

James Bay cont'd

subservient to him. There was a sharp delineation between the roles, and all tasks were without question either man's work or woman's work. As can be expected, Eskimo women are not nearly so meek now that they have seen the behaviour of the white woman towards the white man. Few girls gave marriage and children and a life on the land as their primary goal in life. In fact it was symptomatic that they gave no definite answer to the ordinary question "What would you like to be when you are older?" Caught between two cultures, not wanting the old one, yet not able to belong to the new one, women can see no future. They drink to excess, and indulge in a high degree of sexual activity but they are not hedonistic — rather, their choice of partners, almost always a white man, indicates their hopes of being accepted in the white community, of raising their status, of finally getting married and getting out.

The Eskimo male suffers the rejection of the female as an additional burden in the struggle to cope with the white man's ideas. Even those men who enjoyed high status in the band share in the low-status of all natives in a white community. Employers say when they work, they work steadily, but they are apt to suddenly take off for several months to hunt, and come back to find they no longer have their jobs. Drinking is also excessive among the men; anxiety over their future, bitterness towards the government, tension depression, and sexual rivalry with the white men are all reasons for this prevalence of alcoholism. "The female's resentment of Eskimo males and her proclivity toward white men constitute two of the gravest signs of breakdown of Eskimo culture, and contribute greatly to emotional disturbances in the male."

The Eskimo way of life is hardly suitable training for adaptation to white society. Keeping the band together and functioning required a minimization of disruptive character traits, therefore food and other valuables were shared among the members of the band. Non-accumulation of wealth not only controlled envy, but gave each individual self-confidence as a necessary member of an integrated unit. This principle also reduced the competitive spirit, leading to the lack of ambition exhibited by Eskimos today, who can no longer follow the old way, but will not take

jobs. Because the structure of the band did not allow leaders to establish themselves, Eskimos tend to be hypersensitive towards authority figures or patterns of hierarchy that white men take for granted. Thus many employer-employee relationships strike the Eskimo as degrading.

Traditional upbringing among the Cree is similar, and also leads to the same conflicts, as mentioned earlier. The Quebec Cree had "a social life patterned around the winter hunting-trapping group and summer trading post encampment, childhood training in individual competence and self-reliance, reciprocal social relations which emphasize sharing and mutual aid, and techniques of decision-making which minimize aggressive behaviour that might threaten the harmony of the group."

Most of the impact of development, settlement and finally urbanization must be borne by the youth of the Cree and Inuit. They must gain recognition for their people in the courts, involve themselves in the planning of developments that could bring prosperity and autonomy to them, and make the final decisions on the fate of their cultures and the old ways of life.

Towards this end, the McGill Cree Project Study made the following recommendations: 1) establish economically viable reserves 2) establish a regional economic corporation directed by Indians 3) reorganize the educational system to increase competence in both societies 4) establish an Indian social development programme to promote sociopolitical development and attempt to bridge the gap between Indian and white.

But native people, as long as their aboriginal rights are denied, won't be able to do much with a regional economic corporation. These recommendations may almost serve to increase alienation. The native people need powerful representation on the corporations that are now developing the land they use, as is the situation now in James Bay.

Chief Billy Diamond gave his own description of the future for James Bay natives if they fail to gain the right of self-determination:

"So there will be two towns — one French and one Indian. And there won't be any development in the Indian town. In the French town there will be hotels and taverns when the road comes — I call these roads booze roads."

"Indians here have a drinking problem. It will get a lot worse when the road and the town come. The Indians will go there and set up their tents outside the village like

they do in Matagami."

Of the 1300 Cree, 100 Metis and 50 Inuit in the area few will benefit from employment on the complex, or involvement in the complex's plans. There will be welfare, there will always be some demand for unskilled labour, there will always be a few animals around, so large-scale starvation is not likely to be a problem. But large-scale starvation is not the consideration, or worry, of this report.

The quality of the natives' life will deteriorate. That it will do so in order to keep up the quality of life for others is an injustice that should not be tolerated.

Loss of self-respect, and the self-reliance that was so prevalent in the personality of both Cree and Inuit in the old way of life will give rise to feelings of inferiority, discrimination, alienation and despair. They will no longer be a people with a culture, and identity, or a future.

The problem encountered in James Bay is many-faceted. It is the immediate problem of several hundred Cree, Inuit and Metis whose land and life-style will be disrupted with as yet unpredictable consequences. It is also the problem of native people everywhere in Canada who are fighting for their rights to the land — in the Maritimes, in the Northern territories, in British Columbia. It is the problem of a people whose future is to be irrevocably changed, while they have no say as to its direction or implementation. In short it is part of an age-old power struggle of people who want to be recognized, want to be involved, want to have a decisive vote in the management of their own affairs.

Eric Gourdeau, former director-general of the Nouveau Quebec Department in the Quebec provincial government, has made a most eloquent plea for the recognition of aboriginal rights:

"The northern natives are being told now that this last dimension of their national identity, their common ownership of a territory that their fathers considered theirs and occupied for millenia, must be forgotten. No matter if they occupy the land or not, there is no prescription against the Crown, and the Canadian Crown does not recognize them as owners. When the Crown wants to dispose of their territory, there is no expropriation accompanied by negotiations for a financial settlement.

Now that the occupation of their territory by the outsider is made with such contempt and takes on such huge proportions, its meaning has become quite obvious to the Indians and Eskimos of the Canadian north. If they can no longer consider their immense territory as a heritage of their fathers, it can no longer be part of their identity. Then, after all their other values have been denied, this last one is also negated. What is left of their identity, what is left of them?"


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