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The Role of Traditional Food in Identity Development among the Western James Bay Cree

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INTRODUCTION

Unlike the conventional notion that traditional cultures assimilate into a dominant society, many traditional cultures have been adapting to changing conditions and persisting. Such traditional cultures have been undergoing rapid socio-cultural changes in the modern world. The Omushkegowuk Cree, a group of Algonquian aboriginal people with a nomadic hunter-gatherer tradition in Northern Canada, is one such group that has experienced change and has been adapting to remain distinctive and to create a new lifestyle.

The Omushkegowuk Cree live on the Western James Bay in Northern Ontario (Fig.1) and they still actively hunt, fish, and trap. However, it is no longer a way of making a living. Their life rapidly changed after they settled down in villages. They now live in modern houses equipped with electricity, propane gas, running water, and are beneficiaries of modern civilization. Children attend schools and many people work for regular wages. English is commonly spoken at school, in the work place, and at home. A major characteristic of the contemporary Cree villages is that the traditional activities and modern lifestyles based on regular employment come to coexist and are interdependent.

Although the Cree have tried to create a new lifestyle adopting the benefits of modern civilization and maintaining their hunting heritage to remain distinctive in the contemporary world, one of the problems they face is that the numbers of young people who are unfamiliar with their traditional culture is increasing. Like any other aboriginal communities, the younger generation, who are under twenty-four and unfamiliar with traditional life styles, presently accounts for about 60 percent of the Cree population. Many Cree youths have difficulty acquiring traditional bush skills, knowledge, and language in their villages. Consequently, many youths have difficulty in knowing who they are and in establishing their own identity, which in turn may lead to maladaptation.

This paper argues that ethnic identity, or ethnicity, is a part of their adaptive strategy to remain distinctive. Furthermore, that identity can be an effective tactics to facilitate learning traditional culture. This paper begins with a discussion of the Cree strategy of using a mixed economy and the role of bush activities in contemporary Cree villages. Following this discussion, it examines Cree adaptation of bicultural orientation, associated problems, and the potential role of identity to cope with these problems. Finally, the role of bush food and bush activities in identity development is explored drawing on cases from young Cree women.

