

**Component Studies  
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Report on the Fieldtrip to Ushkan-shipiss  
October 14, 2006

January 2009

Environmental Impact Statement for the  
Lower Churchill Hydroelectric Generation Project



## Report on the fieldtrip to Ushkan-shipiss, October 14, 2006

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1 February 2008

### Overview

On October 14, 2006, Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro (NLH) sponsored a fieldtrip by a group of Sheshatshiu Innu residents to Ushkan-shipiss (near Upper Brook), the site of the last shaking tent ceremony (*kushapatshikan*) anywhere in Innu territory in Labrador and Quebec. The ceremony had been performed by the late Uatshitshish (Shinipesht Pokue) in November 1969, and the majority of the participants in the fieldtrip had participated in that ceremony.

The fieldtrip was conceived as a way to commemorate the last *kushapatshikan*, given the site's vulnerability to flooding as a result of reservoir creation, and to document testimony by the participants concerning the culturally and historically significant religious event. A professional camera operator and sound technician were retained to record Innu testimony with respect to the shaking tent event and the social and cultural context for it. The audio-visual material obtained here was archived with the Innu Nation.



Uatshitshish and his wife, Sheshatshiu, 1963 (photo José Mailhot)

Obtaining this audio-visual material at this point in time was deemed crucial because there are very few Innu Elders alive who remember *kushapatshikan* and any further delay in visiting the last shaking tent site could have resulted in the loss of such Elders to infirmity or death. As such, producing audio-visual material concerning the Ushkan-shipiss *kushapatshikan* may provide an important testimonial about Innu life on the river for future generations of Innu, as well as a highly valued legacy for the Elders who participated in the fieldtrip. NLH played an important role in having made this legacy possible.

The following is a brief report of the fieldtrip including a description of the activities that took place there and the religious context for them.

## Participants

The fieldtrip was sponsored by NLH and organized by its consultants, Minaskuat, and Peter Armitage, the author of this report. Marie-An Alyward was the key person at Minaskuat responsible for logistical details.

The participants in the fieldtrip included Pien Penashue, Nishet Penashue, Kanikuen Penashue, Tenesh Penashue, Manikanet Mark, Ishpashtien Pastatshi, Katinen Pastatshi, Enen Gregoire, An-Mani Penashue, Atuan Penashue, An-Pinamen Penashue. All but one of these people had been present at the site in November 1969 when Uatshitshish conducted his last *kushapatshikan* there. Apinam Pone Jr. attended on behalf of Minaskuat to provide logistical support and First Aid if required. The professional film crew consisted of Nigel Markham and Harvey Hislop both of St. John's. Peter Armitage also participated in the gathering in his capacity as study lead and facilitator of the documentary process.

Atuan Penashue, An-Pinamen Penashue, and Minaskuat staff, Patrick Penashue and Pinute Andrew, had visited the site in advance to set up stove-equipped canvas tents, and chop firewood in preparation for the gathering on October 14<sup>th</sup>.

Shortly after the arrival of the last participants, another helicopter arrived carrying Nishapet Penashue, Jack Penashue, Jervis Penashue, Max Penashue, and Denis Penashue. Although the members of this group had not been invited to attend the gathering, they took it upon themselves to organize (at their own expense) a visit of their own. Nishapet Penashue indicated a strong attachment to the Ushkan-shipiss location because she had been living in the Mishta-shipu (Churchill River) area with her husband in the fall of 1969, and had narrowly missed the shaking tent ceremony by a day or so. She was anxious to bear witness to the gathering and hear first hand the reminiscences of her husband's relatives.

## Context – Innu religious beliefs and practices

A great deal has been written about the “animistic” religious beliefs and practices of the Innu people of Labrador and Quebec. While it is unnecessary to review in detail all of the elements that make up this complex intellectual tradition, an overview of Innu animistic beliefs and practices will help the reader better understand the significance of the Ushkan-shipiss *kushapatshikan* (shaking tent) location. Much of this context has already been provided in the report of the work of the Innu Traditional Knowledge Committee. Innu beliefs and practices are described mostly in the present tense, recognizing that they have changed considerably over the last 50 years since the Innu were settled in villages.

