Burdened with Change: Land, Health and the Survival of Indigenous Peoples

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> *The Innu are burdened with change…All this change was imposed upon the Innu. The Innu are not happy as they once were because these changes are focused more on the white way of life. This in turn brings social problems such as the abuse of alcohol, sexual abuse and marital break-ups.*
>   - the late Matthew Penashue, Innu hunter, Camp 41, Labrador, Canada, 1999

Many of us are *burdened with change*, but it is one thing when the change springs from within one's own society and another when outsiders bring it upon us. Steeped in Enlightenment notions of history as progress and of an incrementally improving world, Western opinion from Parliaments, corporate HQs, the academy and the streets has commonly viewed its own cultural expansion as inevitable. Even in more reflective scholarly writings, change to small peoples in what are regarded as remote locations is assumed to be a rather impersonal and ubiquitous feature of the world, as the way things are. To criticise change is often to be accused of wanting to 'turn the clock back,' maintain an idea of culture as static or to keep non-Western peoples as living museum pieces.[1]

The use of coercion and violence by one group to change the beliefs and practices of another society, while receiving attention in ethnographic studies, is often secondary to the focus on the subjects of study themselves. Certainly, the connections between the broader globalizing forces of nation-state and capitalist expansion on the one hand and unwanted change among non-European peoples on the other have been rarely highlighted in ethnographies. As George Marcus (1986: 166) remarked, 'the world of larger systems and events has…often been seen as externally impinging on and bounding little worlds, but not as integral to them.' In part, this is driven by the quest for knowledge of little worlds as an end in itself, separate from the political machinations that insinuate themselves between peoples.

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[1] A characteristic example of this is Hedican (1995) in his wide-ranging text on applied anthropology in Canada. Discussing the effects of the James Bay hydroelectric developments on the Cree, Hedican (1995:152-3) is scornful of the idea that any 'cultural heritage' has been lost as a result of the projects. This, he points out, would imply a static Cree culture: '[s]houldn't the Cree change like anyone else, rather than be locked in a temporal-cultural setting of flint-tipped arrows and birch-bark canoes. The author (1995:153) goes on to describe the Cree as having experienced 'cultural *enhancement*...making a *constructive leap* from one *stage* to another' (Emphases added).

Like the Innu of whom Matthew Penashue spoke, many indigenous peoples stand on a ledge between historic cultural attachments on one side and persistent efforts to force them to abandon such attachments on the other. Involuntary transformations with regard to land tenure, patterns of subsistence, concepts of ownership and even cosmology were initiated by colonial powers, and often pressures to change did not alter much with decolonization. In much of Africa, for example, colonial rulers simply handed over European instruments of power to favoured ethnic groups, who regarded many other tribal peoples as 'backward' populations (Davidson, 1992:99-101, Hameso, 1997:9, Olmsted, 2004). In most of the Americas, decolonization did not amount to more than the transfer of authority to European settler populations resulting in both territorial expansion and social policies that actually accelerated unwanted change among indigenous peoples. The significant cultural changes among indigenous peoples necessitated subtle outward transformations that they made under coercion to placate aggressive intruders.[2] They also occurred more directly under assimilation policies such as that driven by the philosophy of 'killing the Indian to save the man' in North American Indian boarding schools (see Adams, 1995; Brody, 2001). Change also occurred directly via the spread of European infectious diseases from which indigenous peoples had no immunity, a process that continues to today in Amazonia (Samson, 1999:272-275).

Over the last twenty years, many anthropologists who have tackled the issue of social change have rejected the idea of culture as a bounded entity in which non-Western peoples were contained. While the critique of the concept of culture is a necessary corrective to objectification and colonial imagining, in its conception of group identity as 'historically contingent and contested and collective identities as friable, imagined and emergent' (Wilson, 2000:21), it creates another flat image of the world's peoples. It does this by failing to distinguish between peoples that have a long and relatively stable history of cultural attachments, often through connections to specific lands, and others, especially migrant minorities, who do not. The reversion to more universalist assumptions implicit in the critique of culture has provided a rationale for opposing the extension of culturally-based rights. For example, some have argued that specific international indigenous rights such as collective rights to lands, languages, and tribal laws as embodied in many of the articles of the UN Draft Declaration on Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 1994) legitimate essentialist thinking, primitivism, and lead to new kinds of apartheid (see Kuper, 2003 and Asch and Samson, 2004 for the response). According to some advocates of this position, it also promotes 'cultural relativism,' which can encourage separatism and prevent much needed improvements in living standards, an argument not lost on some states, such as the UK, that oppose international recognition of the collective rights of indigenous peoples (see Survival International, 2004).

