



Nitinkiauu Innusi

*I Keep the
Land Alive*

**Tshaukuesh Elizabeth
Penashue**

Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive
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Introduction © Elizabeth Yeoman 2019

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Introduction

The Innu

There are about 22,000 Innu. They are an Algonquian people and speak Innu-aimun, a language related to Cree. Although “Innu” sounds and looks similar to “Inuit,” they are completely separate peoples who speak unrelated languages and have very different cultures. Innu territory includes twelve reserves and stretches across the eastern part of what the Canadian government and most maps call the Quebec-Labrador peninsula, from Mashteuiatsh in the southwest to Natuashish in the northeast and Pakuashipu in the southeast. It borders on Inuit and Cree territories in the north and west and on the St. Lawrence River in the south and the sea in the east. About 2,200 Innu live in Labrador.

Tshaukuesh’s diaries refer often to the Innu Nation and the local band councils. These are the official administrative organisms for the Labrador Innu, the Innu Nation being the overarching entity and each of the two communities, Natuashish and Sheshatshiu, having its own elected band council. However, the councils have little bearing on traditional egalitarian Innu decision-making processes. Colin Samson suggests that “any policy directed towards the Innu needed to elicit some level of *Innu* consent” (italics in original). He goes on to argue more broadly that Indigenous political organizations such as band councils were “manufactured” to protect the Canadian government from accusations of not recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples.³ The Innu Nation’s website suggests more autonomy on the part of the Innu, stating “The Innu people of Labrador formally organized under the Naskapi Montagnais Innu Association (NMIA) in 1976 to better protect their rights, lands, and way of life against industrialization and other outside forces. The NMIA changed its name to the Innu Nation in 1990 and today functions as the governing body of the Labrador Innu.”⁴ Either way, the Innu Nation and band councils are clearly recent introductions. Several elected Innu leaders have expressed unease about their roles in these structures. During the Gathering Voices Inquiry, for example, Kiti, said, “As a leader you have to live on both sides, both the Innu and the non-Native way. You have to follow the white

Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue and Elizabeth Yeoman. Photo: Robin McGrath.

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man's way of living . . . It's really hard to choose which path you will go for the people."⁵ Many others at the inquiry said that they were very concerned that the government only recognized the band council and Innu Nation leaders but not the Tshenut, the elders or traditional leaders and experts consulted by the people.⁶ Tshaukuesh herself describes the situation like this: "Our life now is chaotic; long ago life was beautiful. There was no Innu Nation, no utshimau, no band council, we were our own utshimau. Everybody sat down together to make decisions and they made good decisions. We managed our own affairs, we were self sufficient: what to do about an accident or illness, where to hunt or camp, any issue that affected us we decided collectively."

Until the second half of the twentieth century, when Innu were gradually coerced by agents of the Catholic church and the provincial government to move to Sheshatshiu and Utshimassit, or Davis Inlet (and later from Utshimassit to Natuashish)⁷ and to adopt the structures of the Innu Nation and band councils, most lived in nutshimit year-round, and the Quebec-Labrador border was meaningless. Because they lived on the land, they retained their language and culture, their skills and knowledge.

Inuit elder Sarah Anala remembers looking out from the residential school in North West River in 1959 at Sheshatshiu across the river: the pink sky of early morning and all the white tents scattered among the trees along the shore and up the hill. It gave her hope to see them there. And then one day the tents were gone and all the families were in their canoes paddling up the Mishta-shipu, the great river so central to Innu history and culture, to nutshimit. Somehow, although the Inuit children were in the residential school, the Innu were free then.⁸ But their freedom and their ability to live in nutshimit were gradually eroded by others claiming ownership of the land (despite the fact that no treaties had ever been signed), by laws forbidding hunting and fishing, by pressure to put their children in school, by the destruction brought by dams, mines, and logging, by diseases they had not known in the past, and by the drugs and alcohol they turned to in despair. One of the greatest shocks in this long list was the construction of the hydroelectric dam at Patshishetshuanau in the 1970s and the flooding of more than 13,000 square kilometres of land, lakes, rivers, and islands to create the Smallwood Reservoir. Tshaukuesh recounts how the Innu were never consulted and only discovered the reservoir when they returned

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Nitinikiau Innusi

1992

January 4

Yesterday my husband, Francis, and I came to Tshenuamiu-shipiss. It was a lovely day and not cold at all when we left. When we got to Matshiteu, Tuminik and An Pinamin were waiting for us. Tuminic was cutting down small trees to mark a path across the ice. We drove off on our skidoos toward the river and stopped at the end of the path to set up camp. The next morning, the weather was perfect, and Francis and Tuminic went hunting for kak^u. An Pinamin and I went for a walk. We saw pineu twice during our walk but we didn't have a rifle. When we got to the top of the mountain, we looked all around us and it was very beautiful.