At the outset, it is important to note that traditionally-minded Innu, like other hunter-gatherer peoples around the world, make no distinction between the

sacred and the profane, between religious and non-religious ideas and practices; such divisions of experience and rationality are but the constructs of industrial peoples. Similarly, the universe is not parsed simply into two separate worlds, nature and society, in their way of thinking; rather it is constituted as one world, “saturated with personal powers, and embracing both humans, the animals and plants on which they depend, and the features of the landscape in which they live and move” (Ingold, 2000:47).

At the core of Innu animist belief and practice is the idea that the Innu and other human beings are of the same “ontological status” as a variety of other-than-human and pseudo-human beings.<sup>1</sup> The nature of the relationship between humans and such beings was first articulated in modern terms by Hallowell (1960) for the Anishinaabe of Berens River, Manitoba, who share the same linguistic-cultural continuum that the Innu do (see also Black, 1967). Since then, a number of scholars have weighed in on various questions related to the way in which hunting and gathering peoples conceptualize “being,” both human and otherwise (e.g. Bird-David, 1992; Ingold, 2000; Laugrand and Oosten, 2007).

In a nutshell, traditionally-minded Innu extend person status to animal masters (*aueshish utshimauat*) and a variety of other entities some of which are considered non-living by non-Aboriginal people. Depending on the beings in question, they are thought to be able to understand or communicate with humans, dream like humans and enter into sexual relations with them on occasion, and may share many human physical, behavioural and social attributes.<sup>2</sup> Some other-than-human or pseudo-human beings are superhuman because of special attributes such as their gigantic size, and abilities to hear over great distances, travel under ground or fly through the air like birds. As with the Cree to the west, each of the Innu non-human or pseudo-human beings “has its own special and distinctive characteristics, but in general they seem to share some general features: they are living entities, mysterious, normally hidden, powerful, and able to influence certain kinds of experiential events” (Tanner, 2007:134).

The *aueshish utshimauat* (animal masters) were perhaps the most important of all other-than-human beings to the Innu because the success of the hunt depended upon them. As will be discussed at greater length below, failure to respect these beings could result in starvation and death.<sup>3</sup> One encounters small variations in beliefs about the animal masters as one travels from one part of the

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<sup>1</sup> “Ontology” refers to conceptions of reality and the nature of being, foundational “perceptual and conceptual categories by which people code their experience, through language” (Black, 1967:2).

<sup>2</sup> Re. the black bear dreaming about Innu hunters, see Clément (1995:295).

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally-minded Innu possess an elaborate taxonomic system that divides animals into different categories (Bouchard and Mailhot, 1973). However, an additional classification of animal species into kingdoms (*tipenitamun*) is superimposed upon the category of Innu animals. Here, each animal kingdom is controlled by an animal being called *utshimau* (chief or master) or *katipenitak* (controller) (ibid.:61-62). *Tipenitamun* means ‘authority, responsibility, jurisdiction, domain’ (Drapeau, 1991:676, my translation).

Innu territory to another. For example, in Unaman-shipu (La Romaine) on the Quebec North Shore, many animal species are thought to have their own animal master. *Papakashtshishk<sup>u</sup>* is the master of caribou, *Kakuapeu*, the master of porcupine, *Uapineu-napeu*, the master of partridge, etc. At the same time, individual species are represented by a single master on the basis of certain shared traits. Thus, *Missinak<sup>u</sup>* is the master of aquatic species including fish, beavers, otter and mink. The master of caribou is the most powerful of all of these masters and hence controls all terrestrial species, including most mammals, and birds (Clément, 1995:440-441). Innu living in Labrador do not use the term *Papakashtshishk<sup>u</sup>* to refer to the caribou master, preferring instead *Kanipinikassikueu*.

Traditionally-minded Innu live in a perpetual cycle of reciprocity with the animal masters. In return for following certain rules of respect, the animal masters provide animals under their control to the Innu. The rules of respect include sharing meat and other animal products, disposing the uneaten remains in the fire, in trees or on scaffolds, handling the caribou marrow with extreme care during the ritual feast known as *makushan*, not wasting meat or over-harvesting, making presentations to the masters in the form of decorated clothing and hunting equipment, and using deferential language when referring to or communicating with the masters. The need for respect is paramount,<sup>4</sup> and people who do not show respect run the risk of offending the animal masters, and hence, having no success at hunting or fishing. Respect is therefore at the core of the traditional Innu moral code, as noted by Henriksen.

Man and nature are part of one spiritual world. Hence, [*Mushuaunnu*] behaviour is guided not merely by what White people call 'rational principles', but also by the spiritual and moral principles which exist in nature of which Man is an integral part. They believe that a hunter does not kill an animal against its will, but with its consent. Hunters and hunted are alike part of nature. As long as the [*Mushuaunnuat*] follow the customs of their people, as handed down from their fore-fathers, and they do not offend the animals and their spiritual masters, they will continue to live in peace with each other and with nature" (1977:8).

Some Innu believe that a generalized lack of respect is the cause of a wide range of social problems in the Innu villages, and that a number of tragic events can be directly traced to specific acts of disrespect. Even horrific catastrophes in other countries such as tornadoes and the hurricane that ravaged New Orleans in 2005 are attributed to widespread disrespect towards the animal masters by Innu and non-Innu alike. In fact, the shaking tent ceremony can no longer be held, according to some Innu, because the *kakushapatak* (the officiant) would surely be harmed in it due to punishments inflicted upon him by angry animal masters over the disrespect shown them in recent years.

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<sup>4</sup> *ishpitenitam<sup>u</sup>* – s/he respects something, *ishpitenimeu* – s/he respects someone.

In addition to the animal masters, traditionally-minded Innu say that their territory was populated at one time or another with a variety of other-than-human beings some of which continue to inhabit it. In addition to *aueshish-utshimauat* (animal masters), they include Mishtapeu, cannibals such as Atshen and Meminteu, giant beavers and eagles, *manitush* (potentially malevolent beings) such as Uenitshikumishiteu, pseudo-human beings like Katshimaitsheshu (aka Uapanatsheu), cave/rock beings like Memekueshu, and Tshiuetinishu.<sup>5</sup> Mishtapeu is a type of guardian helper that comes to the assistance of a shaman and assists him in his “negotiations” with animal masters and battles with malevolent beings and hostile shamans. Tshiuetinishu is a weather control being associated with northerly winds. In addition to these non-human entities, Innu have also encountered pseudo-human entities such as *atshak<sup>u</sup>* (souls) and Kameshtashtaniunat, the latter inhabiting the shores of Kameshtashtan (Mistastin Lake).

As with other Algonquian-speaking peoples, many other-than-human beings are referred to as “grandparents” – *nimushum* (‘grandfather’) or *nukum* (‘grandmother’) depending on the sex of the being (see Hallowell, 1960, 1926; Scott, 2007). The black bear is certainly referred to deferentially in these terms. Grandparent beings appear to be analogues of the entities known as *atshak<sup>u</sup>* (‘soul’) which reside within all beings regardless of their person (ontological) status. *Atshak<sup>u</sup>* is like a guardian in that it can watch over humans and protect them from harm, malevolent beings and powers.

Communication with the animal masters, Mishtapeu, *atshak<sup>u</sup>*, and other beings is possible through dreams, *kushapatshikan* (shaking tent), *matutishan* (steam tent), scapulimancy (shoulder blade divination), oracles, omens, and other media (see Armitage, 1992; Savard, 2004:97-105; Vincent, 1973). However, only people with power could communicate with these beings, and in this regard the shamans were the most powerful. Known as *kamiteut* or *kamanitushit* (or its euphemism *kamataukatshiut*) to the Innu, the shaman could be *kakushapatak* or *kamushtatet*, the former term referring to the person who conducted a shaking tent ceremony, the latter to someone with power but who did not do the shaking tent.

Of all the possible communications media, the *kushapatshikan* (shaking tent) was the most powerful in terms of its capacity to establish contact with other-than-human or pseudo-human beings, as well as distant relatives and shamans. In widespread use among many Algonquian-speaking peoples until relatively

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<sup>5</sup> See Vincent and Bacon (1978:92) – “...the Montagnais territory has always been populated by multiple forms of life: neighbouring Indian groups whose members came in person or whose shamans sent their spirits in the form of animals, groups of maleficent beings which arrived from far away, and which may have been a Montagnais representation of Iroquois or other Amerindians, dangerous groups which had to be repulsed to the margins of the territory” (my translation).

recent times,<sup>6</sup> the *kushapatshikan* was the most important instrument in the shaman's toolkit for determining the whereabouts of animals and for encouraging generous treatment from the animal masters. The *kushapatshikan* was a small, conically-shaped tent with caribou hide or canvas covering, and four, six, or eight poles fashioned from a "special juniper that is hard to find." The number of poles used depended on the power of the shaman. The tent would be set up inside a carefully prepared larger tent with fresh fir boughs on the floor and all metal removed. The *kushapatshikan* would start to shake violently as soon as the *kakushapatak* entered thereby indicating the arrival of Mishtapeu who acted as an interpreter between the shaman and the various other-than-human and pseudo-human beings who also entered the tent (Armitage, 1992:72-85).<sup>7</sup>

With the aid of the *kushapatshikan* and other media, Innu shamans played a key role in reminding people of the rules of respect, in maintaining relations with the animal masters and other beings, and in rectifying problems when people had committed transgressions. Moreover, shamans had frequent encounters with non-human and pseudo-human beings



Pien Penashue standing in front of a model *kushapatshikan* he erected at the Labrador Interpretation Centre (photo Pinip Nuna, courtesy Innu Nation)

The last shaking tent ceremony among the northern *Mushuaunnuat* who settled in Davis Inlet in the late 1960s was conducted by Meshkana (Sam Rich) at Mishta-natuashu not long before his death in 1957. The last one conducted

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<sup>6</sup> See Armitage (1992), Cooper (1944), Feit (1994), Flannery (1939), Hallowell (1942), Preston (2002), Tanner (1979), and Vincent (1973).

<sup>7</sup> Kanikuen Penashue, personal communication, 15 Oct. 2006. Kanikuen said that the *kushapatshikan* he witnessed in his youth lasted from about 8:00 pm to midnight. "It was like a double feature at the movies." Even though it was getting cold, the shaman worked up a real sweat in the shaking tent. He went in wearing only his underpants.

among the Innu who settled in Sheshatshiu was conducted by Uatshitshish (Shinipesht Pokue) at Ushkan-shipiss in November 1969. Uatshitshish passed away in Sheshatshiu in 1971.

Another great Innu shaman of his generation was the late Uashaunnu (Atuan Ashini). He died early in the new year of 1952 at Amishku-shipiss on the southern shore of Atatshi-uinipeku (Lake Melville). He had conducted his last shaking ceremony the previous fall at the nearby Iku-shipiss.

### **Description of the fieldtrip**

The site of the October 2006 gathering was a short distance downstream of the junction between Ushkan-shipiss (near Upper Brook) and Mishta-shipu (Churchill River). It is approximately 200 metres from a campsite occupied in the fall of 1969 by members of the Penashue, Pastatshi and Pokue families who have strong historical connections to the territory between Mishta-shipu/Atatshi-uinipeku (Lake Melville) and the Quebec North Shore.



Pien Penashue explains how Mistsapeu and Aueshish-utshimauat entered the shaking tent (photo Peter Armitage)

Pien, Nishet, Kanikuen, Atuan, An-Mani, and Katinen shared their memories of the *kushapatshikan*. Story telling commenced about 10:30 am and continued until 1:30 pm at which point the group stopped for lunch. A variety of bush meats such as porcupine and ptarmigan had been brought for the occasion which made for a mini-feast and added considerably to the special occasion.

