

## Chapter 6

### School Control: A Means for Cultural Continuity?

In school, I learnt nothing about my own culture, my own people. How can I benefit when I don't know who I am. I have lost my identity as an Innu (Survey, 1993:F12).

#### 6.1 Cultural Change and the Institutionalization of Tradition

In October, 1993, the Innu Nation and the provincial government worked out a compromise over the hydro boycott. With this issue resolved the negotiations for school control will commence again and the actual take-over of the school may take effect in 1994. Once complete control of the school is achieved, the Innu will have to grapple with the question of what Innu culture is, and how it might be transmitted to current and future generations through a locally-run school.

Community members express differing views on the role the school should and can play in the expression of culture and institutionalization of traditional Innu practices. This chapter will discuss the perceived ability of the school to serve as a vehicle for the transmission of Innu culture and the tensions between the desire of the Innu to have the benefits of a "White education" while also trying to hold on to the language and traditions. These tensions parallel some of the controversy between community members and leaders regarding who should control the school and why.

The process of defining culture and incorporating it into an institutional curriculum will be challenging for the community given that settlement and modernization have given rise to so many differences in cultural expression. Divisions in ethnic groups frequently accompany assimilation into a modern lifestyle which emphasizes differences in generation, class and kinship groups (Enloe, 1973:161). Enloe suggests that the problems members of an ethnic group face in forging unity will vary according to the divisions which fragment them the most (1973:161). She points out that one of the ironies of development is its "tendency to acerbate differences inside ethnic groups" (1973:162).

The decline in the practice of traditional folk culture has often paralleled the process of integration into modern industrial society (Sider, 1976:102). As the pre-industrial means of production and the accompanying social relations are uprooted, the basis for the reproduction of cultural practices is also lost. Despite the changes introduced in the reproduction of cultural practices, the collective articulation of cultural symbols in political struggles continues and serves to perpetuate romantic images of the traditional Innu. Keesing points out that these political symbols "radically condense and simplify 'reality' and are to some extent devoid of content: that is how they work" (1989:19). The attempt to transpose Innu values onto an

educational system involves interpreting both myth and reality from the past in the socio-political context of the present.

The desire to preserve indigenous knowledge tends to remain an ideal which seldom finds practical expression. The conflicting sentiments of both idealizing the past while getting on with a modern future were expressed by one man in his late 30s. He felt passionately about the "real" Innu culture and yet says he knows little about it. Having been educated through the formal school system, he learned English and "White ways" and now feels that his knowledge of Innu-aimun and Innu traditions is inadequate. His laments for the past do not interfere with his practical expression of future goals as he carves out a career for himself in a business enterprise. However, recently he began to practice Innu traditions. Last spring he spent several months in the country with his family, a practice he is now very committed to. While in the country he discovered an old Innu camp site. He remarked on how clean the old campsites of his ancestors had been left and said despairingly that in years to come the next generation of Innu would find disposable diapers and pepsis cans on the sites of his generation.

In Sheshatshit some traditions are being revived<sup>27</sup>. The

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<sup>27</sup> Henriksen (1993) refers to a process of "cultural revitalization" occurring among the Innu of Davis Inlet. He suggested that the people in Davis Inlet have not experienced the same degree of distance from country life and traditional

outpost program has played a major role in reviving people's relationship to the country. Prior to this, people in the community had more or less stopped going into the country for several years as they were not able to receive social assistance or child allowance cheques while in the country. The outpost program allows people to receive their cheques three months in advance, thus enabling them to stock up on provisions to take into their camps.

Other efforts to revive traditions include the language research which began in the summer of 1993. High school students were hired to interview elders and record the vocabulary associated with country life, which is no longer part of the Innu-aimun now spoken in the community and taught in the school. Recently, a local radio program explored how the Innu have been changed by the church. A presentation was made on the way Innu history and culture has been presented in church records. This was followed by an open discussion on the phone-in line which ran for 10 hours.

The Innu cultural festival, Innu-etuin is now an annual event which takes place in late August or early September. One of the performers I watched was an elder who played the traditional Innu drum, sang songs and told stories. There are

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culture as the people of Sheshatshit and that revival is perhaps a more appropriate term in this case (personal communication).

very few elders still living who know these songs and who can beat the traditional drum, a sacred practice reserved for the most skilled hunters. The majority of performers at the Innu-etium in 1992 were Innu youth in rock bands playing popular Innu songs from Kashtin and other Quebec Innu rock groups. There were also several middle-aged men who played the guitar and sang Innu folk songs. Past the stage, on the edge of the festival grounds along the beach, each family group had one or two canvas tents set up around which all the extended family members gathered. On fires in front of the tents traditional foods like smoked caribou and smoked salmon were being prepared and sold. Inside, on tent stoves, bannock, caribou stew and Innu donuts were cooked and sold. This festival was primarily a public celebration of Innu culture. Though residents of surrounding communities came out to listen to the music and partake in the festivities, the Innu did not cater the program or production of food to the outside market.

