

# Drinking and Healing: Reflections on the Lost Autonomy of the Innu

Colin Samson

## *Abstract*

Heavy drinking has been a feature of the village lives of the Innu people of Labrador ever since they were coerced to abandon permanent nomadic hunting in the 1950s and 1960s, when the government-built villages of Sheshatshiu and Davis Inlet (or Utshimassits) were created. The process of sedentarization has accompanied a removal of the people from the hunting life in the interior of Labrador (known as the country or *nutshimit*), incurring a serious loss of meaning, purpose and autonomy. To combat heavy drinking, the Canadian authorities have imported into the Innu villages both pan-Native healing organizations and their own social services and criminal justice institutions. The Innu, through their political body, the Innu Nation, have also developed Healing Services. In these reflections, which are derived from my work with the Innu since 1994, I examine various approaches to healing and look at the experiences of some Innu with drinking. Paradoxically, although drinking is very often destructive, it can also be a form of emotional sharing, protest against assimilation and power to drinkers.

*“When you are put in a house, and even if you have a job, you can't be what you were. My father had no skills, so he was less than a person. So, he became an alcoholic. He turned into something he didn't want to. So, then we inherited*

*those learned behaviors of violence and drinking. I ended up not having the family I needed to support me."*

-Jack Penashue, Sheshatshiu, 1995

*"We are cleaning up what the government has done to the Innu people. We are cleaning up the government's mess."*

-Mary May Osmond, Healing Services, Sheshatshiu, 1996

*"People are sharpening their knives. The anger will come out in violence or protest."*

-Mark Nui, Innu Health Worker, Utshimassits, 1997

*"The federal government collects revenue from the sale of beverage alcohol; the funds that are returned to tribal communities are used to establish new treatment bureaucracies that focus on individuals rather than on larger social problems."*

-Gerald Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa*, (1984:122)

### ***A Spiritual Healing Journey***

Bertha and Ken, two Plains Indians I met in Davis Inlet during my first stay in the village, were also making their first visit. Rapidly, they had set up an Alcoholics Anonymous group and a women's healing circle. They were planning a bake sale and a Halloween dance to raise money. Bertha and Ken were looking forward to their first visit to Border Beacon (*Ashuapun*), a favored Innu camping site some 135 miles into the sub-Arctic interior, where they would be taking along a generator and VCR to play promotional material from their organization, the Nechi Institute. Videos of healing, psychology, alcoholism and the medicinal qualities of sweetgrass and sage would be played in the midst of an area with myriad historical associations for the Innu. They would speak of their founder, Eric Shirt, who had had a dream instructing him to go to California. There, I was told, he met the psychologist Dale Flowers, who helped Shirt initiate aboriginal healing programs. "Nechi" was a name that featured in Eric Shirt's dream. The Nechi Institute, a pan-Native therapeutic organization based in Alberta, has established both training and treatment for Innu, and has been funded to run mobile treatment programs in the country. Most, if not all, of those who work for the Innu Nation Alcohol Program were Nechi trained by the end of the 1990s.

Over the last decade, Nechi (as well as other treatment and training programs) has exerted an increasing influence in the two Innu communities in

Labrador. Its counselors and trainers have practiced their healing pedagogy, and Innu themselves have gone to Alberta for treatment and training. The Plains Indian healers have brought with them feathers, sweetgrass, sage and sweat lodges. Their manufactured dreamcatchers, icons of pan-Indian identity, now festoon the walls of the houses of many Nechi graduates, and their ponytail hairstyle was imitated by some Innu men. In Edmonton at Poundmaker's Lodge, a treatment center connected with Nechi, Innu children, adolescents and adults have been exposed to the healing properties of pipe ceremonies, sweat lodges, meditation, prayer and the counsel of Plains Indian elders.

Nechi was established in 1974 by Native professionals who were often "recovering alcoholics," and was developed primarily in the province of Alberta. It has since grown and provides a range of services to Native communities across Canada, in the United States, Australia and New Zealand. While the Nechi publicity material recognizes what it calls "cultural oppression" and urges its clients to understand their own problems in terms of the history of colonial domination, its main focus is clearly the psychological and medical conditions of individuals. A Nechi pamphlet on Adult Children of Alcoholics gives a flavor of this:

Today in our healing from the effects of alcoholism and other painful ways of living, we are re-discovering that what we are doing is a spiritual healing journey to be shared for the recovery of all our relations. In this century we have gradually come to know much about alcoholism and its effects. Medical research has shown that alcoholism is a disease with recognized symptoms and named progression. Consequently, we now know a great deal about how this disease can physically destroy people. Psychology has brought insights to the emotional pain resulting from alcohol...This movement (Adult Children of Alcoholics) is guided by two spiritual principles; self-empowerment and mutual aid. Self-empowerment means that each person has the ability, as well as the basic human right, to direct their own life. Mutual aid states that people have the ability to help each other to grow and to heal.<sup>1</sup>

What we see in this passage (and other elements of Nechi literature could be produced to similar effect) is an appeal to the authority of scientific research wedded to "spiritual principles." Embracing the materialism of medicine and psychiatry, and combining this with the New Age other-worldliness of Alcoholics Anonymous, "alcoholism and other painful ways of living" are depicted as "disease" for which the prescription is a "spiritual healing journey." Embarking upon this "treatment" is the first step towards "recovery." This involves practical exercises, mastery of handout information, and self-disclosure in order to unblock the pain that lies underneath the alcohol and substance abuse. "Denial," the inability to freely disclose past and present anguish, pain and abuse, is

considered one of the cardinal traits of members of alcoholic and other “dys-functional” families. Nechi graduates often repeat these basic principles, emphasizing the role of “denial” in protecting the self against unpleasant truths. As one alcohol counselor told me, “You have to deal with sickness first. To do this you have to go deep inside you. First you have to talk about why *you* drink, then talk about the immediate situation.” He continued, “We must tell our own stories now. I must blame myself now, not my parents or the alcohol. That’s the past.” In the context of Nechi-style healing, these stories are often somber reflections of maltreatment, abandonment, fermentation and inebriation in a guided Nechi confessional.

