Twentieth-Century Transformations Of the West Coast Cree

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The adaptations of the native peoples in the James Bay region to the fur trade of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries is not the topic of this paper. Instead, I argue that it is only in the 20th century, in just the past three generations, that the great majority of these people have been radically transformed — from hunter-trappers who spent only a few weeks of the year at coastal trading posts (Skinner 1911:47) to townsmen, the majority of whom hunt and trap only recreationally in the 1980s. I had expected to be able to generalize my knowledge of the East Coast culture to the West Coast, as part of an interdisciplinary program of research on the probable effects of major energy resource development projects in the region, but events proved me wrong. In this case, anecdotal information once again made a crucial point.

In the summer of 1984, while my wife Sarah did her "Women and Work" research at Moose Factory (Blythe et al. 1985), I was doing some casual inquiring into the contemporary status of the West Coast settlements. Bill Hutchison, who has worked for the Moosonee office of the Ministry of Natural Resources for some years, passed on a comment from a man at Winisk, to the effect that bear meat was "damned Ojibwa food". Now, no one who has enjoyed an East Cree bear feast (cf. Preston 1982:40) can take this comment without a sense of shock, and besides, as an East Coast specialist, I simply hadn't heard, or thought, very much about Ojibwa. The East Coast Cree just didn't talk that way, and the West Coast Cree suddenly
sounded like a more culturally distinct group than I had imagined. And so I have been reviewing the published and unpublished work done during this century, to see what differences as well as similarities can be found in the recent culture history of James Bay Cree. What follows is an overview rather than a history, and so in this sense it must be preliminary to a synthetic history, in which I have selected what appear to me to be the major transformations for the West Coast Cree.

The economic and technological changes of this century have been very considerable, but whether they were the primary and directly causal factors in transforming Cree society and culture is, as we all know, much debated. These factors may be seen as being incorporated into the Cree milieu, not as radical events in themselves, but rather as phenomena contributing to, or triggering, other more fundamental or structural transformations. Adaptation by incorporating new people, new trading relationships, new technology and the like is characteristic of the fur trade period, and for the Crees seems to have been accomplished without much radical loss of continuity with the past, until this century. I will emphasize processes of change that are primarily social and cultural, whose secondary factors are economic and technological.

Transformation 1: From Traditional Hunter's Symbols to Thinking in English.

I think that this is the most fundamental transformation of all. For practical reasons I will reduce the scope of this complex topic to a single example of the process, "The Bear as a Core Symbol". What bears symbolize is not trivial — it is a core Cree symbol that has been transformed from representations of the most respected of animals into an uneasy blend of varying opinions and feelings. The bear may be "damned Ojibwa food" (a lively social comment regarding the speaker's opinion of some Ojibwa, as well as a comment about food) to one person, and a threatening manifestation of Ojibwa sorcery to another. In another case, overidentification with the human-like appearance of a skinned bear yielded sympathies that would make eating bear seem like cannibalism; one woman said to Sarah Preston that she just couldn't swallow it. Yet another individual, a mature and much traveled leader, said to John Long that he had always
regarded bear as a delicacy. At Moose Factory some people recognize that those who came from the East Coast will like to eat it. Some people at Albany explained to Doug Ellis, in the 1950s, that the bear had helped the first humans on earth, and so respect was shown. The consensus that we believe was virtually universal among circumpolar peoples, of respect for the bear and appreciation of the food value of the bear, is found fragmented in these contemporary feelings, and respect for the bear seems to have been transformed into a variety of quite different attitudes and to have expression in several much less central symbols. The process apparently has been about a century in duration.

