

# INDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE POLITICIZATION OF HEALTH IN LABRADOR MÉTIS SOCIETY

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

Health is a multi-dimensional concept in Labrador Métis society. Labrador Métis Elders and experts view themselves as active agents in health maintenance and promotion, particularly vis-à-vis food intake and practices associated with personal safety. The relationship to the geophysical environment is the bedrock of Métis health. In recent decades, this relationship is threatened at the intersection of local realities and external politico-economic structures, with the result that the Labrador Métis have become part of the Fourth World. Specifically, industrial development and myriad government regulations act to undermine Métis peoples' ability to maintain their relationship to the land and thus, pose a threat to individual and community health.

La santé représente un concept multi-dimensionnel dans la société métis du Labrador. Les anciens et les experts métis du Labrador se considèrent comme des agents actifs dans le maintien et la promotion de la santé, en particulier dans les domaines de l'alimentation et des pratiques relatives à la sécurité des individus. Dans cette société, la relation à l'environnement géophysique constitue la base de la santé. Depuis les dernières décennies, cette relation se voit menacée par la rencontre des réalités locales et des structures politico-économiques externes, ce qui a pour effet que les Métis du Labrador font maintenant partie du Quart-Monde. Plus précisément, le développement industriel et une myriade de règlements gouvernementaux servent à miner la capacité du peuple métis à conserver leur relation à l'environnement naturel et menacent donc la santé individuelle autant que collective.



## **Introduction**

The Labrador Métis concept of health as articulated by Métis Elders and experts<sup>1</sup> is multi-dimensional; it encompasses many more elements than allopathic medicine which emphasizes physical health, is hierarchal, and constrains "patients" to a passive role. Métis health is not unique in its multi-dimensional respect; the by now pan-Indigenous Medicine Wheel conceptualizes health as consisting of four parts: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. While Labrador Métis<sup>2</sup> concepts of health are not expressed in such a systematic manner, they also feature social, emotional, and physical aspects. Métis people see themselves as active agents in health maintenance and promotion. This is particularly true in the areas of food intake and practices associated with personal safety in their geophysical environment. The politicization of Métis health concepts reflect the changing circumstances of class, work, and power relations in recent Labrador history.

Many Métis are keenly aware that they have (unwillingly) become part of the Fourth World: the global community of Indigenous peoples living in internal colonies within larger nation-states. Fourth World land, which is often geographically marginal, has been expropriated and Fourth World people are politically dominated by the immigrant population. Although the heritage of the Labrador Métis is British as well as Indigenous, they have never considered themselves or been considered by others part of the dominant society (as my discussion of the descriptive terms applied to them will show). Métis Aboriginality is also expressed in concepts of health; at the heart of these is the contention that it is important to maintain a constant and intimate relationship to the land. The imposition of external politico-economic structures creates a hierarchy of power, with Métis at the bottom. This happens primarily through government regulations, from the 1940s onwards, that restrict resource usage, and through development projects that alter the environment. This hierarchy makes the Métis relationship to the land difficult, if not impossible, to maintain. The threat to Métis health maintenance is obvious.

The incorporation of power into Indigenous concepts of health grows out of this knowledge and experience. (This is not to say that most Métis would prefer to return to a Labrador under Indigenous conditions. Given their enthusiastic adoption of certain types of modern technology, such as snowmobiles, Métis themselves have been active agents in eroding historical Indigenous traditions. Not all changes in Labrador have been imposed.) Métis politicization and subsequent alterations in health concepts, however, centre on an escalating comprehensive loss of control over the nature and pace of change in Métis territory and society. This loss dates back to the

establishment of a military base in Labrador during World War Two; more recently, it is noted in a growing number of industrial mega-projects in Labrador and the government regulations instituted to facilitate industrial development.