Many of the Nechi handouts require memorization of key terms and definitions. Using the positivistic assessment criteria that infuses so much contemporary mass education, they stipulate particular learning and behavioral “outcomes,” the most important of which is permanent sobriety. Likewise, Poundmaker’s Lodge employs a highly structured residential program, through which “Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous philosophies are interwoven.”<sup>2</sup> This may be why some of the people who have been through Nechi or have attended rehabilitation programs, such as the one at Brentwood in Ontario, often speak about their problems in formulaic ways, repeating the psychological and medical phrases which are inculcated in these approaches and which, with some cultural modifications, have come to define the pan-Native healing process.

Tumas Rich had experienced pan-Native healing. I was fortunate to have spent some time with Tumas and his family at a camp near Sango Bay. While there he was constantly engaged in work and always acted with purpose, whether this be traveling long distances in search of animals or in felling huge dead spruce trees for the stove in the tent. He showed me many places that he had known all his life and instructed me on the landscape, noting places to get fresh brook water and guiding me over fragile ice. At nights we would talk and get to know each other long after his family had gone to sleep. However, when we returned to Davis Inlet, he lost much of the energy he had in the country. When I was walking past his house, Tumas would tap on his window and beckon me in. He poured out stewed tea and we shared cigarettes. Sometimes we played cards. His thoughts and words turned inward as he revisited his childhood with tales of his father’s violence and drunkenness, his own crimes and his history of incarceration. For Tumas, “Alcoholism is a disease, not a crime.” He was “a patient.” As a patient at the Brentwood treatment center, he was able to let go of his anger and resentments and forgive himself for the things he had done to others while under the influence of alcohol. “I can’t go on like this,” was the conclusion he came to many times. But, unfortunately, while increasing his powers of self-reflection, his treatment had led him only in circles. Believing he was sick, diseased and possessed of an illness, his lapses into drinking and violence could always be consigned to a “condition.” He struggled to control himself, calling this “body over mind,” because when he drank his body could not

control his mind's craving for alcohol and then he became a slave to the intoxication. When drunk, he admitted to not caring about anyone.

In Tumas' stories, which mixed the phraseology of "treatment" with a narrative of lifelong wounds, the orientations to *nutshimit* were sporadic, perhaps evaporating as we spoke, and it was the village with all its misery, drink, anger and resentments that was the "reality" he had come to locate himself in, although he was, in my observation and his own admission, much happier in the country. Likewise, the inward focus encouraged by "treatment" combined with the magnitude of the suffering he experienced made the momentous political realities facing the Innu seem superfluous. While the mining company was bracing to take the land not far from where we had camped and Innu autonomy was being threatened on all sides, many Innu like Tumas found it hard to focus on what should be done to protect themselves from these onslaughts. To Tumas, the whole village was "sick." The drinking, gas sniffing and suicides that occurred all around had affected everyone. There was no way to detach such problems from the village social form itself. Daily life is suffused with noise, interruptions, and crises. Televisions are constantly blaring. Children are running around and shouting. There is never enough money. Tumas himself was broke, without even a skidoo, and a recent job application for a position at the mine at Voisey's Bay had been rejected. He had lost a job as an alcohol counselor because he went on periodic bouts of drinking, and was awaiting a court appearance on a serious charge. The previous year, his teenage daughter had committed suicide. In the midst of a recent bout of drinking, one of the teenage children had taken one of the younger children, his grandchild who lived with the family, to the Social Services. I ask where the child is now. "I don't know. Somewhere in the community, I guess," he replies.

Although it has greater legitimacy as an invited rather than an imposed institution, pan-Native healing bodies propose certain solutions to the personal problems of Innu like Tumas. These solutions derive from popularized medical and psychological formulae as well as certain beliefs and practices of largely urbanized and more assimilated Native people from Western and Central Canada which are elaborated as pan-Native beliefs. Simply postulating that "alcoholism" is firstly an entity itself, and secondly a medical condition, imposes a particularly *external* frame of reference on the trauma of the Innu. This is further compounded with layers of obfuscation by the claim that Nechi treatment for "alcoholism" somehow relates to the Native experience in Canada, and perhaps around the world. Although there are some similarities in worldview that could be traced between the Innu and the Plains Indians, the pan-Nativism, like the imposed European world-view, obliterates difference and uniqueness.

One example of this is the Nechi use of sweat lodges in the Innu villages. As practiced, this healing is a mix of Christianity and New Age psychology, fusing confession and disclosure with heat, darkness, sweat, and sometimes sage. Prior to the arrival of Nechi, the Innu used sweat lodges only in the country. These were set up after a strenuous hunt to help relax the hunter or for therapeutic

reasons if a member of the camp fell sick. The use of the sweat lodge as a therapeutic device in the village differs significantly from the Innu use of sweat lodges since psychological “healing” through prescribed rules largely replaces Innu medicine and spirituality. To many *Tshenut* (elders), the Nechi sweat lodge is a travesty of their own histories. It is an agent of cultural assimilation in the same way that the school is. The only difference is that the personnel are now Natives themselves, Natives who have very little in common with the Innu and whose ways of life and languages were eroding long before the Innu were ever sedentarized.

Despite a widespread sense that sweat lodges in the villages are impositions, many Innu enjoy the saunas and find them therapeutic. Since the time of my first sweat in Davis Inlet, when on a late summer night four others and I went through three rounds of searing hot steam interspersed with blunt and honest confessionals, I have always accepted opportunities to join sweats. Before one sweat in Sheshatshiu, I had a rasping sore throat which cleared up almost immediately afterwards. The heat seeps through every pore in the body. Everyone groans with pleasure. As the hot steam concentrates inside the airtight tent, it is hard to breathe, and after fifteen or twenty minutes, the person nearest the entrance opens the flap and all go outside for cool air and cold water. Inside the pitch darkness where no one is visible, save in the haziest of profiles, people reflect on their past, their mistakes and their regrets. Although it borrows Alcoholics Anonymous language, the Innu confessional is rarely smug or conclusive. I have never heard anyone presuming to have overcome their problems or ruling out any recurrences, even after many years of sobriety. For me, the sweats were an opportunity to say whatever I wanted without judgment. I often noted my own failings, my sense of being out of my depth, and occasionally my own homesickness.

