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Denendeh: anthropologists, politics and ethnicity in the reorganization of the Canadian Northwest Territories

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This chapter examines epistemological assumptions that underlie, on the one hand, the anthropological knowledge and descriptions of Northern Athapaskans¹ or Dene and, on the other, Dene knowledge and presentation of themselves.² The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part shows that ‘cumulative knowledge’ about Northern Athapaskans of the past, gathered in volume 6 of the *Handbook of North American Indians* (Helm 1981) and reproduced in many publications since, is organized around categories that are theoretically ill-defined. It suggests that anthropological descriptions and presentations of Dene tribes tend to legitimize and reify, rather than analyze, the socially and politically salient ethnic labels in terms of which residents in the subarctic have attempted to organize their relationships in the fur-trade era. The second part of the chapter argues that this is true also for the more recent anthropological presentations of the Dene as constituting a First Nation within its own territory, *Denendeh*.

The chapter addresses the following questions: how are English terms or labels adopted by Dene and non-Dene to identify local Dene populations? How does the adoption and use of these English terms enter the process of reification whereby Dene identities are taken for granted as objective facts? And, how do Dene individuals and groups use these English labels of tribal or national identification in their interaction with each other and with Euro-Canadians?

Anthropological knowledge and ethnographic conventions

In the *Handbook of North American Indians* (Helm 1981, hereafter simply referred to as the *Handbook*) the Dogrib, Hare, Loucheux, Slavey, and many other groups, are presented as distinct peoples or tribes, each living within its own tribal territory. As editor of the *Handbook*, Helm is aware that the use of labels, such as ‘tribe’, ‘people’, or ‘nation’, is problematic when applied to Northern Athapaskans who in pre-contact times had ‘no overarching Dene polity nor tribal policies in the sense of coordinated political authority’ (Helm 1980: 234) but were ‘deployed over the land in small and often mobile autonomous groups’ (Helm 1981: 2). Helm argues that it would be inappropriate to write about Northern Athapaskan tribes if we understand the term ‘tribe’ to imply ‘political integration or unity’ (ibid.). Nevertheless, it is possible to write about Northern Athapaskan tribes defined as populations who, in spite of the lack of any form of central political authority, are characterized by ‘similarity of dialect, social contact and amity,

and common historical experience' (ibid.) - hence the tribal names that serve as chapter headings in the *Handbook*.

Having established the existence of tribes, so defined, Helm cautions the reader that geographical boundaries drawn between tribes are 'especially arbitrary' (ibid.: 3). First, maps of tribal territories do not show how the territory of a particular population may vary in extension over time. Second, the maps are sometimes based on incomplete or inexact historical records.³ Third, more than one tribe could share and occupy certain geographical areas. Helm therefore writes that,

It is false to historical and ethnographic reality to view the lines around and between peoples drawn on the maps in this volume as constituting a sufficient basis for legal or political definitions [of territory] on the part of governments, native peoples, or nonnative occupants. (ibid.: 2)

Notwithstanding these cautionary remarks, the presentation of each Northern Athapaskan tribe in the *Handbook* follows a well established pattern. In all cases a map is drawn of the people's tribal territory at a given point in time, and a running commentary is devoted to the group's history, social organization, and culture.

In producing maps of tribal territories as part of the permanent ethnographic record, the *Handbook* uses what Latour and Woolgar call 'inscription devices', an important feature of all scientific activity. An inscription device is 'any item of apparatus or particular configuration of such items which can transform a material substance into a figure or diagram which is directly usable by one of the members of [the research group and other individuals interested in their work]' (Latour and Wolgar 1986: 51). Inscriptions are 'objects that mediate between an observable universe and general statements about the universe' (Orlove 1991: 5). The maps of tribal territories therefore suggest to the reader that anthropologists accumulate knowledge about relatively distinct tribes. Within anthropological discourse maps are produced to mediate between specific external facts and general statements about these facts: 'Look, this is where the Dogrib live', 'This is where the Slavey live', and so on, for every known Northern Athapaskan tribe. This rhetorical device goes hand in hand with the process of reification: Northern Athapaskan tribes are real entities in the real world which can be studied empirically.

The central epistemological question concerns the status of ostensibly objective phenomena - tribes or peoples - about which anthropologists claim to accumulate more and more precise and detailed knowledge. Kenneth Burke's notion of 'terminological screens' is relevant here. Burke (1966: 46) maintains not only that 'the nature of our terms affects the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another', but also that '*many of the "observations" are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which observations are made*' (italics in original). That is to say, 'much of what we take as observations about "reality" may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our choice of terms' (ibid.). This is largely the case in the field of Northern Athapaskan studies.