This case illustrates how relationships between global and local structures affect Indigenous communities; it goes some way toward explaining what Indigenous people have been saying for decades. In this respect, it follows a continuing tradition of anthropological political economy-influenced work that try to go beyond an assumed structural determination in their explorations of global and local links.<sup>3</sup>

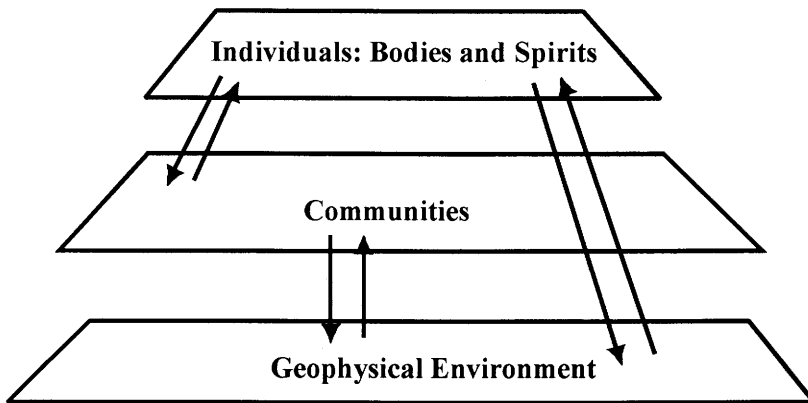
### Who are the Labrador Métis?

The Labrador Métis (unrelated to other Canadian Métis ) are the country's only Inuit-Métis. Although many Labrador Métis have Innu and, to a lesser extent, Mi'Kmaq heritage, over 80% are Inuit descendants. The marine-oriented Inuit economic adaptations have dominated the Métis way of life in the collection of South Labrador Coast communities where I carried out my qualitative study of health beliefs, concepts, and world-view.

The Métis speak the language of their British ancestors but the occasional Inuktituk word still makes its way into conversation.<sup>4</sup> Words like *ulu* (women's knife) and *komatik* (sled pulled by dogs) are in common usage. As one Elder said, "We speak pieces of it (Inuktituk)". An Inuktituk Bible sits in the small church in William's Harbour, a reminder of the historical importance of the language. William's Harbour is one of eleven "permanent communities" on the South Coast, thus far accessible only by air or water.<sup>5</sup> Prior to their year-round settlement into these communities in the 1950s and 1960s, Métis people practised seasonal transhumance (or migration) which was dictated by resource use. They lived on islands and headlands in the summer and in wooded bays in the winter. As an example, the Russells lived in sheltered Raxon's Cove in the winter, and in William's Harbour on an outlying island near fishing grounds in the summer. The summer communities consisted of extended families while some of the winter communities were made up only of single nuclear families, especially north of Charlottetown. Some families, most commonly those in Sandwich Bay, had more than two residences. With the establishment of the ground-fish moratorium in 1992 on Canada's east coast, the Métis practice of seasonal transhumance has waned (but not disappeared). It had been dealt its death blow decades earlier, however, with the resettlement programs of the Newfoundland and Canadian governments. The permanent communities of the South Coast are home to just under 3000 people, the majority of the Labrador Métis population.

The term "Labrador Metis" was institutionalized with the formation of the political organization, the Labrador Métis Association (now Nation) in the mid-1980s. Historically, several other descriptive terms were applied to the Métis, a number of them stigma-laden. These terms include "breed", and "half-breed". The Métis were also called Eskimos (or Esquimaux) and settlers. All of these words appear in historical primary sources. Writing in 1861, Lambert De Boillieu referred to "Esquimaux" in Sandwich Bay and "settlers" south of there (Bredin, 1969). In 1893, a young English doctor called Eliot Curwen travelled to Labrador's South Coast. In Fox Harbour, he visited Mrs Thoms, a "half-breed", and Mr and Mrs Pawlo, "full-blooded Esquimaux" (Rompkey, 1996:37). In Black Tickle, he learned Indigenous medicine from Mrs Keith (probably Keefe), an "Esquimaux" (*ibid.*:59). On Spotted Island, he discovered a community of "half-breed Esquimaux", one of whose members had an English father (*ibid.*:60). In *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, written in 1905, there is a chapter called "The Kindness of the Breeds" (Wallace, 1990). There are also many references to "settlers"

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and a mention of George Morris of Seal Islands as a "native trader" (*Ibid.*:209).

Although both governments, particularly Newfoundland's, have been reluctant to extend recognition to the LMN,<sup>6</sup> the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples has written:

The Labrador Métis exhibit the historical rootedness, social cohesiveness, and cultural self-consciousness that are essential to nationhood...along with an unmistakable Aboriginal relationship to the land. Their political organization will allow them to engage in effective nation-to-nation negotiation and to exercise self-government (Canada, 1996).

