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Horde, Band and Tribe: Northern Approaches

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Horde, Band, and Tribe: Northern Approaches

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Frontispiece

Femmes Esclaves (Dené women of the Slavey tribe, circa 1860) by Emile Petitot. Published in *En Route pour la Mer Glaciale*, 1887.
In 1889, the young Franz Boas attacked the notion that the evolutionary "primitiveness" of American Indian languages was revealed in their alleged phonological imprecisions, termed *alternating sounds*. Rather, Boas demonstrated, the actuality lay in the "alternating apperceptions" of the European listener, "who apperceives unknown sounds [of an exotic tongue] by means of the sounds in his own language." In the struggle to comprehend whatever may be actuality, even more tyrannical than the culture-bound apperception has been, as Boas also recognized, the culture-bound conception. Such intellectual thralldom is well demonstrated in the history of anthropological thought and research on hunter-gatherer or foraging societies.

Even after research in the field on foraging peoples began to be undertaken by a few professional anthropologists in the decades before World War II, residues of nineteenth-century suppositions blocked comprehension of the nature and structure of the land-utilizing groups in these societies. Those residues tended to dominate theory building until a spate of ethnographic fieldwork in the 1950s and 1960s burst the confines of received knowledge and preconception.

In the history of anthropology, thinking about foraging societies has revolved around three word-concepts: *the horde*, originally conceived as a congregated though mobile local group; *the band*, sometimes identical to the horde, sometimes less sharply formulated; and *the tribe*, taken to be some sort of maximal societal entity.
The concept of the horde was the first focus of formula making and theory building. Short of fantasy formulations, the horde was latterly incorporated into the problem of the band. Although collections of contiguous hordes or bands had long been lumped together under some sort of tribal rubric by investigators, the question of what a tribe of foragers might or might not be has been the last to be addressed critically by anthropologists. The concepts of horde and band, especially, tended to be reified as “things” that shared the defining characteristic of being fixed and solidary in personnel and in owned, circumscribed, and defended territory.

In the last third of the nineteenth century, the horde in anthropological literature was conceived, not as a vast nomadic swarm as in the Golden Horde, but as a small crew of foraging “savages.” Theorizing about the horde took two avenues, both of them in the service of schema of the universal cultural evolution of humankind from a primordial state. One approach we may term once-upon-a-time constructs of primal man. The other approach viewed extant foragers as exemplars or living fossils of the earliest stages of human society.

The once-upon-a-time constructs of the primordial horde served as the base for theories, in various combinations, of the origin of “group marriage,” of “wife capture,” of the incest taboo and exogamy, of totemism, and of the Oedipus complex and the patrilineal clan (Freud’s brother clan). One theorist, the Edinburgh lawyer J. S. McLennan, emphasized a primordial state of chronic warfare and territorial defense among hordes.

In charting mankind’s ascent from the brute, the nature of sexual relations within the horde was critical to these formulations. McLennan and the Rochester lawyer Lewis Henry Morgan postulated indiscriminate mating in the primordial horde. The alternative once-upon-a-time view was of the primordial horde as a patriarchal sexual group. “Looking far enough back into the stream of time,” wrote Charles Darwin, “the most probable view is that [primeval man] aboriginally lived in small communities, each with a single wife or if more powerful with several, whom he jealously guarded against all other men.” Alternatively, Darwin speculated, “he may not have been a social animal, and yet have lived with several wives, like the gorilla.” Here Darwin was adverting to an account published 35 years earlier by an American missionary, Dr. Thomas Savage. According to Dr. Savage, his native informants of the Gabon region of West Africa “agreed that but one adult male is seen in the [gorilla] band; when the young male grows up, the contest takes place for mastery, and the strongest, by killing and driving out the others,
establishes himself as the head of the community.” Dr. Savage’s gorilla as sexual despot, not a valid portrayal, informed Sigmund Freud’s 1913 formulation in *Totem and Taboo* of the primal, parricidal horde.

Herbert Spencer was as thoroughgoing a nineteenth-century social evolutionist as one can find. But he made no recourse to hypothetical constructs of primeval society. He turned directly to the ethnographic record of his time. “Scattered over many regions,” he wrote, “there are minute hordes—still extant samples of the primordial type of society.” His “samples” included Australian Aborigines, Tasmanians, Andaman Islanders, South African Bushmen, Eskimos, Fuegians, and “Digger Indians” of the American Great Basin. He rightly saw that, at the hunting-gathering level of technology, environmental constraints kept foragers ordinarily in small mobile groups that might on occasion be able to congregate with like “hordes.” In his earlier writings, Franz Boas accepted the reality of “a number of primitive hordes” in the ethnographic record, among whom the “solidarity of the horde” required the destruction of every stranger, seen as an enemy. Here Boas fell victim to misemphases in the early literature on Australian Aborigines.

