

Introduction

The Naskapi live in two different worlds: in the winter, they roam the interior of Labrador, hunting caribou; in the summer, they live in or around the village of Davis Inlet on the coast of Labrador. In this book, one of the themes I explore is the contrast in the social life between these two worlds. One may say that the Naskapi alternate between two economic spheres: the subsistence sphere of caribou hunting in the winter, and the money sphere of cod fishing in the summer. However, their lives are altered not only in economic terms, but also ecologically, socially, and ideologically, so that one may say that the Naskapi alternate between two life spheres.

In Sango Bay, approximately ten miles from Davis Inlet, lives an isolated settler family that exploits the same environment as the Naskapi. Yet, the only son is able to earn \$6,000 a year, while a Naskapi seldom makes more than \$1,500. This great difference in income is readily, though superficially explained if we look at the yearly round of activities of the settler and the Naskapi. However, the question remains: why do the Naskapi not exploit the environment in the same manner as the settler does? While the settler lives in his house by the sea year-round earning money by fishing and sealing, the Naskapi leave the coast in the fall to go hunting caribou in the Barren Grounds throughout the winter. Their life here earns them little or no cash, is very strenuous and implies a certain risk through sickness and starvation. Why do they prefer it to the safe and comfortable life on the coast where they could earn more cash and buy more material goods, both of which they value, or simply live off relief?

From the preceding remarks, it can be seen that the two worlds offer very different opportunities for the Naskapi, and I shall try to analyse some of the crucial values which they share and pursue in the two situations. It is not a question of the Naskapi having two different sets of values, one belonging to the coastal world, and another to the Barren Ground world. Rather, as I shall demonstrate, the Naskapi hold the same values in both worlds, but the opportunities to maximize these values differ in the two worlds. As a consequence of this fact, the quality of life differs radically, as does the relative richness of meaning which the two worlds represent to the Naskapi.

I shall argue that the harsh environment of the interior provides a setting for joint activities through which shared values are consummated. The focal point for these activities and the one foremost in the minds of the Naskapi is

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the caribou. The Naskapi pursue herds of caribou as they feed widely scattered on the semi-barren plateau in the interior of Labrador. In tents made out of flimsy cotton duck, the hunters and their families subsist on caribou throughout the arctic winter. The caribou, the caribou hunt, and the sharing of its produce lie at the heart of Naskapi culture. The sacred marrow from the long bones of the caribou is eaten raw by all the hunters in a ritual context where crucial cultural values are communicated and confirmed. Inside one tent, they sit in a circle for a whole day, partaking in this communal meal through which their relationship to the natural and supernatural worlds is expressed. Also communicated in the ritual are some of the dominant characteristics of their social life, notably that of the fundamental interdependence of one Naskapi upon the other, and the importance of sharing the fruits of the hunt. The environment of the Barren Ground world makes them dependent upon one another.

Yet, simultaneously with this interdependence, I shall argue that individual autonomy is also a central value for the Naskapi. Their adaptation as hunters makes it possible for them to attain an exceptionally high degree of autonomy. Thus, the Naskapi are confronted with a fundamental dilemma: on the one hand, the harsh environment forces dependence upon each other, while on the other, they wish to maximize their autonomy and personal individuality.

In the course of my analysis, I shall discuss another basic dilemma in the Naskapi culture: that of sharing versus having. Sharing, especially that of caribou meat, is fundamental to the social system of the Naskapi. It is with the knowledge that successful hunters will share their kill with the others, that most of the Naskapi are able to travel into the Barren Grounds with their families. Also, through sharing a hunter can gain a following and prestige. But, at the same time, the individual Naskapi also values having and keeping for himself. Hence, sharing is encumbered with many sanctions; keeping anything that should be shared makes one a target for social contempt.

We shall see that the Naskapi manage to cope with these dilemmas in the Barren Ground world, but they become more acute in the coastal world, and have different behavioural consequences. This is so because of the different opportunities presented in the coastal and interior worlds. On the coast, new and non-traditional transformations of economic goods are possible and desirable, whereas crucial traditional values and goals are difficult or impossible to realize in this ecological setting. While the core of their culture belongs to the Barren Grounds, the Naskapi, nevertheless, value the safety and comfort of living on the coast, in touch with the white man's world. However, problems exist because they have not adapted efficiently to the market economy.

On the coast, it is possible to exercise autonomy to an extent never attainable in the interior. At the same time, it is also possible to maximize the value of having, and neglect the traditional rules of sharing. Thus, the two dilemmas in the value system of the Naskapi come to a head on the coast, and this leads to open interpersonal conflicts. I shall argue that the perpetual quarrelling and heavy drinking, so characteristic of social life on the coast, is due largely to the discrepancy between Naskapi values and goals and the opportunities they have for their realization in the two different settings. The disruptive effects on social life on the coast are caused by the lack of opportunities to act out traditional role behaviour with respect to being a hunter, a leader, and husband. The new opportunities and constraints regarding the allocation of economic goods necessitate making choices which are inconsistent with traditional ideas concerning the circulation of goods.

Although one may say that the Naskapi have become acculturated in the sense that they have adopted, and have grown dependent upon goods from the industrial world outside, the superficiality of their effects on Naskapi culture should emerge throughout this book. The Naskapi are still hunters at heart.

Note

The orthography used in the present text for Mushuau Innu (Naskapi) words is a convention adopted in the field. Note particularly that the “o” ought to be substituted with /u/. For recent linguistic transcription see Lynn Drapeau and José Mailhot, 1989, *Guide pratique d'orthographe montagnaise*. Québec: Institut éducatif et culturel attikamek-montagnais (English translation by Marguerite MacKenzie, Department of Linguistics, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991). http://www.innu-aimun.ca/modules/spelling/files/Guide_Montagnais_Spelling.pdf