

Beyond the Conflict: The Reconstruction of the O-Pipon-Na-Piwin First Nation Community in Manitoba

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In the early 1960s, Manitoba Hydro, along with the governments of Manitoba and Canada, initiated the Churchill River Diversion-Lake Winnipeg Regulation, a large hydroelectric project in Northern Manitoba that adversely affected five Aboriginal communities which ultimately led to the relocation of the community of South Indian Lake. Even though an agreement concerning compensation for the communities was signed in order to mitigate the effects of the CRD-LWR, it did not solve the mounting social, economic, and health problems facing First Nations – especially those faced by the relocated South Indian Lake. Drawing from the experience of the community of South Indian Lake, we examine how traditions and legal constraints are now mobilized and interpreted by the members of the First Nations. We are especially interested in the strategy put forward by the leadership of South Indian Lake to obtain Band status, as well as the community's innovative efforts to rebuild its relationship with the territory and produce a common culture.

Keywords: First Nations, Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal territory, Aboriginal identity, Band status, Reserve housing, South Indian Lake, Manitoba Hydro.

In the early 1960s, a Crown Corporation Manitoba Hydro, the Government of Manitoba, and the federal government developed a plan for a major hydroelectric project in Northern Manitoba known as the Churchill River Diversion (CRD) and Lake Winnipeg Regulation (LWR). The project was nurtured and developed for a number of years without taking into account the presence of several Aboriginal communities potentially affected (Waldram, 1984). One of these communities was South Indian Lake, a small community whose residents were registered as members of the Nelson House band, known today as the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN).

Due to the CRD hydro development, the community of South Indian Lake, which is at the center of our discussion, experienced many disruptions to their

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livelihood and culture. For example, the community was relocated and housing was rationalized according to a suburban planning model – a model that does not take into account the specific privacy needs and traditional spatial organization of families (Waldram, 1984). The CRD hydro development also caused dramatic environmental issues, such as territorial flooding, that had economic consequences on the way of life and earned incomes of South Indian Lake residents. Moreover, four hundred people (now grouped together as the Displaced Residents of South Indian Lake) left because they were unable to rebuild their livelihood.

Although an agreement was signed in 1977 to compensate the northern Aboriginal communities affected and mitigate the effects of the CRD, Manitoba Hydro and the provincial government made various attempts to avoid fulfilling their legal obligations (Waldram, 1984). After years of legal disputes and hard negotiations, a compensation package was awarded in 1992 to the Community Association of South Indian Lake. However, according to several observers (Hoffman, 2002, 2008; Waldram, 1999), this compensation package did not solve the social and economic difficulties caused by flooding of hunting and fishing grounds and the community divisions that had arisen from these new economic and social conditions. On December 22, 2005, the leaders of the community of South Indian Lake signed a final agreement to activate their status as a First Nation, the O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN). According to the new Chief, this event marked the beginning of a new era of development, growth, and cooperation with Manitoba Hydro and the governments of Canada and Manitoba.

Drawing from the experience of the community of South Indian Lake, this paper examines the innovative ways in which the members of the community sought to rebuild their relationship with the territory. Past researches on hydro development within Aboriginal territory have largely focused on environmental changes and socioeconomic factors, but rarely has it focused on the new relationship that Aboriginal peoples establish with their territory, as re-shaped by the complexity of hydro development.

In this article, the factors that led members of the O-Pipon-Na-Piwin First Nation to negotiate for band status are examined. The relationship between traditional and modern institutions and the way traditions and legal constraints are mobilized and reinterpreted to produce a particular and common culture are then discussed. To illustrate this relationship between modernity and tradition, three major initiatives developed by the community to regain control over their territory are analyzed: new housing policy, Ke-We-Ka-Pa-We-Tan and Windigo Wander'ers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The initial data for this study was obtained from several research reports (Bodaly, Hecky, and Fudge 1984; Canada, 1996, 1992; Coates, 1986; Cobb, 1993; Dougherty,

1984; Duckworth, 1967; Prairie Research Associates, 2002; Tritschler, 1979; Van Ginkel Associates, 1967), as well as academic publications dedicated to describing the evolution of socioeconomic conditions in Aboriginal communities in Northern Manitoba and the development of hydro projects in the region (Chodkiewicz and Brown, 1999; Hoffman, 2002, 2008; Kulchyski, 2008; Friesen, 1984; Loney, 1995; Niezen, 1993; Waldram, 1980, 1883, 1984, 1987, 1988, 1999).

