

Colonialism to Post-Colonialism in Canada's Western Interior: The Case of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band

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The Western Interior of Canada—that vast land stretching from Hudson Bay to the Rocky Mountains—was one of the last areas of North America to witness the arrival of Europeans as fur traders, missionaries, and government officials. Contact with British fur traders began shortly after 1670 when King Charles II granted the Hudson's Bay Company an exclusive charter to engage in fur trading in the lands draining into Hudson Bay. Over the course of three centuries, a series of external events altered the economic, political, and social relationships between the original inhabitants of the Western Interior and the newcomers. At first, a handful of British and French traders appeared. Later, many more traders, missionaries, and government officials came. Each has had a different, but powerful, impact on Indian peoples and their landscapes. The cumulative effect has been profound—initial loss of population, weakening of links to the land, and finally, relocation to reserves and more distant settlements. Yet, despite the many terrible losses and impositions of the colonial period, the history of the native inhabitants of this region has not represented an inexorable progression toward ever-worsening circumstances. Since the 1970s, Indians, especially those that are beneficiaries of modern treaties, have gained some measure of control over their affairs (which we will refer to here as political and economic power). Power stems from three main developments in the late-20th century: the legal recognition of aboriginal title, the negotiations of modern treaties, and First Nations participation in resource development. The Lac La Ronge Indian Band of Saskatchewan, having gained considerable political and economic power from these recent changes, is a leading force for economic and political change for aboriginal populations both province- and nationwide. They serve as the central case study in this paper.

From the first appearance of colonial peoples in the Western Interior of Canada to the present, myriad forces have transformed Indian culture, their economy, and their relationship to the landscape. While this paper focuses on events taking place after the 1960s, the history of this region can be divided into three major eras: the pre-contact era, the colonial era, and the post-colo-

nial era. Like regions, historic eras have core characteristics that fade into the next era and are replaced by new core characteristics. Sometimes change is sudden and dramatic. The pre-contact era marks that long and little-documented period from the original human occupation of the interior of Canada to the arrival of colonial peoples; the colonial era is characterized by the re-settlement of North America by Europeans and the consolidation of the Canadian state while the post-colonial era, as defined here, is a recent period characterized by the rise of native political power within the national arena. The post-colonial era provides the central focus for this paper, and the role of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band within that era provides specific insights into cultural adaptation, economic vision, and the emergence of a new Indian landscape that has unprecedented urban and industrial properties.

Entering the Post-Colonial Era

On the world stage, the post-colonial era began with the collapse of colonial empires in Africa and Asia and the creation of independent nation-states on those continents. The emergent political landscape not only reshaped the geopolitics of Africa and Asia, but the ideas of independence and self-determination spread to oppressed minorities in North America, igniting their desire to revise their place in American and Canadian societies. Long-simmering concerns in the First Nations community about restrictive measures in the 1876 Indian Act began to reemerge with greater urgency by the 1950s. Particular concern was being expressed at mid-century regarding Indians not having the right to vote in provincial and federal elections, and about the persistence of residential schools designed to eradicate native culture and language and remake Indian children into productive members of white society. As the rumblings became louder in the 1960s, Indian voices became more strident, influenced in part by the American Civil Rights movement and the American Indian Movement (AIM) whose members advocated confrontational political action to advance aboriginal rights. In 1974, George Manuel wrote *The Fourth World* in which he referred to Indian bands as nations, a term without the same precedents in Canada as found in United States Indian law.¹ In the following year, Howard Adams wrote *Prison of Grass*, which challenged Eurocentric history.² Adams, considered a radical in his day, expressed his views on Eurocentrism:

Eurocentric history is more than a glorification of Western Europe's past and a denigration of Native people. It is an aspect of imperialism, a mechanism designed to suppress resistance and to prevent the native population from developing a counter-consciousness to Western Europe's culture.³

In 1975, the Dene peoples of northern Canada compiled the Dene Declaration of the Indians of the Northwest Territories, moving the debate from

rhetoric to political action, and calling for political independence from the Canadian state:

