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THE LEGACY OF DRESS-UP CREEK:
FORMAL EDUCATION FOR NORTHERN ALGONQUIAN HUNTERS

by

© John Stewart Murdoch

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Thus far, formal education for Canada's Native people has centred on a Euro-Canadian view of the world and the values and definitions which such a view supports. The researcher proposes a different set of values and definitions based on a hunter-gatherer, and specifically Northern Algonquian view of the world. In the first three chapters, the author criticizes current Euro-Canadian social scientific assumptions about and descriptions of hunter-gatherers, paying particular attention to Northern Algonquians. This critique is synthesized with a similar critique of Euro-Canadian education for Canadian hunter-gatherers and particularly for Northern Algonquians.

To offer practical illustrations as well as the opportunity for the author to 'ground' his assumptions, this study next focuses on the development of a course outline of Cree land skills in the schools of the James Bay Territory of northwestern Quebec.

This study is finally brought to a conclusion with a description of a the strategy this researcher has developed for formal education for Northern Algonquian hunters.

DEDICATION

Without the influence, advice and example of the late Malcolm Diamond, it is unlikely that this thesis would have ever been written. As his son-in-law, I learned a positive alternative way for viewing the world as well as equally positive strategies for coping. This study is dedicated to him in respect and loving memory.

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I wish to thank my wife Gerti and my children for being supportive and patient while I completed this study.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

A significant number of Canada's indigenous people have maintained not only their traditional subsistence activities but as well, their languages and unique styles of social interaction. This remarkable persistence has compelled social scientists and educators to question the validity of long-accepted characterizations of them. On re-examining the theories generated as well as the data on which the latter have been based, social scientists now realize the vitality and complexity of what were previously thought to be 'simple' and 'archaic' cultures (Asch 1979) (Lewis 1983). Educators, too are gradually relinquishing their view of Indian and Inuit children as 'culturally deprived' and are becoming increasingly aware of the rich cultural resources available among hunter-gatherers (Deines 1984).

However, there is still the risk of developing another mythical 'savage', this one more noble than the last, if the experience of the last myth is not well used as a corrective example. The presentation of Canadian Aboriginals as lovers of nature, for example, can be readily supported by pointing to the manner in which many have and continue to live. Pervasive features of their world-views are intimately linked to and referenced with natural phenomena. But, as LaRocque (1975:34) points out "romanticizing Native peoples as Nature-lovers is damaging because the image tends to be presented in a very superficial way. The philosophy that

underlies the Indians' closeness with nature is usually circumvented. In motion pictures and popular writing, aboriginal people and other personages of Nature (such as animals, birds, fish) are often blurred together with such interchangeable terms as "young bucks" or, "feathered friends", (Aubry 1972). Often a commonality of behaviour among aboriginal people and animals is insinuated with such phrases as "the little Iroquois...silent as fish in a stream" (Aubry 1972:8) or "happy, they flexed their growing muscles like young animals" (Aubry 1972:63). Similarly, the behaviour of animals is often expressed in a manner associated with that of aboriginal people. In her book, Without Reserve, a description of contemporary Canadian Indian life, Sheila Burnford characterizes a certain dog as being a "part husky, part wolf, part Indian, dog" (Burnford 1969:224). As Frantz Fanon wrote of European writers' attitudes toward blacks (Fanon 1968:167), Canadian Indian and Inuit people are similiarly portrayed by writers as "symbolizing the biological". Implicit in these portraits is the view that Canadian Natives are driven by Nature and are not practising an articulated adaptive culture or cognitive style. In the words of Emma LaRocque, a Native woman from northern Alberta, "It is good and well that in our classrooms Native peoples are credited as the original defenders of ecology, but again, they are more than this. This is especially true today when there are thousands of urbanized Native peoples" (LaRocque 1975:34).

This dissertation develops a better understanding and

characterization of eastern James Bay Cree social and psychological traits. It is based on extended, practical and analytical experience of an ethnographic sort, over seventeen years of residence, family-forming, and work in education in three eastern James Bay Cree communities. The characterizations advanced would then be translated into appropriate premises and strategies for formal education. The research is truly interdisciplinary in that it draws first on the disciplines of social science, particularly anthropology, and must finally be articulated with foundations in formal education.