This paper is based mainly on qualitative research consisting of eight extensive open-ended interviews with Labrador Métis Elders and experts from six coastal communities. These were conducted in the spring of 1999. This work followed two years of research on Métis Indigenous Knowledge, oral and written history, primarily related to land claims and environment assessment processes. My 1999 interviews on the concept of health consisted largely of narratives. This is consistent with and reflective of Métis culture and knowledge transmission, as it is for many Aboriginal societies (see Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). This method was chosen because people make sense of their life experiences by narrating them. Further, "the more fully *particular* are the stories we hear, the stronger our analyses will be of the relationship between the general and the particular" (Chase, 1995).

## Labrador Métis Health Maintenance

There is no general agreement among academics, policy-makers, and practitioners on how to define health (Amich *et al.*, 1995). Yet the traditional paradigm that conceptualized health in terms of physical and biochemical markers has been expanded to include quality of life and other social factors; meanwhile, self-reports are increasingly seen as valid indicators of health and well-being (Amich *et al.*, 1995; Levine, 1987). The current emphasis on the social determinants of health, such as social relationships and commitments, reconceptualizes health in western society, and brings it closer to Indigenous concepts of health.

Until recently, Western medicine existed only on the fringes of Métis life. This is in spite of the widely publicized activities of Dr. (late Sir) Wilfred Grenfell and his International Grenfell Association (IGA) which offered medical assistance, religious instruction, and various social services to the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Labrador and Northern Newfound-

land from 1892 to 1981. Grenfell was recruited by the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen and much of his work focused on the thousands of Newfoundland fishermen who travelled to Labrador for summer fishery (Smallwood, 1984; Rompkey, 1991). Indeed, the IGA's two Labrador hospitals were located in the important summer fishing stations of Indian Harbour and Battle Harbour. The latter was on the southern edge of the Métis territory; the former was very rudimentary and deserted in the winter. Much later there were nursing stations in approximately half the current year-round communities.

Formal healthcare was delivered in a sporadic and rushed fashion; on Grenfell's first visit to Labrador, he treated 900 people (Smallwood, 1994:737). On another August visit, he was overwhelmed by the geography as he tried to visit Double Island, an Inuit summer station. He wrote:

Our first difficulty was to find where it was, for though among the countless islands of bare rocks, those we sought were not marked in the chart and the way was unknown to us (Rompkey, 1991:63).

Although a history of Western medical care in Labrador is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to state that until well into this century the entire formal health care system in Labrador as well as western and northern Newfoundland was chostic. This was largely due to the sparseness of the population and its migratory nature. The situation was exacerbated by the ongoing conflict between Grenfell and the Newfoundland government, which was embarrassed by the doctor's theatrical fund-raising efforts in the United States. Sir Richard Squires, Newfoundland prime minister, refused to issue promised funds to the IGA because he felt the Association's claims of dire poverty in the Dominion hampered its efforts to improve external trade relations. Indeed, stories still circulate in Métis communities of how Grenfell took pictures of abandoned trappers' tilts and, on his fund-raising trips, presented them as people's homes. Certainly, Grenfell gave little or no credit to the efforts of either the Newfoundland government, the Moravian missionaries on Labrador's North Coast, or the ingenuity of the people themselves. Yet the government's health surveys included a large number of summer stations, both Métis and non-Métis, in Labrador. In 1874, for example, Surgeon A. Winn found that people were in general, healthy, although he did report the occurrence of a large number of diseases including neuralgia, rheumatism, psoriasis, syphilis, and others. The government medical reports of the time did tend to focus on non-Aboriginal communities like Red Bay and Forteau.<sup>7</sup>

The IGA and Western medicine did not figure prominently in the health narratives of Métis Elders. There was, in fact, only one spontaneous

mention of these subjects even when informants were asked about "health": this was an Elder's mention of how an IGA doctor said his community was the healthiest in Labrador. This man also reported that another IGA doctor used Métis medicine (specifically, a treatment involving juniper) to cure rash when his own methods failed. When asked about the IGA in particular, one informant described the Association as "parental" and remarked:

Do not ask me my opinion of Dr. Grenfell himself because I will not express that. But I will say that Dr. Grenfell had some wonderful people working for him.

