

Toward An Alternative Interpretation

of

Cree Kinship and Social Organization

by

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OF  
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## Abstract

This essay is an attempt to interpret the kinship system and social organization of Cree Indians during the fur trade period within a theoretical framework which is essentially alliance-based. It is maintained that in order to properly understand the process by which Native people came to be highly dependent upon an outside colonial economic system it is necessary to understand not only the mechanisms of colonial practices but also the changes in social organization structured to accommodate the new economic realities. The changes in the kinship system and social organization with the advent of the fur trade are viewed as deliberately patterned changes designed, from the point of view of the providers of raw materials, to deal with a world-wide colonial system which involved trade relations with the representatives of the colonial powers.

An attempt is made to apply to Cree social organization the notion that kinship systems function in regulating the inter-relationships among the constituent groups (lineages, local groups, etc.) of a non-capitalist social formation, and the inter-relationships among individuals as members of these groups. The implicit notion throughout is that a kinship system functions as a means of articulating and reproducing specific alliance modes within non-capitalist societies, in contradistinction to the more conventional view of these types of societies being built up from

kinship relations which are essentially biological phenomena. Individual Cree kinship terms are re-defined according to these notions. Also, what is conventionally referred to as a 'bilateral cross-cousin marriage' system is re-interpreted in such a way that the critical aspect of the system is not the manner of reckoning descent but the manner in which production and labour are organized.

The essay begins with the outlines toward a typology of 'band' societies the purpose of which is to provide the means for systematically describing these types of social formations showing their basic properties to be intimately bound with the nature of production and of different kinds of productive units.

This essay is based on a review of extant literature and not on newly collected data. Therefore, it is general in character and intended to provide a framework for the interpretation of specific Cree groups. It is also, therefore, highly tentative.

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## Introduction

In the anthropological literature on Cree Indians there has not yet appeared a description of Cree social organization which has employed an alliance based conceptual framework. Part of the reluctance to do this has probably been due to the fact that these people have been so long in contact with Europeans that this framework, which has been applied mainly to "traditional" societies has been thought inappropriate. It is probably assumed that the long period of contact has made it impossible to arrive at any estimation of what these alliances were like at some point in the past. The result has been that the study of Cree social organization has lent itself more to the kinds of explanations which attempt to hold as many factors relatively constant as possible, such as the environment, and to interpret social organization strictly in terms of the changing relationships to these factors.

Very often in describing the effects of contact on Cree social organization, the fur trade is implicitly characterized as a large irresistible force which imposed upon the Indians a variety of social changes and technological innovations. What is rarely analyzed are the changes brought about in the social organizations

which are understandable from the point of view of the Indians themselves. It may be of some value to see many of the changes which took place in the Indians' lives as modifications of aboriginal social organization initiated by the Indians themselves. With the fur trade the Indians engaged in new and modified social relations with each other and with the fur traders in ways which they perceived to be in their own best interest. Neither the presence of the fur traders nor the technology which they brought with them entirely and independently account for the changes in social organization. In order for the whole fur trade enterprise to be able to utilize and exploit Indian labour, there must have been a time when the potential benefits of new technology were seen by them as a definite and desirable good. Generally, in these types of contact situations with an external money economy, indigenous people rarely realize until too late the ultimate consequences of the changes which are made in economic activity in order to acquire a few desirable trade goods. The factors of subsistence, technology, ecology, and colonial marketing practices were interrelated in a dynamic nexus the understanding of which can be aided by an analysis of the changing nature of alliances. It may be quite proper to view Cree social organization during the peak of the fur trade era as a consequence of, or a solution to, a fundamental opposition; that is, the opposition between European economic practices, with an emphasis on

competition, profit, adjustment to market fluctuations, on the one hand, and traditional Indian subsistence activities emphasizing egalitarian social practices and cooperative values, on the other.

More specifically, this essay will attempt to apply to Cree social organization the notion that kinship systems perform an important role in describing the nature of the relationships between individuals and groups. This will be an attempt to evaluate the extent to which the descriptive assumptions of Rose (1975) and Turner (1974, in press a) are applicable to Cree Indians. The basic notion involved is that kinship systems and kinship terms define and articulate production relations between groups and individuals, and the rights and obligations between them. Marriage is viewed as a practice performed for the purpose of creating a "connubium", that is, for producing specific ties and alliances between groups. When considered as a whole, a kinship system functions in such a way that it articulates and distinguishes groups of people within a society, and further, groups of people are distinguished who are important from the point of view of productive and economic activities. Individuals, in this view, are important insofar as they occupy certain kinds of positions within these groups. Ultimately, individuals are definable in terms of specific production relationships and the kinship terms applied to individuals have reference to these relations. According to these hypotheses kinship terms cannot properly be considered as solely the names applied to certain genealogical routes, but rather, they must be considered as the names of the relationship which individuals have to each other by virtue of their membership in respective groups. Kinship terms are, to a very significant extent, the names applied to social relationships with specific requirements and privileges. These hypotheses

have very important implications for any attempts to characterize the "meaning" of kinship terms. If they are essentially correct, these hypotheses suggest that any description of the meaning of kinship terms which does not include mention of social relations by virtue of group membership in a set of definitions must be incomplete.