Although sweats may prove recuperative for some, other aspects of Nechi healing are more puzzling in the Innu context. For example, both Nechi and Poundmaker’s Lodge advertise high “success rates.” Success is defined in terms of specified percentages of its graduates who fall into such categories as returning to school, increasing their income, holding program management positions, or, in a more personal sense, improving their family life and strengthening their identity as Native people. These claims assume both a degree of cultural assimilation and a structure of employment opportunities which largely do not apply to the Innu. Furthermore, Nechi sees no conflict between, for example, holding a “program management position” and at the same time, “strengthening one’s identity as a Native person.” Since Innu identity is much more bound up with hunting than with “program management positions,” it is difficult to see how becoming an office functionary would enhance one’s appreciation of being Innu without either elaborate rationalization, or, more likely, psychic confusion. Furthermore, the treatment that is administered by these organizations does nothing to address the difficulties that the Innu encounter in the community. Neither does it address the degrading physical and social conditions in

which almost all Innu have lived since sedentarization.

One of the first experiences the Innu had with Poundmaker's was a six-month treatment program for a group of gas sniffing children. This occurred in the aftermath of the release to the press of a video of children sniffing gas in an unheated shack on the anniversary of a Davis Inlet house fire in 1992 that killed six young children. Within months of their return to the village, the children returned to their gas sniffing. As Waldram put it, "[E]ntire families were airlifted across the country to receive treatment and rehabilitation...[T]he children returned with their counselors, accompanied again by much media fanfare. Unfortunately, the causes of the substance abuse, which are rooted in the poverty and despair of the community, remained unchanged..."<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not it is successful for particular Innu (and personal testimony suggests that it is for some), Innu remain as clients of pan-Native healing. The very presence of Nechi serves to marginalize remedies for social and psychological problems which already exist among the Innu. For Nechi, "Healing means that you have gone through the program at Poundmaker's," George Rich told me, but, "For me, healing is laughing, crying, living, loving and hunting." While many people in both communities testify to having quit alcohol through using Nechi techniques and see no necessary conflict with Innu practices, others believe that Nechi trainees who "relapse" are more severely affected than they were before training. Others say that they quit alcohol by themselves. Jean-Pierre Ashini, for example, told me that "the cure is in the mind." Some of the older Innu believe that Nechi is an unhelpful presence and, like other non-Innu institutions, also imposes alien interpretations and frames of reference upon the Innu.

Although the Nechi literature provides a pan-historical sweep of cultural and political oppression, it necessarily ignores the particularities of Innu-European encounters and the role of liquor in Innu history. Alcohol has long been known to the Innu. It was probably first introduced by fur traders on the North Shore and at the Hudson's Bay posts, but seldom were Innu described as heavy drinkers.<sup>4</sup> One evening, Prote Poker recalled his father drinking in the country. "In the country, my dad when he was drunk would just sing and dance around the stove. He would talk about the trees and say that the trees can sing when they are swinging back and forth." Some years before this, William Duncan Strong observed in the diaries of his 1927-28 ethnographic visit that the Mushuau Innu drank spruce beer and home brew to celebrate a big kill.<sup>5</sup> He records no particular adverse effects other than mild chaos. The anthropologist, Frank Speck, observed that after particular dreams, hunters drank whisky to libate their soul-spirits in payment for the revelation of a caribou by a river, and to induce the fulfillment of the vision.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Georg Henriksen argued that Innu used alcohol not only to celebrate but also along with drumming, singing and dancing, to communicate with the Animal Gods.<sup>7</sup> In the early sedentarization phase, alcohol, along with shamanism and the shaking tent or *kushapatshikan*, was suppressed by the church, and, as Henriksen puts it, "[T]he people were

thereby deprived of some of their crucial means to obtain spiritual power.”<sup>8</sup>

While the Nechi disease theory does not use the word “sin,” alcohol use is clearly conceived as an individual failing and Nechi literature often has a missionary tone. On a hot summer day in Utshimassits, the late Roman Catholic Father Fred reinforced this association, telling me that Nechi was “the best thing that ever happened here.” Like the earlier missionaries who did their utmost to reward the sober, punish the drunk and instill guilt,<sup>9</sup> Nechi establishes a binary morality, inflecting alcohol with the language of contagion, and encouraging a divisiveness in the villages between those who drink and those who do not. Father Fred was in unanimity with every *Akaneshau* (literally, English-speaker, but synonymous with “white person”) professional that I have encountered in the communities in backing the Nechi approach. A Mennonite couple in Davis Inlet enthused about how good Nechi training was for “them.” “They find out what is wrong with them and question why they drink so much,” said Ernie, the last Mennonite in Davis Inlet.

Although alcohol is sometimes consumed in the country, binge drinking and daily drunkenness are almost exclusively associated with village life. Importantly, drinking occurs when the means by which Innu can practice their way of life and spirituality has been severely compromised. Innu drinking in the villages marks a separation from any objects of celebration. It takes place against a background of chronic boredom, loss of purpose, forced acculturation, extreme material poverty and, significantly, the tragedies, unnatural deaths, and illnesses that these have compounded. While these points may be acknowledged by Nechi and other treatment programs, the programs themselves assume the primacy of a psychological cause to the “disease.” They tend to emphasize the individual roots of drinking, of taking to the bottle when the person is not strong and cannot deal with problems in a healthier or more acceptable manner.