The second data consists of interviews administered in South Indian Lake during three different phases of fieldwork. The first interviews of six participants which was conducted in spring 2005 was aimed at examining community issues with local leaders, both formal (members of CASIL-Community Association of South Indian Lakes and the South Indian Lake Fisherman's Association) and informal (elders, teachers, social workers). These interviews were also conducted to identify, in each leader's opinion, what were the important issues to be addressed by the survey. Next, fifty semi-structured interviews with participatory observation were conducted in South Indian Lake in the spring of 2007. Interview questions were designed to assess changes in community networks, public life, family activities, and reciprocity networks since the relocation. These variables were based on previous experiences in assessing solidarity among two Inuit communities impacted by the James Bay hydroelectric project in Northern Quebec (Martin, 2003). The interview questions were submitted to the band council for feedback. Comments received were incorporated in the second interview. A sample of fifty people was purposely selected, although most of the people were recommended by the band council or community associations. Even though the sample was not designed to represent the entire population, effort was made to interview a variety of residents to reflect the diversity of the community by such variables as age, sex, and occupation. A third fieldwork was undertaken in 2009 summer. Fifteen interviews were conducted using the same interview technique. In addition, a meeting was held with members of the band council and agents of major institutions who were interviewed in 2007.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the 19th century, the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company established several fur trading posts in the area of Southern Indian Lake. With the signing of Treaty Five in 1905, these posts were surrendered to the federal government. As a result, several reserves were created. At first, the northern reserves were inhabited by relatively few families, but overtime, and especially after the Second World War, the population of the reserves increased rapidly. Since the reserves are small and have limited economic base several social problems emerged. In order to prevent the deteriorating social, economic and health conditions, several families from the Nelson House reserve left to "squat" in a former Northwest Company post that had been established in the 1930s at the south end of the Southern Indian

Lake. They were later joined by several Métis families and some non-native trappers that intermarried with Aboriginal women. Trapping and commercial fishing became the major sources of cash income in the new community of South Indian Lake.

On the eve of the hydroelectric project in the 1960s, South Indian Lake was one of the most self-reliant communities in Northern Manitoba (Hoffman, 2008). The community of 800 inhabitants had developed an economic model that relied on both traditional activities, such as fishing and trapping, and the adoption of new forms of exploitation of natural resources, such as “semi-industrial” cooperative of a fishing operation. These activities were the cornerstones of an economic system which employed “some 80 to 125 licensed fishermen and 80 to 150 licensed trappers.” (Hoffman, 2008, 112). This combination of activities guaranteed the cohesiveness of the community (Waldram, 1983).

Although the CRD hydro development project was bound to disrupt the life of thousands of Aboriginal people (members of Northern Manitoba's Cree First Nations), its social repercussions were not considered during its design phase. For instance, the original scheme involved raising the level of Southern Indian Lake and flooding the Aboriginal community of South Indian Lake (Tristchel, 1979). Nevertheless, advocates of the project disregarded the environmental and biological changes, as well as the social impact on Aboriginal people that occurred from “re-engineering” the water regime. The resettlement of the community of South Indian Lake was not even mentioned by Manitoba Hydro in the initial plan. This was acknowledged in the Duckworth Report published in 1967 by a research team at the University of Manitoba (Duckworth, 1967). The report identified important negative effect of the project and proposed another plan to avoid this relocation. This alternative solution was not conceived favourably by Manitoba Hydro and the Government of Manitoba, and so they preferred to rely on the conclusions from a report, written by a consulting firm Van Ginkel Associates, which concluded that the traditional way of life of the Cree which is based on trapping, hunting, and fishing was not sustainable and therefore likely to disappear. According to the report's authors, the dam would be a move forward for the community (Van Ginkel, 1967). Indeed, since several direct, indirect, and induced jobs would be created for the construction of the dam, the hydroelectric complex would compensate for the decline in traditional activities by preparing the Aboriginal labour force to enter the industrial sector. The communities engaged in this modernization process would “evolve” from a traditional form of organization to a contemporary one more adapted to the realities of Canadian society. This “progress” was deemed to be important enough to justify the adverse effects of the relocation and land destruction.