This essay will begin with a brief and rather rudimentary attempt to formulate a typology of band societies. The basis of the typology is an attempt to characterize different kinds of bands as functions of different kinds of alliances and designed for different purposes. There are several reasons for attempting such a typology. First, it is desirable to understand Cree social organization with respect to criteria by which any "band" society is explainable, and these criteria need to be explicitly formulated. Thereby, Cree social organization can not be seen as being or having been in any fundamental way anomalous. Secondly, by understanding Cree social organization within the context of a typology permits systematic comparisons to other "band" societies. And also, an alliance-based typology permits a clearer understanding of the kinds of changes which a "band" social organization will likely undergo given certain kinds of pressures. If a typology is based upon critical features of alliances, predictions about the direction of social changes and changes in the structure of social organization are more possible.

People in "band" societies exchange individuals among their respective groups in different ways and for different reasons. In some societies groups (lineages, clans, local groups, etc.) exchange individuals, usually women, for the purpose of maintaining a situation in which the economically important members of the group retain an exclusive identity with their respective groups. A situation is created in which there are numerous

diverse productive groups throughout the society's territorial range. In order to maintain diverse productive groups exchanges of individuals among groups are engaged in and, in addition, the potential conflict which may arise along mutual territorial boundaries is reduced. The presence of local group members in adjacent local group ranges may inhibit the degree of overt hostilities displayed (Fox 1967:176; Williams 1974:26). The underlying motivation in this type of exchange is to permit the productive groups of each local group to retain their loyalties to their respective groups. The reduction of conflict along mutual boundaries is often necessary for this diversity to be maintained and for economic activities to be performed. In this sort of arrangement, one can expect a great deal of regularity and systematicness to be exhibited in the relations among a "band's" different groups. Marriages, in such a context, tend to be very precisely defined and alliances are regularly renewed. Such alliances need not result in substantive exchanges of labour, resources, or territory. In alliances which are designed to maintain productive group diversity it is likely that the group which is responsible for the subsistence activities in any given delimited territory is continuous in successive hunting seasons and usually is part of the same matrilineage or patrilineage. It is because of a high degree of group autonomy, with respect to subsistence activities, that a high degree of regularity can be expected in a kinship system of such a society. It can also be expected that in such a system of social organization the descent principles described by the kinship system will, to a large extent, determine residence patterns. Such systems, with an emphasis on lineal principles, describe situations in which members of a lineage or local group, especially those members who are economically important for the

group, remain contiguous with a specific territory over consecutive generations. An example of such a system of alliances might be exemplified by the pre-contact Ojibwa residing in the area from the northeast shore of Lake Superior to the east end of Georgian Bay (Bishop 1974:5). They exhibited these characteristics during that part of the year when they dispersed into various clan territories in order to hunt large game animals.

There are other social situations in which alliances are formed, not for the maintenance of productive group diversity, but for the creation of productive group unity. There are situations where the migratory patterns of game, the general variability of resources, or the significant cyclical fluctuations of subsistence resources make it disadvantageous for a group to remain unvaryingly associated with a specific territory or a specific group. Frequently, in such systems the pragmatics of the immediate subsistence exploitation conditions have a great importance in determining the nature of the residential patterns. A lineal, descent-determining principle of alliance formation and residence is inappropriate to these types of situations. In a system of alliances based on creating productive group unities, the kinship system will generally reflect the fact that people from one group (local group, lineage, etc.) can be residing on the territory of some other group, and also reflects the possibility of people from another group potentially residing on one's own group's territory. The manner in which this is done is by considering, once the alliance has been decided upon, the incoming group as a part of one's own group. The kinship system will reflect this by exhibiting terminological equivalences between certain consanguineal and affinal relatives. Turner\*(in press b) has suggested referring to this process as "incorporation", and the general type of alliance system as an "incorpor-

\* See Bibliography.

