

In the Land of the Innu: The People of Sheshatshit. Jose Mailhot

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In the Land of the Innu: The People of Sheshatshit. José Mailhot (Axel Harvey, trans.). St. John's: ISER Books, M.U.N. 208 p., b & w photos, maps, 1997, ISBN 0-919666-88-4, \$22.00, softcover.

NOEL DYCK

THE INNU OF LABRADOR have figured prominently in national and international news media coverage of Aboriginal issues during the past decade. Nevertheless, televised images and newspaper reports of worsening social conditions in Davis Inlet or of ongoing protests staged against the low-level training flights of NATO air force pilots based at Goose Bay have tended to locate the Innu within a highly stylized rhetorical framework. In short, the news media's preferred interpretive frame frequently depicts the Innu, like other Aboriginal peoples, as a people who have for the most part "lost" their traditional culture without yet developing an ability to accommodate themselves to the "inevitable realities" of contemporary Canadian society. Represented thus, the Innu may garner some degree of public sympathy and editorial support for their plight, but only at the cost of being characterized as a people whose "problems" likely exceed their capacities to resolve them. This assumption typically serves to trigger a perceived "need" for the Innu "problem" to be referred to and managed by government agencies, albeit with a proviso for somewhat "greater sensitivity" to be shown by bureaucrats now than may have been evinced in the past. What is, however, sacrificed whenever this rhetorical framework is marshalled is any conceivable possibility that Innu may, in fact, continue to possess a vibrant form of social and cultural organization which, if acknowledged and respected, offers a viable means for the Innu to shape decent lives for themselves now and in the coming century.

José Mailhot's study offers a much-needed corrective to this view by exploring the durability and intricacy of the social world of the Innu of Sheshatshit. Drawing

upon some thirty years of research on the language, culture, and history of the Innu of Quebec and Labrador, she presents an intriguing analysis of the pragmatism and flexibility of Innu social organization. The translation into English of an earlier French edition of Mailhot's book and republication by the Institute of Social and Economic Research now makes this important work available to a larger audience.

Mailhot commences by retracing the different stages of her scholarly engagement with the people of Sheshatshit, from her beginnings as a neophyte social scientist to her later work as a professor of linguistics and finally the recognition that a historically informed social anthropological study would be required to pull together the various threads of her findings. The crux of the challenge that emerged from her painstaking research was that of accounting for the remarkable linguistic variation that exists within the forms of Innu spoken by the people of Sheshatshit. To explain this she was obliged to collect and synthesize archival materials with detailed genealogies, naming systems, dialectal differences, and complex relationships between Innu families and the territories that have so long sustained them.

After outlining nearly three hundred years of contact between the Innu and the economic and religious institutions of Euro-Canadian society, Mailhot turns her attention to the notion of Innu egalitarianism. Nestled beneath superficial impressions of contemporary social life in Sheshatshit lies a subtle hierarchy of prestige that is tightly linked to past patterns of Innu relations with Euro-Canadian society. Members of those sub-groups with a longer and closer history of interaction with Euro-Canadians have in the past enjoyed greater status than members of other sub-groups. Intertwined with this system of social differentiation are the dialectal variations that Mailhot's and others' linguistic research uncovered in the 1980s. While this parallel distinction of dialect and social status reflects the relatively recent crystallization of the community of Sheshatshit in the early 1960s, Mailhot predicts that these differences are likely to diminish. Support for this view is furnished by a careful study of marriage patterns in Sheshatshit which shows that members of lower status sub-groups have consistently striven to raise their social standing by marrying members of higher status groups.

Mailhot's explication of the kinship system of the Innu is written with a lucidity that simultaneously invites those who are not social scientists to appreciate the significance of this fundamental realm of relationships without giving anthropologists any grounds for claiming that she has unduly simplified a technically sophisticated field of study. Moreover, in an accompanying chapter on the land tenure system of the Innu she demonstrates how this richly textured system of kin-reckoning enables the Innu to deploy and redeploy themselves over vast hunting territories in a manner that is full of meaning and of endless possibilities for managing the allocation of appropriate numbers of people to seasonally varying game resources. The genius of the Innu and the interpenetration of culture and land shines through in this masterful analysis. Mailhot ends the book with a brief account of the struggle being waged today by the Innu in Sheshatshit and elsewhere in

Labrador and Quebec to preserve the integrity of their lands and their social and cultural systems.

Throughout the book Mailhot takes care to demonstrate that the recent settlement of the Innu in settled communities such as Sheshatshit has by no means severed their connection to the land nor undermined the salience of their social practices. Telephone calls and air travel have readily reinforced social relationships that were once the product of nomadic travel. In consequence, the Innu are becoming an even more unified people today than they were in the past. Mailhot dismisses the question of whether the people of Sheshatshit were originally from Quebec or Labrador as a false issue. Just as when, in their nomadic past, they traversed the entire expanse of the eastern half of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula with ease, in the future they can be expected to identify themselves first and foremost as Innu and only secondarily as residents of Quebec or Labrador.

In summary, this is a fine work of discerning scholarship that will reward readers both inside and outside of the academy. The generous acknowledgement by Mailhot of the continuing intellectual assistance and guidance afforded her throughout her career by the people of Sheshatshit as well as by fellow linguists and anthropologists deserves to be repaid by a wide audience.