Skinner (1914:205), in his 1908 and 1909 reconnaissances, reported that the bear ritual complex was actively practiced on the East Coast, and remembered but not practiced at Moose, but that on the West Coast (Fort Albany) they had forgotten the significance of the ritual, or so he was told. Cooper, at Moose in 1933, interviewed informants from both coasts and suggests a bear cult on the east side and a caribou cult on the west side. (Cooper 1933:7). But the caribou is a behaviourally undistinguished animal, and Cooper's cult is not mentioned elsewhere by him or others. I think that the caribou's relative importance may have been greater at that time on the west side of the Bay, and the cult may have been only a working hypothesis, left dormant by Cooper. Honigmann, at Attawapiskat in 1947-48 and again in 1955, reports bear as a traditional and contemporary food (1956:39; 1962:157, 161), and his informants recalled some specifics of ritual practices, but did not recall any of the euphemisms that were probably once used to express respect (1956:69). He comments that many of the traditional concepts were given little importance in the memory culture of his informants.

This is a very important comment. For hunters, the primary aspect of life is the context of the actions of hunting; the practical actions of getting a living. For them, symbols are not of such great interest as the hunt itself. Yet symbols are an expression of that great interest — the motives, attitudes, and convictions that sustain the hunt, and in that sense characterize the hunter's world. Since animal imagery constituted a symbolic system that was central to the way the hunters perceived their world, the process of losing consensus and more idiosyncratically redefining the significance of animals may now express the diminished importance of hunting as a way of life. But
even more important, it may express a diffuse and unstable stage of adaptation. By this I mean an incomplete transformation of values and world view, based on a turning away from traditional experience in the bush, and on experiments in a transition to town living, that have developed into contemporary experiences in getting a living by obtaining cash and buying imported food.

It is possible that the process of loss of respect for the animals, and the loss of traditional understanding of ritual practices was initiated by missionary challenges to, and denigration of, the hunting beliefs relating to a spirit or soul of animals or animal "masters" or "bosses". Certainly we know that, from their arrival as residents in the region in the mid-1800s, most missionaries were quite explicitly determined to eliminate any beliefs of a spiritual nature that were not, in their judgement, authentically Christian. We do not know much about the extent to which Crees accepted this doctrine, but it seems clear that most Crees were aware of the missionary attitude, and apparently took it seriously. At most, this might be the primary reason for this transformation; at the least, it would be a contributing influence.

Also possible is a weaker version of the "Calvin Martin effect", where sustained poor success in hunting led the survivors of starvation to the perception of a loss of generous intent by the animals, and therefore a loss of respect for the animals as providers for men. But like Martin's own hypothesis, this is based mostly on intellectual plausibilities and overgeneralization from scant evidence. While it hypothetically could explain the changes we believe to have occurred on the West Coast, certainly it would not explain the persistence of these beliefs on the East Coast (cf. Preston 1975).

Of course, it may not involve spirituality at all, and simply be a result of ecological conditions, either that bear were so scarce as to be an anomalous animal and so not much a part of the hunter's plans, or that the food eaten by bears was such that they spoiled themselves, as some do now at garbage dumps, and were not good to eat. Both of these alternatives are possible, but I doubt seriously that they are true.

It is also quite probable that Ojibwa beliefs, in becoming known to the Crees, would have raised the possibility of doubt, and anticipation of embarrassment due to Ojibwa criticism in a heretofore unchallenged or given set of Cree traditional beliefs. In many cases
Cree consensus seems to have been typically an open system, with a facility for incorporating new elements that seemed practical or congenial. But criticism, whether overt or covert, is not congenial. Relations to whites, and especially to missionaries, have shown examples of this sort of changing of ritual behaviour for the sake of avoidance of criticism.

A related, but more subtle process was probably also involved. There was a range of variation in the beliefs and knowledge and strategies for practical action, with each individual doing things in his or her own way, trying this strategy or that. But like idiolects within a dialect, people rarely went very far from the norm or pattern. Perhaps, if these aspects of Ojibwa culture were too different from the Cree pattern (Rogers 1969) to be comfortably incorporated, people would avoid the discomfort or conflict by just dropping the whole thing. For an example of radical difference, if some bears might be the transformed appearance of an Ojibwa sorcerer, it would be potentially dangerous to try to kill any bear, and once killed, it would then be very hard to act with ritual respect and then to feast. This seems to me the most likely explanation, but we know too little to be certain. That traditional belief and behaviour was, by the 20th century, less strongly held on the West Coast than the East is clear; but the reasons for the difference are not yet clear.