### *Akaneshau and Innu Perspectives on Healing*

Coincidentally, several conceptual and practical similarities are apparent between the pan-Native and official Canadian understandings of the troubles of the Innu. Both can grasp the problems and imagine the Innu only through inventing them as “Indians”—as disadvantaged relatives under the multicultural fraternity constructed by the state.<sup>10</sup> In this context, the various “healing” initiatives are trumpeted as an important dimension of the “progress” that *Akaneshau* professionals attribute to the Innu. Improvement is measured out in speculative sobriety counts or communal confessionals, while regression is noted in lapses into drunkenness, most notable at critical moments, such as elections and inter-community rivalries. “I see a lot of hope for the community,” said Kate Gray, the professional social worker, on a hot Saturday in Davis Inlet. With characteristic optimism, she continued:

“There’s been a lot of change over the last fifteen to twenty years. In another twenty to twenty-five years, you’ll see a lot of good changes as well. It’s

moving step by step. Sometimes it might fall back a few steps, but they keep moving forward. A lot of really committed people in the community are struggling with their own healing and waiting to give something back to the community as well and we [at Social Services] are trying to figure out what it is we can do that is meaningful for them in a Native way and not just wanting to take on the non-Native stuff and put that in..."

The forward and backward movements, steps to and fro, are dizzying, but the direction in which "healing" leads is unmistakable and the "Native" help that her agency will render will be rallied to these ends. Like many other *Akaneshau*, the social worker held out high hopes for the move of the Mushuau Innu from Davis Inlet to the new village of Natuashish.<sup>11</sup> The training of Innu carpenters to build some of the houses in the new community was a "good healing process" because "they would learn how to build their own houses." In the process—what this might symbolize to former nomads, for whom meaning and identity were developed in a wider landscape, was not acknowledged—"the community can build their own community."

However, the Innu loss of autonomy is only incurred transparently and in some ways superficially by the optimistic visions of *Akaneshau* professionals. In this case, the former nomads who have had a most troubled, even catastrophic experience as settled village dwellers are now being configured as a "community" that must build another "community." To provide some semblance of cohesion in the community, the social welfare and the pan-Native programs have become central to village life, marking Utshimassits and Sheshatshiu out as villages of pathology. In both villages new institutions to deal with sickness, such as treatment centers, group homes, women's shelters and clinics, have been funded and established rapidly over the last decade and now provide a large segment of the little employment available for Innu.

Not all healing in the villages, of course, is filtered through the visions of urbanized Plains Indians or the *Akaneshau* social workers. The Innu themselves have set up a number of health programs and counseling services, and most recently an institution for children and adolescents with gas sniffing problems was established in Sheshatshiu by the federal government. The problem of alcohol abuse is one that Innu have directly confronted, beginning with the move to intermittent and sometimes long term sobriety by some of the young leaders in the mid-1980s. Because tragic acts of violence, sexual abuse and self-harm regularly occur when people are drinking heavily, alcohol programs in both Sheshatshiu and Utshimassits have been established. On-site counseling is provided, and individual clients can receive funding for up to six months to attend treatment programs throughout Canada. In Sheshatshiu, the Band Council established a Healing Services department in 1993. The idea behind this was to establish non-conflictual and non-confrontational methods of healing. In this way, the Healing Services personnel strongly differentiate themselves from the official Canadian Social Services, which insists upon retribution and punishment and is coordinated with the courts and the criminal justice system. The

Healing Services provide support to anyone in the community who expresses a desire to be helped. Most of the people seeking help have problems related to alcohol and sexual abuse, and many refer themselves in order to receive help and support in the court system through which their problems and conflicts are channeled.

One of the main principles of the Healing Services is that Innu problems are best resolved by Innu, not the Royal Canadian Military Police, the Social Services or the courts. The accent is on understanding, not blame. Professionals are not hired. Only Innu women and others such as Lyla Andrew, an *Akaneshau* woman who is married to an Innu man and has lived and raised children in Sheshatshiu for two decades, are on the staff. Lyla Andrew explained the philosophy with an example of a young man who, many years previously, had abused two siblings. Feeling alone, he now drinks and is full of shame and fear. He wants to approach his sisters, but is fearful of the consequences. The Healing Services encouraged him to confess and to speak out without the fear of retribution. This could be guaranteed because the Healing Services are not obliged to report to the Social Services or the RCMP. Freedom from retribution insured against the humiliation and public exposure that results from court trials. In this case, the young man could speak to other Innu who may well have known exactly what it was like to be in his position. Furthermore, all discussion can take place in *Innu-aimun*, the Innu language, rather than English.

Despite the greater degree of legitimacy of the Healing Services among the Innu, a major difference between the Nechi programs and Social Services on the one hand and the Healing Services on the other is that Nechi and Social Services have much more secure sources of funding. Nechi has received lavish funding through Health and Welfare Canada, and the Social Services operate on secure provincial funds. The Healing Services funds, however, are funneled through the Band Councils, and the Utshimassits and Sheshatshiu Healing Services compete for a fraction of the budget of the Nechi and statutory services. Until very recently, when a widely publicized gas sniffing epidemic provoked the federal government to act in concert with the Innu, a more external source of assistance indicated a more secure entrenchment as a means of healing in the Innu villages.

### ***Experiences of Drinking***

The fact remains that despite the efforts of these programs, and the ongoing destruction caused by alcohol, many Innu continuously drink. In contrast to urbanized people and Euro-Canadians, nearly all Innu drinkers are binge drinkers. Drinking coincides with certain junctures, situations, and events. When drinking starts, it often does not stop until the drinker either runs out of alcohol, falls asleep, passes out, or precipitates some action that brings all partying to a stop. One drinking session that I observed, for example, was terminated by the sudden grief of a mother for her dead teenaged son. Others may come to a halt

by violence or the intervention of the police. While this pattern of binge drinking in association with certain circumstances largely obtains among the Innu, Nechi and most other Alcoholics Anonymous-influenced treatment models stress the addictive quality of drinking as a "disease," and either ignore or discount the situational contexts within which it occurs.