It was on the Aborigines of Australia that the term-concept *horde* became focused in the ethnographic literature. In an 1885 article, A. W. Howitt and Lorimer Fison, who had direct field contact with the few Aborigines still surviving in New South Wales, applied the term *horde* to what they also termed geographical or local divisions within the tribe. These local divisions they distinguished from social divisions predicated on principles of descent on which, in their interpretation, marriage regulations were based. In their reconstruction, each horde of a tribe occupied a certain definite hunting ground. Horde membership of males was fixed from generation to generation, and hordes were usually exogamous. In their words, “the daughter may go away when she marries but the son remains in the father’s horde.” A close reading of their writings indicates that their local divisions or hordes were not coterminous with on-the-ground foraging camp groups, which might include men’s sons-in-law, fathers-in-law, and other adult men not linked through male-to-male descent lines. But these camp groups they alluded to only in passing.

It remained for A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, an anthropologist trained at Cambridge, to extend Howitt and Fison’s patrilineal horde as the model of aboriginal local organization throughout the Australian continent. With some modifications Radcliffe-Brown reiterated his model of the horde from his first paper in 1913 until the final one published after his death in 1955. In his final statement
The unity of the horde and its connections with a certain territory result from the fact that all the married men of a given horde are members of one particular [patrilineal] clan. A woman belongs to her father’s clan and to her husband’s horde.

In Radcliffe-Brown’s constructions, the horde “regularly cooperate[s] in the food quest,” “regularly lives together in one camp,” and is “the primary land-owning group,” “each horde owning and occupying a certain area of the country.” In designating the horde as “the primary land-owning group,” Radcliffe-Brown falsely equated the male composition of the on-the-ground foraging group with the male members of the patrilineal clan, which collectively owns a religious “estate” of sacred localities. Radcliffe-Brown’s overriding message was that the horde as a local group was residentially solidary, bounded, and fixed through the male descent line and through “ownership,” “possession,” and “dominion” over a territory. Radcliffe-Brown’s eminence as a theorist of social anthropology surely worked to fix his model of the residentially solidary horde occupying its own territory so firmly in the minds of the world’s anthropologists.

The work of the American anthropologist Julian Steward in the 1930s provided the foundation for modern approaches to socioterritorial units and their composition in societies of foragers. Steward sought to determine “cross-cultural regularities which arise from similar adaptive processes and similar environments.” From this perspective of “cultural ecology,” as he termed it, he analyzed the available literature on hunting-gathering peoples around the world. He identified three forms of socioterritorial organization among these foraging peoples.

One, the “family level of sociocultural integration,” found its sole example in his own intensive field data on the Shoshonean-speaking Indian peoples of the Great Basin of the western United States. These included Spencer’s “Digger Indians.” Reconstructing from elderly informants the movements and social relationships among these peoples before the advent of the white man, Steward pronounced them lacking in the “band level” of organization in that they lacked at a suprafamilial level “permanent groups of fixed membership.”

As the second form of integration, Steward accepted Radcliffe-Brown’s formulation of the exogamous patrilineal horde among the Australian Aborigines, though he abandoned the term horde for band, as I shall do henceforth. From the scanty evidence available to him, Steward attributed this form of organization not only to the Aborigines of Australia but to the Negritos of the Congo, the Bushmen of South Africa, and certain other hunting-gathering peoples. Steward assumed that there was an
inherent strain toward the patrilineal band form of organization in foraging societies unless special environmental variables intervened.

The third type of organization he termed the *composite hunting band*. In Steward's interpretation of the evidence, the composite band consisted of "many unrelated nuclear . . . families . . . integrated to form . . . bands . . . on the basis of constant association and cooperation" rather than "of actual or alleged kinship," as in the patrilineal band. He attributed this form of organization to the hunting peoples throughout subarctic North America in "aboriginal times," including the Dené tribes with whom I was to work. The ecological basis of the composite band arose, he argued, from the opportunity or necessity for subarctic hunters to congregate regularly to hunt large game herds, such as caribou and musk-ox. These composite bands were, in Steward's formulation, "probably not only the political unit but also the land owning and subsistence social unit" among subarctic peoples.

