
From 'Great Lakes Metis' to 'Aboriginal People of Canada': The Changing Identity of Canadian Metis During the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Sabrina Peressini

Department of Community Dentistry

Faculty of Dentistry

University of Toronto

Abstract: Many interrelated factors affect the formation of Metis identity including cultural, historical, socio-economic, and political processes (Dunn n.d.). Giraud's work *Le Metis canadien: son role dans l'histoire des provinces de l'Ouest*, published in 1945, was the first comprehensive scholarly history of the Metis people of western Canada. Eurocentric sentiments influenced the early studies of Metis identity and often assessed Metis social evolution with reference to European societies (Miller 1985). This paper examines Metis identity from the eighteenth century, when the Great Lakes Metis were described as a "people in the process of becoming" (Peterson 1985), to more recently, as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples brings Aboriginal views into perspective, and emphasizes the importance of culture as a defining aspect of a community. The human processes associated with the formation and recognition of Metis identity are dynamic and unique to each community. The literature demonstrates that Metis identity has usually been defined and assigned by non-Metis people and agencies. Originally serving to identify French speaking, mixed descent individuals of the Red River Settlement, this term has evolved to define the descendants of Metis parents residing in very diverse communities throughout Canada today.

Accepted for Publication 1999

Introduction

The rather complex issue of conceptualizing Metis¹ identity may perhaps be best illustrated by mercury, which is fluid and elusive (Dunn n.d.). Many interrelated factors affect the formation of Metis identity including cultural, historical, socio-economic, and political processes. Both historically and contemporarily, Metis communities across Canada represent unique and diverse groupings of individuals. Yet, as "sensitive" researchers we are always looking for ways to label and comprehensively define Metis identity in terms that have significance to us as Euro-Canadians. However, the critical issues worth addressing are how should the term Metis be defined and used appropriately? Who should define

and use the term? Finally, should we be defining it in the first place (Dunn n.d.)? Researcher and Metis, Martin Dunn cautions us about seeking to define Metis identity. "If we make the mistake of replacing the human process of identification with the academic or legal process of definition, we run a serious risk of demeaning and diminishing the real significance of Metis reality in Canada" (Dunn n.d.:3). One may favour this contention, however, there is still merit in investigating the literature to recognize how and by whom Metis have been identified throughout written history, and to perhaps understand why their categorization was necessary. This paper intends to review how the Metis were identified during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as illustrated in the literature, by various historians, anthropologists and Metis authors. In addition, this paper will outline some of the many issues, questions and problems associated with describing Metis identity.

Giraud's work *Le Metis canadien: son role dans l'histoire des provinces de l'Ouest*, published in 1945, was the first comprehensive scholarly history of the Metis people of western Canada. While travelling across the western Prairie provinces of Canada during the 1930s, Giraud became aware of a large population of people descended from early contacts among whites and Natives during the fur-trade era (Giraud 1985). This mixed ancestry population lived in impoverished conditions and were alienated by the rest of English-speaking and French-speaking white society. Giraud's study began with "mainly on-the-spot observation among people" with the assistance of missionaries from different parishes in Manitoba and Alberta (Giraud 1985:xii). Subsequently, Giraud supplemented his observations with information from available written documents including daily journals recorded by missionaries in the west, correspondence of various prominent bishops of the time, Hudson's Bay Company documentation in London, and colonial archives and manuscripts. His work did not address the issues surrounding the origins of Metis communities. Rather, it focused on the classification and description of "observable" Metis communities from a Eurocentric perspective.

Eurocentric sentiments influenced the early studies of Metis identity, and often assessed Metis social evolution with reference to European societies (Miller 1985). Most of the earlier literature written on Metis history focused on their involvement in the competition between the Northwest and Hudson's Bay Companies (Miller 1985). The notion that the Metis' sense of nationalism was a direct result of the Northwesters influence was often demonstrated in these early bodies of literature (Miller 1985).

Thus, broadening his appeal, Cameron laid the first foundations of Metis nationalism: he brought to the people of mixed blood the consciousness that by virtue of their birth they had rights of their own, which they owed it to themselves to assert and to defend against the threats posed by an alien race... At least, by arousing among the Metis aspirations hitherto unknown to them, the North Westers provided the group with an element of cohesion which partly made up for the lack of a clearly defined culture which the group owed to the duality of its origins (Giraud 1986:408-409).

This view of Metis nationalism suggested that these individuals of mixed ancestry were not capable of establishing an identity for themselves, without the aid of white society.

The perception that the Metis nation developed as a direct product of white society, in particular the economic conflicts between the Hudson's Bay and Northwest Companies, placing a special emphasis on the Battle of Seven Oaks, has even been entrenched in more contemporary works (Sealey and Lussier 1975; Burley *et al.* 1992). Metis were often portrayed as the passive and "uncivilized" agents whose very fate lay in the hands of the superior and more advanced white society.

Such weakness naturally plays into the hands of the whites. They know it is easy to dupe the uneducated Metis, and to gain their political support by the kind of gestures of sympathy to which they are particularly sensitive, or by the prospect of material advantages which usually do not go beyond the stage of promise, or by distributions of alcohol (Giraud 1986:505).

It was not until social and community centered studies that the Metis were perceived as an independent group worth understanding (Miller 1985; Brown 1980; Peterson 1978, 1985; Foster 1985).

More recent studies suggested Metis self identity as a distinct people emerged as a result of their cultural and economic roles as "go-betweens" for the Northwest and Hudson's Bay Companies (Redbird 1980; Daniels 1979). Their identity was an intrinsic expression of their own reality, as a result of their own social development, and not an outcome of the political conflicts of white civilization. The processes involved in human relationships were responsible for the emergence of Metis identity not political agents (Redbird 1980).

