

RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY AMONG THE INNU OF EASTERN QUEBEC AND LABRADOR

Peter Armitage¹

Religious ideology continues to provide a charter for social intercourse in secular societies, and a cultural underpinning to social and personal identity.² Religious ideology is a special kind of thought, namely, «motivated thought» which aims to totalize the information received by an individual concerning his/her natural and social environments, adding in the process additional levels of reality to that accessible through «common sense thought» (Tanner, 1979: 208). As Tanner notes, this kind of thinking (religious thought) is «not unrelated to the practical goals of everyday life, but it stands apart from "common sense"

¹ Peter Armitage a enseigné au département d'anthropologie de l'Université Memorial (St-John's, Terre-Neuve) et poursuit actuellement des recherches à l'Université Laval (Québec).

² This paper is a revised version of a chapter of a land use and occupancy study prepared for the Innu Nation in 1990 (see Armitage, 1990). I would like to thank José Mailhot and Anthony Jenkinson who devoted many hours to a careful review of an earlier version of this paper. Thanks are also due to my anonymous reviewers for their insights and detailed comments. Most importantly, however, I would like to thank Greg Penashue for sharing his rich insights into Innu religious ideology, and Nympha Byrne, Jeannine Mestenapeo, Anne Mestenapeo, Alex Andrew, George Gregoire, and other Innu friends for their expertise and patient assistance during the numerous interviews we conducted with Innu elders where religious matters were discussed.

thought, in that it offers quite separate techniques to produce these goals» (*ibid.*: 208).

Among the Innu people of eastern Quebec and Labrador, religious beliefs about animal masters and other spirits also continue to play an important role in shaping human behaviour.³ Such beliefs «totalize» empirical reality by adding additional levels of meaning and explanation to it.

The aim of this paper is to present a brief overview of the non-Christian components of contemporary Innu religious expression and thought. Readers are referred to other literature for more detailed descriptions and analyses of particular aspects of Innu religious ideology discussed in this paper (e.g. Armitage, 1990; Bouchard and Mailhot, 1973; Clément, 1991; Savard, 1985, 1972; Tanner, 1979; Vincent, 1978, 1973).

In describing Innu religious ideology, I have no intention of presenting a romanticized view of Innu intellectual life; a view which erroneously projects into the present-day beliefs which are moribund. Rather, I wish to convey an image of contemporary Innu religious belief and practice. This is not to say that there are no problems with the way in which these beliefs and practices are being transmitted to younger generations. Education in the Euro-Canadian school system, exposure to new and competing values and ideologies in the mass media, alcohol abuse, family breakdown, and a more sedentary existence for many Innu have combined to erode the transmission of religion between generations.

³ The Innu are also referred to as Montagnais-Naskapi Indians. They are based in thirteen communities in Labrador and Québec and are part of the Cree-Montagnais-Naskapi linguistic-cultural continuum that stretches across the northern boreal forest of Canada, from the coast of Labrador to the Rockies. The Innu refer to their homeland in Labrador-Québec as *Nitassinan*.

As a hypothesis, I suggest that the non-Christian elements of Innu religious ideology cannot be properly learned unless the Innu spend time in the country. This is because the religion, like any other, is in many respects a «practical» religion; where knowledge is acquired through years of practice, hunting and handling animals, showing respect for them, dreaming about them, analyzing dreams, observing and performing ritual actions such as scapulimancy (a form of divination) and *makushan* (a feast), learning and reciting myths and being with elders in a context which encourages them to share their knowledge (see Cavanagh, 1985: 6). But it is also because certain key elements in their religious practice and belief are directly related to the land and the animals.⁴ It should be noted, however, that not all elements in Innu non-Christian religious expression need be dependent on hunting in that even though an Innu person may not be a hunter, she/he may nonetheless practice the religiously sanctioned virtues of sharing and respect for elders and animal masters (e.g. via the sharing of meat harvested by hunters).

While my data are far from complete on the matter of intergenerational transmission of religious knowledge, there is some evidence to suggest that younger Innu who regularly engage in harvesting activities with their parents or other relatives are more inclined to be knowledgeable about the animal masters, mythology and other aspects of the religion. Innu youth who live in households where their parents or other relatives frequently discuss such matters are also more inclined to be knowledgeable. Otherwise, the only way they can learn

⁴ The concrete actions that the Innu take in the country to express their religion are what Giddens (1979:73) calls «practical consciousness», that is, «knowledge embodied in what actors "know how to do". » Discourse, on the other hand is «what actors are able to "talk about" and in what manner or guise they are able to talk about it.» Discourse is what certain Innu «theologians» are best at; a high level of reflective and analytical thinking about the past, present, and future within an ideological framework that has assumptions significantly different from those of the Euro-Canadian.

about non-Christian beliefs and practices is in the country while they and/or their parents are pursuing various harvesting activities.

In any event, the youth in any culture will not be knowledgeable about all the complexities of their religion. The acquisition of such knowledge takes many years, and even then, no one can know everything there is to know about a society's religious beliefs and practices. Those who are most knowledgeable about religion acquire the status of «theologians» (i.e. religious experts, priests, shamans, medicine men and women, etc.), a status usually reserved for mature adults, and generally a select few. Keesing warns us, in fact, not to treat religious belief and practice as a homogeneous system of belief in which every member of the community is an active participant. In reality, a «great diversity of knowledge in religious matters» is likely to be encountered in any culture, and it is «only the experts who make the full panoply of connections in this symbolic system, who see global patterning where others see only parts and surfaces» (1987: 163).

Dualistic Religious Belief

Before I proceed to the main discussion, allow me a brief word on the largely dualistic nature of contemporary Innu religious ideology which juxtaposes two seemingly contradictory belief systems (see Rousseau, 1964; Rousseau and Rousseau, 1952).⁵ On the one hand, the Innu are Catholic; older members of the community are especially devout.⁶ But on

⁵ The religious expression of the Innu is not completely dualistic. Syncretism is manifest in a number of examples including the practice of some individuals who seek the assistance of priests to defend them against the powers of antagonistic elders or ghosts. The role of missionaries in ridding the earth of cannibal monsters is another example of syncretism.

⁶ Western Innu living in the vicinity of Québec and Tadoussac were first introduced to Christianity in the early 1600s through the

the other hand, they continue to believe in animal masters (animal spirits) and other forest spirits despite many years of contact with Christianity and missionary displeasure with their own religious expression.⁷ One possible reason for the persistence of these beliefs is that the Innu have been able to practice their religion in the country far from the supervision of missionaries, many of whom at times attempted to suppress certain aspects of the non-Christian religion such as the shaking tent ceremony and drumming which were considered tools of the devil.⁸

Another reason perhaps is that the Innu see no contradiction between belief in the Christian God and Jesus on the one hand and animal masters and forest spirits on the other. God is responsible for overseeing the activities of human beings while the animal masters oversee the activities of the animals (Armitage, 1984: 50). In other terms, the Innu have assigned responsibility for protecting them against exterior forces (e.g. cannibal monsters) to Christianity and missionaries whereas responsibility for satisfying their needs for wild game has been assigned to the non-Christian religion (Vincent, 1991: 135).

proselytising efforts of Recollect and Jesuit missionaries. Christianity spread north-eastward from one Innu group to another with the extension of the fur trade and administrative control by colonial governments.

⁷ Arthur Lamothe's film, *Mémoire battante* (1984), documents the extent to which Innu non-Christian religious beliefs and practices have remained unaltered despite the best efforts of missionaries.

⁸ The shaking tent ceremony was a form of divination or communication to establish contact with animal masters, other spirits and shamans, often with the view to ascertaining the whereabouts of caribou and other game. When the shaman entered into the conically shaped tent, it would start to shake, sometimes violently. The commencement of the shaking signified that animal masters and other spirits had joined the shaman in the tent.

This dualism takes on a spatial character by virtue of the fact that the principal Christian rites of baptism, confession, communion, marriage, and funerals take place in the community, while important non-Christian rites such as the placement of bones on scaffolds out of respect for the animal masters and scapulimancy predominate in, or are reserved exclusively for, the country. However, such geographic dualism is not complete (*ibid.*: 136). In some Innu communities, beliefs in shamanistic powers, omens, ghosts and other spirits enjoy considerable vitality even among people who rarely if ever step foot in the country. Similarly, crucifixes, photographs of the Pope and Bishop, rosary beads, broadcasts of Mass on portable camp radios, and taboos against Sunday hunting indicate that Christianity has penetrated country life, although to a limited extent.

