

Chapter 3

The Present

3.1 Sheshatshit Today

The settlement sits on the south side of the channel that flows out of Grand Lake and Little Lake into Lake Melville. Northwest River is located on the north bank of the channel facing Sheshatshit. Both communities had been incorporated under the name of Northwest River until 1979 at which time the towns were formally divided and Sheshatshit was incorporated under its Innu name. The Innu name Sheshatshit refers to the coming together of the shores of two lakes, Lake Melville and Grand Lake (see Map 2) (Mailhot, 1993:18). This location has been used by the Innu for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. The name Sheshatshit appeared on topographical maps as early as 1703 and was referred to in a document by Louis Jolliet in 1694 (Mailhot, 1993:17).

Prior to 1979, a cable car transported residents and visitors to the north side of the channel. Today the town of Northwest River is accessible by a bridge that connects the two communities. Northwest River has a population of approximately 750, the majority of whom are Settlers. There are also several Inuit families and a number of Newcomers. Here, there is a post office and a large department and

grocery store, a cafe and take-out, a school, a community college, a clinic, an alcohol and drug rehabilitation centre, various recreation halls and three churches. The town is relatively affluent in appearance. It is landscaped with gardens and trees, and there are street lights and signs marking the paths and gravel roads.

On the south bank of the channel, across the bridge, lies Sheshatshit. The population of Sheshatshit is about 1,000 with a birth rate of 5.6 percent¹⁵. Though historically intertwined, these communities have maintained very distinct cultural identities, and these differences have served to reinforce a sense of each community being ethnically defined in relation to the "other".¹⁶

Sheshatshit lies along the beachy shores of Lake Melville and faces east towards the Atlantic ocean which lies beyond the horizon (see Map 3). The community itself is spread out, with houses running along more than two kilometres of beach road and lining the steep hill side which rises above the shoreline, providing most residents with a view. There are 151 houses in town, several of which are currently uninhabited and in need of renovations. Sheshatshit has a small store with

¹⁵ Based on population statistics from the Mani Ashini Clinic records 1990.

¹⁶ Evelyn Plaice in The Native Game (1991) describes how the ethnicity of people in Northwest River has been defined in relation to their Innu neighbours.

inflated prices run by an entrepreneurial Settler family, a school, a church, a clinic and a Social Services office that serves both communities. For other services, residents of Sheshatshit go across to Northwest River or to Goose Bay. Northwest River is a popular option as many residents in Sheshatshit do not have cars. Every day people from Sheshatshit cross the bridge to go to the stores, take-out or post office. This flow is not reciprocated by residents of Northwest River who rarely set foot in Sheshatshit.

Many of the government attempts since the 1960s to promote economic growth have not been successful (Armitage, 1991:51). Unemployment has remained high, leaving many families on social assistance. Traditional values are being replaced with the material values of the secular consumer society which now surrounds the community. Television is watched regularly and is constantly on in many homes.

The majority of families in Sheshatshit are struggling to cope with problems of low self-esteem and the experience of a family life overshadowed by alcoholism and violence. The stress which accompanies these conditions often hinders an individual's ability to participate in the formation and administration of community organizations.

Alcoholism and more recently bingo addictions have become pervasive. In Innu-aimun the word for alcohol is "spirits" and drinking for many people is felt to be means of

transcendence in a community which, in contrast to the country, is without spirits. Alcoholism is seen by many Innu to be caused by community life, loss of autonomy, and anomie, but historical data reveals that drinking for the Innu and the early Settlers was already a strong addiction in the mid - 1800s long before settlement. However, drinking patterns have changed with village life. In the past, the Innu and Settlers who enjoyed their drink were able to sever this addiction at least temporarily by virtue of having to hunt and trap for most of the year, during which time they had no access to alcohol.

Alcohol today is purchased in Goose Bay. For people without cars or access to a "lift", taxis are available. The director of the alcohol centre informed me that over 90% of the adults in the community are alcoholics. Alcoholism manifests itself in different ways. Broadly speaking in Sheshatshit there are three types of alcoholics¹⁷: 1) Binge drinkers are those who may go for long periods without drinking and then go on a drinking binge, usually with one or two other people. This type of drinking can go on non-stop for several days to be followed again by a dry period. 2) Dry alcoholics are people who do not drink but have alcoholic traits from either growing up in a home where people drank or

¹⁷ These "types" and the terms I have used to describe them are commonly used in the community.

giving up drinking without receiving treatment. 3) Alcoholics in "recovery" are people who have given up drinking through intensive treatment and who continue to work on overcoming addictive behaviours ¹⁸.