Multi-Disciplinary Ethnographic Research

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[2] In the face of violent Spanish colonisation of the American southwest, many Pueblo Indians adopted Christianity, while at the same time preserving their own religion. This syncretism, still in existence today as Pueblo festivals exist side by side with Catholic masses, was a means of outwardly accepting the coloniser's beliefs as a means of protecting Pueblo religious and political forms (see Wilson, 1997: 205). The violence of colonisers in some other parts of the North America, however, resulted in the physical extermination of indigenous peoples before they had opportunities to make such strategic adjustments.

It is with these considerations in mind, that our study examines the relationship between coerced cultural change and drastic declines in indigenous peoples' health and well-being. In particular, the project focuses on the health of specific indigenous groups with continuous associations to particular lands with which they have recently become disconnected. The study has begun to document changes in mortality, morbidity, nutrition, physical activity and mental health, as well as evaluating indigenous initiatives to maintain cultural continuity as a means of restoring the health and vitality of the people. In broad outline, the recent relocations, resettlements and sedentarisation processes have resulted in a swift transformation from relatively independent and self-sufficient livelihoods to lives of wage labour, social welfare dependency and, increasingly crime, prostitution and drug and alcohol dependence. At the same time, conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, chronic heart disease, cancer and obesity have rapidly swept through whole communities.

These processes need to be understood as intertwined with the personal experiences of local indigenous people. The loss of the meaning and purpose many derived from the land requires a profound ontological shift. But when this loss is accompanied by new patterns disease, radical changes in diet, and outbreaks of self-destructive behaviour, then the loss is not only compounded, but becomes lost in quests to solve the more immediate problems of physical and psychic survival. The two types of loss appear to be so closely related that they need to be studied together in the context of the global forces acting upon indigenous peoples. If we are serious about the interconnections between the local and the global, ethnographic studies will increasingly become multidisciplinary collaborative endeavours, since single professional or disciplinary perspectives will only reproduce the limitations of the single sited ethnography. The combination of individuals and organisations with specific and cross-cutting expertise is vital in understanding the environmental aspects of cultural change and the health implications of new *non-indigenous* lifestyles with changed dietary and exercise regimes. Our project includes a sociologist, a biologist, and a geographer.[3]

Projects will also have to do more than cast a pensive and mawkish eye upon the misery of people mired in confused and confusing sets of circumstances. For moral and political reasons, arms-length anthropology, which documents and interprets, but does not act, will have to be replaced with a more public-spirited engagement with local peoples.[4] Mindful of this, the project also incorporates direct collaboration with the indigenous rights NGO, Survival International. Through daily contact with indigenous peoples around the world, Survival International is aware of the vital importance of land rights and land-based activities to indigenous health and well-being. Given the long involvement of both Survival International and myself with the Innu of Northern Labrador, Canada, the predicament of these peoples will serve as a paradigm case for the multi-disciplinary and multi-sited ethnographic study.

The Transformation of the Innu

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[3] An initial collaboration analysing the benefits of hunting and fishing lifestyles for the Innu has already been prepared (Samson and Pretty, 2005)

[4] This might be along the lines of the 'anthropologist with their feet on the ground' (Scheper-Hughes, 1992).

At the request of settlers, and with no consultation with either the Innu or Inuit indigenous peoples of the territories, the British home rule colony of Newfoundland, which includes Labrador, was handed over to the Canadian Federation in 1949. Shortly thereafter, government authorities in collaboration with Oblate missionaries had settled the nomadic Innu in coastal villages of Sheshatshiu in the late 1950s, Davis Inlet in 1967 and a further relocation of the people of Davis Inlet to Natuashish in 2003. Sedentarisation was to be a first step in an aggressive assimilation campaign involving missionary schools, contrived wage labour schemes, and punishments of the Innu for both leaving the village and hunting (Samson, 2003: 149, 176).

The policies had the intention and effect of breaking the permanent connection between the Innu and their land. Concretely, the vast interior of Labrador-Quebec suddenly became free of roaming 'Indians.' Severing this relationship was an important precursor to natural resource exploitation and extraction for timber, hydro-electric energy and minerals. Symbolically by placing the Innu in villages, the authorities were able to point to a vital measure of their 'integration' into Canadian society. The village, rather than the land, then became the domicile of the Innu. In the eyes of the state, the village became the social unit to which policies became primarily oriented, and this remains steadfastly the case today. Current negotiations over land claims rights are based principally upon the assumption that the Innu *are* village dwellers with the same assumptions about political organisation and decision-making as Euro-Canadians (Samson, 2001, Samson, 2003: Chapter 2).

