

# **Environmental and Human Rights Defenders: Criminals or Martyrs?**



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## Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue: The One Who Keeps the Land Alive

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She calls it *nutshimit*.

For Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue, it is the place where she longs to be, the place where she was born. It is the place she seeks in her dreams. The word *nutshimit* has many meanings: “in the country,” “in the bush,” or “on the land.” It is often understood as being the opposite of the community or the reserve. For the Innu people, the word can also simply mean “home.”<sup>1</sup>



*Tshaukuesh Penashue and granddaughters (Penashue Family Collection) & Boreal Forest in winter (Camille Fouillard)*

This is the story of Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue, a mother, an Innu elder who has laboured for decades in the name of her family, her community, and the lands and waters she calls *nutshimit*. She has been an unwavering witness to the beauty of her people and their home in the boreal forests of eastern Labrador, Canada.

Formerly known to outsiders as the Montagnais-Naskapi, the approximately 22,000 Innu people currently live in eleven communities in northeastern Quebec (nine Innu communities) and Labrador (two Innu communities), Canada, as well as in other urban centres in the region. Tshaukuesh and other elders refer to the traditional Innu territory or land as *Innusi* or *Innu-assi*. Younger Innu use the term *Nitassinan* meaning “Our Land”.

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<sup>1</sup> Penashue, T.E. (2019). *Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive*. University of Manitoba Press: Winnipeg. p. 212.

Tshaukuesh was born in a tent in the boreal forests of interior Labrador. Innu-aimun is her native language. She has lived the transition of her people from nomadic hunter-gatherers, following the wandering caribou and other animals on which they depended, to settled life in the two Labrador Innu communities of Sheshatshiu in eastern Labrador and Natuashish further north. Tshaukuesh is a member of the Sheshatshiu Innu First Nation (population 1000+), about 30 km north of the town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

For Tshaukuesh and her people, change has been rapid. For many Indigenous peoples of North America, including the Innu, a major European influence was manifested by the fur trade that dominated the economic life of the continent beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Christian missionaries followed, with the brothers and priests of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate being the dominant Catholic evangelizers in northern Quebec and Labrador. The construction of the World War II Canadian-American air force base in 1941 on the sandy levels of Goose Bay presaged the rapid social and cultural changes about to happen.

In the late 1980s the increase in NATO low-level flying and live missile testing on “uninhabited” Innu land galvanized Tshaukuesh and her people. This was not the first time that the Innu people has been dispossessed of decision-making with respect to their traditional territory. Dissecting from east to west the central plateau of Labrador is the 856 km long *Mishta-shipu* (known in English as the Churchill River or Grand River and previously as the Hamilton River), the longest river in Atlantic Canada. For years, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador has had grand designs for this river as a source of hydroelectric power.

The Canadian provinces of Newfoundland and Quebec initiated the Upper Churchill River Hydroelectric development in the late 1960s. When it was completed in 1974, the 6500 km<sup>2</sup> Smallwood Reservoir had been created, inundating significant swaths of Innu territory including *Kanekuanakau-nipi*, where Tshaukuesh was born. The Innu people were never consulted in the creation of one of the largest dammed reservoirs in the world. Today the Lower Churchill River is under development for hydroelectric power. Forestry and mining developments, particularly the discovery of extensive nickel deposits at Emish (Voisey’s Bay), have also exerted pressure on the Innu for whom land claims negotiations with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador are on-going.<sup>2</sup>

*Long ago, when I was young, I used to look at the mountains in the distance with nothing but sky beyond them and long to climb to the top. I thought that was where the world ended and Heaven began.*<sup>3</sup>

Tshaukuesh would soon realize that her childhood world that flowed into heaven would not be seen by others in the same light. Outside forces would lay claims to the lands and waters. Heaven would never be considered.

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<sup>2</sup> Wadden, Marie. (1991). *Nitassinan: The Innu Struggle to Reclaim Their Homeland* (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre); Ashini, Daniel. (1999). "Opening Remarks" (*Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Aboriginal Communities and Mining*, co-sponsored by the Innu Nation and Mining Watch Canada. September 10-12, Ottawa, Mining Watch Canada/MinesAlerte).

<sup>3</sup> Penashue. *Nitinikiau Innusi*. p. 117.

For Tshaukuesh, it seems that *landscape* and *waterscape* have become *inscape*. Her interior life, fed by her years of intimacy with *nutshimit*, could never envision the lands and water devoid of meaning. They have been transformed from space to place; interior places pregnant with memory and significance.<sup>4</sup> Such places could never be adequately comprehended in solely technical, scientific, or financial terms. While necessary for helpful understanding, these terms can never be sufficient. They can never plumb the depths of deep interior, felt knowledge.