The Dene find themselves as part of a country. The country is Canada. But the Government of Canada is not the government of the Dene. What we seek then is independence and self-determination within the country of Canada.⁴

This shift from a subdued and discursively marginal native population to one seeking power in national arenas signaled the start of the post-colonial era in Canada. Very quickly, the federal government was dragged into the fray, and aboriginal issues suddenly changed from being “irrelevant” in the 1960s to becoming pressing national issues in the 1970s. As late as 1969, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau denied the legal status of aboriginal rights stating, “We can’t recognize aboriginal rights because no society can be built on historical ‘might have beens.’”⁵

How did aboriginal issues move so quickly—in less than a decade—from being “might have beens” to the top of the national agenda? The answer lies in a series of major events that combined to focus Canada’s attention on Indian issues. Each, in their own way, triggered the process of political empowerment of native peoples. These events included:

- The White Paper (1969),
- The *Calder* Case (1973),
- The Berger Inquiry (1974-76), and
- The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (1975).

The White Paper

In 1969, the Canadian government began to seek solutions to the “Indian problem.” A few years earlier, the Hawthorne Report had documented the plight of Canada’s most disadvantaged ethnic group—its native people. Jarred by the contents of this report and by fears of damaging Canada’s international reputation as a “just society,” the federal government sought to devise a more progressive Indian policy. Based on the philosophical concept of “equality among all citizens,” Ottawa proposed, for the first time in Canadian history, a policy based on the presupposition that Indians should be treated equally under the law. The plan was to terminate the legal distinction between Indians and other Canadians by repealing the Indian Act. Indians would gradually take control of their land and their lives. The carefully engineered dependency of Canadian First Nations would be replaced by greater self-reliance and self-government. Yet simultaneously, the traditional legal protections assigned to Indians—the treaties, previously established aboriginal rights (including some land titles), and the special federal status—would end. Indians were to become part of the larger Canadian society, with the ultimate aim of assimila-

tion. Ironically, this announcement was called the “White Paper.” Almost immediately, the White Paper ignited the fury of Indian leaders, resulting in a political firestorm that caused Ottawa to withdraw its proposal. Harold Cardinal wrote a scathing account of Ottawa’s proposal, calling his book *The Unjust Society*:

The history of Canada’s Indians is a shameful chronicle of the white man’s disinterest, his deliberate trampling of Indian rights and his repeated betrayal of our trust. Now, at a time when our fellow Canadians consider the promise of the Just Society, once more the Indians of Canada are betrayed by a programme [the White Paper] which offers nothing better than cultural genocide.⁶

The National Indian Brotherhood declared that:

...the policy proposals put forward by the Minister of Indian Affairs are not acceptable to the Indian people of Canada ... We view this as a policy designed to divest us of our Aboriginal, residual and statutory rights. If we accept this policy, and in the process lose our rights and our lands, we become willing partners in cultural genocide.⁷

The *Calder* Case

In 1973, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in the *Calder* case that aboriginal land title, though often denied in previous cases, did exist in law (*Calder v. Attorney General of British Columbia*). The court also ruled that aboriginal title, unless formally extinguished, continued to exist. Suddenly, aboriginal rights to hunt, trap, and fish on public lands dispossessed from tribes roughly a century earlier were transformed; instead of being granted “at the pleasure of the Crown,” the use of traditional lands for subsistence purposes became a legally protected right. The *Calder* case represented a major turning point, forcing the federal government to radically revise its policies toward aboriginal title. The federal government’s response was to initiate a process of extinguishing aboriginal claims through negotiations with individual First Nations that had not previously held treaties. In 1981, Canada’s comprehensive land claims policy was put in place, in which the federal government negotiated with aboriginal peoples in an effort to encourage these peoples to exchange poorly defined aboriginal land rights for concrete rights and benefits (often including no land title).