Metis Identity in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Missionaries and French officials in New France promoted the assimilation of mixed Indian and white descendents into French society to expand the French population in the New World during the seventeenth century (Dickason 1985). As the population grew, more able-bodied persons were available to work in the ever-expanding fur-trade out of the Northeast (Dickason 1985; Ray 1996). However, during the early eighteenth century the political usefulness of one nation in the Old Northwest was being questioned by the French (Dickason 1985). As a result, the mixed blood descendents of the Old Northwest were not encouraged to identify as either French or Indian during this time period.

The Great Lakes Metis² were identified as being ethnically and culturally unique from surrounding white and Indian communities by Englishmen and Americans travelling through the area during the early nineteenth century (Peterson 1985).

Whereas, during the eighteenth century mixed blood descendents were labeled as Indian, French or Canadien by white fur traders (Peterson 1985). The hallmark of Metis development in this region was the establishment of geographically distinct permanent villages (Ens 1996). These mixed blood descendents of Montreal *coureurs de bois*³ and Indian or Metis women, formed communities dependent on the fur-trade and displayed few class distinctions (Peterson 1985). Unlike their antecedents, the *coureurs de bois*, who were ultimately assimilated into Indian society during the seventeenth century, the Metis population flourished. By the early nineteenth century these Metis descendents had developed a network of trading villages and corporate towns following along the shorelines of rivers and lakes that was suggestive of earlier French settlements along the St. Lawrence (Peterson 1978, 1985). In 1816, the Michilimakinac registers indicated that approximately 87 per cent of the households were people of mixed blood descent (Peterson 1978).

An intricate network of marital and fur-trade alliances characterized the Great Lakes communities and suggested a larger regional Metis identity had developed, replacing locally defined identities (Peterson 1978). The ethnic identity of the Metis was based on a strong reliance on the fur-trade, a lack of agricultural development, local subsistence practices providing necessary clothing and tools, and the lack of established individual land rights. Native and white cultural traditions were adapted and amalgamated into the clothing, food, medical practices, language, beliefs, and customs of all communities. They were a people in between two identities who considered themselves distinct (Peterson 1978). However, a separate sense of ethnic identity was not completely embodied in the Old Northwest. Rather, this ethnic consciousness crystallized in the Far Northwest due to the slowed development of white settlement, the relative isolation of the Metis, and the continued importance of the fur-trade (Dickason 1985). The Great Lakes Metis during the eighteenth century have been described as a "people in the process of becoming" (Peterson 1985). A fully unified sense of ethnic consciousness did not develop among the Metis until the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries (Dickason 1985; Brown 1985; Foster 1985; Sawchuk 1978; Frideres 1993).

During the nineteenth century, many descendents with mixed ancestry, born of the unions between Northwest Company freemen and their Native or Metis wives, were assimilated into either Indian or white society. These freemen were Euro-Canadians, usually of French descent, who once held low-ranked positions in the Montreal trade and were traveling west into the interior of Canada. They were purveyors of supplies and furs to trading posts and had close kinship ties with Indian bands and Metis (Ens 1996; Brown 1985; Foster 1985). A significant portion of male mixed descendents, however, found their niche in Indian Country among the French Northwest freemen and their Native or Metis wives. These descendents had limited exposure to eastern Canada (Brown 1985). Many of these Metis men were "homegrown" fur-trade voyageurs who identified themselves as freemen. These freemen and other Metis middlemen monopolized the intermediate employment hierarchy in the fur trading system through various

positions such as guides, interpreters, brokers, and ferry tenders (Peterson 1978). These sons were caught between two culturally diverse worlds; one of their paternal white society, the other their maternal Aboriginal community. However, the majority of daughters arising from the unions between French freemen and Native or Metis women remained in the Indian Country, increasing the number of mixed descent women around trading posts (Brown 1985). The genesis of Metis identity in the mid nineteenth century arose from this distinct group of male individuals (Brown 1985). French speaking Metis continued to reside and trade in the Upper Great Lakes area during the early to mid nineteenth century until incoming white settlement resulted in the decision by many to migrate north and west to Red River (Peterson 1978). White settlement was a motivating emigration factor because fur-bearing animals in the region were being depleted. As a result, hunting and trading economies began declining in the area. Therefore, Metis choosing to pursue the fur-trade over agricultural practices had to move further west (Ens 1996). The Northwest Company descendents with mixed ancestry residing at the Red River Settlement were identified as Metis in the nineteenth century and had already identified themselves as separate peoples entitled to the privileges of both their Native and white ancestry.

Another identifiable group of Metis descendents emerged during the late eighteenth century as a product of the unions between Hudson's Bay Company officers and Native women. Shortly after the 1770s, company records and letters display an increase in the recording of Native women as spouses and the presence of descendents with mixed ancestry (Brown 1980). Prior to this time, only fifteen examples of company officers having acquired Native women as spouses are recorded (Brown 1980). Similarly, very little documentary information exists regarding descendents with mixed ancestry prior to 1750. The suggestion has been made that these children were most likely assimilated into Indian society (Brown 1980). Beginning shortly after the mid eighteenth century, interest in their children was increasing among Hudson's Bay Company fathers, and descendents with mixed ancestry were given more guidance (Brown 1980). Consequently, these mixed descendants assumed different identities during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Brown 1985). Hudson's Bay Company fathers were actively determining and maintaining their descendant's identity as either that of English or Indian. Therefore, some were assimilated in white society, while others were absorbed into surrounding homeguard bands and were labeled as Indians by traders (Brown 1985).

