

**Ila Bussidor and Üstün Bilgen-Reinart. *Night Spirits. The Story of the Relocation of the Sayisi Dene.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000, 152 pages. ISBN: 0-88755-643-4**

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In autumn a chartered plane takes some members of a small band of the Sayisi Dene Natives of today's Manitoba, who live on the south shores of Tadoule Lake in the northern part of the province, on a flight to some remote area in the "wilderness" where they organize ritual annual caribou hunting. This is the time when former hunters recall the past heritage in a common effort to give a ceremonial shape to an old functional custom.

*Night Spirits* is the account of a tragedy that happened to this tribe, the story of unsuccessful social engineering forced on them by the Canadian government. The disaster that took the life of a third of the population and destroyed its cultural and social bonds took place not in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries at the time of the colonizing of the land, but quite recently, in the middle of the twentieth century. Within some seventeen years the Sayisi Dene, who belong to the Chipewyan language family, went through (or one could say failed to go through) traumatic change caused by forced relocation from their native land to the outskirts of Churchill. Their story can be described as the moving narration of a people's hardships and the collapse of a community, or it can be regarded as an example of the stupidity and inadequacy of any paternalistic policy undertaken by any government. However, from the anthropological point of view, which I would like to apply here, it is the story of the unbelievably rapid destruction of a culture, substantial patterns of which have been replaced by the worst habits of the White man's world. The real patterns of contemporary Sayisi Dene culture, which is no longer grounded in hunting caribou or any other wild animals, are a far cry from what they were: nowadays the abuse of women, alcoholism and the use of drugs overwhelmingly dictate the conduct of the people's behavior.

The significance of the present work is strengthened by the fact that it is told by the Sayisi Dene themselves, with only the occasional objective comment by Üstün Bilgen-Reinart, a Canadian broadcaster and journalist. And the value of the book derives not so much from the fact that its characters speak about themselves – it is a quite popular misconception to assume that the "view from inside" must always be more valuable than the one from outside – as from the Dene's sincere admission of their own debasement, crimes and abuses against other members of the community.

In the tribal history of the Dene, caribou have been both the source of their welfare and the reason for their decline. A photo of the carcasses of a caribou herd taken by chance in 1955 by a member of an expedition sent by the Manitoba Department of Natural Resources to count wolf and caribou numbers in the northern part of the province became "proof" for the officials that the Dene were killing animals to a much greater extent than would allow them to survive. The "ecological" attitudes of the authorities prevented any real understanding of the hunters' methods of gathering and storing food. For the Dene, leaving killed species under the snow in winter was a natural way of freezing them. Thus, in periods of less successful hunting, when there was a growing threat to the community's survival, people could always go and dig in the snow and find perfectly preserved meat there. But for the photographer, as well as for

the provincial officials, the sight of hundreds of dead and abandoned caribou was proof of the maladjustment of the Dene economy. This led to plans to reduce hunting opportunities in the North, which put the Natives at a great disadvantage. But what turned out to be yet more disastrous was the project to relocate the band to a town.

In August 1956 the Department of Indian Affairs sent a plane to Duck Lake, where the Sayisi Dene community lived, and several hours later the whole population was taken to Churchill. This was the beginning of the catastrophe. The tribe discovered that the government had not provided any housing for them. A year later, the government decided to move the Dene to a particular location and build some houses for them so that they they would lose their “squatter” status. The area between the Roman Catholic and Protestant cemeteries and the water pipeline was chosen. For the next ten years Camp 10, a former army camp, became the area inhabited by the majority of the band. This was a place where alcoholism, rape and feelings of total loss quickly developed. Humiliated by their neighbours, finding no work to do, living in cabins constructed too close to each other, the Dene soon witnessed the disintegration of their community, with alcohol taking control not only of adults but even of children no older than ten.

When it became clear to everybody, even the authorities, that the settlement of the Sayisi Dene in Camp 10 was a disaster, another move was made. Again a particular area was chosen – this time in the southern part of Churchill, a district that later gained the name Dene Village – and once more people were relocated. But after a few relatively good months, the burdens of Camp 10 once again began to weigh down on the people, only with greater force. It is not easy to read the Sayisi people's memories of life at Camp 10.

Despite all the wrongs and injustices committed by the government and provincial authorities against the Sayisi Dene – something that is clearly shown in the book – one reflection, perhaps not made explicit there, may arise. This has to do with the former tribe's culture and heritage. Was it really as ideal, as efficient before the time of relocation as is suggested by the text? Probably not, since the Sayisi Dene had been influenced by the Hudson's Bay Company and involved in competition with other Native groups in the search for animal furs for centuries, which created new needs they had not had before, but were imposed on them by the White traders. Relocation evidently speeded up the process of change and ensured it would take on the most terrifying form, but already the culture of the Sayisi Dene was so weak – weakened by the constant contact with a strange culture that had begun at the beginning of the eighteenth century – that they let others determine their lives. In the book we are given the explanation that the Dene did not understand English, thus letting Canadian officials pursue any policy they wanted. But they must have understood, when the plane came and they were ordered to abandon most of their property, that this did not portend anything good for them. They let others direct their lives. And when a culture lacks any rules to preserve the community, or if these rules are not strong enough, it is social bonds that should keep the community together, especially in times of hardship. The Dene did not pass this first test; the result of the second, which is going on right now, is still unknown.