Ponting and Gibbins describe the *Calder* case as a watershed in Indian/Canadian legal relations, and describe it as the basis for a new geopolitical order:

Thenceforth, Indians exhibited levels of determination, organization, and sophistication in the ways of Euro-Canadian politics and media manipulations such as had not been seen for over a century, if ever. Simul-

taneously, Indian lands once again took on high value in the Canadian economy, and various favorable court rulings (especially the one by the Supreme Court in 1973 on the Nishga Indian aboriginal land claim) demonstrated to the government that Indians could no longer be ignored. Indians had once more become a power to be reckoned with and negotiated with.⁸

The Berger Inquiry

Prior to the 1970s, the Canadian public had shown little interest in Indian affairs. The media ignored this dark side of Canada's history. All this ended with the Berger Inquiry.⁹ From 1974 to 1976, Thomas Berger headed the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry. Berger was to assess the proposed natural gas pipeline from Prudhoe Bay across the Arctic Coast to the mouth of the Mackenzie River and then south along the Mackenzie Valley to Alberta and on to U.S. markets. Touted as the largest construction project in the world and backed by major Canadian and American petroleum and pipeline companies, most assumed that this massive construction project in Canada's northern wilderness would be quickly approved. Not only did everyone stand to gain—the petroleum companies, the construction workers, the American consumers, the pipeline companies, and the national and local economies—but federal authorities had never before questioned the merit of such industrial development proposals. However, Berger revolutionized the process of such inquiries by taking the project hearings from the boardroom to the public halls of native communities. At the same time, Dene political leaders added their voices to the discussion, shocking Canadians with visions of an autonomous Dene state within Canada. Other Indian faces appeared nightly on national television news programs. Each expressed his or her fears about the possible impact of this project on their way of life. Dene leaders insisted that their unresolved land claims must be settled before such development took place on their traditional lands. The impact on Canadian society was astounding. Until then, Canadians assumed that large-scale developments in northern Canada resulted in benefits for everyone. Canadians were awakened to previously hidden social costs of such massive projects. More importantly, they became aware of the simmering Dene struggle for a land-claim settlement and the potential implications of aboriginal land claims for national-scale industrial projects.

The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement

In 1971, the Quebec government announced plans to build a series of huge hydroelectric dams—the James Bay Hydroelectric Project—in sparsely settled northern Quebec to provide power to provincial and national markets. At that time, the Quebec government believed that the native peoples in northern Quebec had no legally binding claims to the land. Opposed to the flood-

ing of their traditional lands and a host of other anticipated impacts, the Cree and Inuit took their concerns to the Quebec courts. Through this litigation, the First Nations forced both the government of Quebec and its partner in the project, Hydro Quebec, to the negotiating table. There, the Cree and Inuit were successful in having their interests addressed prior to the completion of the James Bay project. In 1975, as a result of this process, federal and First Nations representatives signed Canada's first modern treaty, the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. The purpose of this controversial agreement was:

- to extinguish aboriginal title on impacted lands;
- to compensate the Cree and Inuit with cash, land, and exclusive rights to hunt, fish, and trap within specified land areas; and
- to allow the construction of the James Bay Hydroelectric Project.

By surrendering their aboriginal claim to the lands of northern Quebec, the Cree and Inuit received a cash settlement of \$225 million, with annual payments spread over 25 years. They also received title to nearly 14,000 square kilometers of land around settlements and access to an additional 151,600 square kilometers of land to which they held exclusive hunting, fishing, and trapping rights. In the remaining land in northern Quebec, the Cree and Inuit retained exclusive rights to hunt 22 species of wildlife.

The 1975 agreement required the federal and Quebec governments to enact special legislation to facilitate local government and land administration for the Cree and Inuit living in northern Quebec. This served as the foundation for a number of subsequent agreements that asserted the titular rights of First Nations in land claims and land-management dispute settlements. The Naskapi, who signed the Northeastern Quebec Agreement in 1978, were beneficiaries of this legislation. In 1984, the Cree-Naskapi Act was passed by Quebec and was subsequently recognized by Ottawa as superceding the Indian Act. The Cree-Naskapi Act further asserted the authority of local and regional Indian governments in matters pertaining to aboriginal land title.

