

**Dene Women in the Traditional and Modern Northern
Economy in Denendeh, Northwest Territories, Canada.**

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and
Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

by

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July 1992

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Abstract

The Dene are a subarctic people indigenous to northern Canada. The indirect and direct contact the Dene had with the European traders and Christian missionaries who came to their land around the turn of the 20th century triggered profound changes in their society and economy. This study focuses on some of these changes, and, particularly, on how they have affected the lives of Dene women who inhabit the small community of Fort Liard, which is located in the southwest corner of the Northwest Territories.

Using as context the formal and informal economy and the concept of the mode of production, the author proposes two main ideas: first, "nurturing" or "social reproduction" and "providing" or "production" are vital and integral to the Dene's subsistence economy and concept of work; second, it is through the custom of "seclusion" or female puberty rites that the teaching and learning of these responsibilities occurred. Dene women played a pivotal role in this process. The impositions of external government, Christianity, capitalism, and free market economies have altered Dene women's concept of work.

The Dene women of Fort Liard are presently working to regain the social and economic status they once had. However, reclaiming their status in current times involves recognizing conflicting and contradictory ideologies in the workplace. The goal of these Dene women is, ultimately, to overcome economic and ideological obstacles, to reinforce common cultural values, and to reaffirm the primacy of their own conceptions of family and community. The goal of this study is to identify and examine the broad spectrum of factors and conditions that play a role in their struggles.

Résumé

Les Denes sont un peuple autochtone du Canada septentrional. Les contacts directs ou indirects avec les commerçants européens et les missionnaires chrétiens, à l'orée du 20^{ème} siècle, allaient grandement modifier leur société et leur économie.

Cette thèse tente d'analyser certaines des conséquences que ces changements allaient produire sur les Denes, en prenant pour exemple les femmes autochtones de la petite communauté de Fort Liard, sise dans le coin sud-ouest des Territoires du Nord-Ouest.

S'appuyant sur les données de l'économie "formelle" et "informelle", aussi bien que sur l'idée du mode de production, l'auteure avance deux propositions générales. Tout d'abord, la "croissance" ou la "reproduction sociale" et les "activités liées à la survie" ou la "production" constituent des activités vitales et intégrales de l'économie de subsistance dénée et de sa conception du travail. Deuxièmement, c'est à travers la coutume "mise à l'écart" ou de célébration des rites pubertaires de la femme que se faisaient l'apprentissage et l'enseignement de ces responsabilités. C'est pourquoi la femme dénée jouait un rôle aussi central dans un tel processus. L'imposition de formes de gouvernement extérieures, la christianisation, le capitalisme et l'économie de libre entreprise sont venus considérablement altérer le concept de travail qui était celui de la femme autochtone.

Les femmes dénees travaillent présentement à restorer leur statut économique et social. Dans le contexte actuel, revendiquer un tel statut oblige à reconnaître des idéologies conflictuelles et contradictoires sur les lieux mêmes de travail. Leur but devient alors la mise en valeur des fondements culturels qui pourraient redonner au peuple dénée sa propre définition de la famille et de la communauté.

Dedications

To my grandmother, Dora Nahanni,
my parents the late Celine and Alfred Nahanni,
the women of Ft Liard.

Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I must say, 'mussi cho' or thank you. First among them is the McGill Geography Department for accepting my application as a Qualifying Student, then as a Graduate Student. Several of my field trips would not have been possible without the grants I received from the Northern Scientific Training Grant (NSTG) of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. My tuition and living allowances were provided by the Dept of Education, Government of the N.W.T.

My supervisor, Dr Ludger Muller-Wille has helped me in several ways. To him I extend my sincere thanks for his unfaltering patience with me while I faltered in the writing of this thesis. His confidence in me will always be a source of inspiration.

The Fort Liard Dene Band Council made it possible for me to carry out my field research. To this Council I say "mussi cho". It would not have been possible to continue without the encouragement of friends and relatives: Elsie and Jonas Marcellais, Harry Fantasque and his daughters Judy, Noreen and Bernice, Martina Kochea, Genevieve Bethale and late son William Bethale, Pauline Sassie, Annette Mattou and all the women who participated in the Questionnaire. My cousin Cathy Nahanni was always there to talk with me and provide me with transportation over the long gravel highways.

"Mussi cho" also to the numerous women and friends in Denendeh and Montreal, with whom I have enjoyed many hours of debate and conversations, especially Marie-Helena, Kiatch, and Debbie. I am especially thankful for the encouragement and support I received from Souie Gorup, Heidi Nast, Mary Williams and Richard Bachand.

Finally, my sincere thanks to my family and extended family for their financial and moral support

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0. INTRODUCTION

The indigenous people who belong to the Athapaskan language family and who inhabit the Cordillera and the Boreal forest areas in the Northwestern Subarctic region of North America are descendants of a hunting and fishing people who inhabited the region since at least 1700 B.C. (Helm 1981:116). This study focuses on the Slavey-speaking Dene in the Lower Liard region of the Mackenzie Basin in the Northwest Territories (Fig. 1). More specifically, my thesis is an examination of the role of the Dene women who live in this region, and on the effects that the changes in their indigenous economy that have occurred since the turn of the century, have had on their social and economic status. "Indigenous" economy is the term I use to describe the Dene hunting, fishing and gathering way of life that existed prior to the contact with European traders. During the first decade of this century, the Dene began to depend more and more on western trade goods (Asch 1976). Trapping for trade altered this economy into what is herein called the "traditional" economy. In general, processes discussed here may also apply to Dene women of other Dene populations in the Mackenzie Valley of the Northwest Territories.

0.1. Dene Women and Their Changing Economic Context

The available literature on indigenous societies does not adequately recognize the positive role of Dene women. The work of Dene women within the home or within the extended family is not recognized as an important contribution to the continuity of their culture. Consequently the extent of their participation in, and the depth of their contribution to, the family-based subsistence economy in the bush, and the household economy in the community are relatively unknown.

The thesis concentrates on two fundamental responsibilities Dene women have

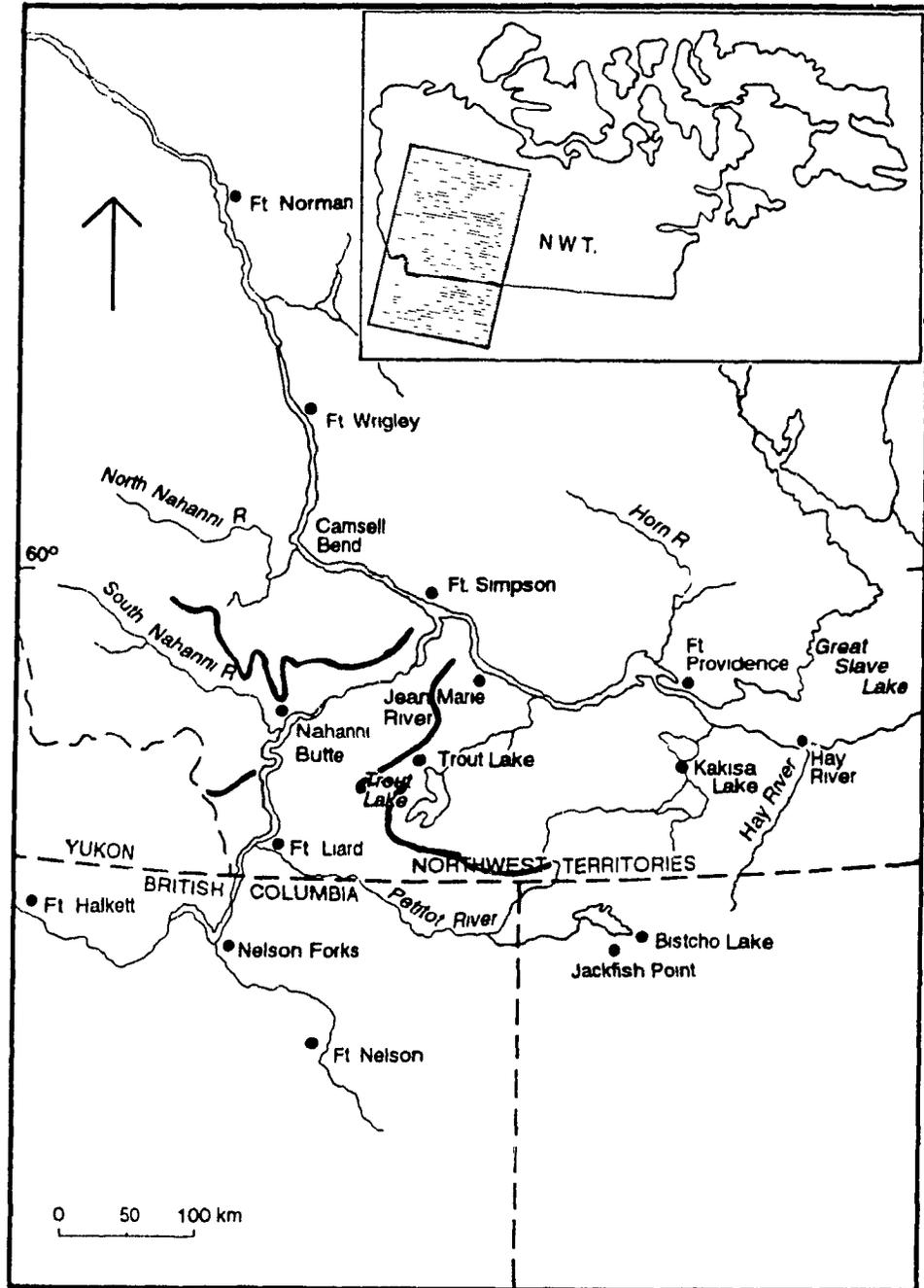


Figure 1.

Lower Liard Region of the Mackenzie Drainage Basin.
 Source: Adapted from Helm et al. 1981: 338.

— Watershed

in caring for children and family - 'nurturing' and 'providing'. In the Slavey-Athapaskan language these responsibilities are expressed separately: *ts' neh zheh*, ('to nurture' or 'tending to the growth of'), and *-k'ets'ęndi* ('to provide' or 'caring for the needs of') When these terms are used in close association they refer to Dene women's responsibilities towards children and family, both immediate and extended.

The conceptual meanings of the Slavey terms 'nurture' and 'provide' are depicted in the context of indigenous Dene society's social relations, and in the context of the contacts the Dene have with certain externally imposed institutions, namely, the schools (mission and government), the law (in the form of the R.C.M.P.), state government (federal and territorial), and the formal economy (large corporations and small businesses) (fig.2). These Slavey concepts comprise the essence of the thesis, and will be discussed throughout.

It will be also be demonstrated: (1) how these responsibilities are understood within the context of Dene social relations as conceptually inseparable and where they become separate concepts; (2) that the skills needed to 'nurture' and 'provide' are congruent with the activities of the subsistence economy; and (3) how through time and interaction with exogenous forces these responsibilities separate and diffuse.

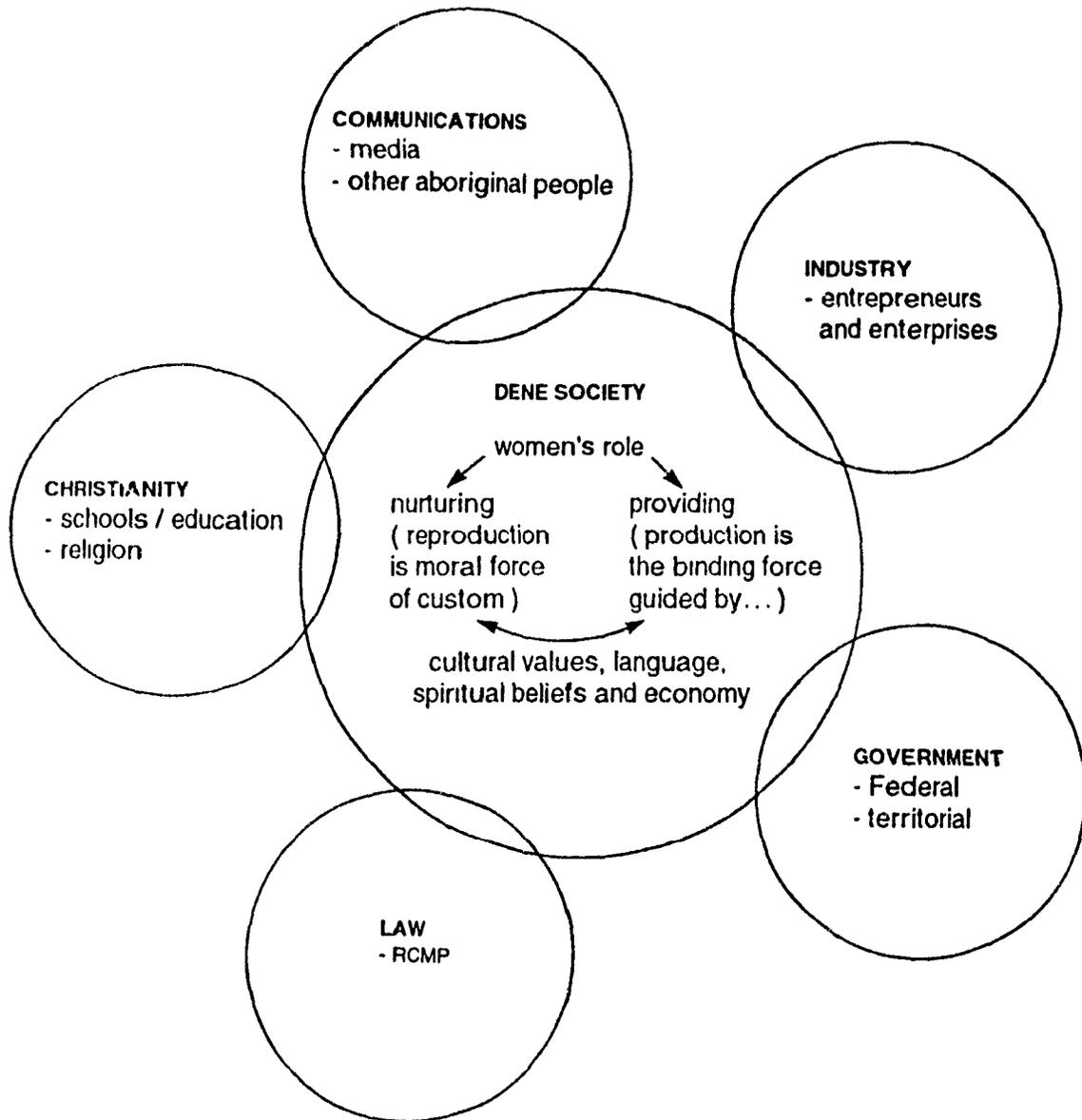
Prior to the examination of these assertions I draw attention to my preference for the term 'nurture' rather than 'reproduction' (of 'social relations') because the former conveys a moral force. Similarly, I prefer the term 'providing' over 'production,' because its use in conjunction with 'nurture,' converges on the essence of a 'binding force' in the subsistence economy. Through an elaboration of these concepts, an attempt will be made to compare them to Western feminist and feminist geography analyses of 'social reproduction' and 'production.' A brief discussion of this appears in chapter I

Any inquiry into indigenous Athapaskan people and culture must include the

Figure 2.

The Dene and Externally Imposed Institutions.

Source: Author.



examination of the levels of participation of women in socioeconomic processes. In this research, I wish to substantiate the importance of such examination by looking at the nurturing and providing roles of women in the socioeconomy of one Athapaskan community. By qualitatively examining their social and familial responsibilities, I wish to contribute to knowledge about Dene women in two areas.

In the area of education, I would like to contribute the following. It will be established that, from the Dene perspective, 'nurturing' and 'providing' are customarily attached to Dene women's approaches to 'learning' and 'teaching' methods. These methods are applied from birth. Interviews with older Dene women from Fort Liard corroborates this. These women maintain that 'nurturing' and 'providing' are a major part of their 'eghalaeda' or 'work'. When young women have their first menses, or 'ala sagh li,' the Dene concept 'work' is actualized through a custom of puberty rite also referred to as, seclusion among Athapaskans. Older Dene women learned skill of 'work' from their mothers and female relatives. Most of this transfer of skills took place formally, during seclusion. In August 1991, interviews were conducted with twelve Dene women between the ages of 20 and 45. They were asked specific questions about Dene women's 'work' and about seclusion (appendix 1). A few had knowledge of seclusion or the female puberty rituals of the Dene, but most did not know that it was the Dene way of initiating into the responsibilities of adulthood and family membership. This reflects one of many changing circumstances for women in the Dene society and traditional economy. (For a further discussion on this see chapter 4.)

In the area of social development, I have the following comments to make. Dene women have as other contemporary aboriginal women, not only their position in their society to comprehend and maintain but also the expectations that are thrust upon them from external sources. Participation, passive or active, in a variety of processes such as

community organizations; political organizations that employ liberal democratic procedures; the classroom, where formal styles of education prevail; and in the wage and free-market economy, as well, challenges the Dene women. These external forces have tended to generally deviate from their traditional society. I will identify some of the choices available to the Dene women in the modern context, and discuss how these women are compelled to recognize that in making and mixing those choices, their concept of 'work' will be transformed. There is the temptation to presume that they frequently ask themselves, "Am I prepared to make these choices and sustain my traditional beliefs?"

0.2. Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into five parts. The first outlines the theoretical framework I have chosen to use, and begins with a discussion of the traditional economy and its place in the North that employs the concepts of the 'Formal and Informal Economies' and the 'Mode of Production'. Included in this chapter is an examination of the ways Dene women are presented in the existing literature. The Dene concepts of 'nurturing', 'providing' and 'learning process' are discussed in relation to these analyses of the 'mode of production'. In addition, I engage in a broad discussion of Western feminism, feminist perspectives in Geography and 'Aboriginal Feminism.'

The second chapter contains an overview of Dene history, of the Dene people's movements and contacts. The third chapter consists of a description of the Slave Territory, and of the Lower Liard people and their land use, their traditional economy, and their cultural knowledge. This chapter is a summary of the available literature about the Dene, supplemented by my own cultural background, experiences, notes, and field stays in the region. The fourth chapter includes an analysis of the contemporary role of Dene women within the context of informal and formal economies. This theoretical

construct provides a base for some understanding of the current situation of these women. It also provides a way of viewing adjustment problems experienced by Dene women. Finally, in the fifth chapter, I present my conclusions and discuss some future considerations.

0.3. Methods and Methodology

An interest in the study area was first established in 1975 when I collected land-use data from a 30% sample of Dene hunters and trappers (Nahanni in Watkins 1977:27, Dene Mapping Project 1981). At that time, there did not exist extensive research material on indigenous history or first-hand accounts of Dene land-based travels. In addition, literature on their traditional knowledge and economy had not yet been published.

Thesis research was conducted in Fort Liard located in the Lower Liard region of the Northwest Territories. The majority (92.4%) of Fort Liard's population of 460 (as of 1986) is Dene. Most continue to hunt, trap, fish, and gather, either full time or part time on a seasonal basis. They balance the time they spend in the wage economy with that which they spend in the traditional economy.

