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GEORGE GREGOIRE

on the coast. The Innu of Natuashish were first settled in Davis Inlet and relocated in 2002.

Before settlement became a way of life during the latter half of the last century, the Labrador Innu lived a nomadic life for most of the year when waterways were frozen and the land covered with snow. George was born into this life, which he describes through the stories of his childhood. Small groups of two or three families would journey to the interior in search of game, walking on snowshoes and pulling their possessions on toboggans. In the summer they traveled by birchbark canoe to various gathering places, including Old Davis Inlet¹, North West River and Sept Iles². Here they traded, arranged marriages and held feasts and other celebrations. They lived off the bounty of the land, hunting small mammals and waterfowl, fishing and gathering berries. At the heart of their culture was the caribou that migrated across *Nitassinan* in the spring and fall. The caribou provided them with food, as well as clothing, shelter and tools. Innu technology was well adapted to their environment. They were experts at making skin clothing, their means of travel — snowshoes, toboggans and canoes — as well as tools, weapons and utensils out of wood, stone and bone. They practised their own medicine. Their diet was very healthy — rich in meats, with few carbohydrates.

The traditional Innu world was filled with spirits related to animals and forces of nature. George writes about some of the spiritual practices that were integrated into everyday activities. Rituals and feasts were held in conjunction with all hunting activities. Shamans communicated with the *Aueshish-utshimaut* or Animal Masters to foretell future hunting, but each hunter could obtain spiritual power through dreams, songs and by performing rituals of respect for all *Aueshish-utshimaut*. Innu spirituality stressed egalitarianism. Humans were seen as equal and integral to nature, as opposed to superior. The hunt was not a conquest. If the hunter showed respect to the *Aueshish-utshimaut*, the animals gave themselves up willingly. After a successful caribou hunt, a *makushan*³ was held to honour the spirit of the caribou.

George also writes about the fur trade and its impact on the Innu way of life during his lifetime. European trading posts were first set up in

¹ Uipat Utshimassit

² Uashat

³ Feast of the Caribou

GEORGE GREGOIRE

Settlement coincided with a number of industrial developments on Innu territory, including the mines at Labrador City, Wabush and Schefferville, and the Upper Churchill Falls hydro-electric project which flooded thousands of kilometres of land, including valuable caribou habitat and Innu burial grounds. Forestry projects and road developments resulted in a further incursion into Innu land.

Colonization – the process of subjecting the Innu to foreign institutions such as courts, schools, the church, hospitals and governments, as well as opening their territory to a multitude of developments – stripped them of control over their lives. A once active, proud and independent people became cut off from their culture. George writes candidly about his family's experience of this transition to village life and the subsequent unraveling of his people's social fabric and connectedness. Life in the village turned out to be one of squalor, family breakdown, violence, drunkenness, suicide, accidents, malnutrition and illness.

George's story is also about the resilience of the Innu people and how they never fully surrendered to the process of assimilation. When the government introduced band councils in the two communities in the 1970s, Innu leaders quickly implemented outpost programs to finance the cost of chartering planes to hunting camps in the interior of *Nitassinan* each spring and fall. Whole families embarked on sojourns of up to three months to return to their way of life and ensure that their children would learn Innu practices, skills, language, values and beliefs.

George expounds at length about the band council. From the point of view of both citizen and elected leader he writes about his experience and thoughts about this imposed and foreign structure with its municipal-like mandate. He also discusses the challenges and triumphs of the Naskapi Montagnais Innu Association, which later became the Innu Nation – a regional government established to represent the Labrador Innu in land rights negotiation with the province and Canada. George documents how the Innu capacity to govern within these bodies evolved over the years, at times serving the interests of their communities while other times creating chaos, divisions and dysfunction both within and between the two communities.