Related to alcoholism is the problem of a high suicide rate in Sheshatshit. In 1988, a total of 21 people, the majority of whom were between the ages of 15-24 attempted suicide (Armitage, 1989:29)¹⁹. Wotton's (1984) analysis of suicide rates among native people in Labrador reveal rates that are twice as high as native suicide rates in the rest of Canada and five times higher than the national average. Many accidental deaths and skidoo accidents have been alcohol related.

The effect of alcoholism on individuals and on the lives of families is quite obvious in Sheshatshit and for the most part, the Innu do not attempt to hide or deny its existence.

¹⁸ The causes of alcoholism are complex and controversial and will not be reviewed here. For a summary of reasons for alcohol and chemical abuse among the Innu see Armitage (1989:32-34). See also Savishinsky (1991) and Henriksen (1993) for an analysis of the social meanings associated with drinking in native society. The Innu Nation and the Mushua Innu Band Council (1992) published The People's Inquiry Gathering Voices: Finding Strength to Help our Children which exposes the tragic effects that alcoholism has had on the lives of the Innu of Utshimassit.

¹⁹ News of a suicide or attempted suicide are fairly common. During my stay there was one attempted suicide and just after I left I heard news of another, this time a successful attempt. A young man in his late teens, the boyfriend of my host's niece, hung himself. His girlfriend had just given birth to their second child, and they had split up shortly before he took his own life.

During my first month of fieldwork, the level of drinking in the community was very severe. Several people suggested that this was a result of the boredom of summer and that people who usually go into the country in the spring had not gone because the outpost program had run out of funds that year²⁰.

Efforts have been made by community members to start a healing circle and other support groups which could address the problems of alcoholism, bingo addictions, suicide, abuse and neglect in families. Differing views exist as to where community priorities lie. Some people feel the problems related to abuse and addictions must be given priority before the community is able to take on larger and more practical development projects such as school control and self-government. Others believe that personal changes must go hand in hand with institutional and political change.

Coloured by addictions and the breakdown in family relationships, much of the social experience in the community revolves around coping with life day-to-day. Some people have quit drinking without treatment and then turned to bingo. The bingo games are held in Happy Valley- Goose Bay every night of the week between 7 and 9 pm. The community has now instituted the 'bingo bus' which ferries people to and from the bingo

²⁰ The outpost program was instituted in the late 1970's. It is administered through the Band Council and provides transportation and subsidies which enable families to go into the country for up to three months in the fall and spring (see MacEachern, 1984).

games. Bingo has become a serious addiction for many people and the effects of this are visible on individuals and families whose entire income gets consumed by this game.

Government funding has supported the establishment of an Innu alcohol program centre. The centre is run by the Innu Nation and staffed by Innu counsellors who hold Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) meetings twice a week with as many as 30 to 40 people attending each meeting. The staff at the centre have helped with the formation of community healing circles. They have also helped to establish women's groups and men's groups which focus on overcoming addictions and dealing with scars from mistreatment received and/or inflicted. Unfortunately, efforts to establish support groups like the healing circle have often failed due to internal conflicts, which the group members are unable to resolve effectively.

A great source of discouragement and sometimes a cause of deep resentment is the demise of values which were integral to life in the country. Sharing which once characterized the nature of the relationship between hunters and their families did not transfer into settlement life. The ethic of sharing is sometimes renewed within and between immediate family groups when caribou and other wild meat are brought into the community. Though the expectation that people share what they have lingers, this practice collapses when individuals and families struggle to manage within the constraints of a cash

economy. The economic environment of community life does nothing to reinforce sharing. One informant lamented the loss of caring and sharing between community members and pointed out that the lack of sharing has deteriorated relationships of interdependence and become a divisive force between family groups.