The World of Animal Masters and Other Spirits

Like other non-industrial peoples, the Innu possess an elaborate taxonomic system that divides animals into different categories. The Innu divide the animal world into European (i.e. domestic animals), and Innu (i.e. wild) animals (Bouchard and Mailhot, 1973; see also Clément, 1986; 1987). In turn, the latter category is divided into four legged animals, waterfowl, birds, fish, and insects. An additional classification of animal species into kingdoms (*tipentamun*) is superimposed upon the category of Innu animals. Here, each animal kingdom is ruled by an animal spirit called *utshimau* (chief or master), *aueshish-utshimau* (master of the animals) or *katipenitak* (controller) (Bouchard and Mailhot, 1973: 61-62).

As one moves from one Innu community to the next in Nitassinan, one encounters small variations in Innu ideas about these animal masters. Variations are also found among the members of the same community, particularly in the case of a community like Sheshatshit where many people are immigrants from other bands including St. Augustin, Maliotenam and Utshimassit (Davis Inlet). Intra-band variation is evident when we compare beliefs from La Romaine, Utshimassit and Schefferville. In the case of the La Romaine Innu, many animal species are thought to have their own animal master:

Papakashtshihk^u — master of caribou;
Kakuapeu — master of porcupine;
Uapishtan-napeu — master of martin;
Nisk-napeu — master of geese;
Atshikash-napeu — master of mink;
Uhuapeu — master of owls;
Uapineu-napeu — master of partridge;
Mashkuapeu — master of bears;
Amishkuapeu — master of beavers.

At the same time, certain species are represented by the same master on the basis of certain shared traits. For example

Missinak^u is the master of fish and many aquatic creatures, while *Anikapou* is the master of frogs and toads.

For the La Romaine Innu, there is some measure of hierarchy in the relations between the masters in that *Missinak*^u, the spirit of aquatic creatures, and *Papakashtshihk*^u, the caribou spirit, are the most powerful. The caribou spirit, who lives in the Ungava Bay region in a house filled with animals and their masters (*Atiku-mitshuap*, literally the caribou house), is thought to control all of these individual animal masters (see Clément, 1991; Strong, 1991; Vincent; 1978: 21-22). One Innu hunter used the analogy of parliamentary government to explain the relationship between the caribou boss and the other spirits. This relationship, he said, is like the relationship of control exercised by the Prime Minister over his cabinet ministers. Sheshatshit Innu who have strong ties with Innu based in St. Augustin and La Romaine, and who hunt in the headwaters of the Eagle River hold this particular theory of relationships between animal masters.

Henriksen notes that the Utshimassit Innu also tend to think of the caribou master, here called *Katipinimitautsh*, as the most powerful, although the nature of his relationship with the master of aquatic species, *Missinautsh*, is sometimes ambiguous (1977: 6). According to Henriksen:

Although the Naskapi usually seem to agree that *Katipinimitautsh* is the strongest of them all, they are not always sure that this is the case. When John Poker and Philip Rich discussed the relative strength of *Katipinimitautsh* and *Missinautsh*, John Poker told a story about [*Meshkana*], the great shaman who died in 1957. [*Meshkana*] was living in a camp with many other Indians at the lake called *Ashuapun*. They had been hunting and fishing for a long time, but they got neither fish nor caribou. One evening [*Meshkana*]

said to the others in the camp that they would hear a lot of noise during the night, but that they should pay no attention to this. [*Meshkana*] made the spirits come to him, and a great battle between *Katipinimitautsh* and *Missinautsh* ensued. *Missinautsh* argued that he could only give away a few small fish, and that this would not be enough to satisfy all the hungry Indians. In the end *Katipinimitautsh* had to give away caribou, and he had therefore lost the battle with *Missinautsh*. The next day the hunters shot two caribou very close to the camp. John Poker was of the opinion that this story indicated that *Missinautsh* may perhaps be stronger than *Katipinimitautsh*. Nevertheless, when both hunting and fishing yield poor results, this is usually attributed to *Katipinimitautsh* (*ibid.*: 7).

Innu based in Schefferville hold a slightly divergent theory. Certain animal species such as mice and song birds are not thought to have a master. But many animals are grouped in one of four classes each controlled by an individual animal master (Bouchard and Mailhot, 1973: 61-64; Clément, 1987: 61). These animal masters are:

Missinak^u — master of aquatic species including fish, beaver, otter, muskrat, seals, toads, frogs, and migratory waterfowl, etc.;

Mashk^u — master of bear, marmot, skunk, etc.;

Uhuapeu — master of porcupine, hare, grouse, crow, etc.;

Memekueshishkueu — a female fox who is master of fox, martin, mink, wolves,

wolverines, squirrel, weasel, lynx, etc.
(Bouchard and Mailhot; 1973:61-64).⁹

The caribou master, *Kanipinikassikueu*, while one of the most important spirits, is thought to control only the caribou and not the masters of other species (*ibid.*: 61).

Other mythological beings resident in the cosmological world of the Innu include *inter alia* the following:

Mishtapeu — a class of giant, generally benevolent beings, referred to respectfully as "grandfather or grandmother". Normally, they reside in another world called *Tshishtashkamuk*^u, and only visit the world of the Innu in times of need;

Matshishkapeu — the "Fart Man" who is both a powerful Innu spirit and source of great amusement on the frequent occasions in the country when he communicates with the Innu;

Tshiuetinush — the weather spirit, the spirit of the north wind;

Meminiteu — a class of cannibal monsters of human proportions who appear frequently in the mythological record and who normally reside on *Tshishtashkamuk*^u where they wage constant war with the *Mishtapeuat*;¹⁰

⁹ Bouchard and Mailhot note that the martin is also controlled by sub-masters, *Uapishtan-napeu* and *Uapishtan-ishkueu*. The former is responsible for male martin, the latter for females (1973: 61).

¹⁰ Animate nouns in the Innu language are made plural by adding *-at*. Hence the singular noun, *Mishtapeu*, becomes *Mishtapeuat* when pluralized.

Atshen — a class of giant beings who were once human but were transformed into cannibals with no lips and hair on their hearts after they consumed human flesh;

Katshimetsheshuat — spirit beings seen or heard in the dark or fog, that throw stones at the tents, steal camp belongings, and in former times, stole women as well;

Tshishikunapeu — "the weather watcher", the spirit of the 'Y' tent post who in one myth rescues Innu women from *Anikapeu*;

Memekueshu — spirit beings that live in caves;

Utshakanue — master of the caribou's tail.

It would appear that few of the above spirits have relations with animal masters in the mythical and legendary records. *Mishtapeu* enters into relation with the masters primarily in the shaking tent when he is called upon to facilitate communication between them and the shaman. For his part, *Matshishkapeu* established a relation of dominance over the caribou master when, according to one mythic account, the master refused to provide caribou to starving Innu (see more on this point below).

Many of the other spirits listed above are still manifest in the daily lives of many Innu. *Katshimetsheshuat*, for example, are often thought to be responsible for noises in the dark, throwing stones at tents, and stealing camp utensils. Children are sometimes exhorted not to stray too far from camp for fear that these spirits will accost them. *Tshiuetinush* also enjoys a contemporary existence as I discovered when I violated his rules about outdoor, winter bathing while living in the country with an Innu hunting group from La Romaine in the fall of 1982.¹¹

¹¹ The members of the hunting group admonished me for sponge bathing outdoors because, they said, *Tshiuetinush* did not like

Other spirits such as *Atshen* and *Memekueshu* no longer appear to have any contemporary existence except in myths and legendary accounts. As noted previously, *Atshen* disappeared with the arrival of Christian missionaries.

The *Mishtapeu* Concept

As stated previously, the Innu communicate with the cosmological realm of animal masters by various means including drumming, dreams, scapulimancy, and the shaking tent. In a major study of the Innu shaking tent, Vincent notes that the officiant of the tent, the *Kakushapatak*, communicates with the animal masters but only with the assistance of his *Mishtapeu* (1973: 70). My own discussions with Innu from Sheshatshit and Utshimassit confirm all of Vincent's conclusions about the *Mishtapeuat*. *Mishtapeuat* comprise a class of giant beings, neither human nor animal, that do not eat the same things as humans (they eat organ meats only), and do not defecate or urinate. They have special powers to predict the future, heal the sick, and kill (*ibid.*: 69,80). In addition, they appear to be divided into benevolent and malevolent beings that are constantly at war with one another as well as with other spirits. Their chief, *utshimau-mishtapeu*, appears to be benevolent, and protect(s) the Innu against bad spirits, but Vincent's data and my own are incomplete here (Vincent, 1978: 19).