In the late 1960s, the sole opponents of the CRD project, besides the members of South Indian Lake and Nelson House, were mostly academics and religious organizations. In 1970, after the announcement that the CRD project would be combined with the Lake Winnipeg Regulation (LWR), four other communities joined their voices as opponents and asked for more reliable information about the overall im-

pact of the hydro complex (Cobb, 1993). From 1970 to 1974, Aboriginal communities made several unsuccessful attempts to obtain information. However, licences for LWR and CRD were issued (in 1970 and 1972 respectively) and Manitoba Hydro made available neither the development plans nor impact studies. One of the numerous pieces of misinformation they spread was that no community would be flooded. According to Waldram (1984, 220) “a whole process of misinformation began early in the development plans of Manitoba Hydro and continued until the project became operational in 1976.”

THE NORTHERN FLOOD COMMITTEE AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NORTHERN FLOOD AGREEMENT

Without adequate answers to their concerns, the affected Aboriginal communities decided to form the Northern Flood Committee (NFC). The goal of the committee was to “represent, organize, negotiate on behalf of, obtain information bearing upon, and take whatever further and other steps as may be necessary to protect the rights, interests and property (both real and personal) of communities and individuals affected by the hydro-electric development in Northern Manitoba commonly known as the Churchill-Nelson River Diversion project” (NFC, 1975, 1). Though the initial position of the NFC was to oppose Manitoba Hydro and the province on behalf of the entire population that would potentially be affected, their position shifted in the mid-seventies. They chose, in 1975, to represent only the Treaty members of Northern Manitoba because the protection of reserve land was their only legal basis for negotiation. As stated in Treaty 5, “the aforesaid reserves of land, or any interest therein, may be sold or otherwise disposed of by her Majesty’s Government for the use and benefit of the said Indians entitled thereto, with their consent first had and obtained” (Cobb, 1992, 30).

Adopting this position was also a means for Aboriginal leaders to obtain funding from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND). The strategy was designed to oppose the provincial government and Manitoba Hydro on the basis that the project was a violation of their treaty rights established with the Crown. However, Manitoba Hydro and the Government of Manitoba did not recognize the NFC as a legitimate negotiating agent. The Manitoba Government claimed that the NFC “usurped the role of government for the native people in Northern Manitoba” (Martin, 1975, 1). Moreover, the provincial government argued that it was more advantageous to the individuals themselves if the Province of Manitoba negotiated with them directly. Indeed, “The government believed that individuals or communities might wish to deal with the Government directly and it was the Premier’s view that Government would be abrogating its responsibility if it refused to deal directly in such case” (Tristchler, 1979, 213). This argument was an indication of the bad faith that characterized the attitude adopted by the

Government of Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro during the negotiation process.

Although the NFC was unhappy with the proposed Northern Flood Agreement, they came to realize that they had exhausted their options for recourse to stop the project and were not able to obtain a better deal. Without any other leverage, the NFC signed the agreement in December 1977. The agreement was signed on behalf of all the First Nations affected by the CRD: Split Lake, Nelson House, Cross Lake, and Norway House. However, it soon became apparent that the issue concerning the members of the Nelson House First Nation who resided in South Indian Lake fell in a legal grey area that was subject to interpretation. Indeed, as Cobb pointed out in 1989, the NFA arbitrator ruled that SIL residents were not beneficiaries of the NFA since they were living "off reserve", but nevertheless admitted that "they had jurisdiction to deal with their claims for Project related impacts." (Cobb, 1992, 42)