ative band". It should be noted that an "incorporative band" type of alliance functions additionally in reducing a great deal of potential conflict along territorial boundaries. An example of a typical incorporative band would be the !Kung Bushmen (of S. Africa). Although variable residence is the significant factor in the functioning of incorporative bands, it is not inconsistent for there to be, within the context of an incorporative band situation, both pragmatic-residential and lineally-determined alliances. It is quite conceivable that a great enough knowledge of resources and their variations can be obtained in a given region which could permit the prior arrangements of alliances so that access to territories can be gained when the resource conditions are propitious. Incorporative bands, however, cannot be described by nor can they function with a productive group diversity, lineal system with its emphasis on the maintenance of a continuous exclusive identity of each productive group with the same local group. Both productive group diversity and productive group unity alliance systems are capable, independently, of developing formal clans and totemic identities from un-named lineage structures. In both situations the determining factor in changes toward formalization would probably be increasing knowledge of the resources in the area permitting a higher degree of regularity to be created within the system. The fact that both alliance systems can develop clans should not, however, obscure their fundamental differences. They are neither logically equivalent nor are they in any sense extensions of one another, and the manner in which one explains one system is not necessarily applicable to the other. Systems based on maintaining productive group diversity can be transformed into systems based on productive group unity, and vice versa, only if there are very significant changes in the nature of productive

activities which would require a radical re-thinking of the modes of social relations.

There are situations, also, where neither the notion of productive group diversity nor productive group unity are applicable. These are situations where the recruitment of labour comes from a group of people who are not arranged in any territorially defined way. The recruitment of communal labour often takes place where the "band" in its entirety is engaged in corporate-like activities. The type of situation which this reflects is the very common aggregation of dispersed groups during particular seasons of the year at locations where corporate activities can be undertaken. These periods of corporate aggregation may vary in length from just several days (Washo) to as much as six months (Ojibwa), and may correspondingly be comprised of temporary shelters or substantial clan-based villages. It would appear that there is no independent kinship reckoning designed to deal with these situations and they are subsumable under the type of alliance which obtains through the rest of the year when the "band" is dispersed in various groupings.

Alliances may, therefore, be divided into two important kinds. They may be 1) lineal and descent-regulating, or, 2) incorporative and permitting variable residence. Alliances are lineal insofar as the descent modes expressed by the kinship system together with the marriage rules largely determine who the affinals will be; and they are incorporative insofar as affinals may be pragmatically determined and permit some limited negotiability. In alliances in which productive group diversity is maintained individuals retain their loyalties and identities to the group to which they belong and they do not merge with any other groups in any way which obscures these loyalties. In alliances designed to establish productive

group unities prior group membership is sufficiently obscured so that the new productive group may function as a homogeneous unity and become relatively self-sufficient. In addition, every "band" society will tend to emphasize one of two non-mutually exclusive contrasts. It will either emphasize the fact that (1) an important feature of the social organization is the reduction of potential conflict along mutual territorial boundaries, or, (2) that it is necessary in a given social system for local groups to gain access to a variety of dispersed territories. Although elements of both of these features may be present in all "band" societies, one or the other will be more important depending on the specific type of "band".

Another factor which may also play a critical role in determining what type of "band" any particular configuration may exemplify is the spatial arrangement of territories. The specific configuration of and the distance between territories may be significantly related to the kinds of relations between groups. A distinction may be made between two kinds of territories found in "band" societies: (1) a resource dependent territory, and (2) a resource independent territory. The notion being conveyed by the phrase "resource dependent territory" is that there are situations in which subsistence resources are distributed in such a way that the position and the shape of the territory is a critical factor in land tenure forms and land utilization, and that such a situation could result in the arrangement of territories so that they are not necessarily adjacent to one another in regular patterns. Fur trapping lines may be like this, where it is more important to have territories near streams and rivers than having them near each other. This type of territory is contrasted with situations in which the subsistence resources are evenly distributed throughout a "band" territory, and group territories within

the "band" may be more or less regularly patterned and distributed in a way roughly in conformity with the ideal model for "band" societies which has been diagrammed as contiguous, geometrically equal spaces (Williams 1974:28). With "resource independent territories" there need be no specific "fit" of territories over resources.

In order to better formulate the band typology which is utilized in this essay, it may be revealing to devise a feature matrix which inter-relates the kinds of critical constituent factors just mentioned: (1) kinds of territories, and (2) purposes of alliances. Thus:

	Alliance for creating productive group unity	Alliance for maintaining productive group diversity
resource independent territory	Incorporative band (emphasis on conflict reduction) (e.g. !Kung Bushmen)	(1) lineage band (lineal) (2) clan "tribe"  (emphasis on conflict reduction) (e.g. pre-contact Ojibwa)
resource dependent territory	(1) lineage band (incorporative) (2) "brotherhood tribe" (emphasis on territorial access)  (e.g. fur trade Cree)	Lineal band (emphasis on territorial access)  (e.g. Aranda of Australia)