George also writes about how the Innu people decided to wrest control of their lives and fight for their rights beyond the realm of band councils and the Innu Nation. In the late 1980s they organized a series of spectacular acts of disobedience – actions that continued into the 1990s and forced the

GEORGE GREGOIRE

My two sisters Tshestu¹ and Eshkuess² were old enough to help Nikai when Nutai was away. They were good hunters for partridges and porcupines. They could check my father's traps and it was easy for them to check the fishing net in the winter when it was not cold. But when it was cold, it was very hard on their hands because they couldn't wear mitts to pull the net out. That doesn't mean they were not allowed to wear mitts. They could, but the mitts would be soaking wet in a matter of seconds.

The hardest part of winter fishing was setting the net under the ice. The ice could be as much as four feet thick. I watched my father chop holes in the ice many times with a long pole and ice chisel on one end. It could take him a couple days to make two holes, a week to chop more holes, depending on how long his net was. The first and last hole had to be large enough for the net to pass through. One person could not put a net under the ice by himself. It took two people. After the four holes were made, Nutai would then cut a long dry pole that could easily be seen underwater. I remember wondering as a small boy how he would get that net under water. He tied a rope at one end of the pole and pushed it underwater directly towards the second hole, where Nikai would stand. Once the pole touched Nikai's stick at the second hole, she would call out to my father. He would move to the second hole, and push the pole to the third hole. The two would repeat this until the pole reached the final hole. My father would then pull the pole out, untie the rope, and hand it to Nikai. He would walk back to the first hole, tie the rope to the net and call Nikai to pull on it. If the net got tangled up, he would call to her to stop and straighten it out.

This is how the Innu still put the net under the ice during the winter. They have to make sure the net doesn't touch the ice, because if it does it will freeze and stick to the ice. It's hard work but the Innu don't mind. It is one way we support our children. In those days it was the only way.

When my father came back, he chartered an aircraft. The plane couldn't land where we were camping because the ice was too rough. It did finally land on the same lake, but away from our camp. All of us children were very happy.

When I tell this story I can hardly remember because I was so small. In those days, I spent a lot of my time in *nutshimit* with my parents and sisters. These were the good times for us. Now I always wish we could start all over again.

¹ Ann Philomena

² Mary Martha

GEORGE GREGOIRE

range stoves for the whole community. This was good for all of us, especially the elders.

When a bunch of us were drinking together we'd never discuss anything about life in *nutsfirmit*. Politics was the one thing we always wanted to talk about. We'd blabber about our leaders and the government people we'd met. We'd argue with each other like a debate to see who'd end up on top. We liked the way alcohol was used to lure us to vote for the candidates. Maybe that was why we talked a lot about politics when we were drunk. We discussed all the things we should do for the community, how we could help the people of Davis Inlet. The next day I'd remember what I'd said. It would really hurt me and I felt shame. The only way I could forget was to drink again.

In those years the leaders had no voice at all. When the government people came to Davis Inlet to meet with our leaders no one knew what was being said at the meeting. We always thought White people knew what was best, even if we couldn't understand what they were saying. What we didn't know was that they were saying things just to keep us quiet. We said nothing and we did everything the government wanted. They controlled our money. They hired their own consulting engineers to work for us. These outsiders would usually bring their own men to work. We didn't know at the time that they were only interested in contracts to build houses or to do studies on water and sewage facilities. We were told many times that Davis Inlet would soon get water and sewage facilities. Many studies were done but nothing ever happened.

No matter who was elected Chief, nothing changed. It was always the same year after year. In the same way that our leaders were powerless in the face of governments, we were powerless against our own leaders. Anyone who tried to voice his or her concerns was the enemy of the council. I wrote many letters to the council about the way the Chief and council were doing their work but my complaints went nowhere because I was an Innu person. If I'd been a White person they would've listened to me. Sometimes when a person went outside of the community to complain the council would offer him a job to buy him off. That would be that, and the complaint would end there.

When the band council came into our lives the government took control of us and part of our culture was lost. We had to follow too many government policies. For forty years I attended many Innu meetings, which the leaders tried to run the way of the *Akaneshau*¹ people. If someone asked a question that

¹ White

WALK WITH MY SHADOW

the leaders didn't like, they'd say the constitution did not allow that question. I'd think to myself, "The hell with the constitution! The Innu have survived thousands of years without ever using any kind of constitution."