Steward's comparative work was a profound advance in ethnological thinking about structure and causality in the socioterritorial organization of foraging peoples. Yet his formulations suffered from a triple handicap. He remained constrained by presumptions of *boundedness* in the form of "owned" and delimited territories and in the form of fixed membership of the band and, as both cause and consequence of these presumptions, a third presumption: that the band was the singular significant concept for the comprehension of the socioterritorial organization of foraging peoples. Since his own meticulous reconstruction of social groupings and family movements among the Indians of the Great Basin showed these three presuppositions to be invalid for the Shoshoneans, he was forced to the conclusion of "no bands" among those peoples. By adhering to these presuppositions in assessing the data from other parts of the world, Steward went astray in regard to his constructs of both the so-called patrilineal band and the composite hunting band.

**II**

Steward's constructions were the state of knowledge when I first went to the subarctic in 1951 to carry out field research among the Indians of Canada's Northwest Territories. All but the southern edge of this vast land was then inaccessible by rail, road, or telephone. In 1951, there were only two published field reports on the Indians of the region by professional ethnologists. Their work, carried out in 1913 and 1928-29, was in the "old-fashioned" ethnographic idiom that attended only to salvaging evidence of putative aboriginal culture traits. Trained at
Chicago where the Radcliffe-Brown school of "social anthropology" was emphasized, my goal was certainly not to inventory culture traits, aboriginal or otherwise. I aimed at a "functionalist" study of contemporary life. In any event, the received anthropological opinion was that the traditional social order of these Indians was now gone and unrecoverable, victim of the fur trade and its assumed consequences.

The total set of linguistically related Indians of interior Alaska and the western two-thirds of subarctic Canada may be collectively termed Dene. Dene, in its dialectic variants, denotes "people" and speaker's "own kind of people," as well as "person" and "male human being." (There are also southern Dene, migrants to the American Southwest about 500 years ago and known to us as Apaches and Navajos.) The historical and ethnographic literature has parcelled out the northern Dene under various "tribal" rubrics. Three such agglomerates in Canada's Northwest Territories are the Slavey, the Hare, and the Dogrib Indians (figure 1). The site of my first fieldwork was in the Slavey hamlet of Lynx Point (a pseudonym), where 56 Indians lived in log cabins on the banks of the great Mackenzie River that drains into the Arctic Ocean.

In the course of my fieldwork among the Lynx Point Slavey, I learned how the community had grown through births and recruitment by marriage from a tiny, mobile hunting and trapping group linked by parent-child and sibling ties that had localized at Lynx Point and built the first cabin there sometime around 1910. By the end of my stay with the Slaveys of Lynx Point, one of the number of questions that had been generated by the field data was: Was this kind of kin-community—whose nuclear families were linked by primary kin ties, parent-child and/or sibling-sibling, one to the other—a unique or recent development in northern Dene socioterritorial organization? If not, how was this structure to be reconciled with Steward's large "composite hunting band" composed of "unrelated families" to which he had assigned the aboriginal Dene? A search of the historical as well as the ethnographic literature, combined with fieldwork in subsequent years among neighboring Dene, the Hare Indians, and, especially, the Dogribs, began to clarify levels and patterns in northern Dene socioterritorial groups and organization. One thing that became clear was that there was no one singular entity that could be specified as the band in Dene society.

The spur to analyze rigorously my field data on socioterritorial groupings among the Slavey, Hare, and Dogrib came from the publication in 1962 of a book titled *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*. The author, Elman Service, rejected Steward's three forms of
Major "tribal" divisions of the northern Dené Indians. The Mackenzie Dené, as discussed in the lecture, are comprised of the Chipewyan, Slave (Slavey), Dogrib, Mountain, Bearlake, Hare, and eastern Kutchin peoples.

ecologically based socioterritorial organization among foraging peoples. Service argued, on formal structural grounds, that "the patrilocal band [Steward's patrilineal band] is early; it seems an almost inevitable kind of organization." Back to square one with Radcliffe-Brown's Australian horde as the prototypic model of socioterritorial organization for all foraging peoples. Wherever the patrilocal band is not in evidence among historical foragers, Service argued, it has disappeared in consequence of the catastrophic impact of expanding world systems.