In the fall of 1993, a model of a shaking tent was erected in the curriculum centre and its significance explained in Innu language culture classes. A steam tent was also set up in the village in 1992. Though steam tents were used by the Innu historically, the construction of this particular one was inspired by a Native conference on healing which took place in Alberta. Pan-Indian traditions from other Aboriginal groups, such as the sweet grass ceremony are being

brought to the community by people returning from conferences and gatherings in other parts of Canada.

Hobsbawm (1983:4) describes tradition as "a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition". Traditions are most frequently "invented" when societies undergo rapid transformations which undermine the basis of previous traditional practices. When the old "institutional carriers" of tradition can no longer adapt to the changes, new traditions are invented along with appropriate "institutional carriers" (1983:4-5).

[W]here the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived or invented. Yet it may be suggested that where they are invented, it is often not because old ways are no longer available or viable, but because they are deliberately not used or adapted (1983:8).

Hobsbawm organizes traditions that have been invented since the industrial revolution into three overlapping types:

a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, in real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour (1983:9).

An Innu-controlled school in the future will no doubt serve as a means for reviving and transmitting the traditions and value systems of the past. It will also be a means through

which modern traditions and conceptions of Innu-ness may be institutionally validated.

## **6.2 Putting Culture in the Curriculum**

In the last few years the staff at the Innu curriculum centre have produced an array of educational materials using Innu content. The centre is directed by an Innu teacher. She and another Innu teacher and two non-Innu staff work on developing culturally relevant curriculum. Much of the material produced by the centre integrates Innu-aimun into traditional English style text books. A large library of Innu booklets have been produced for use in the primary grades, illustrated with images from Innu country life. The curriculum centre also maintains an extensive library of books and videos of Canadian and American Indian histories, myths, and legends. The library provides teachers with excellent resources on Aboriginal peoples and Innu history for use in supplementing their lesson plans with content which is more meaningful and relevant for the students.

For the most part, materials developed by the curriculum centre mirror the standardized materials employed in formal educational curriculum in Canadian schools elsewhere. The main difference is that Innu cultural and linguistic content is transposed onto these standardized materials. The educational advisor for the Innu Nation felt that far more innovation is needed in the development of curriculum materials. The Innu

staff, however, feel that their creativity is limited as long as they remain under the auspices of the Roman Catholic School Board.

In the primary grades students are taught by Innu teachers and instruction is almost entirely in Innu-aimun, (except for gym and music). In observing the daily activities of students and teachers in these classes, I was struck by the degree to which Innu teachers chose to use non-Innu curriculum materials. In one class the teacher had children colour in stencils of a scarecrow in a pumpkin patch. This halloween imagery would seem to be uncharacteristic of Innu culture, but it is not: Sheshatshit is saturated with values and images from the broader society of which the Innu are now a part. Children in Sheshatshit enjoy trick or treating and halloween parties. In another Innu class, the children were watching "Charlotte's Web" on video.

Pride is a highly emphasized objective in Indian education (see National Indian Brotherhood Association 1972, Kirkness, 1992). But pride is transmitted through parents and role models in the community as well as through formal education. The school has come to be seen as the main educational force in the lives of Innu children, and it is to the curriculum that many parents now look for assurance of cultural continuity and the transmission of Innu pride. But cultural acquisition is obviously not limited to the

classroom. A father told me that he felt the school was inadequate in that they did not teach students basic skills such as how to chop firewood and he regretted that his children were not able to help bring in the winter wood supply. There is a general expectation that the school will provide children with everything they need to know, yet at the same time it is criticized for its inability to effectively teach children anything.