The Innu had their own rules to follow but they weren't written down in a book. The elders made the rules and everyone had to follow them. Now elders would speak out at meetings to give advice to the young leaders but the Band Council wouldn't listen at all. They preferred to depend on their *Akaneshau* advisors. Many times a *Akaneshau* would say the same thing as the Innu elder had said and the band council would grab onto the advice. Why had they not listened to the elder in the first place? We thought *Akaneshau* people were the best advisors. We forgot that our Innu elders were the ones to provide advice for our people. The other problem with community meetings was that it was often people who were drunk who did the talking. Or if someone said something important for the community, the leaders would agree with their suggestion but after the meeting everything was forgotten.

In the summer the council would hire students to clean up the community but only the relatives of the councilors would get the jobs. One time my two sons and my friend's grandson weren't hired. I was really upset. My youngest son was crying because other kids his age were working and he had no job. It really hurt me but there was nothing I could do.

People could complain as much as they wanted to but no one would listen and nothing changed. It didn't matter what the leaders did, they'd continue to get re-elected because the majority of voters were related to them. These problems went on into the 1980s and well into the 1990s when things finally began to change a little.

The governments must have known about these problems. They didn't care. They wanted our leaders to continue to drink so that they could easily control them. Governments played all kinds of dirty games with us. Innu people had to follow the direction of these *Akaneshau* officials. We didn't have a real say in anything at all. It would take many years for us to learn that the only solution was for us to heal ourselves. Then people would begin to respect themselves and each other. We'd begin to learn that no one should be left out.

WALK WITH MY SHADOW

Our dependency on planes and choppers didn't mean we'd lost our way of life. Even today the outpost program is still very important especially for young people. Although they don't learn the old ways of traveling by foot or by canoe, they do learn a lot about the Innu way of life. We still hunt in the ways of our ancestors. We can still walk long distances in one day. Our elders and some young people still respect the animals. Many aspects of our culture are very much alive. We've taken good care of our culture. Even in the community some people who are not healthy enough to hunt will still often set up their tents outside their houses. They feel more comfortable living in a tent than in a house.

The elders say Innu children used to have their own traditional games but now these have been replaced by *Akaneshau* games, like volleyball, floor hockey, skidoo races and others they learn from the school. This still doesn't replace our culture because another people's culture will not fit into our culture. Our language will be with us for many more years to come. Every child in our community speaks his or her own language. One huge problem is that many of our teachers, the Elders, have passed away. Another problem is that our school does not teach Innu history or language. Does the school have Innu books? As well, I know mixed parents whose children don't often speak *Innu-aimun*. They probably understand the Innu language better than they speak but they find it too hard to speak. We have to be very careful to make sure our language is with us for many generations to come. Once our language is lost it will be gone for good. Nowhere else in the world will we be able to learn how to speak it again.

Another challenge to our culture has been the foreign laws imposed on us to keep us from hunting and fishing. These laws have been a very serious attack on the heart of our culture. The government made our way of life illegal. For many years the RCMP gave the Innu a hard time. People were afraid to hunt while the police were in the community. Now it's also more difficult to get a gun because of new gun laws. Years ago the RCMP came into the community and called a public meeting. They told us that anyone who wanted to buy a gun would first need to get a permit from the police. They said no one would have to pay for this permit but a few years later we had to pay ten dollars. Now we have to pay fifty dollars to renew our permits.

I have no idea whether the RCMP made their own laws. One time I was charged wrongly for impaired driving. I was just trying to start an ATV but it wouldn't go. Someone must've reported me to the police. Whoever it was, he

WALK WITH MY SHADOW

One beautiful day I went to visit an elder at Daniel's Rattle, a few kilometres outside of Davis Inlet. When I arrived at the camp the elder was sitting on his komatik outside his tent. I walked over and sat on the komatik too.

"The ice is getting bad so fast," he said to me.

"True. There's a lot of deep water in some places I just came from." As we continued to talk, a Twin Otter flew over headed west.

"I wonder where that plane's going?" I said.