Settlement brought about built 'communities' consisting of single family houses (or shacks in Davis Inlet) arranged in close proximity to one another. This village form of spatial organisation was principally designed for people dependent upon agriculture, not for hunters, whose livelihoods in the Sub Arctic necessitated mobility and flexibility. With little wage labour and the replacement of hunting with government welfare, the Innu villages came to resemble the ghetto so classically described in Kenneth Clark's *Dark Ghetto* (1965). From the 1970s onwards alcohol consumption on a vast scale started to destroy lives, break up families and sap the health of the people. With bottles of bootlegged whiskey in such high demand in Natuashish that the going rate can be $200, the insidious effects of alcohol abuse have shown no signs of abating. In a population of 600, suicide attempts are now running at 5 to 6 per month in the village of Natuashish, ensuring continuous business for the Medi-Vac helicopter. In 2003 alone there were four completed youth suicides. Added to this are periodic epidemics of youth gas sniffing. In 2000, 75% of those treated by doctors were also diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, a lifelong condition.

A less noted, but momentous change involves food. Since sedentarisation the Innu diet, like that of other hunter-gatherers, has changed dramatically, but in a more deleterious pattern than experienced elsewhere. Although flour, sugar, hard tack biscuits and canned foods – the staples of the sailor's diet that Newfoundland settlers adopted – were introduced prior to sedentarisation, the significant changes came only after Innu were domiciled in villages from the 1960s and thus required to purchase processed foods at the village stores on a regular basis. This has changed rapidly on to junk and fast foods which became more readily available with microwave cookers, convenience stores and fast food restaurants, especially in Goose Bay. Like other recently settled hunter-gatherer societies, the Innu food transition has occurred directly (and abruptly) from wild foods to modern refined foods. This can be

characterized as a change from foods that are '…nutrient-dense, with high levels of protein… omega-3 fatty acids, and antioxidants … while low in carbohydrates' to diets 'high in carbohydrates and saturated fats and low in essential nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids' (McGrath-Hanna et al., 2003:230, 231).

While the Innu were consuming wild foods, the incidence of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases was extremely low. The diminution of consumption of country foods has coincided with high rates of diabetes, estimated by some to be 80% in Sheshatshiu, obesity, which is over 50% of women in Davis Inlet, according to a study in 1992 (Lawn et al., 2002), and long term chronic diseases that were unknown before 1960s.

Sedentarisation has also incurred a massive decrease in physical activity, since village life requires little exertion, and the exercise that Innu do achieve mostly derives from hunting trips into the interior. Hunting life itself is physically demanding. Constant activity is required in setting up camp, maintaining camp, chopping wood, making and maintaining tools, travelling long distances, often on snowshoes in search of animals, carrying water up hills. Days typically begin at dawn and may not end until late at night, though not every day is active. Väino Tanner (1944: 619-20), a Finnish geographer visiting in the late 1930s commented that, 'the continual moves from one place to another can, in the course of a year, amount to 1500 or 2000 miles, and all the transport at their disposal are…canoes, *tabanask* [toboggan], and snowshoes on his own back.' When dragging loads on toboggans, the stronger men who pull 100 kg and the weaker 70kg over dry floury snow. They do this 'from morning till night without stopping, day after day, winter after winter. No meals are provided. Eat light to travel far, they say.' The abrupt shift from this sort of exercise, still in evidence into the late 1960s (see Henriksen, 1973), is implicated in the many health problems experienced by the Innu. The relationship between physical inactivity and mental health problems such as depression is also now well established (North et al., 1990, McDonald and Hodgdon, 1994, Dishman, 1995, Pretty et al, 2005).

The Innu serve as an example of a wider set of processes of disconnections from land that continue to occur across the world. These processes can only be understood with reference to wider global dynamics, especially the extensions in the authority of the nation-state over 'internal' territories and the expansion of corporate resource extraction.[5] In Marcus's (1995: 110) terms, the project could be said to 'follow the conflict' in that the interlinked political and economic pressures on indigenous peoples have been the products of domination and have resulted in appeals for indigenous peoples rights at the highest international levels (Niezen, 2003, Morgan, 2004).

Multi-sited Ethnographic Research

The human consequences of severing the link between indigenous peoples and lands have been remarkably similar across the globe. While the driving forces behind such

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[5]In addition to these processes, displacement from indigenous lands also occurs through the creation of national parks and conservation (Neumann, 1998)), environmental degradation, pollution and biopiracy (Global Health Watch, 2005:169-170) and the movement of farmers into hunting territories (Brody, 2001).

actions differ slightly between countries with differing colonial histories, there is remarkably little to choose between First and Third Worlds when we look at the health consequences (Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, 2003:3, Global Health Watch, 2005: 166). The situation of the Innu in Canada is mirrored in Africa and South America. For example, the Gwi and Gana Bushmen hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari present a telling example of the process that began only in the late 1980s. The eviction of the Bushmen from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve by the Botswana government under banners of economic development and wildlife conservation separated them from their hunting areas, and has diminished hunting activities. In turn, this has led to radical changes to their diets from a dependence upon varied, protein-rich, wild hunted and gathered foods to protein-poor, processed foods in government rations with little supplementary food sources (Olmsted, 2004, Gall, 2002:219). Most recently, the Guarani of Brazil, pushed into tiny settlements on the Brazil/Paraguay frontier, have been affected by malnutrition that has claimed many lives, and it is also known that Guarani children have started to kill themselves as early as eight years of age (Ferreira, 2002).