The land and the sea were the basis of all aspects of Métis life including health. Every action was underpinned by the relationship of individuals and communities with the geographical environment. This is true, for example, of eating; the Métis diet featured caribou rashers, seal flippers, porcupine and beaver meat, the herb Alexander, salmon in the spring and partridge-berrys in the fall. It is also true of child play and early socialization. Elders describe the following leisure activities (among others): looking at the pretty coloured stones in the landwash as the tide went out; sitting in small boats tied to wharves pretending to paddle along; climbing trees and finding birds' nests they were strictly instructed to leave untouched. All of these activities brought and kept children in close and constant contact with the geophysical environment. The presence of the land and sea also shaped modes of travel from one community to another—over land by *komatik* and dogs and, later, snowmobiles, or by water in small boats.

Paramount in Métis medicine is the principle that everyone is responsible for their own well-being and that of their families. Health is maintained through the fulfilment of relationship obligations, such as to the community and to the geophysical environment, including other life forms, particularly animals. This closely resembles Inuit health concepts (Wenzel, 1981:7-17) which were summarized by John O'Neil as follows: "good health depended upon the personal pursuit of moral, spiritual, and social ideals..." (O'Neil, 1986:119-128, 122). These ideals focused on the people's relationship with the geophysical environment. Like that of most Northern peoples now partly subsumed into the global capitalist economy (Myers, 1996:18-23), the Métis economy is a combination of Indigenous and modern subsistence strategies. Métis must be able, or "free" to use a favourite Métis word, to make the social and cultural arrangements that allow them to carry out these activities. If this process is threatened, say through lost access to the land, then so is subsistence and so is Métis health.

The land and the multitude of life forms it supports provide many of the elements of Métis medicine. The resources of the land were called upon in instances of medical emergencies. In the case of broken bones, Métis



fashioned casts out of birch bark. They treated frostbite by drying out the crop of a partridge<sup>8</sup> and placing it on the frostbitten area. At the end of a long winter, some people experienced a potentially dangerous condition marked by severely declining appetite and energy reserves. In these cases, the root of beans of "bog bean" (an underwater plant with the Latin name of *Menyanthes trifoliata*) was retrieved from swampy areas and steeped. The patient drank the liquid which resulted in appetite restoration.

Métis also used environmental resources to practice preventative medicine. "Spring cleaning" is probably the most conscious example of this; the term refers to "cleaning the blood" through the ingestion of tonics made from boiled tree boughs, usually black spruce or juniper. Other ingredients, such as molasses, might also be added to the tonic. Preventative medicine and health maintenance were also practised through diet. Elders and experts identify food, often called "wild food" or "wildlife" as the foundation of both individual and community health. Many claim there is a direct connection between "store-bought" foods and ill health, often articulated as "weakness" or "lack of strength". Food from the land was the usual response to the question: *What makes a community healthy?* As seen in this explanation:

It was the food we ate, the wild life, all that, the fish. We ate a lot of fish, seabirds, seals, everything that was wild. All of us had little gardens which helped with greens and that. And we ate Alexander—it's a wild plant, really good for you. We ate that in the summer. And we ate dandelions. In the winter we had other wild life—caribou, beaver ... we had a great diet, looking back. Some years we had less food than others. We had a real healthy diet. We ate half a dozen or more wild fruits and other berries. That diet is why I'm still around.

The land and all its elements—animals (marine, fur-bearing, big game), birds, fish, trees, and plants—made up the bedrock upon which Métis life and society were built. For this reason the geophysical environment is the foundation of the above model of Métis health maintenance. Métis medicine, economic adaptations, social life, and world-view were all shaped by the land and sea that surrounded them. In the case of medicine, isolation and the provisions of the land facilitated the development of a comprehensive healing system, as explained above. The Labrador Sea freezes over in winter with the result that, historically, "outsider" traffic into coastal communities occurred primarily during the short summer season. Using the knowledge of their Indigenous ancestors in particular, the Métis came to rely on themselves in terms of health. There is considerable observable evidence that allopathic medicine has become prevalent and has under-

mined the use of Métis medicine in the modern era. But the establishment of nursing stations by the International Grenfell Association and the sporadic visits of doctors that began in the last century did not eliminate Métis medicine. One Elder in a community where there is no health professional says:

We have a drug box with antibiotics and that but we use our own medicine. It's best because we know our medicine and we don't know what's in the drugs.