The method of participant observation, interviews, and distributing a one-page questionnaire were employed to facilitate the qualitative analysis of the traditional economy and the role that women have within it. I have attempted here to look at the microcosm of social relations, describe how they function, identify where women fit in and explain some of the related processes and their complex underlying factors.

Completed were three short period of field work in 1986 and 1987. Eight weeks were spent in Fort Liard, Nahanni Butte, and two bush camps - one that was visited in the summer (Swan Point) and the other in the winter (Harry F's camp) (see fig. 3). Five of the eight weeks were spent in Fort Liard. I briefly describe both experiences, the first

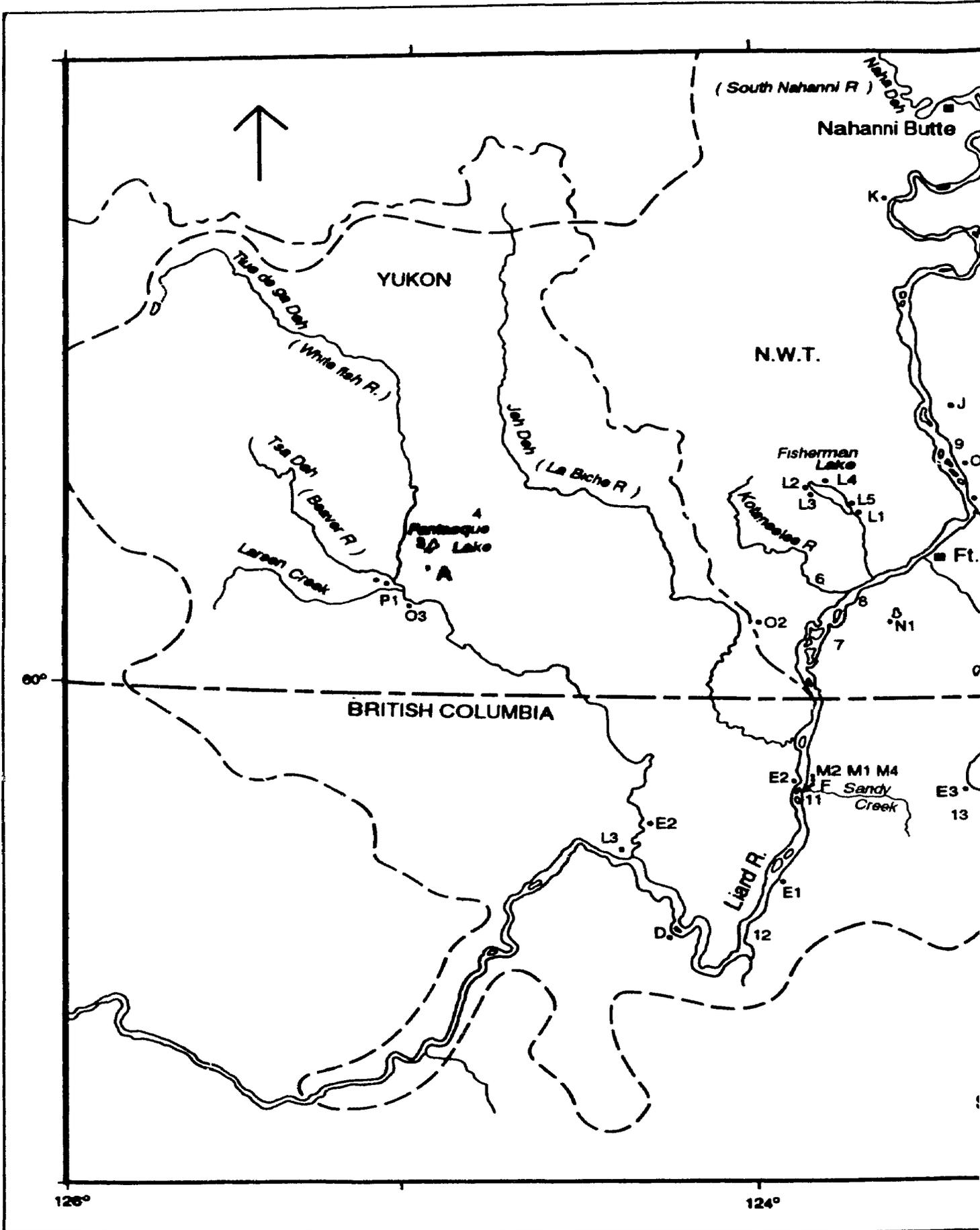
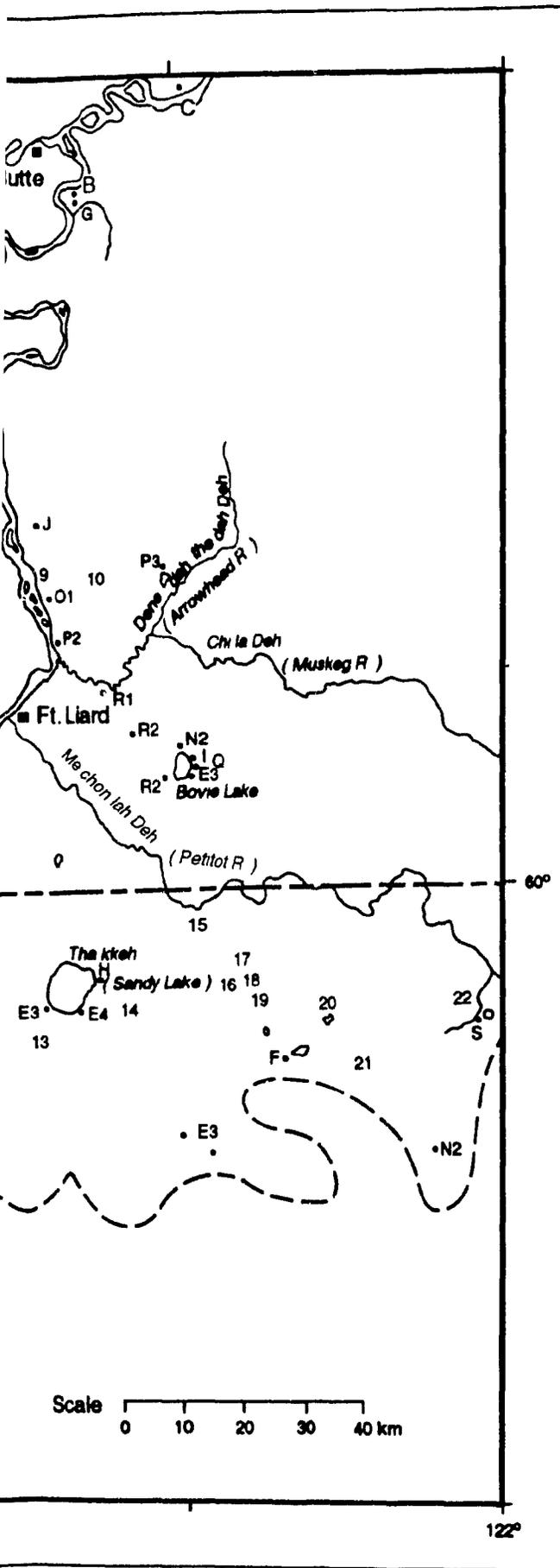


Figure 3 The Study Area. Source: Author.



■ Settlement

● camp

A Harry Fantasque	L4 Klondike, Johnny
B Nella	L5 , Julien
C Swan Point	M1 Kotchea, Fred
D Berreault, Fred	M2 , Gordon
E1 Bertrand, Armand	M3 , John
E2 , Francis	M4 , Raymond
E3 , Joe	N1 Lomen, Daniel
E4 , Philip	N2 , Frank
F Bethale, William Sr	O1 Mouyé, Edward
G Betsaka, Francis	O2 , Wind
H Deneron, George	O3 , St. Pierre
I Diamond - C, Edward	P1 Nande, Francis
J Edda, Alfred	P2 , Lucy
K Ekotia, Isidore	Q Sassie, John
L1 Klondike, George	R1 Thomas, Alfred
L2 , James	R2 , Stanley
L3 , John Jr	S Timbre, Gordon

Dene Place Names

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. s̄amba deh | 12. di daa the |
| 2. 'eh daawa l̄eh | 13. tai deh |
| 3. mia go cho | 14. ga la deha |
| 4. mia go d̄ymbe | 15. sh̄ada lah |
| 5. t̄ue too | 16. medzih mia |
| 6. goh̄ta ni ij | 17. matoo mia |
| 7. nu cho d̄ena | 18. ama tsa too |
| 8. d'̄e tse ah deeten̄i | 19. go la chi deh |
| 9. gah cho deh | 20. mia go cho |
| 10. gah cho mia | 21. tsu da deh o |
| 11. t̄i go ch̄e | 22. tsa t̄i 'e deh |

- Fantasque camp in registered Trapline
- Provincial Boundaries
- Full extent of Lower Liard
- Dene Land Use

in the bush camps, the second in the community of Fort Liard.

In August 1986, I went to visit a bush camp called Swan Point situated on the Liard River. It belonged to a Nahanni Butte family. During the five days of my stay I was witness to events in the daily life of a healthy Dene women, who was well accustomed to her role in the community household and bush workplaces. The other bush camp I visited, in December 1986, belonged to a family from Fort Liard who had a registered trapline around Fantasque Lake in the Liard Plateau, Yukon Territory. This family consisted of a father (Harry F.), his two daughters, and the preschool children of one of the daughters. At this winter camp, I saw the two daughters perform many tasks such as cutting and hauling wood, packing snow and ice for cooking, and ice fishing, while the father concentrated on hunting and visiting the traplines.

In the summer of 1987, I lived in the Fort Liard community for five weeks. I visited people in their homes, and explained in English and Slavey that I wanted to talk to them about the traditional economy. Some conversations were short, while others stretched out over days and contained abundant information. Generally, the interviews began with some discussion of the hunting and trapping trails and the place names known to the people of Fort Liard. The place names were recorded on audio tapes and designated on maps at 1:250,000. (See fig. 3 The place names provided me with a general picture only and cannot be considered complete.) I requested the help of people to whom I spoke in interpreting the trails that they used. It was not always necessary to ask structured questions, because the hunters talked spontaneously about their hunts and traplines. I sought to confirm that people still depend a great deal on the traditional economy, and found confirmation in the interviews that I conducted in the community and in the observations that I recorded there. I observed the Dene preparing and departing, on foot, by canoe or motorboats, for expeditions along the river or in the bush

and the preparation of moosehides by Dene women.

I also visited the local office of the N.W.T. Department of Renewable Resources to obtain some animal species information, some harvest-kill information, and some information about general locations.

In the summer of 1987, I made three other short land trips adding to my overall appreciation of the summer conditions in the area. The three locations were Virginia Falls in the South Nahanni River area; a fire tower situated on Mount Coty, fourteen miles west of Fort Liard; and a small lake called Dendale Lake, situated in the far northern area of the Liard Plateau near the N.W.T.-Y.T. border a place where some hunters went for caribou, moose and sheep.

A final field trip to Fort Liard was taken in August 1991 to accomplish two things. First I met with the Liard Dene Band Council to discuss the substance of my research and to share information with them. Second, I interviewed four women (50 years and over) and conducted a survey using a one-page questionnaire directed at young women between the ages of 20 and 45 to find out how much they could tell me about the Dene puberty ritual (a topic to be introduced in chapter 4) and Dene women's work (see appendix 1).

Secondary sources that dealt with historical information were conducted at the Prince of Wales Museum in Yellowknife, N.W.T., and libraries at McGill University and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (DIAND) in Ottawa. Some primary sources were used at the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario.

1. The Theoretical Framework

1.1 The Socioeconomic-economic Context

This chapter is directed towards a theoretical understanding of the focus of the thesis. I will consider current and existing information and analyses of the traditional economy (to some extent this includes traditional knowledge) and the role of Dene women in the traditional economy. For the latter, I will direct my attention to the nurturing and providing roles. Lastly, some views are proposed here of how Dene women's role could be understood in relation to and within the Western feminist perspective in Canada. Considered also are some discussions of feminist perspectives in geography.

1.1.1. Traditional Economy and Modern Northern Economy

The milieu of the Dene, the traditional economy, is one that is commonly misunderstood. One view that was prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s had the traditional economy to be fading with the introduction of industrialization. Ross & Usher (1986) suggest a theoretical framework for an understanding of traditional economy as persisting in the modern context or contemporary northern economy. They suggest that in North America, economic activities fall under two general economic categories - formal and informal. The formal economy in northern Canada today is the economy that was introduced by commerce, government and industry. The process began incrementally from the beginning of the fur trade and with much more force during the last 20 years.

In the domain of the formal economy, progress is easily measured. Every year the Government of the N.W.T. tables its budget, estimates and public accounts. The progress of the northern economy is thus assessed in dollar value. In contrast to the formal economy the informal economy is not easily measured. It is based in hunting, fishing,

trapping and gathering, a way of life in northern communities. These activities are land and community based and still dominate Dene settlements in northwestern Canada. These communities are characterized by small populations, the great distances between them, and by the presence of government and industry even while the majority of the inhabitants are engaged in hunting, fishing and trapping (Ross and Usher 1986:141).

Since the 1970s N.W.T. Government researchers and academics have attempted to quantify the value of hunting, fishing, gathering and trapping, which they refer to as renewable resources utilization. So far, two types of assessment have been developed. One type has been built into the government system of calculating fur value with each trapper's fur return. For example, the Fur Management Division of the Renewable Resources Department of the Government of the N.W.T. recorded the total fur value returns for Fort Liard in 1989-90 to be \$116,990.18 and in 1990-91 down to \$97,131.08, (personal communication with Wildlife Officer, Renewable Resources in Fort Liard in 1992). The second type of assessment is done occasionally. Calculations of the value of country food are measured in 'replacement' dollar based on value of store-bought meat for an equal weight of harvest-kill country food. This type of assessment was done for the community of Fort Liard by Michael Asch and presented before the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in 1976. (In presenting this evidence, M. Asch added that the people in the North face a number of economic, social, and political problems which would not be solved by the introduction of a pipeline development.)

What is difficult to calculate is the distribution value of the country food in the community (or how many people benefit from the harvest of one moose, for example), the value of finished products for domestic use, such as leather and fur goods, use of bones for tools and carvings, and so on. Furthermore, it is difficult to quantify the time spent in travel, the expertise and knowledge in the assessment of

conditions of the environment, the preparation of the work place, and means of production. In all of these, the activities of women are prominent

The continued failure to recognize what cannot be quantified is a predicament for the Dene and the future of their traditional economy. The tendency is for the general western public to view hunting, fishing, and gathering as an "evolutionarily superseded activity" (Asch in Whittington 1985:3). Asch (ibid) suggests that this will remain so until drastic changes are made and the traditional economy is accorded recognition in its value to industrial economy much, like agriculture is currently of value to the industry in the south

1.1.2. Mode of Production

All economies are comprised of processes known as material production and reproduction. These processes are generally defined within the concept of the **Mode of Production**. The informative source for the application of this concept, (even while it was not fully developed by Marx) to pre-capitalist societies is Godelier (1977:18). The interpretation of this concept by Asch (1979) is one that provides a framework for the analysis of economic activities within Dene societies. It also puts their 'informal' economy into simultaneous perspective with the 'formal' economy; sometimes linked to and sometimes separate from the latter (see chapter 4). The mode of production concept is based on two assumptions about human beings. First, humans have the ability to think rationally (Asch 1979: 88) Second, humans require each other to fulfill their material needs and they do this through social relationships (Ibid: 88). Humans as rational beings create technological and institutional structures through social relations that will enable them to produce and reproduce their material needs. The structures are technical in nature and are called forces of production. Since the structures are created by humans,

the stability of these structures depends on their usefulness to those who use them and the products they produce. The structures require the assurances of the social relations of production.

Usher defines the concept of the mode of production as follows

A mode of production encompasses not only the resources and technology by which a people make their living, but also the social organization and ideological system which combine the factors of production (land, labour, resources, technology and capital) in a functioning productive system. (Usher 1982: 418)

To explain the unique economy of the Canadian North he proposes two modes of production - **domestic and capitalist** (Ibid). Usher proposed that in the Canadian North the prominent domestic mode of production is the **native economy** (Ibid 420) or the **village economy** (Ross & Usher 1986: 141, I call this the **traditional economy**, see chapter 3, subsection 3.2). The prominent capitalist mode of production is the **industrial economy** (Usher 1982: 419). Usher considers the former a type of **informal economy**, prominent in the North, and the latter a **formal economy** in modern Canada. Each identify products, sectors and producers that characterize them as such. The traditional economy is linked into the northern economy through commodity exchange, that is raw fur for credit or cash and more recently, the sale of country food in retail stores. The irreconcilable difference is that the time spent in the wage economy undermines the time that could be used in the traditional economy (Ibid:419).

Ross and Usher (1986) and Whittington (1985) identify a third economic sector - the **welfare economy**. They also appear to agree that the welfare system is just another source of income to be tapped in time of need, or off-season when people are unable to hunt, fish and trap. People use welfare as a buttress between the formal and informal economy to secure cash flow. While the term 'welfare' may have negative connotations, it is important to note that there are other perspectives on the welfare issue. In the case of

northern hunter-gatherers, this is the amount received and how the spending of it are utilized. For example, Scott observed among the Cree of Quebec in the mid-1970s,

. . . when subsistence production is taken into account at its replacement value, the contribution of wages and welfare income to Wemindji use-value in 1975 was still only about half of the total, as was the case for most Cree groups (Scott 1984: 75).

Furthermore, Scott proposes that the Cree, through their land claims negotiations are managing to balance the 'original affluence' of a hunting society with the 'consumer affluence' they enjoy under the terms of the Income Security Program they negotiated through the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. Integrated in the Income Security Program are the Cree concept of wildlife conservation and management (Feit 1985) The positive effects of this Agreement on the continuity of James Bay Cree hunting demonstrate the ability to balance economic spheres, including transfer payments.

1.2. Views of Dene Women: Literature Review

Two major criticisms are levelled at non-aboriginal researchers of Athapaskans. First, that research on indigenous societies has generally been kept within the confines of academic understanding and is not usually readable by the average aboriginal person, and has been kept out of indigenous education until recently (Weaver 1981:15). Secondly, there is the obvious omission of the female perspective in the literature.

Prior to the 1960s most of the analyses of Subarctic Athapaskans were on culture change. A few researchers acknowledged their inability to interview aboriginal women (Vanstone 1961, 1963, 1974). In subsequent years, non-aboriginal academics turned their attention to explaining Athapaskan ecological adaptations including stress (e.g. Savishinsky 1973, Vanstone 1974), then to Subarctic Athapaskans as adapting to socioeconomic changes (Helm 1961) and analyses of social organization (Asch 1980). The term 'acculturation' was generally used to describe indigenous people who adopted western and

modern clothes and mannerisms such that they fitted in neither society. 'Modernization', 'westernization', 'development and under-development' and 'industrialization' constituted different ideas that scholars used to describe what was implied by Government objectives in policies towards aboriginal people (Mayes 1982:36-47).