A parent recently sang out to me as he was getting into his truck: "Most of these kids spend eight hours a day in front of the television and about five hours in the school and I don't know how many [hours are spent] in the classroom learning anything". Children in Sheshatshit absorb a lot of information from television, video movies and popular video games like Ninetendo. These products can be found in almost all homes in the community and in some tents in the country. In some cases traditional country skills are passed onto children by parents, grandparents or relatives. However, elders and parents sometimes complain of the lack of interest displayed by the village youth in acquiring this knowledge. Several middle-aged adults spoke about their sense of inadequacy in being unable to build a canoe or make snowshoes, sew moccasins, or tan a caribou skin. Despite the sense of loss they seem to show no real interest or motivation to learn

these skills. Now many people are looking to the school as a means to transmit this knowledge.

Children learn about Innu animals, beliefs and traditions through spending time in the country with parents or elders and this knowledge expands their vocabulary in Innu-aimun. Parents who are unable to teach their children Innu ways through spending time in the country hope that an Innu school will provide this type of cultural education. Many children have contact with the country through visits to people living in tents and their grandparents. Other children may learn about Innu culture in the school and come home everyday to lifestyle which has, for the most part, assimilated many Western values.

The children in the village are learning from a variety of sources which are constantly being assimilated into their behaviours and general knowledge of the world. Unfortunately, many children in Sheshatshit are exposed to far too much drinking, violence and neglect at home. The type of "cultural" education in the lives of Innu children today is a problem which pervades more than just the school as students do not necessarily learn what is held up as Innu "culture" in their homes.

While emphasis is often placed on the revival of culture and identity in an Innu school system, the value of formal

education as a means of survival in today's world is recognized by many parents. As one parent pointed out,

I never really appreciated school for what it is. I feel my children need school. I find it hard living in this community, my skills are limited and I would find it hard to get employment now anywhere else. I went to school because I was told to go. [But now], I am beginning to see that everything is learning. The future depends on the people who participate in it. Your children are your heritage. I will always be interested in education because of my grandmother. For the sake of my children I am learning to be more appreciative of its works. It will do what it is suppose to do (Survey A:23).

The recognition of the importance of education and the necessity of a school is evident throughout the interview data. Some respondents were positive about the school and stated that they thought it was alright now. One elderly women said "My grandson seems to be happy about school. He goes everyday. He was able to open up to us and tell us how much he likes it" (Survey A:1).

Support for the current inclusion of Innu-aimun in kindergarten to grade three was generally high. Innu language and history is taught up until grade nine where it has been made a credit course. The use of Innu-aimun is still very much alive in most homes in the community, the exceptions are those families with one non-Innu parent. In school most of the

classes are held in Innu-aimun up until they enter grade 4<sup>28</sup>. Though the language is still strong, the elders have expressed concern about the inclusion of English words and the loss of a whole branch of the Innu vocabulary associated with country life and religious thought.

Two mothers who were interviewed expressed concern that their children at the age of eight still did not know how to read or write a word of English and thus did not have access to many English books and educational resources. They felt that the school should introduce English in the primary grades as it is the language that their children will eventually need in order to continue their education, get further training or employment. A minority of respondents felt that the school should operate totally in Innu-aimun. The majority of respondents wanted a school which incorporated an even balance of English and Innu-aimun throughout the curriculum.

The leaders see education both as a means through which pride in Innu history, language and culture, temporarily eroded, can be reinstated; as well as a means to facilitate Innu participation in the wider social and economic spheres:

Kids should go to school because education,  
university is an accepted means to learn, to

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<sup>28</sup> Research on language learning demonstrates that children who learn a second language between the ages of 8-12 will learn faster and be more proficient than children learning a second language between the ages of 4-7 (Olivares 1993:5).

know more, to always want more information and to be proud of who you are and to teach your history - teach something about yourself, something relevant. At the same time, it has to deal with the realities of the situation. As I have said, we have to deal with the emotional problems of the kids. So, I think we have to start thinking that way so our kids can grow up to be very proud of who they are and not have the baggage of their childhood lugged around with them throughout their life-time, and they find themselves when they are 30, married, three or four kids, no job, no future and they have no pride in themselves, and they realize they need help because they have been drinking too much. Essentially that is what it all leads to. So we have to address that seriously I think (Survey C:31).

### **6.3 The Politics of Control**

The following excerpt from a brief submitted to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, by the Innu Nation, June 1992, illustrates the Innu Nation's presentation of the necessity for local school control.

I believe this Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples wants to hear of solutions relating to self-government... We can only tell you this: we believe strongly that we have the right to determine our own futures and that right includes the right to become educators of our own children. We cannot relinquish that right because if we do that, the futures of our children would be in jeopardy.