"I heard on my bush radio that they're taking ATVs to Border Beacon and it's probably for the mobile treatment program," the elder said.

"I don't know anything about that," I said. "I don't know why they need ATVs to run the mobile treatment program."

"I heard they're taking lumber and plywood to build cabins at Border Beacon. They say it's too far for them to get fresh boughs every week. Who's paying for all this?" the elder asked.

"The band council is paying for most of the transportation but for other things – like the satellite dish, radio, telephone and food – the Health Commission is paying for that."

"It must be very expensive," he said. "Why didn't the Health Commission consult with the elders before deciding on Border Beacon? It would've been better to have the program nearer to Davis Inlet. They could hire local people for ground transportation. People have their own skidoos and they need the money. We, as elders, have some ideas but the young leaders don't need us anymore."

The elder said the mobile treatment program was not going to work unless Innu elders were involved. People from the outside would not solve our problems. He thought Innu children should first be taught their traditional way of life out in *nutshimit* before being sent out for treatment. He wanted to see the children taught how to make homemade tools or snowshoes, how to use these tools to travel in the winter by foot, to haul a sled, to canoe and portage, rather than being too dependent on machines such as speedboats, skidoos and chainsaws. He thought the children would be so proud to learn these things. They would then be able to make their own choices about whether they wanted to go out for treatment afterwards.

He continued to tell me a story about the mobile treatment program he'd attended where there were many Native elders from Western Canada. A few local elders were also hired.

GEORGE GREGOIRE



With Napeu home again and the problems with Pien sniffing, we decided to go into *nutshimit* with a couple other families. I thought it would be best for my sons to be in *nutshimit*. I was working with the Innu Nation and had one month's holiday coming to me as well as a month of cultural leave. I thought it would be nice for my sons to be in *nutshimit* in the fall to help with their healing. I wrote in my journal many days that fall.

AUGUST 31, DAVIS INLET

Patnik¹ Rich left on a Twin Otter this morning with his family and father-in-law for *nutshimit*. The plane returned and we quickly loaded our gear without noticing that the tide was going out so fast. The plane was grounded. We should've pushed the plane out with every load. The pilots said we'd have to wait for high tide. They should've started up the plane and tried to move forward but they were new to the job. I never met them before. I told them it would be at least three hours before the water would begin to rise again. We left around 5:00 in the evening and it took us about forty minutes to reach the camp at Kassitakaikan. As the plane circled to prepare for landing I could see Patnik making a fire. No tent was set up and I wondered why. The pilots beached the plane. One of the pilots grabbed the rope, quickly jumped out of the plane, tied the rope onto the rear of the floats and threw the rope to Patrick's family. They pulled it to turn the plane around. We unloaded our stuff and decided to set up just one tent before dark. This is temporary and we will move somewhere else once we have our canoes. There are seventeen of us in one big tent. Patrick has already killed three caribou. It didn't take long to set up the tent because all our children helped. Napeu and Pien are very happy to be here.

SEPTEMBER 1

Weather: partly sunny, snow and high winds later in the day. Shanut and I went to cut some wood and then I skinned a caribou Patrick killed yesterday. We heard a plane fly over our camp on its way to another one

¹ Patrick

GEORGE GREGOIRE

We split up into four groups. My group talked about the position of a band councilor, what authority a councilor had and what his duties were for his people and community. The other three groups talked about the roles of the Chief, the staff and the public. We all came together to share our separate discussions. We didn't agree about everything but it was very helpful and easy to understand what other people thought. Everyone had a chance to say something.

The facilitator also talked about how the band council should hire people, how positions had to be advertised in public places. The person who applied for that job had to be a good person. Some of us wondered what was meant by the word "good." We were told it meant a person with qualifications. I asked what happened if the brother or the sister of the Chief applied for the job. If that person was qualified, should they be hired? It was suggested the Chief should not be present during that hiring process. The hiring committee would make that decision.

The role and responsibilities of the Chief were discussed. When a big issue arose in the community, whether good or bad, it was not just the Chief's responsibility. For example, if a protest took place in the community and someone was hurt, who would take the responsibility? We couldn't blame the Chief. We had to blame ourselves. When something serious happened in the community, like an accident or gas sniffing, it didn't only affect only one person or family. It affected the whole community.

