CHAPTER THREE

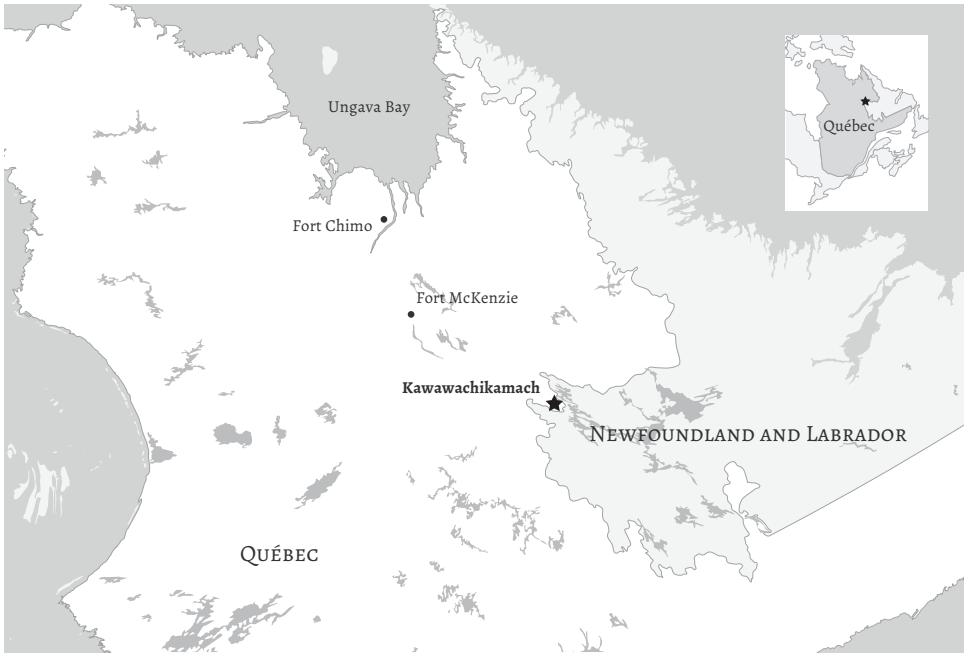
Naskapi Women

Words, Narratives, and Knowledge

Carole Lévesque, Denise Geoffroy, and Geneviève Polèse

By sharing their stories and knowledge, Naskapi women have played a key role in the reconstruction of the cultural and ecological heritage of their people. The Naskapi, who live in the subarctic region of the province of Québec, today represent about nine hundred people, most of whom reside in the village of Kawawachikamach, located about fifteen kilometres from the former mining town of Schefferville, along the 55th parallel (see map 3.1). The first written reports of the Naskapi date from the late eighteenth century. It appears that, at the time of the Europeans' arrival, the peoples to whom these reports refer did not form a single, integrated group rather they were several groups of hunters who ranged across the northern portion of the Québec Labrador peninsula (Lévesque, Rains, and de Juriew 2001). The evidence suggests that these were families or groups of hunters of Innu origin who, sometime around the mid-eighteenth century, had apparently migrated to the hinterland of the subarctic region from the North Shore of the St. Lawrence (where several Innu bands had settled). Initially few in number, the Naskapi are said to have comprised about three hundred people around 1830 (Lévesque et al. 2001).

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01



Map 3.1 Location of the Naskapi village of Kawawachikamach, northern Québec. Source: Laboratoire d'analyse spatiale et d'économie urbaine et régionale, Institut national de la recherche scientifique, Montréal.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Cree families from the James Bay region arrived in the area and joined the Naskapi families. By the end of the century, these peoples were travelling regularly to the trading post at Fort Chimo (now Kuujjuaq), on Ungava Bay, where they traded their furs for manufactured goods and food products (Turner, 1979). During his stay at Fort Chimo between 1882 and 1884, the American naturalist Lucien Turner ([1894] 1979) noted the presence of Naskapi Indians, who called themselves "Nenenot," or "true red men." Other sources state that these were indeed the ancestors of the Naskapi families living in Kawawachikamach today (see, for example, Cooke 1976; Graburn 1975; Mailhot 1983). At the time Turner wrote, the Naskapi differed from other Indigenous groups in the subarctic region because they preferred to hunt for caribou rather than trapping fur-bearing animals. In addition, because they did not attach themselves to a particular trading post but instead travelled to many trading posts over a wide expanse of territory (from Labrador east to James Bay and Abitibi, as well as south to the North Shore and the St. Lawrence valley), they preserved a certain degree of independence in their relations with both traders and missionaries, at least up to the early twentieth century. They are recognized in the oral tradition and in the literature as great travellers, and especially as highly skilled and prolific caribou hunters. Unlike many hunter peoples in the subarctic region, the Naskapi's adoption of a sedentary lifestyle is fairly recent, dating only from the 1950s (Lévesque et al. 2001).

This chapter is based on data from an ethnographic survey begun in 2000 and carried out in phases until 2012. The research involved several groups of Naskapi elders, both men and women, as well as a university research team.[1]

1 This ethnographic study was part of a broader initiative carried out by the Naskapi Development Corporation (NDC) aimed at revitalizing local cultural and ecological knowledge. At the request of the Institut national de la recherche scientifique, which is associated with the Université du Québec, we undertook this study in close collaboration with the community (see details p. 14 in the present chapter). The team of Naskapi elders brought together by the Naskapi Development Corporation included Jane Einish, Philip Einish Jr., Thomas Einish, Joseph Guanish, Luke Guanish, Sandra Guanish, Ann Joseph, Matthew Mameamskum, Ruby Nattawappio, Sandy Nattawappio, Donald Peastitute, John Shecanapish, David Swappie, Shinapest Tooma, Kathleen Tooma, Minnie Uniam, and Sandy Uniam. The team of researchers, under the leadership of Carole Lévesque and Denise Geoffroy, consisted of Nadine Trudeau, Marcelle Chabot, Muriel Paradelle, and Geneviève Polèse. Assisting the participants were translators Noat Einish, Philip Einish, and Silas Nabinacaboo.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

The study was guided by two goals: to listen to and record Naskapi men's and women's words and knowledge and to create conditions favouring the equitable expression of views as well as knowledge sharing between men and women. Interest lies with the nature and scope of the information provided by Naskapi elders but also with the collaborative and reflective methodological approach underlying the discussion and research activities themselves. This approach reflects a firm commitment, on the part of everyone involved in the study—researchers and elders alike—to the co-production of knowledge on the culture and way of life of the Naskapi people.