However, during the 1780s and 1790s, descendents with mixed ancestry were no longer being paternally persuaded to make a choice between these two options with regards to their own identity. The result was the emergence of a distinct identity. Male descendents with mixed white and Indian ancestry were not specified as Metis or mixed bloods, but referred to as "Natives of the Hudson's Bay" (Brown 1980, 1985). Foster (1985) contends that few Hudson's Bay Company officers gave rise to "Hudson's Bay English," with the majority being identified as Indians. Nevertheless, the descendents with mixed ancestry who chose a distinct identity. They had developed fur-trade skills and were given low

ranking employment opportunities around trading posts with the company, but they were never encouraged to seek upwardly mobile positions (Brown 1980). Although anglicized, these men were not seen as possessing the status equal to that of Englishmen (Brown 1980). Brown (1980) illustrates one of several examples of the distinct and intermediate relationship experienced by descendants with mixed ancestry within Hudson's Bay Company communities. John Richards, a fur-trade son, appeared in the servants' records as a Hudson's Bay Native. While not being considered an Indian, he was not English enough to advance in the company. He was led away from a traditional Indian life through low level employment with the company and was never allowed to progress upwards through the company's hierarchy of authority. This intermediary position between white and Indian societies serves to identify these Metis (Peterson 1978).

Hudson's Bay Natives emerged as a separate social group. However, they lacked ethnic and political consciousness during the early nineteenth century. Communities of adult males from both the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes system and the Hudson's Bay Company coastal factories shared experiences regarding the hierarchical nature of the company (Foster 1985). The adaptive experiences shared among these adult males through their associations and relationships contributed greatly to the emergence and development of Metis identity (Foster 1985). The essence of Metis origins lay in the "company of men" (Foster 1985).

Equally as important to the formation of Metis identity were the shared experiences among adult women communities who maintained close ties with their ancestral bands. This continued involvement is reflected in the preservation of some traditional ways observed in Metis communities (Foster 1985). In many Great Lakes Metis communities, both Cree and Ojibwa languages were spoken (Foster 1985). The Red River Metis manufactured shot pouches adorned with geometric designs in loomed quillwork, a method inherited from their northern Cree ancestors (Brasser 1985). Many Metis communities in western Canada produced moccasins, leather garments, and pemmican using techniques inherited from their Indian mothers (Van Kirk 1980). However, the experiences shared by Metis descendants raised in fur-trade communities differed from the influences affecting descendants with mixed ancestry raised in Native communities. In Native communities, women would have had complete control over raising their children. In fur-trade communities, European fathers would have had some authority over child rearing practices (Van Kirk 1980). Therefore, many Metis descendants were influenced by both traditional ways as inherited from their mothers, but also by the social structure of white society as inherited from their fathers. The partnership between a Euro-Canadian male and his Native wife contributed to the success of the fur-trade during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and their shared experiences were instrumental in the development of Metis ethnicity (Foster 1985).

Once the Metis moved out of the Upper Great Lakes region, many settled in the Red River Settlement. It was in this region, through specific political and economic conditions, that identifiable Metis communities crystallized (Ens 1996;

Spry 1985). Metis identity was associated with the economic and social niches they established for themselves within the fur-trade (Ens 1996). Many found an economic niche in the fur-trade as buffalo hide traders where few opportunities existed for them outside of the Red River Settlement.

Three European cultural antecedents were identified in the Red River Settlement; the English employees of the Hudson's Bay Company, the Scottish men employed by the Northwest Company, and the French from the St. Lawrence River fur-trade (Ens 1996). Some of the mixed blood descendents of the Hudson Bay Company residing at Red River Settlement identified themselves as "Country-born Half Breeds" distinguishing themselves from Metis descendents of the Northwest trading system (Ens 1996). However, the Metis were a heterogeneous group whose ethnic identity could not easily be discerned (Sawchuk 1985). Many labels identify the Metis of this area. The Protestant English speaking Metis communities, also known as Red River mixed bloods, halfbreeds or English Metis, and the Roman Catholic French speaking Metis communities were defined as separate entities (Ens 1996), yet several others of mixed ancestry were also identified as Scots "halfbreeds" and "Rupert's landers" (Sawchuk 1985).

Regardless of terminology, in general, Metis identity at Red River Settlement was principally an ethnic identity based on an occupational specialization within the fur-trade (Ens 1996). The emergence of a discrete identity was a consequence of the monopolization of middle status employment opportunities by fur traders and their Native families (Ens 1996). Lifeways for both Catholic French Metis families and Protestant English Metis families incorporated employment in the fur-trade with varying levels of involvement in subsistence agriculture, annual buffalo hunts, and the pemmican trade (Douaud 1984; Ens 1996). Metis social life was centered around the parish, which also served to provide a community with its identity (Ens 1996). Identity was in part influenced by parish affiliation. Most English Metis were affiliated with the Protestant church and they were actively encouraged to assimilate into the surrounding white society. The Roman Catholic church encouraged most French speaking Metis to maintain their cultural distinctiveness (Douaud 1984).

Throughout the course of Metis history, changing social and political circumstances have led to transitions in Metis identity. The name used to designate French speaking descendents of mixed blood descent of the Red River Settlement and surrounding locations during the early nineteenth century acquired new constructs as social and political events evolved. Pre- and post-Confederation eras were marked with newly developing governmental policies. The first *Indian Act*, in 1876, excluded Metis individuals from Aboriginal rights. Metis communities were redefined through policies drafted by the government and the lands they occupied were slowly being exploited by white society.

According to government policy, a Metis was regarded as any person with mixed Indian and white ancestry without the recognition of legal Indian status (Sawchuk 1978). In defense of their Indian ancestral rights, two insurrections were organized; the Red River Resistance of 1869-70 and the Riel Rebellion of 1885.

At this time, Metis identified themselves as the 'new nation' (Sawchuk 1978; Ens 1996). As their identity emerged as a unified people, in the face of external governmental pressures, their identity also was evolving to include yet another externally imposed identity as "non-people" by the federal government. Following the rebellion of 1885, Sir John A. McDonald, in effect, denied the existence of the culturally distinct group when he stated that "half-breeds either must consider themselves Indian or if they are half-breeds they are whites" (Sealey 1980:15).