Regardless of one's perspective, the negative effects of parental drinking on Innu children are clearly evident. There is growing evidence that this may start with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), which can cause physical abnormalities as well as serious learning and behavioral problems. FAS was detected in several Innu children and adolescents who were sent to St. John's, Newfoundland, for treatment in the winter of 2000-01.<sup>12</sup> When their parents are drinking, infants are sometimes left in the charge of older children, often with inadequate food or heating. Many children attribute their gas sniffing to feelings of being neglected by drunken parents. Many older people tell tales of abandonment, abuse, and fleeing alcohol-fuelled parents and elders. Alcohol particularly affected the first generation of children to grow up in Davis Inlet and Sheshatshiu in the 1970s. In 1990 a local health report covering this period found that between eighty and eighty-five percent of residents over age fifteen were alcoholic, and that half of these were intoxicated on a daily basis. As their report observed, "The behavior and appearance of the majority of Davis Inlet people are characteristically consistent with chronic alcoholic populations. The people appear to be physically older (by ten+ years) than they are..."<sup>13</sup> When in 1992, the Innu instigated a "people's inquiry" into what was going wrong in Utshimassits, they found that between 1965 and 1992, forty-seven of the sixty-six deaths in the community were alcohol related.<sup>14</sup> "When I was a child," Prote Poker told me, "I didn't trust my parents or anything they said. I used to be happy when my father got sick and went to hospital because when he came back he wouldn't drink for a while. When there was drink in the house, I used to run around making like I was playing and knocking over the home brew."

Although gas sniffing, suicide, sexual abuse, marital disharmony and neglect are all widely believed to be connected with drinking, Innu remain largely non-judgmental about alcohol. Instead of seeing drinking as a disease called "alcoholism," many Innu view it as a symptom or even expression of a host of other experiences linked to the loss of social cohesion incurred by the settlement process itself. The gas sniffing of the children is perhaps the most visible symbol of communal breakdown—hunched and hooded children can often be seen on the ice openly inhaling fumes from plastic garbage bags, and hauntingly shrill screams are heard in the woods where the children are hiding themselves away.

At the most immediate level, Innu health workers relate gas sniffing to chronically low levels of self-esteem. They depict many of the youth as feeling useless and lacking in confidence. One day when we were talking about a recent spate of gas sniffing in Utshimassits, Simeon Tshakapesh said, "That's how I felt as a kid. I thought I didn't have anything. I'm not worth it. There was nothing

to look forward to. I didn't realize that I had a future." Gas sniffing is commonly related to the drinking of the adults. In fact, there is a lot of graffiti in Davis Inlet to this effect and adolescent sniffers often corroborate this. When I asked him what it was like to live in Davis Inlet, a nine year old boy in whose house I was staying replied, "Bad, especially because of all the gas sniffers, because it's something in their heads. When grown-ups drinks, they fights when they drunk. My daddy might fight my mummy and then my brother fights my daddy. And there is a lot of stealing. I never sniff gas, yet. I never smoke, yet." Here even the child of nine could not rule out following a prevalent pattern. When I asked him what were the good things about Davis Inlet he said, "I don't know, maybe when I go riding on bike or on the skidoo."

Despite the obvious importance of psychological factors such as lack of self-esteem and social factors such as parental drinking, it is important not to lose sight of the wider political context within which each operates. Every contemporary Innu family has been effected by the shift from nomadic hunting to settled life in the village. While they have been domiciled in the villages, the land that they and their ancestors used becomes progressively appropriated by developers. The connections between drinking (as well as other self-destructive activities and disease) and self-esteem on the one hand and removal from the land on the other, are apparent to all Innu. Jack Penashue, a Nechi-trained alcohol counselor, put this in perspective when he stated that, for many Innu, "Their culture is not what their grandparents taught them and that's why they drink. Then when they drink, they lose a lot of things. I began to see my parents *just* as drinkers. I asked myself, why can't they be white? Why is there no food in our house? No heat? When we see white people with lots in their lives. Then, I said to myself, these are not my real family. We didn't have any family unity or gatherings. I didn't have any of that." In this brief account, drinking is related to both the loss of the nomadic hunting life and the desire on the part of the child for a whiteness that cannot be attained. Even if his parents had been like "white people with lots in their lives," this would not have delivered contentment unless Innu values were radically redefined.

The same connections apply not only to the removal of the Innu from permanent nomadic hunting, but from the consolidation of non-Innu occupation of their homelands. During the initial period when nickel was discovered at Voisey's Bay, there was a widespread view in Davis Inlet that disease and alcohol problems would escalate as a result of the development of the mine. Since most Innu had no real information about what the mining company was up to at the time, there was a feeling that the land was simply going to be taken away from them. The prospect of having something of value, even sacred, stolen, influenced many people to drink. As one resident put it, "If everything's going to be taken, why not drink."

Unlike the society that Jack Penashue's parents were wrenched away from, in Euro-Canadian society status is displayed by "position" and the accumulation of material wealth. While some Innu, principally the leaders who have

access to secure salaries and “joint ventures” with industrialists, have been able to acquire gleaming new trucks and snowmobiles, massive television sets and other accoutrements of suburban life, such possessions have not generated status. If anything, the displays of these possessions are not seen by the bulk of Innu living in shacks as badges of accomplishment. The widespread cynicism towards the leaders and their possessions, particularly in Sheshatshiu, mean that goods only tangentially deliver status.<sup>15</sup> The newfound material wealth of such individuals, often at the cost of massive credit card debt, may provide them with a kind of whiteness that some of the young crave as an escape route from drinking. However, possessions are no victory for the leaders and fledgling capitalists, because even if they refrain from drinking, their close relatives and sometimes immediate families are often prone to binge drinking, wild partying and tragic endings.

### *Drinking and Power*

Although a wealthy person’s possessions may be coveted, a drinker is a person to be reckoned with, if only because he or she will be remembered for some extremely good and bad times. As a drinker, you will be remembered for your drunkenness, your adventures, your fights. Alcohol gives people feeling and passion that, amid chronic torpor, the community itself expunges. Sheer boredom should not be ruled out as a powerful stimulus to take to the bottle. In the Innu, as in other colonial contexts, it is easy to see how drinking can help fill the cultural vacuum. Sociologist Edwin Lemert explained Native American drinking in part as “...a direct reaction to boredom induced by the disintegration and disappearance of...ritual...”<sup>16</sup> The material possessions, even if they are “legitimately” acquired, seldom compensate for the loss of meaning occasioned by settlement.