Innu leaders and community members have somewhat ambiguous views on the presence of non-Innu institutions. The Roman Catholic Church, despite its enduring influence historically, is now becoming increasingly marginalized. Its influence became more pervasive when year-round settlement began. Previously, the long periods of separation from the mission and the priest allowed the Innu to return to their traditional religious practices when they returned to the country every fall. In the early years of settlement, the priest actively condemned the practice of the shaking tent, drumming and other sacred Innu rituals. They were instructed by the priest that these rituals were evil and that when practising them they were acting not in accordance with God but with the devil. Physical punishment by the priest for disobedience and not attending school classes in the early years of settlement has left many adults with sour memories.

The Church has admitted to some of its mistakes in the past. The changes being instituted by the mission today seem to have come too late. Though weddings, funerals, baptisms,

and Christmas celebrations remain popular, regular mass is not well attended. The Church has more recently become the locus of blame for the erosion of the culture and many traditional values. The Church and the school have become concrete representations of Innu colonization. Part of the dark history these institutions symbolize for the Innu is linked to physical and sexual abuse perpetrated in the domain of the Church and school. However, today these problems are not confined to the Church and the school.

The Innu Nation is in the process of taking over the administration of several non-Innu institutions in the community. Sheshatshit has established its own radio station which broadcasts for 10 to 12 hours a day. The station plays primarily Innu pop and rock music by Quebec and Labrador musicians. A phone-in line is operated for people to air their views, deliver messages, and make announcements. The radio is listened to regularly in most homes and has become an important means of informing people of local events. The radio has also been used as a means of facilitating communication on community concerns.

A component in the effort to "indigenize" local institutions has been the Innu Nation's lobby to involve more Innu staff in administering social services to the community. It is hoped that the greater participation of Innu staff will ensure a delivery of programs which can more effectively

address the specific cultural needs of Innu families. However, this is proving to be a complex and difficult process²¹.

A large number of non-Innu people live and work in the community; many are married to Innu men and women. There is a fair degree of ambivalence towards non-Innu "outsiders" regardless of whether or not they have Innu spouses and children. The presence of non-Innu residents is a contentious issue; as residents they have access to the same subsidies as the Innu residents do. Several Innu have expressed indignation over this policy of resource distribution to non-Innu members of the community and wish to see the non-Innu residents ousted from the community altogether. It is not uncommon for a non-Innu person living or working in Sheshatshit to be harassed with racist remarks by an Innu person (for example see footnote 30 p. 135)²².

The run down appearance of Sheshatshit in contrast to Northwest River may, in part, signify a symbolic assertion of difference. Schwimmer (1972) suggests that marginalized

²¹ Lyla Andrew (1992) prepared a study on the delivery of social services in Sheshatshit which points to the historical relationship between the Innu and Social Services as being one of domination and control. She argues that it is difficult for the Innu to recommend changes because the philosophical framework from which the Innu would recommend changes is fundamentally different from that of Social Services.

²² This racism towards Whites is not so surprising when you witness the racism that residents in Goose Bay and Northwest River express towards the Innu.

Aboriginal groups may present themselves in opposition to the dominant White society through what might be seen as competitive acts which assert difference in relation to the perceived value system of others (1972:117-155, see also Kennedy, 1982). In Northwest River people are seemingly more affluent and take pride in their lawns, gardens, houses and cars. In Sheshatshit people are poor, and the services limited. The message conveyed here may be one of resistance to an imposed value system. An Innu informant explained that if he wears clean, new clothes other Innu might think he is "trying to be White". Another person said that he had a briefcase which he never used for his work because using recycled plastic bags was more characteristically Innu. His briefcase looked very new and sophisticated. Though he held an important position which involved a lot of travel and meetings with high level government officials, he went everywhere with plastic bags, a symbol of his Innu-ness. Sheshatshit, in its run down state may also be a symbol of Innu-ness and non-conformity, a statement of resistance to the dominant middle-class values of "White" society.

The word "community" has primarily negative connotations for the people of Sheshatshit. One day I asked an elder who was living in a tent in the woods between Goose Bay and Sheshatshit, "What's missing in the community?" "The country" she replied.