The practice of combining allopathic medicine and Indigenous medicine occurs to varying degrees elsewhere in North America and in Australia and New Zealand (Morgan *et al.*, 1997). In a Wisconsin study of Indigenous people from many nations, Marbella *et al.* (1998) found that 38% saw an Indigenous healer whilst receiving Western medical treatment; of those who did not, 86% said that they would consider seeing one in the future.

As my model of Métis health maintenance attempts to explain, it was interaction with the land that made bodies healthy. As Métis expert John Howell has written in response to Labrador's nickname as "the land God gave to Cain":

Labrador is not a barren, empty land. For us ...our home is a bountiful land. The land has been good to us. Rather than being empty, it is full. Rather than being barren, it is fertile, giving life to everything from tiny plants to huge herds of caribou. The land and the sea never fail to provide for us, except when people actively show disrespect for it (Howell, 1998).

Howell's words reflect the normative Métis view of the land as provider or caretaker of the people, as long as they keep up their end of the bargain: to show respect for and take care of the land. The enjoyment of a constant and intimate relationship with the land is one of the historical sources of emotional support for Métis individuals and communities. The maintenance of this relationship and the knowledge transfer that it necessitated affirmed the roles and status of Elders and served to connect the generations in Métis communities:

(Outsiders) would call it (Labrador) a harsh country but I think it's a beautiful place. It didn't seem that harsh to us because they (Elders and parents) taught us how to survive. They taught us how to make our own clothing you know; how to substitute various foods and so on; how to look after yourself with remedies when you were sick; the dangers of getting around in cold weather and how to survive without freezing to death and so on; how to travel on bad ice, where you knew where to go; how to travel in the country without breaking your neck

somewhere or breaking a leg or arm or something like that, survival things; how to survive in this country with our climatic conditions. That is what they taught us. They taught us well because, you know, we did survive. In spite of everything, we did survive and we survived sometimes where a lot of people wouldn't.

The geophysical environment was also a conduit through which general social cohesion was maintained. The conscious, deliberate sharing of resources, especially food, is central to the Métis ceremonial, as seen in the cases of seal and salmon. Salmon begin to appear in the rivers of Southern Labrador in early June. Historically the first salmon of the year was shared amongst all community members and in at least one, member of neighbouring communities. This ritual brought individuals into the community, enhancing connectedness. At times, it even strengthened ties between communities, already significant due to exogenous marriage. Finally it united the community and the geophysical environment; in fact, this ceremonial might be seen as a celebration of the bounty of the land. The same is true of seal; whoever caught the first "square flipper" (large, aged seal from Northern waters) in the spring would announce it by hoisting a piece of cloth to a stick, as a flag, in their boat as they sailed into the harbour. The meat would be distributed throughout the community.

Today an Elder speaks of going to the river to get a salmon for her supper (despite a moratorium on salmon fishing, except for anglers). The small canon of Métis literature also emphasizes the frequency and importance of direct interaction between individuals and the land and sea. In her book, *Woman of Labrador*, Elizabeth Goudie describes hunting and fishing by herself while her husband was away on his trapline. Her situation and consequent roles were representative of Métis women who were left alone to manage their families while their husbands were away, sometimes for a few months at a time. The individual connection with the geophysical environment was also experienced by trappers who were immersed in the wilderness alone or in pairs.

To the Métis Elders, then, health might be described as the ability to provide food, clothing, shelter, and medicine for individuals and communities using the resources of the land and the sea in the Labrador Métis homeland. Yet the health and well-being of Métis communities is under serious threat as the impacts of larger politico-economic structures on Métis society increase in scope and degree. The result is that Métis choice over how to live declines, independent of any decisions the people themselves might take, individually or collectively. In the words of one Elder:

Every year you'd mark your berth for the salmon. You had all kinds of hope that it'd bring you a living. Now that hope is taken away.