It should be of no great surprise then to learn that the Innu are in disagreement with the educational philosophy that the Roman Catholic School Board for Labrador tries to impose on Innu children.... The Roman Catholic School Board for Labrador has basically been following a philosophy which borders on assimilation of the Innu child into the mainstream of North American society and thus

forcing and/or coercing the Innu child to abandon and/or reject the notion to be a distinct people. Our children are following a school system which teaches them values and aspirations which are foreign to us. The school system, in effect, reflects nothing of our culture but rather continues to confuse and poison the brains of our children by the steady flow of non-Innu values and aspirations being fed into their heads (Innu Nation, 1992b:1-2).

Another leader commented on the political and practical realities of school control:

So if people think magically that by taking over the school, that their problems...are gonna disappear, they got another thing coming to them, cause it's not going to disappear. But it is gonna disappear if we approach it properly over the long-term. Everybody is running away from the realities or from their responsibilities because that is the way they have been treated, that's what people have been trained to do. Social services will deal with this, the church will deal with that for your sins, education will deal with this, everything is compartmentalized, everybody has a department, has a role. So if the people are given an opportunity to play an equal role in developing policy and a role in the administration of policy, then I think things will change.

What we've got to do is such a huge task because what we have to do is that we have to retrain ourselves, everybody, we have to stop being subservient, we have to start teaching ourselves to be proud, we have to recognize that everybody around us speaks English and that there is a different way of looking at things and that there is a lot to learn. There has to be different ways of looking at things. We have to start realizing that as collective people we do approach things differently even though sometimes we don't realize it, but by our actions you can tell that we people belong to a certain group of people. You know some people say, I don't want to be Innu, I just

want to be like them, you are envious, understandably, but if you want to be like them this is not the place to be (Survey, 1992:M31).

These quotes reflect a relatively high degree of realism in the Innu Nation's understanding of what would be required of an Innu school given the contemporary problems of community life. The transition process from the current school system to an Innu school is projected as being a gradual one<sup>29</sup>. The leaders I spoke to felt that no modifications to the present school should be entertained until total control and decision-making power is handed over to the Innu Nation; everything else is to be worked out afterwards.

The responses from survey respondents in the community on the issue of whether or not the Innu Nation should take control of the school were varied. In response to the question: "Are you in support of the take-over of school control by the Innu Nation?" several different positions were expressed.

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<sup>29</sup> A fear among the Innu and non-Innu teachers is that when the Innu Nation takes control they will get rid of many current members of staff at the school and hire a completely new group of teachers.

Table 1.

**Percentage of Survey Respondents in Support of a Locally Controlled School**

|         |            |     |
|---------|------------|-----|
| Group 1 | YES        | 55% |
| Group 2 | NO COMMENT | 15% |
| Group 3 | NO         | 25% |
| Group 4 | YES AND NO | 5%  |

The themes which emerged among respondents in group one who supported full control of the school by the Innu Nation, expressed the desire for the school to reinforce an ethnic identity which would be distinctly Innu. One respondent viewed local control as an important part of the nationalist agenda for Aboriginal peoples in Canada to run their own schools. Another respondent equated an Innu school with being Innu.

I support it because Innu kids go there. There are no non-Innu there so it should be completely controlled by the Innu. The school was originally built for the Innu and they should be in control (Survey, 1993:L:1).

There are a handful of non-Innu students in the school and many students from mixed marriages. However, this person obviously perceives the school as predominantly Innu. I think there are dangers in the more extreme expressions of Innu

ethno-nationalism in that it may increase the degree to which non-Innu and children of mixed blood are harassed by racist comments. I spoke to two white children who had left the school after having been taunted by racist remarks. Several children of mixed blood also complained of being teased, harassed and called "half-breeds"<sup>30</sup>.

For some respondents in Group 1 local school control was seen as being synonymous with the nature of community life and therefore very necessary. Others felt that local control would enable greater participation from community members in deciding what is taught. The respondents in Group 1 also felt that school control would be a decisive step away from the "White" ways which have long been imposed upon the community. Nationalist sentiments were expressed in many responses.

We can't let the Government take control of our children because it's the way we will lose our way of life forever. If they educate us, we live like them. But if we teach our children our way of life too, it will be the best thing that Innu will ever do, we cannot let the school system destroy us, we have to

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<sup>30</sup> I once had a stick thrown at me by a little boy who was not more than 9 or 10 years old. As he threw the stick he yelled, "You White mother-fucking... [something or other]" Though these incidents are not commonplace, they do occur. It is common to see little boys hurling stones at other kids as they pass by on foot or bicycle. A group of young boys were responsible for stoning to death a new born puppy belonging to the family I lived with. This type of destructive behaviour has become quite upsetting for many adults who in response feel even more intent on the need for the Innu Nation to take control of the school and other institutions and bring order back into village life.

have our own Innu education run by the elders  
(Survey, 1993:L:64).