Empowerment, Economic Change, and Indian Industrial/Urban Landscapes

How has the legal empowerment of First Nations affected the landscape? I argue that international political events initiated the process of altering the power relationship between Canadian Indians, their government, and the minds and attitudes of non-Indian Canadians. This power shift represents both a relaxation of Canada's colonial grip on Indian people and efforts by Indian people to assert their power, often through the courts. These two processes act unevenly, allowing many aboriginal peoples to assert their rights to lands and resources while leaving many other aboriginal peoples still subject to the colo-

nial baggage codified in the Indian Act. I further argue that these changes are radically altering Indian society and economy as well as facilitating the emergence in places of an Indian industrial/urban landscape. A caveat must be added, namely that these changes are occurring among only a few First Nations and other aboriginal peoples. Whether other First Nations adopt these practices and construct these landscapes is unknown, but, as Roger's innovative model predicts, if the more adventurous First Nations succeed in these endeavors, others will follow.¹⁰

While this paper is not intended to construct a comprehensive geographic theory of post-colonialism and landscape, it does recognize the need for historical geographers to pay more attention to this matter. My paper does tread gingerly on the edges of Sluyter's quest¹¹ and in this way may help move the theoretical discussion forward.

Landscapes are ephemeral. Since human landscapes are most actively shaped by those who control the economy and dominate the culture, major changes to the landscape occur as power slips from one group to another. By their activities, whether cultural or economic, the power-holders shape the landscape into their image. Place names, too, reflect this power over the landscape. Control over toponymy is one mark of cultural domination. As discussed in this paper, the transformation of Indian economic strategies and the resulting involvement in the market economy has created a new Indian landscape.

The role of the landscape in geography is well established. As a visible mark of human activities, the colonized landscape clearly has a role to play in the study of aboriginal historical geographies. As Sluyter observed: "Landscape, after all, is a key unit of geographic analysis and its transformation through social/biophysical processes is a primary phenomenon of geographic inquiry."¹² In the pre-contact world, all aspects of nature arguably had a place in the landscape; it was not necessary or even desirable to tame the land and reshape it. Not so in the colonized era. Now indigenous space was colonized, and the landscape took on a new appearance. At first, the impact of colonization on the landscape was only subtly noticeable. By 1700, only a few fur trading posts existed along the shores of Hudson Bay. The rest of the landscape remained Indian land, though both the Indian economy and society had adjusted to the fur trade. By 1800, the Western Interior had fur trading posts along all major waterways. Missionaries established their presence at the trading posts. Epidemics and demographic collapse ensued in the years that followed.¹³ The fur trade had become spatially ubiquitous and the efforts of the missionaries attacked the very spiritual heart of Indian culture. Colonialism affected Indian tribes in geographic regions differently. Beyond the agricultural lands, Indian tribes were not displaced and could continue to hunt and trap. In all cases, however, the story is the struggle of the original inhabitants trapped in a colonial empire and then in a nation-state to adapt to new circumstances and find their places in this new and different world.

The Lac La Ronge Indian Band: From Treaty to 1969

Indian tribes located north of the settled agricultural lands escaped the worst aspects of Canadian colonialism. For example, Plains Indians, who had the bad fortune to be occupying arable lands at the time of contact, were confined to their reserves while Woodland Cree were free to hunt and trap as they did before the Indian Act of 1876. The historical record for the Lac La Ronge Band began on February 11, 1889 when the descendants of the James Roberts Band became signatories to Treaty 6. Certainly, the establishment of treaties was part of Ottawa's plan to gain territorial control over the Western Interior by extinguishing aboriginal title, and the Lac La Ronge people must have sensed this. What events, then, propelled the James Roberts Band accept the treaty?