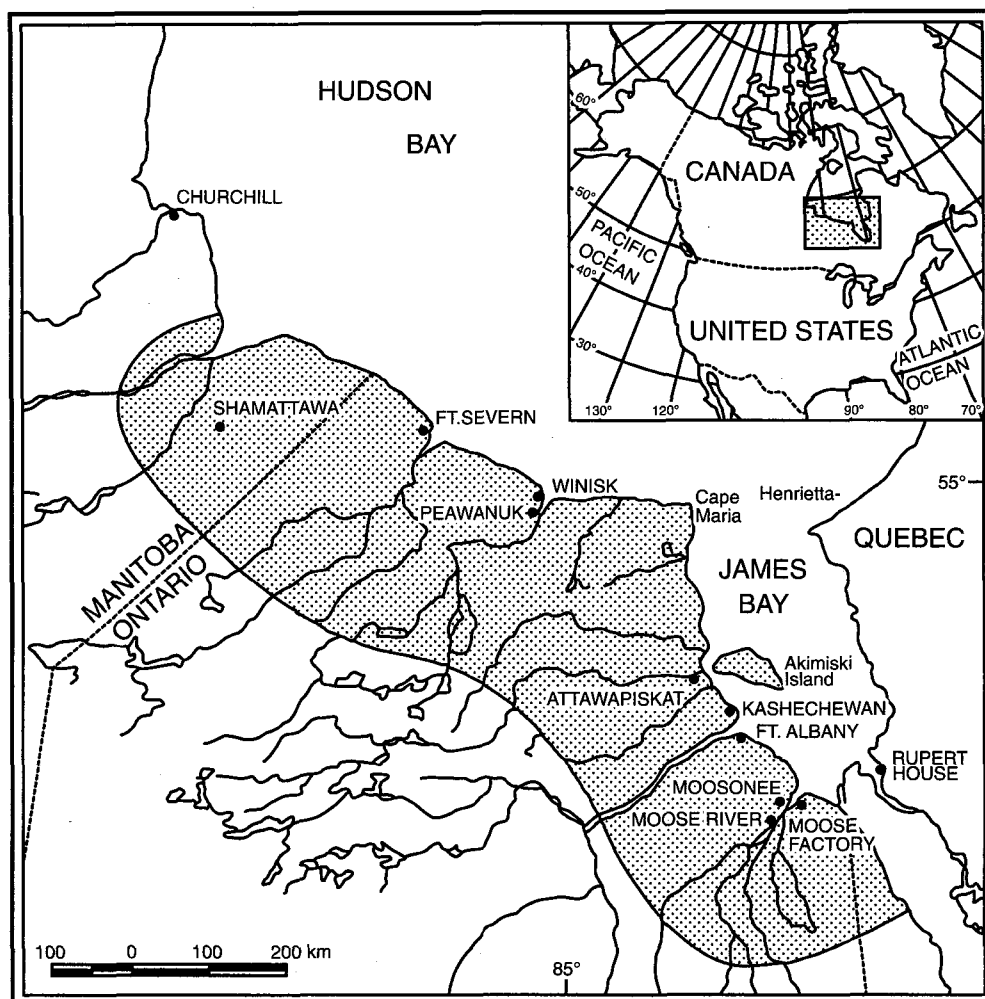


Figure 1 Location of the traditional territory of the West Main (Omushkegowuk) Cree. The Mushkegowuk region excludes Fort Severn as well as Manitoba and Quebec parts of the historical territory. Adapted after Honigmann (1981).

CONTEMPORARY CREE VILLAGE LIFE

Village Mixed Economy

Due to rapid social changes associated with sedentary life, the village came to have a mixed economy composed of three parts: the wage sector; the traditional economy (income from trapping and calculated as the replacement value of meat); and transfer payments which include welfare, child allowances, disability pensions, and unemployment insurance (Berkes et al. 1994).

In Northern villages, where infrastructures are not well equipped, the costs of transportation

are high, and there is little hope for industrial development. Unemployment is a serious problem and it is the reason why transfer payments provide the largest source of income (38%) for an average household. The public sector provides most of the jobs and the wage sector remains the second largest source of income (29%) in the region. The traditional sector is the third major source of household income (25%) since bush food still remains an essential part of the diet in many Cree villages (Farley 1992: Table 1). To cope with the economic insecurity in northern communities, it is necessary to rely on all three sectors of economy.

Such a mixed economy was traditionally considered transitional to a market economy. It was believed that the Cree would eventually abandon the traditional pursuit of hunting-fishing-trapping and all Cree would be farmers or workers. Nevertheless, despite strong acculturation pressure, Cree did not lose interest in their traditional activities. The food produced in the traditional sector still has considerable economic, nutritional, and cultural importance for the region.

Furthermore, Cree themselves want to pass their traditional activities onto future generations. In their own wording, "We cannot live the traditional ways, but we cannot live like white people. We are going in between to create a new life" (George and Preston 1987). Recent literature suggests that a mixed economy could be a stable economic base for local communities for the future (e.g., Berkes et al. 1994).

The Role of Bush Food in Cree Economy and Culture

The Cree maintain a strong interest in traditional activities because bush food remains an essential part of the diet in many Cree villages. According to Berkes et al. (1994), almost all able bodied men in the Mushkegowuk region participated in harvesting activities and about 400 grams per adult per day of bush food was provided. The traditional Cree diet is highly protein-based and the researcher observed that about 500 grams of meat per adult per meal was consumed in two communities in the region.

Table 1 Preliminary average household* income for Omushkegowuk region economies (Farley 1992)

Income Source	Income	Percentage
Transfer Payments**	\$13,000	38%
Wage Income	\$10,000	29%
Bush Products***	\$ 8,420	25%
Other****	\$ 2,500	7%
Total	\$33,920	100%

Notes:

* 7 people per household. Total number of households in region is 1,116.

** Income from government assistance, such as welfare, family allowances, and disabilities pensions.

*** Bush products are calculated by replacement values.

**** Other sources of income derived from private small businesses owned by Cree people, such as retail shops and food stands.

It is bush food that provides the Cree with a high quality diet in everyday life. Every year, people are anxious for the arrival of geese in spring and fall. People are very interested in obtaining bush food, such as goose, caribou, moose, and fish. However, they have difficulty getting it, particularly if their family members are not active in bush activities. Native people belong to a poor segment of the population within Canada. Nevertheless, they do not suffer malnutrition due to the lack of adequate protein, as is the case in many developing countries (Young 1979). If cheap carbohydrates replace their basic diet, their health would deteriorate rapidly. Thus, the maintenance of the traditional economy is essential for their well being.