I shall recur briefly to Service's formulation in light of both my research and that of other field ethnologists. At this point, however, we should take a short look at the long run of contact between the Dené of the Mackenzie region and the Western world.
Recorded history began on their home ground when the fur trader Alexander Mackenzie made first contact with these peoples in his voyage of exploration down the Mackenzie River to the Arctic Ocean in 1789. In precontact times the ancestors of these Dené were probably as independent of alien social and cultural forces as it is possible to conceive. They relied on no other peoples for raw materials or items of technology. Their world contained no societal entities holding dominance or hegemony over any other. By this absolute standard of sociocultural autonomy, the Dené’s voluntary involvement in the fur trade—as it developed after Mackenzie’s voyage—marked the first time in their history when they entered into what came to be a needful relationship with another sociocultural system. Certainly the Dené were in a disadvantaged relationship in that, to advance their material well-being, they needed the trade goods of the fur trader far more than the trader’s world needed their furs. But the retreat from their former absolute sociocultural independence was partial and circumscribed. The Dené societal groups continued to manage their own affairs and feed and otherwise provide for the well-being of their members. No doubt the unquestioned worth of European technology, plus the traders’ cultural arrogance, “broke trail” for the God-given authority assumed by the missionaries who entered the region in the 1860s.

Isolated and insulated by their subarctic domain, the Mackenzie Dené had, until World War II, little involvement with the Eurocanadian world except through the narrow and selective channels offered by the fur trader and the missionary. When in 1959 I went to the Dogrib hamlet at Marten Lake, I found a community comparable to the Lynx Point Slavey community of 1951. By the late 1950s the Canadian government was introducing changes throughout the north (including day schools, effective medical services, and transfer payments) that were affecting even the most isolated groups. Still, in their isolation from most of the daily impact of the “modern” world—no roads, no television, little or no command of English, infrequent contacts with whites—these “bush” communities had retained much of a way of life that had endured for 100 or more years. With the perspective gained from the historical literature, I realized that I was seeing the end of a sociocultural era that I came to term contact traditional.

To characterize the classic contact-traditional era: the only Whites in the land are the personnel of the trading post and, in the course of time, the mission. Both are usually at the same site. Indians have no permanent dwellings at the trading “fort” or elsewhere. They live out in the land, taking moose and caribou, fish, and the snowshoe hare. By 1905 or so,
a few begin to build log cabins at the fort or at a major fishery or other site occupied for several weeks during the year. Thus the small Slavey hunting-trapping group of 1910 grew into the settlement I knew in 1951. But, generally, Indians remain mobile, with ammunition, nets, and a few staples (flour, tea, tobacco) from the trader, often on credit. They leave the fort in August before "freeze-up" to prepare for winter in the bush. Subsistence hunting, fishing, and snaring is combined with taking of furs during the winter. Trading gangs come to the fort at New Year's and debts are paid with furs. With new supplies, they return to bush camps or hamlets. In March-April, furs are again traded and supplies obtained. Some time after "breakup" in late May, they come to the fort with the beaver and muskrat pelts taken in the "spring hunt." Ingatherings at the fort are occasions for festivities: feasts, dances, gambling games.

This way of life endured for over 100 years, up to the 1950s when events arising in the modern national purpose began to reshape the native scene. Certainly there was change, ideational, technological, and social. The sedentarization, growth, and stabilization of personnel of the Lynx Point Slavey community since 1910 is a case in point. But on the whole, the process of change was slow and untraumatic, even after the missionary joined the trader as the other agent of contact and acculturation.

III

My pursuit of social anthropological questions has gained much from taking a historical perspective. In my first foray into historical reconstruction, I surmised that early epidemics of European-derived diseases might have irreversibly altered Dené socioterritorial organization. But research on population levels within the historical era and continuing assessment of ecological imperatives and the historical record, interpreted in light of the specificities gained from contemporary field evidence and Dené oral history, has allowed me a substantial degree of confidence that my reconstruction of groups in the contact-traditional era holds in basic outline and principles for aboriginal socioterritorial organization as well.

In analyzing socioterritorial groups among the Mackenzie Dené, I addressed any form of human occupation lasting one night or more at a particular locale or over a range in respect to the nature of the social group constituted by the occupants of the locale or range. Setting aside for the moment the question of tribe, I concluded that the traditional socioterritorial organization of the Mackenzie Dené took the form, not of a single kind of "band," but of three analytically distinguishable kinds of groups that I designated task groups, local bands, and regional bands.
The task group is of brief duration and is explicitly created for exploitative activities. In size it may range from a hunting-trapping group of two or three families to perhaps a dozen families at a seasonal fishing camp. Sometimes the task group is composed only of men, such as a men's fast-traveling caribou hunting party, with women and children left in camp or settlement.

Sometimes a small group of related nuclear families, usually focused around a core set of siblings, endures for a few or many years as a community body resident in one settlement or, formerly, as a mobile camp group. Thus, duration jells a task group into a local group or local band, as in the case of the Lynx Point Slavey. The local band may comprise as few as two or three conjugal pairs and their children.