The elders, who lived most of their lives on the land, still prefer to remain in their tents for most of the year. These tents can be seen from the roads radiating out of town. Staying in the tents brings back a strong sense of the past and of an identity very much connected to the forest and the life within it. In the community, the signs of collective despair are everywhere, the vitality of country life is lost.

3.2 The Meaning of Community

Both the experience and concept of living in a fixed community were foreign to the nomadic Innu. Since year-round settlement began in the 1950s, Innu community life has been problematic. Today, the concept of community for most adults is one associated with social and political divisions along the lines of territorial sub-groups; the imposition of foreign institutions and values; and with social and cultural breakdown.

In the past, territorial and inter-band mobility allowed for a dynamic pattern of social organization (Mailhot, 1986:106). Historically, Innu communities were composed of social units which held a coherent self-identity, but had shifting social and geographic boundaries.

A basic attribute of group identity [among the Innu] is the shared perception of a commonly used environment and a shared knowledge of its resources. Such a knowledge would be as flexible as group membership. At any specific

instance the perceptions of group identity and land use would vary depending on the group's composition and the pooled knowledge of experience of individuals (Loring, 1992:30).

Community life introduced a form of social organization in complete opposition to what had previously been known to the Innu. The concept of community is an idea linked to a state of consciousness. The "consciousness of community is, then, encapsulated in [the] perception of its boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction" (Cohen, 1985:13). This consciousness of community is developed through shared values and symbols of meaning. The nomadic life of the Innu hunters was profoundly connected to a very different consciousness of "community", the boundaries of which were affirmed through rituals such as makushan and later Holy Communion (which the Innu perceived as being essentially the same as makushan). During these rituals the Innu hunters collectively communed with the Caribou Spirit and/or Jesus Christ, affirming their culture and the symbolic boundaries of their community (Cohen, 1985:47, See also Henriksen, 1989).

Although the idea of community has often been associated with wholeness and integration, Cohen (1985) addresses the meaning of community from a different angle embracing its complexity and dualistic nature. The community of Sheshatshit

has developed what Cohen would describe as a public and private face.

[T]he boundary as the community's public face is symbolically simple; but as the object of internal discourse it is symbolically complex. Thus, we can all attribute gross stereotypical features to whole groups: but, for the members of those groups such stereotypes applied to themselves as individuals would almost invariably be regarded as gross distortions, superficial, unfair and ridiculous... In the public face, internal variety disappears or coalesces into a simple statement. In its private mode, differentiation, variety and complexity proliferate (Cohen, 1985:74).

The private face of Sheshatshit is a divided one as it is composed of four distinct territorial sub-groups. Mailhot suggests that the establishment of these sub-groups is as recent as this century and the crystallization of social and political divisions between these groups occurred at the time of settlement in the 1960s. Though similar social groupings existed in the past, the corresponding social stratification did not. The emergence of a hierarchy of sub-groups within the community has its genesis in the contact period, during which time certain groups remained more isolated from trading posts, missions and the forces of modernization, then others. The degree of acculturation through contact with Euro-Canadian society was a primary influence in the formation of these sub-

groups (Mailhot, 1993:54-81)²³. These internally entrenched divisions have had less impact on the Innu youth today, who may be the first generation to share a community consciousness in contrast to identifying primarily with a specific territorial group (Mailhot, 1993:81).

This system of class and social position, which among other things determines access to political leadership, lies in contrast to the assumptions that many Canadians have of native communities as being socially cohesive and egalitarian. For most adults in Sheshatshit the experience of community has been shaped by these political and social divisions, as well as three decades of poverty, dependence, alcoholism and physical violence. Internally, the sense of community shared by its members is "refracted through all the complexities of their lives and experience" (Cohen, 1985:74). The consciousness many people in Sheshatshit have of their community is sometimes very dark and antagonistic towards its own wounded existence.