Moreover bush food is more than just a nutritional need, but it also serves as the source of their identity because "you are what you eat" (O'neil et al. 1997: 30). The Cree call a bear "Ojibwa food" and a seal "Eskimo food," implying that the Cree are different from them. Thus, animal food is often identified with a particular group. In addition, bush food is generally called "Indian food" in contrast with store-bought "white man's food." Indian food is shared generously. In contrast, white man's food is generally not shared.

Participation in traditional activities gives the people a sense of self-reliance and security as the land is considered their "bank" (Brightman 1993: 18). Furthermore, production in the traditional economy promoted a common good through enhancement of personal relationships by the sharing of bush food, reciprocity, and mutual assistance. Sharing still continues today, although villages are far beyond reasonable distribution size (Freeman 1988). In the Mushkegowuk region, 88 percent of hunters shared their harvest with more than one family and some shared with more than six families (Berkas et al. 1994: 357).

Sharing and delayed reciprocity create and maintain personal relationships that have social importance (Gregory 1982: 19). If the receiving family is not active in the bush economy, various other forms of gifts can be given, often in delayed reciprocity. For Cree, sharing and reciprocity in sharing of bush food are "irreducible moral axioms" (Brightman 1994: 10). In other words, bush food enables the Cree to maintain their traditional values of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and interdependence in contemporary village life. In turn, it also allows them to claim their identity.

Table 2 Annual yearly expenses for maintaining bush equipment (Peawanuck First Nation 1992)

Item	Cost
Gasoline (snowmobile cost to get firewood only)	\$5,500
Snowmobile maintenance:	
a) accessories	\$1,500
b) oil and grease	\$ 500
Hunting ammunition:	
a) shotgun shells	\$ 700
b) rifle bullets	\$ 600
Total	\$8,800

Although bush food remains integral to the economic, as well as cultural, survival of northern communities, bush activities are becoming more expensive. According to Peawanuck First Nation (1992), the purchase and maintenance of bush equipment (snowmobiles and hunting ammunition) is estimated at about \$8,800 per year (Table 2). In addition, snowmobiles have to be replaced every two years because of hard use and the replacement cost of snowmobiles is about \$3,600. A boat with outboard motor, essential for summer transportation, costs about \$6,600 (Peawanuck First Nation 1992).

Moreover, on top of these costs of equipment and maintenance, the actual hunting expedition requires camp equipment as well as an additional purchase of food and fuel. For instance, a moose hunting trip for four people costs about \$1,400 for food and fuel alone (Table 3). On this particular trip, three moose were secured for the winter supply of meat that was shared with the entire community. Such trips are productive, but not everyone could afford such a high cost. One of the informants, who were training his sons, complained that he could not really afford the cost of gas to take them around the bush without any assistance.

It is, therefore, difficult for many people to get involved in bush activities unless they have a substantial cash income. According to George et al. (1995: 81), high levels of bush activity occurred in communities with relatively high rates of employment. Since the major output of the traditional economy is bush food that has no market value, it is necessary to obtain cash from other sectors. Thus, income from the wage economy is essential to finance the traditional economy (Ross and Usher 1986: 147–149).

Welfare has been an important source of cash income. However, welfare income alone does not provide the Cree with enough money to invest in bush equipment. Such income only allows people to live modestly in their villages since the cost of living in many northern communities is high. The borrowing of cash and bush equipment among members of the extended family is a common practice. However, many people are still unable to go out in the bush because they simply cannot afford it. Even if there are able men in the house, the family become “receivers” of bush food as is the case for elders and widows. Consequently,

Table 3 Operational costs of moose hunting (fall, 1992; hunting ground 180 miles from the village; means of travel, boat; hunting party, food for four people) (Ohmagari 1996)

Item	Cost
Gasoline (\$5.06/gallon: 130 gallons)	\$ 658
Oil	\$ 80
Food (2-3 weeks supply)	\$ 660*
Total**	\$1,398

Notes:

* The number excludes the food cost of one participant who came from a separate family.

** The total cost excludes the cost of ammunition. For moose hunting, little ammunition is used in comparison for goose hunting.

many suffer from loss of pride, confidence, as well as their identity of being Cree.