In current times, these analyses have evoked mixed responses from Aboriginal people and researchers. Some aboriginal people like the Dene compare their experiences with the dominant society as similar to those experienced by colonized people in Third World countries (Erasmus in Watkins 1977:177-181). To them, the term 'colonization' has real meaning because they are experiencing elements of this process. Their political struggle is to work to undo their 'colonized state' through 'de-colonization'. Part of their response is due to the realization that they no longer want to be the objects of study by outsiders, solely. Instead, further studies about them must involve them.

Recognizing the need for aboriginal perspectives on their own societies, some academics have turned to the syntax of Aboriginal languages to convey the 'internal' or 'emic' perspective that would for example, describe the environmental conditions that are taken into consideration when preparing to go on a hunt or while on a hunt (Basso 1972, Brody 1987, Rushforth 1986). Others have examined the legends and oral traditions including life histories and culture (Cruikshank 1979, 1981; Bataille and Sands 1984) and the meaning of inner world technology as compared to material technology (Ridington 1987). Consequently, there appears to be a recognition that research with and about the Dene can also improve research techniques and quality. Yet, information that exists about Dene women is not substantial nor critically examined. Dene women continue to remain in the background.

Since the mid-1970s researchers have observed that the historical and contemporary roles of aboriginal women in their economies have been seriously neglected

in the literature (Fiske 1987: 186, Littlefield 1987: 173, Van Kirk 1989). Furthermore, reconstructing pre-contact societies and the traditional role of women is virtually impossible for two reasons: (1) aboriginal societies and cultures experienced rapid disruption by the fur trade and (2) early recorders portrayed ethnocentric and patriarchal biases (Brodrigg 1984: 86, Leacock 1981). The colonizers and missionaries displaced women by supplanting male-oriented views on aboriginal societies, (Leacock 1981: 43-62). In the last three decades women have attempted to understand the authentic role of aboriginal women through lifestories (Cruikshank 1990; Bataille and Sands 1984). Through critical analyses and cautious interpretations of recorded history, researchers revealed evidence of the pivotal roles of aboriginal women in their societies as well as in the fur trade, (Brodrigg 1984, Brown 1975, Cruikshank 1969, Etienne 1980, Leacock 1981, Littlefield 1983, Van der Flier 1974, Van Kirk 1989). This has encouraged several aboriginal women to offer additional perspectives which have appeared in anthologies (Gunn Allen 1989, Crynkovich 1990, Perreault and Vance 1990).

There are indications that historical information on Dene women was slow to accumulate. How useful is this information in the development of theory is still uncertain. The bibliography of *North American Native Women* (Green 1983) contains two references on Dene women (Cruikshank 1975, 1979) which are used in this paper. Some information on Chipewyan Dene women before 1900 is found in a recent publication entitled "*Many Tender Ties*" by Sylvia Van Kirk (1989). The book provides an insight into the involvement of Indian women in the fur trade in North America from journals kept by members of the HBC, other fur trading companies and explorers during the years 1670-1870. One notable Dene woman was Thanadelthur, a Chipewyan who, "acted as guide, interpreter and peace negotiator for Governor (James) Knight's expedition of 1715-16" (Van Kirk 1989: 66). She took on the major task of establishing peace between the Cree

and Chipewyan so that the English could trade with both groups. Chipewyan women were also prominent in Hearne's third expedition to the Arctic (1771-72). In his journal Samuel Hearne recorded that his Chipewyan Indian guide, Metonabee, insisted that Hearne's first two failures were due to the lack of women's help and that he would not join Hearne's third attempt without women. Metonabee argued,

...when all the men are heavy laden, they can neither hunt nor travel to any considerable distance; and in case they meet with success in hunting, who is to carry the produce of their labour? Women...they also pitch our tents, make and mend our clothing, keep us warm at night; and, in fact, there is no such thing as travelling any considerable distance, or for any length of time, in this country, without their assistance..(Van Kirk 1989: 63).

Hearne's other notable encounter was on his return from the third expedition (1772). His expedition found a young Dogrib woman who had been enslaved, escaped, got lost and had lived alone for the previous seven months,

Snared small game kept her in good supply. She had a fishnet of willow bark; she had a knife fashioned from an old hoop; she had turned an arrowhead into an awl, she made fire by knocking two sulphurous stones against each other; she was in fact a very resourceful girl, a most desirable package! (Speck 1963: 236)

Hearne and Hardisty as quoted in Perry (1979: 363) also recorded the low status and miserable life of subarctic women, who practised female infanticide to spare their daughters a miserable life. However, Perry also argues that negative portrayal of women and behavior of men towards them are directly related to involvement with European trading (Ibid). Female infanticide among the Subarctic Athapaskans appeared in historical records from the early 1800s (Helm 1980:260). Helm attempts to provide the extent of this practice through her analyses of the census in the years 1829, 1858, 1891 and 1924. Her estimates are based on the proposal that the average number of males for every 100 females is around 99 to 104. Excess of this average indicates fewer females than males and consequently can infer female infanticide. The figures she provides in

these years indicate skewed sex ratios among the Mackenzie Dene in the years 1829 and 1858 with some decline in 1891. Between the years 1820 and 1840 historical evidence of high rate of disease and starvation occurred (Yerbury 1986:158). The imbalance between native populations and food resources suggests that infanticide continued to occur throughout the nineteenth century (*Ibid*). Evidence from one Mountain Dene woman (1872-1971) indicates her knowledge of female infanticide from her mother, "it was hard then...if it is a big family" (Helm 1980:259).

While some comments were made by Honigmann (1946) and Jenness (1972) about the Slave women, insufficient information is offered to develop a portrait of them. The most that was stated was that the women did not have the prestige associated with hunting; that they were treated with kindness; that they did the hardest work, but the men packed the heavier loads.

On the other hand, useful and positive insights have been provided in several publications by Julie Cruikshank (1975, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1991) on Athapaskan women in the Yukon which indicate a role very similar to that among Dene women. Others before her have also noted a practice which appeared to be a common custom among Athapaskans, the female puberty rites or seclusion (Osgood 1936, Honigmann 1946). Cruikshank's research into this custom among Yukon women concludes that the most important time in the life of a woman is during her first menses. This is the time when the woman experiences seclusion. The rites she experiences are the door and path to maturity. The valuable contribution that Dene women make to their society are signalled by their entry into adulthood through this rite. Puberty rites have ceased to be practised since the 1950s. Why? Cruikshank (1975) discovered that it was related to the conversion of the Athapaskan to Christianity. The following statement made by an older Yukon woman contains the concerns many older Dene women have and will be discussed in part

in chapter 4.

Many older women offer descriptions of puberty seclusion as an important example of the 'old ways' which have changed so greatly in this century. It was a custom specifically tied to women's roles and its passing is a change they have experienced in their lifetime. (Cruikshank 1975:4)

White (1987: 76) alleges that stereotypical views of aboriginal people evolved since the 18th and 19th century colonial experiences and that these views in turn influenced the policies and legislation of the Department of Indian Affairs. The Department changed the role of Indian women in Indian culture by the formal education of Indian children (Ibid:100). Their policy was to civilize, protect and assimilate all Indian people defined by the Indian Act. Through the women, social change would occur. They characterized "Indian women as down trodden and oppressed by a brutish and savage culture" (Ibid: 116). White's thesis concludes among her several important salient points, that the,

Canadian state with the help of the church set about to transform the degraded squaw into a helpful, industrious and health conscious rural housewife. Thus the restructuring of the domestic economy was a key ingredient to the assimilation of the Indian women into the larger Euro-Canadian society...(Ibid:264).

In the Canadian north, this policy was implemented after the Second World War, by forcibly removing children from their parents and sending them to residential schools for several years, then reducing it to ten months of each year but with some children starting school as young as three years of age. In these institutions they were supervised and taught by either Protestant or Roman Catholic missionaries. Sentiments, similar to those of the State towards Indian people were also recorded in the historical sketch of the Slave area that included Fort Simpson, Jean Marie River, Fort Providence, Nahanni Butte, and Fort Liard between the years 1858-1958 by the Sacred Heart R.C.Mission (Lesage 1958). The Dene with whom the above accounts were discussed and who also knew this priest, displayed expressions of disbelief and disappointment.

1.3. Dene Concepts of "Nurturing" and "Providing"

It was stated earlier that when the Dene terms 'nurturing' and 'providing' are used in close association, they refer to the responsibilities of women towards their children and family, immediate and extended. For the purposes of analyses, these responsibilities will be separated, first in the context of the indigenous Dene society, without using European historical periods, followed by the context of the changes to this society.

In association with the act of physical caring, 'nurturing' is largely the transmittal and reception of information. They occur within two broad areas: language acquisition, comprehension and use; and apprenticeship. Language acquisition and cognition is obtained from infancy. It begins with the parents, grandparents and siblings mimicking with the baby so they acquire what their parents and elders iterate. The first three years of the child is spent primarily with the mother who carries the child on her back while she performs all her duties. Movement with the mother provided reference for language acquisition, particularly the sounds and articulations. Christian and Gardner (1977) documented extensively the context of language acquisition among the Fort Liard Dene in their field study in 1974 and 1975. Language transfers information on kinship, customs, beliefs, and socially accepted behavior towards others and the environment. It also includes concepts on the seasonal and cyclical nature of the environment. For example, months are named by the cyclical nature of the moon and the movement of animals. The first menses of the women is translated as 'first moon flow' thereafter it is referred to as regular 'moon flow'. Story telling to the children, usually in the evening time, when both parents and grandparents are settling down for the night, is the time when what was observed and experienced during the day is related in legends.

Apprenticeship is the method of learning. It is the "internal organization of the learning" (Lave 1982: 183) by listening, observing and doing. Christian aptly describes

'listening' processes in three different ways: listening, not listening and noisy (1975: 118)

Observation enables the apprentice to find a 'way-in'.

Way-in is a nickname for whatever it takes to get from the state of high ignorance about how to do something to a state in which one can make a first approximation to it (Lave 1982: 184).

Through a succession of doing, undoing, redoing, replicating the craft is perfected. For Dene women, apprenticeship in preparing a hide, fish processing, setting snares, etc. begins at the early age of six or seven. The young apprentice usually receives encouragement when successful.

Observation of the learning process indicated that parents emphasized to their children the importance of acquiring knowledge through performing tasks repeatedly and independently while also transferring language acquisition

The act of 'providing' or 'production' in the indigenous Dene society usually are a collective activity. From the home base, whether it is a bush camp or a community setting, women teach their children to 'provide' by first having them assist at home and their surrounding environment an act of 'gathering'. They teach them how to identify the material, how to select them and why, and how much to harvest at one time. Children learn about their resources of the environment near home, through the act of fetching and gathering necessities including water, firewood, food such as berries, roots, sap, herbs, and building material such as spruce boughs, young spruce for snowshoes, bows, and for whittling.

Fishing, enables the children to become familiar with the Dene techniques in getting food in open water and through ice. They also become familiar with species and preparation of fish for storage, drying, and eating. In addition, they become aware of the location of fish runs. They grow up becoming familiar with and cautious of

environmental conditions for their safety. Air temperature, snow conditions, and thickness of ice, for example, become important factors for decision.

Learning how to provide necessities require participation in small game hunting and snaring. Usually participation begins when the child learns to control bodily functions properly. This is the start of the child's first personal experience with the environment far from 'home'. Season, climate, vegetation, and animal habitat is explained on these excursions. Power of animals is also explained. A successful hunt is followed by encouragement and techniques for preparation and sharing with others. Also, children are encouraged to relate their experiences about outings and hunting excursions.

Women (mothers and grandmothers) encourage their sons and grand-sons to go on big game hunting with their fathers. Through observation and sometimes participation, women are familiar with the techniques of big game hunts, but generally do not engage in this activity. Children observe this and know from language acquisition the cultural belief that women possess powers that can counter or complement those of men when they are on a hunt. Young girls during their first menses are instructed on this among other cultural beliefs, and the purpose of their responsibilities.

All clothing and some tools were made by women prior to contact with European traders. Clothing was made from hide and fur which had to be acquired through hunting and snaring. By learning to dress themselves up, children learned to see how their clothing were made. A young girl particularly, had to follow her mother so that she could learn how to prepare and tan hides, as well as sew moccasins and other articles of clothing. In this way she learned some short cuts and in making quality clothing. In addition she learned to skin animal fur, prepare whatever is edible and dispose of the viscera in a respectable way according to custom.

Working with material on hand was not only for clothing, it also included making

and building homes. Mobility of Dene hunter-gatherers required that the Dene know what materials they needed to build temporary homes. Often, it was the women who prepared the hides for the tents they lived in or the mooseskin boats, especially in the pre-contact years. Women often helped their husbands gather material such as moss and spruce bark for temporary camp dwellings and spruce bark and gum for bark canoes

1.4. Dene Society: Changes and Continuities

Exogenous forces, identified above, have exerted considerable influence in altering the indigenous Dene society concepts of 'nurturing' or 'social reproduction' and 'providing' or 'production.' I recognize the complexity of events around the culture-change process and have chosen to identify a few of those features in this process that would explain my thesis on nurturing and providing.

Beginning in the 1930s, children, primarily orphans, were sent to mission-run residential schools for at least ten months of the year. There, learning was done through books, the printed word and lecturing rather than sharing. Love for "God" was emphasized. After the Second World War, the federal government took over the education of the Dene contracting the mission schools to continue educating them. The additional feature in this change of authority in education was the compulsory attendance for all children at specified ages. This meant that many children even those who had living parents, were sent to residential schools for most of the year.

Compulsory attendance and education meant that the responsibility of teaching by mothers and elders were taken away from them. By imposing a new language, English, upon Dene children, a non-Dene world-view both physical and spiritual were also imposed. Most of the Dene children were brought to residential schools from distant communities. These schools were fenced in, physically cutting off any association with

the surrounding land and bush environment. By cutting off association with family and environment, Dene children were vulnerable to whatever physical or spiritual information transmitted to them. The situation they found themselves in was entirely new: they and their parents had never experienced such situations before. They could assimilate and *forget their heritage or they could be stubborn and refuse to learn what was taught.* Those who insisted on the latter choice were punished severely.

The type of 'nurturing' Dene children received were based on different expectations in morals and behavior. Individual attention was not given except for competitive success or examples to ridicule. Sisters and brothers were separated and not allowed to talk with one another nor were they encouraged to show emotional attachments.

Underlying this government and missionary teaching method was the assumption that the Dene children did not know anything. They were inferior and ridiculed for this. The mission schools were determined to teach the abstract fundamentals of reading, writing, arithmetic and religion. Competition - spelling matches, sports - for rewards were one of several ways to motivate children. Religion was to be the source of consolation in time of need or despair. It also provided the moral guidelines on interpersonal relationships. Dene children in their readings had to learn they were discovered by Columbus. In this history, what was said about them and other aboriginal people was new to them. The derogatory remarks left them with low esteem of themselves and their parents, uncles, grandparents, ancestors. In order to redeem themselves they were coerced to believe in the religion of the Mission school, learn English, and someday, get a job. In so doing they could become like "everyone else in the Western world", and earn a living in the 'new world', and forget about the 'old world' of their parents.

The term 'providing' took on an entirely separate meaning. *Within the context of*

mission schools, 'providing' meant in part learning to use abstract concepts mentioned above in order to get a job in later life. Education was to be the necessary tool for the Dene children to survive in the 'new world.' But, the skills young girls learned for the purposes of 'providing' included homemaking (only the older girls learned some cooking), particularly embroidery, knitting, mending, and sewing. Homemaking skills acquired at Mission schools were to prepare young girls to become useful mothers and domestics in the 'new world' (White 1987). Knowing how to make tools and moccasins was not emphasized. Bigger boys helped in chopping and gathering wood for heating, and cooking in the mission schools. Some were even allowed to set rabbit snares. But the primary emphasis were on learning in the classrooms, cleaning, and praying. What skills they would have learned in the indigenous Dene society were compressed into two summer months when they returned home to their families. The clash between what was morally right in the Dene society as compared to the residential school environment meant that many Dene customs were forgotten or were modified. For example, puberty rites which were so important to young women was no longer possible to practice except by chance that this event took place during the summer months.

Time took on a new meaning - time by the clock and not by the moon and seasons - which was marked by the hour to eat, to work, go to school, to pray, to sleep, etc. There was no positive mention of what it meant 'to provide' in the indigenous Dene society, in the context of the mission school environment. The consequences under these circumstances created confusion among Dene children - some have described it as living in twilight.

1.5. Dene Women and Western Feminism

In the previous sub-sections of this chapter 'nurturing' and 'providing' were

explained as the fundamental features in the role of Dene women, as well as how these responsibilities were learned and taught. It was stressed that the integrity of these responsibilities depended on the puberty rites custom of the Dene. With the introduction of Christianity and other exogenous influences the puberty rites custom was eradicated, according to the Athapaskan women who spoke with Cruikshank (1975). The demise of this custom has concerned the female elders ever since.

The task here is to put into a broader context the changing circumstances of Dene women. The context of Dene women's work in theoretical terms will be discussed. Second, will follow a discussion of how salient points made by feminists and feminist geographers on the 'production' and 'reproduction' relate to the concerns of Dene women and their predicaments in their work situations. Finally, there will be a discussion of the notion of 'aboriginal feminism' which is the term to describe a kind of ideological mediation between tradition and present social and political situations.

1.5.1. Dene Women's Work

The concerns of the Dene female elders over the demise of their puberty rites custom are well founded. Without experiencing these rites, young women have not benefited from an overall education of Dene customs. Customs outline basic moral obligations. Without this education, young women (and indirectly, young men) have not learned Dene social relations and most importantly, how to 'work.'

Two issues are emphasized here. First, the encompassing changes to their society have not necessarily been an improvement for the family. Second, customs and changes, notwithstanding, most women regard their role as 'work.' Informants included elderly women whose upbringing was primarily in the 'bush' and younger women who grew up in the community and have had some formal schooling in their community or have gone to

larger communities to go to school. Having talked with women of all ages then, three meanings of 'work' have been identified:

- (a) work in the 'bush' where the way of life is based on hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering;
- (b) work in the household setting of domestic work; and
- (c) work outside the home, commonly known as 'having a job'.

Table 1: Types of 'Work' in the Dene Setting

	'Bush'	Household in the Community	Industrial and Formal Economy
Time	-seasonal and flexible	-determined by clock -some flexibility -dependent on service hours	determined by clock -time means money
Benefits	-whole family -sharing of resources	-some families -some sharing -dependent on available services and commodities	-individual -provides income and employment as well as experience in wage economy
Ideology	-egalitarianism -sharing	-division of labour -some sharing	-capitalist

Source: Nahanni 1990: 22.