Even though the protection of treaty rights was the leverage used by the NFC to compel the other parties to negotiate, its centrality and significance to the final agreement are questionable. Cobb (1992) believes that Manitoba Hydro and the Government of Manitoba signed this agreement to legitimize an appropriation, for the good of the majority, of the reserve lands allocated by treaty to the Aboriginal signees. While the NFA stated that the five First Nations signatory to the agreement would be compensated for damages and losses, it also described such commitments as the protection of traditional resource harvesting, improvement of socioeconomic conditions for the Aboriginal communities, training and employment opportunities related to the CRD, and the monitoring of environmental and social effects of the CRD with tolerance limits that the Government of Manitoba and Hydro Manitoba had to respect. Nevertheless, at the time the agreement was achieved, no annual compensation payment was defined.

Unlike the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) that created territorial regimes, a consultative committee for the protection of the social and biological environment, and programs to preserve Cree culture such as Cree School Boards and a Hunter Support Program, the NFA had no provision to preserve traditional values and practices. As a result, Northern Manitoba Aboriginal communities were left without institutional instruments to cope with the social and environmental impact of the hydro project. Moreover, Manitoba Hydro and the province were very slow and reluctant to comply with the few commitments they had made in the agreement. In effect, several years after the NFA was achieved, Aboriginal communities received only some monetary payments for remedial works, while no real investment in the development of the communities was made (Cobb, 1992).

The relationship between the parties therefore became quite antagonistic. In order to solve their disputes, Aboriginal people requested for arbitration. The arbitration process had, however, an adverse effect on the Aboriginal communities since, according to Cobb (1992) the government of Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro took advantage of the arbitration to slow down compensation payments. Cobb also con-

tends that Manitoba Hydro and Manitoba signed this agreement only to legitimize the appropriation for the good of the common of Aboriginal lands but not to create a real framework to help Aboriginal communities to cope with the changes induced by the project. This situation became more unbearable for NFC that had to face increasing frustration within the Aboriginal communities. As a result, the NFC agreed in 1990 to a Proposed Basis of Settlement that defined the guidelines for each affected community to negotiate its own compensation package (especially the financial components). This was another set-back to the NFC, since it had always demanded a global implementation process in order to prevent Manitoba Hydro and the Government of Manitoba from implementing a “divide and conquer” strategy. Over the following years, each affected community signed a separate settlement agreement with the Crown. In 1992, the Community Association of South Indian Lake (CASIL), acting on behalf of the people of South Indian Lake, signed an \$18 million dollar agreement known as the CASIL agreement (Hoffman, 2008).

THE CREATION OF THE RESERVE

The conflict between the Government of Manitoba, Manitoba Hydro, and the community of South Indian Lake did not end with the CASIL agreement. Indeed, in 1997, Manitoba Hydro announced a new hydroelectric project, the Wuskwatim, that would again affect the community. In order to go forward with the project, Manitoba Hydro sought a partnership with the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN) and promised great economic benefits. However, this project had to be approved in a referendum by affected First Nations comprising of Nelson House and South Indian Lake. The problem for the promoters of the project was that one quarter of the NCN membership lived in South Indian Lake – a community that opposed the project, and in fact threatened to halt it, because the potential impact was perceived to be more adverse there than in Nelson House (Kulchyski, 2008). As Chief Baker of South Indian Lake contended, it was only “a proposed partnership between Manitoba Hydro and the people of Nelson House.” (Baker, 2004, 1)

Meanwhile, the Government of Manitoba and the federal government had signed a draft agreement in 1995 for the constitution of a new band in South Indian Lake: the O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN). The creation of the reserve was delayed for ten years, however, due to lack of commitment by the federal and provincial governments. As long as the OPCN band was not officially created, members of South Indian Lake also had the right to participate in a referendum regarding the Wuskwatim project. Everyone anticipated strong opposition from the residents of South Indian Lake and some feared that the proposed agreement would not survive the referendum. Ironically, in 2005, the South Indian Lake leaders won their case after countless attempts and obtained a band status for their community – just before voting for the Wuskwatim project. As a result, a few months before the vote, about

one quarter of voters, mostly those who opposed the project, were made ineligible as "the federal government inexplicably finally stepped in to create a separate band for South Indian Lake" (Kulchyski, 2008, 143). According to Kulchyski (2008), the recognition of this new band was another indication of the "divide and conquer" strategy long used by the Government of Manitoba and Manitoba Hydro.