Transformation 2: From the Personal Community to The Catholic Community.

The personal community is that small group of persons, mostly relatives, with whom one typically lives for the full span of one’s life. In the Cree case this was the wintering group, composed of one or more commensal groups, whose use of the ethic, or ideal, of egalitarian non-interference and respect for the independence of others is one of the most remarkable and enduring achievements of Cree culture, and is paralleled in the cultures of many other hunting societies. In contrast, the Roman Catholic hierarchical community was the social and political competitor to the Hudson’s Bay Company, while the opposition (Revillion Frères, or free traders) was challenging the economic monopoly in a way that presaged the many challenges to come.

The Anglican presence on the West Coast was given strength to
change the Cree traditions by the personal influence of John Horden and Thomas Vincent in the second half of the last century, and was probably a significant source of experimental or short term changes and a more modest source of radical changes. But the Catholic efforts were more far reaching, in both scope of interventions and the depth of effect. That is, the Catholic mission sought to transform all aspects of Cree life, not simply that of worship. Honigmann reports that Attawapiskat was 100% literate in Cree syllabics in 1947–1948, a result of Catholic instruction, using Cree as the language of instruction. Further, he counts the Catholic presence as clearly more influential than the Hudson’s Bay Company. Trudeau (1966:109–113, 120–121) contrasts the powerful authority of the priest at Winisk with his loss of influence and the town’s social and moral disintegration during the radar base construction period in the 1950s.

At Albany the Catholic community was developed early in the century and on a large scale, and in 1925 removed a few miles upriver to a site of its own, Lac Ste. Anne, drawing the majority of Indians there instead of at the HBC post or the Anglican church, for their summer residence. Here, as their mission, they maintained a hospital, a residential school, and a farm, with three priests, and about 20 brothers and 20 nuns in 1951 (Dean 1957:70). It provided a demonstration effect of the capability of the Church as an independent community, though how all this was perceived by the Crees and Ojibwa is not much recorded, to my knowledge. Moose was developed by the Oblates only after the railway came into Moosonee in 1932, and though the Bishop makes his headquarters there the total effect seems to have been less, and later, than the other settlements, except for Moose Factory, where the Oblate mission has had little effect.

Taking the Oblate missions as a whole, however, their influence is considerable on the West Coast, partly from their assumption of authority over the Natives, who genuinely respected their role in mediating between God and the people. There was some reduction of emphasis on individual responsibilities in favour of an approximation to a Catholic version of a Christian collectivity, including encouragement of confessional forgiveness through the power of a priest, or if the case was serious, the bishop. And the mission’s secular success as a self-sustaining group was probably viewed as tangible evidence for the effectiveness of their beliefs. The residential school as a tech-
nique of getting young people “under the bells” and instructing them towards conversion to life in a Catholic community is a mission tradition, and was probably one of the reasons why George Simpson tried to keep the Catholics out of Rupert’s Land. The manner of authority — the style of dogmatic certainty that characterizes both daily behaviour and instruction of novices, and the church discipline with which it is exercised — may have made an impression of power and infallibility that was separated from the more human persons of the priests, nuns, and brothers (Nonas 1965). In 1933, Fr. Saindon talked with some elderly men on the subject of a high God conception of manitou in the old beliefs, and was assured that the old ways were the influence of the bad spirit, not the good spirit. While we do not know the time that they made this decision, it probably represents a pre-20th century conviction. (Cooper field notes, 1933) Cooper astutely attributes their statements to missionary influence (perhaps including the influence of Fr. Saindon), in arguing for an aboriginal supreme being concept. But the 20th century is late to be asking such questions in the James Bay region.