The insurrection led by Louis Riel Jr., in 1885, was not an event defining a separate Metis culture, but rather the pinnacle of two centuries of ethnic evolution emerging out of communities from the St. Lawrence, the Upper Great Lakes, and the Red River Settlement (Peterson 1978). The members of this new nation regarded themselves as a closely established community of peoples who were distinct from the surrounding society, and they effectively demonstrated their sense of pride associated with their unique identity. Culturally spirited and economically viable, the Metis of the new nation were independent from, yet interdependent with, the surrounding white society (Daniels 1979). Buffalo hunts organized by Red River Metis and the economic monopoly held by the Hudson's Bay Company at that time have been suggested as the source of feelings of nationalism or identity among Red River Metis (Sawchuk 1978). Metis were largely responsible for the expansion of the fur-trade across the Canadian frontier. They were voyageurs who often engaged in conflicts and signed treaties with Lakota, Dakota and Nakota, and attracted various Indians into trading networks. Their distinctive roles as commercial harvesters of pemmican and as freighters rendered an independent and free lifestyle from which emerged a sense of free nationhood (Daniels 1979). Daniels's definition of Metis identity is motivated by his own political agenda and may tend to generalize diverse groups of people as Metis.

Metis individuals claimed entitlement to the land they were residing and hunting on through their Indian ancestry. However, harassment and hostility by immigrating white settlers coupled with poor farming years during the early 1870s left many Metis with few options. Many chose to sell their land for a pittance and emigrated out of the Red River Settlement during the 1870s, dispersing regionally throughout the west (Ens 1996). It has been suggested that emigration out of the Red River Settlement was related to class rather than ethnicity (St-Onge 1985 as cited in Ens 1996). Poorer buffalo hunters and those involved at the production end of the buffalo-robe trade possessed less land and were generally the first to emigrate out of the settlement. In contrast, richer traders and farmers could afford to stay and maintain their river lot farms. This change in settlement notably influenced the devastating impact observed in years following 1885 in the living conditions and sense of identity for many Metis. Lack of employment opportunities, the government's refusal to recognize and financially assist this group of "non-people," and, perhaps most significantly, the loss of control over the 1.4 million acres promised to many in the Manitoba Act, forced many into lives of extreme poverty with feelings of ostracism from the rest

of society (Ens 1996; Sawchuk 1978). Others chose to assimilate with white communities and adopted the respective identity (Ens 1996). For many, an identity created from voyageurs who once forged the destinations of their own lives shifted to one associated with impoverishment, and was burdened by governmental constraints and definitions of who was considered an Indian by the first *Indian Act* in 1867. Numerous individuals began to reside on the peripheries of white communities, rejected from mainstream society and the government. This desolate circumstance persisted throughout the early and mid twentieth century (Douaud 1984). Only the Metis residing in geographically isolated rural communities prior to 1885 managed to escape much of the political and economic upheavals. They maintained an economy based on hunting, trapping and fishing, and established small scale agricultural practices. These communities were offered protection by the Roman Catholic Church (Douaud 1984). Metis identity demonstrating a lifestyle of independence with the expression of their distinctive culture, customs and traditions was best preserved in these communities.

Metis identity for those residing in Ontario was also being threatened. Many were discouraged from identifying themselves because of evolving government policies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ontario was found by the Privy Council to own surrendered Indian lands, and was requested to pay the treaty annuities to all Indians associated with these lands. In addition, they were to re-pay the Dominion for any of their expenses accumulated since 1867 as a result of Treaty Three and Robinson Treaties. Edward Barnes Borron, an Ontario and, later, a federal civil servant, investigated this matter and consequently excluded several Metis from annuity lists from both treaties (McNab 1985). He argued that the Government of the Province of Canada had made an error when it included Metis as beneficiaries in these treaties. This action established a precedent for the exclusion of Metis from Aboriginal rights in Ontario.

The scholarship of Brown (1980, 1985) and Peterson (1978, 1985) emphasizes the social aspects of fur-trade communities through family level studies. Van Kirk (1980) examined the important role of women in the fur-trade. These studies derived information from the careful examination of historical documents, with an appreciation of the social and cultural contexts conveyed by the white fur-trader authors. Ens's *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century* reviews the socio-economic changes experienced by the Red River Metis as their subsistence economy of the 1830s changed to market capitalism beginning in the 1840s and led to the development of social classes in the 1850s. This social history study analyzes changes expressed at the family level. Ens's study contradicts the Eurocentric perspective as previously illustrated in the early literature by Giraud and Stanley. He suggests that the Metis were not unwilling victims in the path of capitalism, but rather they were active agents in their history and development.

A Eurocentric approach to Metis history is demonstrated by Sealey (1980), Burley, Horsfall and Brandon (1992), and Douaud (1984). Sealey's perspective on the interactions among Indians, Metis and whites is essentially a variant of

Stanley's 'frontier thesis,' where Metis are portrayed as passive victims to an advancing white society. He suggests that Metis ethnic identity is primarily focused on Louis Riel, the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, and the Riel Rebellion of 1885. Burley, Horsfall and Brandon (1992) also suggest Metis identity is a product of white society, in particular, the Northwest company. This archaeological study of four historical Metis communities in southern Saskatchewan emphasizes an egalitarian structure for Metis society. This contention is based on excavations of each site, which demonstrate a lack of individually organized lots. Douaud (1984) reflects a Eurocentric approach to Metis history. Douaud also suggests white society was instrumental in shaping Metis identity. In particular, he argues that the Protestant and the Roman Catholic churches were responsible for determining the extent to which a Metis community maintained its identity. Douaud (1984:11) refers to life at Assiniboia as a "little-civilized." The contention that the Metis had difficulties in understanding their own prosperity on the frontier and, therefore, they were "doomed" when fur-trade opportunities declined, is reminiscent of earlier Eurocentric literature.

