in an Innu identity. What is sought by this group is the integration of languages and skills that would enable students to bridge the dichotomy between country and community and to transcend the experience the middle-generations has had of being marginal in both worlds.

Country as Past represents the views of the younger generation, who are under 20 and make up just under 50% of the

population. This group identifies the country and its symbols as being important and having meaning, but these particular expressions of Innu-ness do not play a central role in the defining their identity. The Innu language remains important, as do the stories of the elders and occasional trips to the country. However, this generation of youth have other aspirations. Several of the teenagers I spoke to want to be doctors, teachers, secretaries, study business administration or go on to trade school. There also exists a small group of young people who prefer to live in the country and aspire to be hunters when they grow up.

There seems to be less idealization of the past amongst the youth. While sitting in on a grade eight Innu history class taught in Innu-aimun, I noticed that the students were quite distracted, one boy was playing with a deck of cards. The others were listening in the bored, distracted way that young teenagers everywhere listen to old people talk about how they used to live. The teacher was telling stories of her life in the country as a small girl in Innu-aimun, (she later translated it for me). But her students did not express much interest. The youth do not appear to share the excitement or romanticized views of an Innu past. A past which holds marginal relevance in their lives today.

The high school students I talked to supported local control but had little vested interest either way. Through the

local Innu rock bands and more popular bands like Kashtin, and an increasingly more positive depiction of Native people in the media, these youth appear to project a stronger self-image than their parent's generation.

These data reflect the degree of consideration given to issues of the past, identity and change amongst the two older generations who are attempting to maintain the continuity of their culture both through practice and an institutionalized cultural education. There are clear expectations that Innu culture in its changing forms must be an integral component in the school's curriculum. The degree of uncertainty regarding the expression of Innu cultural forms reflects a community struggling to adapt to the changing demands of the present while also trying to articulate how the symbols and practices of the past and of country life can be effectively preserved and transposed onto an important social and political institution.

7.2 Being Innu in the Modern World

The idealization of the past prior to settlement has been an important strategy in asserting a common identity and in the advancement of a political agenda (Keesing 1989:19). But political leaders are not always able to establish unity within the community. A common Innu identity may exist in relation to the "other" but this identity is not maintained in relation to each other.

The Innu have drawn from the representations of country life to define their identity in the context of a modern political and social reality which emphasises the oppositions between modernism and traditionalism. These form what Friedman refers to as a "hypothetical field of available identifications specific to Western modernity" (1992:847). Integral to becoming part of the modern world is to identify with values in opposition to those which are dominant within modern society (Friedman, 1992:847).

The country and community present the Innu with oppositions, in response to which different senses of "self" and what it means to be Innu emerge. The different "selves" which exist within this heterogenous community find a sense of identity in relation to the country and in opposition to the dominant values of modern society. The meanings associated with country provide important resources which are employed in affirming a contemporary Innu. The representative role these constructions play in enabling the community to resolve its dilemmas and continue to make beneficial choices in the future may in the end be what determines their validity.

In the expression of Innu-ness today, the past serves as a resource, but not necessarily as a role model. Innu-ness is predominantly expressed through many Western values which are now incorporated into life in Sheshatshit. The middle-generation of Innu, whose identity has been closely tied to

their conception of the country, are in the process of examining what it actually means to be Innu in the modern world. Some are asking whether they have a right to call themselves Innu now that their lives have lost the spiritual values and practices embodied in Innu country life of the past. This line of questioning is internal to the community, but it reflects the tensions involved in grappling with concepts of identity that are tied to the past and symbols which remain somewhat dissonant with their lived experience.

The younger generation, as outlined above, do not seem to feel the split between the past and the present in their identity as Innu. While speaking with fifteen year-old one evening, I asked how she would describe Innu culture, her response was "Everything in Sheshatshit is Innu culture!".

The incorporation of Innu culture into a locally run school may not present the up and coming generation of Innu leaders with the same dilemmas that today's leaders face while their sense of identity still lies somewhere between the country and the community.

7.3 School Control: The Challenge

The progress towards school control achieved thus far; the overall success of Innu politicians in their negotiations with government; and the precedent set by Aboriginal communities elsewhere in Canada who are running their own school, suggests that Innu school control is inevitable. But

the implementation of school control will initially raise more problems than it will immediately resolve. This is because the Innu Nation will be pressed to coordinate the participation of a community which is, in many respects, divided. It is also because school control raises in embryo many wider issues to do with the tension between political authority and the tendency for many Innu to see Innu-ness as the capacity to act autonomously. Whether school control is a desirable objective, and if it is, what form it should take, is contested. In part this is because school control means different things to different strands of opinion. For the Innu Nation, control is envisaged as part of a political strategy: self-government. The issue of control is related to a nationalist project and, at the same time, has become one of the stakes in it. For others, the issue of control has a different significance. Many parents are more concerned with the need to equip their children with skills that will provide them with an opportunity to participate in the social and economic structure of modern society. However, the record of the school thus far in this regard is poor, and critics of local control have no clear sense of how to improve the school. Improvement is likely to require leadership - and this is what the Innu Nation is seeking, in difficult circumstances, to provide. In this way, and in some tension with its traditional ideology and claims, the Innu Nation is a 'modernizing' force which at

the same time seeks to preserve vital aspects of Innu tradition.

The take-over process is occurring at a decisive period in Innu history. Innu traditions are now noticeably disappearing with the death of the Innu elders who embodied them. The school represents an opportunity to preserve the knowledge of the elders, Innu history and language. The "past" may be institutionalised, though inevitably re-shaped, through courses in Innu history and culture integrated into a modern educational curriculum.

Gaining control of the local school will challenge Innu leaders to involve teachers and parents in finding solutions to the internal political diversity, and to the complex questions of ethnicity and identity which trouble the community. Questions such as "Who am I?" and "What is Innu culture?" will still need to be addressed and school control will not automatically answer them. Innu leaders and adults, of the middle-generation, are caught between two worlds. On the one hand, they are compelled to respond to the dissonant voices and images of modernity which provide a new set of narratives on what it means to be Innu. On the other hand, they are also drawn to listen to the voices of the past, and experience the pull of country life which continues to provide, in diluted form, a contrasting narrative. The establishment of a curriculum that will enable students to

understand their past, and acknowledge the cultural diversity and the future dreams of the Sheshatshit Innu, remains a difficult challenge. Perhaps the process will encourage people to let go of the limited concept of what it means to be Innu, a concept partially imposed upon them through a Western educational system which taught today's leaders that the nobility in being Aboriginal lies in being traditional.