

CULTURAL SURVIVAL STUDIES
IN ETHNICITY AND CHANGE

David Maybury-Lewis and Theodore Macdonald, Jr., Series Editors



Defending the Land

Sovereignty and Forest Life
in James Bay Cree Society

Second Edition

Ronald Niezen

SECOND EDITION

Defending the Land Sovereignty and Forest Life in James Bay Cree Society

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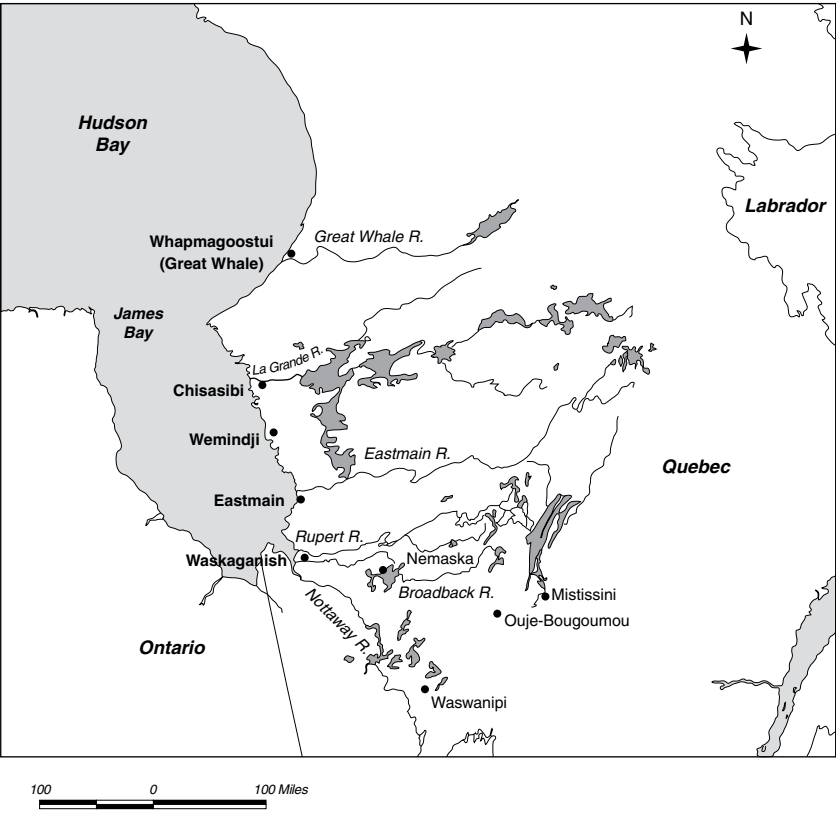
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To the memory of Robert Epstein



Cree Villages and Major Rivers of the James Bay Region.

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Foreword to the Series

Cultural Survival is an organization founded in 1972 to defend the human rights of indigenous peoples, who are those, like the Indians of the Americas, who have been dominated and marginalized by peoples different from themselves. Since the states that claim jurisdiction over indigenous peoples consider them aliens and inferiors, they are among the world's most underprivileged minorities, facing a constant threat of physical extermination and cultural annihilation. This is no small matter, for indigenous peoples make up approximately five percent of the world's population. Most of them wish to become successful ethnic minorities, meaning that they be permitted to maintain their own traditions even though they are out of the mainstream in the countries where they live. Indigenous peoples hope therefore for multi-ethnic states that will tolerate diversity in their midst. In this their cause is the cause of ethnic minorities worldwide and is one of the major issues of our times, for the vast majority of states in the world are multi ethnic. The question is whether states are able to recognize and live peaceably with ethnic differences, or whether they will treat them as an endless source of conflict.

Cultural Survival works to promote multi ethnic solutions to otherwise conflictive situations. It sponsors research, advocacy, and publications which examine situations of ethnic conflict, especially (but not exclusively) as they affect indigenous peoples, and suggests solutions for them. It also provides technical and legal assistance to indigenous peoples and organizations.

This series of monographs entitled *Cultural Survival Studies in Ethnicity and Change* is published in collaboration with Pearson/Prentice Hall. It will focus on problems of ethnicity in the modern world and how they affect the interrelations between indigenous peoples, ethnic groups, and the state.

The studies will focus on the situations of ethnic minorities and of indigenous peoples, who are a special kind of ethnic minority, as they try to defend their rights, their resources, and their ways of life within modern states. Some of the volumes in the series will deal with general themes, such

as ethnic conflict, indigenous rights, socio-economic development, or multiculturalism. These volumes will contain brief case studies to illustrate their general arguments. Meanwhile the series as a whole plans to publish a larger number of books that deal in depth with specific cases. It is our conviction that good case studies are essential for a better understanding of issues that arouse such passion in the world today and this series will provide them. Its emphasis nevertheless will be on relating the particular to the general in the comparative contexts of national or international affairs.

The books in the series will be short, averaging approximately 160 pages in length, and written in a clear and accessible style aimed at students and the general reader. They are intended to clarify issues that are often obscure or misunderstood and that are not treated succinctly elsewhere. It is our hope therefore that they will also prove useful as reference works for scholars and policy makers.