While for many years the people of South Indian Lake resisted all initiatives from the provincial and federal governments they surprisingly agreed to accelerate the process leading to the creation of their reserve even though it would exclude them from the debate surrounding the Wuskwatim project. This new strategy was motivated by the strong desire of the South Indian Lake to obtain band status. Indeed, if they had chosen to postpone the creation of their band, they could have prevented the adoption of the Wuskwatim project and its potential impact on the land. However, they chose to let the hydro project go ahead because it allowed them to acquire a "reserve" of their own, that is to say, a specific territory to serve as a means of identifying themselves and defining their culture.

This fight for recognition as a distinctive band also illustrates the empowerment process of an Aboriginal community, but an empowerment represented by the "ability to make choices within the context defined by the Canadian system" (Rodon, 1998, 132). The community realized the inevitability of the fact that it was difficult to win against the government and Manitoba Hydro and therefore more productive to collaborate with them. As Chief Baker suggested "It is time to turn over a new leaf with Manitoba Hydro and develop a new relationship. It is the only way. After all, they are not leaving either, so we shall be neighbours forever. The big challenge is how to go about accomplishing a more positive relationship" (Baker, 2004, 1). The place of this new relationship is the reserve which, ironically, has historically been the legal instrument of marginalizing Aboriginal people (Martin, 2009). But reserve creation became the means for the community to promote socioeconomic development, preserve cultural identity and, above all, control their destiny. This illustrates how the OPCN members exert on themselves, through their collective social practices, a reflexive action by which they write the present and, as a consequence, become authors of their own history.

Even though creation of the OPCN band marked seclusion within the periphery of the reserve, it also gave them the legal means to exercise control over their own affairs. For example, the funds they receive from the Department of Indian Affairs can be used to identify their priorities in areas like education, health and housing. These new responsibilities are great opportunities to fight against the effects of acculturation and assimilation to which they have been subjected. Instead of seeing the reserve as a means of dispossession, the leaders of South Indian Lake saw its creation as a means of decolonization. They were aware that this decolonization would be limited, but they chose this path nonetheless because it gives them a legal basis to negotiate with the government. They also have a legitimate territory defined by law that will be the ground on which they will be used to fight future legal battles.

The achievement of band status by the people of South Indian Lake as a means to regain control of their history is comparable to resettlement of their ancestors who left Nelson House, in the 1930s, to find freedom and a better life. Indeed, to many people, creation of a reserve was a means to take control of their fate and to emancipate themselves from the leadership of Nelson House. It meant being able to promote their own interests, as expressed by Chief Baker in a hearing with the Manitoba Clean Environment Commission: "We should have the right too, to speak on our behalf, and to lay out our interests, and to protect the rights of our children that will ultimately have to live with the results of any future hydro development that occurs in this province or anywhere else in the neighbouring provinces, such as Saskatchewan" (Baker, 2004, 2).

RESERVE CREATION AND CULTURAL EVOLUTION

In order to illustrate the process of empowerment and the reflexive action taken by the people of OPCN, three projects which were initiated after the reserve was created—are analyzed. These projects were chosen because they aim at rebuilding community relationship with the territory. Two projects are led by the Band Council while the third project is by community members (current and former residents).