When *Akaneshau* are witnesses to drinking and drunkenness, either by accident or design, there is sometimes a clever reversal that takes place. The *Akaneshau*, nearly always judge and jury to the Innu in other contexts, is judged, questioned and interrogated. The Innu drinker turns the tables and marks himself or herself as a memorable person, a persistent teaser of white certainties. In one of my first encounters with drinking in Sheshatshiu, I met an inebriated couple walking along the beach road. Repeatedly, they asked me, “Who are you?”

The reply of my name and where I was from was quickly brushed aside as they continued to probe. “Are you Jesus?” they asked.

“OK,” the woman continued, “You’re from England. Tell the Queen to fuck off when you see her.”

My amusement at this, however, was not appreciated, as they quickly sensed that as an *Akaneshau* in the community I might be in the pay of Innu Nation. My protestations to the contrary were met with disbelief, as they told me that the current President of Innu Nation was going to be kicked out because he only

listened to white people like me. These commentaries continued as they motioned to kick me out of the community literally, before reverting to the earlier questions. "Who are you? What do you want?" Several years later the couple died in one of the spate of house fires that occurred regularly in the mid-1990s.

Over time, I discovered that the accusations of the drinkers mirror the concerns of the day, particularly the pervasive perception of being duped, raped, or violated by *Akaneshau*. Thus, at the height of all the Environmental Impact Assessment studies over the Voisey's Bay mine, seventy-five kilometers north of Davis Inlet, I would sometimes be accused by drinkers of taking money from the mining company. If I denied this, the counter-accusation was that I was taking money from Innu Nation, as the two were linked in the minds of the drinkers. There was nothing remiss about such a linkage, because several complements of aid had been dispatched from the Voisey's Bay Nickel Company to Innu Nation at that time. The complete refurbishment of the Sheshatshiu offices in 1996 was paid for by mining company funds and could be seen by all in the community.

One evening at dusk, I was walking along the beach road in Sheshatshiu with Tom Green, an *Akaneshau* advisor at Innu Nation. At almost the same location as the previous encounter with the inebriated couple, we discerned several men weaving as they walked along the road towards us. One was pretending to drive, using the handlebars of a child's plastic scooter. When we met, some jovial teasing about our gait and our ubiquitous backpacks rapidly gave way to questions about our dealings in the community. Each man interrupted the questions of the next in a sort of one-upmanship of interrogation. One man shouted, while another man smoothly and persistently questioned us. Soon, Tom and I were broken apart into two groups with two to three Innu men questioning each of us. In response to my protestation that I was helping to write a human rights report,<sup>17</sup> one man with a loud rasping voice put his nose within an inch of mine and shouted, "Do you think we are *animals*?" His brother, an older, gentler man, quietly told me that what I am doing is the wrong thing for the Innu. It is leading the Innu in the wrong direction. There were no clues in his speech or bearing to indicate whether he was making a scathing indictment of my work, merely mocking it or actually approving it—going in the "wrong direction" could be perceived as positive if the "right direction" was "wrong." Meanwhile, Tom Green extricated himself and made off as quickly as possible, leaving me with the men. Before I was distracted by Tom's departure, the older brother pointed out into Lake Melville, asking, "Colin, what do you see there?"

The answers I volunteered—"waves" and "water"—were batted down like the summer blackflies. They were either "not right" or simply "wrong."

Simultaneously, the brother with the rasping voice interjected a repetition of the question, "What are you doing here?" Between questions a third brother subtly asked more philosophical questions, which, at my muddled non-response, were then mixed with his own maudlin reflections on the community.

From this point, we entered the house of a man who was to commit suicide

a few years later. The older brother introduced this man, clearly younger than him, as his grandfather. Cans of Labatts were opened and one was thrust into my hand. As I took a swig of mine, a truck arrived outside and virtually the whole household, minus the children, evacuated to jump on the flatbed. Alone, I walked back to my lodging, which happened to be the next house.

In these incidents, I did not see drinking as simply an expression of powerlessness and disenfranchisement through displaced or misplaced anger. Nor did I see it as disease. Drinking was not in Gerald Vizenor's terms, *victimry*,<sup>18</sup> nor was it, as some have suggested of aboriginal drinking, "symptoms of underlying inequalities."<sup>19</sup> Rather, through their quick-witted verbal tactics, the drinkers were talking back to the power of interrogation and surveillance to which they are normally subjected. And here, it is not simply an "act of aggression against white authority," as Lemert described the drinking of British Columbia natives in the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> It is an ironic reversal of roles that makes *Akaneshau* aware of the colonial nature of the situation. Through these chance meetings, the drinkers not only expressed their own understandings of the Innu-*Akaneshau* encounter in *their* way, they gave me a glimpse of how it must feel to be Innu in many situations—in the court room, in the Social Services office, while speaking to the police, as subjects of "research," and even upon walking into the Innu Nation office to find salaried *Akaneshau* making major decisions on their behalf while they languish on welfare. In similar situations, I have only tasted what it must be like for the Innu to be repeatedly confronted with rules and expectations that they are uncomfortable with, dimly aware of, or both, and found wanting.

Turning the tables again, some Innu say that drinking can be productive. It is productive in that it breaks down the nuclear insulation of village life. People get to know how others feel. When drinking, they do not have to pretend that the pain of all that has happened in the villages does not exist or that the *Akaneshau* colonization of their land does not matter or affect them. Drinking could be reframed as a useful, even therapeutic, activity because it puts people in touch with common experiences very directly. As Lemert pointed out in relation to such drinking, "...one cannot escape the impression that the reputation of these Indians have as drunkards, makers of home-brew and 'Bad Indians,' is a powerful *sustaining factor* for them (emphasis added)."<sup>21</sup> That is, drinking builds solidarity among the Innu by constructing a contrast with the colonizing *Akaneshau* world. Echoing anthropologist Nancy Lurie's classic paper on Indian drinking as protest, we could say that, "...Indian people are more likely to drink when they feel thwarted in achieving Indian rather than white goals or when their success as Indians or simply individuals apart from Indian-white comparisons is interpreted as success in achieving status as whites."<sup>22</sup> Thus, several of the Innu who regularly drink do so when they cannot practice the Innu way of life and through circumstance are forced to return to the villages.