The regional band has tribelike characteristics. Its total range yields sufficient materials for the necessities of life (famine periods excepted) so that within its domain the regional band can endure as an identity for generations. Some of the constituent members of the regional band may be spatially and socially oriented as a local group. But the total constituency of the regional band is larger (one or two dozen nuclear families), and it lacks continual nucleation of camp or settlement. Its members are commonly scattered over its range in smaller groups. The dimensions of the regional band’s range are defined in terms of its “roads,” the main routes of movement for its constituent groups. The regional band’s zone of exploitation thus has axes rather than boundaries or edges. Some roads lead from one regional group’s range into their neighbors’.

Traditionally, from the patterns of human ecology that the region imposed upon the Indians exploiting it, the region and its people are socially defined. At any moment in time, any individual—let us call him Joe Dogrib—can be placed in several socioterritorial identities. As a member of one of several Dogrib households currently hunting muskrats at the locale kwekateli, Joe and that task group are kwekatelihot’i (Water-over-Rocks-Place People) on the basis of their temporary residence at that site. Since Joe has a cabin in a local-group hamlet on Snare Lake, he will, in appropriate context, be identified as one of the House-Place-at-Ghost-Channel People. He is equally detsilahot’i or Edge-of-the-Woods Man, thereby specifying his regional band identity. Joe Dogrib’s multiple territorial-group identities demonstrate how misleading a simplistic definition of “the band” must be.
Figure 2
Primary kinship bonds between conjugal pairs in the Lynx Point Slavey community, 1951.

a: closest genealogical relations between married (and widowed) persons. Men are indicated by triangles, women by circles. Marriage is indicated by the equal sign; open-end equal sign indicates that the deceased spouse was never resident.
b: primary consanguine relative relationships—parent (P), son (S), daughter (D), brother (B), and sister (Z)—between conjugal pairs as units.

The documentary and field evidence laid to rest the idea of the Dené "band" being composed of "unrelated families." The Dené socioterritorial groupings that I have called bands, local or regional, as well as multiple-family task groups, have a mode of alliance and recruitment based on the principle of social linkage through bilateral primary kinship bonds from one conjugal pair to another (figure 2). Thus, between men, not only kin ties to father and brothers but affinal links through wife and married sisters serve as the mechanism of potential affiliation with one group or another. By these modes of sponsorship, a couple may form a task group with others, join another camp group or local group, or move from one region to the next.
IV

In the 1950s and early 1960s, at least two dozen anthropologists were in the field working with those foraging peoples who still maintained at least some of their traditional subsistence pursuits. I had the opportunity for interaction and exchange with a number of these ethnologists in the course of three conferences that were held in 1966 and 1967. Beside the Slavey, Hare, and Dogrib of western Canadian subarctic, foraging peoples studied by ethnologists explicitly concerned with socioterritorial organization included

In the eastern Canadian subarctic, the Montagnais and Mistassini Cree of Quebec and the Round Lake Ojibwa of northern Ontario;

Along the central Canadian arctic coast, the Iglulik Eskimo, Copper Eskimo, and Netsilik Eskimo;

In Africa, !Kung Bushman groups of the Kalihari Desert, the Mbuti Negritos of the Ituri rain forest, and the savannah-dwelling Hadza of Tanzania;

In India, the Paliyans of the southern tip of India and the Birhor of northeast India, both enclaved forest folk;

And, in Australia, the Walbiri of the central desert and the Gidjingali of northeastern Arnhem Land.

Also shown on the map (figure 3) are the Shoshoneans, Fuegians, Tasmanians, and Andamanese treated by Steward and Spencer.

I should remark, parenthetically, that fieldwork by a more recent generation of ethnologists is currently under way among foragers in these areas and, in addition, in Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and lowland South America.

Several major conclusions emerged from the field studies of these ethnologists. (1) Territoriality, in the sense of bounded, defended territory, is rare, if it exists. Regional groups do have territories in the sense of habitual ranges with which—indeed, by which—they are identified, but this is not territoriality in the ethologist's sense. Localized, restricted resource locales may be "owned" or controlled by the group but not the group's or band's range as such. (2) Among contiguous groups in their habitual ranges, membership is fluid. Individuals and families move from one group to another. This fluidity is even more pronounced in respect to residential camp groups or task groups. (3)
Hunter-gatherer or foraging peoples among whom ethnological research was carried out in the 1950s and 1960s. Also included on the map are the Shoshoneans, Fuegians, Andamanese, and Tasmanians, who figured in earlier theoretical formulations on the structure of foraging societies.