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Preface

It is indicative of the rapid, seemingly accelerating pace of change in James Bay Cree society that when offered the opportunity to prepare a second edition of this book, a mere decade after its first appearance, I find it difficult to decide what to include. To have thoroughly discussed every subsequent event, every key political decision, every process of irrevocable social transformation, along with the full spectrum of efforts to anchor Cree culture to its core values based in the forest way of life, would have changed this uncomplicated book beyond recognition. To maintain the integrity of the existing narrative, I have chosen to concentrate a small (but dense) amount of new material into an epilogue that discusses the most important recent changes in Cree society: the approval of a New Relationship Agreement between the James Bay Crees and the government of Quebec, which prepared the way for a new phase of hydroelectric development on the Rupert and Eastmain rivers, the conditions for which include revenue for the Crees of \$3.6 billion over the next 50 years.

The possibilities inherent in this Agreement would make it an ideal place to discuss the paradoxes of hyper-modernity in the context of a people who have had a leadership role in the transnational struggle for recognition of indigenous peoples, whose identities revolve around simple, subsistence-based ways of life. But should it really be a surprise that, out of a dizzyingly rapid transition—over only a few generations—from a subsistence-based, fur-trading economy with informal leadership to bureaucratically managed communities in the epicenters of large-scale projects of resource extraction, there should be a revival of the essential values following from spiritually integrated human–animal relationships and a return to the simplicity and healing power of life in the forest?

There are more complex issues that follow from the dynamics of cultural representation in the context of publicly mediated cultural defense to the processes of transnational activism that built pressure toward the New Relationship Agreement. What might be the limitations of the “politics of embarrassment,” undertaken so effectively by the James Bay Crees? Can

public lobbying in defense of distinct rights be relied upon to the exclusion of other forms of judicial or political remedy? What might be the consequences of "success" in campaigns of political and cultural representation? For me, these are the issues that come most immediately to mind when faced with the challenge of discussing the very recent history of the James Bay Crees.

Since this book was written I have not revisited the Cree communities, but have shifted my experience and intellectual attention in the direction of the Grand Council's transnational activism. In updating my acknowledgements, I am therefore above all grateful to the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) for including me in their delegations as an observer in meetings on the Draft U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1996), the World Health Organization's first International Consultation on the Health of Indigenous Peoples (1999), and a preparatory meeting on the U.N. Permanent forum for Indigenous Issues at the U.N. headquarters in Geneva (2000). The Pimicikamak Cree Nation of northern Manitoba kindly included me in a delegation, jointly attended by the Grand Council, to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs in Ottawa (1999). Each of these experiences gave me the opportunity to hear the views and witness the strategies of the James Bay Cree leadership in the public sphere, leading me toward a more complete understanding of the Crees as a political entity, with the struggles and opportunities of an emerging nation within a nation-state. My thanks go to Ted Moses, Mathew Mukash, Romeo Saganash, Ashley Iserhoff, and many others for those conversations, widely distributed in space and time, which have directly and indirectly shaped my understanding of Cree nationalism and internationalism. My students and colleagues at McGill University have to a surprising degree also contributed toward keeping me up to date with the issues and events surrounding the James Bay Crees. Financial and logistical support for the additions to this text came from a consultation I undertook in 2001–2002 on the concept of culture elaborated by the Canadian Supreme Court in decisions involving aboriginal rights and resource extraction, jointly sponsored by the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) and the Assembly of First Nations. I was also assisted in my research by Laura Chassaigne and Matthew Pettite through funds made available from a Canada Research Chair in the Comparative Study of Indigenous Rights and Identity.

Attentive readers might note that I have changed the dedication of this new edition (with the encouragement of my first dedicatee) to Robert Epstein, who, more than anyone involved in the collaborations and contestations of indigenous activism that I can think of, grounded a personal sense of indignation at the human consequences of injustice in a measured, strategically fine-tuned logic of fairness.

Montreal
8 November, 2007

Acknowledgments

My first debt of gratitude is to the many Cree people who contributed openly and generously to several research projects under the auspices of the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay. The Cree Health Board hired me in 1987 and asked that I visit the (then) eight Cree communities as part of a project investigating the needs and activities of their social service branch. In April, 1992, I returned after being invited to participate in the spring caribou hunt; and from June–September, 1992, and July–August, 1993, I was invited to conduct interviews on traditional healing in Chisasibi and Mistissini. This work was supplemented by visits during ‘goose-break’ in May, 1994, and October, 1995. During these stays, the Cree Health Board assisted by arranging interviews and providing my accommodation, and funding was provided by the Clark Fund and Milton Fund of Harvard University. James Bobbish, General Manager of the Cree Health Board, was instrumental in encouraging this work and coming out with important insights during our ‘power lunches’ at Chisasibi’s arena restaurant. During several of these visits, Sam Kitty and William Cromarty gave me memorable introductions to hunting activities. The James Bay Telecommunications Society made an important contribution to this research in the form of recorded interviews with elders from the weekly radio program, *Chischaiyu Aitimuun*, “the mind of an elder.” Annie House, translator for the Youth Court, provided excellent translations of these narratives from the difficult Cree of elders into English. Funding for this translation project was generously provided by the Milton Fund of the Harvard Medical School. In the summer of 1996, the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation provided me with an important comparative experience by asking me to visit six Cree and Ojibwa communities in northern Ontario as part of a mental health policy development program. Although very little material from this project found its way into the present volume, it was significant in broadening my understanding of the situations and struggles of native peoples in the North. Support during the writing of the manuscript, in the form of a paper-storm of documents, was provided by Robert Epstein and Ann Stewart. The