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REVIEWS

A Way of Life That Does Not Exist. Canada and the Extinguishment of the Innu. Colin Samson. London, New York: VERSO; St. John's: ISER, 388 pp., plates, illus., diagrs., 2003, $29.95, trade pbk., ISBN 0-91966699x.

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THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE INNU in the two Labrador communities of Sheshatshiu and Utshimassits (Davis Inlet), and the impact of the policies and behaviours of Canadian institutions on the Innu, their society and culture. The predicament of the Labrador Innu has been extensively reported in the media, and should be well known to the Canadian public. Their plight has also made headlines in the international press, notably when five youngsters in Davis Inlet were rescued from a willed act of collective suicide. The case of the Innu has been brought to the Human Rights Commission in Geneva (Rich 1994), and has also been dealt with by a Canadian Human Rights Commission (McRae 1993) and in a number of other publications.

The book consists of nine chapters, each written as a separate essay depicting selected aspects of the processes by which the dominant Canadian society has drawn, and continues to draw, the Innu into an ever-tighter state of dependency. However, to read and to review this piece of work is a trying and provocative experience. On the one hand, the author, a sociologist, describes well how the Innu have been treated by the dominant society, and he documents many of the severe problems which the Innu face in terms of health, land rights, and the justice system. He shows how the school curriculum fails to reflect Innu society and culture adequately, thus promoting cultural assimilation. On the other hand, on a number of central issues the analysis is surprisingly flawed. The author has, right from the out-

set, the answers to all the problematic phenomena he chooses to describe, and simply avoids many questions that he should have both asked and argued in order to make a proper analysis. It is certainly legitimate to have opinions and to argue them with force, including opinions about issues that may be politically contentious. But in order to make sound and credible arguments, one must take into proper account alternative interpretations. Samson does not do that.

"Chapter 1," writes the author, "begins with perhaps the central most important facet of the transformation of the Innu, that is, sedentarization itself, with the accompanying imposition of the state and formal authority structures among the Innu. By imposing itself on a formerly autonomous people and acting on prior interventions of missionaries, Canada itself created the conditions for political extinguishment, and it is here that we start" (24-25). These are big and important issues, so much so that they really deserve a book of their own. They are issues faced by indigenous peoples all over the world: namely, how to organize themselves in order to be able to deal with large and powerful structures such as states, industrial companies and multinationals. Indeed, having a voice at the United Nations and at the recently created Permanent Forum demands local and regional political structures that can instruct and receive reports from delegates. Facing such challenges, how can small-scale indigenous societies, "with no tradition of representative authority" (38), build adequate social infrastructures without setting into motion extensive social and cultural transformations? How does "a formerly autonomous people" maintain its autonomy? And what, may we ask, does autonomy mean under changing circumstances during the history of a people like the Innu?

Samson does not ask such questions. He simply says that the institutions imposed by the state, such as the Band Councils and the position of the Chief, had nothing to do with the traditional social organization of the Innu, and hence should be repudiated as an act of colonialism. He also dismisses the Innu Nation, the regional organization. He says correctly that the Band Council with its Chief was created by the state, in order for Canada to have someone to address when dealing with issues affecting Native peoples, in particular land and resources. Also, those who represent the Innu through the Band Councils and the Innu Nation are paid by the Canadian government, which adds to their tangled and contradictory position (38).

Most people are aware of these aspects of Innu organization. These institutions have been around for some 30 years, and the Native peoples of Canada, including the Innu, have turned them into their own political instruments. Although these institutions are not devoid of problems, what are the alternatives? Samson's answer seems to be that the Innu should go back to the country, and leave behind the village with all its foreign institutions. The scale of this idea will become clearer as we proceed. And I cannot resist the temptation to ask whether or not Samson also would advocate that the Norwegian Sami dismantle their Sami Parliament, established only in 1989, and paid by the Norwegian government? And what about Greenland Home Rule? And what about Nunavut? If he does not think that these political insti-

tutions, invented and built in societies without any traditions for representative authority, should be dismantled, then why not?