With the exception of the local bands of the Birhor of northeast India, no field ethnologist encountered the patrilocal band, of whatever size, either as an actual on-the-ground coresidential camp group or as the exclusive region-occupying or region-exploiting group. Specifically, the Australian field-workers demonstrated that in actuality an Australian socioterritorial group of any size is usually composed of men of different patriclans, whether in coassemblage as a camp-task group or as scattered residents of a range. Challenged by this conclusion, other field ethnologists have since refined and clarified the relationship between the variability of on-the-ground group composition in Australian Aborigine societies and those peoples’ own cultural constructs of the indissoluble bond between the patriclan and its sacred localities that compose its religious estate.

Assessing adaptive strategies, both social and ecological, acted out by individuals, families, and larger units among the world’s foraging peoples, field ethnologists rejected emphatically Service’s formulation of the patrilocal band as “an almost inevitable kind of organization.” What these ethnologists, imbedded in context in the field, had done was to
focus on practice—what people conceive, decide, and do, within the format of a given social and cultural structure. What none of us could counter, of course, were the theoretical presumptions of the necessary bases of order that shaped the argument for the universality of the patrilocal band under pristine conditions. Neither contemporary field ethnologists nor prior observers were encountering peoples under pristine conditions, that is, before any form of contact with greater world systems. In the final analysis, the issue is whether one is willing to opt intellectually for a theoretical once-upon-a-time construct.

V

In the years that have intervened since the excitement of the forager conferences of the late sixties, my research interests on the northern Dené turned to other questions. One recent project, however, led me by indirection to the question of maximal socioterritorial entities, tribal and supratribal, among the northern Dené. In developing a study on the evidence of female infanticide among the Mackenzie Dené in the first half of the nineteenth century, my search of the literature on infanticide brought back the concept of the bounded band or population. The study in question presented computer simulations, modeled from population counts on several Eskimo regional groups or “bands,” of the maximal percent of female infanticide allowable if a small population was not to go extinct in 100, 200, or 300 years. The population unit was posited as socially and genealogically bounded and impermeable. The ethnographic invalidity of this assumption led me to return to questions I had addressed but superficially in my prior work on levels of socioterritorial organization among the Mackenzie Dené: Is there, at any level of inclusiveness, bounded socioterritorial entities among these peoples? If so, what is the quality or nature of that boundedness? What are these Dené that historically have been assigned names such as Slavey, Hare, Dogrib? Are these tribes? More precisely, is there any reality or usefulness to the concept of “the tribe” or some equivalent in respect to Mackenzie Dené peoples? Is “tribe” coterminous with “society”?

It is certain that the peoples that have come to be known as Hare or Slavey or Dogrib aboriginally were not tribes in the sense usually employed by anthropologists. There were no tribalwide chiefs, councils, or other modes of political integration between constituent regional groups or even within those groups. Some 20 years ago, I suggested that for these peoples the largest societal entity, the “tribe” or what have you, is to be defined structurally by “the greatest extension of population
throughout which there is sufficient intermarriage to maintain many-sided social communication.”

At about the same time Joseph Birdsell set forth the idea of the “dialect tribe” among foragers, which, he argued, “both the natives and the anthropologists ... have recognized as a reality.” Within the dialect tribe, speech is homogeneous relative to other tribes. From, especially, the Australian data he established for the dialect tribe a modal value of about 500 persons. In Birdsell’s analysis, “[d]ialectical homogeneity at the simple level of hunters may profitably be viewed as a consequence of the pattern of density in face-to-face communications.” Is it, then, in the dialect tribe that we find a meaningful dimension of socioterritorial boundedness among foragers under aboriginal conditions?

VI

It is the charge and challenge of the ethnohistorian to contextualize a people through time in their matrix of interactive environing variables, inorganic, organic, intersocietal, and intercultural. Even for the documented past, environing variables are elusive of quantification, even specification. “Upstreaming” from the historical toward a reconstruction of the prehistoric allows substantial opportunity for missteps in judgment as to dimensions of change or continuity in sociodemographic manifestations and in the variables that govern them. Although chancy, the enterprise is legitimate as a historical method and may serve as a critical corrective to catastrophist assumptions about the obliterative consequences of contact between foragers and Europeans.

For the remainder of this presentation, I take the broader and longer view of the implications of evidence from the historical era for sociodemographic processes among the precontact Dené. The point at issue is that, unless historically known modes of Dené intergroup social alignment and communication can be demonstrated to have no bearing on prehistoric patterns, it is unjustifiable to posit hypothetical aboriginal Dené populations of some selected size and attributes as bounded populations that are the units of biogenetic or sociocultural survival or extinction.