Identity in the Twentieth Century

The regional and economic disparity prevalent among many Metis, following their emigration out of Red River during the 1870s, led to the reformulation of an ethnic identity for many Canadian Metis during the mid 1960s. Their relative position of political powerlessness, impoverishment, lack of economic integration within Canadian society, and their will to improve their socioeconomic position were key elements leading to their ethnic reformulation (Sawchuk 1978). The Manitoba Metis Federation was instrumental in initiating social change, and served to enhance Metis' attitudes regarding their own identity. Overcoming the situation of poverty and political domination through new employment opportunities, and preserving ethnic identity were significant agendas for the politically oriented organization (Sawchuk 1978; Frideres 1993). The reformulation of Metis ethnic identity was a political and economic approach used by the Manitoba Metis Federation to obtain financial aid from the federal government for Metis communities (Sawchuk 1978).

Some identifying characteristics unifying the Metis during the 1970s were poverty, lack of governmental recognition and privileges, and lack of education and employment opportunities (Sawchuk 1978). The advocacy of a distinctive identity, as many had aspired to during the mid nineteenth century, was no longer a feasible assertion. Accordingly, placing emphasis on political autonomy from authority, as demonstrated during the nineteenth century, was not a reasonable and beneficial position to maintain during the 1960s and 1970s. Historically, independence from the Hudson's Bay Company and the Council of Assiniboia was advantageous to the economic position of Metis in the fur-trade. However, during the mid twentieth century Metis organizations needed to facilitate socioeconomic change through negotiations with the federal and provincial

governments (Sawchuk 1978). Hence, Metis identity was being influenced and modified by social and political forces in an effort to seek a favourable outcome for its members. With the new pressures associated with expanded white settlements, restricted land use, and no financial assistance, it was impossible to maintain the objective of complete independence from the government.

Since the enactment of the *Indian Act* in 1876, Metis identity has evolved to include an administrative aspect. Distinctive economic and cultural markers including various independent fur-trade roles, seasonally organized buffalo hunts, the development of the Michif language, the traditional Metis sash, clothing adorned with distinctive Metis floral design bead work, fiddle music and dance no longer adequately served as defining characteristics of Metis identity (Brasser 1985). Even though their identity emerged from, and is based on, social relationships shaping the expression of their Aboriginal culture, they were subjected to externally imposed labeling according to their cultural antecedents and geographic location throughout history. The designation of Metis into categories has continued. However, these newer labels contain a legal component. Some of the legal markers identifying Metis prior to the *Constitution Act* in 1982 include any person with mixed Indian and white ancestry with no legal status (non-registered Indians), non-status Indians, non-treaty Indians, unregistered people with any amount of Indian ancestry residing on a reserve, any person of mixed Indian and non-Indian ancestry who identifies as a Metis, and any person with mixed Indian and non-Indian ancestry. The last definition was to accommodate descendants of Indian or mixed ancestry persons and a non-white person. They were not recognized as Aboriginal peoples by the federal government and, therefore, were not entitled to Aboriginal rights.

How did Metis identify themselves during this transition prior to the *Constitution Act* in 1982? The Native Council of Canada, founded in the early 1960s, became the voice for Metis and non-status Indians not recognized under the *Indian Act*. The aim of the Native Council of Canada was to ensure “full Native,” meaning mixed and full blood individuals, participation in the life of modern Canadian society (Douaud 1984). A passage from the Native Council of Canada Declaration of Rights outlines how Metis identified themselves during this time.

We the Metis and non-status Indians, descendants of the “original people” of this country, declare: That Metis nationalism is Canadian nationalism. We embody the true spirit of Canada and we are the source of Canadian identity (Daniels 1979:5).

According to this definition, Metis are the only true indigenous people in Canada, and were instrumental in the development of its frontier and identity through their various roles as voyageurs, guides, interpreters and settlement builders during the western fur-trade expansion. They readily identified themselves with non-status Indians who also were not being treated fairly by the federal government. Metis people wanted to be considered as one culturally distinctive community irrespective of their diversities in expression of Aboriginal culture

(Douaud 1984). This statement is not supported by any evidence, and likely represents the author's Eurocentric sentiments towards Metis identity. Again, Daniels's definition of Metis identity is motivated by a political agenda. Prior to the *Constitution Act* in 1982, Daniels identified Metis and non-status Indians as a large group representing the "original people" of Canada. This strong alliance between Metis and non-status Indians serves to provide this group with more power when demanding changes to government policies.

The classification of Aboriginal peoples into various legally defined identities by the federal government has not served the best interests of Natives. Their true essence of identity and community has been greatly diminished. An identity based on land entitlement, customs, traditions and a vibrant culture has been eroded, and has been replaced by an identity surrounded with confusing classifications, artificial segregations, and rigid constraints which were externally dictated by people not willing to fully understand Aboriginal lifeways. Many Metis felt that inequitable treatment by the federal and respective provincial governments was what essentially distinguished them from Indian and Euro-Canadian societies. This imposed identity became partially accepted and institutionalized, and was often heartily defended by many Native people for whom the definitions tended to accept, such as Indians as defined in the first *Indian Act* in 1867 (Sawchuk 1985).

The *Constitution Act* in 1982 included Metis among the "Aboriginal peoples of Canada." Non-status Indians were not specifically mentioned in the *Act*, however, this does not imply that non-status Indians are definitionally excluded from the *Act* (Sawchuk 1985). The qualifications distinguishing non-status Indians from Metis are not easily discerned, and it may be suggested that they be included under the term Metis. Many non-status Indians may clearly resemble Metis in their expressed behaviour, yet the government fails to recognize their culture, consequently excluding them from its legal responsibilities. However, with Bill C-31, an amendment to the *Indian Act*, many non-status Indians have regained governmentally recognized Indian status. The government's methodology of establishing criteria for group membership does not effectively define identity; rather, it only serves to undermine the significance of Metis peoples. Contemporary issues reveal that, with the initiation of government legislation, Metis ethnicity has become focused on external social and political processes identifying a community of individuals rather than characterizing people through the use of cultural markers.

