

THE LANGUAGE OF THE MONTAGNAIS
AND NASKAPI IN LABRADOR

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1. Introduction

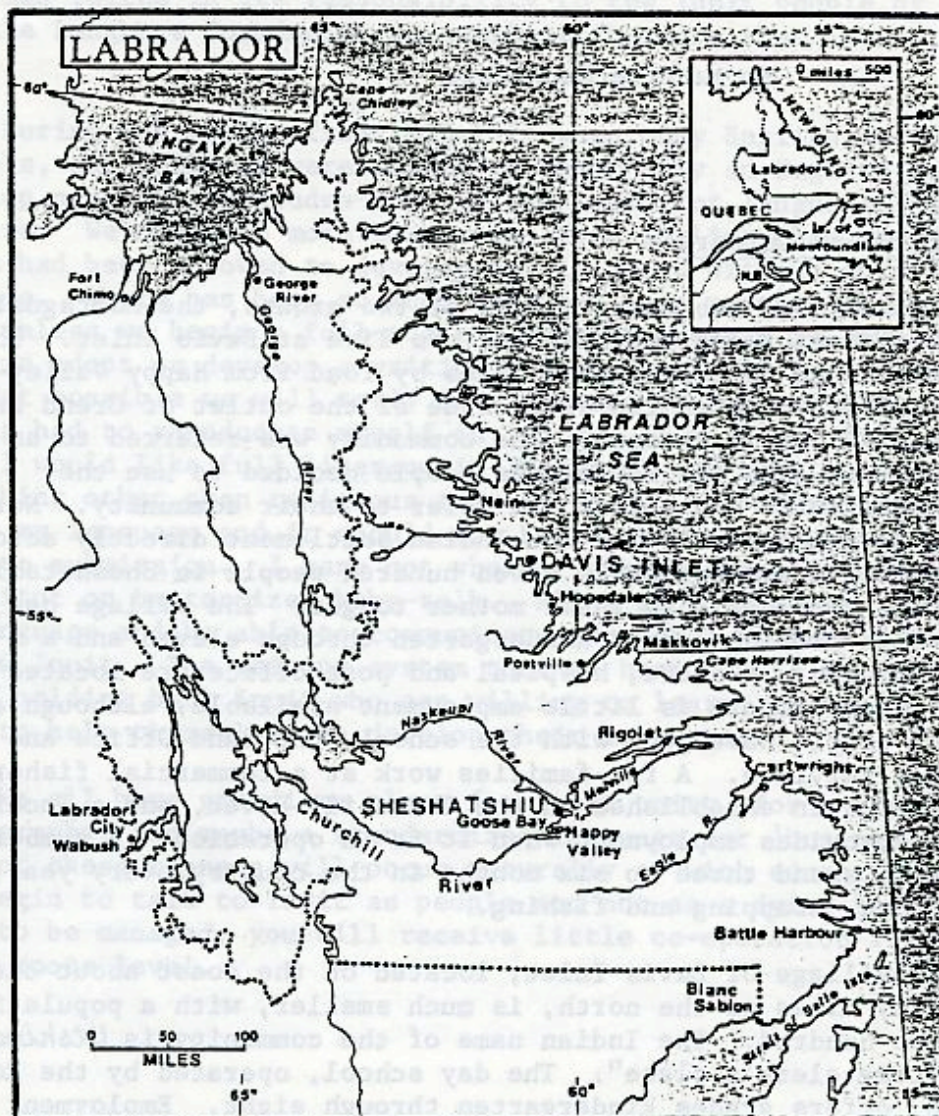
1.1. History and Culture

The Indian people of Labrador consist of two groups, the Montagnais, resident at Sheshatshiu, and the Naskapi, who live at Davis Inlet. The village of Sheshatshiu is twenty-five miles by road from Happy Valley-Goose Bay. It is situated on the south side of the outlet of Grand Lake into Lake Melville. Until recently, the community was referred to as North West River; in 1980 the Montagnais people decided to use the Indian term *Sheshatshiu* "big outlet" to refer to their community. North West River now designates only the non-Indian settlement directly across the river. There are approximately seven hundred people in Sheshatshiu, all of whom speak Montagnais as their mother tongue. The village has a day school which provide grades kindergarten through eleven and a Roman Catholic Church. A store, hospital and post office are located in North West River. There is little employment available, although a small number of people have jobs with the school, the Band Office and social and legal services. A few families work at a commercial fishery project which has been established on the Churchill River, and a local sawmill project provides employment when it is in operation. A number of families still spend three to six months in the country every year, living off hunting, trapping and fishing.