Many of the habits that will be ascribed or implied for Cree adults and children in the course of this study could easily be related to some Euro-Canadians as well. Nevertheless, formal education is necessarily founded on what is the central tendency (norms or cultural patterns) of the children in the milieu to be served rather than what might be said of only some individuals, or of unusual situations. Room for variance must be made in terms of that central tendency. Accordingly, the frequency and prevalence of social and psychological characteristics are of much greater importance than their surface manifestations. For example, children and adults reluctant to express opinions in a public setting can be found in not only a northern Algonquian milieu but a Euro-Canadian milieu as well. But the degree to which this reluctance is viewed as 'normal' or 'proper' has important implications for the manner in which



**MAP OF QUEBEC AND LABRADOR,
SHOWING THE EASTERN JAMES BAY TERRITORY**

FIGURE 1

educational activities should be structured and carried out, and the attitudes underlying reticence have a positive role to play.

As a way of giving this study practical dimensions and attainable goals, the main focus has been fixed upon the development of an elementary level Cree Culture Program for the community schools of the James Bay Territory of northern Quebec. This program involves the teaching of traditional northern Algonquian skills, usually by older members of each community. In addition to offering practical dimensions, this focus offers the most intracultural setting possible in a formal education context. The instructors, students and program content are virtually all Cree, northern Algonquians. For fundamental reasons, an intracultural setting is critical to this study. A setting where Euro-Canadian educators and knowledge were prominent would probably not produce many new insights. The ambiguities likely to be generated by Euro-Canadian confidence in ethnocentric attitudes and methodology, met by a corresponding northern Algonquian acquiescence would only reiterate the same styles of formal education which have produced so little northern Algonquian academic achievement. Conversely, northern Algonquian teachers engaged with northern Algonquian children in an exploration of northern Algonquian systems of knowledge will likely evoke a more ethnorelative climate, regardless of the historical models that the northern Algonquian teacher or student may have come prepared to imitate. Indeed, it has been this

researcher's experience that whatever problems typically occur in such settings (usually discipline), occur precisely because northern Algonquian students are unwilling to accept Euro-Canadian behaviour from northern Algonquian teachers.

The evolution of the Cree Culture Program also offers an instructive illustration of the evolving role which northern Algonquian competence and systematic knowledge has played in formal education in the James Bay Territory. Teaching traditional Cree skills and lore began as an interesting way of preoccupying students at school. It later became a practical context for a school initiated Leader Corps. With the birth of a legally constituted Cree School Board in 1978, Cree competence and systematic knowledge legitimately became part of the regular school program. Since that point, the Cree Culture Program has become an activity-oriented land skills program and there is a growing notion that a Cree system of knowledge should become the foundations for more academic programs such as mathematics, social studies, language arts, science, etc., as was begun in the Cree Way Project 1974-1977. This evolution of the Cree Culture Program closely parallels the development of a Cree community-level notion of culture and of the viability of a hunting and gathering lifestyle. A doctoral thesis, "A Study of the Cree Culture Course: An Educational Innovation by the James Bay Cree of Quebec", (Deines 1984), though lacking any ethnographic theory or perspective, offers some historical details and is a useful

example of perspectives shared by many Euro-Canadian educators. This researcher wishes to specify the actual social and psychological characteristics of the Cree core, and from a solid but not dogmatic basis in Cree socio-psychological reality, to build education foundations that speak to the children on their own terms, with allowance for individual variation. The proposals for the Cree Culture Program will serve to define education foundations by concrete examples, thereby ensuring that the foundations are truly Cree, not a merely plausible substitute derived from or by non-Cree sources.