More social problems seem to develop in communities as the amount of time spent being idle increases. Niezen (1993) has also reported that reduced bush activity in the eastern James Bay community impacted by a large scale hydroelectric development, has been accompanied by an increase in social service workload that is an indicator of physical as well as mental health problems.

Bicultural Orientation

A major adaptation that the Cree made in order to cope with the village mixed economy of "going in between" was to develop a bicultural orientation. After the collapse of the fur market, it became impossible to finance the cost of bush activities by itself. Cash income is a prerequisite for both traditional pursuits and everyday village life. Thus, many people seek regular employment. Competency in English, formal education, and a certain work attitude is needed to obtain and to keep a job. However, once one is in the bush, formal education and most of the skills associated with office work are meaningless. A totally different set of skills, knowledge, and mental attitude are needed to participate in harvesting activities. Hence, a bicultural orientation is a key to Cree adaptation in contemporary village life.

However, this bicultural adaptation has not been an easy task and the Cree themselves are aware of the challenge they are facing. On one hand, many Cree elders were concerned that the younger generation was more familiar with Euro-Canadian culture than Cree culture. For instance, a study on the transmission of 93 items of knowledge and skills among women (Table 4: Ohmagari and Berkes 1997) revealed that 53 percent of bush skills was learned by hands-on experience, and another 13 percent was learned by observation only, in Moose Factory. In Peawanuck, 45 percent was learned by hands-on experience and another 11 percent by observation only. Thus, about half of the skills were transmitted. However, skills that took a considerable time to master, such as reading animal/fish movements, orientation in the bush, and tanning hides, were only known to an elementary level. Although some women were trying to learn these skills, the incomplete transmission of knowledge about these skills was a major problem.

The reasons for incomplete transmission of knowledge were complex and interrelated. There are four major reasons: 1) changes in the educational environment and peer influence; 2) effects of the diminished time available in the bush; 3) problems related to learning bush skills at a later age; 4) value changes (Ohmagari and Berkes 1997).

After they settled in villages, there was a major change in the Cree educational environment. Children now attend schools and village life offered young people the option of not learning. Time became an important commodity in village life. Parents and children no longer spent much time together due to work and education commitments. Fathers alone go to the bush as weekend hunters. If young people want to learn, they were expected to take the initiative. However, some young people are embarrassed and hesitate to approach their elders. Elders also think that young people do not have adequate manners and respect. Some youths do succeed and become good hunters, but others give up learning or never try. These young people cannot see the necessity of learning bush skills, as most material needs are easily available from stores. Television programs revealed the material wealth of southern

Table 4 Transmission of bush skills and indigenous knowledge among women. Mean scores by groups of skills and by percentage (Ohmagari and Berkes 1997)

Items	Percentage Reporting Skills					
	Moose Factory (n=19)			Peawanuck (n=25)		
	Y	O	N	Y	O	N
Fur preparation skills (n=8)	34	8	58	17	7	76
Food related skills (n=26)	61	10	29	53	15	32
Bush camp related skills (n=26)	71	7	22	64	3	33
Hunting, fishing and trapping skills (n=11)	71	9	20	53	8	39
Skills related to clothing and crafts (n=22)	39	35	26	38	20	43
Total (n=93)	56%	13%	31%	45%	11%	44%

Legend:

Y: learned by hands on experience;

O: learned by observation only;

N: not learned; n: number of interviewees/items

Notes:

The reason why the transmission rates of Peawanuck, a more traditional community than Moose Factory, had lower transmission rate was because of a difference in sampling method. In Moose Factory, the sampling represented 13 percent of women over 15 years of age and was biased in favor of the bush-oriented women. In contrast, sampling in Peawanuck represented 48 percent of all women over 15 years of age and this sample could be considered representative.

Canada and made them aware of their living conditions. Some believed that they were poor because their Indian culture and lifestyle were inferior to southern Canadian ways.

In regard to language, English is becoming more dominant among the younger generation. More women were sufficiently bilingual in both Cree and English in Peawanuck, a more traditional community. However, those women in their twenties to thirties spoke only English among themselves. Cree is mostly used when addressing elders and none used Cree at home. Some teens did understand Cree, but they were not able to speak it. Cree children leave communities as early as thirteen to attend secondary schools that are often located in southern towns. Many stay with families with non-aboriginal origin and these children came home only twice a year. They seem to lose their command of Cree while they are away and they often do not attempt to relearn it.

On the other hand, the younger generation was not always successful in a Euro-Canadian context. Many dropped out of schools and had difficulty in completing a grade 12 education. Consequently, they did not have the qualifications to compete with Euro-Canadians for jobs. At the same time, they did not have the traditional skills and knowledge, or capital, to participate in the traditional sector. Thus, they were left with a lot of free time in community, and could easily end up in trouble. There is a strong concern that some youths may not be successful in either cultural context.

IDENTITY AND BICULTURAL ADAPTATION

There is a large body of anthropological literature on adjustment difficulties among aboriginal people, such as school drop-out statistics (see Ledlow 1992 for summary). In old literature, it was said that Native students from traditional families failed at school because they suffered from value conflicts between Native and Western cultures as students were forced to make either/or choices. However, recent studies argue that such difficulties are not derived from cultural discontinuity between Western and ethnic minority groups. Rather, it derives from an identity crisis due to insufficient cultural knowledge of the minority students. Students who have little knowledge of their tradition feel threatened when they are expected to acquire new knowledge at school that is valued by a dominant group. Such students try to claim their identity by resisting learning. In contrast, students with a secure ethnic identity tend to do better at school (Ogbu 1982).

This theory may provide a key to bicultural adaptation for the younger generation. Euro-Canadian and Cree cultures should not be necessarily viewed in conflict and choices between the two, but as ones that can support each other. Participants in Ohmagari's work (1996) included two women who were the most familiar with bush skills and were also the most successful in school, progressing beyond grade 12. Both of them knew who they were from a young age since they came from bush oriented families.

It is commonly understood that ethnicity is of a marginal nature. In everyday life, there are few occasions for the Cree to be aware of their ethnicity. Occasions where they realize their identity usually arise in relation to other aboriginal groups and Euro-Canadians. As long as they stay in their village, they would not feel threatened by being a majority group. However, once outside their villages, they became a minority and more aware of their ethnic status. Such feelings were reinforced by ethnic labeling of Aboriginal/Cree imposed by others. In some cases, it was reported that some boys asked their fathers to teach them how to hunt and trap in order to reclaim their identity. These students took a year off from school and returned to the community. However, most students didn't know how to respond to such labeling if they did not know their own culture, and have a secure cultural identity or resources they could turn to. These students may end up in trouble due to a lack of a sense of belonging to either culture.

In other words, the establishment of a secure identity could facilitate young Cree's bicultural adaptation, not only encouraging school education but also learning traditional skills and knowledge. The rest of this paper will explore the relationship between identity and transmission success. Cases of young Cree women who have experienced a reverse value change and rediscovered their identity are examined. The role of bush food as well as bush activities is examined in the process in the development of Cree identity. Lastly, the paper briefly discusses a strategic use of identity to promote bicultural orientation needed in village life.

DISCUSSION: THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL FOOD IN IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

The establishment of a secure identity could be important to promote the bicultural adaptation needed for the village life among the younger generation. Participants in the transmission study (Ohmagari and Berkes 1997) included young women in their 30s who have experienced reverse value change. They found new meaning in Cree tradition, and had rediscovered their identity in the process of active involvement in the production of bush food.

There were five such women in Moose Factory, a large urban settlement. They came from village oriented families and they were seldom taken to the bush when they were young. Their fathers alone went to the bush. Thus, they had few opportunities to observe and learn about their hunting heritage. Many helped their mothers, but this was mainly with housework. After they finished school, many took regular employment, and some still kept their jobs.

They later married men from bush-oriented families that changed their course of their lives. In the beginning, they did not know how to clean the fish or geese brought by their husbands. They thought it was a dirty job and were reluctant and not interested in doing it. However, meal preparation became their duty and many learned from their husbands and mothers-in-law. Some turned to their mothers, friends and relatives who were familiar with the skills. Then, the work became everyday routine and they got used to it. Later, they learned to appreciate bush food and strongly believed that bush food was much healthier and nutritious than store bought food.

Then, they started to take an interest in how food is harvested and to go to the bush with their husband and children. This was because they cared for their family and the food they ate. Many stated that they wanted to feed their children good food so that their children would acquire a taste for bush food. In addition, the bush had provided them with a context to appreciate the importance of traditional values, such as diligence and patience. Since they want to give their children opportunities to observe, learn, and share, they tried to go camping as often as possible during the summer.