By the same token, many of the drinkers are sharp, witty and articulate

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people whose politeness, deportment, spoken English or some other factor—when they are sober—renders them “good” Innu in the eyes of *Akaneshau*. However, few Innu, including the political leaders who are competent in their dealings with *Akaneshau* authority, would relish being seen as what Erving Goffman once called “heroes of assimilation,”<sup>23</sup> for that would be an admission that the game is up and that the Innu are really only a somewhat different type of Canadians.<sup>24</sup>

Drinking can also be seen as a way of refusing to collaborate in the imposed way of life, of fashioning out a resistance to the order of assimilation. On lonely days, drunks can create havoc in the Innu Nation and Band Council offices. By doing so, they sometimes bring humor and vitality to the office workers’ day, and through their tricky semantics they challenge the assumptions of these torpid bureaucracies. Along with the presence of the *Tshenut* and the closeness of *nutshimit*, the drinkers remind others that the village is a fragile order of assimilation. This is abundantly illustrated by their inebriation in the centers of contact with the *Akaneshau* world.<sup>25</sup>

People drink both to live and to die. They drink to feel that they are alive in a community that is, after almost half a century, moribund. The villages have no echo in the history of the Innu as a people nor do they possess any meaning or purpose. Drinking can cut through the phoniness, the pretence that Sheshatshiu or Utshimassits are somehow Innu. It can give the courage to see a vision of oneself and one’s webs of relationships in a more truthful light, not refracted through the prisms of Euro-Canada. Drinking is to live in another sense: it helps to remove oneself from the constant haunting of death, fighting, sickness, material poverty, land theft, and failure to live up to the expectations of the ever-judgmental *Akaneshau*.

But let us not get too romantic. Certainly, drinking is a pleasure, but it is also a poison that leads to destruction and death. Some drinkers’ relationships have been permanently tainted by acts of cruelty and carelessness, and their lives have been cut short in road accidents, exposure to cold weather, self-inflicted gunshot wounds or house fires. Four house fires killed six people in Sheshatshiu in 2000. Drinking is perhaps the major precipitating cause of what has become normal—premature death.

In the face of these tragedies, it is hard to conceive of the problems confronting the Innu as anything other than *social* problems.<sup>26</sup> It is also problematic, if not absurd, to compartmentalize the problems as stemming from a “disease” called “alcoholism,” or from “solvent abuse” or even “dysfunctional families.” These problems may be an understandable reaction to an extraordinary situation of total loss of control over one’s life and future. In one of the earliest sociological studies of Native American drinking, Lemert concluded his study by remarking that the disastrous effects of drinking on American Indians “...in actuality may have been the *secondary effects* of a shattering of the fabric of cues and symbols which ordered their overt actions into appropriate spheres (emphasis added).”<sup>27</sup> Georg Henriksen explained the “incessant” drinking he

observed in old Davis Inlet thirty years ago in a similar vein, stating that "...alcohol probably plays a significant role in people's efforts to cope with the numerous interpersonal conflicts resulting from the inconsistencies between the Barren Ground world and the coastal world."<sup>28</sup> And here, Henriksen was pinpointing the origin of the problem with the imposition of village life on the coast.

In *The Divided Self*, psychiatrist R.D. Laing identified a similar situation when he reinterpreted Emil Kraepelin's famous case study of a patient showing signs of catatonic excitement. After describing the public humiliation of the patient at the hands of Kraepelin in the case presentation in a medical lecture hall, Laing offers an understanding of why the patient may have behaved in what appeared to the psychiatrists as a "schizophrenic" manner. Laing's conclusion is that, "[o]ne may see his behavior as 'signs' of a 'disease'; one may see his behavior as expressive of his existence."<sup>29</sup> Like Kraepelin's patient, the Innu drinker also wants to be heard. The point is that when medical or other authorities place individuals in particularly constraining situations, these authorities may be generating the subject's behavior, and thus forming the presumed pathology. The words or actions of the subject may be interpreted as a way of being heard, but the medical frame of reference leads only to their categorization as symptoms of illness. This has been shown in studies of "total institutions," the prototype of which was Erving Goffman's *Asylums*.<sup>30</sup> While there are obvious differences of scale and context, it is not too farfetched to see elements of the "total institution" in the villages. Like "total institutions," the villages remove Innu identity, bring the Innu under a foreign authority structure, and attempt to mold the Innu into conformity with Euro-Canadian norms.

### **Conclusion**

That the linked problems of alcohol, sexual abuse, gas sniffing, suicide and accidents are expressive of Innu existence is more than the morose refrains of the dysfunctional consequences of domination. While all of these problems are extremely damaging, and are recognized as such, they indicate not only the predicament of being between "two worlds," but also the troubled individual and collective relationships of the Innu to Canada. Sometimes, albeit often with high personal costs, the Innu in their drinking are able to turn the tables of power and resist the desired assimilation. At the same time, drinking may lead to the neglect of children who, feeling unloved and unguided, may start sniffing gas. In the ensuing chaos, and combined with the pain of past abuses of settlement and the callous actions of priests, unwanted sexual activity often occurs. Or the sufferings a person experiences may produce a spirit of abandon in which his or her life becomes disposable. Massive reservoirs of resentment have been created from cruelties that people have inflicted upon one other in the communities. However, such problems—the domain of *Akaneshau* professionals—are rarely allowed to be considered or treated as *social* problems— problems that

are interconnected, rooted in the history of sedentarization and occur under the intrusion of colonizers. Thus, as Mark Nui, a health worker in Utshimassits, told me, "Our culture has been ripped apart and ourselves too. A lot of anger is locked inside us and it's hard to snap out of it."