To the extent that the missions were successful, authority was transformed. The locus of responsibility moved from being almost entirely a matter of self-control, family-centered and in the bush, which was the personal community of the Crees (Preston 1979), to a submission of self-control to the doctrine controlled, priest-centered settlement, which was the self-contained Christian community of the Catholics. Of course, the Catholic community was, in turn, challenged by the influx of secular whites from the south who often openly and confidently ignored the authority of the Oblates. It is quite likely that the decline of Oblate authority has involved at least a partial return to Cree forms. That is, culture change, even radical change, may be and sometimes is, reversible.

Transformation 3: From Bush Homes to Northern Townsmen.

The shift from a portable home within an ecological range, to housing in sedentary settlements is a radical change. It is also the effective end of the ideology of seasonal aggregation and separation, where the seasonal cycle includes predictable changes of living context. The bush was a welcome home when you arrived in the fall, but often became a long time in the enforced intimacy of the wintering
family group, and sometimes had become a stingy provider by the
time you left to aggregate, in the spring goose hunt and at the post.
The post was the place of excitement and reunion when you came
in the spring, but often became an overcrowded jumble of tensions
before you left for the bush again, in the fall. This process of post-
ing was a gradual one for the majority of Crees. Skinner (1911:47)
reports that the Indians stayed at the post for only a few weeks in
1908, but Dean reports a May to October summer sojourn at Albany
in 1951. It may be that Skinner was referring to inlanders, and Dean
to coasters, who stay longer and have less far to go in the winter.

In the 1980s, with most of the year spent in town, the context of
life is a radically larger social network, on a year round basis, with
some relief for the crowded feelings provided by fishing or hunting
trips, or trips south. Especially when times have been poor, as in the
20s and 30s, or when tensions become too much trouble, many fam-
ilies have migrated south to Moose or farther. For some individuals,
drinking provides some release from the stresses of town life, or the
Pentacostal spirit can reduce many of the complexities and ambigu-
ities into simple truths and predictable relations. Probably some of
the chronic problems in these settlements are a product of the sheer
increase in the number of people who have to get along, and look
after each other. The old subtleties of intimate relationships may
sometimes go missing in the towns, as is the case generally, in most
of the contemporary world.

Transformation 4: From Self-Control to Social Control.

The shift from small intergenerational and task-oriented winter-
ing groups, to age-graded and peer-oriented town activities, is a shift
from the place where individuals learn the discipline of the bush, to
the place where the question of discipline has become a matter of
collective concern. Self control was learned by observing or hearing
about the exemplary behaviour of more mature individuals. But the
discipline of self-control was learned more immediately from experi-
ence in the bush environment, where the consequences of mistakes
and failures are usually all too obvious, and self-correction is unam-
biguously necessary. The bush is a dynamic and unforgiving teacher,
and a competent adult was normally strongly motivated to make him
or her self fit for the tasks at hand. Problems arise when a person
fails to adjust to the requirements of the environment, but even more of a problem are the contingencies that are not a normal part of the environment, particularly strange persons (Ojibwa, whites, etc.) and their effects on the ability of the personal community to continue in the security of familiar activities.

Perhaps the initiation of this process was in the trading post setting, but a major shock to the orderly life in the bush was brought on by the arrival early in this century of the four railroads, exposing gold that brought a rush of exploration and development, and providing access to adventurous and ambitious whites who became free trader-trappers and quickly exhausted the headwaters areas of the Moose and Albany drainages during the boom in world fur prices that ran from late in World War I until 1920 (Anderson 1961:163–164). White trappers are still apprehensively remembered as dangerous persons to meet and as trappers who would try to kill all the animals out in one sweep, rather than harvesting with an eye to the coming years (Binney 1929:13).

