Sociocultural and political changes among the Crees of Québec
Contributors

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Introduction

The current reality of Québec’s First Nations was shaped by ongoing contact with Europeans. Influence began gradually, but ultimately framed and structured the Native way of life, and accelerated the process of social change. Many ideas originating in non-Native culture were introduced to Northern communities, which either adopted and integrated them, or perceived them as obstacles to rebuilding a society in their own image. This paper illustrates the evolution of Cree communities.

1 Brief History of the Culture and Community Governance of the Cree Nation

SETTLEMENT IN NORTHERN TERRITORIES

The first settlers in James Bay arrived in around 1500 BP [Before Present]. Once they moved into the territory permanently, families of hunter-gathers traveled across the land according to an annual cycle, based on survival needs. Individuals used all the elements of nature to make all of their clothes, tools, weapons and homes. The size of the hunting group varied according to the season and species of animal being hunted. The group comprised 15 to 25 individuals. Their view of the universe was infused with mythology, based on a balance between the natural and supernatural world, and was orchestrated by shamans, mostly masculine, but at times, feminine.

THE CREES IN THE 17TH CENTURY

The British crown sent the first merchants to the northern regions in 1668. Two years later, the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) was founded. The Crees were already familiar with trading practices, and current prices, probably because of a pre-existing system of trade among Native nations. Groups of hunters had no choice but to share wildlife resources on their territory with traders and merchants whose interests were essentially commercial. This had some repercussions for the social and economic organization of the Crees, and on land use.

THE CREES IN THE 18TH CENTURY

Two different groups of Crees (Coasters and Inlanders) probably existed before first contacts. From 1730, the Coasters, also called the Homeguards, established themselves near the posts. The Crees provided the employees of the trading posts with labour, food from the land, firewood, clothing, male and female companionship
and family life. The employees of the HBC gave food to families during periods of shortage. The HBC employees taught Cree children the rudiments of reading and writing. The situation of the Inlanders was different. They visited the trading post only occasionally in small groups. They did not develop the same relationship with employees or go to the trading posts merely to sell their catches.

**THE CREESES IN THE 19TH CENTURY**

Missionaries settled near the trading posts and thus joined the circle of foreigners that Native peoples encountered from time to time. They provided care for the poor and did their part to transmit basic instruction in the fundamentals of Western knowledge. A trade group emerged that focused exclusively on commerce while sharing the territory with the traditional hunting group. The trading post employees appointed a trading captain to head the group, taking into consideration the traditional criteria of Cree leadership. The fur trade probably helped to preserve the original principles of their way of life.

Instruction which took place was generally rudimentary and usually occurred during the summer season, during the gathering of people near trading posts, and was dispensed by teachers hired by the government. It was only after the Second World War that a comprehensive education system was established throughout Native communities in Northern Québec.

**THE CREESES IN THE 20TH CENTURY**

During the first half of the 20th century, the Crees worked for the HBC in exchange for food items and credit at the trading posts, thus maintaining the spirit of barter. In the 1930s, the mission established a sawmill and bakery in southern James Bay and introduced the concept of working for wages. This concept gained currency in the 1950s, spreading to the majority of communities. From that point onward, the second half of the century was characterized by a definitive transition to permanent settlements, depending on the geographical location of each community.

**1.1 IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY AND FAMILY**

For the Crees, the family represents the continuity, protection and survival of each member of the clan. Community and family practices underwent numerous changes caused by the foreigners' presence in the sub-Arctic region. The presence of foreigners brought about many changes. The proximity of settlements to trading posts encouraged mixed marriages between Natives and trading post employees. The fur trade led the Crees to develop a new mixed economy based on commerce and traditional economic activity. This new economy encouraged the adoption of individual activities and contributed to a redefinition of the community, creating new roles and hierarchies.

The missionaries encouraged the Crees to abandon polygamy and polyandry, an ancestral practice devised to meet the economic needs of the family. They also
The construction of frame houses now met the needs of a nuclear family, not the needs of an extended family. The second half of the 20th century was the most significant era of change for Cree families and communities, with interventions by the state, and the finalization of the settlement process that would reach its peak in the 1970s.

