

7-1-2012

The Métis Nation Through Anderson's Lens

Randa Stringer

The University of Western Ontario, rstring@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem>



Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stringer, Randa (2012) "The Métis Nation Through Anderson's Lens," *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol20/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact kmarsha1@uwo.ca.

The Métis Nation Through Anderson's Lens

Abstract

Throughout a history of struggle the Métis have continually fought to be recognized as a distinct nation. An interesting perspective from which to examine the Métis nationhood is the use of Benedict Anderson's theory of a nation as an 'imagined community'. Anderson's criteria state that a nation must be limited, have sovereignty, and provide a sense of community. An examination of Métis history demonstrates their right to nationhood under this theory. Through exclusionary terminology, a unique language, and conditional acceptance, the Métis identity remains separate from that of others. Military and political actions throughout their history demonstrate their constant quest for sovereignty. Finally, a set of inherited and invented cultural traditions brings the Métis together as a community. It is clear that under Anderson's theory, the unity of the Métis throughout their turbulent past qualifies them as a distinct nation.

Keywords

Metis, nationhood, imagined community

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/)

The Métis Nation Through Anderson's Lens

Randa Stringer

Introduction

The emergence of the Métis Nation is a crucial component of Canadian history. While the origin of any nation is difficult to define, the Métis are particularly so because of the mixed quality that gives them their identity. This paper will demonstrate that Benedict Anderson's theory of a nation as an imagined community provides an interesting framework with which to analyze the emergence of the Métis Nation, and will argue that, under Anderson's criteria, the unity of the Métis people is demonstrative of nationhood (Anderson 1991:6).

The Imagined Community

In 1983 Benedict Anderson published the work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. He felt that the phenomenon of nationalism had not been well explained, and therefore proposed a theory by which to define it (Anderson 1991:3). He postulated that a nation is really an imagined community because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991:6). To this end he proposed three traits shared by each imagined nation: limitation, sovereignty, and community (Anderson 1991:7). He contended that for a nation to truly exist there must be limitations on who is a part of the nation; the nation must have sovereignty; and the members of the nation must live in a sense of community with each other (Anderson 1991:7). By assessing how these three criteria are reflected by the Métis Nation, it can be established that this

particular nation is demonstrative of Anderson's theory.

Elements of an Imagined Community: Limitations

The first stipulation for a nation to be an imagined community in Anderson's theory is that the created community is inherently limited; no matter how broad the criteria for membership, there is always a point at which someone will be considered an outsider (Anderson 1991:7). Robbins and Larkin (2006:94) observe that, for a nation to be truly defined, there must be a clear set of Others: outsiders who do not belong to the nation whether because of a different ethnic background, history, culture, or simply overall values. Since Métis identity is derived from a mixture of two or more distinct ethnic heritages, this limitation is more fluid and much harder to define than those based primarily upon territorial borders; however, it is always intuitively present and the members of the Métis Nation have ways of expressing this separation. A large component of this definition is shared history. Individually, the Métis boast many different ancestral origins, but collectively, they also share a common history, particularly in regards to facing adversity. Even those not considered to be historic Métis (descendants of Métis from the Red River area) have still had their land claims, ethnicity, and emerging nationality blatantly ignored by the government, and in rising above this adversity, the Métis of all regions form together in a strong community (Bakker 1997:62). The strength gained from this common background immediately sets apart all those who do not share in the Métis history as the necessary Others and, in identifying these outsiders, the Métis Nation is even further validated.