## **The Intersections of Global and Local Structures**

In the Labrador Métis world-view, place and time are synonymous with health and well-being. Unfortunately the population health status of Labrador Métis has never been studied and provincial statistics are not useful as the Métis population is divided into two health regions, making them an untracked minority in each region. A lack of systematic historical data makes it difficult to accurately assess Métis health historically. Many Elders and experts believe that the health of their communities has declined; they frequently point to the presence of alcohol which had been absent from some villages historically, and to unemployment, radically altered diets, and erosion of the intimate relationship with the land and sea, caused primarily by industrial development, and government regulations, especially salmon and cod moratoria.

Over and over again Métis Elders and experts refer to a better bygone time when they were "alone", "left alone", "by ourselves". In this, they echo other Indigenous groups such as the Lubicon Cree in their statements about the era before oil and gas development in Northern Alberta. Some might be tempted to infer that this is little more than sentimentality of the kind that is often expressed by people recalling their childhood days, perhaps exaggerating the good and ignoring or de-emphasizing the bad. But these sentiments might also be read as political statements, developed out of Métis frustration with the loss of autonomy they have experienced over the last fifty years. There is undoubtedly some of the human tendency toward romanticism in the words of Métis Elders and experts; we are all emotional beings after all. Yet, within the remembrances of Métis Elders are deeply felt political convictions that the Métis have become part of the Fourth World—and that this social change has involved a difficult-to-express but significant loss.

This change has occurred at the intersection of larger politico-economic forces with Métis individuals and communities. Specifically,

We had our own little world. We had no outside contact with government people and that. Now it's people who don't care making decisions about things. People (in government) thinks that it's their birds and that, not ours, and they don't care about it. That's where the sadness comes in.

The past six decades have seen rapid and almost constant political, economic, and environmental change in Labrador. All of these have led to

social changes so encompassing that in their speech many Métis, including some younger people, themselves divide time into a before and after with the mid-century introduction of government policies and programs at the center of the dividing line.

The state began to pay attention to Labrador with the outbreak of World War II and the construction of the military base at Happy Valley-Goose Bay. Although this started the militarization of the Labrador economy and was the impetus for the migration of some Métis people into Central Labrador, coastal communities remained largely intact and little affected. Other economic and environmental changes had more impact on the coastal Métis population. Perhaps the most significant of the many mega-projects in Labrador was the Upper Churchill hydro-electric project begun in the 1960s. This resulted in the flooding of Métis trappers' tilts and traplines, thus hammering another nail in the coffin of the fur trade. No compensation was ever paid to those affected; further, they had not even been made aware of the impending project and had no chance to reclaim their property before the flooding. There have been other developments and changes post-war. These include the proposed Voisey's Bay nickel mine, the influx of mining prospectors throughout the peninsula, the construction and planned expansion of the Trans-Labrador Highway, and the planned Lower Churchill hydro-electric development.

Technological innovations were introduced to coastal Labrador following Confederation with Canada and the subsequent introduction of cash and transfer payments into the economy. Métis people chose to buy such items as refrigerators and freezers, which altered their relationship with the land; they could now accumulate foodstuffs, rather than harvesting or hunting only what they needed at one time. As a result, hunting trips became sporadic rather than regular. Air travel was also introduced and Métis communities made good use of their airstrips. Planes and snowmobiles replaced functional dogteams. As the Elders and experts in my study expressed over and over, adaptability is a key value in Labrador Métis society. I have heard many stories that express the desirability of this characteristic, especially the fact that it often leads to innovation—a key characteristic that enabled Métis to survive and even thrive in Labrador.

But it was in the politico-economic sphere that the most transformative changes were made; these are the ones Métis Elders remain most concerned about. Recent government rules and regulations are the most cited threat to the health and well-being of Métis communities. Prior to Confederation, governance of this kind was foreign to the Métis. In the absence of any treaties, the Newfoundland government had an unstated policy of ignoring Labrador, especially the peninsula's Indigenous people. It was

perhaps presumed that the Innu, Inuit, Métis and Mi'Kmaq would assimilate into the general population (and, indeed, many Indigenous people, particularly Mi'Kmaq on the island, married people of European descent and left their home communities). The government was able to continue this policy even after Confederation with Canada in 1949; the Terms of Union contained no reference to the new province's Indigenous people with the result that the Indian Act was never applied here. Thus, the Indigenous people of Newfoundland and Labrador were not subjected to Reservations and residential schools. Nor did they receive any programs and services for Indigenous people until the 1970s, when these were finally begun on an ad hoc basis.