Most recently, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) has discussed Metis ethnicity. This hallmark analysis brings Aboriginal views into perspective, and emphasizes the importance of culture as a defining aspect of a community. Mixed Aboriginal ancestry is only one aspect of Metis identity, and cultural factors expressed as a consequence of social dynamics are most relevant. Individuals may consider themselves as Metis because they identify with Metis culture, and when Metis people accept someone as a member it is because that person is considered to share in their culture. Therefore, it is fundamentally a

distinctive culture that distinguishes the Metis from other Aboriginal people. This culture may be considered to be more than a mere blending of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. Metis culture emerged from social dynamics of early Metis communities who served in the fur-trade, participated in seasonal buffalo hunts, developed their own cultural traditions including a distinctive language, unique style of dress and music (RCAP 1996). This is not to suggest that all Metis communities will share all of these shaping circumstances or traits. For example, Metis communities emerged along the southeastern coasts of Labrador, where individuals did not participate in seasonal buffalo hunts (Kennedy 1995, 1996). This identity has undergone many transitions since its genesis, and has been recreated over time to suit the needs of many external parties, from white fur traders during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the federal and various provincial governments during the twentieth century. As societal changes occurred, Metis people were invariably reevaluating their position within the dominant society and were maintaining efforts to preserve their Aboriginal culture based on traditional land-based activities. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples made the recommendation that a person may be considered Metis if they identify themselves as a Metis, and are accepted by the particular Metis nation with which that person wishes to be associated. The recognition and importance of many culturally distinctive Metis communities existing across Canada is stated.

If one accepts the Native viewpoint, the emphasis of Metis identity should indeed be based on culture. However, ambiguous legalities continue to plague many communities. Descendents of the western fur-trade communities identify themselves as the Metis nation, whereas Metis communities residing beyond the Metis nation homeland identify themselves as Metis and have been designated as the 'other Metis' (RCAP 1996). These other Metis believe the term written into the 1982 *Constitution Act* refers to all Metis. However, many Metis nation members declare that the term has been most commonly associated them. Therefore, they concede that other Metis are at liberty to refer to themselves as Metis, but not as members of the Metis nation. Presently, governmental legislation continues to raise issues concerning Metis identification. The federal government and Metis disagree over the inclusion of Metis under section 91(24) of the *Constitution Act* of 1867. This section provides the parliament exclusive jurisdiction with respect to Indians and lands reserved for Indians. Metis claim that this section, as written, was intended to apply to all Aboriginal people, and that at the time of confederation the term Indian included Metis and Inuit. Metis identity inevitably cannot be separated from political and social ramifications.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and the work of Dunn (n.d) are politically motivated. The Commission has made several recommendations to the federal government to enhance the present situations for many Aboriginal people. The recommendations deal with a diverse range of issues. The inclusion of Aboriginal curriculum in schools, identifying Labradorian Metis and the Metis Nation as suitable units to exercise Aboriginal self-government, and amendments to the *Constitution Act* of 1867 that will include Metis in social benefit programs,

are just a few of the recommendations made by the Commission. Therefore, Metis identity as defined in the report serves to increase rights for Metis people. The acceptance of the group an individual wishes to identify with, and self-identification defines Metis identity. This view of identity serves to provide choice for Metis individuals, thus empowering them. It also allows the government to reflect on a different way of identifying Metis people, as individuals with voices who are capable of making choices about their own identity.

Presently, Metis people articulate the distinctiveness of their culture and the variability of its expression throughout communities in Canada. According to the 1991 Constitutional Review Commission of the Native Council of Canada, behaviours associated with Aboriginal culture in different communities are diversely expressed. There are Metis peoples who have completely assimilated into Euro-Canadian society, and there are those with lifestyles reflecting traditional land based culture. The latter group represents mainly subarctic communities where some Metis continue subsistence practices based on hunting and gathering (Slobodin 1981). Finally, other Metis people demonstrate lifestyles that are in between these two situations. These individuals are involved in dynamic cultural processes and may often demonstrate "bicultural identities" between Metis and white culture (Dunn n.d.). By no means does this imply that these individuals are faced with some inevitable movement towards assimilation into Euro-Canadian society. In general, however, Metis identity continues to develop as a dynamic, living process in today's society, which is entrenched with political agendas and, as a consequence, Metis identity cannot be easily defined. Agreement among all involved parties continues to require ongoing negotiations. As the definition of Metis identity continues to be modified, it is unlikely that a single definition will be agreed upon by all levels of government and by all Metis communities. However, an agreement on a definition is often necessary between the federal and respective provincial governments, and a certain Metis community in order to meet the concerns and needs of that community.

Problems, Issues and Questions Surrounding Metis Identity

The human processes associated with the formation and recognition of Metis identity are dynamic and unique to each community. An attempt to classify a continually shifting and evolving process into a static category results in the loss of many of the social interactions and cultural nuances among individuals and communities that express the behaviour classified as Metis identity. The imposed categorization of Metis identity falsely defines individuals as one homogenous group and deprives them of their unique cultural histories. Throughout Canada, Metis communities represent a variety of different Native cultural antecedents such as Inuit, Innu, Cree, Chipewyan, Huron, Ojibwa, Kwaguth, and Sekani (Sawchuk 1992; Dunn n.d.). Metis communities also represent many different white cultural antecedents including English, Irish, German, and Scandinavian. These distinctive backgrounds are often diminished by the single identification of

Metis. Similarly, the term as applied in contemporary contexts poorly represents the heritage of modern Metis individuals. Today, most Metis are descendants of one or more Metis parents. Thus, this term does not represent the Native populations from which it was established, and it does not accurately portray an indigenous population in Canada (Dunn n.d.). Class distinctions appear nonexistent with the application of such a uniform term.