Tshaukuesh exemplifies a knowledge that comes from “somewhere.” It is born from years of close daily encounter with the lands and waters that provided a home, a place of nourishment and meaning. Such affect-laden intelligence engenders a knowledge that is often ill-appreciated by those who dwell on abstract, so-called objective knowledge from “nowhere.”<sup>5</sup>

Tshaukuesh’s lament and protest – and persistence, is rooted in this deep well of experience and life. It is a form of “integral knowledge” that has integrated her years of life with the rhythms and seasons of the land and the waters. We suspect that it is Tshaukuesh’s lifelong intimate, particular encounter with her native land that is the source of her dignity and depth.

Indigenous thinkers often express this integral knowledge as part of a cosmology in which love of people, land and all living things are interconnected. For example, Potawatomi environmental biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer critiques the idea “that humans alone are possessed of rights and all the rest of the living world exists for human use.” She notes that in Algonquian languages<sup>6</sup> “Birds, bugs, and berries are spoken of with the same respectful grammar as humans are, as if we were all members of the same family. Because we are.”<sup>7</sup> The Innu poet Josephine Bacon writes, “My sisters, the four winds, caress a land of lichens and moss, rivers and lakes, where the white spruce spoke to my father.”<sup>8</sup> The focus is on loving relationships and intimate knowledge of the natural world.

*Every time I leave nutshimit, I try to find some special way to let the land know that I’ll be back. I say goodbye to the plants, the animals, even the tent poles we leave behind. Today I went down to the beach and found a crooked tree. I hugged it and said: “I’m leaving but I’ll come back. Don’t be sad.” I started crying, still hugging the tree. And then I walked on, looking for pineu.<sup>9</sup>*

In the late 1990s Tshaukuesh began her walks into *nutshimit*. Beginning in the spring after the harshness of winter had passed, the sun rose higher in the sky, the days warmed and the snow

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<sup>4</sup> Williams, D.R., Stewart, W.P., and Kruger, L.E. (2013). “The emergence of place-based conservation,” in *Place-Based Conservation: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, (ed.) Stewart, W.P., Williams, D.R., and Kruger, L.E. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> A large language group that includes Potawatomi and Innu-aimun as well as many others.

<sup>7</sup> Kimmerer, R. W. (March/April 2017). “Speaking of nature.” n.p. *Orion Magazine*.  
<https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/>.

<sup>8</sup> Yeoman, E. (2009). Translation from Bacon’s Innu-aimun and French versions. Bacon, J. *Bâtons à message/Tshissinuutshitakana*, Montréal: Mémoire d’encrier. pp. 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Penashue. *Nitinikiau Innusi*. p. 130. The Innu-aimun word *pineu* refers to the ptarmigan or partridge, a favourite food among the Innu.

was often good for travel, although not always. These walks were important. They symbolized her deep desire to witness to the fact that the Innu and the land needed each other.

The cover photo of her published dairies (by Jerry Kobalenko) is iconic; Tshaukuesh leaning into the trail, intent on moving ahead, her loaded toboggan lashed to her straining body by a cord. She welcomed whoever would walk with her. Support was not always forthcoming, but she persisted nonetheless. The walks proved to be a way for many non-Innu (*Akaneshaut*) to learn from Tshaukuesh and to share a hand in solidarity if possible. People came from across North America and even from Europe. They were no doubt attracted by the witness of this persistent, gentle Innu elder. They wanted to help, but more often to learn.

At their core, the walks were a protest, a prophetic cry against all that was destroying and dispossessing the land. A lament at the destructive powers that slowly, often imperceptibly, but persistently seem to erode the soul of the land and the soul of her people. Before such powers that devour, all you can do is walk, put one foot in front of the other – and witness. Sometimes one has simply to step forth in hope and confidence.

*When I walk in nutshimit with my people, I'm showing how much we respect Innu culture, the natural world, and all living things. I want people to know we won't give up our land. We won't allow the government to damage it with mines and dams and bombs. If I was elected to the Innu Nation or the band council, I'd put all my energy into this and I'd look after the people walking in nutshimit.*<sup>10</sup>

Long before Pope Francis highlighted the notion of integral ecology as a theme central and indeed original to *Laudato Si'*, Tshaukuesh seemed to have integrated such a vision in her soul. In his encyclical, the Holy Father dedicates a full chapter to this concept that is grounded in a metaphysic of interrelatedness, to the fact that everything is connected or that everything is related.<sup>11</sup>

Integral ecology is deeply cognizant of its social and human dimensions. Too often has environmentalism failed to account for the human, cultural, indeed religious dimensions of a comprehensive ecological vision. As Pope Francis has clearly indicated, *Laudato Si'* is fundamentally a social encyclical. It hopes to gather all the multitude of relationships that need to be considered for a viable approach to ecology.<sup>12</sup>

Tshaukuesh seems to have understood intuitively this fuller vision of engagement. She never wavers from her inclusive perspective that includes what she terms the *full circle*.<sup>13</sup> All relationships are essential to consider: the future of her family, the life of her community and Innu people, and the life of the lands and waters that mark their common home.