Recent decades, however, have seen the introduction of a wide-range of directives concerning the hunting and harvesting of almost every resource used by Métis, including large and small game, freshwater and saltwater fish, seals, and seabirds. Elders object to having to get a block of land from government to cut timber; they are opposed to government-set bag limits on murre (seabirds that are hunted); and they say that the trout season decided on by the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) is too early. They see most of these rules as unnecessary:

We're not the kind of people who kill for the sake of it. We don't destroy stuff.

They resent land being taken over by mining companies for projects such as the proposed \$4 billion nickel mine at Voisey's Bay. For the past seven years, they have lived with groundfish moratorium, which they feel would have been unnecessary had government limited the use of large-scale harvesting technology. There has also been a salmon moratorium, except for tourist anglers. This may be the bitterest pill to swallow. The sum of these restrictions represents the appropriation of Métis sustenance and wealth, and lost access to the land. Because of this, Métis cannot live off the land even if they wanted to.

Under the industrial global economy, Indigenous people in Labrador have become economically marginal. Low employment rates and income levels are indicative of this. In 1996, official labour force participation rates in the four incorporated Métis communities varied from 35.4% in Charlottetown to 61.4% in Mary's Harbour (Statistics Canada, 1996). The official unemployment rates were equally discouraging, ranging from a low of 35.3% to a high of 62.8% (*Ibid.*). In addition, many of those in paid employment were in temporary and/or part-time jobs. Métis society has become more stratified with a significant proportion of the South Coast population in marginal positions *vis-à-vis* the capitalist economy. This

marginalization coincides with the decline of subsistence activities due to government restrictions, mega-projects, and technological adaptations.

This "push off the land" is the most important factor for Métis Elders. Monikers like "the land God gave to Cain" developed out of the conventional wisdom that the peninsula is barren and unreliable in its ability to sustain human life. Undoubtedly there were occasional, perhaps cyclical, resource shortages historically. "Hard times" were mentioned by Elders in my studies, although they were not a dominant theme and tended to be confined to particular communities or families and certain seasons, especially spring before the fish came inshore. However, many Métis believe that the current marginality of the Indigenous population of Labrador can be attributed primarily to colonial relationships and increasingly dominant external control of access to land (Russell *et al.*, 1999). A comprehensive historical analysis may bear them out. This interpretation of the Labrador economy parallels Leatherman's analysis of Andean producers (Leatherman, 1992). Like that of the Southern Peruvian Andes, the Labrador environment itself was not marginal (if requiring intensive labor) but seems to have been a fairly reliable provider. It may be that Indigenous people's integration into the capitalist system has made their communities apparently unsustainable and transformed them into poor people. Virtually every Elder I spoke with told me that they did not think they had been poor; the notion of poverty, a relative concept after all, seems to have been introduced with the militarization and capitalization of the Labrador economy.

This integration began a long time ago, with the introduction of the mercantile fishery into Labrador in the last century and the simultaneous expansion of the fur trade along the South Coast. At times Métis resisted the intrusion of external politico-economic structures and were forced into accepting them on some level; at other times they embraced such intrusions as I have said. Many Métis Elders are painfully aware of how their historical economy has been subsumed into capitalism, and they distinguish clearly between *work* and *employment*:

(When I was growing up) there was work for everybody. It was healthy for us, having work for everybody. The boys chopped the wood, we (girls) had to wash our clothes. It was a good thing. Things got modern. It went so gradual. Now they have beer, pampers, and Mary Brown's chicken. That's living *on* the land, not *off* the land...I thought I had a good life. But now I hear everyone saying we were poor. But I think we were rich.

I am not saying that Métis communities should or can return to a Labrador under Indigenous conditions, (although some Métis say that that would be their preferred option). A restoration of what amounted to control

over the land and sea, however, is a key priority, not just for the LMN, but also for Métis Elders, many of whom are not involved in politics at an organized level.