The transfer of the Hudson's Bay Company lands to Canada in 1870 and the settlement of the arable lands of the Western Interior were key factors. Indians in the Western Interior numbered about 35,000 in 1870; the Métis, about 12,000; whites, fewer than 2,000. By 1930, the white population had grown to nearly 3 million while the native population remained around 50,000. With a low rate of population increase, and the incoming flood of settlers, the agricultural part of the Western Interior quickly took on a new appearance in its agricultural lands—gone were the hunting camps and huge herds of buffalo. Cultivated land, farm buildings, and railway lines that took the grain to foreign markets now dominated the scene, effectively displacing aboriginal landscapes and lifeways. But more than that, the Canadian Prairies become integrated into the North American economy and ecumene. Indians and Métis now formed only a marginalized minority within the larger population.

Not so farther north. In the Boreal Forest, life remained centered on the fur trade and few whites ventured into these subarctic forests or settled there for long. By 1930, native people still represented close to 90 percent of the region's population. Unlike most Indians in Canada, Ottawa leaders did not initially enforce reserve settlements among the peoples of the northern taiga forests, allowing and even encouraging a nomadic lifestyle. This was in marked contrast to the policies pursued in the south, where the government sought to totally restructure native culture by pursuing rigorous policing, agricultural training, residential education, and tightly enforced regulations of off-reserve activities. However, the northern landscape was being subtly and increasingly shaped by the power of the state, as expressed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (at first called the North West Mounted Police), the Department of Indian Affairs (which administered the Indian Act), and a host of other public institutions.

When the Lac La Ronge Indian Band signed Treaty 6 in 1889, its population was 435—the first official figures for this band (Table 1). In the next 40 years, the population of the Lac La Ronge Indians increased very slowly. Its average annual rate of natural increase was around 0.5 percent. By 1930, the population stood at nearly 700. Epidemics and high mortality rates kept its

Table 1. Population Size of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, 1889-2001

Year	Population
1889	435
1909	516
1920	643
1936	747
1947	932
1958	1,555
1969	2,010
1976	2,522
1985	3,274
1992	5,298
1998	6,757

Sources: Factum of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, 2001; Indian Register Population by Sex and Residence.

population growth in check. A small but still important source of population loss was due to Indian women marrying outsiders and thereby losing their Indian status under Canadian federal law.

The mobility of the northern hunters was giving way to a host of new pressures. In the late 1940s, Indians began to spend more and more time near the fur trading post at Lac La Ronge. By the 1950s, both provincial and federal governments reversed their conventional leniency on Indian mobility in the north. Indians were encouraged to relocate near tiny communities, which contained trading posts, churches, and government offices. With the relocation of Indians into settlements, their demographic characteristics began to change. Death rates declined while birth rates increased, causing the band population to explode. From 1940 to 1970, the birth rate nearly doubled from some 20 births per 1,000 persons to 40 births per 1,000 persons. Settlement life, combined with a host of political and economic changes during the post-war period, meant a secure food supply at the store, medical assistance at the nursing station, and welfare available from the Indian agent. Moreover, the clergy, especially the Catholic priests who proselytized to the Lac La Ronge, strongly advocated large families and were adamantly opposed to family plan-

ning. At the same time, the federal government introduced family allowance payments (payments to mothers for each child) to facilitate larger families. For native families, these payments amounted to a much larger and more reliable cash flow each month than trapping had ever provided.

In addition to these factors, population figures were increased by a statistical "return" of former female band members, who had lost their status because of marrying a non-aboriginal man. They and their offspring regained band status as a result of Bill C-31.¹⁴ Since 1985, the Lac La Ronge Indian Band has received more than 1,200 Bill C-31 members. Lac La Ronge also experienced a slow but steady drift of band members to off-reserve locations (Table 2). Frequently, these off-reserve locations were towns and cities, such as Prince Albert and Saskatoon.