1.2 IMPORTANCE OF GIFTS

The structure of Amerindian society is expressed in two principles: the act of sharing, and the giving of gifts. They were essential for the perpetuation of communities, took place within the same family or community and reinforced pre-existing ties.

The sharing of food however would only be possible in the context of production, where hunting was of the highest importance. Hunting structured and continued to structure sharing and giving, which rebalanced inequities. The distribution took place according to the degree of participation and was formalized by ritual and rules. The basic rules of gift giving and sharing were strictly applied, and most of all, during periods when animal resources were scarce.

These principles have been preserved over the centuries and are now enshrined within modern political structures such as the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement (JBNQA). The program for hunter-trappers helps maintain hunting and helps the inhabitants of the sub-Arctic to integrate a traditional way of life and a market economy (with salaried work). This mixed economy provides a clear picture of the reality of Northern Québec, in its modern form.

2 Brief History of the Evolution of Community Governance

2.1 PRE-CONTACT

In an egalitarian society, certain criteria were required to choose a leader. The chief represented the public will, was a man of wisdom and had the ability to communicate, which encouraged, above all, co-operation between the sexes, unanimous decision-making and the maintenance of harmony with the natural and supernatural universe. The leader had good knowledge of the territory and the resources available. The role of chief, however, was not a fixed position; the members of a hunting group could take turns in assuming the role of authority. The activities of the community were dominated by a gender-based division of labour, in which women were recognized as having equal rights to those of men. Politically and religiously the men were the leaders, although the women could and did take positions, depending on their ability and personality, since neither religion nor political leadership was institutionalized.
2.2 EVOLUTION OF GOVERNANCE UNTIL THE SIGNING OF THE JBNQA

The period of first contact with new arrivals did not cause any significant changes in the governance arrangements of the Crees in Northern Québec. However, the fur trade did modify several aspects of material and organizational culture among Native peoples, while preserving their traditional economic and political strategies.

1668 First English expedition in the Northern territories.

1670 Founding of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC).

1685 The essential elements of the English fort system were put in place.

1760 France had to cede the territory of Nouvelle-France, following its defeat by England.

1763 Great Britain wrote and promulgated the Royal Proclamation of 1763.

The British, concerned about the fears of Amerindians facing the loss of their territory, decided in the end to reassure them by recognizing, in part, their territorial rights over the regions considered essential to the continuity of their way of life.

1850 Commission of the Governor General Charles Bagot.

The Governor General of the time, Charles Bagot, initiated a commission to examine the situation of the Native people. The conclusions reached by the commission laid out the objectives of reducing the numbers of Native people on Crown territory by accelerating the process of dispossession of lands, and also by keeping the power to decide who was Indian. The Governor General Bagot proposed the creation of residential schools and set up the first policies of assimilation.

1852 First Anglican mission was established at Fort George. During the same decade, the Inland Crees received visits from the Catholic Church.

1857 The objectives of the commission Bagot took legal form through the passage of the Act to encourage the gradual Civilization of Indian Tribes in this Province and to amend the Laws respecting Indians.

1867 Founding of Canada through the British North American Act (BNA), without either the consultation or presence of the Native population.

The BNA recognized the exclusive legislative authority of the federal government – without any legal or moral obligation – over the Indians and the lands reserved for the Indians.

1869 The Rupert’s Land territories granted to the HBC remained under the Company’s authority, when the British Crown bought them.

Amendments to the Act of 1857 now called the Act for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians, the Better Management of Indian Affairs and to Extend the Provisions of the Act obliged Indians to have a blood connection to a Native community and introduced a triennial election system for the bands. The chiefs’ powers were extended somewhat, and the band councils now had the power to establish regulations on minor questions.
of order, under the supervision of the authorities. The Amerindians demonstrated no interest in the new structure and resisted by refusing to exercise the limited powers that had been granted them.