January 9

Our work is going well—we're cutting fresh boughs for the tent floor and throwing out the old ones. The tent is very cozy and the children are having a lot of fun. In the evening, I went for a walk over the frozen marshes and I enjoyed it so much that I didn't want to turn back. When I finally did turn around I was facing a mountain, and it reminded me of a time when I was a little girl in nutshimit with my parents, when we were camping near a mountain that looked a bit like this one. We'd had a successful caribou hunt and there was plenty to eat for all of us—a good memory.

It's really nice in nutshimit. Whenever I think about the past, when life was going well and we lived here all the time, I miss it terribly. Every day was a good day and the Innu were strong and healthy. Today the government has made us very poor. Why did they have to find us when we had such a good life on our land?

Part Two: 1990–1997

January 30

We're back in Sheshatshiu. I did something today that made me feel very brave. I drove the skidoo all by myself, towing our food and belongings in a komatik.¹⁰ It was a long way, and it's the first time I've ever driven a skidoo that far. I realized that I can be strong when I want to be.

February 6

We're very poor in Sheshatshiu, but if we work hard and look after each other we'll do better. One thing we can do is to help the young people. They're losing our Innu way of life. I wish they could be taken out to nutshimit this spring. They'd enjoy it so much and they'd be much healthier. They spend so much time in school, but it's not doing them much good. If we don't teach them now, they'll be helpless in the future.

February 15

Last night something terrible happened in Utshimassit. A house burned down and six children who were left alone there died. The parents were out drinking. This is a huge tragedy. Alcohol is killing us more than ever. We've lost our way of life.¹¹

February 27

Our priest left Sheshatshiu, our long-time priest.

This morning I had a hard time getting up. I didn't feel like eating, but I forced myself. By nine o'clock, my children were at school and the others had gone to work. After everyone left, I started to cry. I was afraid someone would come through the door and wonder why I was crying by myself, so I went to my room and started praying to Saint Anne and then I felt a bit better. It's very difficult when a long-time friend leaves. We've been friends for so many years with Father Jim. How could he just leave us like this? People don't know why he left so suddenly. He has deeply hurt the people who cared so much about him.

Nitinikiau Innusi

1993

Letter to an Akaneshau woman (undated)

Munik,

How are you? I'm okay. Today I received the little cars you sent. My son and grandson love them. As I write this, they've shut themselves up in a bedroom to play with them. I wish you could see how happy they are. Thank you so much, you sent them really quickly.

I still haven't gone to nutshimit, but I've almost finished doing the things I need to do first. I'll thank the Creator if nothing happens to us before we go. Keep praying for me, okay? Every time I see you I'm very happy. I think of you as a friend. When I go away, I really miss my land, my children, and my friends, but when I see you I feel better. I know it's because of your kind heart that you're helping the Innu. If you could come with me to nutshimit, you'd see that we're happy there, that we work hard and that the children are happy. When we had that last meeting with the Akaneshau who support the Innu, new people attended, and I told them what I thought: "It's difficult for you to really know the Innu people."

That's all.

March 21

We've been here at Tshenuamiu-shipiss since Friday night. It's so good to be here.

I've been thinking about the old days. When my mother didn't go hunting with my father, she went on her own in the area near the camp. She set snares, she hunted pineu and kak", she fished. While she was busy with that, we older children took care of the younger ones, which we really enjoyed. We also helped with the tent: the boys cut down trees for poles, and the girls got boughs for the floor and cooked.

I loved learning from my parents when we were in nutshimit. We were never impatient or dissatisfied. We were always happy and we always slept well.

Part Two: 1990–1997

July 22

We're on the train to Uashat and I want to carry on to Sainte-Anne de Beaupré, because prayer has helped me many times. My husband has already left to drive back home on his own. I'm thinking about him and I feel sorry he has to drive so far. He helped us by bringing us here, and now I think he must be very tired.