The limitation of membership to the Métis Nation is best seen in the language

used by outsiders to describe the Métis, as well as the language the Métis use to describe themselves and others. It was in the nineteenth century that distinct terminology emerged to describe the Métis (Bakker 1997:54). Though the term Métis, derived from the French word meaning mixed blood, had first appeared in 1666 in the Euro-Canadian publication the *Journal des Jesuit*, it did not become widely used until this time (Vrooman 2001:39). Other terms began to emerge as well, the most common of which were half-breed and *bois brûlé* (which referred to the stereotypical Métis skin colour) (Bakker 1997:54). Although these terms were originally used by outsiders, the Métis accepted them and made them their own, so that the term Métis, originally developed by outsiders and once considered derogatory, has become an honourable title (Slobodin 1966:151). It was also around this time that the Métis began using words such as whites and natives to refer to Euro-Canadians and First Nations peoples respectively, generally in such a context that the Métis speaker was clearly set apart from the groups he or she was describing. This method of separation is still used by Métis today as a way of indicating that they are separate from their mixed ancestry (Slobodin 1966:151).

The distinctiveness of the Métis can be seen not only in certain vocabulary, but also in the use and indeed the formation of entire languages. Most Métis are multilingual, often conversing in French, Cree, and sometimes English or other native dialects (Bakker 1997:72). Gradually, through time and combined use, these languages changed slightly, until distinct Métis versions of them arose: Métis Cree, Métis French, and Métis Salteaux being the main three (Bakker 1997:72). These languages, while still very similar to the originals, contained slight alterations specific to Métis speakers (Bakker 1997:72).

The Métis also developed a language of their own called Michif, a hybrid of French and Cree that is as unique as the Métis themselves (Bakker 1997:72). The nouns of Michif are primarily taken from French, while the verbs come from Cree; most other components of the language follow a similar division (Bakker 1997:72). This distinctiveness in the language reflects the Métis culture as a mixture of backgrounds that developed into a new identity and ethnicity (Bakker 1997:72). Through the creation of their own language, the Métis outlined finite linguistic borders that clearly isolated them from those who were not a part of the Métis Nation.

Perhaps the most explicit indicator of limitation is the definition of Métis as currently outlined by the Métis National Council, which contains a contingency that an applicant must not only self-identify as a Métis, but must also be “accepted by the Métis nation” (Métis National Council 2012). This clearly demonstrates the wish of the Métis Nation to be able to identify outsiders and to keep them separate, thereby fulfilling Anderson’s criteria of limitations and demonstrating that the Métis Nation is, in this aspect at least, a good example of a nation that is truly an imagined community.

Elements of an Imagined Community: Sovereignty

The issue of sovereignty is central both to Anderson’s concept of imagined communities and to the attempts of the Métis to truly define themselves as a nation. Until the 1810s, the Métis were largely unorganized, and were not particularly nationalistic; however, as they faced increased levels of adversity, the nationalistic fervour and wish for sovereignty grew rapidly. In 1810 the Hudson’s Bay Company set aside 116,000 square miles of land to build an agricultural community at Red River, and began the

process of sectioning off land without consultation of the Métis already living there (Burley et al. 1992:17). The new governor of the colony, Miles MacDonnell, feared for the economic stability of the settlement and in 1813 passed a series of regulations on methods of buffalo hunting, the stripping of tree bark, and the use of certain kinds of trees (Burley et al. 1992:18). All of these regulations ignored the Métis and posed a threat to their way of life (Burley et al. 1992:18). They were tolerated until 1814 when the Pemmican Act was passed, banning the trade and export of pemmican from the settlement (Burley et al. 1992:18). With pemmican as a primary source of income for many Métis, their discontent stirred an early form of nationalism. In 1815, in support of the Métis, the North West Company sponsored Cuthbert Grant as Captain General of All Half Breeds, giving the Métis a leader around whom to rally (Burley et al. 1992:18). Grant also promoted the first Métis flag, originally a blue infinity sign on a red background; this was a clear indication of an emerging sense of the Métis not only as a distinct ethnic group, but also as a unique nation in their own right (Burley et al. 1992:18). This culminated in the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816, in which twenty-two men were killed by a group of Métis led by Grant (Burley et al. 1992:18). However, this early nationalism was abated as the Hudson's Bay Company turned its attention away from agriculture and merged with the North West Company (Burley et al. 1992:19), essentially leaving the Métis in isolation for almost fifty years (Burley et al. 1992:22).