The quality and goals conceptually inherent in these types of work are not complementary in terms of ideology, time and benefits. Consequently, they present great difficulties for Dene women. These difficulties are further explained in chapter 4. It should be noted that, work in the bush, is interpreted by elderly Dene women differently than it is by younger women.

Perspectives on the quality and goals of each of the three meanings of 'work' and

their relationship with each other become a little clearer when regarded within the context of Dene society as well as within the framework of the two economies, formal and informal. But if Dene women are to assess the benefits of the changes whether it is from the point of view of finding support systems for their culture or their families, they must include in their assessment a critical look at how other women fare in the informal and formal economies. This critical look must necessarily be from the feminist perspective.

1.5.2. Western Feminism

Feminist literature (the main source of reference on Feminism in Canada is from Burt, Code and Dorney 1988) is now abundant and revealing many facts about the conditions of women historically and in the present. For example, the historical basis for male-female differences in western society date back to Greek/Roman times in Europe. Over the years, feminists have attempted to understand how these differences have created "oppressive social practices that disadvantage women" (Code 1988:18) and to find ways to change them. Although feminists (in Canada there are four main ideological groupings of feminists - liberal, radical, socialist, and French feminists) differ on where the emphasis should be, they do agree on certain common themes. Outlined below are commonly recognized and basic issues of western society which have created social and economic inequities between men and women.

Table 2. Basic Issues of Female-Male Relations in Western Societies

Philosophical Premises	Capitalist Economic Structures	Economic-Social Constructs
Aristotelian	Production Reproduction -sexuality -socialization	Created (a) gender inequalities (b) Spheres -public -private (vary historically, culturally, racially along class lines)
Ideology Patriarchy		

Source: Burt et al 1988.

Feminist researchers assert that patriarchal ideologies have their origin in the philosophy of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) - "the male is by nature superior and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled..."(Code 1988: 22). The philosophy of Aristotle on human nature has been the basis of western theory up to the 18th century. Code suggests, thus, patriarchal ideals have influenced and shaped political and social procedures and economic structures in western society throughout that time.

For example, socialist feminism draw upon Marx's analysis of class oppression. They say that capitalist economic system oppresses women as a group just as it oppresses the working class as a whole, in the following ways:

(a) through its economic structures of production and reproduction created and controlled by a hierarchy of men, which function to maintain the subordination of women,

(b) by alienating women's work as well as men's work,

(c) by placing at a disadvantage, women as housewives whose work has no monetary value and who are excluded from recognition in the 'public' workplace.

The patriarchal capitalist system perpetuates disadvantages to women; first in the nuclear family structure where women's work has no monetary value, but where she is expected to biologically reproduce the labour power; and second, if she decides to join the workforce, she inherits the double duty of working for wages and performing unpaid work at home - a situation which the socialist feminists argue, have not altogether been liberating for women. Socialist feminists promote a radical restructuring in the economy where women will get equal pay for work of equal value. Social change they say, must include an alternative to the capitalist mode of production and to the patriarchal organization of the family and other social institutions.

1.5.3. Feminist Perspectives in Geography

Since the early 1980s geographers have recognized concepts in feminist theory and practice. The Women and Geography Study Group of the British Geographers (IBG 1984) recognized the theory and practice of concepts such as patriarchy and gender. It was suggested by this group that patriarchy can be defined as "a set of social relations between men which although hierarchical establishes an interdependence and solidarity between them which allows them to dominate women" (IBG 1984: 26). This group further suggested that such concepts underlie daily decisions in the work and home places, space-time and production/ reproduction relations (IBG 1984:28), and that geographers are interested in these kinds of factors.

Feminist discussions of the dominance and subordination relationships issues are also found in the Marxist, the Phenomenologist and Humanistic approaches. To the feminist analyses, geography offers (a) materialism which is the idea that change can only occur with the analysis of social and technical mode of production of a society, (b) study of the state as an apparatus for the ruling class or a neutral institution within which social

conflicts are resolved. While the phenomenologists and humanists, like feminists, emphasize the importance of caring and nurturing in relationships among people and the environment, the IBG analyzed these approaches to be directed at men more than women (IBG 1984:36). Furthermore, IBG stated that these approaches failed to move beyond description and self-revelation to find the reasons for gender inequalities

The analyses of social and technical mode of production of a society is very complex and beyond the scope of this thesis. (For example, the analysis by Seccombe [1980: 25-99] of domestic labour and the working class household is layered with other modes, such as the mode of appropriation, mode of distribution and mode of consumption, to find some explanations of labour production and reproduction processes of the proletariat). In the section following, I introduce some thoughts on this concept (see also chapters 3 and 4).

The discussions among geographers on 'gender' and 'patriarchy' and 'gender and locality' while of interest to the analyses of capitalist economic structure are not issues to the traditional economy with similar intensities. While social relations in the traditional economy is an issue now, it is relevant in so far as its inherent ideology conflicts with social relations introduced with the modern economy (see Table 1). The potential exists for such in-depth analyses in a cross-cultural situation in the modern economy of the Canadian North. In this thesis interest is primarily with recognizing the contribution of women's work in the traditional economy and its yet to be accorded value in the overall education of the Dene.

1.5.4. Western Feminism and 'Aboriginal Feminism'

At a recent gathering of Indigenous people in Ottawa, Ontario (Indigenous Nations of the Americas 1991 International Conference, Working Groups and Cultural Events,

"Strengthening the Spirit", November 10-14,1991) a workshop of aboriginal women revealed an increasing interest in sharing different ideas around the role of aboriginal women in current times. The interests among North American aboriginal women particularly those who are entering or have entered professional fields in contemporary society, include feminist issues. However, their interest is also to maintain their ties with their cultural communities and have a voice in the future of their indigenous societies. Becoming involved with the contemporary society at large makes them more aware of the need to ensure the continuation of the aboriginal identity in their homeland.

The issue of 'universality and diversity' within the Canadian feminist perspective provides the framework for recognition of diverse contemporary concerns of women belonging to ethnic minorities and aboriginal societies. It is the author's observation that the Dene women (including many women in the working-class) do not have time to take a critical look at their situations. However, in the last fifteen years, women have allied themselves with organizations who were struck to represent them or intervene on their behalf whenever government policies and laws have to be challenged. Consequently, aboriginal women through their organizations have been able to advance constructive critiques of their situations. These have been heard at Canadian constitutional conferences and meetings such as the one mentioned above.

Recently, an article on 'Indian Feminism' appeared in an anthology (Shanley in Brant 1988: 213-215). Shanley tries to answer the questions, "why do Indian women avoid the designation feminists? or do they? what is a feminist anyway?" (ibid:213). Her answers are from a political perspective.

First, she outlines the common themes between Indian and western women. These include (1) working for change toward equal pay for equal work, child health, and welfare, women's right to choose contraceptives, sterilization, and abortion, (2) facing the

realities of male dominance or patriarchy - the attack should be on the system, not the person, (3) against violence perpetrated on women and children.

Second, she takes issue on the meaning of 'equality'. She says, that Indian women seek equality on two levels that are different from mainstream women's movement: (1) on the individual level, Indian women struggle to maintain the survival of social structures of the family according to their aboriginal traditions, (2) on the societal level, Indian women join the struggle for sovereignty as a people to maintain legal and spiritual links with the land in order to survive.

Shanley's presentation on 'Indian feminism', although very general in scope, provides a framework for discussion. The distinctions between aboriginal and non-aboriginal women are primarily historical and legal (Jamieson 1978). The facts and awareness about the colonization of aboriginal people were not public knowledge until the civil rights decade of the 1960s. This was a time of renaissance for many including the aboriginal people, women, blacks and other people of color. The time was right for the aboriginal women to raise their own issues. In the 1970s certain legal cases brought to the attention of Canadians generally, that Section 12 of the Indian Act (1955), the Federal law imposed on all aboriginal people called Status Indians, discriminated against Indian women.

In taking this action, Indian women revealed two realities. First, they exposed the extent to which Indian men were colonized to believe that the Act was the ideology of their own societies. Second, in defying the right of Indian women to take such legal actions, the Indian men demonstrated the paradox complicating the lives of Indians generally - they hang on to the Indian Act, the instrument that makes them dependent on government while they are struggling to become self-governing.

The struggle to restore the aboriginal structure of family means that Aboriginal

women have to come to terms with the effects of colonialism that has divided them and their families. For many people, European colonialism started back in the 1600s. To change negative social relations means historical research, analysis of mythology, injection of positive images into the educational institutions, analysis of male-female relationships. *The struggle is primarily internal or within the aboriginal family and society.* Aboriginal women realize that this is a necessary first step before achieving a satisfactory solution to the level which means self-government in Canada.

The other dimension of the struggle for aboriginal women in general and Dene women in particular is to face economic realities. Dene society is drastically different from the non-aboriginal Industrial society. The example commonly used is hierarchical structures of the Industrial society. They do not exist in Dene society. The Industrial economy has affected the Dene in two ways. First, it has relegated them to a lower labour class category of that economy; second, it has classed women as secondary or subordinate to men. The application of the hierarchical system to analyze the role of Dene women in their society is useless because it assumes that Dene women occupy a status in the Traditional economy similar to that occupied by other women in the Industrial economy. This assumption is a distortion of their social and economic contribution in the traditional economy. Therefore, other factors have to be considered in the analyses of Dene women as compared to non-aboriginal Canadian women. And to do this, we have to look at Dene women in the mode of production process.

Furthermore, recognition has to be given to the suggestion that in discussing the mode of production it is important to give particular attention to reproduction and family from the point of view of women. The term reproduction has been interpreted to have double meanings in the feminist theory and the Marxist theory (IBG,1984:30). The former alleges that the family plays a role in maintaining patriarchal relations while the

latter pins the role of the family as agents of reproducing the labour force. The former maintains that the capitalist has 'ownership' and 'control' over the means of production and that the labour force sells their labour and are therefore tied into the social relations of production. In joining the workforce Dene women have to initially overcome this particular ideological difference, primarily because in traditional society the women have 'ownership' and 'control' over the means of domestic products and property.

Finally, Dene women as nurturers have to consider political and social changes that have influenced their culture when they assess their present predicaments and their future. They have to look from where they are locally, in relation to the world around them. Their experiences in the role they have as the binding force in the traditional economy broadens their perspective.

2. DENE HISTORY

It has been suggested by Carl Sauer (1941) that,

The geographer...cannot treat the localization of activities without knowing the functioning of the culture, the process of living together of the group; and he cannot do this except by historical reconstruction...modes of living and winning a livelihood from their land involves knowing both the ways (cultural traits) they discovered for themselves and those they acquired from other culture groups.... The quality of understanding sought is that of analysis of origins and processes...[and]...the all-inclusive object of spatial differentiation of culture. (Sauer in Johnston:1981:66)

Sauer's words set the context for the presentation of the historical overview of the Dene in this section. In the field of geography, as indeed in the fields of ethnohistory and anthropology, historical reconstruction has enabled some understanding of culture and functioning of societies. Culture, as the term is used here, refers not only to the similarities and differences among people but also their comprehension of themselves and their homeland through their own language.

This thesis cannot go into depth on historical reconstruction. There is a need however, to cover some early historical ground to know who the Dene are and to comprehend a little of Dene ancestry. Ancestry, means the transfer of the Dene ways from one generation to the next, including knowledge of their groupings, relations, movements and localizations. For the overview of Dene historical movements and trading relations, reference is made largely to secondary information. While yet many questions remain about the Dene and their society in prehistoric and historic times, certain facts are now known. These include Dene movements, approximate populations, 'tribal wars,' starvation, infanticide, epidemics, diseases and trade relations with Europeans and other forms of contact. Summaries of some of these events will be provided.

A description will be included of the Slave Territory the area that has been identified since the mid-19th century as the area inhabited by the Dene who speak the Slavey language. The focus is placed on the Dene of the Lower Liard who inhabit the

southern part of this territory. A general discussion on the Lower Liard people, incorporates their designations of land use, the functioning of their traditional economy and their cultural and environmental knowledge. This kind of information from the Dene was not recorded nor widely known prior to the 1970s.

2.1. The History of Movement and Contact

Events that are known to have occurred among the Subarctic people in North America, have been summarized by Athapaskanists and other academics using different time periods. Helm and Leacock (1971:350-372) regard the years up to 1820 as the era of early contacts; the years following 1821 as a stable time when missions and the fur trade were established; and the years following 1940 as the government and industrial stage. Usher names three major phases of development: "Discovery and Commercial Penetration" occurred between the early 16th Century and 1939; "Administrative Colonialism and the Welfare State", between 1940 and 1950; the "Transition to an Industrial Mode of Production", between 1950 and the present (Usher in McCann 1982:423-436). The primary interest of Helm and Leacock was to provide a history of the Dene and of the events surrounding their contacts with outsiders; while the interest of Usher was to detail the events related to the Dene's economic development and relations. I have considered both, and have chosen to organize this thesis according to the following time designations pre-1820, 1820-1945, 1945 to present.

2.2. Pre-1820: Early Contacts

Prehistorical information about the Dene in the Mackenzie River Valley area of the Arctic Drainage Lowlands has been gained largely since 1940 (Helm 1981: 107). The assumption that human habitation of North America began with the Bering Strait crossing is the basis of analysis of archaeological material found in the Western Subarctic (Helm 1981: 107). Millar's archaeological research, which began in 1966 strongly suggests that a

study of the Fisherman's Lake-Pointed Mountain area in the southwestern Mackenzie River Basin is important to an understanding of the general movement of the Athapaskan people (Millar 1966). Furthermore, fragments of microblades radiocarbon dated 320 B.C. have been discovered (Helm 1981: 109, 111).

Yerbury (1989:13), who also conducted research on Athapaskans, divides the pre-1820 years into three major eras: Prehistoric, which ended around 1680; Protohistoric, 1680-1769; and, Historic, 1770-1890.

The last ten years of the Protohistoric Era are significant because ethnohistorical research indicates a major shift during that time in the movement of people, including the Upper Mackenzie Drainage Athapaskans. However, their prehistorical location continues to provoke controversy. Gillespie (in Helm et al:1981:161-168) insists the records of Alexander Mackenzie are too ambiguous to be interpreted with certainty. She asserts that "...others like Gallatin 1836, Morton 1973, Jenness 1932, Innis 1956 and Curtis 1907-30 to also cautiously interpret them." Using the evidence and conclusions of a study by Dyen and Aberle (1974: 251) Yerbury (1980: 27), citing "their linguistic matrices and maps of innovations, and the shallowness of the archaeological sequences," states that the "displacement of indigenous population by force" was instigated by the Cree expansion of the fur-trade competition. This Cree invasion of the Canadian Athapaskan in the Athabasca Lake region and the displacement of the latter to the Mackenzie River transition boreal forest zone is estimated to have taken place between the years 1759 and 1764. Yerbury bases this assertion on archaeological findings and on the "remarks of Ferdinand Jacobs, Samuel Hearne (1971:354-357), Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Alexander MacKenzie (the former's nephew), Willard Ferdinand Wentzel, George Keith and Emile Petitot" (Yerbury 1980:29).

Yerbury further suggests that displaced Dene Athapaskans are those now called

Slave, Dogrib, Hare, Beaver, and Sekani. He adds, "the territory occupied by the Slave, Dogrib, Hare, Beaver and Sekani during the prehistoric and most of the protohistoric period included, for most of these groups, a type of biotic area distinctly different from that which they occupied during the historic period." (Yerbury 1980: 27)

At this time the Cree and the Chipewyans were the middlemen in the trade with these northern and western Athapaskans, as the latter were not in a favorable position to take advantage of the fur trade.

Concurrent to their displacement, and before they had even had contact with the Europeans, the Athapaskans were subject to other new European impositions. These included diseases which reduced their population by 9/10 (Morice: 1904) and trade goods (Yerbury 1981: 43). In addition, this direct and indirect contact thrust the Athapaskans into 'tribal wars', infanticide (particularly female infanticide [Helm 1980, Yerbury 1986], and starvation (Fumoleau 1973, Helm 1980, Yerbury 1986).

The Historic Era (1770-1890) consists of three periods related to the fur trade: the Early fur-trade period, 1770-1800; the competitive period, 1800-1821; and Trading Post Dependency Periods, 1821-1890 (Helm and Leacock 1971, Helm 1981: 146-157). The third period will be discussed in section 2.3.1., Periods of Transition (1820-1945)

During the Early Fur Trade Period (1770-1800), there was indirect and direct trade with European traders. The trading stations that were established were temporary, as the aboriginal groups did not regularly visit them (Helm 1981: 148). Being hunters and gatherers, the Dene travelled widely. Their dispersal in groups made it difficult for the original recorders to estimate their total population. Their customs were difficult to understand due to their mobility and reticence. (Osgood 1936, Asch 1982, Savashinsky 1973).

By 1780, traders, other than those of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), began to

penetrate the Mackenzie River Drainage (Helm 1982: 147). A group of French Canadian merchants from Montreal who wanted to get into the fur trade formed one large company, the Northwest Company, in 1784. Peter Pond, who had established a trading post on Lake Athabasca in 1778 was asked by the new company to establish others in the north. He established Fort Resolution in 1786. In 1787, Pond was replaced by Alexander Mackenzie who in 1789 decided to explore the river that flowed out of Great Slave Lake. Along the way he encountered Indians and saw land rich in furbearing wildlife: the conditions were ripe for the establishment of new Northwest Company trading posts. Thus began the direct contact between the Slavey and the fur traders, and the increased exposure of the Slavey to the diseases that would decimate their population..

In the **Competitive Period (1800-1820)** competition became fierce between the Northwest Company (which consisted of Canadian and American business peoples and which, in 1787, replaced the French traders operating from Montreal) and the HBC (which was owned by the English). However, this competitive rivalry did not occur in the North (Asch 1976:8). The HBC, which had its main post at Fort Churchill, did not have permanent posts in the Mackenzie River area, and so, the Northwest Company took advantage of the situation by establishing several posts along this main river and surrounding area. Fort Liard was established in 1804.

Although one might imagine that the competition between the two companies would have resulted in the Slavey Dene becoming involved in trapping, this was not the case. The only trade goods of interest to the Slavey were metal implements, such a cooking pots (Asch 1976:8). Their subsistence way of life was little changed in this period (Ibid).

2.3. Periods of Transitions: 1820-1945

2.3.1. The Trading-Post Dependency Period (1820-1890)

The Northwest Company and the HBC united in 1821, retaining the name of the latter. The company then began to reorganize its trade in the Mackenzie River area, making Fort Simpson its main administrative centre. Goods of all sorts were sent there, including wool blankets, beads, powder horns, clothing, dried food (Hall 1986: 12).

The Athapaskans were given names by the traders, and their territories were identified (Helm 1981: 16¹). Most of the Dene shunned trade goods such as guns. The Slavey-speaking Dene, for example, still used indigenous tools for hunting, fishing, and snaring. they lived on bush resources such as fish, small game, moose, caribou, and a limited range of furbearing animals (Asch 1976: 8). They gathered a variety of wild berries, roots, and herbs.