**1870** Rupert’s Land was sold to the Canadian Confederation and was annexed to the Northwest Territories.

**1876** The foundations of the *Indian Act*.

This new law outlined the chief system and granted the First Nations a minor child status, based on a discriminatory process. Each band of thirty or more people was required to have a chief, elected by male band members. The chief and council responsibilities included, among others, public health, construction and maintenance of infrastructures, and the concession of lots on the reserve as well as their registration. The Indian Affairs agents were named by the authorities to administer the band funds. The law prompted resistance on the part of Native people and in 1880, the position of the Indian agent had to be reinforced, confirming his power to impose the electoral system on any band he judged ready to adopt it, voluntarily or not.

**1898** The *Act respecting the delimitation of the Northwestern, Northern and Northeastern boundaries of the Province of Quebec* 1898 was adopted and the border of Québec was extended to the Eastmain River.

**1912** The *Quebec Boundaries Extension Act*, of 1912, defined Québec’s borders as we know them today.

**1930** The Depression of the 1930s forced the Crees to return to a subsistence economy because of the fluctuations of the fur market, and a reduction in game. The first Residential school was established at Fort George. During the same decade, the mission established a sawmill and bakery in southern James Bay and introduced the concept of working for wages.

**1940** The provincial government offered priority services in health and education in James Bay to the Crees.

**1932-1948** Beginning of government intervention through the creation of beaver reserves in James Bay territories.

**1939-1945** After the Second World War, the population and territory came under Canadian control.

**1951** When they returned home, Native veterans were shocked to return to the reality of the reserves. Working with religious organizations, they organized a campaign that gave rise to a joint Senate and House of Commons committee tasked to study the *Indian Act* and consult Native people to guide them in their review.

The amended legislation offered new possibilities to inhabitants of reservations. It reduced the power of Indian Affairs agents, but still prevented bands from establishing their own forms of government. It did increase their autonomy, by permitting their constitution as municipalities. A secret ballot was introduced, and women were authorized to participate in band council elections. The legislation assigned provinces the obligation of organizing health services, education and social welfare for Native populations.

**1960** Universal suffrage granted federally. Québec took control of the territory during the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s.
1961 The government of Québec established the Direction Générale du Nouveau-Québec to administer the lands north of the Eastmain River. The goal of the agency was to aid communities, providing a range of services, from education to welfare to town zoning and policing.

During the 1960s, the chiefs under the authority of the Department of Indian Affairs were not necessarily the traditional chiefs; they served different functions. The functions of a chief required distinct qualities to deal with the requirements of co-existing modern and traditional political decision-making proceedings. Over the decades, and towards the end of the 1960s, the distinction became more pronounced, and the political and social organization of the Crees had significantly shifted away from its traditional form. During the 1960s, the Crees learned to operate under the bureaucracy imposed by Indian Affairs. In the course of that decade, regional chiefs were appointed within the existing political structure in order to facilitate exchanges between the offices situated in Val-d’Or and James Bay.

1969 Québec granted Native people the right to vote provincially.

1971 On April 30, the Prime Minister of Québec, Robert Bourassa announced the beginning of construction of hydroelectric installations in La Grande River. The Crees organized their representation under the Indian Association of Québec.

1972 The Crees and Inuit arrived in Montreal to demand their territorial rights and the halt of construction work on the hydroelectric complex.

1973 On November 15, Judge of Quebec Superior Court, Albert Malouf, made the decision to halt the construction and required Québec to negotiate a treaty covering the territory, forcing the Québec government to provide monetary compensation and the recognition of specific Native rights in exchange for the development of the vast resources of the territory.

The Supreme Court of Canada [established] that Native people had legal title on Canadian territory due to the sole fact of their previous occupation and use, a title that survives in Canadian law unless it has been surrendered by the Native people or extinguished by successive governments. In aftermath of this ruling, the federal government adopted in the same year a policy that consisted in settling, through negotiation, Native territorial claims.

1974 The Crees dissociated themselves from the Indian Association of Quebec and created their own institution, The Grand Council of the Crees.