The heritage that the Naskapi have undertaken to reconstruct for the benefit of future generations is closely associated with the final period of their lives as nomads, which they call the "Fort McKenzie time" and which lasted from 1915 to 1950. Several of the people who lived during this period are still alive today, and it is with these men and women that an ecological reconstruction exercise was launched in the early 2000s. We have organized our text into three parts to enable us to reconstruct some of the components of the universe of Naskapi knowledge. In the first part, we briefly summarize the categories of knowledge shared by Naskapi men and women. The second part examines the interface between men and women in the carrying out of their lives and in ensuring their subsistence. The third part takes a closer look at the area of medicinal plants, an area that is mainly the domain of women.

Research Framework

Our research work is very much a part of the movement toward recognition of Indigenous peoples' knowledge that has developed and intensified over the past few decades. Indeed, since the early 1980s, interest in Indigenous knowledge has continued to grow (see, for example, Chabot and Lévesque 2001; Ellen, Parkes, and Bicker 2000; Lévesque et al. 2001; Lutz and Neis 2008; Menzies 2006). As Indigenous peoples have emerged as a political force both nationally and internationally, their knowledge has come to represent a key mark of identity for them and a new sphere of cultural and political affirmation. The legitimacy of this knowledge as a source of information that can be used to protect ecosystems and promote the responsible management of land and natural resources has been recognized on numerous occasions by the governments of many countries and by Canada, in particular. This recognition has also been manifested in the special provisions regarding the protection and potential use of this knowledge found in many international

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

conventions, national environmental laws, and regional and local co-management strategies. We need only point, for example, to the provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity (United Nations 1992), which urges member countries to take measures to recognize and protect traditional knowledge and to ensure that the application of this knowledge is considered in the areas of conservation and sustainable development.[2]

More recently, with the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 2007), earlier commitments with regard to Indigenous knowledge developed into universal human rights and were extended to all areas of Indigenous peoples' social, economic, political, artistic, and cultural lives.[3] Such developments confirm that Indigenous knowledge offers more than empirical information on the natural environment. It refers to the wide array of attitudes, abilities, and skills that its holders (both men and women) develop over the course of their lives in their social interactions and their social organization. It also testifies to particular ways of understanding the material and immaterial worlds and to the relationships of various kinds that exist among human beings, animals, and the land (see, for example, Berkes 1999; Descola 2005; Stevenson 1996; Turner et al. 2008).

Nevertheless, within this vast field, despite hundreds of studies from various parts of the world and the significant involvement of a number of Indigenous organizations, women's words have more often than not been ignored (Native Women's Association of Canada 2007, 3–4). In 2000, when

2 Article 8(j) stipulates: "Subject to its national legislation, [each Contracting Party shall] respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge, innovations and practices" (United Nations 1992, 6). For a discussion of Indigenous environmental knowledge in the context of northern Québec, see Lévesque et al. (2004).

3 Article 31 (1) reads: "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts" (United Nations 2007, 11).

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

the members of the Naskapi Development Corporation undertook to set up a research project specifically concerning the properties of medicinal plants and herbs, an area of knowledge that was the responsibility of the women of the community, their initiative was bold and innovative (see Lévesque, Geoffroy, and Polèse 2006).

Moreover, our ethnographical studies also form part of a shift toward a knowledge society, which is placing more and more value on many different types of knowledge and on the skills and expertise of knowledge holders, regardless of who these knowledge holders may be (UNESCO 2005). The expression "knowledge society" or "information society" appeared toward the end of the 1990s with reference to the new conditions of learning and knowledge transmission made necessary by the emergence of information technologies. From this perspective, it became increasingly important for modern societies to invest in human knowledge and training and to focus on creativity and social innovation as much as on technological innovation. According to the definitions proposed by UNESCO, the knowledge society calls for development that is no longer centred only on economic growth but also on social development and human capital. Initiatives that aim at reconstructing knowledge that has disappeared or is in the process of disappearing, like the project undertaken by the Naskapi of Kawawachikamach, contribute directly to this new society by helping to document little-known systems of knowledge that may shed considerable light on the ways in which human beings of various origins and at different times have constructed their relationship to the world and the environment (Lévesque 2009).

Elements of the Naskapi System of Knowledge

From the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century, Naskapi families' travel routes covered an area of 150 to 200 square kilometres, spanning the boundary between boreal forest and tundra in the eastern portion of the Québec-Labrador peninsula. In the winter of 1915–16, the Hudson's Bay Company established Fort McKenzie, a trading post in the heart of this region. Located inland some 150 kilometres south of Ungava Bay, the fort soon became a gathering point for many Naskapi families. For more than three decades, until the late 1940s, Fort McKenzie played a structuring role in the lives of these families of hunters, who came there to trade fur for tea, tobacco, flour, sugar, fabrics, ammunition, weapons, and other manufactured goods. At first, their visits took place mainly during the summer.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

Hunting groups, generally consisting of three or four families (or about twenty people), spent the winter harvesting fur-bearing game in remote camps and then, in summer, met up with other groups at the fort. It became a regular gathering place over the years, especially for trading post employees, older people, and widows and their children. Ultimately, it became a place to which the Naskapi were rooted not only geographically but also in terms of identity (see Lévesque et al. 2001).