The Naskapi village of Davis Inlet, located on the coast about one hundred and fifty miles to the north, is much smaller, with a population of less than two hundred. The Indian name of the community is *Utshimassiu*, which means "store clerk's place". The day school, operated by the Roman Catholic Board, offers grades kindergarten through eight. Employment opportunities are even fewer than in Sheshatshiu, but this is somewhat compensated for by the fact that there is easier access to the northern caribou herds. This means that people can live from hunting, and fishing, to a much greater extent than can the Indians to the south.

When speaking of themselves in their own language, the Indians of Labrador do not use the terms "Montagnais" and "Naskapi". These terms were introduced by European explorers, traders and missionaries who first visited the area and are only used when speaking French or English. The term *Innut* "people, Indians" is used to designate Indians and differentiation can be made between groups by adding the name of the village. Thus the Labrador Montagnais refer to themselves as *Sheshatshiu-innut* and the Labrador Naskapi as *Utshimassiu-innut*.

Montagnais and Naskapi



Labrador Innu Communities

Map 1

The following description of their culture is taken from Tanner 1979:

"They have always been a nomadic culture, and they are at home in tents, which they use as they travel over most of the area of Labrador. Many of them have also lived and hunted over large areas of Quebec, and have relatives among the Quebec Indians....

The Innu think of themselves as different from other native North Americans, like the Inuit, the Iroquois

Montagnais and Naskapi

or the Micmac, and among themselves they also recognize regional divisions and differences. The Sheshatshiu Innu, a group which in turn is composed of several regional sub-divisions, inhabit the forests north and south of Lake Melville and west as far as the Upper Churchill River (before it was flooded by the Churchill Falls dam). The Utshimassiu Innu inhabit the interior barrens as far west as the George River (Mushuau Shipu - Barren Ground River), as well as the more forested lands leading to the coast. Both groups were always based in the interior for much of the year, but came to the coast in summer, to catch fish, seals and sea birds. After European contact these summer trips to the coast became intensified, as traders and missionaries persuaded the Innu to meet them each summer at coastal settlements, among them North West River and Davis Inlet. Even before the era of the fur trade the Innu were living on the coast, and even assisted Basque fishermen at their station in southern Labrador....

The culture of the Labrador Indians reflects the nomadic way of life. They developed the technology of travel, by means of snowshoe and toboggan in winter, and by birch bark canoe in summer, to a fine art. They were expert at making skin clothing, stone tools and wooden utensils of all kinds....

For most of the year they lived in groups of several families, each occupying their own tent made of a bark or caribou skin cover (now replaced by canvas). In mid-winter the group sometimes moved into a larger, communal dwelling. At certain times of the year when concentrated resources were available (at the coast in summer, or in the interior where the large herds of caribou gathered, where the fish spawned, or where the waterfowl would flock) large groups would gather for several weeks, and feasts and celebrations would be held. Their diet was very rich in meat, which was cooked in a variety of ways, using all parts of the animal....

Although the contact with the first fur traders had little [effect] on their nomadic hunting way of life, there were many cases on record of traders insisting that the Indians give up their hunting in favour of trapping for fur, only to leave them cut off from food supplies, and starvation was the result. The

use of guns cut down on the need for the communal caribou hunts, in which fences and corrals were constructed and the animals driven there to be killed. The dependence on the missionaries made it necessary for the Indians to travel great distances each summer if the missionaries could not visit Labrador, as was often the case. But the major disruptions of the hunting way of life did not take place [until] well into the 20th century.

Prior to the First World War fur prices rose, and coastal settlers began to trap inland. The settlers did not have the Indians' idea that all land and game meat should be shared. They set up individual trap lines, and drove the Indians away from the best land, forcing them to go further inland. At about the same time the numbers of the major animals started to decline, particularly the caribou, and Indians began to arrive at the coast in a starving condition. They remained living in tents and spending most of the year inland until well after the Goose Bay air base was built in 1942. It was not until the 1950's that the Newfoundland Government, using federal money from the Department of Indian Affairs, started to build houses and schools at North West River, and still more recently at Davis Inlet. In this way pressure was put on the Indians to settle down. Since the price of fur at that time was very low, Indians at North West River became more and more dependent on government sources of income - family allowance, old age pensions and welfare - and less able to live off game meat. The government forced parents to send children to school, and this made it impossible for families to leave the villages for long periods of time. Some managed to continue hunting and trapping, but they found that the growing town of Goose Bay had resulted in overhunting of most of the animals in the vicinity, especially the caribou in the Mealy Mountains....

The creation of permanent villages had drastic results on Indian society. The school took away the children from the parents, and taught them in ways that were irrelevant to the parent's way of life. The necessity to stay close to the settlement, without alternative occupations, meant that formerly strong and active hunters were deprived of the activity which their culture placed most value on, and left them in slum