By 1850, however, the HBC had replaced their canoes with larger vessels, and began to bring in goods in even greater quantities. While the Dene continued to move seasonally on the land they began to make two annual trading post visits - one in the fall and the other in the spring.

By the 1870s the Dene were begin drawn into the fur trade, induced by a range of available trade goods. The HBC introduced the percussion rifle, which they traded only for fur (Asch 1976: 9), and established a credit system.

Between 1875 to 1885, fur prices were high: bear pelts jumped from \$7 90 to \$11.48, and beaver pelts from \$2 56 to \$4.09. Silver fox pelts were the most valued at \$53.53 each (Hall 1976:15). With the introduction of dogs for transportation and steel traps, traplines were created. Instead of gathering at major lakes in summer, the Slavey Dene began gathering at the trading posts.

2.3.2. Period of Early Government Influence 1890-1945

With the advent of high fur prices and improved transportation, the North attracted many southerners in the late 1880s. The first white trappers began to appear around 1894. Many more southern fortune seekers began trickling into the Mackenzie Valley during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897 and a number stayed on there.

Among government officials there was considerable debate over the issue of signing a treaty with the Indian concerning the land that extended north to the southern shores of Great Slave Lake. The missionaries in the area were particularly insistent that the federal government offer assistance to the deprived and starving Indians during the last decade of 19th century (Fumoleau 1975: 30-39). Although the federal government did offer assistance, allowing the HBC to distribute the goods they were providing for the Indians, they did not agree to a treaty with the northern Indians until the possibility of mineral wealth was ensured (Ibid. 39). The events around the signing of Treaties 8 in 1899 and 11 in 1920, and the activities of the Morrow Commission of 1973, which investigated the facts around these events, are extensively covered by Fumoleau (1975). Doubt continues to cloud the notion that the Dene signed away or extinguished their rights to their land through the signing of these 'friendship' treaties.

The Slavey Dene became dependent on Western trade goods in the first decade of the 20th Century (Asch 1976). Once they were induced to join the activities that surrounded the fur trade, their visits to the trading posts became frequent. Their subsistence economy began to include trapping for the purposes of trading for these goods. In the ensuing twenty years they took full advantage of favourable fur prices. Furthermore, the Game Ordinance Act of 1906 (revised in 1917) prevented the overtrapping of furbearing animals and protected the native trappers in the N.W.T. (Fumoleau 1975). Non-resident trappers had to obtain licenses to trap in this territory.

Many independent traders moved into the North to join the competition, and those who did not succeed, turned to mining.

A large oil find in Norman Wells in 1920 prompted the federal government to reconsider signing a treaty with the Dene in the Mackenzie Valley. Prior to 1920, the government was disinterested in the North because "the land within the regions inhabited by [the Dene] were not required for settlement" (Fumoleau 1975:36). In the end, the government considered that by settling with the Indian people they were doing them a favour. (Such negative attitudes towards Indians were prevalent at the time, and were expressed openly by government officials such D.C. Scott and Loring [see White 1987:119]). Treaty 11 was signed by the government and Dene groups in summers of 1920, 1921, and 1922.

The Great Depression of the 1930s affected the Mackenzie Valley. Fur quantities and prices declined; trapping was restricted to Indians and those already holding licences. Many posts closed down, and all the competing companies failed except the HBC. Following the Depression, fur prices never recovered and the Dene in the Mackenzie Valley experienced economic hardships that lasted through to the 1960s.

2.4. The Modern Period: 1945 to the Present

In the years following the Second World War, the Dene gradually moved to permanent communities (most community infrastructures were established by government with government services and public works) while continuing to seasonally hunt, fish, trap and gather in their traditional areas. Many did not continue to travel the full extent of the areas they previously used.

The Dene elders remember these difficult times. Settling into new locations on a semi-permanent basis presented many unforeseen difficulties. These were related to the economic circumstances brought about by the introduction of money, new living and

social conditions, and the erosion of the role of the family - particularly the role of the mother in the care and education of their children.

The early years of the 1960s, saw the beginning of many significant events in the North. I will restrict my comments to the traditional economy. Industrial expansion in this period meant an increase in available seasonal wage employment for the Dene men. This new source of wealth was sufficient to induce many families to stay in the community year round, living on the earnings of their wage-earning spouses or sons rather than going into the bush. Others managed to balance these summer jobs with their winter and/or spring trapping seasons. Having cash meant to these hunters and trappers that they could purchase skidoos and other equipment that could assist them in their traditional work. The fact that they participated in the 'mixed economy' (Cox 1987:256-264) as unskilled wage earners did not necessarily mean that they accepted the ideology of capitalism. It merely meant that such employment supplemented their traditional economy.

However, as oil and mineral exploration and seismic activity increased in the 1970s the Dene of the Mackenzie Valley and other northern aboriginal peoples became alarmed about the environmental damage to the land that provided them with survival resources. The political responses of the Dene at the time were based on their own economic needs, and on the lack of understanding on the part of government and industry of the extent to which the Dene depended on the land for their livelihood. The Dene became politicized in the process of making this point. This was most evident during the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry of 1976 (Berger 1977). Usher's analysis encapsulates the scenario: "...direct competition has arisen between the two economies for the essential factors of production - land, labour, capital" (1982:437). A frontier small-business sector emerged that wanted industrial development, too. The Territorial Legislative Assembly

sided with them, but neither could open the North for development without the assistance of the federal government (Ibid: 436). Central to the problem was the fact that the frontier business sector and the territorial and federal governments knew little about the Dene economy and general way of life.

While the debate and the negotiations have been political, and have occurred only intermittently since 1973 (when the federal government agreed to negotiate on the basis of land use and occupancy), the real concern of the Dene is to ensure the continuation of their way of life on and from the land. Versions of this concern have been expressed in numerous ways over these years.

3. THE SLAVEY: PEOPLE AND TERRITORY

The Dene Athapaskan groups were known only to a few outsiders, such as Petitot, other missionaries and traders, prior to 1890. European traders recorded the names of these groups which were provided to them by the Algonkian Cree from the south. While they did have names for themselves, if the Athapaskans had any objections to the names assigned to them, these were not recorded.

Using Petitot's references, Cornelius Osgood in 1936 proposed the distribution along linguistic differentiations of the Northern Athapaskans (see Fig. 4) which is considered the best reference of their distribution at that time. Osgood identified the Slave Territory of slavey-speaking Athapaskans to include in the south, the western drainage of the Great Slave Lake and the Slave River, parts of the Lower Liard drainage area and along the Mackenzie River north to Ft. Wrigley while Jeness has included the area north of that to include Ft. Norman, (Asch 1981: 338, see Fig. 5). The following communities in existence now are populated by these groups: Ft. Nelson in British Columbia, Assumption, Hay Lakes, Ft. Vermillion, Meander River and other small settlements in the northwestern area of Alberta, and in the Northwest Territories, Ft. Liard, Trout Lake, Nahanni Butte, Providence, Kakisa Lake, Hay River, Jean Marie River, Ft. Simpson, Wrigley, Ft. Norman.

Recent information from the Dene themselves verify that they traveled the full extent of the area shown on Fig. 3 (Dene Land Use Study 1976, unpublished). Two sources generally concur with each other on the Slavey territory: Helm et al (1981) and the Dene Mapping Project (1982).

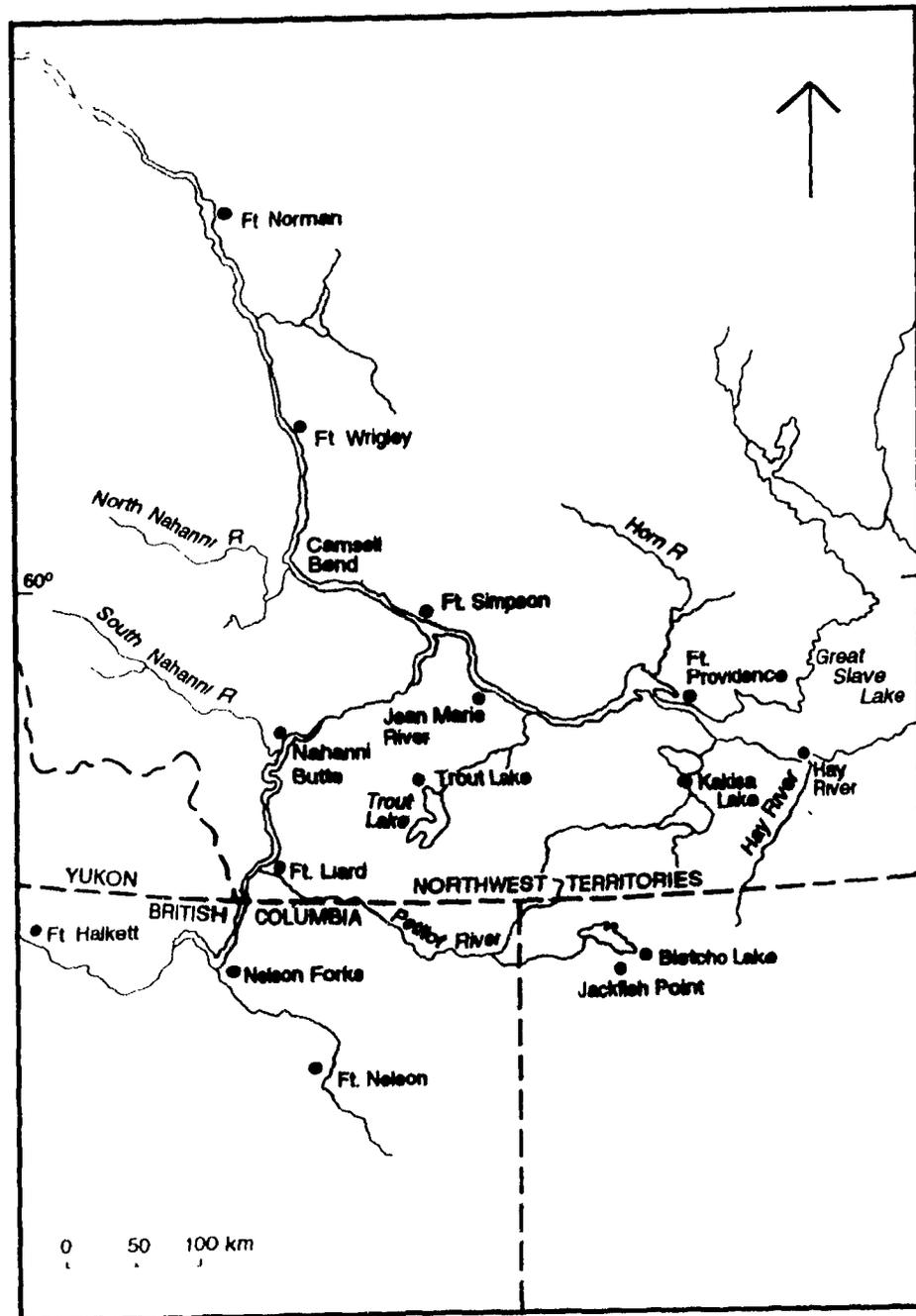


Figure 5.

Slavey Territory, around 1850.
Adapted from Helm et al., 1981:338.

3.1. The Lower Liard - People and Land Use

3.1.1. Geographical and Environmental Context

The geographical location of the Lower Liard area in Canada includes the area between the 59th to the 61th parallel, and between 123°00' W to 127°00' W'. It is an area that lies within two major physiographic regions in northwestern Canada: the Cordillera to the west and the Mackenzie Lowlands to the east. The Selwyn Mountains in the Cordillera divides the Yukon Territory from the Northwest Territories.

The Lower Liard region comprises the area where tributaries flowing south of the divide eventually join the Liard River. This major tributary has its origin in the Pelly Mountains, Yukon Territory. From its source it winds its way in a southwardly direction into northern British Columbia then in a northeasterly direction into the N.W.T. where it meets the Mackenzie River at Ft. Simpson. The Liard River Basin comprises the southwest extremity of the Mackenzie River Drainage Basin. The major tributaries of the Liard River Basin include the Beaver, Whitefish, LaBiche, Kotanalee, Petitot and Muskeg (Fig. 3). Other numerous rivers and tributaries flow from the hills and mountainous terrain in the western area of the Liard Basin, cutting through the floodplains and lowlands to the east. The water level of these rivers fluctuate with season and precipitation. In the early spring with the ice break-up the Liard River will swell up from the silt-laden mountain runoff carrying in its flow, huge blocks of river ice and driftwood that will flow northward to assist ice break-up in the Mackenzie River at Ft Simpson mid- to late May. Throughout the spring and summer the water level will continue to fluctuate until mid-August to late August when the volume of mountain stream flows has been reduced by freezing and low temperatures and the Liard River reaches its lowest level to remain that way until the following spring. The terms 'break-up' is used to mean when a river is clear of ice and 'freeze up' includes a period two to

three weeks before a river 'freezes-over' to become passable, (Higgins 1968:20).

The other important consideration in the study of the Lower Liard area is the environmental conditions. This area is located within a zone of the Boreal Forest Region of Canada. Consequently, it experiences similar bioclimatic conditions that other areas experience within this larger region. The Boreal Forest Region of Canada is the area south of and congruent with the treeline (a transition subzone called tundra forest) that stretches from Alaska to Newfoundland in North America. In some major physical geography researches on Canada, the term sub-arctic is used synonymously with the Boreal Forest Region. Sub-arctic zone is the latitudinal zone adjacent to the polar zone. Koeppen used it to group climatic distinctions in his cold zone (D) where there are some months when the air temperature is above 10°C and the precipitation and evaporation are low. The common understanding is that in the Boreal Forest Region, the climate is sub-arctic and the vegetation is boreal. The terms are conceptually and geographically linked and will therefore be used interchangeably.

In the Northwest Territories, most of the weather recording stations are located in the Mackenzie Lowlands or the Interior Plains and not the Cordillera in the Lower Liard Region of the N.W.T.-Yukon Territory border, consequently no continuous and general weather data exists for the Cordillera portion of the study area. The weather data at Ft. Nelson, and Ft. Liard, weather stations provide a general range of seasonal temperature for the Lowland portion of the study area. The July mean high is 22.7°C and the low is 10.8 C while the January mean high is -20.2°C and the low is -29.3°C. The annual precipitation is generally around 44.9 cm (13.3 cm rainfall and 193.8 cm snowfall) (Outcrop 1984:134).

The Natural Resources include (a) forest resources including softwood and hardwood species (Jeffrey 1964), (b) fur bearing species, game species and fishes (Higgins

1968:132-133, Helm et al 1981:339, Outcrop 1984:134), (c) land that is arable (d) water both fresh and sulphuretted (e) minerals that include metallics, hydrocarbons and industrial(gravel) and (e) park and recreation lands, National and Territorial parks (Higgins 1968:128, Outcrop 1984:134).

3.1.2. Land Uses and Practices

In the protohistoric times (1680-1769) the Lower Liard area was populated by unspecified groups of aboriginal people. In the early years of the historic era (1770-1800) traders recorded having met Slavey as well as Beaver Indians in the Lower Liard area, to Fort Simpson (Innis 1956: 203).

In 1804 the Northwest Company established a trading post at Fort Liard. The earliest HBC post in this community was in 1805. Except for a brief period of about seven years, the HBC maintained a trading post in Ft. Liard since that time, (Usher 1971:66). "Two traders writing in 1807 mention the possibility that the Indians of Ft. Liard and Fort Simpson regions (later designated the Slavey) were once Beaver Indians." (Helm 1981:167) Helm disagrees. She argues that the Beaver and Slavey are linguistically distinct. However if these peoples were the same then separated, this separation probably occurred in the late 1700s, "when the Cree were making their farthest northern and western excursions with firearms in hand" (Ibid).

Pre-1920 population figures for the Dene were difficult to determine. Early recorders did not understand the seasonal movements of the Dene. In the study area, interaction with neighboring groups like the Kaska, Beaver, and Sekani to the south, and the Mountain to the north, made it difficult to determine a definite population of the Slavey. However, attempts at estimations have been made by various historians (Morice 1904, Yerbury 1986, Helm 1980, 1981:347). Populations for Fort Liard were estimated as

follows: in 1858, 281 persons; in 1881, 216 persons; and in 1883, 219 persons (Helm 1981: 347).

In the early years of the fur trade, the Dene in the Lower Liard, provided food provisions to the posts in their area. These food provisions included moose, caribou and bear meat and hundreds of pounds of fish from their fish lakes. In exchange they received items such as blankets, axes, metal pots and implements.

Historically, Slavey-speaking Athapaskans consisted of families and family sub-groups who distinguished each other by the type of clothing each wore, the language and dialect each spoke and the kind of terrain each inhabited. When describing themselves or other groups the Slavey used as the root term '-ttine' (meaning, from there) with the descriptive references on ways, clothing and place. People along the Liard River (in the N.W.T.) were called 'Etcheri-die-Gottinne' people of the swift current (Helm 1981: 348) and people of Fort Liard were called 'Etcha Ottinne' or 'sheltered people', (Ibid). The Slavey in this area also describe themselves as "Dene" (person or people) to distinguish themselves from outsiders such as Whites and Cree as well as adopt the label Slavey or Slavey-speaking for the purposes of distinction with other Athapaskans (Asch in Helm 1981: 338). Today, Slavey-speaking Dene will distinguish themselves by specifying the community from where they and their parents live. The community of Ft. Liard is now called 'echareottine koh', (Outcrop 1984: 134) but most people from Liard call their community 'Meh chon lah koh' which in Dene means 'community near the Petitot River' that flows past Fort Liard and into the Liard River.

The move to permanent dwellings in Ft. Liard was gradual. Until the early 1950s, most Dene families remained in the bush for most of the year, and only returned to the community to trade their furs. Every summer, tents could be seen along the Liard River as families returned from the bush to rest and enjoy the summer. (Christian 1977: 8)

Every fall, they would pack up and return to the bush transporting all their belongings in their boats or on their backpacks and dogpacks. Returning to the bush meant returning to their fish camps where they would prepare for the winter. They would remain in the bush until the next summer when they would return with their furs. A general movement of the Dene from Fort Liard was recorded by the R.C. Mission (see fig. 6) which appears to be consistent through to the subsequent recorded movements of people in this community in 1976 (part of the Dene Land Use Study 1974-76 which reflects the N.W.T. Dene land use dating back to the turn of this century).

Like the other Dene in the Slavey Territory the Dene of the Lower Liard, travelled widely. The composite of use by a third sample each, of three communities in the N.W.T. Lower Liard - Fort Liard, Nahanni Butte and Trout Lake - include six map sections (scale 1:250,000): Maxhamish, Liard, La Biche, Sibbeston, Trout Lake and Toad River. The following areas have been documented as used by the Fort Liard Dene up to 1976: the southeastern Yukon Territory; the area within 100 km of the northeastern area of B.C. (including west of Caribou Hills, north of Fort Nelson and east of Dease Lake); the areas west as far as Trout Lake, N.W.T.; west and east of the Liard River in the N.W.T. as far as Nahanni Butte and Netla (see fig. 3).