At the same time, they enjoyed camping and the opportunity to practice camping and bush skills with their families. They began to take pride in their proficiency in bush skills, such as plucking geese and Cree style barbecue methods, as well as beadwork, and crafts such as moccasin and mitt making. For some families, participation in goose camp was one of the most important family events. Extended families go camping together every year. They share in the work and help one another with plucking, cooking, and washing. Schools now have a special holiday called "goose break," so children can also join the camp. They stated that they enjoyed the sharing of work and bush food. After having this kind of experience, which they had never had before, the women stated that it was a rediscovery of their Cree tradition. Reflecting back, they stated that they had not known about Cree culture, but they learned who they were through these experiences. They gained enough self-confidence to teach their children about their heritage. Furthermore, some women were trying to learn the Cree language as well.

For those who came from village oriented families and were unfamiliar with Cree heritage of hunting tradition and language, bush food has served as the gateway to Cree culture. Although young Cree wish to claim their identity, proficiency in language, bush skills, and knowledge of the land take years to acquire. Thus, they do not have the basis to claim their identity. Bush food, generally called "Indian food," is still widely shared and available in the village. Thus, consumption of such culturally valued food could provide the youths with the justification to claim their identity.

Another element that needs to be discussed was the importance of the bush, the context of learning. For the rediscovery of Cree identity, the bush, in which harvesting takes place, has a special role to play. The bush is considered "a dynamic and unforgiving teacher" (Preston 1986: 246). The bush provides the context for learning the basic Cree values of sharing bush food, generosity, self-reliance, patience, and diligence that may be difficult to learn in villages.

An underlying concept in sharing and reciprocity is respect, the foundation of Cree social philosophy, which signifies the relationship between humans, and between humans and animals or "other than human persons." The act of hunting symbolizes "social reciprocity." Success in hunting is not just a matter of a hunter's skills but implies a social relationship between animals and the hunter. The Cree consider that animals "give themselves" to hunters in order to sustain humans (Feit 1991). In return for this gift, humans show respect to animals by approaching animals with modesty, butchering meat properly, showing generosity in sharing meat, using animals without waste, and disposing of remains properly (Tanner 1979).

In this context, subsistence is not merely a matter of obtaining food but is also a way of life and a mode of production that sustains social relationships and the distinctive characteristics of a society. Indigenous knowledge, values and culture are transferred to successive generations through the repetition of the subsistence cycle (Freeman 1993).

In summary, the experiences of young Cree women who had secured their identity gives us important clues as to the relationship between cultural transmission and the development of Cree identity. Firstly, bush food served as the gateway to the rediscovery for Cree culture and tradition, and this lead them to the bush. Secondly, the bush provided them with the context to learn Cree values and social relationships in the traditional environment. Participation in bush activities gave them the opportunity to learn and appreciate Cree heritage and facilitated the development of Cree identity. In turn, this could further encourage the successful transmission of Cree knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the role of bush food in the contemporary Cree village mixed economy and Cree social life. The Cree adaptive strategy of bicultural orientation was examined and ethnic identity was viewed as a key factor for their strategy of "going in between" two cultures. However, bicultural adaptation that enabled the Cree to retain their hunting heritage in the contemporary world has not been an easy task. Some members of the younger generation have not been adapting well. Many neither have bush skills and knowledge nor are fluent in the Cree language. At the same time, they do not have the

adequate level of formal education needed to obtain jobs, or there were not enough jobs for everyone.

This paper explored the potential role of ethnic identity that may help Cree to secure the bicultural orientation needed in village life. In this process, the paper drew from the experiences of young Cree women who had rediscovered their tradition and successfully established their identity. It argues that bush food could serve as the gateway to the rediscovery of Cree culture and identity. Bush food was a readily available way to appreciate and to learn about their heritage. Their renewed interest in bush food led them to participate in bush activities that provided them with the context in which Cree culture has been transmitted for generations. In turn, Cree identity and self-confidence derived from the newly acquired knowledge on Cree culture could help promote the successful transmission of their culture and their adaptation to village life. Furthermore, their role as wives, mothers, and community members helped facilitate the adaptation of their families, children, and community as a whole.

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