Self control in the Cree sense, was sometimes starkly inadequate to deal with these new “wild men of the woods”. They threatened the composure of life in the bush in a way that that was similar to earlier in-migrations of strange Indians, Iroquois couriers du bois, Algonquins, and Ojibwas drawn to the fur trade or adventuring for its own sake. But in the 20th century these were whitemen, stranger and with less predicable behaviour than the Ojibwa and other Indians who preceded them as invaders. Cooper suggests that the influx of whites near the railroads created a ripple effect in which Indians would see their hunting and trapping areas cleaned out, and would then move, one range at a time, to the areas of more northerly Indians, with the attitude that the old courtesies and use rights were now destroyed by the white intruders. Post managers complained that the old systems of family territories were broken down, causing over-hunting and then poverty. And to reinforce this tendency, white trappers were able to fly in by the 1920s. The province of Ontario then prohibited white trappers in the region, so that they moved over to the Quebec side. It is not yet clear how well the old system of territories recovered during the 1930s and 1940s, following the government’s protective legislation; the main factor would have been the recovery of the animal populations, encouraged successfully by beaver preserves on both sides of the Bay (Denmark 1948). But
the effect of these intruders as challenge to traditional values of self-control, and especially on the ethic of non-interference, cannot be ignored.

Transformation 5: From Individuals to Categories.

The shift from the tacit name “the People” to an explicit concern with identity as Indian, or Cree, or Métis, is symptomatic of a shift from a stable fur trade society of “the People” and “the Company”, to continuing cosmopolitan change. The issue of who is Indian and who is not, or what is a Cree, or Métis, is one that probably was resolved on an individual by individual basis until well into this century. The use of social categories of people as labels describing the expected role of individuals was only sometimes an explicit part of the class-consciousness or race-consciousness of fur traders and and other whites.

But probably for most of the Crees it did not often rise into consciousness until the treaty was signed with some persons excluded (Long 1978c). Now federal government services are for status Indians, and provincial services for “others”, and some of the young reserve politicians have adopted an attitude that is similarly exclusive towards non-status people. This attitude may reflect a sense of getting even with those people who used to enjoy a privileged situation with a Trading Company contract and housing at the post, regarding their identification with a Scotch (or other European) ancestor as their basis of entry into the civilized status of the post community. The Cree tradition of resisting the use of labels, in favour of more personal relations, is summed up in the good-humoured accommodation offered recently by an elderly lady, when she was asked if it was acceptable to her to be classed as a Métis. She replied, “I don’t mind what they call us.” (she laughs and then sighs) “They can call me an invalid now if they like.” (laughs) “I can’t do anything now anyway.” (laughs) (J. Long, pers. comm.) But really, she was implying, she was Ruby McLeod, a Scots-Cree individual rather than a category.

Conclusions Regarding the Results of Transformations.

In the 1980s we do not find, in place of the Cree traditional culture, “a handful of dust”. Instead, we have a transformation from a
mobile, family-centered bush locus for living, to a central place for sustained aggregation of hundreds of people in 20th-century villages, with an emergent urban Cree culture. The symbolic significance of the bear, beaver, caribou and other traditional "other-than-human persons" is no longer much remembered or viewed with a sense of loss by more than a few traditional-minded people. People have their lives to live and immediate problems to worry about, like kids in trouble, some of them with indifferent or incompetent parents. People are looking for jobs where the economic base is less significantly derived from hunting and trapping, but more an amalgam of government grants, programs, and transfer payments. People want better housing, utilities, health and education services. The significance of these and other government-sponsored activities is still growing.

At the regional level, Ontario Hydro plans new dams on the Moose and, eventually, further northward. Federal, Québec, and Ontario political leaders have expressed enthusiasm for the Kierans scheme to block the mouth of James Bay to create a huge freshwater reservoir, and to route the very large volume of annual runoff south via a Grand Canal to the Great Lakes. Occidental Petroleum, partly owned by Ontario, is drilling exploratory wells in Hudson’s Bay. The West Coast Cree bands have formed the Muskegog regional council to deal with their common interests ands concerns in the 1980s and beyond, and perhaps other coalitions, including the others in the James Bay villages, will be formed.

The bear looms small, insignificant and obsolete in this contemporary context. But for some people it was, and remains, very good eating and a respectable animal.

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