We talked about how politics were very new to us. They weren't part of our way of life in the past. We talked about life in *nutshimit* and life in the community and who our leaders were in the old days. Akat Piwas said that when they were in *nutshimit* they felt comfortable and happy because the land was so beautiful. There was clean water to drink. They felt healthy. There was no alcohol. People got along well with each other. We ate fresh meat and life was very quiet. In the community, people didn't often visit each other. There was drinking, children sniffing gas and many different bad things were happening to people. In the old days, people looked after the elders and had respect for each other. Did people share as much when they were in the community? People did share a lot of food but not things like televisions.

In the past an experienced hunter would be the leader or *utshimau*. A person who killed the most animals would automatically become an *utshimau* and the person who decided when people should move from one place to another. The retreat facilitator said that the federal government didn't want to

GEORGE GREGOIRE

again. I still worry a lot about my children, and now my grandchildren and other small children in our community. For years it seemed like most children had stopped sniffing gas although more young people were doing drugs and hard drugs too. Since the fall of 2010, children started sniffing in large numbers again. For so many years the number of kids sniffing was very small. Now some of the sniffers are only six years old. What happened to make so many people turn to doing such a dangerous thing again? Maybe it was because of so much fighting in the community.

I keep thinking the problem is that our children don't know enough about being Innu. There aren't enough education or cultural programs. This must be part of the reason they're turning to gas sniffing and drugs. It seemed for years parents were starting to take more responsibility for their own children, really doing a good job of looking after them, making sure they went to school every day. Where are those parents now? Children seem to be controlling their parents. They tell their parents they'll go to Social Services or they'll commit suicide if they don't get what they want. These children know they are protected by Social Services. They know their parents cannot punish them, so they are always doing things like stealing, breaking and entering, gas sniffing. The one good thing is that there is no more homebrew in Natuashish. We also have times when the community is very quiet and peaceful and there is no drinking at all. We have to work together for the community to be like this more often.

We need to find every way we can to protect our culture, to make sure our children learn about who they are. Many times Shanut and I talk about life in the country. She tells me stories about her family when they were in the country. So I share mine too. As we get old we both know we'll never be able to go back to the old ways again. This is a very sad situation for the elders in Natuashish and Sheshatshiu but the younger people are finding new ways to keep our culture alive.

In 2009, I heard Kestiniss¹ had decided to make a film about Tshiushuas, an Innu legend. I found out when I drove my truck to Mistinatuashu, a spot at the end of the Access Road outside Natuashish. I parked the truck and as I walked along the beach I noticed two tents had been set up – a regular tent and a teepee in a wooded area. Nobody was around. I wondered what was happening and then it came to my mind what I'd heard. Was Kestiniss really

¹ Christine Poker



Now as I finish this last chapter I think about the years I worked writing my story and why it was so important for me to publish this book. I want people to read my book, both Innu and non-Innu, to know about my way of life. I want people to know about my life when I was younger and what I learned about trapping and hunting from my late father. I want them to know about our land rights, our protests against low-level flying and other developments on our land such as mining and hydro projects. I shared stories about Innu leadership, both the good and the bad. Some former leaders might be uncomfortable to read my book but the things I've written are a true story. In some places I didn't use people's names, so I could protect their privacy.

I've also shared stories about how I became an alcoholic. Maybe in the future many Innu children will grow up and read my book. They will learn how alcohol affected my life, my community and my children. They'll also learn about how strong the Innu could be without alcohol when they were living in the *nutshimit*. They'll know how strong the Innu were in their fight with the governments over their rights. Now money has replaced the power of the Innu. The children need to know about their history. We know *Akaneshau* education is important for the Innu nowadays but our language and culture are also very important. If future leaders could continue to learn both the Innu way of life and the *Akaneshau* education, they will have the power to be better negotiators for their people. If our culture and language are lost, governments will say there are Innu people but they don't have any culture and no language. That is one thing I hope never happens.