The hunters and trappers (predominantly male) told us in the Slavey language, about their lives' history. Most of them learned to hunt and trap in their youth from parents, uncles, and grandparents. Some travelled west far into the mountainous regions and beyond, some even west as far as Alaska. Others had gone far south as far as Lower Post, B.C. - vast distances to travel on foot. Their accounts were extensive and beyond the scope of this study. For now, it is sufficient to conclude that the Dene in the study area (from knowledge gained in the Dene Land Use Study 1974-76 and other studies since) possess extensive knowledge of terrain and environment in their region.

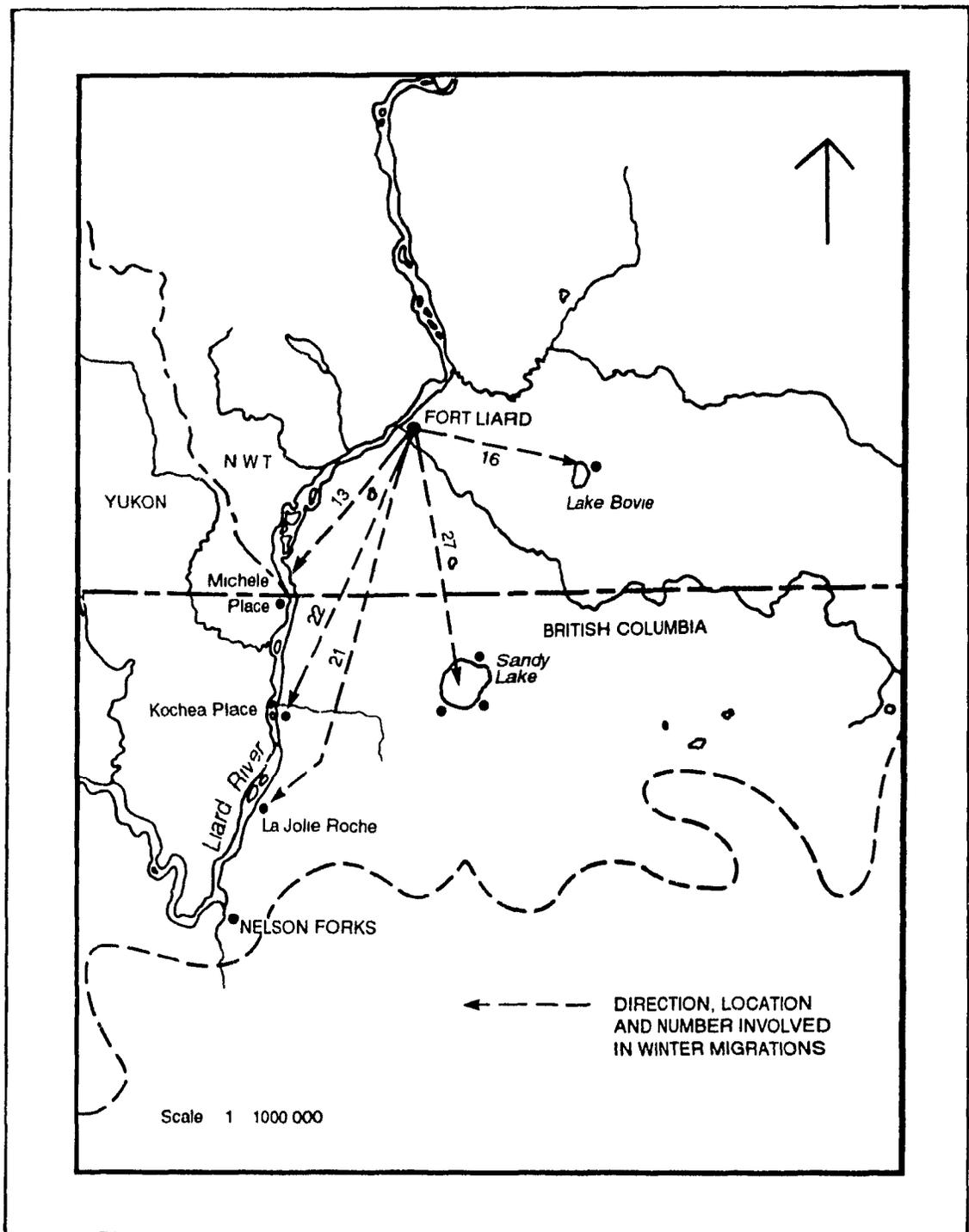


Figure 6.

1952 Winter Migration - Part of the Liard Band.
 Source: DIAND Library, Map File, Ottawa, Ontario.

3.2. Dene Society and Traditional Economy

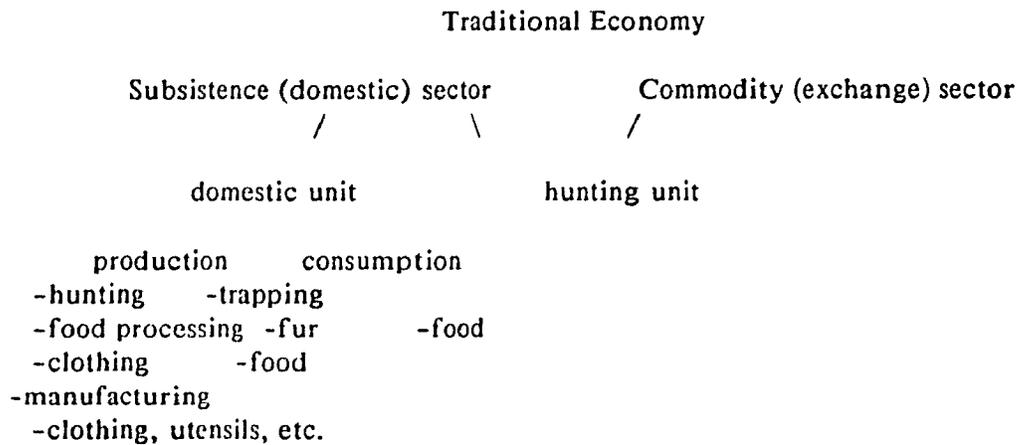
Present day organization of the Dene society is a faint resemblance to that of early 20th century. The background to this fact is extensive and is better left for another study. The purpose here is to focus on how the Dene maintain their traditional economy. It should be noted here that while the Dene communities politically govern themselves through elected village or community councils and band councils, they practice their traditional customs of organization within the family and in the bush environment. Each family and sub-groups of families have seasonal hunting, trapping and fishing areas which are recognized by the community.

The traditional economy includes land and water use for subsistence and fur production. Land and water use for subsistence purposes are identified by major place names, camps both permanent and temporary, harvest kill sites and areas, fish lakes or fish camps and trapping areas or traplines. Subsistence activities include hunting, fishing and gathering. Trapping is the primary activity in fur production and exchange.

Several studies of the traditional economy have broken it down into its basic components. Usher (in McCann 1982:422) has suggested that the traditional economy comprises two major components, the Subsistence (or domestic) and the Commodity (or exchange) units. Irimoto (1981: 56) divides the Subsistence sector into the domestic (family) unit and the hunting (task group) unit. Basso (1972), Christian and Gardner (1975), Rushforth (1984,1986) and Brody (1987) offer several important insights, some which will be discussed briefly in subsection 2.5 on Cultural and Environmental Knowledge.

A general picture of the traditional economy with emphasis on the domestic unit emerges as follows:

Table 4: Traditional Economy



Source: adapted from Irimoto (1981) and Usher (1982).

Women are primarily involved in the domestic unit of the subsistence sector while the activities of men are in the hunting unit. However, it is obvious that their activities are interdependent. Also, some measure of cooperation and sharing is required to harvest, retrieve, prepare and consume the wild food. Each of these steps are not generally an individual activity. Irimoto describes the subsistence sector of the Chipewyan as cooperation of activities.

The function of the domestic unit is subsistence, production and consumption of food through the performance of daily activities in a common rhythm, (1981: 58). The hunting unit, which is bilaterally linked domestic unit(s), is another level of cooperative unit; that is, cooperation of activities and transmission of skills and knowledge for subsistence are observed among its members, (Ibid: 56).

In the following, I will describe activities around domestic units first from my personal experiences having lived in bush camps and from my field observations in the study area. Within the domestic unit, each member of the family performs tasks which were learned by observation or taught to members of the family. Division of labor for some tasks are gender related.

Generally, the women prepare food, fetch wood and water and gather berries,

roots, sap with the children. Care for children is shared when the men are not on hunting expeditions. Although both women and men fish and set fish nets in spring and winter, it is usually the men who perform this task. In some families both women and men help each other to set nets sometimes with the help of their children. Preparing the fish for cooking or drying is also bilateral, some seem to be more adept at these. Both men and women, often accompanied by their children, snare and hunt for small game. Children learned to snare and hunt by observing their parents. By the time children reach the ages of four to seven, they are able to make fire, fetch wood, and water and set snares. By the time young men are 14 years of age they are able to go on big game hunts with their father or their male relatives and if they are fortunate they get their first moose. While big game hunting is not entirely closed to women, and women are known to have harvested big game, this task is generally left to the men. The women are involved in the skinning of the harvested large game and in dividing the meat to be shared with their own as well as with other families.

Two field observations are described below, one in late summer and the other in mid-winter.

3.2.1. Late Summer Field Trip

Late summer in the Lower Liard area is August. In 1986, on my way to Fort Liard, I stopped to visit Nahanni Butte. This is a small community of around 83 people, consisting of four families. The Marcellais-Vital family invited my Dad and I to go with them to one of their bush camps for one week. It was a good time to survey the area for wildlife and 'go for berries'. Altogether, there were three nuclear families - Jonas and Elsie Marcellais (the mother and father) their two married daughters and two adopted children. Their two daughters were there with their spouses. One daughter (married to one son of the late John Vital) had her two children and the other daughter did not have

children. Three tents (including my Dad's and mine) and one cabin were used. The site was called 'Swan Point' a small camp about 40 km south from Nahanni Butte situation on the north shore of the Liard River

As soon as we arrived, everyone seem to know what to do - the men went for tent poles and wood, the adopted children stayed with their mother to packed belongings, collect spruce boughs for the tent flooring (I joined them after I set up my tent), the daughters and the one daughter's children set about separating toys from and arranging the beddings and clothing first then began preparing food. Once the fire was underway, the cooking began, then the eating followed by conversation and stories. The men ate first, the children and the women. After all the dishes were cleaned and packed away, the mother and father began talking over plans for the next few days.

During the next few days, Elsie (the mother) was always the main reference. Several trails emanated from this little camp. The mother determined on which trails the snares(for rabbit) were to be set. When we went for berries, the mother steered us toward the direction for blue berries - a huge muskeg area (muskeg areas are usually dry enough for easy walking in August) that had been burned by a forest fire several years previous and was now abundant with berries. The men spent most of the time among themselves, getting wood, cutting overgrown grass with a scythe or fishing and hunting along the river

One whole day was devoted to tanning a hide that Elsie (the mother) had prepared the week before at her home in Nahanni Butte and was waiting for the perfect tanning day - dry, sunshine and slight breeze. Weather in early August days are often like this. She had brought with her some old and rotten wood that would smolder when lit. Early on that day around 6:30 am, she and her husband went to collect the necessary poles to set up as two connecting tripods from which would be suspended a horizontal pole that

would have attached to it the hide which was sewn to look like an inverted pillowcase. The opening of the hide would enclose a small pail containing the old and rotten wood which would smoke and tan the hide. The pail was placed into a shallow dugout hole in the ground and surrounded by fresh willows. The mother sat beside the fire from the time the fire was lit, sewed, told stories to her children, drank tea and talked with me. She did not leave the hide unattended all day asking her grandchildren and adopted daughters to relieve her for short periods of time. This was to make sure the wood did not flare because that would singe the hide. Then around 5.00 pm she decided the hide was ready. After checking the depth of the tan to be certain, she removed it, undid the stitches, shook the hide and hung it up to air for about one hour. She then set about getting the size of my Dad's feet. She took the measurements, cut out the pieces and began sewing and by 7:30 pm, she handed my Dad his new pair of finished moccasins. (A photo document I prepared of this process was exhibited at the McGill Open House in October 1988 and with Elsie's approval, has been donated to the Prince of Wales Museum in Yellowknife, N.W.T.)

These observations were made. Three prevailing events were occurring often simultaneously. First, the adults were constantly doing things and talking with their children. Often this is the way Dene children learn about the Dene view of their surroundings and how to do things the Dene way. This process is repeated and can get as complicated as the individual is able and willing to allow. Secondly, the mother was the main protagonist. Her decisions prevailed for several events, such as in the tanning process and where to go for berries and the boundaries of the play area for the children. Her decisions were equally shared with her spouse, on such matters as where the snares should be set and the poles for the hide. In part, this is indicative of her knowledge of the surrounding environment. Thirdly, the respect accorded the men and children

demonstrated the self-discipline and self-confidence of the women. The mother demonstrated her teaching capabilities by not shouting at her children but by doing and giving while her children observed her behavior.

3.2.2. Field Trip to Winter Camp

This trip took place in December 1987. My transportation to this camp was in a Cessna 185 owned and operated by the Liard Dene Band. This winter camp is one of three belonging to Harry Fantasque (H.F.) in the Liard Plateau area of the southeastern Yukon Territory. This one is located on the bank of Larsen Creek. Neighboring this camp are two others within 50 km range to the north. Camps belonging to other people are to the west of H.F.'s camp. One is a Dene, Francis Nande (F.N.) from Fort Liard and the other are a couple of white trappers. All traplines are registered in the Yukon Territory and so H.F. and F.N. have registered lines here.

Two cabins and one storage shed and a cache are built here. At the time of this field trip, H.F., one single teenage daughter and one married daughter with her spouse and three children were living there for the winter. He shared his two-room cabin with his teenage daughter - they each had their own space identified. I was invited to share the daughter's space.

During the six days spent here, the weather was mild, hovering around -10 C. The snow was thick, packed hard in some places. The tall black spruces were covered with snow. Although the Creek was frozen, two holes were daily chiseled open for water and ice fishing. Fire wood was abundant. Rabbits and the occasional fish seem to be the staple diet. These were supplemented with store bought food such as oatmeal, rice, dried potatoes, dried fruit and some canned meat.

H.F. told me when he was a boy, his father died. He learned how to trap from his

relatives. They used to walk with dog pack from Fort Liard south of Fisherman's Lake over Pointed Mountain to Kotanelee River and along it in a northward direction, over the Mountain towards La Biche River (Jeh Deh), north along this river then west towards Brown Lake and direct from there to Fantasque Lake. It took them about one month. They hunted and fished along the way.

The first time he shot a moose was when he was a young boy. He had seen the moose two days before. It was the time he lived with his grandfather across from his cabin in Larsen Creek. When he saw the moose he told his uncles about it. They didn't believe him, so he showed them where the moose stood, then they believed him. Two days later he shot his first moose. He said he later use to come this way with another Dene trapper. When he married he came here with his family and has used the area ever since. He has a registered trapline now; so do two other Liard Dene men. He was going to include the headwaters of the Whitefish River because he used it but gave it up then

H.F. has been to many places on this side of the mountain range. He has been to Francis Lake and Watson Lake. He has shot many big game over his life time - grizzlies, black bears, mule deer, sheep, moose, woodland caribou and has caught many furbearers. He said the HBC used to buy rabbit from him, \$1 for the meat and \$1 for the hide. They also bought dried meat. As for the weather, he said, the weather all over here is variable. Often it is not windy here, just a slight cold wind from the south. It had snowed three times since October. The snow on the trees will likely stay until March, when it gets windy. The weather here is often different from Liard weather. This winter there is a fair population of rabbit but hardly any fish. On his trapline, a two-day trip because of the short days, up the hills there are many more rabbits and marten. Probably there is moose as well. He speculates that the white trappers further west may have fished out the river this season, he is not sure. Perhaps the (fishing) season should be cut

short. Now that he is staying closer to his camp he doesn't know how the area north of here is like. There may be quite a bit of game.

The fire is kept burning from 5 am until 10 pm. The most active hours of the day are between 7:30 am to 2 pm. Every morning H.F. and his daughter talked the days plans then turned on the short-wave radio for weather and news from Ft. Nelson, B.C.. As soon as there is a bit of daylight, around 8 am, every other day, H.F. starts off to visit his snares and traps and returns around 2 pm with squirrels and rabbit. Meanwhile, there are many chores that keeps us busy during those short six hours - wood to cut, chop and pile, meals to prepare and dishes and pans to clean, cabin to tidy up, fire to keep going, ice to chisel to open the water hole. While I was there, the young women had moose hides to clean but did not plan to do this until spring. The younger daughter maintained the tools such as the chain saw, the axes from going dull, and the skidoo. During the afternoon, we would go to the other daughter's cabin to listen to the trappers news over the mobile radio and play with the children.

My observation are the following. Very little verbal communication takes place between father and daughter except in the early morning hours and sometimes in the late evening. As soon as H.F. utter a few words of my possible needs or suggests a direction, his daughter utters them to me in English as though to confirm that I understand. Their low-key communication is pleasing, like when one goes hunting. The strategy is uttered in five words or less, a need, a strategy, action e.g. get wood, a meal, whether to check snare, fish hook. Not having a son around does not seem to hamper H.F. To visit his two-day trapline he employed his son-in-law. Before I arrived, his daughter went with him to set and visit the snares and traps along that way. She did all the heavy work like hauling wood, chopping and piling them. She maneuvered the skidoo over hills. She learned these skills from her father. She maintained a cheerful attitude and performed

her chores as though they were the most normal thing to do.

My own personal experiences originate from being part of the Dene culture yet I was an outsider, a visitor to this area. All the different types of facilities at H.F.'s camp are familiar to me. To re-adapt to such a rigorous life, several intellectual adjustments had to be made. Living in the bush demands a lot of the survivor. It is cold - if you can't adapt you will not survive. Adaptation involves a kind of willingness and positive attitude. Cold weather requires getting used to - whether working or relieving oneself - so that bodily requirements are met and bodily functions regulated. To intellectually survive, a great deal of improvisations are required. One cannot wish for the amenities of modern living. Eventually, a great deal of weeding of needs begins to take place and only the important tools and requirements are singled out. It appeared that the weeding had taken place and family was prepared to live there throughout the winter into spring.

3.3. Cultural and Environmental Knowledge

Like most of the Dene communities in the Northwest Territories the small community of Ft Liard is surrounded by boreal forest. It is virtually impossible not to appreciate the importance of the forest environment, the "Bush". For the Dene, living in the bush means all actions are guided by Dene customs. The ability to speak and understand the Dene language(s) facilitates comprehension of the meaning of customs. For example, the proper Dene perspective on kin relations or on hunting. Both examples are explained with references from Christian and Gardner (1975) and my discussions with elders, personal experiences and fieldnotes.