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<sup>10</sup> Penashue. *Nitinikiau Innusi*. p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> *Laudato Si'*: *Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home*. (2015) Chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> Kureethadam, J.I. (2019) *The Ten Green Commandments of Laudato Si'* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press).

<sup>13</sup> Penashue, E. (2010). "Miam ka-auieiat: It's like a circle," in *Despite This Loss: Essays on Culture, Memory and Identity in Newfoundland and Labrador*, ed. Kelly U.A., and Yeoman, E. (St. John's: ISER Books).

Yet, despite her years of protest and witness, despite all who rallied to her side, much of what Tshaukuesh protested has come to be. The forests were logged, the rivers dammed, and the mines dug. But what matters most, took root – and thrived. What stands the test of time she initiated – her faithful persistence, despite all odds. Intensely rooted in *Innusi*, she would never lose hope. Many were the moments that she felt abandoned, lost, misunderstood even by her own family or people. What amazes is that she never gave up.

*“If they flood the river how many metres would the water rise?” I asked, and Francis explained how high it would come. Then I felt so sad thinking about how everything along the shore would be flooded, all the flowers and plants and all the living things. I often think about life before Patshishetshuanau<sup>14</sup> was flooded, and I imagine the people camping along the shore and paddling down the river. How they used to tell their families and their children stories of the past, how beautiful the land was, and how the river would be there for them to live on and to use forever. But now that’s not true. I feel that all the work I’ve done trying to save the land and the river was in vain. I hoped that there would be results, but now I feel that nothing was accomplished. Mishta-shipu is an important name. The river is alive, just like a human being, and its voice is crying out, “Don’t kill me. I’m the water. I don’t want to die. Hear my voice. Without water, you cannot live.”<sup>15</sup>*

What stands the test of time is her loyalty to place and people and to the whole ecology of *Innusi*: animals, plants, pathways, lakes, and rivers, even stones. Seasons and time. Past and future generations. Such love and commitment can only come from years of encounter with what is most real, with all that surrounds.

What strength of heart and soul must Tshaukuesh possess in order to continue her work over the years? To witness to a life that many say is a fable of the past. To walk out the door on a spring day, intent on *nutshimit*, not sure who will join you, or who will persist. To hunger and thirst for life, for what is just and right, fully aware of the strangers, wide awake, intent on devouring the land and waters.<sup>16</sup> What strength of heart and soul is needed to witness to the loss, when rivers of life and energy transform overnight into potential sources of disease and sickness; to see the great *Mishta-shipu* diminished before her very eyes.

*There are so many things I could say about the flooding of the Mishta-shipu. ... In one of the places where we stop on the river, at the far end of Uinukupau, I was surprised to see a sign on the shore. It said in four languages – English, French, Inuktitut, and Innu-aimun – that we shouldn’t take more than one fish per week because of mercury. Why? What are the dams doing to the fish? How many years do we have to live with their suffering? I think a lot about that and about how when I was a child we could eat anything. There was never a sign saying you can’t touch this or eat it. There was so much freedom. Now it’s not like that.<sup>17</sup>*