According to Vincent, and a number of my informants from Sheshatshit, the *Mishtapeuat* inhabit another world called *Tshishtashkamuk*^u which resembles our own; it too has lakes, bays, mountains and the same vegetation (Vincent, 1978: 20). However, it is populated with giant fauna and non-human beings, and is considered to be a hostile world where humans cannot live (*ibid.*: 14-15). It is on *Tshishtashkamuk*^u that the events recorded in Innu myths (*atanukana*) involving the

winter-born people such as myself to engage in such practices. He had punished us by making the temperature turn very cold.

wolverine and *Tshakapesh* occurred (*ibid.*: 14). The world that is inhabited by the Innu and other ethnic groups is like an island that is separated from *Tshishtashkamuk*^u by an immense sea. Only a small land bridge located at the southwestern corner of the island joins this world with *Tshishtashkamuk*^u, the land of the *Mishtapeuat* (see Figure 1). People who try to cross the sea to *Tshishtashkamuk*^u by boat run the risk of being drowned in *kupitan*, a gigantic whirlpool or waterfall (Vincent, 1978: 14).¹²

While none of my Utshimassit Innu informants made explicit mention of *Tshishtashkamuk*^u, John Poker provided a precis of a myth about *Kuekuatsheu*, the wolverine, that indicates that some Utshimassit Innu hold similar beliefs about the world of the Innu and its relationship to the land of the *Mishtapeuat*. According to Poker, the story of the formation of the Innu world begins with the wolverine who originated on another world. Long ago *Kuekuatsheu* built a big boat like Noah's Ark, and put all the various animals species in it. There was a great deal of rain and the land was flooded. He told the mink to dive into the water to retrieve some mud and rocks which he mixed together to make an island. This island is the world which we presently inhabit along with all the animals. *Kuekuatsheu* came across a land bridge to this island, helped across by *Mishtapeu*. There was nothing on this island before *Kuekuatsheu* arrived.

Figure 1. *Tshishtashkamuk*^u and the world of the Innu.

Atiku-mitsuap
(caribou house — home of animal
masters)

¹² The word *kupitan* is also a topographic term referring to the outlet of a lake, i.e., where a lake empties into a river or stream.

The World of the Innu
(like an island)

Tshikamu (land
bridge)

Kupitan
(giant whirlpool)

Tshishtashkamuk^u
(land of the *Mishtapeuat*)

Vincent notes that humans once inhabited *Tshishtashkamuk*^u but were exterminated by hostile beings (1978: 15). Contact has been maintained with this world primarily through the *Mishtapeuat* who play an essential role in the shaking tent as an intermediary between the officiant and the supernatural world; they play the important role of interpreter. Pien Penashue of Sheshatshit stated that *Mistapeu* is «the boss over the shaking tent. He translated the animal masters; you couldn't understand the animal masters speaking.» When the animal masters speak in the shaking tent, their words are heard by the Innu as knocks, or the sound of thunder, water, or hooting owl (Vincent, 1973: 72). The language of the masters is garbled as far as the Innu are concerned. Neither the Innu nor the *kakushapatak* can understand the animal masters. The former must rely therefore on his *Mishtapeu* to interpret for him. The Innu standing outside the tent during the ceremony, hear the *Mishtapeu* communicating with the officiant in the form of a song (*ibid.*: 72). The officiant of the tent can understand the song but the general public cannot.

Thus, according to Vincent, there are two mediators in the shaking tent: the *kakushapatak* and his *Mishtapeu*. In a sense,

each is delegated by his group to facilitate communication between the two worlds: the *kakushapatak* interpreting for the Innu, and the *Mishtapeu* interpreting for the animal masters (Vincent, 1973: 81).

The *Mishtapeuat* communicate with the Innu outside of the shaking tent ceremony primarily by way of dreams. However, the initiative for making contact is usually taken by the *Mishtapeuat*, who may indicate to a hunter in a dream how to make the shaking tent (*ibid.*: 80). In addition, «certain *Mishtapeuat* communicate with certain men, and they establish a direct and permanent relationship between a man and the *Mishtapeu*, so that one speaks about the *Mishtapeu* of someone, of his *mishtapeu*» (*ibid.*: 80, my translation).¹³

The Concept of Respect

Respect is omnipresent in Innu culture; it is a key operating principle in their religious ideology. Personal well-being depends on it and the various ways in which it must be practised. Respect through the maintenance of good relations with various spiritual beings, with the elements (e.g. ice, snow, fog), and with certain objects (e.g. snowshoes) is extremely important (Sylvie Vincent, personal communication).

Respect for animal masters is particularly important in that the Innu believe that both their spiritual and material well-being are dependent upon maintaining good relations with these beings. It is the animal masters who are responsible for giving game to the hunter and his family; the animals they control (*tipenimeu*: «he controls him») cannot be hunted without their agreement. In return, the hunter must follow certain rules, in

¹³ Readers must be cautioned on this point because the linkage between the *Mishtapeu* of an individual and the *Mishtapeu* who appears in the shaking tent remains unclear. More research is required on this subject. It would appear, however, that each person can communicate with a particular *Mishtapeu* (Vincent, personal communication, Sept. 1991).

effect, showing respect to the animal masters in various ways. Thus, the Innu believe that:

a hunter does not kill an animal against its will, but with its consent. Hunters and hunted are alike part of nature. As long as (...) [they] follow the customs of their people, as handed down from their forefathers, and they do not offend the animals and their spiritual masters, they will continue to live in peace with each other and with nature (Henriksen, 1977: 8).

These rules of respect include placing the bones of the animals killed on outdoor scaffolds, in trees, or lakes and streams, making sure that the dogs do not eat the bones, placing animal fat and left-overs in the fire, consuming the fat from the caribou long bones, and wearing decorated clothing while hunting (see V. Tanner, 1944: 643).

Respect is shown to the black bear by referring to it as *Nimushum* (grandfather) or *Nukum* (grandmother), and by ensuring that it is treated in a proper ritualistic manner when it is killed. For example, when hunters wish to kill a bear that is lodged in its den, they firstly prepare a carpet of fir boughs at the entrance-way to the den. Next they call upon the bear, saying «Grandfather [or Grandmother], come out.» After the bear is killed, the den is carefully cleaned and an offering of tobacco left on the floor. Utshimassit Innu, like the Mistassini Cree, place some tobacco or tea leaves in the mouth of the bear after it is killed (Henriksen, 1977: 8; Tanner, 1979: 146).¹⁴ La Romaine

¹⁴ V. Tanner (1944: 643) has the following to say about the way that the Utshimassit Innu showed respect to the black bear at the time of his fieldwork among them: «There was a singular observance whenever a bear was killed and brought into camp. No young children or girls or young married women who had not yet become mothers were permitted to remain in the lodge, either during the

Innu say that the bear must be carried intact to the camp where it can then be butchered. However, the ligament under the tongue (*Lingual frenulum*), is cut out and brought to the oldest person at the camp who stamps on the floor and cries *uau-ui*.

As far as furbearing animals are concerned, respect is shown by ensuring that the animals are not left in the traps for too long where the animal could be attacked by scavengers. With mink and martin, some La Romaine Innu cut the tendons connecting the feet to the tibia, fibula, radius or ulna bones before placing the skinned corpse on a scaffold. Beaver remains, as well as those of other aquatic animals, should also be placed on a scaffold, or in some cases, thrown into the water. Some Innu believe the water level would rise to find the bones if this latter ritual is not conducted. In general, respect to all species is shown by sharing bush food, making sure that none is needlessly wasted, and that proper conservation techniques are practised.

The Innu say that it is important to treat the bones and other remains with great respect because the animal masters need them to regenerate new animals. Failure to treat the remains with respect, or to follow any of the other prescriptions, such as ensuring that animals are not overharvested, will cause the animal masters to get angry and to punish the offending person. The punishment usually entails the animal master refusing to give any more animals to the person who has shown disrespect. In other words, the offending individual would have no success in future attempts to hunt that species. Henriksen notes that the Utshimassit Innu attribute *Katipinimitautsh's* anger, and therefore poor hunting, to their own behaviour. «The search for reasons to explain *Katipinimitautsh's* anger amounts to a self-examination to find possible failings in their spiritual and moral relationship with nature, among themselves, and between themselves and animals» (Henriksen, 1977: 7). Thus, if the

cooking of the bear or during the subsequent feast. Bear flesh was only allowed to be eaten by adult males and mothers.»

caribou boss is angry, it is because someone has broken one of his rules.

It may be something which is very serious: someone may have breached the rules of sharing, or someone may have been careless when handling the marrow from the caribou long bones. For example, after a ritual of *makushan*, held in the spring of 1976, one man said "Yesterday we had *makushan* in my house. One man went outside the house with the marrow he was eating. This is very dangerous. Something bad is going to happen" (*ibid.*: 7).

One can see, therefore, that it is extremely important for the Innu to maintain good relations with the animal masters. An angry master may cause a severe shortage of a particular animal species, and cause hardship to the entire hunting group.