The Dene elders (male and female) are the most informed about Dene culture. They are the ones regarded as most able to explain Dene perspectives because they learned them over many years beginning in their early childhood. What they now know

was passed on to them from generations previous. The essence of the Dene perspective is a complex of cognitive reflexes in response to the self and to the environment. Emphasis is placed on being able to understand the language and experience life on the land. Although it may not be necessary to speak the language with entire fluency to live the Dene way the stress is on having the proper perspective. One of the primary Dene customs is that proper perspective and respect be accorded to other Dene, the environment and wildlife. This custom of having the proper perspective enables one to understand other Dene customs. So, performing tasks like hunting, fishing, carving a harvested moose, disposing of the viscera, sharing the meat and so on, requires the Dene perspective. The moose give up itself so that Dene can continue to live and therefore gratitude must be expressed by diligently carrying out customary practices of disposing of the viscera in a respectful way back to the earth and sharing the meat with others. This is an example of some aspects of a Dene hunting custom. And because the Dene way of life revolved around hunting, fishing and gathering customs evolved, therefrom.

Intellectually understanding the custom is often easier than finding the opportunity to put it into practice. For example success in large game hunts is increased by knowing not only a range of environmental factors, but also having the openness to the related custom of dreaming. Dene elders mention that to dream about a moose is a sign and guide to that food source (Brody 1981, 1987). Following that dream means retaining the details important in the dream to distinguish the symbolic from the reality. The reality is that there are real environmental elements to face, such as the weather, the months (by the cycle of the moon) and seasons. Therefore, 'people just don't go anywhere' (the late William Bethale, personal communication, Fort Liard, 1986). A first-time hunter/trapper usually goes with an experienced person, for general safety. The ability to listen and attempt to establish a relationship with animals is considered the first

proper perspective. The second perspective is understanding the signs in the environment, the weather, the terrain. The experienced hunter/trapper generally prefers to go in the bush alone. "The difference between the experienced hunter and the inexperienced hunter is, you can place the experienced hunter anywhere on the land and he will survive, the inexperienced hunter would prefer to be placed near a lake or river." (William Bethale, personal communication, Fort Liard, 1986)

The proper Dene perspective is a positive one because it makes the 'bush' the place to live. It is a good place to find food, find one's true capabilities, experience places and areas that our ancestors walked and lived on and withdraw from the noise of the community, in short, it is "home".

Two major considerations in deciding where and when to go are environment and weather. Knowing the environment means, knowing the terrain and distance of travel either by foot or dogteam or skidoo. The direction depends on the knowledge of terrain, vegetation and animals. Being able to predict the weather is definitely an asset. The elements are observed fastidiously - wind and precipitation. Most experienced hunter/trappers are able to predict what the weather would be like for three days just by looking at the cloud formation. They have observed the reoccurrence of five year cycles. For example, in October they can predict what the winter will be like, by observing the size and behavior of the rabbit (if skinny and fur stays dark longer in fall, it will be a mild winter; if fat, it will be a cold winter) and the beaver and how it collects its food (if it hauls in its food after the ice formation then it will be a cold winter). This kind of folk knowledge cannot be proven with certainty; one can only observe the final outcome, but many Dene hunter/trappers learn this from observing their environment (Dene oral tradition and personal communication with my father the late Alfred Nahanni and with many Fort Liard elders since 1975.)

Tracking is a skill that is learned. Years ago young children were taught this skill. Now this skill is learned as late as 14 to 24 years, (Christian 1977, personal communication with elders, Fort Liard 1987). Knowing how to dress is important - woollen pants and moccasins are best attire because they don't make noise. Knowing the wind direction is important. Observing the signs - willow, leaves eaten, tracks - fresh in mud, flies in tracks is 1 hour old.

In conveying this information to me, the wives of the hunters were always present. These women also know the proper Dene perspective because they also grew up practicing and participating in the preparing for the hunt, setting up camp and then in the sharing of the harvest. In the section following I will concentrate on the workplaces of Dene women that incorporates their knowledge of the traditional economy and adjustments in the modern economy.

4. DENE WOMEN IN WORKPLACES IN THEIR SOCIETY

4.1. Workplaces in Dene Society

Spatial and temporal patterns have changed in the Traditional Economy since the turn of the 20th century. At the time of contact and generally to the 1920's the Dene traveled widely in family groups, periodically visiting the trading posts. Since then their movements gradually decreased in scope and their annual visits became seasonal visits to the certain trading posts. By the 1940s most Dene families had settled in their homes in the present established communities throughout the year. From the settlements, they traveled seasonally and for most of the year, to hunt fish, gather and trap, in areas that became known as family territories. These changes have affected the lives of Dene women.

First, to the spatial perspective of traditional living in open territory was added, a focus on settlement or community living in close proximity with many other families. Second, the means of travel - from foot and dogteam to skidoo, to chartered airplane - have drastically reduced travel time. The reduction in travel time coupled with the ease in travel meant that transporting family possessions and children did not rest only on the women. Third, their possessions which they transported on the extensive travels were scant compared to what they accumulated since they settled. They could not travel extensively with the kinds of possessions they took with them on their seasonal trips to their fish and bush camps, possessions such as stoves, metal cookware, etc. Their travels were reduced to one or two bush camps in a year. From there they carried on their traditional pursuits.

In this section I will incorporate the foregoing into the following descriptions of the work of Dene women in three distinct workplaces: (a) the 'bush', (b) the "household", (c) "having a job" in the wage economy in the settlements (most of my ideas in sections

4.3 and 4.4 have been covered in Nahanni 1990:27-31, Crynkovich 1990:178-179).

Exemplary knowledge of all three workplaces is not common in contemporary Dene society, as the results of my interviews and questionnaire will show in 4.5. Most women will know more about one or two of these.

4.2. The 'Bush'

One of the first published documents on the lives of slavey-speaking elders was compiled by Margaret Thom of Fort Providence, N.W.T. and Ethel Townsend, a Dene teacher at the time (now a Member of Parliament for the Western Arctic in the House of Commons), in this community (1987). In this document elders spoke of their lives, work and "bush" workplace which are applicable to Dene women in Fort Liard.

I began to sew with quills even when I was quite small. When my mother was busy I was the one who cooked, visited the nets and made dryfish. In winter time I repaired the nets and hauled wood. By the time I was thirteen years old I really was a big help to my father. I worked harder than a boy. (Elder born 1927, in Thom & Townsend:1987:9)

I used to make quill armbands for my husband, hats made of duck wings and jackets of beaded moosehide. We lived in moosehide tents with a fire and a grill over it in the middle. We used a twirling sling for killing chickens...we only had one rifle. I used to love to travel all the way to Trout Lake. You can see just miles and miles of lake from. (Can you imagine anyone walking that far nowadays?) (Elder born 1897 by Burnt Island near the mouth of Great Slave Lake. p.39 in Ibid)

When my husband was on the trapline, I used to worry all the time about my children going hungry. D.L. and I worked constantly to make sure that would never happen. I used to set nets and shoot ducks. (Elder born 1911, p. 91, in Ibid)

Life is especially hard for the women. When the man is away the woman has to feed the children. No matter how cold it was I had to check the snares. Before I left the children, I had to tie a leather thong around the waist of one and tie the end to something stable, put another in the swing cradle, and leave the eldest to watch them all. That's how we used to live. No one taught me to work. I watched others and then I'd try. If I didn't sew something properly I'd undo it try again until I could do it. (Elder born 1926, pp. 22,23 in Ibid.)

In the time when Dene travelled in family groups, both women and men shared the task of caring for their children. From birth, children were cared for and carried on

the travels by their parents over a variety of terrain . Parents and grandparents observed carefully the behaviour of small children for the purposes of giving them a name and determining their character. At a very young age children were taught to share responsibilities - they were given small pails to help in getting water; they were given some wire to prepare rabbit snares; they were asked to carry wood; they were taught to make a camp fire. Around the age of six years, they would begin to accompany their parents on small game hunting. They learned to be quiet. Most by the age of ten years were familiar with land, rivers and wildlife. They began learning associations with place names, who generally travels in an area, what the land is like and what kinds of wildlife can be found there, and stories were told about those places.

In addition to performing small tasks, children began to learn social customs. Custom included learning how to perceive the situation or the matter at hand, how to respond and ask questions. By learning their custom they began to learn several categories of knowledge. Children were told who was a member of the extended family, an aunt, an uncle, cousins and so forth (Asch 1988, Helm 1960, Rushforth 1984, Sue 1965) and how to address some of them in a particular fashion. For example, extended family members would explain who was to be called 'eh mo' (aunt), 'eh tah' (uncle) or 'eh tsu or eh tsieh' (grandmother or grandfather) and so on. The history of the family background was included in conversation with emphasis on the importance of custom and language. Children were also told about different aspects of the physical and biological environment - how to recognize animal tracks, types of terrain, useful herbs were identified (Blondin 1990) different types of wood, how to recognize seasonal changes and the advantages and dangers that these changes bring - to enable them to provide for their families by hunting, fishing and trapping and then to prepare the harvest for domestic use.

The history of family background was often told and retold in stories. This included recounting places travelled, description of land and rivers crossed, the season, who they encountered, the wildlife found there, the beauty and dangers encountered. Parents taught their children how and why to address certain kinsfolk, thus establishing their position in the family. The perception of history was of wide open space, independence, and the ever presence of the spirits of relatives long ago gone.

4.2.1. Lifecycle of a Woman

As a young girl, the Dene woman was generally treated equally, although her character would determine whether she needed more or less attention. She played and made up games with her brothers. She also performed small tasks and watched her parents and extended family as they went about their daily chores.

Then the most important transition begins in the life of an Athapaskan woman when she has her first menses (between the ages of 9 and 14 years). Some ethnohistorians have said that the initiation of the Athapaskan girl into womanhood included being secluded from the male members of the extended family for up to a year (Cruikshank 1975; Honigmann 1946) and being required to wear certain types of clothing in a certain way and eating only certain kinds of food. Others have also said that such initiations have died away by the beginning of the 20th century in many places (Osgood 1936). The first hand information I have is that this practice was still going on in the 1950s among some Slavey families whose girls did not go to residential schools. The seclusion period was reduced to one month. Here is some of what was related to me (personal communication with Elsie Marcellais of Nahanni Butte in 1987, Martina Kochea, Genevieve Bethale, Pauline Sassie and Annette Mattou of Fort Liard 1987-90, Hancock 1990)

The female relatives of the young menstruating girl prepared a tent for her away from everyone. There she stayed alone for up to a month. If her mother had other children to look after, her aunt or grandmother was with her to guide her in learning how to 'work'. She learned the meaning of solitude and hardships. She learned the meaning of respect for herself (hygiene and modesty) and other members of the family, how to care for their property and clothing and not to talk to strangers. She learned how to make fire, the meaning of fire as one of the gifts of life. In the earlier days flint stones would have been used. She learned to prepare food and cook. She learned to prepare hide and tan hide and sew for her immediate family. She was inspired to become strong to be able to perform tasks that required physical strength, carrying and bearing and nurturing children, preparing hides, run a dogteam, hunt, and fish.

Sometimes the young girl found herself in a predicament where neither her mother or female relatives were able to teach her so she learned how to 'work' on her own or by watching, without the lessons she would experience during her menses initiation. In the time from the 20th century this was often the case. Family members were loss to the epidemics and diseases.

My mother was blind so she wasn't able to teach me any of the skills I needed to know so I had to learn on my own. I used to watch other people work, that's how I learned. (Elder born 1923, in Thom & Townsend, 1987:III).

When I was 15 years old, and I became a woman, my mother was very ill. I married an older man because he was a good provider. My mother-in-law who I called 'eh tsu' (grandmother) taught me everything I needed to know - how to prepare moosehides for tanning, how to make sinew for sewing, how to sew with porcupine quills, colored threads and beads and how to sew on birch barks, birch bark baskets. (personal communication with Martina Kochea in Fort Liard 1990.)

When my mother died my sister, brother and I went to mission school in Ft Providence. We stayed there for four years without going home. I came home not knowing anything about bush life. But by 14 years of age, and from one of the best Dene woman teachers, Elsie, I learned how to look after a house, cook, hunt, prepare and tan moose hide as well as make clothing and moccasins from the hide (personal communication with Annette Mattou in Fort Liard, 1990)

After her initiation, the Dene woman was prepared to contribute to the welfare of her immediate family in a structured way. Often her mother was very strict with her. This was part of growing up to control emotions. As she grew older she usually began to understand the need for this rigorous training.

"My mother was my teacher, I don't ever remember not listening to my mother." (personal communication with Pauline Sassie in Fort Liard 1990)

"Among our people in the old days, we had a saying that goes something like, 'if you don't listen to your mother you don't live long'." (personal communication with Martina Kochea in Fort Liard 1990.)

Marriages in the earlier times and into the 20th century were not ceremonious (except if the couple became Christians then there would be a church wedding) among the Slavey. Often marriages were arranged between families sometimes after a great deal of scrutiny by the parents. Ideal arrangements were when blood brothers of one family married blood sisters of another family (Asch 1988) to ensure alliances and ensure that there were men around to hunt and help with the physical work (Honigmann 1946).

Bearing children. Women have related to me their experiences of giving birth at their fish lakes. Some were not as difficult as others. One woman said twice when she was at 'Tha kke' (Sandy Lake) she was all by herself when giving birth. She used sinew to tie the umbilical cord. The placenta was wrapped and placed in a tree.

Rearing Children. Just as her parents taught her, the young mother begins her life as a parent to young children and the cycle continues. She looks to her parents for assistance in teaching her children, her brothers and sisters in disciplining her children and her grandparents in telling stories and teaching history.

Among boreal forest hunter/gatherers, it was vital as it was customary for children to listen to their parents and older kinfolk. Social customs were transferred to

children by example and explanation. For example, when a medicine person and a stranger visits, everyone including children are expected to restrict their movement until the person has left. This custom, is one that is still practised among many Fort Liard families.

4.2.2. Seasonal Activities

Her workplace was wherever the family was in the 'bush' These places were specifically chosen for resourcefulness - access to water, wildlife, fish, firewood, building material. Often however, the place they chose to camp were the regular fish camps (see fig. 3). As soon as the camp site is chosen everyone including the children help in collecting firewood and water. The children are told where to play, the fire is made for tea, the areas for sleeping and relieving oneself are established. Once the tea has been drunk, the women and children set out on trails to set snares for rabbits. The men put the fish nets in the water, women also do this. The grandparents, if they are able, will prepare meals and help keep the fire going.

Once everyone was fed and the cookware washed and put away in the evening, the stories begin. Women begin their sewing and repairing moccasins and tools. The men may be busy making canoes, repairing fishnets, preparing to go hunting for a few days (Hall 1986).

If a moose hunt is successful, there are food preparations and preservations to be done. The hide is set aside for later preparation until food preparations are done. Once that task is completed the women turn to the hide - a collective activity. This preparation of hides may take several days. All hides are stretched. Most Dene men help with building the stretchers. Working on a hide is an arduous task, from the removal of fat and fur to soaking and softening the hide before it is ready to tan. For tanning,

special rotting wood that would smoulder rather than flame is used. Sometime the husband will help his wife prepare the material for tanning and stay to help keep the firewood from flaming. Once the tanning begins, the woman cannot leave her hide. She has to stay with her hide which can take one whole day from seven in the morning to seven in the evening. If she is alone, she will depend on her children to help her cook and mind the slow smouldering fire that tans the hide. Elsie and Jonas Marcellais demonstrated this art of tanning while I was at their bush camp at Swan Point.

Fish camps In earlier times, fish was the staple. When there is a fish run, and families are at their fish camps, women are busy making dryfish. Experienced women will generally clean fourteen fish an hour, for drying. As much of the edible parts of the fish are used. The remainder are given to dogs or thrown back to the lake or river. In winter, fish is either cleaned and stocked or stocked and cleaned when ready to use.

4.2.3. The Mature Dene Women

As her children grow, the Dene women can spend more of her leisure time sewing and perfecting her embroidery skills, (Hancock 1990). (But, the older Fort Liard women emphasized, subsistence in the bush is not learned in school, it is learned by doing and participating in it and they urged the children to listen.)

By the time she is forty, the mature Dene women is preparing her daughters to becoming women. She will encourage her daughters and her daughters-in-law to sew. She also is there to teach other young persons, her craft (Hancock 1990).

As she becomes a grandmother she is accorded respect from her family and is expected to give advice and teach. She could not convey without having gone through and lived the life of a Dene Woman. She is the stable foundation of her family. This has been repeated to me on several occasions. The Yukon women have stated that as well

(Cruikshank 1990). Furthermore, the menses initiation sets the woman for her life ahead. She knows what is expected of her and accepts that stage of her life. Without this initiation, adolescence is extended and instability is pervasive (Cruikshank 1975).

Ideology of the bush environment included a sense of place and family, stability through knowing the customs, egalitarianism, cooperation, controlling one's use of the resources, and self-sufficiency. The overall benefits included the continued replenishment of resources, stability and predictability within the family, and knowledge (education) by knowing how to observe the physical and biological environment. In the context of the life in the bush, time was viewed as a valuable opportunity.

4.3. The 'Household' in the Settlement

The gradual move to the communities began in the 1940s. Many Dene say that the churches and compulsory education of their children accelerated this move, so that by the 1960s most families were settled in permanent homes. The 1940s marked the breakdown of the family and the anguish of many mothers and fathers. At first parents continued their seasonal rounds while their children were at residential schools. Parents and children reunited at the settlements in the summer months. They observed that their children were not learning how to work the way they and their parents had - from the family and the bush environment. Instead, children were learning different kinds of behavior and skills that opposed the continuation of their customs and languages. Their children were learning skills to prepare them for the industrial economy: boys to become heavy-equipment operators and girls to become nurses aides, cooks helpers, hairdressers and secretaries. Skills learned for the bush environment gained no recognition in formal education.

In the context of settlement life, tanning hides became archaic in light of the leather goods that could be purchased from the local stores. The dedication that women put into their art of making moccasins, parkas, and so on was overshadowed by the abundance and simplicity of clothing available in the local stores and mail order catalogues. Settlement life facilitated the accumulation of goods. Now the Dene could not easily pick up their belongings and travel. To remain in the settlements, the Dene had to work for money, money that would enable them to buy food and clothing at the local stores. When work could not be had, they could apply for welfare from the local government offices.

The move from the 'bush' way of life to the settlement way of life required some fundamental adjustment in thinking and behavior. But first it was necessary to recognize

that adjustments needed to take place. For the elderly and parents it was difficult to adjust. Since the 1940s they had witnessed the erosion of the family and their customs. Compulsory education in the residential schools did not include the learning of Dene languages and customs (personal communication with Annette Mattou 1990). And without the language, parents and grandparents could not easily transfer critical knowledge for the Dene way of life.

The next generation of Dene were learning in a school environment from a stiff desk. They learned a new meaning of time. Time became a concept of linear and compartmentalized segments divided into minutes and hours rather than the night and day and seasonal changes.

There was confusion over moral behavior. Rather than learning moral behavior from the family, Dene children were learning good and bad behavior from strangers. Thus it was generally instilled in their innocent minds that a good person went to church and a bad person did not. Memorizing and learning institutional rules was far more valuable than experiencing and learning the characteristics of the weather and season, they were told.

The Dene children were returned to their parents more confused than their parents. Grandmothers and mothers had to bear the anguish as they patiently watched their children struggle to adjust. In addition to the anxieties brought on by the loss of control of what their children learned, parents had to get on with providing for their families. To stay in the communities income had to be earned for food and clothing to be bought from the stores. Adjusting to this new situation began with the men finding seasonal jobs for wages while women stayed home to look after home and children.

Not only the ideology of household maintenance crept into the Dene society but also how women and men were to relate to each other. No longer were women and men

on a bilateral footing. Women depended on their husbands to earn the means of obtaining food and clothing. Earning money raised the prestige of men over women. The meaning of time and its importance to the wage economy overlapped the value of time as it was understood in the bush environment. Women's domestic work increased but was no longer considered important work.

Work in the 'bush' household is not the same as work in the community household. Household work became housework in the settlements. In the context of the 'bush', women and men could balance their responsibilities in the maintaining of the home with the practice of going out on the land to see what was going and learning from the land, bringing their children along with them. For women work in the bush was and is physically difficult but there were always other members of the family to help. There was a sense of order and predictability in the way people related to one another.

Housework in the community was comparatively difficult in that women often found themselves alone in the nuclear family setting. In most cases, they were provided with government built homes which were often not big enough for the large Dene families. So these large families were either crowded together or divided among houses which were not located within proximity of each other. Where is the prestige in living in the community for women? What benefits did they enjoy? There is no glory in being isolated and overburdened with housework which is not recognized as important work in the wage economy. And yet men are able to 'go to work' because their women support them by keeping their clothes clean and pressed and meals prepared. On the other hand, life in the community is easier for some women. But the price they have to pay is to give up if not to postpone the sense of ideology they learned in the bush environment and submit to the ideology of the wage economy and the 'cult of domesticity'. They have to become competitive consumers and share the prestige if and when the men are successful

wage earners.

Under these changing circumstances, the Dene women attempt to maintain some stability through positive attitude and live like a Dene. For many women this means taking the time to make traditional clothing such as moccasins, mukluks, mitts for their family. Most sew for enjoyment. Now even the awkward moccasin sewer sews because a few dollars could be earned from the final product. If their husbands are successful hunters and the women are in a position to prepare the hides as they always did in the bush environment, they will have the material to make traditional clothing to sell to the local arts and crafts outlet or to sell directly to the tourists. A wealthy and fortunate Dene family is one who owns a motor and boat or a car that will enable them to return to the 'bush' environment at any time.

Among other types of work that women do on a voluntary basis is to care for the elderly. Even voluntary work, is becoming a burden because of social pressures felt by women, such as those caused by alcohol and drug abuse. Social services in Fort Liard can attest to such social problems. This subject is extensive and beyond the scope of this thesis.

So far, I have attempted to describe the meaning of work in the context of the bush and the community environment. To my knowledge no attempt has ever been made to establish the value of women's work contribution in these two environments. What is attempted here is to provide some interpretation of the predicaments faced by Dene women as they experience the transition from the bush to the community and how they fare in the changing conditions of their socioeconomic circumstances.

4.4. 'Having a job' Outside the Home

Work for pay outside the home is a recent phenomenon brought about by the introduction of the industrial or wage economy. Women who worked outside the home generally worked for someone other than the family in exchange for money. In the past, Dene women worked outside the home to earn income to pay the bills, maintain their husband's credit at the Bay for tools, clothing and food, or to have extra cash for personal needs. Now, Dene women either work, are seeking work or finding ways to become self-employed and balancing these aspirations with family responsibilities.

In a small settlement such as Fort Liard, regular jobs are limited and most are seasonal in nature. The regular jobs include those available at local enterprises, such as casual labor at the 'Bay' (now called 'Northern'), support and cleaning staff in government offices, hotels, nursing stations and schools. The seasonal jobs originating in or close to the settlement include some tourism, certain kinds of public works, recreation, forestry and parks. When there are no jobs to be had in the communities, there are always the bush camps to which the Dene can turn. However, not all Dene have this option nor are they in the position to depend solely on the traditional economy.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, subsection 1.1.1., two recommendations were made to improve the northern economy:

- (a) develop the non-renewable resources sector, and
- (b) provide enhanced education and training for the northern native people.

Further down I wish to mention the measures taken by government and industry to employ women. Let me say at the outset that where it concerned women, government and industry were slow to respond in terms of policy and programs. The needs of women were not apparent to either government or industry prior to 1975, the International Year of Women. Government felt no public pressure until then, although it was urged earlier

to respond to the needs of women in general. In northern Canada, the Dene and Metis women did not formally organize until 1977-78 when they founded the Native Women's Association of the N.W.T. to voice their concerns.

In 1985, the Government of the N.W.T. in response to public pressure and the U.N. assessment of the achievement of the Decade of Women (1975/85) prepared a 5-year action plan on Equality of Women and, in addition, stated its policy on Equality Between Women and Men. It is an impressive plan of action on paper and we all hope these plans are carried out successfully (cf. Government of the N.W.T. 1987)

To determine what employment interests and goals women had in industry and what problems and obstacles they faced if they wanted this type of employment, Lynda Lange (1984) conducted a 3-year study into the employment of native women at the Norman Wells Oilfield Expansion and Pipeline Project. She interviewed women from the communities of Fort Norman, Fort Franklin, Fort Simpson and Wrigley. Four observations are significant in that they clarify the preferences of the women employed. 65% would like full-time jobs; 68% stated a definite preference for other than office work; good social environment at work is important; 65% did not consider it a problem to do a job considered 'men's work.'

A number of obstacles and problems were identified (Lange 1984: 123-128) of which I want to mention the following four:

- (1) The employment seemed to be closely related to the number of grades of schooling completed, whereas employment in the home community seemed to be related to the training courses taken. Existing jobs in the community that need filling will create whatever training is necessary to fill them. Training courses tend not to create jobs.
- (2) Application forms appear to be a major barrier: (3/4 said they were interested in the employment but few filled out application forms).

(3) Lack of child care was seen as serious impediment. Almost 1/2 who were interested in the jobs said they did not apply because they could not find child care services. Most prefer the care of relatives or friends in the community. Almost 1/2 who held these jobs were working mothers and the majority were single mothers.

(4) Many expressed strongly, that being native affected them more than being female. Prejudices with respect to race and gender prevailed. One quarter of those who answered said this affected them most. 'Male chauvinism' is an obstacle for native women in industry. This chauvinism was reflected in non-native employers rather than native members of their own communities

4.5. Results of Interviews and Questionnaire, 1990

In my attempt to assess the general knowledge of Fort Liard women of their 'role' in relation to their 'work' in the three workplaces and how these related to 'seclusion' or Dene puberty rites, I did the following. I interviewed four older women (over 55 years of age) who had first-hand knowledge of seclusion. With the help of three young Dene women (who did not participate in answering the questions), I developed a short questionnaire containing six questions to be directed at young women between the ages of 20 and 45 years (appendix 1). My interview with the four older women was conducted in Slavey (sometimes with some help to translate colloquial terms). I asked them to interpret from their perspective the concept 'work' and how they learned to 'work.' I asked them to describe their lives growing up and whether they were 'secluded' when they first experienced 'ala sagh li' and what information they knew about the customary practice of seclusion. The interviews are summarized below followed by the results of the questionnaire.

The views of the older women originate from their direct experience in the 'bush

workplace'. Although not all of them experienced the Dene puberty rites custom of 'seclusion' during their first mensus, they specified several related practices. First, from their mother or other female relatives they were told to follow strict guidelines on behavior. They were told to restrict their movements to a small area in the tent. There, they learned about keeping a family, and practicing personal hygiene, including the disposal of clothing after mensus. Information about childbearing and rearing were imparted. A taste of hardship during seclusion not only prepared them for their future but they also felt a new level of friendship with mother and grandmother and other female kin. The four women said they grew up knowing their kin and customs. Their responsibilities to lie primarily with their immediate and extended families. They lost control of their responsibilities of teaching their children when formal education was introduced.

A sample of twelve Dene women between the ages of 20 and 45 years (roughly, this is 1/3 sample of this age group) were asked six questions. The first two questions were personal (age and marital status) and whether they spoke and understood slavey. In the third, fourth and fifth questions they were asked to rank from most to least important (or 1, 2 or 3) which in their view constituted the work, caring and providing role of women. The final question was intended to determine whether and how much these women knew about puberty rites and seclusion of Dene women upon their first mensus.

Six had common-law husbands and six married in a Christian church. Ten were able to speak and understand Slavey and the remaining two understood slavey.

The third question asked the respondents to consider three workplaces, bush, household and job. Within the 36 units of choices (that is 12 possible answers for each of the 3 workplaces): of the 14 choices for the first rank, 8 chose job; of the 8 choices for the second rank, 4 chose household work; and, of the 8 choices for the third rank, 7 chose

bush work as the third rank. Six units were left blank.

The fourth question asked the respondents to rank three nurturing roles. Within 36 units of choices: of the 12 choices for the first rank, 9 chose learn and care for family; of the 7 choices for second rank, 3 chose care for children, and, of the 8 choices for third rank, 5 chose learn from and care for elderly.

The fifth question asked the respondents to rank 3 providing roles as part of their sharing in responsibilities within the family. Within 36 units of choices: of the 12 choices for the first rank, 7 chose provide for children; of the 9 choices for the second rank, 4 chose provide for family members; and of the 9 choices for the third rank, 4 chose provide for elders.

Finally the respondents were asked to answer with a yes or no, whether their mother or grandmother ever talked with them about seclusion or puberty rites. They had the option to comment on their answers. Six women said yes and six said no. Some who said 'no' added that the reason for their lack of knowledge was related to the passing away of the mother, negative attitudes in the family inhibited her, or simply did not know because it was never discussed in the family. Those who said 'yes' included in their responses, that their grandmother told them about puberty rites and how in the old days women were secluded with strict instructions on conduct. Apart from the experiences of being secluded, women were told to avoid hunters, eye contact with men and restriction of movement during monthly menstruations. One woman stated very clearly that her mother explained to her that this ritual had not only to do with the power of women during her mensus, but also about identity, independence and discipline

5. CONCLUSION: DENE WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY

The focus of this research has been on the role of Dene women in the traditional and modern economies, and on the factors that have had an impact on their social and economic status since the beginning of this century. Its aim has been to examine qualitatively two fundamental responsibilities of Dene women: nurturing (social reproduction) and providing (production).

In constructing a general context for this thesis, I made use of the theoretical framework of the formal and informal economies proposed by Ross and Usher (1986). Examination of the two economies by Asch (1979) and Usher (1982), who analysed them using the concept of the mode of production, were also consulted. Usher has specified that the mode of production concept involves not only the factor of production - land, labour, and capital - but also ideological systems and social organization. Both Asch and Usher have juxtaposed the two economies and have identified their links. These links appear in the commodity exchange, labour, and welfare sectors. Of particular interest are their analyses of the traditional mode of production. In determining the value of the traditional economy concept, Asch and Usher have applied quantitative measurements to calculate the annual fur harvest and, occasionally, to assess the replacement value of country food as compared with the store-bought variety. The distribution value of country food is difficult to quantify. Dene women participate in all aspects of their economy, especially in the distribution process, but little is known about their role.

An attempt was made to determine the role of Dene women in these contexts through an examination of what women consider their 'role' and their 'work.' This examination had to be conducted within three distinct contexts or workplaces: 'the bush,' the 'household,' and the 'job.' It is apparent that the 'bush' offers a contrasting view of work when compared with the other two. These contrasts are displayed in table 1.

Women, going from the 'bush' environment into the 'household or community' environment, experienced transformations in the orientation of their ideologies, and these were observed to be quite pronounced. The difference in the meanings of the terms 'nurturing' and 'providing' as they were used in Dene society has been used to explain the latter phenomenon.

5.1. "Nurturing" and "Providing"

In contemporary Dene society, 'nurturing' and 'providing' are fragmented concepts. The general results of the questionnaire reveal this. There appears to be a social re-ordering in process, a search for some kind of standard, a reluctance or inability to state what the standard really is.

Older Dene women who have had a traditional upbringing and extensive experiences in the bush workplace tend to have a more holistic picture of family. As mothers, they see themselves as being the source of family stability. Their role as mother was at one time reinforced by their role as teacher, but since the introduction of formal education and Christianity to Dene society this role has been diminished. Still, these women continue to instruct by example. In Fort Liard, elders are not difficult to find. In summer, they still prefer to live in tents that have spruce boughs for flooring, and they have outdoor wood stoves for cooking. The women will be found preparing moose hides for tanning. They will be happy to see you. They will give you some dried meat or bannock, and serve you some tea. Some inhabitants of Fort Liard view these elders as relics of the past who have no real authority over community matters, but many others do not share this opinion. This dichotomy still needs to be carefully examined.

Younger women tend to consider their 'work' to be in the 'household' and 'job' workplaces. In addition, it appears that for them, 'providing' is more important than

'nurturing'. Younger women have adopted the concept of 'work' from the community-living and wage-earning perspective. The fact that they have specified that it is more important to provide for their children can be explained in two ways. First, the elders who might otherwise require their support have transfer income that enables them to live relatively independently in the community. Second, the availability of separate accommodations for the nuclear family and their elders reduces family interaction to occasional visits. However, without lengthy consideration of several sociological factors (levels of education, for example) such conclusions can only be regarded as preliminary.

One of the possibilities I raised in the course of my research was that elder Dene women of Fort Liard had traditionally learned to work, and had thus known how to 'nurture' and 'provide' from childhood through to their time of 'seclusion.' Young women (most had small children) who participated in my research did not learn to work in the same way their mothers or grandmothers did, and consequently their conception of work differed greatly from that of their elders. Their conception of 'work' had to have been the result of their formal education or training courses. Without having examined the kinds of training courses that each may have taken, I cannot comment on the quality of their 'nurturing.' But I can propose that 'nurturing,' as the term is defined in this thesis, was probably not relevant. Hence, we see the fragmentation of the concept of 'nurturing' and 'providing' when they are understood from the Dene perspective.

5.2. Some Critical Issues for Dene Women

Dene women have begun to address several critical issues that deeply affect their daily lives, primarily social problems, economic imbalances, and language.

They have not, however, had much time to come to terms with these broad issues. Also, the vast range and complexity of the social problems they've had to overcome has

slowed their progress. The young women I spoke to in Fort Liard emphasized their concern about the dramatic increase in such problems in their community over the last twenty years. Among the many they discussed were their lack of control over the quality of television programs their children watch; family violence, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of jobs; the fact that the training programs available to them do not lead to secure jobs, and, general insecurity about the future.

Such preoccupations cause great anxiety. Calm is sought in exploring the bush, fishing on the river, berry picking, or by sewing or making traditional handicrafts (birchbark baskets decorated with porcupine quills, for example). Practical measures taken by women to maintain a sense of community include participation in local committees. Several of the women who participated in my research insisted that these committees consume too much of their time. But, without committees, and without the participation of these women, it would be difficult for the community to keep up with its own shifting and changing and to maintain its spirit.

In the North, at the territorial level, Dene women are represented by the Native Women's Association (NWA) of the N.W.T. (incorporated in 1978). One of the many functions of the association is to address the social problems that arise from the subordination of women by their own society. The association has also concentrated on implementing a number of practical programs involving foster care, home management, and pre-employment, among other things. With the help and encouragement of women from communities such as Fort Liard and of national women's groups, the NWA of the N.W.T. has articulated the social and economic problems experienced by Dene, Metis and Inuit women. Women at the local, territorial, and national levels have demonstrated that they need each other to sustain the pressures on government for better conditions for women. Some have used feminist approaches to address the underlying problems of

gender inequality in contemporary society, problems that aboriginal women share with women everywhere. This is becoming more evident as the Canadian constitutional debate continues.

The Dene do not have an equivalent of the Dead Sea Scrolls to use as historical reference. They have to rely on their oral tradition. It is therefore critical for the Dene to continue using their languages. Language is their main tool for the transmission of historical and cultural information. One goal for the younger Dene should be to acquire the ability to articulate questions in Dene that elders can understand and to which they can respond with the added assurance that their answers will be understood. It was related to me in Fort Liard and in other northern communities that it is not difficult to talk to elders, but it is difficult to understand their replies. Many speak in symbolic terms and 'old' Dene. Older women often alter their speech to make it colloquial. Some say that the elders would rather forget the painful past - a past that included starvation, epidemics, broken promises - but maybe they need to talk about it. And perhaps even more important is the fact that if the Dene lose the ability to speak fluently in their native languages and to comprehend them with equal ease vast quantities of invaluable cultural information will be lost to them forever.

5.3. The Future for Women Under Changing Conditions

Generations of Dene since the turn of the century have experienced very drastic social changes. Those born since the 1940s have had more experience with Christian beliefs and community living than their predecessors. Those born in the 1960s grew up in northern communities that were undergoing a new set of changes - those produced by the introduction of the industrial economy.

The transition from the traditional to the modern economy in northern

communities has not been total. The Dene have mixed elements of both. Several studies conducted by Department of Indian and Northern Affairs researchers in the 1960s document aspects of the transition. Yet little has been published that would enlighten us about the ways in which women have been able to adjust to these changes. Elder women recall, for example, the puberty rites through which they as young girls, became responsible adults. Some contend that since this custom was abandoned, adolescence has been unduly extended. There is a need to assess this assertion and to determine how widely it is supported among Dene women. The broad context for such a study would have to be the general range of problems that afflict the Dene family.

In this thesis I have attempted to address the transition mentioned above through the examination of the concept of 'work.' My research, of necessity, has been limited, I was able to focus on only a few aspects of the rich historical and contemporary lives of one group of Dene women. There is still much work to be done.

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Appendix 1.

Fort Liard, Dene Women - Questionnaire by Phoebe Nahanni
14 August 1991

1. Age

single ___ single/ children ___ married /children___

children

2. Understand slavey___ Spk/Und slavey___

3. What to you, is women's "work" ? explain if you wish.

- a. bush life
- b. household or home in settlement
- c. job or wage job

4. Rank in your view which is the primary role of Dene women

- a. care for children (teach)
- b. learn and care for family (also includes teaching)
- c. learn from and care for elderly

5. Rank in you view , the role of Dene women (sharing concept)

- a. provide for children
- b. provide for family members
- c. provide for elderly

6. Has your mother or grandmother ever talked to you about seclusion or
puberty rites?.

yes___ no___

a. If yes, what

b. If no, what do you think it is?