Year	On-reserve	Off-reserve	On Crown Land	Population
1969	1,757	228	25	2,010
1972	1,962	260	38	2,260
1976	2,097	318	110	2,522
1981	2,400	373	103	2,876
1985	2,729	432	113	3,274
1988	3,030	916	115	4,061
1992	3,385	1,727	186	5,298
1995	3,802	2,127	211	6,140
1996	3,911	2,220	219	6,350
1998	4,137	2,388	232	6,757

Source: Indian Register Population by Sex and Residence.

In the post-war era, the Lac La Ronge Indians, like other northern Indians, were forced to make several further major economic adjustments. First, their fur economy was failing, a victim of fluctuating prices, rising prices for trapping equipment, and competition from white trappers. Fishing and logging provided some seasonal work but the Indian and Métis populations were becoming more and more dependent on government transfer payments. Resource activities were attracting workers, mostly Anglo-Canadian workers, from the south but few Indians had the training or interest to pursue this type of work. In 1944, the provincial government introduced a number of measures

to control trapping, fishing, and forestry, placing unprecedented limits on the timing, location, and intensity of traditional activities. Both Ottawa and Regina continued their assimilation policies to bring the Indians of northern Saskatchewan into Canadian society, while new schools were built in northern centers. As most natives still lived in remote locations, children were often sent to residential schools, breaking the transfer of traditional knowledge and skills. This was by design—provincial and federal policies aimed to retool the skills of Indian children so that they could become laborers in Canada's resource economy. Newly gathered in small settlements with decreasing ties to their traditional lands and livelihoods, the Lac La Ronge found themselves without an economic base capable of supporting the influx of native peoples; welfare soon became a way of life.¹⁵

Post-Colonial Era, 1970 to Present

In the late 1970s, the Lac La Ronge Indian Band formally recognized that the traditional trapping economy could no longer support its members. That fact, combined with a lack of alternative economic developments on the reserve, was a major concern. With few job opportunities, welfare payments became the primary source of band income, and social problems grew increasingly widespread. As well, the band council observed that unless the band was directly involved in a business venture, band members seldom were hired by local businesses. The reasons were complex, but included the facts that few Indians had the necessary education or job experience and most employers perceived that Indians were not competitive employees when compared with other Saskatchewan workers.¹⁶

In 1981, the Lac La Ronge Indian Band embarked on a new economic strategy design to enable it to participate in the market economy for the benefit of its members. At this time, a mining boom was taking place in northern Saskatchewan. The provincial government insisted that mining companies operating in the north provide extra financial incentives to employees—"northern benefits"—in order to obtain a mining lease agreement.¹⁷ The Lac La Ronge Indian Band's main reserve is near the highway, connecting the city of Prince Albert with the Key Lake uranium mine. Moreover, the reserve was situated near the town of La Ronge, the main service center for the region. Geographically then, the band was strategically located for business opportunities with the northern mines. Under the leadership of Chief Myles Venne, the band sought to capitalize on some of these developments in order to secure employment and training opportunities for band members.¹⁸

With the construction of Key Lake mine underway, the mining company required large quantities of gravel for construction purposes. The Lac La Ronge Indian Band saw an opportunity to supply crushed aggregate to the Key Lake uranium mine but it needed both management skills and capital to purchase trucks and rock-crushing equipment. Banks would not loan money to bands and so in 1981, the Lac La Ronge Indian Band Council created the Kitsaki

Development Corporation (KDC). KDC obtained a bank loan and, in partnership with a local firm, Brodsky Construction Ltd., was awarded a gravel contract with Key Lake. With that success behind them, Kitsaki/Brodsky obtained other gravel contracts for road construction. Band members became involved in truck driving and the operation of the rockcrushing equipment. In time, a new partnership was formed with Trimac Transportation Systems, a large trucking firm based in Calgary. Trimac had received a contract for all the trucking requirements of the uranium companies in northern Saskatchewan. The uranium companies wanted Trimac to involve northerners. The answer was a joint venture with the Lac La Ronge Indian Band that not only had the KDC, but had some experience with trucking. In 1986, Northern Resource Trucking (NRT) was formed with Kitsaki and the band owning 51 percent and Trimac owning 49 percent. While the band had the controlling interest, KDC arranged for a management contract with Trimac, giving the Calgary firm the authority to run the company. This strategy of majority ownership, while subcontracting to ensure access to private company's management expertise, has worked well for the Lac La Ronge Indian Band.¹⁹