Every time I'm on this train, I look out the window at the route my parents walked, year after year. The Innu have travelled across this land for thousands of years. When I look at the vast territory they traversed, I think about the hardships they endured and how resilient they were. And they didn't even think it was hard. For them, their way of life was their well-being and their strength. They weren't under pressure but they never stopped working, except when they were sick. They never had to pay their children to help them.

August 13

Ishkueu's daughter was born today. She's doing well, and so is the baby. We're all very happy. I'm so grateful that she decided to keep the baby. Of course, she'll be tired—she'll have to raise her daughter and take care of all her needs. They wanted to put the baby up for adoption, but I was absolutely opposed to that. I did have sympathy because it will be hard, but I was also very upset.

August 19

At Innu Nikamu,²⁶ They're playing a traditional Innu ball game, like the Innu used to play a long time ago, and kuaskuetshikaunanu, nipitekateshimunanu, and utshipitanu pishanapi, as well as Akaneshau games. The canoe race for both men and women is at one o'clock, and there's also a relay race in which they wear funny costumes and each participant has to put the costume on at the beginning of their turn, run to the other end of the racecourse, then take it off again for the next person to put on. Then there's emikuan mak napatat, atikunanu, and kashustatananu. There's also a game that involves one person sitting down, pretending to cook or do something, and other people ask them, "Do you have any daughters?" They answer, "No, you're not going to touch my daughters!" Then all the others, each holding onto the back of the next one, try to catch the daughter. When people in the line fall down everybody laughs.

Part Four: 2002–2016

her, but if you do find one, it's a bad omen. It might mean your husband's going to die, or your daughter. Something bad is going to happen. You might find a baby inside a caribou sometimes, but hardly ever inside a bear, and it's only with a bear that it's a bad omen, not with a caribou.

Innu Life

February 3, 2012

A long time ago, Innu life was like a circle, everything was clear to us, but the government brainwashed us. Our lives were whole, we had everything we needed, but now they're fragmented and full of pain. We've lost our knowledge and our strength. In the old days, the Innu were resourceful and knew how to make everything they needed—snowshoes, canoes, toboggans, drums, everything. They were very independent and full of energy. Everyone made a contribution. They respected the land and never destroyed it or took more than they needed, just enough to live, just enough wood for tent poles and to keep the tent warm so the children would be healthy and comfortable. Sometimes they took a little extra if they were sick and they needed the kinds of tree branches they used for medicine, or they'd take some wood to make traps for uapush, mashk^u, nitshik^u, amishk^u, atshakash, or uapishtan. We just cut a few trees, not everything like the Akaneshau do. Who brought these changes? Who destroyed that way of life? We were healthy and happy, generation upon generation. It's impossible to measure all that we've lost. At first, we didn't understand what was happening or what was at stake. I remember that the Innu were afraid of the Akaneshau. And I think the government thought we wouldn't know the difference, that they could do whatever they wanted to erode our way of life. They didn't expect that we would fight back, or that people like my son would be in the government.⁸ Now the Innu speak English, they're smart, they're strong. They speak out about their concerns.

Epilogue

So Many Changes

People used to be very healthy, but now a lot of Innu are sick with diabetes, heart problems, high blood pressure, and cancer. We never had those diseases before. And some people are just tired all the time and don't have any energy because they don't get much fresh food or exercise. We were healthier and happier in the past. But Innu people were very poor then. They had nothing, no blankets, just a caribou skin to sleep on. I'll never forget how when we were small children, we didn't have enough blankets because my mother didn't have the money to buy them. But we never complained.

On cold nights, my dad would get lots of wood and pile it all by the entrance to the tent. He or my mom stayed up all night to keep the fire going, just sleeping for an hour or so at a time. That's why the children never complained about being cold, because they could see what their parents did for them. When we got up in the morning, we never expected bacon and eggs but we usually had some fish or meat and sometimes bread. I loved the way my mother would get it all ready first, and make some hot tea, and then wake us up for breakfast.

In those days, the big girls and boys helped our father and I helped my mom. Sometimes my father went hunting with my brothers, but the girls would usually stay at the tent to learn how to fish or to make moccasins and snowshoes or get spruce boughs for the floor.

Honestly, we never felt as though we had any problems. If you got a cut or had an accident, my mom just got medicine in the woods. And when my dad got a caribou, he used to butcher it outside and put it on a scaffold, because if he left it on the snow dogs or other animals would eat it. One time my brother Shuash and I were playing outside, and I had the idea of doing the same thing as our dad. "We should make a little scaffold," I said. We made