The published results of anthropological investigations in the subarctic consistently

direct one's attention to tribal populations about which knowledge was, and is, obtained. In the case of the Slavey, for instance, we are told that the term Slavey is a translation of the Cree term *awahka'n*, meaning, 'captive, slave' (Asch 1981: 348). By the middle of the nineteenth century the term was widely used by traders, explorers, and missionaries to denote aboriginal populations they encountered in the Northwest Territories. These populations eventually adopted the term to refer to themselves when communicating in English. This raises the important question of the nature of self-reference when communicating in their own languages. Asch (ibid: 348) notes that people would refer to specific geographic features to identify themselves as 'people of the swift current', 'people of the water', or as 'the brushwood people'. This aboriginal system of social identification was ignored only when aboriginal peoples communicated in English with the newcomers to their land. What is surprising is that anthropologists simply adopted this English nomenclature in their anthropological descriptions of subarctic populations, despite the recognition that the two systems of social identification co-existed in the north, one Northern Athapaskan, the other Anglo-European.

The situation is more complex still. In certain cases different local Dene populations adopted the same English label to identify themselves at different points in time. In her review of Asch's chapter on the Slavey, Keren Rice, a renowned Northern Athapaskan linguist, reminded the editors of the *Handbook* that in modern times the people of Forts Good Hope, Franklin, and Norman, referred to as Hare and Mountain Indians by anthropologists, actually refer to themselves as Slavey when communicating in English. Should they not be included in the chapter on the Slavey? The editors decided against this suggestion and relegated this information to a footnote (ibid.: 349). Why? Because Asch, like all other contributors to the *Handbook*, was obliged to set an arbitrary timeframe within which to consider certain populations as Slavey, and others as not.

In the *Handbook* the term Slavey applies only 'to those Athapaskans who, in the twentieth century, accept this label, at least when speaking English' (ibid.: 338). Accordingly, the map that accompanies this statement depicts the extent of Slavey tribal territory as it existed in the 1850s. While Asch (ibid.) recognizes that 'there is no evidence to support the notion that the Athapaskans of the Slavey region constituted a singly entity in any political, cultural, or linguistic sense, either in late aboriginal times or in the period since European contact', he nevertheless offers extensive descriptions of Slavey tribal territory, environment, language, and culture. Since he deals exclusively with populations who used the term Slavey to refer to themselves in the nineteenth century he can neglect populations who only later came to use the term Slavey in the same way. This arbitrary timeframe allows him to leave these populations to the expertise of other Northern Athapaskanists, such as Savishinsky and Sue Hara (1981: 315-316, 325)⁴, who spend some time justifying their description of the Bearlake Indians and the Hare Indians as distinct tribes, despite the fact that these local populations at a later time have chosen to identify themselves in English as Slavey.⁵ Reading such ethnographic accounts one cannot help but see the *Handbook's* tribes as being to a large extent a reflection of the conventional division of labor and territory among anthropologists. Savishinsky and Sue Hara (ibid.: 314) recognize as much when they concede that their

tribal designations are 'as much a reflection of administrative and ethnographic convenience' as they are 'of cultural identity'.

In brief, in the Canadian subarctic anthropologists encountered aboriginal populations who readily identified themselves as Dogrib, Slavey, and so on, when speaking in English. Anthropologists followed suit and paid little attention to the system of nomenclature itself, or to the fact that aboriginal informants were in fact choosing not to identify themselves in the aboriginal way in terms of their specific local geographical residence. Anthropologists proceeded to obtain knowledge within local populations and to refer to this knowledge as knowledge about a specific tribal group - Dogrib, Slavey, or other. Anthropological investigation then became self-fulfilling. Knowledge obtained amongst the so-called 'Slavey', for instance, became knowledge about the Slavey. In this sense, what passes as cumulative knowledge about this or that population is based on the uncritical acceptance of English labels for social identities, used both by Northern Athapaskans and Euro-North Americans. The use and disuse of such labels, however, are contingent expressions of social, economic and political relationships and processes both within Dene populations and between Dene groups and Euro-Canadians, as is demonstrated in the following discussion of the Dene Nation.