The Fort McKenzie trading post closed in 1948. The Naskapi population (some 190 to 200 people) then went back to live at Fort Chimo, on Ungava Bay. Life at Fort Chimo was very hard for the Naskapi, who found themselves in a less familiar environment, far from their usual hunting and trapping areas and from the places that they preferred for their camps. Many of them suffered from tuberculosis. Poverty now became rampant, and the reports of the teams of doctors and administrators that visited Fort Chimo at that time testified to the Naskapis' plight. The federal government began to take steps to resettle the group in the Schefferville area, where a new iron mine had begun operation in the early 1950s. The initial move to the Schefferville area took place in 1956 when the whole Naskapi population at Fort Chimo was moved by plane.

Although between then and the late 1970s, the Naskapi population was moved again several times in the region, because the government had not formally allocated territory to them, it was only after the signing of the Northeastern Quebec Agreement in 1978 that the Naskapi were granted rights to specific lands in the Schefferville region. They moved for the last time in 1984 to the brand new village of Kawawachikamach, where they built homes and have since been living (Lévesque et al. 2001).

When Naskapi men and women tell stories about the Fort McKenzie period, it is in hopes of transmitting the teachings and the memory of that time to the young people of their community:

> Young people have to know about nature so that they can find means of survival. It would be very useful for the community to pass the knowledge to the young. There needs to be a way to show our traditions to the youth; they need to see it. It is important to preserve the Naskapi culture. Our knowledge is the product of our observation of the environment during thousands of years and of these observations, influenced by our beliefs, values and customs. (woman, 2003)[4]

4 All comments from Naskapi elders were recorded in Kawawachikamach.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

In telling these stories, embedded in which is their collective cultural heritage, the Naskapi identified four knowledge complexes that are in continual interaction with one another. We have classified these complexes as ecological, material, social, and spiritual knowledge.[5]

From an ecological viewpoint, the elders' narratives reflect an intimate knowledge of the natural environment in which they lived. They were closely familiar with the behaviour, habitats, diseases, predators, reproductive cycles, and migration patterns of the animals and fish:

> The wolves run in packs. They ambush the caribou. They go at the back of the herd, and then there is another pack that comes to the front. Once a pack spots a herd, they sneak up on it. When they howl, it is a message to other wolves to join in for the kill, just like a normal hunter gives direction to another hunter. They encircle the herd along with the reinforcements. Then they go in for the kill. Usually a wolf strikes behind the hind leg. This way it slows the caribou down. And then they go for the neck and the windpipe for the final kill. It lets the caribou get out of breath. Or when the wolf bites the hind leg of the caribou, it tires out the caribou. Then it goes in for the final assault. The wolf lives in harmony with us and with nature; it is also a keen hunter. The wolf is afraid of humans, but it has also been part of our roots and traditions for thousands of years. We live side by side with similar guidelines. When we hunt, we do not waste one bit of caribou; as well, the wolf respects its prey, and it doesn't leave anything behind either. The wolf does not waste anything, although it doesn't eat the bones or might leave some scraps for the birds. (Naskapi elder man, 2005)

Similarly, both men and women could easily distinguish the varieties of plants and trees—their properties, growth phases, and location, as well as the effects of climate on them. They also understood the solidity or flakiness and heat-storing capacities of the various rocks and minerals. They classified animals and plants according to their social, economic, or symbolic importance to the community. Caribou occupied a privileged position, both in

5 In identifying these four knowledge complexes, our intention is merely to systematize and synthesize the information that we gathered, rather than to propose a new system of categories for general use. Many of the researchers who have studied the topic of traditional ecological knowledge have suggested useful methods of classification, particularly Berkes (1999), Mailhot (1993), Menzies and Butler (2006), and Stevenson (1996). Here, however, we are referring more immediately to categories derived from anthropology and ethnology (see Leroi-Gourhan 1971 and 1973).

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

the material world, as the primary source of food and raw materials, and in the Naskapi cosmogony and spiritual world. The Naskapi attributed both human qualities and supernatural powers to the caribou:

> We greatly respect the caribou because it gave us life and it is always present among us. To attract the caribou and survive, we would sing and play the drums and dream. If an elder dreamt of his brother or his grandson, the description of the caribou hunting scene would take that person's name. (man, 2006)

> At the traditional feasts, nothing is wasted. Because nothing is wasted, that is how you honour the caribou because it provides food, shelter, lodging, warmth, toys, etc. An area might also be named after a successful hunt has taken place there. The caribou is very important so there is a name it is associated with for each season and for different moments during the year. (woman, 2005)

People's movements over the land, on foot or by canoe, also required a deep understanding of space, topography and geology, watercourses, and meteorological factors:

> We used the stars as guide when we went on a hunting expedition. The stars were our clocks and compass. We followed the stars: when they are in a certain area, we know that it is time to go. With the sun, we would put a stick in the ground, look at the shadow, and know at what point we have to be back according to where the shadow is—it was our sundial. (man, 2006)

From the material perspective, the elders referred to techniques of production, supplying food and materials, and consumption, as well as the tools, weapons, and medicines needed to carry out the activities required for survival and daily life. These might include harvesting methods, which varied with the type of game and the season, or everyday tasks such as food preparation, the treatment of hides and furs, the making of everyday and ceremonial objects and of clothing, the setting up of camps, and the transportation of people and supplies.[6] Again, the caribou stood at the centre of both material and spiritual life, which in turn rested on the principles of respect and reciprocity:

6 For a discussion of women's roles in Naskapi daily life, see Desmarais, Lévesque, and Raby (1994).

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

> The elders taught young men how to prepare the pemmican. Once they had the knowledge, as men, they would prepare the pemmican for the elders. But everyone ate the pemmican; it is shared by everyone, even the small kids. It is honoured because it comes from the caribou. It is so sacred that you can't leave scraps behind, you have to devour everything. The tradition is that, after the pemmican is done, there is the beating drum ceremony to call upon the animals and to thank them. Once the drum has been set up, the drummer has the first taste. Young people were not allowed to be next to the drummer. People come and thank the caribou for feeding them so well. Everyone is feasting away, and they are thanking the animals and asking for more. (man, 2006)

From a social standpoint, the elders described methods of learning and of transmitting knowledge from adults to children, the care that should be given to children, women in labour, the sick, the injured, and old people, the roles and responsibilities of each person in various circumstances, and the mechanisms by which social cohesion was maintained. Children were socialized to the need for mutual aid and solidarity very early on. Men and women also emphasized the appropriate attitudes and behaviour of children toward their parents and of young people toward elders. The learning covered not only ways of doing things but also ways of being, that is, the ways of interacting with others in everyday life, during times of travel, and in specific situations such as a birth or death:

> Before a young person gets to start having knowledge, he has to fast four days. Fasting opens the mind. During those days, the person fasting drinks three different kinds of medicinal teas. After that, an elder can start teaching some traditional knowledge. This normally takes place in the bush. You have to be in good thoughts; the person who gets the medicine has to be positive. (man, 1999)[7]

The fourth knowledge complex concerns the spiritual world and the Naskapi belief system, including communication with animal spirits, mental attitudes, divination practices, rituals, songs and incantations, dream interpretation, and prayer. Such knowledge enables one to decipher the signs of nature and to understand the place of human beings in the universe. As the Naskapi elders indicated, the right to hold this knowledge was extended

7 Citations dated 1999 and 1985 originate from earlier work with the Naskapi that has not been previously published.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

only to those who were spiritually prepared to receive it, therefore the elders did not discuss it further. The ability to interpret and apply this knowledge is based primarily on a state of mind and on a profound understanding of the relationships between humans and animals and between humans and non-human entities that make up the Naskapi spiritual world. One of the elders described the purpose of drumming:

> Children used to ask the elders why they were using the drums and what the sounds meant. The elders said that they were singing of their dreams of what they dreamt, songs about caribou and other animals. The elders used to be able to tell what each sound meant. That is how they knew where the caribou was, because they would ask with their drums. They depended on the caribou. They would beat the drum before a hunting expedition. When an elder beats the drum, they listen and they know according to the sound, where the caribou is. It has been known that these songs really benefitted them. Sometimes these visions really happened. (man, 2004)

The Naskapi clearly did not view these knowledge complexes as mutually exclusive areas of expertise. On the contrary, they were closely interwoven with one another. Nor were they exclusive to the Naskapi: all hunting groups in the subarctic region developed similar knowledge systems (Descola 2005). Similarly, for the Naskapi, such knowledge complexes were not strictly gendered but rather formed the cultural universe of the group as a whole. At the same time, both men and women acknowledged the existence of gender differences. These differences must therefore be taken into consideration in efforts to reconstruct the Naskapi's ecological and cultural heritage.

The Interface Between the Female and Male Universes

The literature in the field of Indigenous knowledge, as well as the anthropological literature on hunter-gatherer societies, frequently reports a division of tasks between men and women and often identifies spheres of activities specifically associated with one or the other gender. The Naskapi are no exception to the rule. But when we listened to what women and men said during joint gatherings, we were able to identify four main organizing principles that were applied to the knowledge and skills of men and women: differentiation, complementarity, transfer, and integration.

It is not surprising to find that the narratives often reveal a fairly clear division of tasks between men and women. Men hunted, and women processed

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

and prepared the game, maintained the camps, and looked after the children. Very early on, little boys and girls learned the roles and responsibilities that they would have throughout their lives, as well as the knowledge and skills that would be needed. Their parents and grandparents made them toys that foreshadowed their future tasks: bows and arrows, guns, and ammunition pouches for boys; dolls, clothes, and wood and bark containers for girls. When they were about ten or twelve years old, boys and girls learned to make and use a variety of real tools and other objects. This process of learning and teaching, which was usually conducted on an individual basis over a number of years, was also gendered: men taught boys, and women taught girls. The elders explained that this division of tasks gave children the foundation on which other, more complex and sophisticated learning would later rely. It also ensured the continued survival of the group as a whole:

> Young people were a big part of the family; they were given tasks that were obeyed. As soon as young children can walk, they are taught traditional practices and values. The whole group teaches the children since everyone has different skills. They must see how everything is done. When both girls and boys have learned these skills, the young boys have become hunters and the girls are able to take care of the camp. Then they are ready to find a mate. (woman, 2006)

The narratives also reveal a degree of complementarity between the female and male universes. We defined complementarity as an arrangement whereby one gender helped in the implementation of knowledge or skills that were clearly associated with the other gender. Complementarity thus pertained to the execution of certain tasks. For example, women played a secondary role in hunting caribou: the tasks they performed were important for the success of the hunt, but it was the men who planned and led the activities. Conversely, during childbirth, an event over which midwives took control, men performed supportive tasks, such as lighting fires, gathering wood, bringing food, and heating stones and water:

> One difficult time was childbirth while people were on the move. Everyone had to stop, the midwives were the elderly, and you had to keep the tent warm for two days after the baby was born, twenty-four hours a day. Women took care of the delivery. Men went to fetch wood. After delivery, two days later they were on the move. You needed to have moss for diapers; the baby was in a toboggan. During winter, it was important to keep the baby warm. Babies were breastfed. (woman, 2006)

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

Both men and women, jointly and separately, emphasized the element of complementarity, stressing the need for mutual aid that prevailed in various circumstances:

> The hard work that was done between genders was well organized; everyone chipped in. The children, the young people, the adults, the elders—everyone helped in the work. All the harder tasks, more physical tasks, are done by the men. All the straps of hide are made by the women, but the setting up is done by the man. The easier tasks, like cleaning the house, are done by the women. But some tasks are shared by men and women—the porcupine, for example, since it is an easy but long task. (woman, 2006)

Here, for example, women might play a complementary role in the construction of a fairly large object, such as a drum, by producing straps of hide, while the men assemble the drum (what the elder refers to as "setting up"). Similarly, although food preparation was a female activity, men would sometimes help with cleaning and butchering an animal, as in the case of the porcupine.