Despite the focus on eastern James Bay Crees, there is sufficient cross-cultural comparability, to make this study pertinent to other hunter-gatherer populations in Canada and elsewhere in the world. Certain traits, quite relevant to this study, such as: "a strikingly uniform division of labour", (Murdock 1979:335); remarkably similar child-rearing strategies, (Whiting 1963, 1979:337); and, an "emphasis on individual achievement rather than group responsibility", (Whiting 1979:337) have been cited in support of a hunter-gatherer cultural type. Moreover, this author's field experiences among Inuit (Canada and Greenland), Dene, northern Algonquian, and Aborigine (Australia) hunters has markedly confirmed that comparability. The comparability of James Bay Cree hunter-gatherers and the lifestyles of other hunter-gatherers was clearly demonstrated during a visit by Greenland teacher college students to the Territory in the fall of 1983. As

the chauffeur and guide, the author can readily vouch for the ease with which Greenlanders and Crees interacted, sharing food, lodging and much discussion of mutual educational issues.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Dress-Up Creek is located a few miles from Rupert House, James Bay, Quebec. It was named after a tradition which offers a vivid organizing metaphor for this study. During the days when Rupert House was a European fur trading post, Crees stopped at Dress-Up Creek on their annual trip to the post to trade their furs. At this creek, people removed their 'bush' clothing and 'dressed-up' in European clothes. Once dressed for their arrival, they continued their journey to the post to trade. In those days, this activity was a special event, looked forward to, and enjoyed by those who took part. While a well-dressed Cree might influence a better bargain in trade, the habit of 'dressing-up' was also a social high point in the year. During the summer gatherings at the post, marriages were made, families and friends were re-united, and a great deal of feasting and storytelling took place. The domains of Cree life were relatively clear as were strategies for competence within those contexts. There is historical evidence to demonstrate that northern Algonquians (Crees among them) were capable of differentiating distinct sets of strategies and behaviours, depending on the domain. Jesuit Father Joseph Ignatius

Lafitau remarked of the northern Algonquians that they often manifested devout Christian behaviour at the trading post or mission, but would later be found on their hunting lands, practising their pagan religion as fervently as ever (Fenton & Moore 1977). Morantz and Frances in their study of trading practices in the James Bay Territory have shown how Crees hunting and trapping in kin or socially determined circumstances would regroup in 'trading gangs' especially constituted for visiting the post (Morantz & Frances 1984). These researchers have clearly demonstrated too that this regrouping was a function of Cree economic strategy rather than a function of European power over a Cree economy. Dress-up Creek was for Rupert House Band Crees a point of passage from one domain into another. More than clothes were changed. Strategies and behaviour were adjusted as well.

Today, the trading post as a domain for Cree living is no longer distinct or isolated from the bush. Neither are Cree control in the bush, nor European (now Euro-Canadian) control at the post, as mutually exclusive as they once were. Crees are competing with Euro-Canadians for control over food-animal resources from the bush, while at the same time are being ceded control over economic and sociopolitical affairs at the post. The bush-post distinction has become obscured and the tradition of Dress-Up Creek persists more as an attitude than as a special event. The lack of continuity between this attitude and current reality is very much evident in Cree community schools. In recent years, much attention has been paid to

changing the community school atmosphere toward one of comfort and familiarity. Yet, school staff, Cree parents, and students themselves, continue to act on the premise that the domain of Cree competence (hence control) is the bush. Conversely the belief prevails that Crees have little experience or expertise to offer a Euro-Canadian institution such as formal education. Consequently, success at school for Cree children has required them to assume or 'dress-up' in behaviours and attitudes many of which are not part of Cree competence. It is the researcher's belief that this Cree response to Euro-Canadian conceived education has contributed to the myth that the Cree child arrives at school deprived of many cultural resources that have intrinsic value for formal education. Many teachers (Euro-Canadian or Cree) and parents have tended to act as if the Cree child were 'culturally deprived'. The children have generally been urged by their parents to 'act properly' and to 'try hard', often in fashions not seen as proper or normal at home. The discrepancies between parental expectations on one hand and those embraced by formal education on the other, deepen as the Cree child continues in the system. During a period in their lives when Cree youth increasingly look for plausible explanations of the events in which they are involved (in early to mid secondary levels) the discontinuity between Cree and Euro-Canadian demands becomes increasingly difficult to bear and a majority of students drop-out (Sindell 1968), (Murdoch

1980). In spite of its very high failure rate, Euro-Canadian styles of education are not adequately questioned. Rather, the underlying complex of values and cognitive style is generally regarded as 'human' or universally true for all students. Blame for the majority of failures is usually attributed to the student, or more recently, the Native teachers. Despite the foregoing, culturally distinctive Native peoples have persisted and they have an abysmal record of success in the formal education system.