The Dene Nation and Denendeh in the Canadian western subarctic

Social, economic, and political changes may lead to changes in the designation of self and of other. Consider for instance the status of the label 'Dene Nation'. In the mid-1970s, in the context of world-wide aboriginal political mobilization, Northern Athapaskans adopted the label Dene to designate themselves when communicating in English. (See the 1975 Dene declaration in Watkins 1977; The Dene Nation 1984; Asch 1984; and Fumoleau 1994.) In the same breath the western subarctic became known as *Denendeh*, 'the land of the Dene', in opposition to *Nunavut*, 'our land' in *Inuktitut*, the language of the Inuit whose eastern subarctic land is claimed by Canadians as part of their nation state. With the adoption of these new labels a broad semantic contrast was publicly drawn between two categories of people: the category of people with aboriginal rights to land and to self-government, the original inhabitants of *Denendeh* and *Nunavut*, and the category of people whose privileged economic opportunities in the land of the Dene was due to Canada's political control of the territory. This control was expressed in part in the official designation of *Denendeh* and *Nunavut* as the Northwest Territories.⁶

In the western sub-Arctic the choice of the term Dene, a variant of which is known to all Northern Athapaskan speakers, was well suited to express an aboriginal political agenda at a time when Canadian governments, allied with powerful business interests, were deciding unilaterally to open the north for intensive economic development. The intention was to open the entire length of Mackenzie Valley Corridor, from the Arctic Coast to the Great Slave area, to a wide range of industrial activity. This development would have involved the construction of a highway and possibly a railway to the Arctic coast, the assembly of gas and oil pipelines to connect gas and oil fields to the national distribution system already in place from Zama Lake in northern Alberta, the building of hydro-electric transmission lines and the creation of telecommunication facilities. A

socio-economic revolution was in the making without the participation of the Dene, Inuit or Metis communities it would affect most.

In April 1973, the Dene response to the Federal Government's intentions was to present a caveat to the Supreme Court of the Northwest Territories asking it to prevent economic developments that did not consider their aboriginal rights and interests in the land. In June of the same year, following extensive hearings in Dene communities, Judge Morrow of the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Dene. He upheld their aboriginal claim to over one million square kilometers of land (The Dene Nation 1984: 138). In March 1974, the Federal Government responded with the appointment of Justice Thomas Berger as commissioner to conduct an inquiry into the social, ecological, and economic impact of the proposed economic development. In his report, released in May 1977, Justice Berger recommended a ten year moratorium on the development of the Mackenzie Valley Corridor to allow for a satisfactory conclusion to necessary comprehensive negotiations between the Federal Government and the aboriginal inhabitants of the land.

In the context of the Morrow decision and of the Berger inquiry, individuals who formerly identified themselves as Bearlakers, Dogrib, Hare, or Slavey, began to identify themselves simply as Dene or as members of the Dene Nation. This shift in labels represented an important moment in the complex process of political negotiation across racial and linguistic lines.⁷ To support the Dene claim to nationhood a broad coalition of Churches formed 'Project North' to lobby the government and educate the wider public about the Dene proposal for a reorganization of the Northwest Territories on a new political basis. While Dene leaders advanced their comprehensive claim to their land, *Denendeh*, some scholars began to write of the Dene Nation as a 'colony within' (Watkins 1977), while others analyzed the management of ethnicity in the Northwest Territories (Watson 1979; 1981; Smith 1993) and the dynamics of ethnopolitics in Canada (Tanner 1983).

The adoption of new labels to proclaim one's identity is part of a social process whereby coalitions of individuals and groups attempt to position themselves vis-à-vis others in their competition for power and control of scarce resources. The term Dene Nation pointed clearly to 'an emergent polity construct conceived of as a counterpoise to the force of the national system' (Helm 1980: 234). Paradoxically, in their quest for a new Dene order of government to look after their national interests, Dene leaders realized that their efforts threatened 'the sociopolitical autonomy, self-sufficiency, and consensuality in Dene life that traditionally was lodged in the local group and local community' (ibid.: 236). To develop their negotiating positions Dene leaders held annual National Assemblies, in which only a minority of Dene could participate, and in which decisions were taken on a majority vote. As Smith (1992: 22) notes, progress in negotiations with the Federal Government 'seemed to require adopting positions and taking actions incompatible with Dene culture, and potentially dangerous to their well-being'. In the words of a young Dene activist, 'If we go through a whole Dene movement and we end up with native people just giving orders to their own people, we're not better off than now, when white people order us around' (The Native Press, October 22, 1975: 12, quoted in Helm 1980: 237).