The third principle is that of transfer. In an environment often marked by severe conditions, both genders had to be able to manage under any circumstances. Knowledge primarily held by one gender was therefore taught to the other, as a backup measure. For example, women were taught to hunt so that they would be able to cope in the event of the extended absence (or death) of the males:

> Men taught women how to hunt for the periods when they were away. Women could kill caribou if the men were away. (man, 2006)

> When men weren't there, then women would hunt and install their nets on the ice and hunt ptarmigan. (woman, 1985)

For the same reason, knowledge about medicinal plants was taught to men, even though this domain was clearly identified with the female universe.

The fourth organizing principle is that of integration, which we define as a necessary combination of knowledge and skills to which men and women contributed in more or less equal measure. This sort of integration was involved especially in the creation of objects that required several types of materials and techniques, some of which were associated with women and some with men. A good example is the production of snowshoes, which called for both animal hides (processed by women) and wood (procured

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

by men) and for the use of techniques such as tanning and smoking hides (done by women) and carving and modelling wood (done by men). Moreover, the end product—the snowshoes—were available for use by everyone. The toboggans used to transport children and supplies, as well as items such as meat, shotgun ammunition pouches, and carrying bags, are other examples of objects that required the collaboration of men and women.

The conceptual categorization that we have set out illustrates the fundamental structuring role that interpersonal relations played in the learning and application of Naskapi knowledge and skills. Simply noting the simultaneous existence of the male and female spheres does not adequately capture the complexity of the underlying social dynamics. An examination of this knowledge opens the door to a world of differential meanings, personal responsibilities, and social roles. Knowledge is always conditioned by the ways that human beings behave both individually and in groups, and knowledge thus continually serves to create social links and social cohesion. Naskapi knowledge is rooted in an intricate system of reciprocity that is made up of numerous combinations and complementarities. In this system, although individuals clearly belong to a female or male world, the boundaries between these worlds are continually adjusted to allow for the socio-ecological alliances essential to group survival.

Medicinal Plants and Social Recognition

The literature on Indigenous women's knowledge, while not extensive, generally concurs that, particularly in subarctic hunting societies, women are the keepers of knowledge pertaining to medicinal plants. This association was borne out in the research conducted with Naskapi elders. As part of the project aimed at restoring the Naskapi's cultural and ecological heritage, the Naskapi Development Corporation undertook to document this area of knowledge in some detail, so that the knowledge held by women elders would not be lost.

The documentation of this knowledge occurred during a two-month exercise in collective learning and knowledge transmission held in the summer of 2000 that brought together women well known for their botanical knowledge. The women were accompanied by two men, and a translator and the researchers on the team were also present. Because the village of Kawawachikamach is located in the same ecosystem as the Fort McKenzie region, many of the plants and herbs that were in use in the past are also found in the

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

vicinity of the village. In crisscrossing the surrounding lands every day for a week, these women recreated the actions and techniques that they had used in the days before the Naskapi adopted a settled way of life. They shared and mutually validated their knowledge by retracing the steps involved in acquiring and processing these plants and herbs.[8] We categorized this information according to the four knowledge principles described above: differentiation, complementarity, transfer, and integration.

Figure 3.1 Sandra Guanish and Ann Joseph talking about medicinal plants (2000). Photograph by Nadine Trudeau.

The knowledge held by these women enables them not only to categorize the plant species in the region (conifers, deciduous trees, flowering or fruiting shrubs) and to distinguish their various parts (roots, mosses, leaves, flowers, branches, buds, berries, bark) but also to evaluate their quality, their stage in the growth cycle, and their seasonal availability. Plants and herbs are named according to their properties or the particular actions involved in processing them (see tables 3.1 and 3.2). As one woman explained:

8 It is not our intention to provide detailed information concerning the methods used to prepare specific medicines and the application of specific remedies to specific illnesses or afflictions. Such information belongs to the Naskapi people, and it is up to them to decide whether and under what circumstances to render it public.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

> The way we named plants referred to their appearance, their smell, their feel, and their use. Plants have different names in the spring, summer, and fall. (woman, 1999)

As this comment suggests, in speaking about plants (or parts of plants), the Naskapi use terms that capture certain nuances about the plant, including its seasonal transformations, that do not correspond to Western classifications. Attempts at translation thus run the risk of reducing the Naskapi botanical corpus to only those categories recognized by Western science.

Table 3.1 Examples of Naskapi medicinal plants

Naskapi name	English name	Scientific name
iikuta	Labrador tea	*Ledum groenlandicum*
kaakaawaasiy	Stiff clubmoss	*Lycopodium annotinum*
iyaahtikw	Black spruce	*Picea mariana*
sikaaw	Planeleaf willow	*Salix planifolia*
uskuy	Paper birch	*Betula papyrifera*
waachinaakin	Tamarack	*Larix laricina*

Source: Lévesque and Geoffroy 2001, p. 4.