In the last section of Chapter 1 the author deals with some fundamental questions concerning comprehensive land claims, notably what he calls the "paradox of sovereignty": states make the laws that regulate their relations with indigenous peoples, and then position themselves outside the law so that they are "impervious to any violations of them by invoking sovereignty" (49-50). This is certainly a good point, although Samson does not mention that international law and conventions may provide potential escape routes. This paradox is likely to have frustrated any person who has worked on land claims from the indigenous side of the table. Having been employed by the Naskapi Montagnais Innu Association (the predecessor of the Innu Nation) in order to document land use by the Mushuau Innu of Utshimassits (Davis Inlet) in preparation for land claims negotiations, I appreciate Samson's reflections. It was indeed a maddening experience at that time (1975-76) for the Innu, who felt forced to document the use of the land that had been theirs for thousands of years. Not only that, but they had to produce documentation and work towards negotiations, with all the terms of the proceedings being defined by the state. Only a very few of the Mushuau Innu spoke English, and then only to a limited degree. Hardly any of them could read or write in English, the Chief signing his name with an X. All of this filled me with a deep sense that an injustice was being done to the Innu, and I know that many of the Mushuau Innu felt the same way (Henriksen n.d.).

In spite of this, I do not find Samson's arguments convincing in Chapter 2, where he castigates anthropologists and other advisers who do land claims work for the Innu. His critique is based on the admittedly unacceptable position in which the Innu are placed by the "paradox of sovereignty," and on his view that the Band Councils and the Innu Nation cannot be seen as representative bodies. Furthermore, Chapter 2, called "The Map Precedes the Territory," is mainly a critique of the methodology and the data which provide the basis for land rights negotiations. Using computerized techniques, the advisers produce maps intended to document how the Innu use their land. The gist of Samson's argument is that however refined the techniques, the maps can never represent the landscape as it changes with the seasons, nor how the Innu charge it with meaning, and live and move in it. "Nothing representational could capture the movements or the visions of the hunters" (75). To this I say, "Of course not," and I suspect that the advisers employed by the Innu Nation, whom Samson so harshly portrays as improperly motivated agents of colonialism, would say the same. Even books, however well written, cannot fully do justice to lived experience.

Even if one accepts the author's critique of the procedures and methodologies used in land claims, one has to ask what the alternative is. Again, Samson does not pose the question. He only seems to imply that the Innu should not engage in any kind of process leading to a land claims treaty. This is in spite of what one of his in-

formants said during a meeting at which the mapping methodology was presented by some of the advisers.

> At this point, the first retort came from the audience, who were in effect being lectured on who they were. Slinking [*sic*] back in his seat, Ben Michel observed that we couldn't really speak of the Innu in isolation, given the rapidly encroaching world. The categories neatly displayed on the computer-generated transparencies had not taken into account all the violations and intrusions into the Innu hunting world by mining companies and other industrial concerns. Whatever "Innu culture" was, it was currently a dynamic engagement with Akaneshaut[1] (plural of Akaneshau). (67)

If Ben Michel is right, which of course he is, how should the Innu go about dealing with "the rapidly encroaching world" and their "currently dynamic engagement with Akaneshaut," if not, among other things, through land claims, through Band Councils and the Innu Nation? Even if Samson dismisses these institutions and their efforts to cope with the "rapidly encroaching world" as misplaced "*real-politik*" (81), perhaps Ben Michel and others of Samson's informants have some alternatives? But Samson himself seems to have an easy answer to the land claims process: either the Innu get "all of their land, or they refuse to participate" (81).

A brief remark on the methodology should be inserted here. As I have already noted, I find the author's rendering of the Innu and the situation in which they find themselves seriously biased. Though Samson tells us that he has spoken to many people, both Innu and non-Innu, there is an absence of voices. Thus, in the quotation above, we do not get enough information to be able to interpret what Ben Michel is actually saying about the issue at hand. The reader is asked to accept Samson's interpretation, which emerges only implicitly as part of the author's rendering of the situation. Samson uses words and expressions in order to create an atmosphere supportive of what he wants to get across. Thus in the quotation above, "Slinking [*sic*] back in his seat, Ben Michel observed ... " (81), the use of the word "slinking" clearly connotes something negative, but we are not told how Ben Michel himself thinks or feels about the situation and the issue at hand. Describing a meeting in which advisers presented their land claims work to the Innu, Samson writes, "Likewise, Ben's humour indicated the presence of the Innu, a presence that was *struggling to breathe in the stuffy room*" (72, my italics). I am not saying that social scientists should not use their writing skills in order to communicate their arguments effectively. However, in doing so the reader must be given the information needed to check on the author's interpretation of the events in question. In the case of this book and what it purports to investigate, we need the many and different voices of both the Innu and the non-Innu.