Fundamentally it means that they have lost their sovereignty: politically, economically, and socially. This, according to the Elders and experts, is what threatens Métis health and well-being. In their narratives, current health and social problems are traced to fisheries regulations like defined seasons and licenses, industrial developments like Churchill Falls, and alterations of the land due to such things as road construction and tourism ventures. These things seriously eroded the way Métis individuals and communities interacted with their environment. The moratorium on salmon, for example, criminalized this central part of Métis life. The new layer between people and environment—an external government—meant the loss of the “freedom” so valued by my informants. The Métis experience with and loss of power to larger politico-economic forces has politicized them and altered their concept of health to include an important new component, the power dimension. Already multi-dimensional, the Métis concept of health has expanded to include power; this has grown out of the analysis community members engage in when they fill out forms to apply for wood-cutting permits and when Elders are arrested and fined for catching salmon “illegally”. They know that the movement of Métis society into the Fourth World may cause individual and community health problems in itself. At least some Métis have bitterly internalized the concept of themselves as disadvantaged politically and economically. They are angrily aware of how circumstances have combined to place them in a marginalized position, wear away at the social cohesion on which they once depended, and threaten social disintegration. With the loss of access to the land, they know what looms on the horizon. Kai Erikson’s analysis of the effects of the Buffalo Creek flood has a general applicability that is useful here:

Collective trauma works its way slowly into the awareness of those who come to suffer from it ...(It is) a gradual realization on the part of an already numbed people that their community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of their world has disappeared without so much as a sound (Erickson, 1985).

Changes to Métis society are experienced in a less gradual and more conscious manner than this. Yet, Erikson’s words give some insight into how deeply colonialism of all descriptions can root itself.



## **Future Research**

Any analysis of Labrador Métis society is made difficult by the absolute dearth of research on this population. We do not understand, for example, the degree to which medical pluralism (Métis and Western) exists among the Labrador Métis. There is an almost total lack of quantitative information for this population. We cannot properly assess whether Métis health has deteriorated, as Elders and experts assert, without at least some statistical information. Historical information is also scarce. Labrador was on the fringes of literary society and much of what has been written by the pen of explorers and missionaries is romantic and/or racist, often conflicting with the oral history of the Indigenous people of Labrador themselves. My time on Labrador's South Coast and my discussions with Elders and experts have convinced me that certain pathologies associated with social disintegration in Indigenous nations have emerged in some Métis communities. These include frequent accidents, alcoholism, gas sniffing, and sexual violence, all of which are usually associated with "lifestyle" or poor coping mechanisms on the part of certain families. The implication is that individuals or families are to blame, which overlooks the root of such pathologies in political and economic change and its consequences. It is unlikely that these problems can be dealt with effectively through the allopathic approach which desocializes and compartmentalizes health. This is in stark contrast to the Métis world view which sees health as integrated into every aspect of life. As the allopathic system has moved into Métis territory and society, the ill have been brought to urban centres elsewhere in Newfoundland for treatment. Thus, health and illness are further individualized and "...people become alienated from their own well-being" (O'Neil, 1986).

These are the issues Métis Elders and experts try to explain when they tell stories about food, keeping safe, and using the offerings of nature to devise tonics and powders for coughs and cuts. Anthropology has an important contribution to make by facilitating the telling of stories by Métis people themselves, stories that can help us develop a better picture of one of Canada's forgotten Indigenous peoples. Specifically, anthropological political economy can help us understand how cultural change comes about, as circumstances of work and power are altered, and what this means to people on an intimate level.

### **Notes**

1. Experts are Métis well versed in their history and knowledge, and respected for their leadership skills.

2. Hereinafter referred to as Métis.
3. These include: Collins (1986), Leacock (1954), O'Brien (1986), Painter (1986) and Smith (1984).
4. Inuktitut is endangered in the Labrador Inuit population as well. In the 1996 Census, only 435 people (out of an Inuit population of 5,000) reported that they spoke the language. Unfortunately, fewer still are able to write it.
5. In the summer of 1999, construction began on a gravel road that will connect some Métis communities to other parts of Labrador.
6. Although the LMN receives government funding under a variety of Aboriginal programs, in 1998, the Department of Justice recommended that the federal government reject the LMN's comprehensive land claim, although no final decision has been made. The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador recognizes the Innu and Inuit as Labrador's only Indigenous people.
7. See, for example, the "Medical Report of the Sanitary Condition of the Fishing Stations of Newfoundland visited by HMS NIOBE" (1870, cited in Smallwood, 1984:876).
8. The crop is the pouch in a bird's gullet where food is prepared for digestion.

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