The first project initiated is the new town planning. Presently, most Aboriginal people live in semi-urban settings which continue to destabilize relations within families and between Aboriginal people and the land. The desire to exert some control on housing development is an indication that the community wants to redefine its relationship with the territory. In 1996, the Government of Canada developed a new policy to deal specifically with Aboriginal housing issues. It gave First Nations the opportunity to play a deciding role in their housing policy by introducing new ministerial loan guarantees to promote ownership on reserves (CMHC, 2008). These policies were adopted in South Indian Lake with the hope of solving three major problems: overcrowding, inadequate housing, and unemployment (OPCN 2007b). By taking advantage of these new opportunities, the band council has promoted a policy of social housing which focuses on the construction of new houses and reduction in the number of dilapidated houses. Twenty-four new houses were built in the last four years, mostly for large families with economic difficulty and living in overcrowded conditions.¹ This housing program was implemented with the underlying goal of initiating an ownership program. Home privatisation represents a major shift in federal housing policy for Aboriginal people. However, selling homes by the South Indian Lake band council represents a major source of revenue that could be used to build more houses and reduce maintenance costs. While this policy is still at an early stage, many questions have already emerged relating to the financial and logistical management of the program and its impact on interpersonal and family relationships.

According to the results of this research, several technical and logistical problems

such as skilled labour and trade personnel (plumbers, electricians) are affecting the ability of the band council to manage this project. Also, remoteness of the community makes the transportation of building materials complicated and expensive. However, these issues are deemed secondary by the band council which prefers to point out the advantages of the program rather than its limitations. The band council seems convinced that the program will help improve maintenance of both old and newly built homes.

Besides technical challenges, it appears that this new ownership program has created conflict between people who can afford to buy a house and those who cannot. Several people claimed that it is difficult to ensure democracy and fairness of the program. They especially fear that only the most affluent members of the community will be able to get a new house. To overcome this problem, the band council proposed establishing a relationship between prices of new homes and household incomes. However, residents with permanent jobs are not in favour of this option because this would make them pay more for their homes. Actually, several people believe that the band council will not adopt this option because the band council members and the band council employees are those who will be paying more if this policy were adopted. This debate demonstrates that an economic stratification exists within the community. Moreover, the desire for private spaces and non-multigenerational houses indicates an increase in individualism rather than collectivism. The rise of individualism is seen by several as a breach of Aboriginal's community principles of sharing. They also found it regrettable that the community has to go through federal programs that pervert their traditions in order to obtain new houses.

The idea receiving most interest is favouring people with high demand for housing and strong commitment of paying mortgage and maintaining their homes in good condition irrespective of income. Yet it is also crucial to note that the first families offered houses were those in high need for homes and have been on the waiting list for a long period. These were not families with high potential of paying mortgage. As such, although the process of privatizing home ownership is in its initial stage, community values and not market rationality is the main determinant of housing allocation. The band council therefore still complies with a general framework of federal government's policy.

The desire of the community to rebuild itself on a cultural and economic system rooted in Aboriginal heritage is not only associated with initiatives of community leadership, but also initiatives by ordinary community members, like the summer gathering, Ke-We-Ka-Pa-We-Tan. The original idea of this gathering came from current OPCN residents in collaboration with Displaced Residents Association of South Indian Lake. The first Ke-We-Ka-Pa-We-Tan gathering took place in the former village in 2006 and has since become very popular. Its primary goal is to pass on Aboriginal identity, traditional culture, and practical experience to younger generation. Traditionally, children were taught spiritual identity and culture by their parents and relatives. This was an everyday learning process as part of their lifestyle

(Waldram, 1984). The relocation, residential schools, and adverse impact of the CRD have undermined their ability to maintain those traditions. According to promoters of this gathering, the gathering is a means of remembering the impact of the CRD on the environment, to refresh the collective memory, and pass on traditional knowledge. "Tracing back our roots and teachings, and our way of providing/living, children will gain a better understanding of how it was a long time ago" (OPCN, 2007a, 7).

It is the same goal of preserving community cultural heritage that guided the band council to devise and implement the Windigo Wander'ers, "festival" in which traditional activities are honoured. The activities include fishing derby, gift exchange, teaching traditional medicine, cooking competition, storyteller competition, and best-dressed camper competition. The lexicon used to promote and describe the program is unique because of its integration of Western and Aboriginal concepts and practices. Indeed, terms like "fishing derby" and "competition" are derived from lexical field of leisure, while "storyteller" and "traditional medicine" refer to Aboriginal practices.