Respondents in Group 3 expressed several concerns regarding local control. A few people in this group had doubts regarding the ability of the community and the Innu Nation to administer a school which could adequately meet the changing needs of Innu students.

I don't know how the Innu would be able to run a school that would be able to teach English and White courses - the Innu just don't have the resources. In order to run the school we would need non-aboriginal people to be working there to help the Innu... We have seen a lot of things in Sheshatshit Innu tried to run - when the Innu took over - bankrupt - every thing bankrupt. Non-aboriginals helped to set up industries but when they went everything was fooled up (Survey, 1993:L7).

During my stay in Sheshatshit, the Band Council office went bankrupt and was closed for almost a year: the Innu Nation took over the administrative functions of the Band Council and was able to get the finances back in order. However, this event undermined the confidence of a few people in the ability of some leaders to effectively institute change. It also intensified criticisms of family patronage among the leaders, which is sometimes blamed for the failure of local institutions and economic endeavours (see also Mailhot, 1993).

Look what happened to our chief [of the Band Council] here, he lost everything. I don't support local control. I don't think we have the kind of manpower necessary to run the

school. If there is Innu control it is going to work for a while then it's not going to work. Soon after Innu control everyone is going to be related. It should be equal but its not fair the way only [relatives] get the jobs. The Innu Nation is related to some of the teachers in the school - something is wrong somewhere (Survey, 1993:8).

A few respondents in Group 3 echoed similar concerns. Others were eager to have their children receive an education and learn to speak English so that the choice to pursue a career in the labour force would be available to them. For Group 3 Innu control was seen as a potential impediment to their children's education as it might cause the school to be closed for months on end and then take several years for the school to be able to function effectively. A few parents questioned the competence of Innu teachers, who they felt were only token educators and lacked proper educational training. Many Innu teachers at the school are related and this has engendered some criticism towards them.

I don't support Innu control of school. I feel if Innu take over, they will try and change the school scheduling and all it will do is fuck-up the schooling of kids and possibly make more changes gearing towards teaching of cultural stuff, which I feel is a step backwards. If Innu do control the school, they should focus more on the importance of English language, education and how important it is to finish school. Maybe turn the school into trade school so those less fortunate in school will at least have job experience to rely on. Also don't rely on those so-called Innu teachers. They're just a bunch of puppets who are well paid. To me those so-called teachers who have teaching certificates would

have a hard time getting jobs outside Peenamin Mackenzie School (Survey, 1993:L:34).

Respondents from Group 4 were unsure about local control. These respondents were torn between wanting local control for the same reasons the people who supported it did, but had similar doubts as those who were against it.

The above discussion of school control reveals the lack of consistency in community political opinion. Several dimensions of control are at stake, and the political discourse of the Innu leaders often fails to reflect the diversity of community opinion. For the leadership, political autonomy and local school control are strongly related. It is believed that such control would enhance pride in Innu culture, further the ethno-nationalist agenda for self-government, and provide the community with a challenge to come together in the creation of an educational system for the next generation.

However, it is not always in the community's interest to buy into the Innu Nation's political agendas<sup>31</sup>. It is true

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<sup>31</sup> This is slippery territory as views are variable, and subject to changing influences. For example, when the Innu Nation decided to set up its own clinic and health care services in Sheshatshit, the community was dubious as to whether or not this would work out. In the end they went ahead without total community support. However the clinic has been a great success and is now a source of pride for the community. But school control is a much bigger issue than control over the clinic; it represents more jobs for community members, and it raises myriad questions about Innu identity, modern values and future goals.

that, on an ideological level, strong nationalist sentiments are felt throughout the community. But when the rhetoric and promise of "self-government" is examined by people in the community, doubts and concerns come to the surface. The actual meaning of self-government is contested in a community where individuals are accustomed to, and have more confidence in, literally governing themselves. The Sheshatshit Innu are, in keeping with cultural practices of the past, much more interested in actually being "self" governing - that is, in being autonomous as individuals rather than having power and authority invested in a single locus, be this the Canadian state or the Innu Nation. Ironically, individual autonomy may be threatened by the power structure implicit in an Innu government rather than enhanced by it.

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