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SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE 1990 DECENNIAL CENSUS

AT THE AKWESASNE MOHAWK RESERVATION

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SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE 1990 DECENNIAL CENSUS
AT THE AKWESASNE MOHAWK RESERVATION

This paper discusses the implementation of the 1990 Decennial Census at the Akwesasne Reservation (Franklin County, New York) in the context of contemporaneous social and political conditions at Akwesasne. Two reports which are relevant to the present paper were previously submitted to the U.S. Census Bureau. The first described the historical and cultural background of the Reservation; the second provided a preliminary view of circumstances and attitudes which might affect censusing there.¹ As it turns out, some of the predictions offered in the second report did in fact materialize.

In the months prior to carrying out the 1990 Census, political and social divisions at Akwesasne deepened. These were caused by controversies over whether the Reservation should be the site of gambling casinos. Beginning in the 1980's, a number of proprietors had opened gambling casinos as public businesses. Although some residents of the Reservation frequented these establishments, the majority of customers were non-Natives. The casinos attracted non-Native customers from nearby localities as well as from cities as far as away as Montreal, Quebec (80 miles) and Albany, New York (250 miles). Some sectors of Akwesasne society were concerned

¹ "Residence Patterns at the St. Regis Reservation." 1989.
Report to the U.S. Bureau of the Census.
"The Census Process at the St. Regis Reservation." 1989.
Report to the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

about the existence of gambling on the Reservation from the very beginning although the issue did not become immediately controversial. However, as the number of casinos increased over the years, and as their appearance became more obtrusive and gaudy, more people began to raise objections. A number of interrelated worries were voiced. Some people feared that the businesses would attract "undesirable" outsiders who might cause problems of rowdiness or who might engage in illegal activities such as use or sale of illegal drugs. Fears were also expressed that some young people of Akwesasne might become involved in these activities.

As more people publicly voiced objections to the existence of the casinos, the people who operated the businesses and their supporters also became more vocal. During 1990, confrontations between supporters and opponents of gambling became more frequent. They evidently sometimes became physical confrontations, either by direct threats or actions or by damage to property including houses and vehicles.

In this context, the determined efforts of a number of employees of the Akwesasne Tribal Council, especially Diane Hearne and Angus McDonald, to prepare for and implement the 1990 Census were commendable. Numerous activities were carried out to alert Akwesasne residents to the up-coming 1990 Census and to discuss procedures that would be used. These activities included seminars, meetings, public appearances at various community events, discussions on the local Akwesasne radio station, as well as house-to-house canvassing. The population was clearly very well informed

about the Census.

In the preliminary stage, two sorts of objections to the Census were occasionally voiced by residents. One was a general feeling of apathy toward government programs. Since many people at Akwesasne doubt that the federal government is particularly interested in or committed to improving local conditions, they wondered why they should bother complying with an official initiative. Even though Tribal and census workers took pains to explain the benefits in federal funding which would hopefully accrue to Akwesasne if their numbers were accurately reported, some apathy remained. Secondly, given the context of the political situation at Akwesasne, some people became increasingly distrustful of government intentions. Census questions which ask for people's names, places of residence, etc. stimulated concern that this information could be used to identify and locate individuals for policing purposes. Whether this could or would be done is beside the point. The issue is that such a perception exists for some people.

A third potential problem which was coincidental was that the Tribal Planning Committee was distributing a long questionnaire for a survey in which they collected information about Akwesasne households. Although there was no contradiction between the Planning Committee's work and that of the Census, the timing may have elicited some resistance to the Census simply on the basis of a lack of time or patience.

The 1990 Census proceeded according to federal regulations in

April 1990. Census questionnaires were sent to each household. Recipients were advised not to return the forms by mail. They were told that the surveys would be collected by census enumerators. This procedure was subsequently followed.

Later, in June and July, a post-census local review was conducted. It was organized by Angus McDonald who employed eight residents of Akwesasne as enumerators. Three main employees conducted a final survey of the entire Reservation.

Before discussing the results of the Census, some additional facts concerning the Census Bureau's objectives and the research project should be presented. As a necessary step in my fieldwork and analysis of the Census process at Akwesasne, I requested official permission from the Tribal Council to conduct the "alternative enumeration" research. This request was put forward a number of times beginning in the fall of 1989. Unfortunately, due to the increasing turmoil over the issues of gambling on the Reservation, the Tribal Council did not initially respond to the request. Then while subsequent requests were pending, additional problems within the Tribal Council itself became manifest. The Council is composed of three members, elected for two-year terms which are staggered. Elections for one of the seats was looming. The man whose position was contested had been a vocal opponent of gambling at Akwesasne while the two remaining councillors were supporters of the rights of residents to operate casinos. As might be expected, this election became quite contentious. The incumbent lost the election and was replaced by someone in agreement with the

other two councillors. After the election, a number of tribal employees who were opposed to gambling, or at least leaned in that direction, were fired by the Council. Included in this group was the Tribal Administrator who had been supportive of my application for permission to conduct the research. In fact, she had been speaking to the Councillors on my behalf. Although this association may have contributed to a lack of positive response by the Council, the political turmoil at Akwesasne was no doubt the primary cause. Given the situation there, the idea of researchers conducting surveys was not particularly welcomed. Although I was told on several occasions that the Council would formally take up my request at the next meeting, it seems that this never came to pass. I think that rather than give me an outright denial of permission, the Council decided to ignore the request.