The band council also implemented activities called "survival weekends". Survival weekends are geared towards young men who are taught traditional techniques and skills for living on the land. This activity, though, is not only a way to reconnect youth to the skills that are essential to a traditional lifestyle in their territory, but it is also a form of workforce training since young men learn skills that can later be used as tour guides. The band council wants to take advantage of the territory gained with the creation of the reserve to implement an economic system that integrates their cultural values, respecting the Aboriginal relationship to the land and vision of the world. Recreational and tourist activities are perceived as a means to support that shift. It is anticipated that these activities would create employment and re-connect the youth with their culture. It would also allow them to participate in the modern economy, which will help them to regain their pride. According to an Aboriginal elder, "when the White people took away our land we did not realize, at first, that we were losing much more than the land. That day we lost our pride, our soul". Regaining a territory has allowed the OPCN people to reconnect to the land and regain their soul.

Initiatives like the "survival weekends" are not designed only to preserve or resuscitate a lifestyle or secular tradition, but they are also aimed at promoting the integration of the community into the modern regional economy and progressively reduce dependency on government funding. Aboriginal leaders believe that transfer payments and economic compensation are necessary to lay the foundations for a stronger and self-reliant community, but they are not long term solution because they put Aboriginal people in a situation of dependency that is the cause, according to them, of many social problems. Most people interviewed acknowledged that the traditional economic system is no longer sustainable in a "pristine" form, but they believe that the values supporting that "traditional" economy should be maintained

and integrated into the modern economy. In other words, the capitalist ethics should be replaced with Aboriginal ethics of work. By doing so, the OPCN members are laying the foundation for a unique model of socioeconomic development.

CONCLUSION

Several researchers believe that Aboriginal people are caught between two worlds (Simard, 2003; Chabot, 2003; Duhaime, 1991; Duhaime et al., 2003; Flanagan, 2008; Kaalaugue, 2001). According to Flanagan (2008, 231) “the current situation of Aboriginal people thus involves a mix of two incompatible visions (separation versus assimilation)”. He further maintains that Aboriginal people are supposed to be simultaneously Canadians and First Nations, subject to Canadian law while exercising sovereignty and self-government, creating their own economies while depending on transfer payments from Canadian taxpayers. Flanagan also contends that Aboriginal people should resolve that ambivalence and realize that their only hope of improving their future lies in adopting the modern economic lifestyle.

But contrary to Flanagan, who sees duality as dead-end, Aboriginal people develop their culture by drawing from both “modernity” and “tradition”. Indeed, working to gain the comfort and security that modernity provides while maintaining values that promote ethics of reciprocity is not seen as contradictory by Aboriginal people, but rather is seen as a natural process by which they can develop their own culture. Within this perspective, a respondent of our interview indicated that: “All I want for my community is so simple that I can’t understand why it takes so much time. We need running water, houses, jobs and the right to bring up our families in a good environment. Other Canadians have it without fighting, why not us?” The same person indicated that the most important thing for his community is to preserve their lifestyle and territory. This apparent contradictory proposition illustrates the dual construction of contemporary Aboriginal communities.

A remarkable thing is that members of the O-Pipon-Na-Piwin First Nation have created their identity by accepting modernity and tradition. The historical process of political and economic deprivation and marginalization of Aboriginal people in Canada that had led to their “minority status” has not, however, deprived them from their ability to act on their destiny.

Members of South Indian Lake were left powerless after signing the NFA. At the time, there were no institutional structures created to preserve their culture and promote a socioeconomic development that would meet their aspirations. Federal and provincial governments and Manitoba Hydro had attempted to diminish their traditional activities, deemed to be anachronisms in the present age of technology (Van Ginkel Associates, 1967). But instead of considering themselves as victims of historical mistreatment, these Aboriginal people are actively engaged in shaping their present circumstances through new initiatives in a changing world. Since the

creation of the reserve in 2005, members of the OPCN have achieved an institutional power that allows them to control their destiny through such initiatives as privatization of housing, “survival weekends”, Windigo Wander’ers, and Ke-We-Ka-Pa-We-Tan gathering.

NOTES

1. Although more modern and recent than the others, due to financial constraints they share similar characteristics such as low square footage and a lack of sewage system or running water.

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