

Historical perspective on the development of the North and the contribution of Aboriginal (Cree) women

Bella Petawabano – JASP November 26, 2013

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10:45 – 11:05

Mme la Ministre, Mme Bruneau, Faisca, distinguished guests, membres du comité scientifique de la journée, my First Nation brothers and sisters and participants: Thank you for your kind invitation to this very important gathering.

My name is Bella Moses Petawabano and I am Chair of the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay. Our organization provides health and social services in ‘Region 18’ of the Quebec Health and Social Services network. We operate a hospital and 9 community health centres (which we call community Miyupimaatisiun centres) in the Cree communities of the land we know as Eeyou Istchee. Before becoming Chair, I worked for many years as Assistant Director of Public Health, where we developed public health programs focusing on maternal and child health and young families.

Let me explain a little bit about where I’m from (Eeyou Istchee)...
show the slide.

Without getting into too much detail, I will also give a bit of background on the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, because that was the biggest turning point in recent Cree history. When Premier Robert Bourassa announced his “project of the century” – a plan to dam the massive rivers of the north to generate hydro-electricity, he didn’t acknowledge the fact that this was our land, our home for at least 4000 years. This announcement was a wake up call to the Cree people. Until the 70s, we lived a very traditional life. In response to a threat to our very existence as a people, we got organized and fought both the Federal and Provincial governments to have our land rights recognized... and we won. 20 years later, we fought again, this time on a global stage, and defeated the proposal to dam the Great Whale river. These struggles – always non-violent, I should emphasise, defined the modern Cree nation that we have become today.

The main message I have for you today, about the evolving role of women in Cree society, is about *partnership* between men and women. In the 70s, it was the men who went down to Montreal and Ottawa to negotiate this treaty, while the women stayed home – literally keeping the home fires burning. But when the deal was done, and the men came home, it was the women, in many cases, who set to work building the local and regional structures that made the agreements a reality.

The transformation of women's lives in western society in the 20th Century is well-known to all of us in this room. To name just a few things - literacy, girls' education, the right to choose your own husband, the right to vote and run for elected office, the loss of midwifery traditions and the medicalization of childbirth – many of you are experts on these trends and their impacts on women's health and well-being. Cree women experienced these profound changes in only a few decades!

As I mentioned, the world before James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, the world of my youth, was in many ways isolated from modern influences. After the JBNQA, the 20th Century arrived in full force. The most significant change was that the majority of people came in from the land and settled in villages once and for all. Before 1975, there had been a more gradual trend toward settlement, but afterward, when new houses were built and huge swaths of land were flooded, most Cree families settled permanently in the villages, adopting a sedentary lifestyle. This has had wide reaching health implications that continue to this day. I need only mention one: nearly 25% of adults over 20 are diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. To a room full of public health professionals this number speaks for itself.

It's a well known fact that Cree women are pillars of strength, physically and emotionally trained for endurance. This was true in the past, and it remains true today, although today, the pressures on women are very different, and constantly changing.

Traditional Cree society was a fine-tuned survival system that relied on strictly differentiated gender roles, and boys and girls alike were socialized this way from birth.

Let me tell you about my mother and father.

My mother and father would rise before sunrise. My mother would ensure that what my father would require for his hunt was well prepared. My father would never forget to tell my mom approximately where he was going and the time of day he would be back. She would ensure amongst her many duties that she would have food ready for his return. She would continue her work by first waking the children and getting them dressed and fed. She would check the supply of food, water, firewood and boughs for the floor. If any of these were not available she would set to work to obtain them often accompanied with a young baby on her back. She used to amaze me of how she knew where to dig in 3 feet of snow to get moss to use as diapers for the baby. As the day went on, we could hear her scraping hides in the cold. She would check the rabbit snares she had set up near the camp and check her night lines for fish. What she brought home she would clean and prepare for food, in addition to cleaning, skinning and preparing hides of other animals that my father brought home. Once her duties outdoors were done, work continued indoors whether it is

cooking, doing laundry, making clothing or doing repairs. I have vivid memories of her making for each child rabbit-skin coats in preparation for the move to another camp. She would haul her own toboggan with a child or two on it along with many other necessities and would travel many kilometres. In the spring and fall, she would carry her own gear with a baby or child on top of her usual load, and walk the portages. Whether in winter or summer, my mother helped to set up camp from erecting the frame of the tent or teepee, to gathering the spruce boughs and placing them like a carpet to provide warmth for the floor. She would set out to split the wood that my father would have brought to camp and if not, she would get it herself.

The roles of my mother and father were complementary. Each was as important as the other.

There were times when we had to steer a fully loaded canoe through dangerous rapids – five people plus all our supplies and two dogs in a 16 foot canvas canoe. My mother sat in the back, paddling, and my father sat in the bow, calling out to her above the noise of the rushing water which way to go to avoid the rocks. Thanks to their communication, their skill, and their mutual trust, we always made it through safely.

Compared to other parts of Canada, Residential Schooling came relatively late to Eeyou Istchee, and it reached its peak in '60s. We can count ourselves fortunate that fewer generations of Eeyouch experienced this forced schooling compared to many other First Nations groups.