Year-round life in Sheshatshit has given rise to an internal community consciousness which exists, fundamentally in opposition to community. I refer to this as an "anti-community" consciousness. Though a consciousness of community

²³ This is a brief summary of a complex social and political pattern which has emerged over the last century, for a detailed description of these groups and the manifestations of their stratification, see Mailhot (1993:54-81).

does exist both internally and in relation to the public world. Within this consciousness is an antagonistic force which is against its own existence. This paradoxical condition exists in many social relationships. For example in a relationship between two individuals living together, there may exist an intense degree of resentment and negative emotions which cause the couple to dislike each other and the relationship; however if they remain together, they still have a relationship which may be publicly regarded as being coherent. But internally the consciousness of the relationship is actually opposed, in part, to its own existence. The situation in Sheshatshit is somewhat more complex as in addition to an anti-community consciousness, there are currents of hope and expressions of healing and change.

Nevertheless, overall the lives of many people in Sheshatshit have been fraught with angst and pain, with a sense of loss and divisiveness. This sombre aspect of community consciousness has been encapsulated in the perception of its own boundaries, and the interactions between people living in this context, have served to constitute several of the symbolic boundaries of Sheshatshit.

Several fundamental problems have given rise to an "anti-community" consciousness: 1. The deep divisions and conflict created by the existence within the community of the four distinct territorial groups between whom differences of status

and prestige exist, each maintaining, to some degree, a consciousness and identity related to the location of its associated hunting territory. 2. The rituals, sharing, interdependence with other Innu and relative independence from non-Innu which characterized life prior to settlement no longer exist. Life in Sheshatshit today has few rituals, individualism and the nuclear family have replaced practices of sharing and interdependence. Although individualism has more scope for expression in the village, its expression is also countered by the frustration of being dependent on government and non-Innu institutions. 3. Village life is boring for many people, there is high unemployment, drinking, conflict, physical and sexual violence within and between families abound.

Political action over the past ten years has revived several concepts of Innu-ness from the past which have helped to create a growing sense of the potential an organized community has in bringing about social and political change. Cohen writes that myths and memories of the past can often serve as a "'charter' for contemporary action whose legitimacy derives from its very association with the cultural past" (1985:99). Political action has produced a new set of symbols which have served to constitute a more positive public presentation of a community consciousness. The meanings that individuals within the community attach to symbols, whether

they be from the past or otherwise, may differ, but what is important to the construction of community is the sharing of the same symbols. A concept of community regardless of its coherence internally has become necessary in order to secure political gains. In the public political sphere the concept of community holds some positive meaning in so far as symbols of Innu-ness from the past and are being employed. The caribou, country, land claims and self-government provide people in Sheshatshit with shared symbols and common markers of their Innu-ness. These symbols of ethnicity and of future goals have infused some positive meaning and solidarity to a concept of community which has for the most part been constructed on a consciousness of resistance to its own existence.

3.3 Loss of the Sacred

Several of the destructive social forces of community life can be understood by looking at the change Innu religious life has undergone since permanent settlement. The provincial game laws drastically reduced access to the hunting and consumption of Innu animals. These activities were the basis of an interdependence between Innu family groups as well as between individuals and the animal spirits. The loss of hunting rights impeded the persistence of several religious practices and ritualized social forms. The cultural and religious forms of the past were practised and reinforced through an interactive relationship with the animals and the

environment. The material culture of the past existed in equilibrium with the sacred spirits of the forest and animals. Through these forces, the natural world was explained and a context was provided for survival. Life was held in balance, and infused with a sense of the sacred. In Innu cosmology "nature and society coalesce... . The spirits are everywhere in nature and the Innu interact with the spirits all the time" (Henriksen, 1993:6).

Settlement created a dichotomy in which life in the country began to be perceived as representing in its entirety, the world of the Innu. Life in the community came to be seen as the antithesis of Innu reality, uninhabited by the sacred forces which infuse life and social relationships in the country with meaning.

The breakdown in social relationships in Sheshatshit can in part be attributed to a loss of the sacred forces which in the past provided a charter for the concept of self in relation to others and to that which is sacred. As Pandian explains:

Human beings acquire their humanness by becoming symbols to themselves and others; they exist as subject and object, and as self and other, in an interactional relationship in a world of symbols that involves taking the role of the other and organizing thoughts and feelings in a culturally coherent and appropriate manner (Pandian, 1991:2-3).

Culture is largely a process; constantly being created by people through their interaction with each other. This conception of culture as a dynamic process is apparent in the way in which people "perceive meaning in or attach meaning to social behaviour" (Cohen, 1985:17). Religious practices determine different configurations of culture in so far as they regulate social relationships.