The following selected communities form the focus of our ethnographic work:

1. Innu in Canada: Our research with the Innu will be through collaboration with The Tshikapisk Foundation of Innu hunting families. In the mid 1990s, members of the Foundation established an Innu 'school' in the country for Innu youth desperately caught up in cycles of depression and dysfunction within the village. With the help of many hunting families, the programme taught young Innu the history of their people, the geography of their lands and the practical skills needed to live in the country. As a result, those who set up the projects argue that the young people who participated in the programme became some of the healthiest and strongest individuals in the communities

2. Gana and Gwi Bushmen in Botswana: These closely connected 'Bushman' peoples were recently evicted from their ancestral lands in the Central Kalahari to relocation sites were they face HIV/AIDS, nutritional change and lack of livelihood, leading to depression, dependence and alcohol abuse. We will be working with The First People of the Kalahari in investigating these issues.

3. Guarani in Paraguay and Brazil: Guarani communities have experienced violent displacement from their lands leading to high rates of child suicide and malnutrition. We aim to uncover vitally needed data on these problems through research with community-based organisations including the Associação Beneficente da Communidade Indigena and the Porto Lindo Associação de Cerro Marangatu.

4. Yanomami in Brazil: Some Yanomami communities have regained control over their healthcare following devastating acute impacts of first contact with outsiders. Working with Hutukara and the Pro Yanomami Commission, we will explore their indigenous healthcare systems for examples of best-practice.

5. **Wanniyala-Aeto in Sri Lanka:** Members of this community were removed from their land due to a conservation project and have suffered sudden changes to their health, inter-generational unity and cultural integrity. The Wanniyala-Aeto have yet to form an NGO, but community members in contact with Survival have expressed support for this project.

What Can be Done?

Equally important to a project like this is research into the practical steps taken by indigenous peoples to address the situation. In the various indigenous communities selected for our study, efforts have been made, often under extreme political and financial deterrents, to restore or reinvigorate indigenous land-based activities as a means to reversing the sharp declines in health. Many of these activities are consistent with the objectives of members of the international indigenous peoples movement and are reflected in culturally-based claims to rights. These have been embodied in the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, virtually every article of which, through provisions for land, language and cultural rights, contains standards for states on the maintenance of indigenous cultural continuity.

Working in the spirit of these aspirations ultimately means developing and using collaborative research with indigenous organisations to understand and document the possible benefits of maintaining or restoring indigenous activities in the face of new patterns of livelihood induced by the imposed changes. To this end, the project will evaluate 'bottom up' programmes instituted in indigenous communities to address the consequences of severing links with the land. Our project crucially depends on collaboration with and support from indigenous organisations that have requested assistance from Survival International to help maintain their ways of life.

While some may think this sounds idealistic, there is a growing body of research relating to Aboriginal communities in Canada that points to the effectiveness of cultural continuity in combating indigenous health problems. Command of traditional knowledge is associated with less self-destructive tendencies (Dell et. al. (2002). Aboriginal communities in British Columbia with higher levels of cultural continuity have lower suicide rates than those who have, for various reasons, lost control over their lands and communities (Chandler and Lalonde, 1998). Nonetheless, there has not been much research on the relationship between improved health and cultural continuity, since most emphasis has gone into medical and quasi-medical forms of 'healing', rather than on looking at preventative measures.

This is not to say that Western-oriented techniques and methods are to be shunned. Indigenous methods of healing are often ineffective in dealing with new ailments arriving in indigenous communities. What is needed according to Global Health Watch (2005: 173) is, '…improved access to modern, allopathic health care combined with revitalizing certain elements of traditional health care.' However, the application of Western medical techniques to the widespread health problems of the Innu have not been encouraging, and many Innu believe that such methods often exacerbate the problems. The primary response of the Canadian government to the collective trauma of the Innu has been to advance village-based programmes such as the funding of quasi-medical institutions, emergency medical evacuations, increased numbers of social workers, new housing and other physical infrastructure. While institutions of pathology now dominate the physical landscape of the village of Sheshatshiu, the sicknesses that such institutions purportedly address continue to grow.

For these reasons, engagement with what indigenous peoples themselves call culture and considering how some of the burdens of change might be lifted is imperative.

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