As it developed, the situation at Akwesasne became increasingly difficult over the months during which the Census was implemented. In spring 1990, tensions increased significantly, demonstrated by more numerous and hostile verbal interactions and damage to property. Each side in the controversy erected blockades of roads near the casinos and/or leading to certain residential areas. Then in July 1990, police forces from New York State and from the Canadian federal and provincial governments entered the Reservation and occupied both the American and Canadian sections of Akwesasne. These forces closed down the casinos, erected barricades around the borders of the Reservation, and refused entry to anyone without an identity card documenting their enrollment on

either the American Tribal or Canadian Band rolls. The total occupation and blockade lasted about three weeks. However, an unusual level of police presence has remained to this day.

In the context of these events, which have had social and personal repercussions in people's lives, the Census enumerators from Akwesasne managed to conduct a detailed community-wide survey. According to enumerators' reports, information was obtained from 90-100% of residents. One person told me that there were approximately 10% of individuals refused to respond to any questions. However, information about most of these people was subsequently obtained from relatives and neighbors. The enumerators solidly believe that their coverage accounted for 100% of Akwesasne households.

Of the people who refused to comply with the Census, most stated that they did not trust government intentions and did not want to participate in any government program. This distrust was especially elicited by questions about one's income. Indeed, a number of people who did comply in general refused to give information on economic status, expressing similar attitudes. They feared that financial information might be relayed to the Internal Revenue Service. According to enumerators, such refusals accounted for approximately 5-10% of those who otherwise complied with the Census.

When re-sampling was conducted throughout the Reservation, a substantial number of people were resistant to being questioned again. Despite their annoyance, most people answered the

questions, although the refrain "don't come back," was not uncommon.

As a result of the Census, 751 occupied housing units were located and identified. An additional 159 units were identified as unoccupied. The final population figures, pending subsequent adjustments, list 1978 residents of Akwesasne.

Since I could not carry out the alternative enumeration research, I cannot independently confirm these figures. I can only restate the strong conviction of the three main enumerators that their survey was complete.

According to recent statistics, tribal enrollment for Akwesasne is 3242.² This means that approximately 1264 people who are enrolled in the Akwesasne Mohawk Tribe are not resident on the Reservation. The actual number of Tribal members who are non-residents is probably somewhat higher than 1264 because the resident population figure of 1978 includes some people who live at Akwesasne but are not members of the Tribe. I would estimate that the number of such resident non-members is small. Akwesasne differs from many other reservations in the United States because it carefully restricts non-Tribal members from residing on reservation land. That is, an individual who is not a member of the Tribe cannot set up an independent household at Akwesasne, nor can a family composed entirely of non-Tribal members do so. Therefore, those people who are non-members but who live at

² Statistics obtained from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Washington DC, February 1991. Figures cited for December 1989.

Akwesasne are married to or are living with Tribal members whose residence there is in accordance with Tribal regulations.

The surmise that resident non-members at Akwesasne constitute a small group is supported by data obtained in 1980. Statistics indicated 1763 Native residents and only 39 non-Native residents (total = 1802).³ Natives therefore accounted for 97.8% of the total population. Although I did not obtain disaggregated statistics for 1990, there is no reason to assume any significant change in percentages.

Questions can be raised about the location of Tribal members who do not reside at Akwesasne. Some of these people may be living in distant cities where they work. Numerous Akwesasne people, especially men, obtain work in Rochester, Syracuse, Buffalo and New York City. Many of these workers are employed in structural steel construction. In the past, many of them established semi-permanent or alternative residences in the cities where they were working. However, since 1980 and the decline in construction in cities in the Northeast, most of these people have resumed their permanent residences at Akwesasne. I would guess that many of the Tribal members who no longer live at Akwesasne are either married to or living with non-Native partners.

For comparative purposes, I would like to include statistics obtained concerning the portions of Akwesasne which are located in Canada. The following table compares resident and non-resident

³ Population statistics obtained from Indian Reservations: a state and federal handbook. 1986. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., p. 202.

figures for the two sections:⁴

	<u>Resident</u>	<u>Non-Resident</u>	<u>Total</u>
New York	1978	1264	3,242
Canada	8170	2084	10,254

A pattern which emerges from these data is that the proportion of people who belong to the New York Akwesasne Tribe but do not reside on the Reservation (39%) is much higher than the proportion of people belonging to the Canadian Akwesasne Band but do not reside there (20%). I cannot offer an explanation at this time for the marked difference attested here, although I believe it would be a significant topic for further investigation.