The KDC increasingly served dual functions, both as a private firm seeking profits and as a band firm seeking to train its members. In the wake of its initial successes, Kitsaki quickly became a major economic force in band life. Indeed, in the 2001 fiscal year, Kitsaki's total gross revenue reached over \$67 million.²⁰ While this amount is not nearly large enough to realize the long-term goal of providing dividends for the individual shareholders (the band's members), Kitsaki still offsets the costs of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band by providing a small dividend to the band's annual budget and by hiring and training band members. In this model, the Lac La Ronge Band has started to achieve something approaching fiscal autonomy from the Canadian government. Kitsaki's CEO, Ray McKay, stated the company mandate was:

To generate wealth for the Lac La Ronge Indian Band by starting or acquiring profitable businesses to create jobs and training opportunities for our Band members, and other Aboriginal people.²¹

While enthusiastic about the successes of Kitsaki, some band members wished to explore more traditional resource-development alternatives. Therefore, the harvesting, packaging, and marketing of wild rice became an increasingly important commercial venture. Funded in part by Kitsaki support, La Ronge Industries Ltd. became involved in the growing of wild rice and established wild rice leases throughout hundreds of lakes in remote areas of northern Saskatchewan, many within the traditional territories of the Lac La Ronge. Some of these lakes are on band reserve lands but most are leased from the provincial government exclusively for wild rice production. The rice, which is harvested from shallow areas in lakes and rivers by driving airboats through rice patches, is then processed in La Ronge at a state-of-the-art processing plant—currently the largest such plant in Canada. For the past three years,

Kitsaki Meats Ltd. has been responsible for the marketing of the wild rice as a gourmet, organic food under the label “Northern Lights.” Much of the product is exported to the United States, Europe, and Japan. While Kitsaki Meats faced stiff competition in the global market place, especially from paddy-grown crops in the U.S., the Saskatchewan firm has an important edge—its wild rice organic certification.²² The company’s success in the export field has not gone unnoticed. The wild rice industry provides important seasonal employment for a number of band members in one of the few industries that remains consistent with those who continue to live on the reserve.²³

While owned by the band, the band council does not interfere with the operations of Kitsaki and its holdings. However, the relationships between this enterprise and band interests remain strong. Notably, in 1994, Kitsaki financed the band’s land-claims proceedings. Legal fees so far have cost almost \$2 million, a total that Kitsaki has been able to support with ease.²⁴ With the case going to the Supreme Court of Canada in 2003, the total cost of legal fees could reach \$3 million. Prior to the emergence of Kitsaki, this level of legal involvement would have been unthinkable, and the band’s land claims might have remained unresolved.

With the prospect of regaining control over portions of their former lands, the Lac La Ronge Indian Band has been forced to confront the question of how they might, after generations of social and economic transformation, incorporate these lands into their current lives and livelihoods. As a result, the Lac La Ronge Indian Band has adopted a *vision* for the development of resources from within its traditional lands. As stated by Chief Cook:

The Lac La Ronge Indian Band views its Traditional Lands as a heritage resource for future generations of its people. Our forest lands are for hunting, trapping, travelling, gathering of special forest products, and for spiritual and cultural purposes. But we also view them as a renewable resource for sustainable, long-term economic growth and employment for our people.