Table 3.2 Examples of Naskapi medicinal plants

Naskapi name	English meaning
kaakaachiiminikisiiwaapuy	Broth made from the boiled stems of the juniper berry bush
kikiskaahtikw	Dried powdered rotten wood
minahikwaasiihtich	White spruce branches
minahikwaasiihtaapuy	Broth made from boiled white spruce branches
niipiya	Various leaves from different green herbaceous plants
sikaaw nituuhkuna	Willow medicine
waachinaakin aakupitusunaanuch	Poultice made with tamarack

Source: Lévesque and Geoffroy 2001, p. 4.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

> The gathering of plants is not a casual activity. In the words of one Naskapi elder:
>
> > Plants are very strong, like the Creator who made them. We have to be careful about how we use them. Plants are the Creator's decision. They are very important. (man, 1985)

According to one woman, plants are best gathered early in the growing season:

> The best time to pick up medicine or edibles is the spring, because the smell is strong: it is filled with water and life. It is good to drink; you take off some bark with your knife and get the sap. You can do this until June, with all the trees. In the fall, you store the plants that you will use in the winter. You freeze the berries. (woman, 1999)

In addition, emphasis was placed on the relationship between human and plant life and on the need to maintain the appropriate attitude of respect:

> There are particular ways to pick up the plants; each plant has to be picked in its own way and prepared in its own way. One has to be in good mood, in good dispositions, and one has to pray that the plants have good effects. Nowadays, most people are not in the right frame of mind to gather plants, so it is not done. (woman, 1999)

Once the plants have been gathered, various techniques and tools are then used to store and process them. Different parts of the same plant may require specific types of processing, such as drying, crushing, soaking, or extraction. Plants can also be combined with animal or fish parts, including fat, marrow, eggs, and blood. In addition, the same plant may be used to make several different kinds of medicines or products.[9]

Naskapi women not only understand the properties of specific plants but are also aware of the possible interactions between plants, as some combinations can be dangerous. Their processing techniques allow for the production of pills, ointments, tonics, powders, or drinks with particular

9 Although the "scientific method" is often opposed to Indigenous epistemologies, knowledge was of course gained in part through a process of observation and reasoning. This is evident in a comment made in 1999 by a Naskapi elder man: "By observing the behavior of a hurt wolf, my grandfather followed the wolf and was able to see that it was eating Labrador tea. Then he saw how fast the wolf was cured; he then deduced that Labrador tea had curative properties."

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

virtues that can be used for chronic or occasional health problems (fever, bronchitis, allergies, arthritis, loss of appetite, bleeding, eczema), injuries or wounds (fractures, cuts, insect bites, infections), or common health concerns (menstruation, leg fatigue, digestive problems). As one woman explained:

> No, there was no doctor [. . .] and the Indian people would use something from the tree. They use all kind of trees, and they use a rock and some part of a caribou. Like if you had pain in the back, they would heat the rock and they would put it in the back and you would sweat up, and there's another thing that would make you sweat, and there's some kind of caribou part you would boil in Labrador tea and you would drink them and put it on your chest, and there's another tree—you would scrape it and you would take and you would boil it and after you would drink it and the pain would go away. (woman, 2004)

Figure 3.2 Sandra Guanish collecting Labrador tea (2000). Photograph by Nadine Trudeau.

In the Fort McKenzie time, girls were taught by their mothers and grandmothers how to distinguish the various plant species. But it was only when they were adults that they could acquire specialized knowledge. Knowledge was thus organized along generational divides as well as by gender. In both

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

the male and female spheres, there was a time in life for learning and another for applying and putting into practice the knowledge acquired. Moreover, possessing this specialized knowledge was a matter of great responsibility, both social and spiritual. As plants have healing powers, the person having knowledge of healing plants also has the power to heal. Naskapi elders explained, however, that merely knowing how to use a medicine or remedy is not enough to cure someone. The person providing the care also has to demonstrate the appropriate mental attitudes:

> You have to respect the plants when you pick them up. The person who receives the medicine has to fully accept it; otherwise it will not work. Also, you have to pray. You have to speak to the medicine, tell the medicine what you want it to do, especially when it is beaver or bear. (woman, 1999)

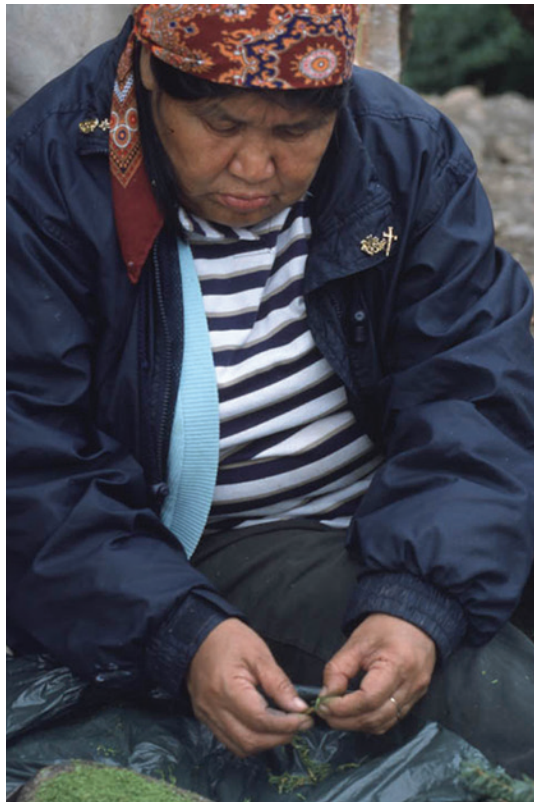


Figure 3.3 Ruby Nattawappio crushing Labrador tea (2000). Photograph by Nadine Trudeau.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

Rituals could be performed to help prepare the healer. In addition, recounting and interpreting one's dreams often provided clues about the nature of health problems or about the treatment to be provided.

Figure 3.4 Kathleen Tooma and Ann Joseph preparing medicines (2002). Photograph by Nadine Trudeau.