It was not until 1869 that the idea of a Métis Nation once again gained wide support, and this time it was a much more volatile concept. In 1867 the Dominion of Canada was officially formed, and in 1868 it officially acquired the lands of the Hudson's Bay Company, including those in the Red

River area (Reid 2008:9). Government surveyors immediately travelled to the site, blatantly ignoring the Métis settlers in their attempts to section off the land. It was at this point that the Métis identity, which had been solidifying during the years of isolation, came to the forefront as not only a cultural but also a national identity. Under the leadership of Louis Riel, a group of Red River Métis overtook Fort Garry by force of arms and claimed a provisional government of the Red River Republic in order to negotiate with the federal government for the rights of the Métis people (Burley et al. 1992:26). Riel and his troops held Fort Garry for almost a year, and this time was the first incident of successful Métis sovereignty (Driben 1985:30). The federal government was forced to recognize the Métis as a distinct group and legally did so in the Manitoba Act of 1870, which formed the self-governed province of Assiniboia in which the Métis would have claim to 1.4 million acres of land (Burley et al. 1992:26). Unfortunately, the amnesty originally promised for Riel proved too politically controversial for the government to fulfill, and he was exiled to the United States (Reid 2008:9).

It would seem that the sovereignty of the Métis Nation had finally been achieved; however, the government reneged on its promise of land, frustrating the Métis with complicated legalities concerning its distribution (Reid 2008:12). This once again led to armed uprising, with Riel returning to Canada to lead the 1885 North West Rebellion under a Métis flag and anthem, both proclaiming the resurgence of the Métis Nation (Burley et al. 1992:32). A number of events, including some political miscalculations by Riel and the superior strength of the Canadian forces, overwhelmed the Métis at the Battle of Batoche (Burley et al. 1992:32). The rebellion was put down fairly quickly,

leading to the execution of Riel and a period of disorganization (Burley et al. 1992:32).

The Métis, who so recently had been on the verge of sovereignty and independence, were dispersed and cast into poverty. Never losing their sense of collective identity, however, they still struggled for their sovereignty and in 1982 were officially recognized in the Constitution Act as one of the indigenous peoples of Canada (Burley et al. 1992:33). Since then the Manitoba Métis Federation and the Métis National Council, among other groups, have continued to fight for Métis rights and for the final formation of the Métis Nation. Although full sovereignty for the Métis has not yet been achieved, their constant struggle for it proves their collective will and fulfills Anderson's theory of sovereignty as a component of the imagined community that is a true nation.

Elements of an Imagined Community: Community

The final criteria of Anderson's imagined communities is that a nation in this sense must, by definition, exist as a community. Regardless of the size of the nation, whether in population or in territory, all members must share a common sense of being linked to one another in a cohesive group. This of course comes in part from achieving the first two concepts of limited membership and sovereignty, but these alone do not make a community. There must also be a sharing of values and culture across space and time. The Métis are a prime example of the theories of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983:1) regarding the invention of tradition, in which so-called timeless traditions that help to define a culture are in actuality recent and also invented by the culture itself. Although the roots of Métis tradition go back to the multiple lineages of the group, many have been combined and recreated to form a

tradition of uniquely Métis culture. As discussed previously, the Métis developed their own individual symbols of the Métis nation in the form of a flag (originally a blue infinity sign on a red background which is now a white infinity sign on a blue background) and an anthem (Burley et al. 1992:18). The anthem is an interesting aspect, however, being more symbolic than official and taking the form of the Red River Jig. This jig shows the distinct Métis style of music; it has rhythmic similarities to Aboriginal music but uses a European fiddle, or an approximation thereof, as the instrument of choice (Vrooman 2001:37).