Let me focus first on the Hare Indians, a Dené people on whom I am currently concentrating in respect to another project. In 1862, the Oblate missionary Petitot identified 422 persons as Hare Indians, most of them resorting to the trading post of Fort Good Hope, on the Mackenzie River near the Arctic Circle. Among the Hare, the mutability of regional bands
and the ranges with which they were identified within the historical era is attested by the inconsistencies contained in the several band lists that have been published since the mid nineteenth century.

One specific kind of mutability must here suffice to provide an example. In the 1860s, Petitot identified two regional bands of Hare who exploited the northern shores of Great Bear Lake. By the early decades of the twentieth century, these two regional groups were no longer identifiable Hare. They had become part of a people self-identified as sahtúgot'íne, Bearlake Indians. The Bearlake Indians are demonstrably a historical amalgamation of “Hare” and “Dogrib” peoples with some infusions of “Slavey” and “Mountain” Indians. Whether or not those particular Hare regional bands of the 1860s suffered population loss—an account by an elderly Dogrib migrant to Great Bear Lake indicates that they did—they did not “die out” in the sense of extinction, either biogenetic or sociocultural. Their descendants have been transmuted into new identities.

During the course of the historical era, the trading forts in the Mackenzie region became foci of social communication among the groups deployed over the land. That today “Hare is a well-defined dialect with little internal diversity,” as attested by the linguists Krauss and Golla, is almost surely the consequence of some 170 years of ingathering and interaction at Fort Good Hope. If Fort Franklin and Fort Norman at either end of the Great Bear River had never existed, that melange genealogically identifiable as descendants of “Hares,” “Dogribs,” and other Dené would probably never have emerged as the “Bearlake Indians” (sahtúgot’íne) now speaking a dialectal “lingua franca,” as Krauss and Golla characterize it. But the fact that trading forts became foci of linguistic, social, and marital interchange did not preclude a flow of visitors and of residence and marriage exchanges between groups attached to different forts and between groups identified on linguistic or historical grounds as different “tribal” entities (figure 4). Native historical traditions recovered in my field research as well as documentary sources also testify to major territorial shifts and intertribal amalgamations within the historical era. These include, besides the emergence of the “Bearlake Indians” from the linguistically disparate groups who came to trade into Fort Franklin-Fort Norman, the “disappearance” of the Yellowknives into the Chipewyan population, the social and linguistic submersion of some of the easternmost Dogribs into the Chipewyans exploiting the southeastern shore of Great Slave Lake, and the creation by joint land occupancy and intermarriage in the nineteenth century of the “Bâtard Loucheux” from Kutchin and Hare and their subsequent absorption into the Hare trading into Fort Good Hope (figure 4). The
evidence is clear that among these Dené peoples neither the regional band nor the "dialect tribe" (when it can be distinguished) is, through extended time, genealogically or territorially encapsulated.

For the Marten Lake regional band of Dogriebs, a population averaging about 120 persons, I was able to establish the premarital "residence" of 74 persons who contracted mutual first marriages between 1911 and 1959: 20 percent of the persons involved came from another regional group. Outmarriage, or band exogamy, is underrepresented, since band members who married out or otherwise joined another regional group could not be included in the tally. In a priest's account of 1911, of the 17 household heads of the Marten Lake band, five (29 percent) are recorded
either as immigrants from Slavey country or sons of Slaveys. Overall rates of such intertribal, interlanguage marriages among the Mackenzie Dené are not known. Judging from a world sample of outmarriages in small populations, the rate would likely be on the order of 20 percent.

In prehistoric and protohistoric times, before trading forts came into existence as foci of interaction, the web of social communication among regional nodes of Dené was probably more diffuse, less centripetal. But there seems no justification for arguing that in those times flows of personnel between regional and supraregional populations and, sometimes, shifts of exploitative ranges of groups did not obtain. No less than in contact-traditional times, major fisheries and passage routes of caribou would encourage seasonal congregations of regional and supraregional populations drawn from broad hinterlands. In the subarctic biome of the prehistoric as well as the historical era, the “constant” has been patchiness and flux, spatial and temporal discontinuities in food resources. Forest fires and successional aftermaths that alter faunal deployment, population crashes of species of food animals, shifts in range and migration routes of caribou due to climatological or other factors are some of the contingencies operating to promote realignments among Dené groups or impel shifts in their exploitative ranges. Short-term and more or less localized crises in food resources are apt to occur every several years, impelling groups to seek food and succorance beyond their usual range. At the other end of the scale there was almost surely the long-term resource crisis that every few generations would bring an extended period of hard times and major human movements over large areas.