During the collective learning and knowledge transmission exercise conducted in the summer of 2000, the two men had a secondary role: their involvement included cutting tree branches with axes and saws, gathering less accessible plants, and locating desired plant species. This arrangement between the men and women is illustrative of the principle of complementarity described above. Specifically, the knowledge pertaining to medicinal plants remains, as it always has, under the control of women, and the men assist them sporadically, as needed in the various stages of production. In

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

line with the principle of knowledge transfer, however, men may also acquire such knowledge if the circumstances call for it or simply as a security measure. Most of the men who took part in the ethnographic survey, for example, reported having some knowledge of plant properties, and a few were even familiar with methods of preparing remedies. Nevertheless, it is generally held that this medicinal knowledge belongs to women and that, as the guardians of it, they have the authority to dispense it. In other words, we observe a difference in degree between possessing particular knowledge and having the ability and authority to apply it.

The rules that govern the possession, transmission, and application of knowledge are socially constructed. The fact that men recognized women as the primary holders of knowledge relating to medicinal plants illustrates the relational dimension of Naskapi knowledge, as well as the manner in which it is socially organized. In the context of our study, the reconstruction of this knowledge extended beyond the summer of 2000. In the years that followed, many additional meetings were organized with men and women in an effort to expand the body of knowledge on this subject and to ensure that the information had been fully recorded and thoroughly validated. In the course of these meetings, many stories were told about people's experiences during the Fort McKenzie time, when traditional care was the norm and plant-based remedies were routinely produced and applied. Beyond describing the illnesses or accidents that occurred, these stories provide insights into some of the reactions to certain remedies, the phases of recovery, the people concerned, and the times and places involved. On each occasion, these narratives were recounted in the presence of many women and men, which not only helped to document the knowledge but also deepened the collective understanding.

The knowledge that each person possessed was gradually set out in detail and enhanced through a process of discourse and exchange. This exercise allowed for the operation of what Pierre Lévy calls "collective intelligence" and generated a shared understanding of the knowledge, the historical events, and the everyday situations that constitute the Naskapi heritage.[10]

10 Lévy (1999, 13) defines collective intelligence as "a form of *universally distributed intelligence*, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills." Collective intelligence allows human beings to forge links among bodies of knowledge, thereby producing what Lévy (2003) describes as "ecosystems of ideas." An analogy can certainly be drawn with the Naskapi, who are,

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

Moreover, placing an emphasis on women's voices has undoubtedly fostered a more nuanced understanding of the interactions between the knowledge spheres of men and women, as well as providing a clearer and more complete picture of the Naskapi way of life as a whole.

Conclusion

The importance of narratives in the transmission of Indigenous knowledge has been widely emphasized (Cruikshank 1998; Heine et al. 2001; Turner et al. 2008), and, over the past few decades, projects similar to the one initiated by the Naskapi Development Corporation have been undertaken all across Canada. Such projects have, however, been less common in Québec. Quite apart from its location, however, this project stands out for the reflective approach that the Naskapi adopted in working to restore their cultural and ecological heritage, for its examination of gender specificity, and for the recognition given to the social dimensions of knowledge. Although their attention was turned toward the past, the methods that the Naskapi elders developed to ensure that the voices of all persons were heard, as well as the importance they placed on sharing and circulating knowledge, have placed these elders in a position to become integral players in a rapidly evolving knowledge- and information-based society. In our view, a fundamental structural relationship exists between the manner in which Indigenous peoples produce and share knowledge and the way that knowledge is created and distributed in a knowledge society. In both cases, the key elements of explanation and mutual understanding serve to prevent the development of divisions among different knowledge systems or among the knowledge bearers themselves. On the contrary, they facilitate the discovery and application of the bodies of knowledge in question.

It may seem paradoxical that two systems of knowledge that have evolved so separately could have something in common. And yet it is probably no coincidence that the debates regarding the value of traditional knowledge—and the international claims that such knowledge deserves to be recognized—have arisen at a time of major transformation in the realm of human understanding. The advent of new information technologies has brought about a resurgence of interest in ways of knowing, as well as in the

in effect, attempting to reconstitute the ecosystems of ideas that at one point constituted the product of their own collective intelligence.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

ways that human beings have always stored, reproduced, renewed, and transmitted information about the world that they live in and their ways of life.

Clear ties exist between the emergence of questions about the nature and utility of Indigenous knowledge and the worldwide rise of Indigenous peoples' movements. Over time, Indigenous peoples' demands to have their political, territorial, and human rights recognized have expanded to encompass the sphere of knowledge. Excluded from the places of knowledge production for too long, Indigenous peoples have gradually advanced their own intellectual traditions, epistemologies, knowledge systems, and "regimes of nature,"[11] all of which express both the complexity of their relations with the various worlds—natural, social, spiritual—with which they interact (Descola 2005). Meanwhile, other movements such as globalization and significant opening up of national borders, precursory to the major technological and communication changes that we are experiencing today, have helped to transform the ways that we produce information and knowledge. The age-old substantive, scalar, epistemological, and hierarchical barriers that stood between different bodies of knowledge are gradually eroding, which is opening the way to innovative combinations, facilitated by new communication and information technologies. The categories of knowledge (written, oral, artistic, spiritual, etc.) are increasing as a result of the new means and platforms of dissemination. The social relationships and networks that form around knowledge systems of all kinds sometimes become more important to people than the knowledge itself. Indeed, Indigenous elders have long tried to convey that knowledge is first and foremost a matter of relationships between human beings and nature.

In research both into the knowledge society and into Indigenous bodies of knowledge, emphasis is now placed on participatory, community-based, and partnered projects, as well as on the co-production of knowledge, in the form of interdisciplinary and/or intersectorial collaborations. In the field of Indigenous knowledge, collaborative initiatives of this kind have been favoured from the beginning. Indeed, our own study deliberately created a "community of learning," one that not only fostered the sharing of knowledge but also reinforced a systemic and organic understanding of Naskapi culture and heritage.