In his portrayal of the non-Innu advisers, Samson does not give them a voice. He casts them in a wholly negative light, without even once shifting the argument, giving no consideration whatsoever to the arguments and explanations that I am sure some of the advisers must have given him. Samson does a disservice to him-

self, to the Innu, to Canadians and to Canada on issues that are of importance to all parties. And what, we must ask, are the arguments of the Innu leaders who have employed the non-Innu advisers to help them prepare for the land rights negotiations?

In describing the relationship between the Innu and the Euro-Canadian society, Samson portrays the Innu as passive victims of colonization. The very title of the book, *A Way of Life That Does Not Exist*, indicates the perspective that permeates the text. Granted, there is no denying the overwhelming influence of the encompassing society, and of the violence carried out by Euro-Canadian individuals and institutions against Innu society and culture. Nevertheless, we have to accept that the Innu themselves have chosen to replace tents made of caribou hides and heated by open fires with cotton tuck and sheet-metal stoves, and have chosen more recently to move into modern, furnished houses. They have chosen to use rifles and shotguns rather than bow and arrows. They chose to adopt the dog sled from the Inuit, and have now chosen to discard the sled and the canoe in favour of the snowmobile and motor-powered boats. Unless we accept this, then we can hardly say anything about how the Innu can deal with the economic and political challenges that they are facing today. It is too easy to say that the Innu have been colonized, and that the use of modern technology is the result of cultural assimilation and unacceptable Akaneshau policies. When carried to the extreme, this depicts the Innu as submissive in dealing with the Akaneshaut, as inert agents, unable to deal either with their present situation or to navigate themselves into a wanted future. Again, there is no denying the formidable problems that followed the sedentarization process, but it is vital to include the constructive and innovative agency of the Innu in one's analysis. It is true that Samson, in his Prologue, acknowledges that the Innu "made voluntary changes under the influences of the people who colonized them," such as the adoption of non-Native technology, and he mentions specifically the use of airplane charters as something that is desirable (20). The problem is that he leaves it at that. Neither does he discuss the far-reaching economic consequences of such changes, and their wider adaptational implications, such as the need for new sources of income, including the means to pay salaries to those who shall do the job of representing them.

When I visited the Mushuau Innu in their new community of Natuashish in the fall of 2003, I met a number of young men and women who were optimistic and eager to make a difference to their community. They said that they wanted to look forward and not backward into the past. Building on their traditions, yes, but not being stuck in the past.

Samson is concerned with "cultural integrity in peoples," and he says he has "attempted to preserve an understanding of the Innu as a people. This is not to fix the Innu as static and bounded, for I recognize that they are not" (22). I agree with him on this, but as I read his book I found much evidence to the contrary in his rendering of how the Innu live today. I have discussed his treatment of the Band Councils, the Innu Nation, and the land claims process. Other examples can be added, in

which he comes close to saying, by implication, that the only authentic Innu culture is that which unfolds in the country. In his extremely critical exposition of the "culture days" in school, he writes, "Knowledge of the legends, stories, and Animal Gods, sometimes imparted to children by older people who have been asked to participate, is out of context and abstract in a school building in the community, far removed from the areas of importance to the Innu" (191). I can agree with Samson on one level, but there is a problem with the way in which he presents his material and his views. In one way it is "out of context." However, the school, even with all its non-Native teachers, is also an Innu context, just like the preference for "pop, candy and potato chips" rather than "caribou stew" (191) is part of today's Innu context. (And we could add TV, video players, taking the airplane to Goose Bay for Christmas shopping, and so on.) Instead of depicting the "culture days" negatively, they can be seen as a challenge. One cannot on the one hand lament the fact that the curriculum lacks material on Innu history and culture, and then simply dismiss efforts to produce and convey such material. I would also argue that it is of the utmost importance for the Innu to gain access to their myths and legends in school, both in oral and written format, so that this material, in combination with other cultural stuff, traditional as well as non-traditional, can be forged into tools whereby the Innu can talk, and write, constructively and innovatively, about themselves and their society (Henriksen 2003).

Note

[1]Akaneshau translates as English speaker, i.e., non-Native.

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