Historical documentation referencing the uniqueness of Metis communities and the involvement of individuals in the fur-trade were authored by outside members belonging to white society. The distinctions in ethnicity observed and recorded by external members of society will never capture the true essence of the Metis' sense of self. How did the Metis view themselves within the whole society? Unfortunately, it is the voice of the more dominant society that is often heard throughout history. The question of how Indians viewed Metis communities is also an issue not addressed in the literature. In what ways did Indians view their cultures as different from Metis cultural traditions and customs? The social dynamics contributing to the emergence and maintenance of the sense of Metisness among Hudson's Bay trading posts and the Upper Great Lakes communities may never be fully understood. How difficult was it for historic Metis to express and preserve their identities? Did they find it necessary or advantageous to adopt an externally defined label to maintain their identity? What cultural processes lead to the emergence of Metis identity, and what cultural processes inhibited its development? Unfortunately, the acknowledgment of Metis as a distinct people by white society was often only referenced when their properties acquired substantial economic value as judged by surrounding society (Redbird 1980).

The distinctiveness of, and the complex human processes surrounding Metis identity are revealed in both contemporary and historical communities situated at opposite ends of Canada. Kennedy's fieldwork at two Labradorian villages, Lodge Bay and Cape Charles, reveals the inherent problems of an outside observer identifying Metis individuals. In light of the dearth of available historical information, on the geographical extent to which intermarriage between Inuit women and Europeans occurred along the southeast shoreline, the number of emerging Metis communities is not fully understood (Kennedy 1995, 1996). Similarly, outsiders do not readily identify the contemporary Metis populations inhabiting the southern coastal communities. Prior to the emergence of Native socio-political organizations during the late 1980s, in particular the Labrador Metis Association, many of these individuals with mixed Indian and white ancestry often denied their Aboriginal ancestry and referred to Natives as "just like savages as a bunch of halfbreeds" (Kennedy 1996). Unfortunately, in the face of racism, many willingly failed to acknowledge of their Aboriginal ancestry. Today, however, opinions regarding one's ancestry have changed and many of these Metis view the recognition of their Aboriginal roots as an important goal (Kennedy 1995). This example illustrates the problem of an externally imposed identity when, in reality, many may not self-identify with this group. Is it then appropriate to use the term Metis to identify these individuals?

The Metis of Grande Cache, Alberta, offer another illustration of a group of individuals with mixed ancestry who did not identify themselves as such until recent urbanization and industrialization in the area (Nicks and Morgan 1985). The residents of this small community, however, were referred to by outsiders as Metis or halfbreeds. Different reasons contributed to the absence of an external label for this community as compared to the Labradorian villages. These individuals lacked direct interactions with Euro-Canadian society, from whom they were geographically isolated. Therefore, an ethnic marker was not required (Nicks and Morgan 1985). The population was involved in the fur-trade and was distributed seasonally while maintaining extensive kinship ties. Despite an external identification of Metis, would this community still have considered themselves distinct? Did they employ any other markers to identify themselves prior to Euro-Canadian expansion? Once outsiders viewed them as Metis, did they think of themselves as such? The external imposition of a label may not effectively reveal the expression of an internal identity (Dunn n.d.). If they indeed thought of themselves as Metis did they feel a sense of affiliation with other Metis communities?

A review of the literature exploring Metis history reveals a commonly reiterated theme. It was through their exploitation of the intermediate employment positions within the fur-trade and their buffalo hunting skills that a sense of identity emerged (Brown 1985; Peterson 1978; Ens 1996; Burley *et al.* 1992; Sealey and Lussier 1975). Defined as such, this identity may conjure up images of a people who focused their identity on a subordinate position. It diminishes the role their cultural identity, not associated with their economic situation, played in the formation of Metisness. Individuals assume a variety of identities. When defining Metis identity through their economic role we only serve to diminish their identity. Developing a list of parameters to identify a person as being Metis is also problematic as no one individual will possess all of the features (Dunn n.d.).

We seldom read about more empowering images of identity. Metis individuals probably identified themselves as a founding people of Canada, as voyageurs who opened up the passageways for exploration, and as a free and independent people, who were entitled to their land rights. As a proud and honorable people they earned great respect because of their knowledge of the natural environment, as well as the organization of white society (Sawchuk 1981). They possessed the necessary skills to negotiate with both Indians and Euro-Canadians, creating a complex network of communication patterns whereby trade and exploration were feasible. The development of many settlements and the transportation of goods were the result of Metis' hard work (Redbird 1980). They were indeed an admired role model for many, and established themselves as "wardens of plains and the prairie cavalry" (Dunn n.d.). Metis were "the lifeblood of the frontier economy, the muscle of the colonial military, and the diplomats of White/Indian statesmanship, they played a critical role in the evolution of North America up to 1800" (Dunn n.d.:3).

Why did the term Metis first arise? Who first identified this distinctive group as Metis? Was it the Metis themselves, or did a certain external group apply the term to fit their own agenda? Did the emergence of the term Metis in different communities represent the same cultural markers? Many comprehensive studies have examined the Red River Metis, however, when and under what circumstances did these people use the term Metis? In the documents composed by Red River Metis, *Declaration of the People of Rupert's Land* and the *Provisional Government's List of Rights*, they did not refer to themselves as Metis but as "uncivilized and unsettled Indians" (Dunn n.d.). It has been suggested that many of the terms, especially Metis, used to describe mixed Indian and non-Indian individuals were not originated by the group they referred to (Dunn n.d.). In most historical instances, terminology generated to identify Metis communities was the product of missionaries or white officers, who wished to acknowledge the existence of a growing mixed blood population to superiors living in Europe. However, all too often terms relating to their identification served to purposefully denigrate the Metis population possibly as a means of controlling them. Their lack of cooperation with surrounding white officials would have had a detrimental economic impact on the fur-trade.

In conclusion, this paper outlines the representation of Metis during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries as presented in the recent literature. The literature demonstrates that Metis identity has usually been defined and assigned by non-Metis people and agencies. Externally imposed identities have effectively diminished the significance of, and ultimately coalesced a diverse group of people under, a single term. Originally serving to identify French speaking, mixed descent individuals of the Red River Settlement, this term has evolved to define the descendants of Metis parents residing in very diverse communities throughout Canada today. Unfortunately, the true essence surrounding the identity of these culturally rich, powerful and unique individuals residing in a diversity of communities across Canada cannot be resolved through historical research. Furthermore, it continues to elude us today as the political issues and agendas of both Metis and the dominant societies often shroud it. From the beginning Metis identity has been subject to significant transitions and will likely continue to do so well into the twenty-first century.