1975 November 11, ratification of the JBNQA by the Québec government, the Government of Canada, the Grand Council of the Crees, the Northern Quebec Inuit Association, Hydro-Québec, the Société de développement de la Baie-James and the Société d’Énergie de la Baie-James.
2.3 SINCE THE SIGNATURE OF THE JBNQA

The governance mechanisms laid out and funded by the Agreement give the Native people new administrative and parapublic structures for the management of their territory and of their communities, such as school boards, regional health and social service councils, regional administrations, etc.

1984 The Crees were no longer subject to the Indian Act but had been transferred to provincial jurisdiction with the adoption of the Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act.

1991 The end of the 1980s marked the beginning of the second phase of the hydroelectric project on Great Whale River. In order to demonstrate their discontent, Crees and Inuit took the debate to the international level and won sympathy from people. Crees and Inuit made two expeditions paddling down to New York City and Québec in a specially combined canoe and kayak, with the objective of forcing Hydro-Québec to reconsider its environmental review process.

2002 February 7, after thirty years, the Grand Council of the Crees put an end to the discord arising from the JBNQA and signed an Agreement Concerning a New Relationship Between the Gouvernement du Québec and the Crees of Québec. With this ratification, the Crees would be compensated with 4.5 billion dollars and would now be partners in the development of Northern Québec.

This new Agreement suggests that both governments are attempting to establish a new relationship of cooperation. In this extension to the original 1975 agreement, as reported in the national newspapers, the Crees have addressed some of their key concerns omitted previously. In exchange for permitting further hydroelectric development on the Rupert and Eastmain rivers, the Crees are ensuring their own management of their natural resources and greater environmental protection, substantially increased training and employment opportunities, and a measure of full political autonomy.

2007 July 16, the Crees signed the Agreement Concerning a New Relationship Between the Government of Canada and the Cree of Eeyou Istchee.

This Agreement is intended to put an end to the disputes that were being fought in court between the two parties. When the agreement was accepted on October 12, 2007 through a referendum, the Crees qualified to receive compensation of $1.4 billion, as well federal responsibilities, principally with regard to the administration of justice and of social and economic development. The ratification also permits the Grand Council of the Crees and the government of Canada to launch a second phase of negotiation that will look at the modernisation of the governance regime of the Crees.

These two new Agreements enable the Crees to take part, with the rest of Canadian society, in the coming wave of globalization, and exercise greater control over their identity and culture.
The Crees perceive time as a form of rhythm and cycles. Alternation of day and night doesn’t serve to measure time, but to count it. So, they count the days by the nights, the months by moons and the years by seasons.

For them, time is cyclical. It is based on lunar movements and the seasons. The Crees have kept the vocabulary of the English language, in order to designate days, months, seasons and years. The Crees of the Northern regions have hybridized the Western notion of time and their own cyclical view, facilitating the co-existence of a modern and traditional way of life.

3.1 RELATIONSHIP OF NATIVE PEOPLE TO SALARIED WORK

Native activities traditionally provided the opportunity to accumulate food reserves for the survival of the group, and were followed by a period of rest and celebration. Salaried work was integrated into the Cree culture only recently, coinciding with the intensification of the presence of foreigners and government services. Originally, the first salaried contracts were offered on a part-time basis, but that does not explain why some Crees have succeeded in adopting permanent, full-time work. The explanation might be found in the desire to conserve societal structure and traditional life, based on a variety of opportunities for achieving the well-being and income required to support family needs.

Although many socioeconomic conditions have improved, many Crees have not had access to work partly because of their lack of qualifications, but also because of a lack of jobs. In such a situation, they must turn to social assistance programs that reinforce their dependence on state transfer payments. Jobs presently available are mostly related to public administration and public service. The individualism that has developed with the arrival of salaried work has had the effect of creating a gap that has given rise to the concept of social classes in the Cree Nation. Disparity of income separates some Native people from members of the same community, and also from non-Native inhabitants.

In fact, Crees must establish work relations in a language they master less well. The rigidity of work hours is another aspect which cannot be ignored, and to which Native people are not accustomed. Finally there is a significant lack of preparation and education on the part of non-Native people working in Northern Québec. Their limited knowledge of the culture in which they are living and working leads, at times, to frictions and frustrations within Native communities. For example, non-Native work methods emphasize individual effort and competition in contrast to cooperation and the responsibility of the group.
3.2 MIXED ECONOMY AND VALIDATION OF TRADITIONAL WORK

The persistence of a mixed economy reveals that the traditional subsistence activities are profoundly anchored and continue to exist in modern times, because varied sources of income coexist in the Native reality of each community. Crees juxtapose their earnings and income obtained through diverse activities with food from the hunt, and clothing and accessories obtained through domestic labour. The solidarity system still at the heart of communities and families is embedded in salaried work as well. Workers help each other, therefore, and replace each other at work, permitting several villagers to have temporary access to a remunerated position. The replacements are sometimes sent directly by the former worker, or are requested by the employer who is prepared to accept the cultural differences of Native people.

The ratification of Agreements have given Native people the opportunity to preserve the economic diversity they developed over the centuries while embedding in these agreements the structures required to integrate traditional activities and validate their culture. Contemporary life does not permit all Native people to practise traditional activities, but they continue to attach great value to these traditions. The Native elite supports the positions they adopt on the provincial, Canadian and even international scene, by reminding us of the special characteristics and uniqueness of the Native nations.

4 Geographical Influence

The Crees integrated the province through the Quebec Boundaries Extension Act only in 1912. They were not really connected to the province until the 1970s, when a road was constructed between the region of Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Northern Québec and the Crees founded Air Creebec Company. These new communication channels would serve the Northern populations that until then had been isolated.

The cost of transportation is a decisive factor in the fixing of prices of imported products, raising the cost of living to high levels. Furthermore, the northerly location and the lack of passable roads linking the communities constitute a disadvantage. The elevated cost of living, of real estate and the small potential market do not encourage investors or business creation.
Conclusion

To summarize, the Cree nations have, over the course of the last century, experienced many social, economic, cultural and political changes, orchestrated by agents of the Church, Europe and government. These external influences disrupted the way of life of Native people in the Ungava Peninsula, leading them to adopt a Westernized, sedentary lifestyle. Until the creation of the Canadian confederation in 1867, the Crees were able to pursue their traditional way of life. After the intervention of government in Rupert’s Land in 1870, the prime objective of Canadian policy was to “civilize the savages” with the ultimate goal of limiting the financial commitment which politicians had undertaken with regard to Native people, in exchange for the ceding of their lands and ancestral rights, in order to make way for non-Native colonists.

Be that as it may, the Crees of Québec entered the modern era with the imposition of a settling process that aimed to streamline government services. After the Second World War, Native people experienced increasingly restrictive policies aiming for cultural genocide, although such policies sometimes had the opposite effect. The geographical location of the Crees played a positive role, protecting them from the application of these policies. Thus, they were able to preserve the essentials of their values and their culture, still enjoying today these values as the foundation of their society. Thanks to the safeguarding of their social principles and the maintenance of their ancestral modes of governance, they have been able to sidestep the encroachment of the South.

The Québec state, which had previously had no desire to take any responsibility for the well-being of the Crees, changed its mind and, several years later, asserted its territorial authority and proclaimed it as a national symbol. By then, the Crees had for several decades attended school, worked at salaried jobs and learned to manage their communities as required by the provincial and federal governments. In 1971, the construction projects of the century began without consulting local populations. At this point the Native peoples realized the importance of events and embarked on battle for the recognition of their rights. The James Bay Northern Québec Agreement marked an important passage for the Native people of Northern Québec, but also for the First Nations, the Inuit and the Métis in the rest of Canada.
Finally, although the First Nations and the Inuit of Québec have long been the forgotten ones of history, today they are in position within a process leading to their political autonomy and are continuing their integration into modern decision-making bodies in order to improve their condition, even though they have encountered frustration in some situations. Union members of the Centrale des syndicats du Québec can guide them in their decision-making processes by supporting and accepting them in their unique cultural voyage. During this period of significant demographic growth due to their high birth rate, it is even more important to work together with all the categories of education employees from the Cree communities, to help them promote the schooling and educational continuity of their children, who represent the foundation of their traditional values, and also the future of their society.