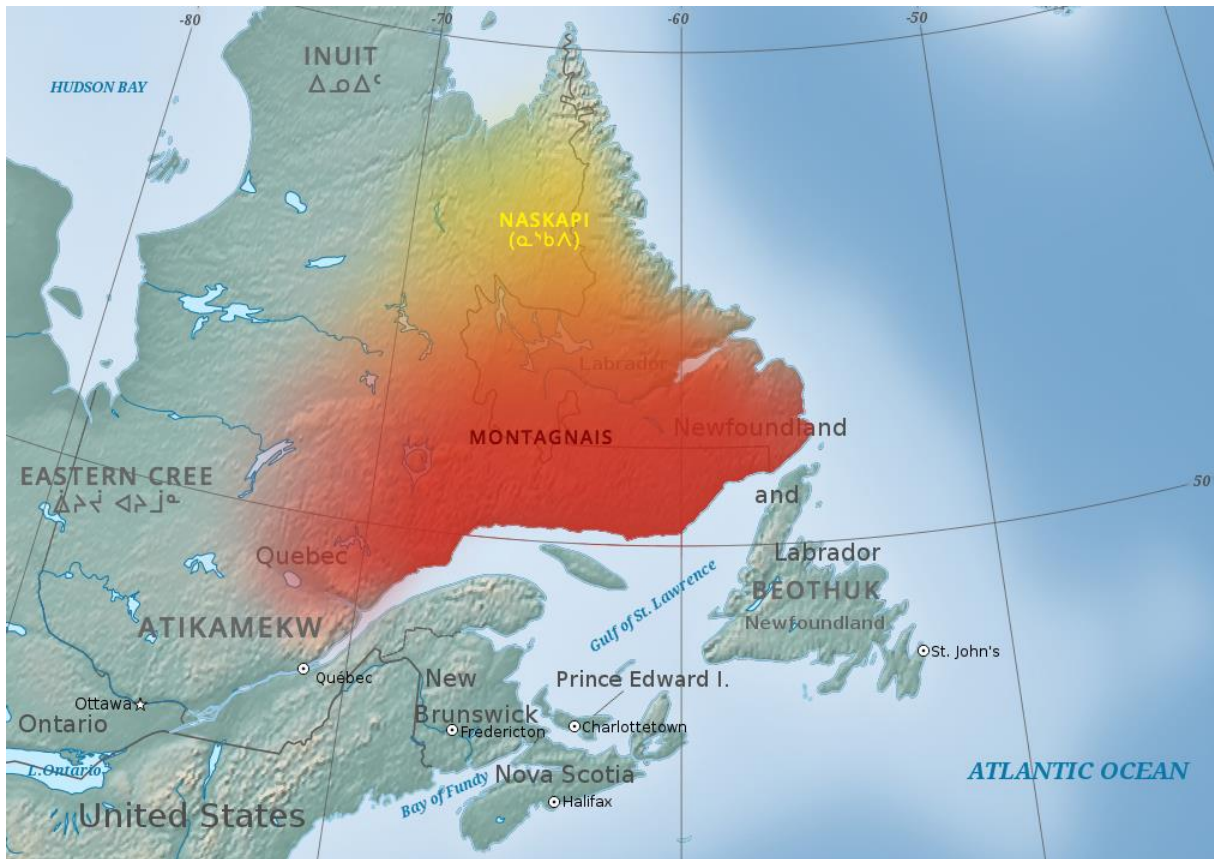
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<sup>14</sup> Innu name for Churchill Falls, site of the first dam.

<sup>15</sup> Penashue. *Nitinikiau Innusi*. p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> Richardson, Boyce. (1975). *Strangers Devour the Land: The Cree hunters of the James Bay area versus Premier Bourassa and the James Bay Development Corporation*. (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada).

<sup>17</sup> Penashue. *Nitinikiau Innusi*. p. 169.



*Innu Map*

On the 42 km road between Sheshatshiu and Happy Valley-Goose Bay rests a small shrine dedicated to St. Anne. Tshaukuesh has a deep devotion to St. Anne, as do many Innu elders. Indeed, the annual pilgrimage to the national shrine of Ste-Anne-de Beaupré in Quebec attracts many Innu from all over *Innusi* during a week-long celebration each July. St. Anne is considered the grandmother of the Innu. For a community that is often strengthened and maintained by the grandmothers, St. Anne is a source of strength.

*I went to my room and started praying to Saint Anne and then I felt a bit better.*<sup>18</sup>

*I often thank the Creator that the Innu have woken up and found strength in each other to walk this long, hard road together. We are all very strong.*<sup>19</sup>

Tshaukuesh's published diary ends with a short section entitled "Still Walking." It is a most appropriate way to end her book. Her "old ugly feet"<sup>20</sup> have walked a "thousand thousand miles".<sup>21</sup> No doubt, Tshaukuesh has more to journey. The exterior journey has indeed been long, difficult – and joy-filled. The interior journal has no doubt been arduous – and life-giving. We leave the final word to Tshaukuesh – a mother, a grandmother, a living witness

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

to the beauty of faith, hope and love in the boreal forests of eastern Canada. She is a living witness to the care of our common home, the common home the Innu call *nutshimit*.

*I was walking by myself one beautiful day. The dogs were behind me and I had my tea and biscuits and I wasn't afraid of anything, not wild animals, nothing. When I got to the marsh I sat down for a rest and a cup of tea, just me and the dogs. The trees were swaying in the wind, all different kinds of trees. It looked as though they were dancing. I wondered why I was all alone, why people didn't want to walk with me when I'm trying to protect the land and the animals, our culture, our children, our way of life. There'll always be money, but if the land is gone, it's gone. I hope people will understand this one day. In the meantime, I'll just keep trying to make a good meshkanau for future generations. I feel as though the dancing trees are my friends, as if they're saying to me, "Don't worry. We're here and we know you care about us. Don't cry in your heart. We're still here, still dancing." It was a clear day and I could see the mountains. Then I put my thermos away again and started walking.<sup>22</sup>*



**Elizabeth Yeoman** worked with Tshaukuesh to translate and edit her book, *Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive* (University of Manitoba Press, 2019). She is also the author of a book about that collaboration, *Exactly What I Said: Translating Words and Worlds* (University of Manitoba Press, forthcoming). She lives in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada.

*Original in English*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.