* * * * *

Endnotes

¹ As stated in *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America* (1985:6): "Written with a capital 'M,' Metis is a socio-cultural or political term for those originally of mixed ancestry who evolved into a distinct indigenous people during a certain historical period in a certain region in Canada." In this paper, the term Metis is capitalized throughout, based on the position presented in the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal People* (1996), stating individuals with

mixed Indian and white ancestry outside of western Canada are entitled to refer to themselves as Metis, if they so choose. The term is not only restricted to individuals with the ability to trace their roots back to the western fur-trade.

² In this paper, the term Metis is used to apply to individuals of mixed Indian and European ancestry who arose in the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes trading system. Also included are those from within the Hudson's Bay trading system who chose to see themselves as different from Indian communities, and often different from white communities as well. The term Metis is used to apply to contemporary individuals, of mixed Indian, Inuit, or Innu and white or other ancestry residing in diverse communities across Canada, who identify themselves as Metis.

³ In this paper, *coureurs de bois* is used to apply to illegal voyageurs, members of the widely dispersed population of original settlers who were mostly peasant farmers.

* * * * *

References Cited

- Burley, D.V., G.A. Horsfall, and J.D. Brandon
 1992 *Structural Considerations of Metis Ethnicity: An Archaeological, Architectural, and Historical Study*.
 Vermillion: The University of South Dakota Press.
- Brasser, T.J.
 1985 In Search of Metis Art.
 In *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America*.
 J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds. Pp. 221-229.
 Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.
- Brown, J.S.H.
 1980 *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*.
 Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- 1985 Diverging Identities: The Presbyterian of St. Gabriel Street, Montreal.
 In *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America*.
 J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds. Pp. 195-206.
 Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.
- Daniels, H.
 1979 *We are the new Nation: The Metis and National Native Policy*.
 Ottawa: Native Council of Canada.

Dickason, O.P.

- 1985 From "One Nation" in the Northeast to "New Nation" in the Northwest: A Look at the Emergence of the Metis.
In *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America*.
J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds. Pp. 19-36.
Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.

Douaud, P.C.

- 1984 Ethnolinguistic Profile of the Canadian Metis.
In *Canadian Ethnology Service Paper No. 99*. Pp. 7-27.
Ottawa: National Museum of Man Mercury Series.

Dunn, M.

- n.d. *Metis Identity – A Source of Rights?*
Unpublished Paper presented at Trent University.

Ens, G.

- 1996 *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century*.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Foster, J.E.

- 1985 Some Questions and Perspectives on the Problem of Metis Roots.
In *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America*.
J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds. Pp. 73-91.
Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.

Frideres, J.S.

- 1993 *Native Peoples in Canada: Contemporary Conflicts*.
New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

Giraud, M.

- 1945 Foreword.
In *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America*.
J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds. Pp. xi-xii.
Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.

- 1986 *The Metis in the Canadian West*, Volume I.
George Woodcock, translator.
Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press.

- 1986 *The Metis in the Canadian West*, Volume II.
George Woodcock, translator.
Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press.

Kennedy, C.

1995 *People of the Bays and Headlands: Anthropological History and the Fate of Communities in the Unknown Labrador.*
Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

1996 *Labrador Village.*
Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.

McNab, D.T.

1985 Metis Participation in the Treaty-Making Process in Ontario: A Reconnaissance.
Native Studies Review 1(2):57-79.

Miller, J.R.

1985 From Riel to the Metis.
Canadian Historical Review LXIX(1):1-20.

Nicks, T., and K. Morgan

1985 Grande Cache: The Historic Development of an Indigenous Alberta Metis Population.
In *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America.*
J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds. Pp. 163-181.
Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.

Peterson, J.

1978 Prelude to Red River: A Social Portrait of the Great Lakes Metis.
Ethnohistory 25(1):41-67.

1985 Many Roads to Red River.
In *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America.*
J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds. Pp. 37-71.
Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.

Ray, A.J.

1996 *I Have Lived Here Since the World Began. An Illustrated History of Canada's Native People.*
Toronto: Lester Publishing Limited.

Redbird, D.

1980 *We are Metis: A Metis View of the Development of a Native Canadian People.*
Toronto: Ontario Metis and Non-Status Indian Association.

Royal Commission on Aboriginal People

1996 *People to People, Nation to Nation: Highlights from Canada.*
Volume 5.

Sawchuk, J.

- 1978 *The Metis of Manitoba: Reformulation of An Ethnic Identity.*
Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Limited.
- 1981 *Some Early Influences on Metis Political Organization.*
Paper presented at Metis in North America Conference. Chicago.
- 1985 The Metis, Non-Status Indians and the New Aboriginality: Government
Influence on Native Political Alliances and Identity.
Canadian Ethnic Studies 17(2):135-146.
- 1992 *Readings in Aboriginal Studies. Volume 2: Identities and State of
Structures.*
J. Sawchuk, ed. Pp. 1-6.
Manitoba: Bearpaw Publishing.

Sealey, D.B.

- 1980 Ethnicity and the Concept of Metisness.
In *The Other Natives. The Metis.*
A.S. Lussier and D.B. Sealey, eds.
Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation Press.

Sealey, D.B., and A.S. Lussier

- 1975 *The Metis, Canada's Forgotten People.*
Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation Press.

Slobodin, R.

- 1981 Subarctic Metis. Subarctic.
Handbook of North American Indians 6:361-371.

Spry, I.M.

- 1985 The Metis and Mixed Bloods of Rupert's Land Before 1870.
In *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America.*
J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds. Pp. 95-118.
Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.

Van Kirk, S.

- 1980 *"Many Tender Ties" Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870.*
Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer Publishing Ltd.