*We shall ensure that our people are fully educated, trained, and counseled to participate in the development of our natural resources. We have made a commitment to develop the timber resources of our Traditional Lands according to the principles of Sustainability, Environmental Protection, Multiple Use of Resources, Preservation of Traditional Activities, and Public Participation and Consultation.*²⁵

A number of new initiatives aim to achieve these goals, by creating partnerships with timber companies—including the American multinational business, Weyerhaeuser—that have agreed to help uphold the Lac La Ronge vision.²⁶

Conclusions

In Indian country, dependency and its associated economic and social ills have been exacerbated by chronic and heavy reliance on the federal govern-

ment. The Lac La Ronge Indian Band has attempted to break with dependency by creating its own economic development through a band-owned company, KDC. While the band insists on asserting its treaty rights, the band council sees band-driven economic development as the key to its future autonomy from the Canadian government. The Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership not only plays a key role in the economic life of northern Saskatchewan, but also marks a new role for the Lac La Ronge Indian Band in the market economy of the region, province, nation, and world.²⁷ Economic strength derived from Kitsaki is a new form of "red power." For the band, this power stems from three main areas: participation in resource development and in service industries, the capacity to train band members within Kitsaki companies, and financial strength enabling it to support the band's land-claim efforts.²⁸ The Lac La Ronge Indian Band, a leading actor in the economic and political changes now unfolding within Saskatchewan, has changed its aboriginal landscape in three ways. First, Kitsaki has its headquarters and several businesses on the La Ronge Reserve, thus creating a new commercial landscape. It has also established commercial offices in La Ronge, Prince Albert, and Saskatoon. Second, the employment opportunities created by the on-reserve business plus the businesses located in the adjacent town of La Ronge has resulted in an expansion of band housing. Third, the wild rice harvesting on northern lakes and the logging operations have altered the natural landscape into an industrial one, albeit one with a comparatively light imprint on the land.

Kitsaki has represented the next step in the ongoing transformation of the Woodland Cree society and its economy, and, in the course of action, is creating an Indian urban/industrial landscape.²⁹ These changes, a product of the decision to enter the market economy, are not exclusive to the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. Though the Lac La Ronge case is somewhat unique, similar stories are starting to emerge in a handful of other aboriginal communities. This decision has consequences for the future of Cree culture, as this direct involvement in the market economy requires the adoption of values associated with private business, i.e., individualism and the profit motive. Indian culture, however, has tempered these western values with more traditional and collectivist ethics, by providing training for band members; funding band land-claims efforts; and developing sustainable harvest methods that ensure, if not maximized profits, at least a predictable source of income for this generation and generations yet to come. In many ways, the pattern of cultural adaptation seen as the Lac La Ronge Indian Band engages the market economy and is not much different from the adjustment made to the fur trade two centuries ago. To be sure, this is not cultural assimilation. Rather, it represents adaptation in response to the changing pressures and potentials emanating from the larger Canadian society.

Notes

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16. Robert M. Bone, "Socioeconomic Characteristics of Northern Saskatchewan," *Atlas of Saskatchewan* (Saskatoon, University of Saskatchewan: PrintWest, 1999).
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18. Cook, *Presentation at Native Studies 312 Class*.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Ray McKay, *Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership: An Aboriginal Economic Development Model*. Presentation at the Sharing Voices: An Aboriginal Community Economic Development Conference (Saskatoon, University of Saskatchewan, May 2, 2002).
21. McKay, personal communications, 4 December, 2001.
22. "Northern Lights Wild Rice: Plunging into Global Waters," *Otuyumow: The Official Newsletter of Kitsaki Development Corporation* 2001:3.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Ray McKay, Personal communications, 4 December, 2001.
25. Harry Cook, *Presentation at Native Studies 312 Class (Resource Geography and Native People)* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 4 December, 2001).
26. McKay, *Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership*, 12.
27. Kitsaki Development Corporation was renamed to Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership.
28. McKay, *Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership*, 1-3.
29. Woodland Cree includes the members of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. The term Woodland Cree refers to those living in the forested area, while the term Plain Cree refers to those living in the great plains (prairies).