There is more. To proceed in their negotiations with the Federal Government the Dene of the Northwest Territories had to exclude from their political project Northern Athapaskan groups living beyond the boundaries of Treaty 11 and the Northwest Territories, such as the Slaveys of north-western Alberta, the Beavers of north-eastern British Columbia, and the Chipewyan of northern Saskatchewan.⁸ The inclusion of all Northern Athapaskans in the Canadian subarctic as potential members of the emerging Dene Nation would have challenged existing provincial and territorial boundaries. This was not to be. The central government was prepared to entertain the notion of a Dene Nation only if it consisted of aboriginal groups found within the Northwest Territories. The claim to Dene nationhood and self-determination had to be made on a political stage defined by Euro-Canadians.

Robinson and Quinney (1985) are particularly critical of this kind of political development within and across First Nations. They argue that Canada's political boundaries have been used 'to dissect Indian Nations and communities' (ibid.: 88). They write that 'The Cree Nation', for instance, 'is split by provincial and territorial boundaries, and too often Crees from Alberta will be going in one direction while brothers and sisters Crees from Saskatchewan go another route' (ibid.). As described above, the same can be said for the Dene Nation. To counter the atomization of First Nations within provincial and territorial boundaries, Robinson and Quinney (ibid: 88-89) suggest the following:

If we take hold and publicly claim our Sovereign Nationhood according to our boundaries and our system, they [Euro-Canadians] would be forced to change their system and approach to us. Right now they have us right where they want us, fitting into their system and needs.

Robinson and Quinney fail to recognize, however, that the Cree people they refer to have never formed a politically organized entity devoted to the defense of a clearly bounded territory that they would declare their own. That is not to say that the numerous members of the Cree community do not share a common cultural and linguistic heritage or that they have not lived similar historical experiences. As a matter of fact, regional groupings of First Nations in the context of comprehensive land claims have always coalesced within the provincial and territorial boundaries established by the central Euro-Canadian government.

For instance, the extensive negotiations surrounding aboriginal land claims in the western subarctic led to an agreement in principle between the Metis, the Dene and the Federal Government in April 1990. Three months later, however, the agreement was rejected when put to a vote of the Dene Assembly. As the comprehensive claim covering all the territory inhabited and used by the Dene in the Northwest Territories collapsed, local groups indicated that they were prepared to sign regional agreements (Dickason 1992: 414; Perry 1996: 159). This was the case, first, for the Dinjii Zhuh (Gwich'in), who signed a regional agreement with the Federal Government in September 1991. They were soon followed by the Sahtu (Bearlakers) and the Dogribs. In August 1993 these three

groups declared that they no longer recognized themselves as members of the Dene Nation (Fumoleau 1994: 454).⁹ In this political climate, a potent, politically-motivated label lost its original significance. The formation of a Dene Nation with a form of political control, and/or a coordinating function over *Denendeh*, cannot be ruled out. This Dene Nation, however, would be one comprised of regional groups who have settled their aboriginal claims with the Federal Government and who have agreed, also, to significant economic developments in their territory.

Such developments reveal that, like other social realities, the tribal or national identities in terms of which the Dene orient themselves as they interact with each other and with outsiders are not 'things', about which cumulative knowledge is possible, 'but processes - processes manipulated or, more radically, composed during the course of interaction' (Moerman 1988: 2). This composition is at the heart of political processes across North America generally, and in the subarctic specifically, as Native North Americans seek in earnest to regain some degree of the autonomy and resources they enjoyed before colonial encounters with Europeans. In the process of this composition of social identifications it becomes apparent that these, like any other categorizations, 'are revisable as different relevancies unfold themselves' (Anderson and Lee 1982: 301). In other words, 'in understanding and producing practical actions', and asserting nationhood is an eminently practical undertaking,

members are not concerned to follow determinate sets of rules. Their involvement in a developing and unfolding world requires the capacity to re-learn, and re-constitute, 'events', 'activities' and 'lessons' in a world that is in some sense always changing (ibid: 306).

Did the developments described above occur on Canadian soil or on the land of the Dene, *Denendeh*? The question is a rhetorical one, of course, for the western subarctic is defined differently by two populations competing for control of the same environment. Giving a name to that environment is a first and fundamental act of sovereignty. In this context, as stated by Hobsbawn (1993: 10), one cannot overemphasize 'the element of artifact, invention and social engineering which enters into the making of nations'. Gellner made the same point when he wrote that:

Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent...political destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: *that* is a reality. (Gellner 1983: 48-49, emphasis in original)

In other words, nations are the outcome of nationalistic movements, or as stated by Hobsbawn (1993: 10), 'Nations do not make states and nationhood but the other way around'.