Although the testimony shared at the gathering has not been transcribed and translated, a number of points were made during the gathering that were translated on the spot for the benefit of the non-Innu present. These include:



- Uatshitshish had a Mishtapeu who translated in the shaking tent. When Mishtapeu speaks he sounds just like the shaman speaking, in his natural voice. However, one cannot understand the animal masters;
- When a shaman dies, he can give his Mishtapeo to another person;
- Uatshitshish got his power from Meshkana. Uatshitshish had lived in the Davis Inlet area in his youth along with his brother Uniam but they didn't remember it. Their sister, Ishkuess, married Meshkana;
- It took two days to prepare the shaking tent. "Everything had to be special." The boughs on the floor were all new. The poles and rings for the shaking tent were made out of a special juniper which was hard to find. It was a four pole shaking tent. There could be absolutely nothing in the bigger tent except the shaking tent. No metal whatsoever, not even the heat shielding for the stove pipe;
- Everyone gathered around the perimeter of the larger tent sitting on the boughs;
- Matiu Penashue had acted as a kind of director, instructing people where to sit inside the larger tent.
- Even though it was getting cold, the shaman worked up a real sweat in the shaking tent. He went in wearing only his underpants;
- The ceremony lasted from about 8:00 pm to midnight;
- "It was like a double feature at the movies";
- The other-than-human beings who enter the shaking tent can smell. They told the Innu, "You smell like White people."

Following the meal, a number of the participants were guided to the 1969 camp location by Atuan Penashue who pointed to the exact place the last shaking tent had been erected. The tent had been set up in a larger, canvas tent by the late Matiu Penashue at W 60.9203 N 53.1786 (GPS accuracy 7 metres, WGS84). The *matakuap* (old campsite) was a short distance from Bob Leg's hunting and trapping camp which is located at W 60.9214 N 53.1782. Both of these camps are at the mouth of Ushkan-shipiss (Upper Brook).



Innu walking along the shore of Mishta-shipu towards the location of the 1969 campsite, which was in the black spruce forest behind the alders just above the group. The mouth of Ushkan-shipiss is a short distance further up the shore (photo Peter Armitage).

Even though Uatshitshish's group had camped here for one month in four tents, there is virtually no sign of any land use at the location today. The low archaeological visibility of the site is confirmed by historical resource assessment archaeologist, Fred Schwarz (personal communication). According to Atuan Penashue, the campsite had been clear of trees back in 1969, whereas nowadays it is quite forested. Beaver chewed branches and logs on the forest floor attest to the fact that the location floods in the spring, an observation confirmed by Bob Leg whose log cabin had once been shifted about by the flooding (personal communication). A considerable amount of wind-fall covers the location where the shaking tent had been erected.



The location of the last *kushpatshikan* in Innu territory in Labrador and Quebec. Overgrown and covered by wind-fall (photo Peter Armitage)

### **The significance of Ushkan-shipiss**

Twenty-one shamans are known to the Innu *tshishennuat* (Elders) of Sheshatshiu and Natuashish, of which Uatshitshish was the last to pass away. To the best of my knowledge, Uatshitshish was also the last shaman, and certainly the last officiant of the shaking tent, anywhere in the greater Innu territory of Nitassinan (Labrador and Quebec). These 21 shamans conducted *kushapatshikan* in at least 32 locations in Labrador including the one at Ushkan-shipiss. The ceremony was conducted at two other places on Mishta-shipu (Churchill River) – the portage trail by Manitu-utshu (Muskrat Falls hill), and Tshiashku-nipi (Gull Lake). Uatshitshish conducted the one at Manitu-utshu while Uashaunnu (Atuan Ashini) conducted the one at Tshiashku-nipi.

There is little doubt that the *kushapatshikan* was an extremely important religious institution in Innu culture in the days prior to settlement, and therefore, it is not surprising that *tshishennuat* (Elders) should be so eager to convey information

about it to younger generations. As noted previously, it was the most powerful medium for establishing contact with the animal masters and various other non-human beings, and the welfare of the Innu depended very much on maintaining good relations with these entities. Dangerous by definition, and requiring great power to operate, the shaking tent was a portal to “another dimension” and its other-than-human beings that no one other than the shaman could use.

The fieldtrip to Ushkan-shipiss triggered many good memories for the participants, and greatly animated their narratives about the events that had occurred there almost 40 years ago. The participants were very pleased to have been able to visit the location one last time because they fully expect that advancing age and/or reservoir flooding will make it impossible to do so in the future.

Lastly, the audio-visual materials recorded at Ushkan-shipiss will serve as useful historical and religious resource material for future generations of Innu, so that they can fully appreciate the significance of the last *kushapatshikan* in their territory.

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