Cultures everywhere have symbols of the self that convey the characteristics and meaning of human identity and cultures everywhere have symbols that convey the characteristics and meaning of supernatural identity; in other words, symbols that signify "who am I" or "what am I" and "who or what is supernatural" are universal (Pandian, 1991:3).

Religion provides symbols through which the "super-natural" elements of human identity can be recognized, and through which people experience "self" in relation to and as part of a greater sacred whole. Pandian suggests that different cultural formulations can be examined through the cultural representations of the supernatural, the "sacred other" and cultural representations of human identity, the "symbolic self". The identity of self is constructed through its relationship with the sacred other.

Innu religious forms had provided a means through which the "symbolic self" interacted with the "sacred other". Sometimes mediated by shamans, rituals or activities such as hunting would provide fertile ground for religious thought and

action while at the same time enabling the pursuit of the practical goals of everyday life (Tanner, 1989:208). Women, who did not necessarily participate directly in the hunt, were nevertheless mediums for the animals spirits as they dreamt about the location of the animals. Dreams provided the inspiration for the designs women embroidered onto hunting garments.

The presence of Euro-Canadian institutions, fixed residence in houses which inhibited social mobility, and participation in the cash economy of a consumer society has had "drastic repercussions for how the Innu organized their daily activities" (Henriksen, 1993:2). The social organization of community life has largely destroyed the ability of the Innu to "use their social relations and cultural apparatus as tools to maintain their self-respect and sense of self-hood" (1993:2).

The conception of the "sacred other" in Innu religious ideology has largely lost its role in the lives of many community members. It would be incorrect to suggest that there is no religious sense in the lives of the Sheshatshit Innu. But community life has deprived the Innu of their access to spiritual power and created a condition today of spiritual powerlessness (Henriksen, 1993:8-9). Much of the social breakdown occurring is a reflection of the breakdown of a culture, the basis of which was a religious ideology. The role

of the sacred other today lacks clear definition or understanding in the lives of many Innu. Thus the framework previously provided for the production of symbols upon which self-identity and social relationships were constructed is now hazy and not fully understood by the younger generations. The perceived meanings upon which social interactions are based, are in many instances uncertain as the old codes are mixed up with secular values. Many people in Sheshatshit still believe in the rituals and sacred forms of the past but lack the necessary knowledge to practice them. Since these rituals, the use of the drum and the shaking tent, were forbidden by the church, this knowledge now lies solely with the elders, many of whom have recently passed away.

It is important to note that two new religious ideologies have been introduced to the community which have provided several Innu families with a new coherent framework of beliefs. The members of the Pentecostal Church and active participants in the A.A. program stand out in the community in their ability to overcome addictive behaviours and in the maintenance of positive and constructive social relationships. Antze (1987:149) points out that "A.A. does far more than to help the compulsive drinker shake off a troublesome habit. It also draws him into a community that globally reorders his life". Though A.A. does not claim to be a religion, it teaches people that their recovery is dependant on the assistance of

a greater power and in the steps to recovery reference is made directly to God. The Pentecostal Church in Northwest River has provided several Innu families with a entirely different perspective on life, and drawn them into a strong and cohesive spiritual community which has provided them with a new road map for their lives²⁴.

The narratives and myths of Innu religious traditions in the past which used to accompany and inform the practices of daily life are now silent in the community. The old maps of reality have not worked here. New maps are gradually being introduced; some people are finding guidance through A.A., others through the Pentecostal Church and many are looking for political solutions. For some residents the political values embodied in the fight for self-government and autonomy from Euro-Canadian institutions are providing a new framework for action. Through the struggle for independent nation status, attempts are being made to integrate the past, overcome the present, and work out a plan for the future.

However, the symbolic power of Innu ethno-nationalism is relatively superficial in the private realm of community life as it applies predominantly in relation to the "other"; outsiders, Whites, government, and the media. Internally, the

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meaning ethnic-nationalism holds for people is complex and produces a dissonance between how people feel about their Innu identity individually and how their identity is collectively portrayed by politicians. This dissonance is reflected in the issue of school control where community participation is often undermined by political apathy, divisions and antagonisms.