It is the pairing of the Red River Jig and the dance that often accompanies it which demonstrates the combination and adaptation of filial cultures that gives the Métis their unique identity. The l'Assomption sash, a traditional part of Métis dress adapted from the French but worn around the waist in a distinctive manner, is a key aspect of the dance, with two sashes being crossed on the ground in front of the dancer (Vrooman 2001:37). The manner in which the dancer steps over and around the crossed sashes is reminiscent of the Highland dance of crossed swords from which this choreography is descended (Vrooman 2001:37). This fusion of aspects from so many cultures demonstrates the unity that the Métis have managed to achieve from the diversity of their mixed ancestry, and shows one of the traits that makes them so enduring – the ability to overcome any ancestral differences and blend all these together to form their own distinctive culture that sets them apart as a separate ethnic and cultural group.

One of the cultural symbols for which the Métis are best known is the so-called Red River Cart, which even today remains a part of the logo of the Manitoba Métis Federation (Bakker et al. 1992:67). The carts were used primarily for

transporting pemmican and other goods from the buffalo hunt between the plains and the Red River settlement (Peterson and Brown 1985:121). As such, they were a crucial aspect of the Métis economy, and became symbolic of the Métis Nation itself (Peterson and Brown 1985:121). The carts were constructed completely from wood and consisted of a body resting solely on axels and shafts, with broad-wheeled tires often of a six-foot diameter (Peterson and Brown 1985:121). Each cart could carry between six or eight hundred pounds and was pulled by a single pony (Peterson and Brown 1985:21). They became famous for the noise they made because the axels were wooden and no grease could be used; those who remembered the Red River carts found the sound they made to be indescribable (Peterson and Brown 1985:121). No other contemporaneous culture used carts like these and, because they were present during the nineteenth century when Métis identity and nationality were solidifying, they became inextricably linked to Métis history and culture: a symbol of the Métis community that could not be ignored.

The entirety of the culture of the Métis is too intricate to fully describe here, but it is clearly a unique and complex series of combined and invented traditions that have come together to represent a nation. This sharing of culture across the widespread and differing Métis territories and histories allows a means by which all Métis, whatever their ancestry or location, are able to join together with a sense of commonality and become, not only a unique ethnicity, but a separate community. It is this which allows the success and endurance of the Métis Nation.

Conclusion

By analyzing the emergence of the Métis Nation in the context of limitations, sovereignty, and community, it has been

demonstrated that Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities provides an effective lens through which Métis nationalism might be analyzed. Through terminology, reinterpretation and formation of language, and a shared history, the Métis justifiably define themselves as a separate group from those around them. Their history is built in many ways around a constant quest for sovereignty, and their unique invented tradition and culture give them a means of joining together in a shared community. Together, these characteristics allow the Métis, despite their difficult past, to truly be defined as a nation under Anderson's theories.

References Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Bakker, Peter. 1997. *A Language of our Own: The Genesis of Michif, the Mixed Cree-French Language of the Canadian Métis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Burley, David V., Gayel A. Horsfall, and John D. Brandon. 1992. *Structural Considerations of Metis Ethnicity: An Archaeological, Architectural, and Historical Study*. Vermillion: University of South Dakota Press.
- Driben, Paul. 1985. *We are Metis: The Ethnography of a Halfbreed Community in Northern Alberta*. New York: AMS Press.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Métis National Council. 2012. The Métis Nation: Citizenship. www.metisnation.ca/index.php/who-are-the-metis/citizenship (accessed January 31, 2012).
- Peterson, Jacqueline, and Jennifer S. H. Brown. 1986. *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. vol. 1. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Reid, Jennifer. 2008. *Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada: Mythic Discourse and the Postcolonial State*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Robbins, Richard H., and Sherrie N. Larkin. 2006. *Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach*. 1 Canadian ed. Scarborough, Ont.: Thomson Nelson.
- Slobodin, Richard. 1966. *Metis of the Mackenzie District*. Ottawa: Canadian Research Centre for Anthropology, Saint-Paul University.
- Vrooman, Nicholas. 2001. 'Rielization' of the Greater Metis Traditional Historic Homeland. In *Metis Legacy: A Metis Historiography and Annotated Bibliography*. Lawrence J. Barkwell, Leah Dorion, and Darren R. Prefontaine, eds. Pp. 37-71. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications.