

Twentieth Century Transformations of Native Identity, Citizenship, Power and Authority

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During the twentieth century, many native groups in the Canadian north were relocated to make way for the development of hydroelectric generating stations, railroads, and highways. Are these relocations always destructive of the culture, economy, and environment of the Indigenous people? Is globalization just an increase in these "modern" destructive factors? Is a loss of freedom to make their own decisions (autonomy) always involved? What sense of self-identity and citizenship has emerged?

I have found strongly contrasting answers to these questions in the two communities that I have studied over the past forty years. Why is there such a difference between the two communities? What sense of personal identity and citizenship (political autonomy) exists in each?

One group of Indigenous people was nearly wiped out, with only two surviving families now living unhappily on the New Post reserve. People here feel that they are dependent upon the decisions and funding of outsiders, particularly government bureaucrats. Individuals see themselves as vulnerable to the whims of outsiders. The two extended family groups are not happy living with each other, insecure about appearances of selfish interests of the other family, so that there is talk of splitting up and opening a second reserve.

The New Post people felt the effects of modernity a half-century before the civil rights movement, before popular sympathies for the situation of northern native peoples and for the northern environment, before important legal decisions regarding native land rights, and before government policy changes. While the New Post hunters were on the northern frontier of Canadian expansion in the early 1900s, they were still "traditional bush hunters" in the sense described above. They continued to hunt for their living, though having to accommodate increasing numbers of strangers on the land. Few were fluent in English, and few had the technical and social skills to join the wage-earning whites at work sites or towns. New Post people found their hunting grounds being exploited by white trappers, many of them from the gangs of labourers who worked on hydro projects — two projects in the midst of the New Post grounds had as many as a thousand men working there for several years in the 1920s and again in the 1930s.

No longer secure to provide for their families on their land, they lived as opportunities appeared, or changes in the environment dictated, trying various places and activities associated with the development of railroads, mining, timber cutting, and construction of hydroelectric generating stations in the region. Mortality was extreme, with depression, disease, and accidental deaths cutting their numbers to the two surviving families, both of which left their impoverished hunting grounds to live in frontier towns for several years. After decades during which the two family heads worked as wage labourers, their numbers began to recover. The two family heads also constituted the legal Band administration of a chief and a councilor, who continued for many years in an essentially modernist fashion, periodically trying to pressure the federal Indian Affairs bureaucracy to take actions in

planning and building a new reserve community.

In the 1960s, the Nemaska people, in a more remote area, were still relatively traditional bush hunters, with little trouble from white trappers and only occasional visits by government people, whose authority was not as effective as that of the Hudson's Bay Company post manager. Advance notice of a hydro mega-project, small fur sales, and the anticipated cost of renovating the Company buildings at Lake Nemaska led the Hudson's Bay Company to give a year's notice of intent to close down. With the actual closure in 1969, the Nemaska people went to other summer trading post locations, but most continued wintering on their family hunting grounds. The people found that summer living for several years during the 1970s on the edge of Waskaganish or Mistassini was not a good substitute for their feeling of being at home, in Old Nemaska, and this loss of well-being was a major source of the desire to relocate. Some people called it "forced relocation" since Hydro Quebec did not proceed with their plan to flood Old Nemaska, and many people felt misled.

A major factor in their relocation was the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (1975), which provided a legal basis for the re-establishment of their community, if this was done within a period of five years. Their leaders decided that, rather than wait for the government to act on their behalf, they would take autonomous action and they employed a multinational firm to coordinate a "community consult." This firm had recently conducted a management consult for the Grand Council staff, who found it very helpful.

The Nemaska people made their own decisions and took their own initiatives to plan and then build their new community. Their sustained work brought results that surprised everyone. They have collectively imagined and created a new community, with the population growing from about a hundred in 1977 to over 600 in 2005, well-maintained housing, full community services, and continuing access to their traditional hunting and trapping lands. This has transformed mobile family hunting groups into a settled community of many families, with new physical, social, and spiritual conditions. Beyond this, most people have a secure sense of self and respect for others and for the environment. Most also have a sense of being a "nested" community that is secure within a legally protected Cree region, with leaders that can negotiate and represent them to provincial, federal, and global authorities. They can and do sometimes make decisions independent of government directives:

- * The Nemaska people made their own choice to relocate, at a time when this choice was protected by law.
- * They made their own choice of a congenial location that would not be flooded for hydro projects, retaining the access to their traditional bush hunting grounds.
- * They made their own choice in accepting the offer of their Grand Council to provide a planning strategy (the "community consult") with a support group of Cree personnel, non-Native consultants, and a clear, explicitly participatory process for developing a practical action plan.
- * They were provided with financial and material support by their Grand Council, and by government fiscal responsibilities as specified in the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement.
- * They elected and re-elected capable local leadership, and they sustained their action plan initiatives and scheduled activities over several years.
- * They were successful in imagining and maturing a new social scale of autonomy, transforming the family level to include the community level.

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