11 Regime of nature corresponds to types of relationships that different people have with nature. For example, in Eurocentric approach, nature is a source of resources to be exploited; alternatively, in an Indigenous context, humans are part of nature.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

In reconstructing their traditional knowledge to benefit future generations, the Naskapi have reclaimed their own history. In so doing, they have reflected on their contribution not only to the ecological and cultural heritage of the Naskapi people but also to the heritage of humanity as a whole. Embedded in Naskapi traditional knowledge are teachings that transcend time, space, and culture. Given that these teachings constantly reference the surrounding environment, they are obviously grounded in the local, but they concern phenomena that are universal—gender and generational relationships, relationships between the individual and the group, the methods by which information is gathered, preserved, and passed down, means to social and cultural recognition, and modes of individual and social governance. All these rest on a system of values that is worthy of restoration and respect.

References

Berkes, Fikret. 1999. *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management*. Ann Arbor, MI: Taylor and Francis.

Chabot, Marcelle, and Carole Lévesque. 2001. *Indigenous Knowledge: Contribution to a Review of the Literature*. Montréal: Institut national de la recherche scientifique (Centre urbanisation culture société).

Cooke, Alan. 1976. "A History of the Naskapis of Schefferville: Preliminary Draft." Naskapi Band Council of Schefferville. Montréal.

Cruikshank, Julie. 1998. T*he Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Descola, Philippe. 2005. *Par-delà nature et culture*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

Desmarais, Danielle, Carole Lévesque, and Dominique Raby. 1994. "La contribution des femmes naskapies aux travaux de la vie quotidienne à l'époque de Fort McKenzie." *Recherches féministes* 7 (1): 23–42.

Ellen, Roy, Peter Parkes, and Alan Bicker, eds. 2000. *Indigenous Environmental Knowledge and Its Transformations*. London and New York: Routledge.

Graburn, Nelson. 1975. "Naskapi Family and Kinship." *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology* 5 (2): 56–80.

Heine, Michael, Alestine Andre, Ingrid Kritsch, and Alma Cardinal. 2001. *Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak: The History and Stories of the Gwichya Gwich'in*. Tsiigehtchic and Yellowknife: Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute.

Leroi-Gourhan, André. 1971. *L'homme et la matière*. Paris: Albin Michel.

———. 1973. Milieu et technique. Paris: Albin Michel.

Lévesque, Carole, Catherine Lussier, Marcelle Chabot, David Toro, and Ginette Lajoie. 2001. *Traditional Knowledge: Issues, Ideas, Challenges*. Montréal:

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

Institut national de la recherche scientifique, Conseil Tribal Mamuitun, and Cree Regional Authority.

Lévesque, Carole, Charleen Rains, and Dominique de Juriew. 2001. "Les Naskapis: Peuple des grands espaces." In *Atlas Historique du Québec*. Vol. 5, *Le Nord. Habitants et Mutation*, edited by Gérard Duhaime, 69–84. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval.

Lévesque, Carole, and Denise Geoffroy. 2001. Field notes ethnographic survey on medicinal plants. Manuscript. Montréal: Institut national de la recherche scientifique (Centre urbanisation culture société).

Lévesque, Carole, Christiane Montpetit, Isabelle Poulin, and Ginette Lajoie. 2004. *Environmental Knowledge in the Aboriginal Communities of Northern Québec: Elements of a Communication Strategy*. Montréal: Institut national de la recherche scientifique and Cree Regional Authority.

Lévesque, Carole, Denise Geoffroy, and Geneviève Polèse. 2006. *Towards a Community Sharing and Dynamic Transmission of Naskapi Ecological Knowledge*. Montréal: Institut national de la recherche scientifique and Naskapi Development Corporation.

Lévesque, Carole. 2009. "Québec Research Relating to Aboriginal Peoples in the Age of the Knowledge Society and the Knowledge Mobilization." *Inditerra* 1: 91–101.

Lévy, Pierre. 1997. *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*. Trans. Peter Bononno. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.

———. 2003. "Le jeu de l'intelligence collective." *Sociétés* 79: 105–22.

Lutz, John Sutton, and Barbara Neis, eds. 2008. *Making and Moving Knowledge: Interdisciplinary and Community-Based Research in a World on the Edge*. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Mailhot, José. 1983. "À moins d'être son Esquimau, on est toujours le Naskapi de quelqu'un." *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec* 13(2): 85–100.

———. 1993. *Le savoir écologique traditionnel: La variabilité des systèmes de connaissances et leur étude*. Dossier-synthèse no. 4, Évaluation environnementale du projet Grande-Baleine. Montréal: Bureau de soutien de l'examen public du projet Grande-Baleine.

Menzies, Charles R., ed. 2006. *Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Natural Resource Management*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Menzies, Charles R., and Caroline Butler. 2006. "Understanding Ecological Knowledge: Introduction." In Menzies 2006, 1–17.

Native Women's Association of Canada. 2007. "Aboriginal Women and the Convention on Biological Diversity: An Issue Paper." http://www.laa.gov.nl.ca/laa/naws/pdf/nwac-CBD.pdf.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01

Stevenson, Marc G. 1996. "Indigenous Knowledge in Environmental Assessment." *Arctic* 49 (3): 278–91.
Turner, Lucien M. (1894) 1979. *Indiens et Esquimaux du Québec*. Montréal: Desclez.
Turner, Nancy J., Anne Marshall, Judith C. Thompson (Edōsdi), Robin June Hood, Cameron Hill, and Eva-Ann Hill. 2008. "'Ebb and Flow': Transmitting Environmental Knowledge in a Contemporary Aboriginal Community." In Lutz and Neis 2008, 45–63.
UNESCO. 2005. *Towards Knowledge Societies*. Paris: UNESCO. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001418/141843e.pdf.
United Nations. 1992. *Convention on Biological Diversity*. New York: United Nations. http://www.cbd.int/doc/legal/cbd-en.pdf.
———. 2007. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf.

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990417.01