Simply put, there no longer exists a clear boundary between the traditional 'bush' Cree domain and 'trading post' European domain. Today, a distinct sociocultural boundary is maintained by teachers, students and parents alike, between Cree households and Cree community schools. The maintenance of such a boundary, and a school at variance with community life, confound the inductive role formal education is intended to play.

ORIENTATION OF THIS STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Three main issues which permeate the educational and anthropological literature, are relevant to this study: the differences in world views embraced by Crees and Euro-Canadians; the nature of culture change; and, the nature of learning. A description of this study's orientation on these three issues is of fundamental importance.

World View:

Euro-Canadians usually do not perceive or subsequently experience the world in the same fashion as do Cree hunter-gatherers. Euro-Canadians tend to regard the world of nature as being apart from themselves, as being wild, unruly, and requiring control or some domesticating action before its resources can be rendered useful. These perceptions and experiences are part of an industrial form of adaptation or social organization, described accordingly by Cohen (1968:52):

"Industrialism, like other adaptations, is as much a unique social organization as it is a technology man in an industrial society follows the machine; if he can better survive and better support his family by moving to a different machine in a different locality he does so, largely without regard to other people. He holds his position in relation to his source of subsistence through an impersonal system that pays for the use of his labour power, rather than through a group of kinsmen and by inheritance. The intellectualized goal of an industrial society is to run itself like the machines on which it is based. The organization of a factory is supposed to rest entirely on rational considerations of profit, efficiency, and production --not, as with the working unit in a preindustrial society, on considerations of consumption."

For Euro-Canadians, survival and the quality of life are determined by the degree that natural phenomena can be controlled or harnessed (Bobek 1962:246). Crees, on the other hand, regard themselves as coexisting with Nature and regard Nature as a provider (Scott 1982). Survival and the quality of life are therefore determined by the degree to which Man can synchronize his actions with those of Nature. "What a man could learn, and it was all that he could learn

in his lifetime, was a degree of fitness for the things he had to do" (Feit 1982).

These fundamental differences of the situations and perceptions which hunter-gatherer and industrial society members engage their respective worlds lie at the root of many misunderstandings. Dr. Peter Denny, a researcher of Canadian hunter-gatherer cognitive behaviour, like Cohen, characterizes industrial man as typically working outside the context in which [his] work has effect - the mechanic repairs an engine which he will not use. On the other hand, the work situation of hunters is fundamentally different in that he works primarily in the situation in which his work has its direct effects for him. Food produced is consumed by the worker's family. Clothes made by them are worn by them (Denny 1983:156). Denny's discussion of industrial and hunter-gatherer cognitive styles, offers a plausible explanation for Euro-Canadian failure to question the present philosophy and structure of formal education for Cree children:

"For context, or what I usually call inclusiveness, the picture from my own studies is that hunters and agriculturalists are inclusive (contextualizing) in their thinking, whereas industrialists are the opposite, which I usually call selective or isolating (non-contextualizing). Both factors are high among hunters (God's original model), and one or the other is low for agriculturalists and industrialists (the tandem disasters made by man). Under-differentiation among agriculturalists goes to spectacular and, to us, unintelligible lengths - a Bantu noun class may group together 'particulate substances' (e.g., sand), and 'liquids,' with 'daylight,' 'pleasant flavour,' 'whistling,' 'six,' 'provisions,' and 'life' (Denny and Creider, 1976). A Gilbertese noun class has as prominent members, trees, land sections, and fish hooks, leading the