A second point can be brought out when considering these figures in light of the amount of land comprising each part of the reservation. Akwesasne includes 14,640 acres in New York and 9115 acres in Canada. Therefore, the amount of territory in Canada is approximately 2/3 the size of the land in New York but it is home to more than four times the number of people in New York. This obviously means that the people residing in New York are much more dispersed than those in Canada. From observation of the community for more than twenty years, I would definitely confirm this pattern. The village of St. Regis, located in Quebec, is the most

⁴ Population statistics for Ontario were obtained from fact sheets from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, Ontario Region, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Figures are for December 1989. Population statistics for Quebec were obtained from The Aboriginal People in Quebec, Quebec Secretariat aux affaires autochtones, 1988, p. 19.

densely-settled area at Akwesasne. Another Canadian section, Cornwall Island located in Ontario, is also more densely settled than other rural areas of Akwesasne in New York.

A further point worthy of mention relates to the issue of tribal enrollment and residence. If the Census Bureau followed the Supreme Court's ruling that a Native American's place of Tribal membership be considered her/his residence, then Tribal administrations would benefit significantly. Since population statistics are used as bases for allocation of funds by government agencies, increased funding would become available for the use of Native Tribes. Such resources are obviously sorely needed by reservation communities. Since 39% of Akwesasne Tribal members do not reside on the Reservation, the possibility of including their numbers for funding purposes would make a significant contribution to the Tribe's resources. It is important to stress that many people listed as non-resident return periodically and often spend substantial amounts of time at Akwesasne. They also often leave their children in the care of grandparents or other relatives for lengthy stays. These people therefore do make use of tribal resources. Allowing Tribal governments to receive funding on the basis of such an expanded population base actually is more in keeping with the true nature of their community than restricting funds to an artificial statistic.

Census data reveal that housing has been an important area of improvement at Akwesasne in the past decade. In 1980, 576 housing

units were identified, 516 of which were listed as occupied.⁵ In the 1990 Census, enumerators identified 910 housing units, 751 of which were occupied. The number of housing units has therefore markedly increased in the last ten years. During this period, the Akwesasne Tribe has increased their outlay of monies for housing and their efforts have had good results. If Tribal enrollment statistics were used as bases for federal and state funding, additional resources would be at the Tribe's disposal. These funds would increase the Tribe's ability to improve the standard of living of its people.

In summary, the 1990 census procedures at Akwesasne were quite successful. This positive outcome can be attributed to a number of factors beginning with the decision of the Tribal Council to fully cooperate with implementation of the census. Through employees of the Tribal government, principally Diane Hearne and Angus McDonald, a broad approach was developed to make Akwesasne residents aware of the census procedures and goals. Their Census Awareness programs included a wide range of notices and activities, developed locally and in coordination with the Census Bureau's Tribal Liaison officers. The purposes of the census count and the benefits which would potentially be received after an accurate count were well explained.

Positive participation by the community in the census was further aided by full use of local enumerators. Because of their

⁵ Housing data were obtained from Indian Reservations: a state and federal handbook. 1986. Jerfferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., p.202.

personal and kinship networks, these people were well received and obtained the cooperation of nearly all residents. Their success can also be attributed to their own commitment to achieve an accurate count. Since they were members of the community, they perceived their direct role in benefiting their own people.

The positive response at Akwesasne is especially noteworthy because of the political and social context in which it took place. Given the conflicts over casino gambling and the resentment aroused by the heavy police presence on the Reservation, one might expect people to refuse to comply with government initiatives. However, people at Akwesasne clearly differentiated between the intervention of New York State authorities and the Census Bureau's procedures. It may well be that had the Census originated from the state rather than federal bureaucracy, a less positive response would have been obtained.

In any case, it is instructive to compare the census process at Akwesasne with that at the Onondaga Reservation located near Syracuse, New York. At Onondaga, the local governmental body refused to participate in implementing the census. Onondaga is governed by a council of traditional hereditary clan chiefs, sanctioned by the constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy. In fact, it is the only Iroquois reservation to be officially governed by hereditary chiefs. They chose not to take part in the 1990 census, as they had also done in 1980. This decision was based on their attitude toward Iroquois sovereignty. They believe that the government (federal or state) has no legal jurisdiction over their

affairs. Although the Council cannot interfere with Census mailings, their lack of administrative support led predictably to community noncompliance.

In conclusion, then, the success of the census at Akwesasne can be attributed both to efforts of the Census Bureau's Tribal Liaison program and to local participation in planning, preparing and implementing the procedures.