If they break one of the rules pertaining to the handling of an animal, they will secure no more of that animal (...) following the rules will further their relationship with the animals. Thus, the communal meals are not only a pleasant social activity and a way of sharing the meat, but they also serve to secure luck in hunting as well (Henriksen, 1973: 33).

One Sheshatshit hunter (35 years old) explained the nature of respect for the animal masters by reference to an analogy with credit from a bank or store. The animal masters give you credit, he stated; an allocation of the animals under their control for the next year. If you show proper respect to the animals that year, your line of credit will be extended into the following year. However, if you show disrespect, you will lose your credit and have no success in hunting the following year. He himself, had offended the master of mink on one occasion by not regularly checking his traps; the result being that a martin or some other

animal partly devoured a mink he had trapped. This explained his lack of success in trapping mink the next trapping season.

Divination and Other Forms of Communication with the Spirits

Innu religious ideology provides an additional method of obtaining knowledge of the universe besides the common sense method of empirical observation. Knowledge about the mundane realm of everyday, practical experience is achieved through the senses, while knowledge of the cosmological realm of animal masters and other spirits and their relations with the Innu is achieved through divination and other methods of communication. Divinatory techniques include scapulimancy, the beaver pelvis, beaver tibia and fish jaw oracles, and in the pre-settlement period, the shaking tent ceremony and use of special ceremonial caribou blankets called *mishtikuai* (see Podolinsky Webber, 1983). Other forms of communication include drumming, use of the steam tent, dreaming, and farting.

Scapulimancy

In scapulimancy, a porcupine or caribou scapula is held in the stove fire (or candle) until it is charred and cracked. The scorch marks and cracks are then studied to determine the possible location of game and future success at hunting. In his book on Innu religious ideology, Speck describes the ritual as follows:

When burning the shoulder blade they hold the narrow portion of the bone toward the body, the wide portion away from the body, and then as the burnt spots and cracks appear these indicate the directions and locations to be followed and sought (the directions indicated by the burnt spots being intended to represent the actual ones to be followed (1977 [1935]: 156).

In the fall of 1987, Innu living at *Mush-nipi* (about forty km. south of Goose Bay) performed scapulimancy with porcupine scapulars. Photographs of these scapulars are presented below along with the interpretations provided by the hunters themselves (see Plate 1, Jim Roche, personal communication). In example 1, the scorch mark is in the shape of a boat or canoe. According to Pien Penashue, this was a favourable sign from the caribou master indicating good hunting, but not necessarily that caribou hunting would be good. In the second example, Penashue thought the burn mark looked like a caribou leg which indicated that caribou might have been nearby the camp. The third example shows a small dark scorch mark which Penashue viewed as a heart shape. This represented organ meat and was a sign that more porcupine would be harvested. Finally, in the fourth case (Plate 2), the scapula has four scorch marks. The darkest and largest mark (A) represents the locations of the base camp. One morning the hunters would leave the camp and discover signs of animals at locations (B) and (C). At the end of the day, just before they returned to camp, they would kill some animals at location (D), represented by a slightly darker spot than the previous two.

A. Tanner observed scapulimancy on four occasions the first winter he lived with the Mistassini Cree (1969-70). On three occasions the ritual was performed with porcupine scapulars and on the fourth, with the scapulars of hares. The interpretations given for the various marks on the scapulars were of the same form as those reported by Speck and by Innu at *Mush-nipi* in 1987.¹⁵ Henriksen notes that the Utshimassit Innu had ceased to use this form of divination by the time he conducted anthropological fieldwork there in 1966-68 (1973: 30). No one I

¹⁵ V. Tanner noted that Innu practice of the non-Christian religion was very intensive in the country once they were «far from the priest's watchful eye (...) The Montagnais, like the Davis Inlet Indians, were blindly convinced of the infallibility of scapulimancy» (*ibid.*: 643).

talked to in the community during the work for this project indicated that the ritual is presently performed.

Kushapatshikan: the Shaking Tent

Numerous anthropologists have written about the shaking tent ritual among the Innu and Cree peoples of eastern Canada, and some have even witnessed it (Flannery, 1939; Hollowell, 1942; Preston, 1966; Rousseau, 1953; Rousseau and Rousseau, 1947; Tanner, 1979; Vincent). In what follows, I present only a skeletal account of the shaking tent ritual, and refer the reader to the work of these authors for more detailed descriptions and analyses.

From talking with a number of Utshimassit and Sheshatshit Innu, it quickly became apparent that, until recently, the shaking tent was one of the most important rituals in the yearly cycle of harvesting and ritual activities; it was not only an important method of direct communication with the caribou and other animal masters, as well as with *Mishtapeu* and cannibal spirits, it was also a source of amusement. The shaman used the tent to look into the hidden world of animal spirits, and to make contact with Innu in distant groups. On occasion, he brought the souls (*atshak*) of people living in other groups into this tent, or waged terrible battles there with other shamans and cannibal spirits such as *Atshen*.

Sheshatshit informants told me that the shaking tent was a small, conically-shaped tent, with caribou hide covering, and four, six, or eight poles depending on the spiritual power (*manitushiun*) of the shaman (the shaman is called the *kakushapatak*, officiant, in the context of the ritual). It would be set up inside another tent on a floor of freshly picked fir boughs. Younger men would act as assistants (apprentices?) to the *Kakushapatak* in setting up the tent; in fact, two Sheshatshit hunters told me they used to perform this role for their father-in-law, Shinipesht Pokue. It would appear that Pokue has chosen one of these hunters in some way to replace him as

kakushapatak; his powers were apparently transferred to him at the same time that his bag of *nimapan* and other objects were given to him (Greg Penashue, personal communication, see Proulx, 1988).

As soon as the *kakushapatak* stuck his head in the tent, it would start to shake violently, indicating that the officiant had been joined by a spirit, usually *Mishtapeu* who helped him communicate with the other spirits. The more important the animal master or more powerful the spirit, the more power the *kakushapatak* needed in order to be able to communicate. Especially powerful people are reputed to have been able to speak immediately with the caribou master, without having to work their way through masters of lesser importance.

Generally, Innu who witnessed the shaking tent ceremony, or who have learned about it from actual witnesses, are of the opinion that the tent itself was a very powerful but dangerous device. It could kill people who entered into it unless they had a substantial accumulation of *manitushiun* (power). This in turn could only be accumulated by hunting; throughout a hunter's lifetime, *manitushiun* accumulated in direct proportion to the number of animals he killed (or was given by the animal masters).

Plate 1 (above). Four porcupine scapulars burnt by Innu hunters at *Mush-nipi* during the fall of 1987 (Peter Armitage, photo).

Plate 2 (below). Burnt porcupine scapula showing the route Innu hunters would take to kill game (Peter Armitage, photo).

When talking about the shaking tent in English or French, younger Innu borrow parapsychological and technological vocabulary from Euro-Canadian society to describe it. For example, one Innu youth from La Romaine told me the shaking tent «was as powerful as an atomic bomb», that there «was a kind of electricity in the air when it operated», and that «the shaman could communicate with people "telepathically" while in the tent». Sebastien Penunsi, who has witnessed the shaking tent, said «it's very similar to a radio... If there were people in George River, or people in St. Augustin, and you wanted to communicate with them, then you could do the shaking tent.»

One hunter in Utshimassit told me he once heard *Mishtapeu* in the shaking tent. *Mishtapeu* said «*Kuekuatsheu* [the wolverine] himself built this world and God cannot have it.» He heard a lot of animals in the shaking tent including

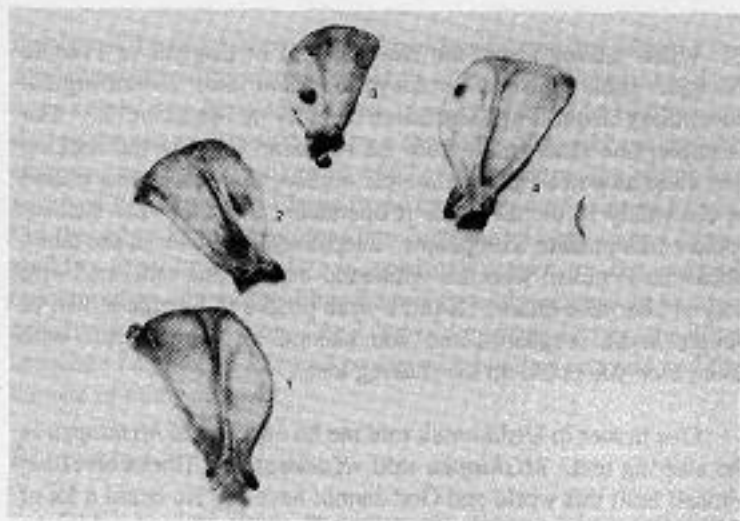
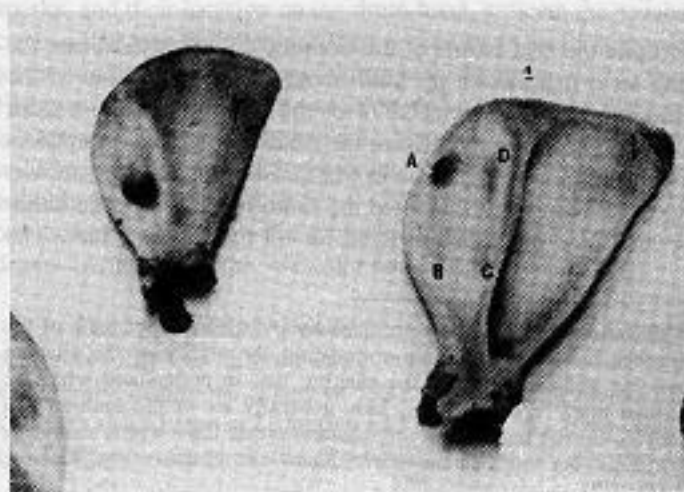


Plate 1 (above). Four porcupine scapulars burnt by Innu hunters at *Mush-nipi* during the fall of 1987 (Peter Armitage, photo).

Plate 2 (below). Burnt porcupine scapula showing the route Innu hunters would take to kill game (Peter Armitage, photo).



Katipinimitautsh whom he could easily understand.¹⁶ The Caribou Boss speaks the way Innu people do, he said. He also heard a female spirit called *Memekueshu*, the Master of Fox, who sounds like an Eskimo or English person when she speaks. The hunter stated that *Meshkana*, as well as his brother, and *Uashaunnu* made the shaking tent on various occasions at a number of locations including Sango Pond and Sango Bay.

Despite the best efforts of the Catholic church to eradicate the shaking tent, it persisted up until about 1957 in the case of the Utshimassit Innu and about 1973 in the case of the Sheshatshit Innu. The last person to perform the ritual in Utshimassit appears to have been *Meshkana*, while in Sheshatshit, the last person was Shinipesht Pokue who conducted the ritual for the last time either at the mouth of the Kenemu River or on the Goose River. The demise of the ritual, as mentioned previously, may be linked to the sedentarization in government-built villages, however, this does not explain why no shaking tents were conducted in Utshimassit during the ten year period between the death of *Meshkana* and the construction of the village in 1967. Furthermore, the ritual has survived the arrival of villages in the case of some James Bay Cree. On the other hand, some Innu attribute the disappearance of the shaking tent to a decline in spiritual power on the part of contemporary elders resulting from a general decrease in hunting activity among the Innu. As I have suggested earlier, the Innu associate heightened spiritual power with hunting prowess and the harvest of many animals.

Drumming

¹⁶ This statement contradicts accounts by Innu from other parts of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula concerning the ability of the shaman and his audience outside the shaking tent to understand what the animal masters were saying. Innu generally are of the opinion that they could not understand the masters; rather their words would be translated for them by the *Mishtapeuat* and shaman (see Vincent, 1973: 72).

Older hunters drum at communal dances, often following *makushan*, or privately while in the country. Not anyone can play the drum (*teueikan*); among the Innu of eastern Nitassinan, it is reserved for older men who have dreamt about playing it on three previous occasions. Drumming provides the Innu hunter with information on the possible location of game and future success at hunting. As he plays, and sings, he falls into a kind of trance wherein he sees «sparks» on the skin of his drum. The size of these sparks, and their location on the drum head, indicate the number of caribou that may be killed and their approximate location in relation to the hunting camp. In explaining how the drum works, the late François Bellefleur of La Romaine made an analogy between it and a television. «It's like a television. You see all that you are going to kill when you sing with the drum. With the drum, you see the animals you are going to kill (...) When one is looking for food, one consults the drum, the animals appear on the surface of the drum» (Arthur Lamothe, *Mémoire battante*, my translation).

In Sheshatshit and Utshimassit, four men in each community presently play the drum during *makushan* and other events. Apparently, during the spring of 1987, a Sheshatshit hunter played his drum at his camp at *Ushuniau* and was able to see his daughter, six Innu hunters and the Priest in prison in Stephenville, Newfoundland. They had been convicted and jailed for violating the Newfoundland Wildlife Act for «illegally» hunting caribou in the Mealy Mountains.

Puamuna: Dreams

Most Euro-Canadians base their dream interpretations (to the extent that they do interpret dreams) on some notion of the subconscious mind that digests important life events during sleep and releases information from this process into consciousness. This model of the psyche, where there is a division between a conscious and subconscious mind, is ultimately based on a Freudian-Jungian model of human

personality (e.g. the Ego, Superego and Id). Dreams «convey to us in figurative language — that is, in sensuous, concrete imagery — thoughts, views, directives, tendencies, which were unconscious either because of repression or through mere lack of realization....the dream is a derivative of unconscious processes» (Jung, 1974: 34). Theories of personality are certainly culture derived and bound, and it is therefore not surprising that peoples in many different cultures base their dream interpretations on different cultural logics.

In the case of the Innu, there remain a number of people for whom dreams are messages from the animal masters. One of my best sources of information on Innu dream interpretation is a 35 year old Sheshatshit hunter. Dreams, for him, provide clues as to future hunting success and failure in the past. Consider the following account of one of his dreams:

Once I dreamt about a lynx woman coming toward me. She was extremely beautiful. Just as I was about to take her hand, my brother came and took her from me. That fall, my brother killed lynx while I killed none (quoted in Armitage, 1984: 51).

Dreaming about women, in his view, is particularly auspicious as it indicates that he will soon kill many animals. However, dreaming about a woman who is angry at you is bad; this means you will have no success at hunting in the near future (Armitage, 1984: 52). Dreaming about a cheque is good because it means one will soon kill many «money animals,» that is, furbearing animals. The arrival of an aircraft in the dream indicates that a visitor may soon arrive at the camp.

Dreaming does not necessarily convey information strictly related to hunting success; it also provides a prediction of other events affecting the welfare of the individual or group. For example, Pien Penashue related a story to me about a man who had a dream that he and the members of his hunting group

would return to Sheshatshit and that someone would not accompany them upon their return to the country. This was a prediction that someone would soon die. Shortly thereafter, the dreamer himself died.

Tanner's comments about the significance of dreaming among the Mistassini Cree show a striking similarity between Cree and Innu dream interpretations. He notes that among the Cree, «most dreams which predict hunting results require interpretation; one of the common rules is that any appearance of members of the opposite sex, particularly strangers, is to be taken to refer to a game animal» (1979: 125). Women also have dreams which have a predictive value related to the success of the hunt; only their dreams, if auspicious, can bring luck to their husbands. Men appear to women in their dreams and indicate hunting success. Tanner's analysis of dreams in Cree culture, and it can be readily applied to the Innu, is that «they offer (...) a partial interpretation of productive activities, an opportunity to uncover not merely what lies hidden in the future, but also something of the significance of everyday events at a level that is normally obscure. They can also be used to signify that particular individuals have spiritual power» (*ibid.*: 126).

Matshishkapeu: the Fart Man

Matshishkapeu is the Innu Fart Man, the spirit of the anus who converses with the Innu with great frequency especially when they are in the country hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering (Armitage, 1987). *Matshishkapeu* is an important character both in myth and everyday social intercourse. But he is a paradoxical character: on the one hand, he is a humorous being and one of the most important sources of laughter to the Innu while they are living in the country; on the other, he is a serious character who is thought of as one of the most powerful beings in the pantheon of Innu spirits — able to control the animal masters as well as human behaviour.

The belief in *Matshishkapeu* appears to be widespread throughout the Innu communities in Nitassinan; in Utshimassit and Sheshatshit I have encountered the belief among all age groups except young, inarticulate children. Innu in Sheshatshit sometimes refer to *Matshishkapeu* as *Matshishkapeu-utshimau* (the boss), *tshitshue utshimau* (the real boss) or *mishta-utshimau* (the big boss).

Matshishkapeu is given the power of speech and song in Innu thought. When someone farts, it is not the person — male or female, adult or child — who is farting, but *Matshishkapeu* who is speaking, singing, or imitating animals and mechanical devices such as motor boats and aircraft.¹⁷ However, *Matshishkapeu*'s utterances are usually cryptic — not everyone can understand him as he invariably communicates in a barely comprehensible way. In the view of one Innu hunter from Sheshatshit, «he is like an anglophone person who can't speak Innu-aimun [the Innu language] very well but who tries to communicate all the same. Such a person doesn't pronounce his words very well, so you have to concentrate hard in order to understand what is being said.» Examples of interpretations of statements by *Matshishkapeu* are as follows:

- "goose"
- "it's cold"
- "one, two, three" (*Matshishkapeu* can count but no higher than five)
- "fishing"
- "good, good, good..."
- "no, no, no"
- "I'm going to trap you"
- "Where is your [hunting] bag?"
- "I can go right through" [the wall like a ghost]
- "The world is soon going to end my son"

¹⁷ Cavanagh notes that in many oral cultures, sounds of one kind or another are associated with spiritual power (1985: 16).

- "I'm going to St. John's to interview anglophone people"
- "Only one in four"
- "I'm the king"
- "I'll come tomorrow"
- "Is that not enough?"
- "Anglophone person is with us"

Matshishkapeu's sonorous manifestations are most likely to be experienced in the bush, while the Innu are engaged in harvesting activities. In general, he «keeps a low profile» while the Innu are living in the community. Innu certainly fart in the community, but this auditory event is likely to pass without any recognition that it is *Matshishkapeu* who is speaking. There are exceptions here, however, one notable one being community meetings. Jim Roche reports (personal communication) that at certain tense moments during public meetings, someone would fart. This public outburst of flatulence, and the translation that went with it, usually produced great laughter and appeared to relieve the tension in the room. That the Fart Man is extremely vocal in the country is evident in the following account:

Last spring at Parke Lake we were about to sit down to eat at *makushan*. The "table cloth" had been set out on the floor, the plates and cutlery placed down with the bannock and serving of *atiku-pimi*. Just before everyone knelt to eat, someone let out a real "ripsnorter." Matthew Obewan [a pseudonym] provided an instantaneous translation, "*kauapukuesht*" ["priest"], referring to Father Jim who had just entered the tent (Anthony Jenkinson, personal communication).

A sudden fart interrupting the tranquillity of camp life calls for an immediate translation. And, the responsibility for providing this falls to specific individuals who have reputations for being able to understand *Matshishkapeu*. These are usually people in their fifties or older including both men and women.

Younger people including teenagers also provide translations in certain contexts, but usually when members of older generations are not present.

One young man from Sheshatshit told me that his father and mother who are now deceased were good at interpreting the Fart Man. «Sometimes,» he stated, «they would both be going at it [i.e. farting], each providing their own interpretations — motor boats, animals — whatever came into their heads.» He went on to tell me that on occasion his mother would find *Matshishkapeu's* comments obscure, and it would take a period of reflection for her to determine the meaning of what had been said. His father, for his part, was very talented at giving spontaneous translations.

The Innu believe that *Matshishkapeu* is able to predict the future. For example, if he says «*kapimipant*» (airplane), it indicates that a plane will soon arrive at the camp. However, according to one informant from Sheshatshit, *Matshishkapeu's* predictions, like a weather report, are not always correct. In addition, the Fart Man is known to take sides in a debate. For example, after someone has stated their point of view, *Matshishkapeu* might suddenly interject, saying «*Tapue tshitukun*» («It's true, you are told») (Janet and Anthony Jenkinsen, personal communication).

As mentioned above, *Matshishkapeu* is not only a humorous character, he is also a spirit of considerable importance in relationship to the animal masters. Innu from Sheshatshit, Utshimassit and La Romaine have told me that the fart man is *mishta-utshimau*, the big boss. He is able to control the other animal masters (and the species they govern) by virtue of his control over their anal sphincters. As the following mythical account indicates, the Fart Man is able to punish animal masters, including even the master of caribou, for going against his wishes.

Once, long ago, the Master of the Caribou was stingy and would not give caribou to the Innu who started to starve as a result. Through the medium of the shaking tent, the Innu asked *Matshishkapeu* to assist them. The latter then went to the Caribou Master and asked him to give caribou to the Innu. The Caribou Master refused. *Matshishkapeu* then told him that if he did not give caribou to the Innu, he would cause some bodily affliction to befall him. Still the Caribou Master would not give caribou to the Innu. So *Matshishkapeu* made him constipated; so much so, in fact that he was in danger of dying. He couldn't fart or shit. Finally, he acceded to the Fart Man's request to provide caribou to the Innu, and as a result, was relieved of his constipation. This explains why the Fart Man is the most powerful of all Innu spirits, even more powerful than the Caribou Master (Greg Penashue, Sheshatshit, personal communication).

Although my data are still very incomplete on this topic, I have some evidence to suggest that some Innu believe that *Matshishkapeu* can punish Innu who refuse to share bush food with one another; the punishment takes the form of constipation and possible death as a result. Some Innu also believe that the Fart Man will punish people who show disrespect to human faeces.

Given the special nature of *Matshishkapeu* — the fact that he can speak, sing, mimic, and predict the future — one might suspect some mention of him in Innu mythology. However, the degree to which he does appear in the extensive library of Innu myths remains unclear to me. In February, 1988, two Innu hunters provided glosses of another version of the *Matshishkapeu* myth. But upon questioning, they also insisted that the anus character who features so prominently in various

versions of the wolverine myth is the same as *Matshishkapeu*, the Fart Man (see section on mythology below).¹⁸

Let me conclude this section by noting that *Matshishkapeu*'s role as a mediator means that farting for the Innu is a form of divination, a method of ascertaining the state of affairs in the realm of animal masters. However, farting is a significant event not just because it serves as a vehicle for the communication of messages from the animal masters, but also because the messages themselves are often extremely funny. *Matshishkapeu*'s perceptive and witty comments, in my view, exemplify the best of Innu humour. In addition, the omnipresence of *Matshishkapeu* makes him an especially unique mythical being: he is everywhere, both inside the tent and outside; he is always with you no matter where you may travel.

Finally, we should note the inventiveness in Innu translations of *Matshishkapeu*'s exclamations. The spontaneous, instantaneous, and varied nature of the translations, as well as the great interest and amusement shown in them, indicate the continuing vitality of the non-Christian aspects of Innu religious ideology. Few Euro-Canadians are aware of the existence of these beliefs and practices, even though some may have lived intimately among the Innu for many years.

Innu Mythology

The Innu oral tradition is replete with countless stories of creation and culture heroes of one sort or another. In general, Innu stories are divided into two categories: *tipatshimuna* (accounts) versus *atanukana* (myths) (Vincent, 1982: 11-12). The former concern the real life events of Innu people, living or dead; their travels in the country, dealings with spirits, other peoples, the Hudson's Bay Company, church and government.

¹⁸ I am still confused on this point. I need to consult with the Innu much more on the exact nature of the relationship between the talking anus of the wolverine myths and *Matshishkapeu*.

They are accounts that relate events that have been witnessed or experienced by the Innu (*ibid.*: 12). *Atanukana* on the other hand «recall the creation of the world and events which transpired during an epoch when humans and animals were not yet differentiated» (*ibid.*: 11, my translation).¹⁹

Kanipinikassikueu, the Caribou Man, is a typical *atanukan* that discusses a time when mythical beings underwent transformations between human and animal states. In this myth, an Innu man goes to live with the caribou, marries a female member of the herd, and is transformed into one himself, becoming in the process the Caribou Master who provides the Innu with caribou. Another myth, about the wolverine and the penis, explains the origins of aquatic animals and plants as well as the present location and size of the male penis. Some of these myths occur on *Tshishtashkamuk*ⁿ, the land of the *Mishtapeuat*, while others occur on the earth itself, populated as it is by the Innu, the animals, and their spirits.

The myths about *Tshakapesh* (the man in the moon) and *Kuekuatsheu* (the wolverine) are perhaps two of the most popular myths among the Innu. Both myths are widely told throughout Nitassinan, and involve multiple episodes in the lives of both characters. Each myth has also been the subject of extensive anthropological analysis. Savard has devoted one book (1972) to the analysis of various versions of the *Kuekuatsheu* myth and another to the analysis of *Tshakapesh* (1985). Lefebvre (1974) has also devoted a book to the analysis of various *Tshakapesh* myths.

The various versions of the *Kuekuatsheu* myth are of special interest because the wolverine is an intelligent but foolish

¹⁹ It is not always clear whether a story is a *tipatshimun* or an *atanukan*. Some stories clearly fall into one or the other category while others share elements of both. A more systematic inquiry among the Innu on this subject might well reveal a significant degree of variation in how individuals categorize certain stories.

trickster figure, a paradoxical character *par excellence*. The general form of these myths corresponds closely to trickster myths among many other Native American peoples including the Cree, Ojibway, Assiniboine, Winnebago, and Tlingit (Radin, 1956). Radin's description of the archetypal trickster figure clearly applies to the Innu *Kuekuatsheu*:

Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being (Radin, 1956: ix).

On more than one occasion, I have had the pleasure of lying on the fir bough floor of an Innu tent listening to a middle-age or elderly Innu person perform the various parts of a *Kuekuatsheu* myth. I have taken note of the suppressed mirth of the audience in response to the often hilarious trials and tribulations of *Kuekuatsheu*. Radin has also noted this response to the trickster figure among Native Americans: «Laughter, humour and irony permeate everything Trickster does. The reaction of the audience in aboriginal societies to both him and his exploits is prevailingly one of laughter tempered by awe» (*ibid.*: x).

The *Kuekuatsheu* myth and other Innu myths present important cultural problems such as incest, cannibalism, the need to share, and excessive pride (arrogance). Some of them appear to have no apparent functional meaning or utility whatsoever. However, a number of anthropologists have noted that myths in general reflect what appears to be a very basic human need; the need (or desire) to understand the world, including nature and human society (Lévi-Strauss, 1978: 16).

Lévi-Strauss in particular has devoted considerable energy to the analysis of myths from hundreds of cultures from the Americas. He notes that the aim of mythology and other elements of religious ideology is «to reach by the shortest possible means a general understanding of the universe — and not only a general but a *total* understanding» (*ibid.*: 17). Ultimately, Lévi-Strauss believes, myths such as those in the Innu oral tradition, can provide insights into the «deep structures» of the human mind, the basic cognitive/symbolic processes underlying all human thought.

Finally, we should note that some Innu myths are set in known geographical regions of Nitassinan. One example is the following myth, told by the late Sebastien Nuna of Sheshatshit, concerning events at Michikamau Lake involving the Toad Master and a number of Innu.²⁰

Two girls went berry picking on the island and they went walking in the swampy place. One of the girls saw the other girl sinking into the mud, on the island *Nitinuk* on *Meshikamau* lake. The other girl went home to tell what happened and told the people what happened. The people went over to see what happened to the girl. The girl was sinking deeper and deeper. Then they tried to pull her out of the mud. She was going down and down. All they could see was the hand of the girl. Then they cut the hand of *Anikapou*, the toad-man (...) And they cut the wrist of the toad-man. After they cut the wrist of the toad-man, the wrist went back in place again. Then they tried again; they cut the wrist of the toad-man, but the toad-man's wrist fastened on again. The

²⁰ This story would be more properly described as a hybrid of *tipatshimun* and *atanukan* elements. Once again, the distinction between these two types of stories is not always clear.

story is true, what happened. Then the girl was no longer to be seen. They lost her under the swamp. Then they tried to find out what happened to her. They made what they called the shaking tent. When they finished the shaking tent, and they brought the toad-man in the shaking tent. The toad-man said: "It is I who took your daughter. It is I who took your daughter." The toad-man told the girl's father that she will always be happy where she stays. And she will never grow old "and you will always stay here (...) in lake *Meshikamau*. And the girl's father said: "I will always stay here," the toad-man told the girl's father where his [the toad-man's] home was, where he lived at *Kueshtakapishkau* (Laboratoire d'anthropologie amérindienne, Montreal, translated by Matthew Rich, 1967).

The Relationship between Sharing and Religion

In *Hunters in the Barrens*, Henriksen devotes considerable attention to the way in which bush foods are distributed among the Utshimassit Innu, the great value assigned to sharing and how this relates to the status of male hunters. In discussing the way in which caribou meat is divided up, for example, he states:

the redistribution and eating of caribou plays a significant part in the social life of the camps and strict rules guide the sharing and distribution of its various parts and hide. These rules vary with the circumstances. If two or more men are hunting together, they divide the kill equally between themselves. However, should the number of caribou and men not correspond, and should there already be enough meat in the camp, the Naskapi will not bother to quarter the animals. Without

following any definite rules in this situation, the hunter who shot the most animals may get one or two animals more than the others, or a hunter with a big family may get the most while a hunter with a small family may get the least. Once back in camp, each of the hunters shares his part with the households that did not get any caribou that day. In this way, every household is assured of not only meat but also hides, as nobody can give away a caribou without giving away its skin (...) There is one rule which applies to any kind of animal that is shot: the man who makes the kill must always give the animal to his hunting companion (1973: 31).

With minor differences, the Innu of Labrador and eastern Quebec follow the same system of food distribution as that described by Henriksen nineteen years ago. For both communities, caribou is the most cherished of all animals harvested; virtually every part of the corpse must be utilized in one way or another, and strict rules govern how the meat and other parts are to be consumed. In the country and in the community, strong social norms and secular and religious sanctions oblige the Innu to share bush food. The Innu, in general, stress the importance of ensuring that the caribou as well as other animals are treated with care in the way they are slaughtered and butchered, and in the way that bones and waste flesh are disposed.

Perhaps one of the most important forms of distribution of bush foods in the country and in the community is the *makushan* feast; a ritual which is conducted with considerable frequency in Sheshatshit and Utshimassit. In preparation for the feast, elderly men carefully crush or supervise the crushing of caribou long bones from which the marrow is carefully extracted. The marrow is subsequently boiled so that the fat can be lifted off. The fat is subsequently made in white fat cakes called *atiku-*

pimi. Served with caribou meat, bannock, and other foods, these cakes comprise the most sacred elements of the feast. Great care must be taken to ensure that no fat falls on the floor or is consumed by the dogs.²¹ Henriksen concludes that the *makushan* allows the Innu to «express and reconfirm their interdependence and the necessity of sharing the land and its resources, at the same time as they jointly reconfirm their relationship with *Katipinimitautsh* [the caribou master]» (1977: 8). Obviously, this kind of *makushan* can only take place when there is an adequate supply of caribou fat and meat. In recent years, feasts have been held by the occupants of camps in the interior of Nitassinan as well as by small family groupings back in the village. However, large *makushan* involving most of the village population occur on special occasions such as Christmas, weddings, or political gatherings.²²

The question I want to address now is whether there is anything in the content of Innu religious ideology which may reinforce or affirm the values of interdependence and sharing, and therefore, contribute to the persistence of domestic production. Henriksen discusses at length the great value placed on sharing among the Utshimassit Innu, and the kind of negative sanctions applied to people who do not distribute bush food (1973: 111). One point of significance in this discussion concerns the way in which sharing is highly interrelated with the natural and mythological realms of Innu culture. He says:

Through the activities involved in hunting and sharing meat, the hunter is simultaneously interacting with the physical environment, the animal spirits, and his fellow Naskapi. He

²¹ See Henriksen (1973: 35-38) for a more detailed description of this feast.

²² In August, 1985, a large gathering was held at Flowers Bay, just south of Utshimassit, to facilitate the discussion of a variety of political issues including military flight training in Innu airspace. Other gatherings have been held at Border Beacon and Esker.

cannot separate them, since they are interrelated. If a Naskapi does not adhere to the proper code of behaviour, he is sanctioned not only by this society but also by the animal spirits that control the physical environment and his luck in hunting (*ibid.*: 108).

A number of informants in Sheshatshit told me that failure to share would result in no future success at hunting because the offended animal masters would no longer allocate game to the individual who had violated the rules of sharing. The same argument was made by La Romaine Innu when I conducted fieldwork there in 1982 and 1983.

Some Innu believe that *Matshishkapeu*, the Fart Man, also plays an important role in ensuring that bush food is shared between groups. As mentioned previously, *Matshishkapeu* punishes people as well as animal masters for transgressing his rules. One way to offend him is to mistreat faeces, for example, by kicking or throwing them about needlessly. But he will also get very annoyed if people do not share bush food. His punishment for the stingy person is to afflict him/her with a serious bout of constipation, diarrhoea and dehydration in a way that may threaten his/her life. Moreover, as was mentioned above, the Fart Man's regulations regarding sharing also apply to the animal masters themselves. A myth recounted previously told of *Matshishkapeu* punishing the Caribou Master for refusing to give caribou to the Innu.

The idea that misfortune such as lack of success at hunting or a physical ailment such as constipation will befall those who do not share is directly related to what may be an essential component in Innu thought, particularly that of older Innu who remember the hardships of hunting and trapping in the pre-settlement period. This is the concern with sustenance and lack of sustenance. In her analysis of Innu myths from the lower north shore region of Quebec, Vincent (1978) argues that this concern is evident in the constant reference to the absence of

food and the risk of being eaten by cannibal spirits. In her view, there is a life/death opposition in Innu thought which must be analyzed from the perspective of sustenance versus lack of sustenance. In one myth, for example, some members of a hunting group are labelled *Atshen* (i.e. cannibal monsters) because they have an abundance of food on their scaffold while the other members of the group have none and are hungry. It is *Mistapeu* who intervenes by entering the tent of the *Atshen* and taking caribou meat to distribute to the famished members of the group. It would seem that one symbolic role of the *Atshen* in this myth is to protect the caribou from excessive exploitation by the Innu, but the end result of *Atshens'* intervention is starvation among the Innu.

Religion and Respect for the Elderly

In Innu society, the elderly are shown great respect and accorded a status which, in general, is not paralleled in Euro-Canadian society. One measure of respect for the elderly is the Innu naming system; a younger person must not call an elder by his or her personal name in face-to-face interaction. Instead the terms *nukum* (my grandmother) and *nimushum* (my grandfather) must be used (Mailhot, 1982: 16). The privileged position of the elderly among the Innu is also demonstrated in the way in which bush food is distributed. Particular emphasis is placed on ensuring that the elderly receive a steady supply of meat and the choicest morsels at that. There are rules which reserve certain portions of animal corpses for the consumption of the elderly alone. For example, the elderly are given the caribou fetuses and bear paws to eat.

The reason why the Innu continue to stress the importance of sharing with the elderly, and why the latter are accorded high status in general, has much to do with religious ideology. The prestige of the elderly is due in large measure to their perceived ability to communicate effectively with the hidden cosmological realm of animal masters and other spirit beings. Communication with the spirit world is accomplished by way of dreams,

drumming, and various divinatory techniques mentioned previously. The elderly play an important role in maintaining good relations with the animal masters and in protecting their kin from magical/psychic attack by evil or hostile shamans and spirits. Evil or hostile shamans are believed to be able to kill people and harm them in other ways while dreaming about them. Many Innu believe that the elderly are able to combat these shamans and maleficent beings in their dreams.

How do the Innu acquire *manitushiun*, the spiritual power used to communicate with spirits and protect against psychic attack? Men obtain *manitushiun* through their hunting activities; it accumulates with age only as a result of maintaining good relations with the animal masters, and as a result, being able to harvest many animals. The more one hunts, the more *manitushiun* one is able to accumulate. Thus, powerful shamans, while their productive capacity may have declined as a result of old age, were good hunters who had demonstrated throughout their lifetimes that they were able to keep good lines of communication open with the animal masters. Apparently, shamans also accumulated spiritual power by defeating other shamans in the midst of battles in the shaking tent. «Thus, the power of the Shamans would be proportionate to the number of animals he had killed and the number of animals killed by the other shamans he had defeated in the shaking tent» (Armitage, 1984: 52).

While women apparently never became shamans in Innu society, they were able to accumulate *manitushiun*.²³ This was accomplished by processing animal hides, meat and other products. The more animals a woman handled throughout her lifetime, the more power she accumulated, so that in old age, her

²³ More research is required concerning the nature of women's spiritual power and the apparent failure of women to become shaman even though they may have accumulated much power during their lifetimes.

powers could conceivably be equivalent to those of her husband and other men.

A recent example of the way in which *manitushiun* can be used comes from Utshimassit; although in this case, the use to which it was put is not particularly benevolent. The example concerns the son of one of the last shamans in Utshimassit, *Meshkana*. This man, whom I shall call Michel Obewan, was reputed to have had much of his father's power, and was greatly respected, if not feared, by the community as a whole. In 1985, representatives of the NMIA visited Utshimassit for meetings.²⁴ One of the representatives from Sheshatshit got into a physical altercation with a man from Utshimassit who was a close relative of Michel. Michel in turn said he would «curse» the plane transporting the NMIA representatives back to Goose Bay and make it crash. However, something went wrong with the curse, and instead of striking the NMIA aircraft, it struck an aircraft belonging to the Grenfell Regional Health Association which crashed, killing all but three passengers on board. Michel had previously been responsible for causing a car accident in Schefferville in which a number of Innu were injured.

Shortly before his death in June, 1986, Michel told another man in Utshimassit (whom I spoke with) that he was becoming weak and doubted his ability to fend off attacks from powerful people in other communities. When he died suddenly that June, for no apparent cause, Innu speculated that he had been attacked by a shaman from Schefferville who was taking revenge for the car accident that Michel had caused a number of months previously (Nympha Byrne, personal communication).

Michel's stature in the community was displayed during the funeral ceremony and related ritual practices. The day of his death (he died early in the morning), all the lights were left on in

²⁴ The NMIA (Naskapi Montagnais Innu Association) is the name of the political organization representing the Labrador Innu. In 1990 the name of the association was changed to the Innu Nation.

his house and his clothing, hunting implements and other personal items were hung up outside in the trees (*ibid.*). Thomas Noah, the oldest person in Utshimassit, imposed a curfew on the village, forbidding anyone to leave their homes after dark. In the case of less powerful individuals, this curfew is usually broken by the second or third night, but in the case of Michel, everyone carefully respected the curfew. Moreover, on the day of his internment in the cemetery at the south end of the village, virtually every Innu man, woman, and child joined the funeral procession and walked Michel's corpse to the grave (Ruby Harkness, personal communication).

Is it any wonder, then, that the Innu accord so much respect to their elders when in fact the entire spiritual and material well-being of Innu society is thought to rest on their shoulders. The high value placed on providing them with bush foods reflects the role they are thought to play in providing for and protecting their kin. They receive information from the animal masters about when and where to hunt, oversee the proper treatment of animal remains and ritual division and distribution of the meat and fat so that no disrespect is shown to the animal masters, and they protect against maleficent shamans and spirit beings. These responsibilities are what comprise much of the stewardship role, mentioned previously, of the hunting group leader and other older hunters, either as members of large hunting groups with women and children present or smaller all-male hunting parties.

Great respect is shown to the elders, and reciprocal exchange relations continue with them, even though they are not able to participate actively in harvesting; what they provide in return for nourishment is invaluable knowledge, communication skills, and protection for the group as a whole. As a result, when a person grows old in Innu society, his/her contribution to the community is seen to increase not diminish in importance; a person's productivity in material terms decreases but this is accompanied by an increase in the importance of his/her role in society and hence his/her social status.

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I noted at the beginning of this paper that essential non-Christian elements of Innu religious ideology have persisted until the present day despite decades if not centuries of contact with European political, economic, and religious institutions. However, the last thirty or more years of semi-sedentary life in government-built communities, education in the Euro-Canadian school system, various social pathologies, and increasing exposure to mass American culture have done more to impede the intergenerational transmission of these elements than the previous two or three hundred years of Christian missionary work. If recent historical trends continue, non-Christian Innu religious expression may at some point in the near future disappear altogether or be transformed into a barely recognizable caricature of its former self.

The form that non-Christian Innu religious ideology will take in future years likely depends on a number of factors including the amount of time that the Innu continue to devote to harvesting activities, on processes of ethnic identity formation, and the influences of competing religious institutions such as Pentecostalism which appears to be seriously intolerant of non-Christian religion.²⁵ Certainly, new transformations are possible which would integrate the non-Christian elements with new ones imported from pan-Indian religious belief and practices. The transformation of the steam tent (*matishantshuap*) into the sweat lodge to be used by people of all generations and genders not just older male hunters is already occurring. Sweet grass and healing circles are being introduced through alcohol

²⁵ By ethnic identity formation I mean the process by which elements of religious expression and other cultural aspects are mobilized by people to form their own personal and group identities and to differentiate themselves from other individuals and peoples. This process is particularly salient in the context of «ethnopolitics» concerning land claims negotiations and disputes over resource development on aboriginal lands.

treatment programmes, and by younger people who have interacted with aboriginal people from western parts of Canada. Pan-Indian religion may also be introduced by way of native environmentalism, for example, notions of protecting «Mother Earth» with its associated iconography.

Another possible direction for Innu religious expression is that the non-Christian elements will simply become a static corpus of folklore to be taught to young school children. Under this scenario, Innu religious expression would be essentially Christian in character or else replaced by the techno-rational agnosticism which is so prevalent in secular industrial societies.

Yet another possible direction for Innu religious expression is that future generations will update many of the old religious understandings about animal masters and spiritual power and apply them to contemporary situations. In fact, there is already evidence of this occurring, as the statements of one Innu political leader will attest. Three years ago, the leader informed me that he had been asking elders to use their power to make low-level military aircraft crash.²⁶ The elders refused to do so because they said they could not use their powers to kill people.²⁷ What this example suggests is that at least some Innu people will continue actively to use their non-Christian religious ideology as an interpretative framework to make sense of the world and explain daily events. Under this scenario, non-Christian religious belief would not be relegated to a moribund, fossilized body of quaint folklore, but would constitute a dynamic interpretative framework that Innu of various age groups would use in their identity construction and in their efforts to give meaning to contemporary problems, even if they spend little time hunting.

²⁶ Low-level military flight training in Innu airspace is conducted by the German, British, and Dutch air forces.

²⁷ An additional example is the widespread belief found in eastern and northern Innu communities that personal ill-fortune can be the result of evil exercise of the powers of hostile elders, i.e. withcraft.

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