### Notes

1. John Allan White, *Adult Children of Alcoholics: From Survival to Healing, Walking the Recovery Road* (Edmonton: Nechi Institute on Alcohol and Drug Education, nd), 1.

2. Sherry Sagers and Dennis Gray, *Dealing with Alcohol: Indigenous Usage in Australia, New Zealand and Canada* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 152.

3. James B. Waldram, Ann Hering, T. Kue Young, *Aboriginal Health in Canada: Historical, Cultural, and Epidemiological Perspectives* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 93.

4. For example, the Hudson's Bay Company factor John McLean, who was stationed at Fort Chimo and North West River in the early 19th century, rarely mentioned alcohol among the "Nascopie," although he did display his disdain for drinking among other natives. On the Ottawa River, McLean records a meetings with Natives in which "...scenes of a revolting nature were of frequent occurrence. Rum and brandy flowed in streams, and dollars were scattered about as if they had been of no greater value than pebbles on the beach." See John McLean, W.S. Wallace, ed., *Notes of a Twenty-five Years' Service in the Hudson's Bay Territory* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1968), 23. Similarly, Samuel King Hutton, a doctor working with the Inuit on the North Labrador coast from 1903-1908, remarked that, "...it may be observed that alcoholism as a habit is not known among Eskimos. Occasional cases of drunkenness have arisen, but chronic alcoholism from the habitual use of intoxicating liquors is unknown." See Samuel King Hutton, *Health Conditions and Disease Incidence among the Eskimos of Labrador* (Poole: The Wessex Press, nd), 30. These Inuit communities, principally Nain and Hopedale, are now rife with alcohol related problems as much if not more than the Innu communities.

5. Eleanor Burke Leacock and Nan Rothschild, *Labrador Winter: The Ethnographic Journals of William Duncan Strong* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

6. Frank Gouldsmith Speck, *Naskapi: The Savage Hunters of the Labrador Peninsula* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977 [1935]), 92.

7. Georg Henrikson, "Life and Death Among the Mushuau Innu of Northern Labrador," in ISER Research and Policy Papers No. 17 (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research Press, 1993).

8. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

9. Georg Henriksen, *Hunters in the Barrens: The Naskapi on the Edge of the White Man's World* (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research Press, 1973), 77.

10. I have commented on this in connection with the policies of the Canadian state which require the Innu to configure themselves into political organizations sharing basic Western assumptions about land and rights and in relation to the policies advocated by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Affairs and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988. See Colin Samson, "Sameness as a Requirement for the Recognition of the Rights of the Innu of Canada: The Colonial Context," in Jane Cowan, Marie-Benedicte Dembour and Richard Wilson, eds., *Culture and Anthropology of Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 226-248.

11. Some five years after my interview with Kate Gray, the Auditor General of Canada, Denis Desautels, did not share the optimism of local *Akuneshau*. In a report to Parliament on 16 October 2000, Desautels observed that the federal government had failed to identify what remedies were needed to address the "social pathologies" of the Innu. "There is a significant risk that the causes of these conditions will not be adequately addressed through the reloca-

tion," said the report ("Davis Inlet Innu may not be served well by relocation: auditor general," Canadian Press web posting, 17 October, 2000).

12. As reported in "Innu children face more health problems," CBC web posting, 9 February 2001.

13. David C. McTimoney and Associates, *Davis Inlet Assessment*, prepared for Medical Services Branch (Halifax: Health and Welfare Canada, 1990), 7.

14. Innu Nation and Mushuau Innu Band Council, *Gathering Voices: Finding Strength to Help Our Children* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1995), 187.

15. The following encounter with a man at midday on the road in Sheshatshiu is typical. The man tells me of his resentment that those who work at Innu Nation do not pay attention to the community and they get "fat cheques" for their work. While in their jobs, these employees appoint members of their own families to vacant positions. When he goes in the Innu Nation office, he tells me, "I feel like I am in a prison cell."

16. Edwin Lemert, "Alcohol and the Northwest Coast Indians," *University of California Publications in Culture and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 6, (1954): 335.

17. Subsequently published as Colin Samson, James Wilson, and Jonathan Mazower, *Canada's Tibet: The Killing of the Innu* (London: Survival, 1999).

18. Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

19. Saggors and Gray, *Dealing with Alcohol*, 88.

20. Lemert, "Alcohol and the Northwest Coast Indians," 336.

21. *Ibid.*, 338.

22. Nancy Oestreich Lurie, "The World's Oldest Protest Demonstration: North American Indian Drinking Patterns," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 40, No. 3, (1971): 317.

23. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 25.

24. In *Stigma*, Erving Goffman (*Ibid.*, 25) notes how members of stigmatised groups can manage their "spoiled identity" by becoming success stories within "normal society" and providing "exemplary moral tales." Becoming a hero of assimilation in this way is precisely what most Innu avoid, even if it means fairly regular inebriation. The tendency is more pronounced in Sheshatshiu where the white presence looms larger and where "good Innu" are continually sought out as models of assimilation.

25. Bonnie Duran's assurances that alcohol "is viewed as destructive of Native life," and that "...abstinence becomes a symbol of protest and an affirmation of Native identity," do not fit the Innu situation. See Bonnie Duran, "Indigenous Versus Colonial Discourse: Alcohol and American Indian Identity," in S. Elizabeth Bird, ed., *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 124. While it is true that many Innu view and experience alcohol as destructive, it is not directly destructive of *nutshimit* life, from where it is largely absent. It is, however, destructive of drinkers' family relationships and participation in village life. But, this is not to say that abstinence *per se* is a symbol of protest.

26. As C. Wright Mills put it, "When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But, when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual." See C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 9.

27. Lemert, "Alcohol and the Northwest Coast Indians," 382.

28. Henriksen, *Hunters in the Barrens*, 77.

29. R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 31.

30. Erving Goffman, *Asylums* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 6.