At any level of socioterritorial grouping, from one Dené group to another kin linkages by blood and by marriage were both the consequence and the conduit of population flow. Courtship and bride service removed a young man to the girl’s camp group. A Dogrib legend begins “There was a young man with great medicine who wanted to get married. He told his father and mother, ‘I think I will go traveling so I can find some people.’ When he said this, his father and mother knew he wanted to get married.” Sometimes young men remained with their wife’s group after completing bride service. Individual families left one camp group to visit or sometimes to relocate in another group where, usually, a primary relative of the husband or the wife served as sponsor. Any of these movements might occasion a shift in regional band or even “tribal” affiliation. One must envision interactional linkages from one regional node of Dené to surrounding nodes and from those to other groups yet more distant so that there existed an ever-radiating network—perhaps
crochetwork is a more apt image—of sexual, social, cultural, and linguistic communication that transcended socioterritorial entities of the regional band or even "tribal" level. Periods or episodes of hostile relations between one regional or "tribal" population and a neighboring group would produce only a partial and temporary rupture in the network. The conclusion drawn by Christian and Gardner from recent sociolinguistic research in the Fort Liard trading-post community of Slaveys speaks to the point.

Ethnic . . . boundaries are not uniformly agreed upon by the people [under study]. We raise the question whether, in some cases, they even exist objectively, except as artificial constructs, like boundaries between colors; there are no marked discontinuities that would provide unproblematic . . . social or linguistic boundaries to be drawn.

The critical issue is the dimensions and modes of communicative relationships among persons and groups. To return to the Hare Indians of Fort Good Hope, throughout the historical era Fort Good Hope as point of trade has been a centripetal force that has served to intensify the communicative relationships, including marriage, of those Indians trading into it. But those Dené and, perhaps more pronouncedly, their ancestors of the precontact era were imbedded in a yet wider though more tenuous web of communication. Krauss and Golla's characterization of the structure of the linguistic relationships across the entire northern Dené domain treats of the same systematic feature expressed in the communicative mode of language.

[Northern Dene] linguistic relationships . . . cannot be adequately described in terms of discrete family-tree branches. This is because intergroup communication has ordinarily been so constant, and no dialect or language was ever completely isolated from the other for long. The most important differences among [the northern Dené] languages are generally the result of areal diffusion of separate innovations from different points of origin, each language—each community—being a unique conglomerate. . . .

Whatever the immediate, short-term language boundaries, the network of communication in the northern Dené linguistic complex is open-ended. The open-ended structure of this network finds its homologue and its source in the network of Dené sociodemographic communication. Of the Edge-of-the-Woods Dogribs, whose traditional exploitative range fronts on the barrens and on the other sides is bracketed by the ranges of other Dogrib regional groups, a Dogrib commented, "They speak real Dogrib because they got nobody else [no other 'tribe'] to marry."

The structure of the northern Dené social and linguistic network has its own distinctive order, but the principle is not unique. For, among others, Great Basin Shoshone and Australian foragers, Jane Hill rejects on the
basis of linguistic evidence the model of "dialect tribes . . . predominantly endogamous and monolingual" in favor of the "area network," as she terms it. Phonological and lexical patterns in the manifestation of the area-network principle differ from one culture area of foragers to another. Another anthropologist has pursued evidence that "variability in these patterns is indicative of different forms of local and long-term adaptive strategies" among different collections of foraging peoples. Variabilities aside, the area network is seen as a "major level of structural significance" that is not a consequence of sociodemographic perturbation or breakdown due to historical contact crises. Rather, it is long-term and systemic. From particular culture-areal research perspectives, I and other forager ethnologists have come to the same conclusion on the grounds that, as Hill puts it, "In ecological terms it is only at the level of the area [a term that at present carries no precise operational definition] that we can see the systematic nature of the long-term mechanisms of homeostasis that allow the survival of human ways of life which involve very simple technologies." I would add the obvious: and the overall survival of those broad areal collections of human populations that are the creators and transmitters of those ways of life.

In conclusion: As genetic or societal congregations, regional bands and larger socioterritorial adhesions among the northern Denë have been potentially evanescent. Seen within the areal-network structure, that evanescence carries reduced import for the continuance of Denë population, society, and culture from far prehistoric times. The questions raised around Denë perdurance in the longer run out of the past bear on the evolutionary processes, biogenetic and cultural, that acted on the foraging forebears of us all.
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