Conclusions

This chapter has critically examined the classic ethnographic identification of discrete Northern Athapaskan tribes and associated tribal territories. This examination has shown that what came to pass as tribal names were first labels used by members of local Dene populations to identify themselves to outsiders when speaking English. English labels for self-identification that would match the aboriginal system of self-reference, such as 'people of the swift current', 'people of the water', or 'the brushwood people', were not so used. In their work anthropologists, who also ignored the pre-contact system of self-reference used by local groups, elevated labels such as Beaver, Dogrib or Slavey to the status of tribal designations. With this ethnographic convention at hand anthropologists then presented the knowledge obtained from a given local population as a contribution to cumulative knowledge about a particular Northern Athapaskan tribe. The perception of Northern Athapaskan peoples as being distributed over mapped tribal territories came to appear self-evident.

In more recent years, Northern Athapaskans have used the term Dene to refer to themselves when speaking English to native speakers of English. The term Dene was used to assert the existence of a Dene Nation whose territory, *Denendeh* 'the land of the Dene', comprised the western part of what had been known till then as the Northwest Territories. Aboriginal people, and scholars following them, used this new terminology in the context of a world-wide movement among indigenous peoples to reassert their sovereignty and their rights to their homeland. Dene leaders speaking in the context of a comprehensive land claim for the interests of the Dene Nation as a whole throughout the Northwest Territories, sought recognition by Euro-Canadians and the international community as a distinct, self-governing, First Nation. Not surprisingly, the process of asserting the existence either of multiple Northern Athapaskan tribes, as anthropologists did in the past and continue to do in the present, or of a single Dene Nation, as Dene did in the past with the support of numerous Euro-North Americans, calls for the creation of maps. Maps, Latour and Woolgar's 'inscription devices' (1986: 51), are the inevitable instruments used by individuals and groups to substantiate their claims to be speaking about an observable universe in which they live and affirm definite identities and rights.

Notes

- 1) Alternative spellings of this term are favored by different scholars, including in this book 'Athapaskan' by Goulet and 'Athabaskan' by Inoue and Shnirelman.
- 2) Since J. Helm MacNeish's 1960 article 'Kin Terms of Arctic Drainage Dene' published in *American Anthropologist*, anthropologists have used the term 'Dene' where their predecessors would have used 'Northern Athapaskan'. For a history of the use of the terms 'Northern Athapaskan' and 'Dene' in the anthropological literature, see Abel (1993: xiv-xv).
- 3) Dene and non-Dene respond very differently to the task of mapping a territory. As demonstrated by Pentland (1975) and noted by Helm (1989), in the Canadian subarctic, Algonkians and Dene would not complete maps that they could not vouch for on the basis of firsthand experiential knowledge of the land. This is 'in contrast to European mapmakers of former times, who consistently represented unexplored territory and rivers by simplified, imaginary features' (Goulet 1994: 118). See Goulet (1998: 27-46) for a discussion of Dene

epistemology and conception of 'true knowledge'.

- 4) See also Gillespie (1981).
- 5) In *Denendeh* (The Dene Nation 1984: 10) one also reads that, 'In modern local usage, the English name Slavey applies also to K'ashot'ine (Hareskin), Sahtu Got'ine (Bearlake) and Shihta Got'ine (Mountain people)'.
- 6) Nunavut will become part of the Canadian political reality on April 1, 1999 when it officially separates from the remaining Northwest Territories. On Friday, March 5, 1999 Mr Paul Okalik was elected as the first premier of the fledging territory with a population of approximately 25,000 citizens, 85% of them Inuit. Mr Okalik will preside over a 19-member legislature which collectively is responsible for the management of the territory. Since there are no political parties but only local politicians called to serve in the legislature, they will operate by consensus.
- 7) See The Dene Nation (1984) and Fumoleau (1994) for a chronology of events in the Dene movement towards nationhood.
- 8) In the mid-1960s, for instance, the Slaveys or Dene Tha of northwestern Alberta played an important role in the revitalization movement among the Dogribs and other groups in the Northwest Territories (Helm 1994 and Goulet 1998). In theory, this might have constituted an additional reason to consider them as an important partner in the process of building the Dene Nation. The Federal Government would have ruled out such considerations.
- 9) This was also the year in which George Erasmus, who had been President of the Dene Nation, accepted the position of co-president of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

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