But that does not mean we were unaffected; far from it. Our communities have many people – an entire generation of people – who were removed from Eeyou/Eenou Istchee and placed in residential schools.

The arrival of residential schools accelerated the transition from the bushlife to living in the communities year-round. Robert Kanatewat, an elder who was one of the signatories of the JBNQA, talked about this time. I quote: “Living in the community started with the building of residential schools in Fort George, when the parents were asked to remain in the community during the school year so that their children could attend school. Therefore the women were unable to accompany their husbands to the traplines to hunt and trap. This lasted for a few years until the men could not continue with this leaving their wives and children behind and could not harvest as much as there was no one to do the women’s work. Eventually the men resided in the community and this is when families became poor.” The idea of poverty was one of the bitter legacies of Residential School, which destroyed the cohesion of the family group and made men unemployed.

Yes, the power structure between men and women was essentially patriarchal in traditional Cree society, and elements of that mentality persist today in the attitudes of both men and women. Of course, the

traders, priests, and even the nurses and nuns who came from outside also shared the belief that men should have dominion over women.

- When me and my husband Buckley were getting married, we went to see the Minister, John Gull, to get his advice about married life. He said to me: (*in Cree*), which means: “And you! You will never be boss!”

The fact that Cree society has seen the emergence of a whole generation of well accepted women leaders, in such a short space of time, says something about Cree men and Cree society. In spite of its patriarchal structures, there is respect, and this respect survived the shocks brought about by the transition between the old world and the new. I remember when Violet Pachanos was elected Chief of Chisasibi in the 1990s, she was at an AFN meeting, the only woman in the room, and one of the chiefs said “it’s about time we have a woman leader here, so she can clean up the mess the men have made.”

25 years ago Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come took a look at the numbers of Cree women pursuing higher education and predicted that one day the Cree Nation would be led by women. I quote:

“I told the leadership there would be a shift, a change in leadership in every facet of our organization. It would shift our culture. Our members would have to approach women in many areas, including education, health, culture, language and businesses because when you look at the stats the women are getting an education and getting their degrees.”

He said back then that the Crees would have to “Change attitude and change thinking.” “We would need to approach women to ask for things you would normally be approaching our fellow man.”

Today, in 2013, his predictions have come true. Women are history makers. They are writing their own chapters in the history of the Cree Nation.

It has taken more than 20 years, but women are now in many vital leadership roles in Eeyou Istchee. For the first time, the two biggest

social entities in the Cree Nation – the Cree Health Board and the Cree School Board, are both led by women – me and Kathleen Wootton. Others include Darlene Cheechoo, head of the Cree Regional Economic Development Commission (CREECO), Violet Pachanos, head of Niskamoon Corporation, the group that controls the allocation of the millions of dollars that have poured in over the years from Hydro-Quebec agreements. Violet is also a past Chief and Deputy Grand Chief of the Crees. Cree tourism is headed by a woman, Robin McGinley. The Human Resources Development Corporation that is now helping to lead the way for Crees to get into the work force, is led by Louisa Saganash, and the Director of Quebec Relations for the Grand Council of the Crees is my daughter Tina. One of the brightest financial analysts in the Cree Nation, Tanya Pash, who for more than 10 years now has been building a reputation for herself as the go-to person for finance with CREECO and the Board of Compensation, investing in India and China years ago before they were on the radar of major investors in the world markets. While there is only one female chief in Eeyou Istchee at the moment, Pauline Trapper in Washaw Sibi, there is also a Deputy Chief, Daisy House-Lameboy in Chisasibi.

We can't forget Dianne Reid Ottereyes, founder and President of the Cree Cultural Centre and museum in Oujé-Bougoumou, my colleague the executive director of the Cree Health Board, Mabel Herodier, and Dr. Darlene Kitty, one of very few Aboriginal doctors in Canada, and President of the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada.

One of the things we all have in common is post-secondary education. Most of us had to earn our degrees while raising families and fulfilling

some of the traditional female roles, like housekeeping. Most of us also had the support of our spouse – as in the past, Cree people tend to approach life decisions from the perspective of the whole family, not just the individual.

Cree women who attain leadership roles have to act as role models and are often called upon to support extended family through times of crisis, both financially and emotionally. We take these responsibilities for granted.

The 21st century has seen an acceleration of resource development in Eeyou Istchee. Thanks to our land claim we are in a position to demand partnership, employment guarantees, and compensation in these ventures, but there is intense pressure from all sides to exploit every natural resource as quickly as possible. Managing the pace of change will be one of the great challenges of the future. As leaders of today we need to fix the deficits in our education system so that our people can have the tools they need to meet the challenges of the coming years, to fight the battles and to seize the opportunities in every field, including the continuing project of making our health services our own.

I have confidence in the future. We live in an age of change. In these times, we can't afford to float down the river of life, gazing behind, lamenting past injustices. We need to look ahead, we need to be alert, and most importantly we need to work together. Managing change is something that Cree women and men have been doing all along, and that we will continue to do, and we will make it safely through these waters, safeguarding our land, our language and our values for generations to come.