What this typology suggests is that fundamentally there are only two basic types of "band" societies--incorporative "bands" and lineal "bands". There are, in addition, "band" societies which may represent variational states which could obtain when certain external pressures arise. The variations which can be expected to arise within the framework of this typology are of two kinds: (1) variations

can arise as a result of the logical manipulation or extension of intrinsic properties of the social system. That is, there may be numerous possible logical variations of either a lineal band or an incorporative band, all of them functionally identical with respect to the basic structure of the system. For example, in a typical lineal band in which minimal inter-group exchanges are designed to reduce border conflicts for maintaining productive group diversity, it matters very little whether the operative marriage rule requires symmetric first-cousin marriage, second-cousin marriage, or assymmetric forms of marriage. All will basically function in order to maintain the minimal contacts and alliances which the system as a whole fundamentally requires. Turner (in press a) has used the apt term "involution" for this sort of phenomenon in which variation occurs without there being fundamental change--change within a framework which remains essentially stable. Similar involutinal change is possible within the context of an incorporative band. Although in incorporative bands the specific marriage rules may have real significance in terms of the relative advantages of resource exploitation, they will all likewise perform the same basic task. Although how far out one marries, both in a formal sense with respect to kinship, and in a geographical sense may have a bearing on relative advantages in exploitative behaviour, these variations are nonetheless involutinal (Turner in press a). Incorporative bands are capable of developing into clan societies without fundamentally altering the incorporative character of the "band". Likewise, both lineal band and incorporative bands are capable of undergoing involutinal changes in such a way that formal clans can disappear leaving unnamed lineages. (2) variations can occur as a result of the pressures exerted from forces external to the system. As a result of factors such

as colonial contact, contact with other groups, warfare, drastic resource changes, or changes in the resources exploited, etc., there may need to be fundamental changes in social relations which require a shift from one type of "band" to another. Unless there are precedents in the area for such changes which help to guide the change, such variational states may be found to exhibit internal contradictions and irregularities. These contradictions could take the form, for example, of a set of marriage rules which prescribe marriages between people who are in non-marriageable classes. In this type of variational situation contradictoriness is not necessarily a negative feature of the system, but rather, a positive one which reflects a flexibility crucial in the change from one fundamental type of "band" to another.

The type of "band" exemplified by lineage bands (lineal) and clan-based "tribes" (where alliances are for the purpose of maintaining productive group diversity and the territory is resource independent) are the kinds of bands which most observers would refer to as atypical "band" societies. The exception to this view in recent literature is Williams' (1974). Regular and regularly renewable exchanges of women between the "band's" groups with few exceptions are likely in this type of situation. Also, in this kind of "band" society the functioning of the kinship system and the marriage rules will operate to determine gross residential patterns. The recognition of a unity larger than the clan or lineage, by virtue of lineage exogamy and band endogamy has often led to the ascription of the term "tribe" to this type of collectivity of lineages or local groups.

The type of "band" exemplified by the lineage band (incorporative) and the "brotherhood tribe" (where alliances are for the purpose of creating

productive group unity and territories are resource dependent) reflect conditions which permit the determination of alliances on the basis of pragmatic needs. Although this type of "band" permits the pragmatic determination of alliances, it need not be considered as exclusively pragmatic in character. The logic of an incorporative kinship system permits pragmatically-determined residence to have a greater importance than rigid descent principles. The type of "tribe" which can develop from an incorporative system is different from the previously mentioned "tribe". They are similar in that they are both formal recognitions of a larger unity, but they are unities based upon different processes. Incorporative systems often have "brotherhood" connections as a means of allying people from different groups. This involves the use of the term "brother" to certain individuals of every group, or specified groups, within the "band". "Brotherhoods" are very appropriate to systems based on the creation of new productive units. They are in essence formal recognition that an entire class of individuals within the "band" whom one calls "brother" are individuals who are members of groups with which one's own group may be allied. The appearance of a "brotherhood tribe", therefore, probably represents a fairly well developed stage in an incorporative band. It represents a kind of involutinal change which is in the direction of a greater degree of regularity and rule-governedness. Both "brotherhoods" and clans exhibit the same type of involutinal change toward systematicness and formalism within an incorporative context. If clans--either in a lineal or incorporative system--are evidence of an increasing regularity in a situation where people are becoming increasingly knowledgeable, one should expect that when there occurs either (1) drastic geographical dislocation or (2) a change from one fundamental type to

another, clans, as formal entities, will begin to disintegrate.

The type of "bands" characterized by (1) resource independent territories with alliances for creating productive group unities and (2) resource dependent territories with alliances for maintaining productive group diversity are both variational situations and probably entail internal contradictions. In the first case, in which subsistence resources are evenly distributed over an area, it is, strictly from the point of view of exploiting resources, unnecessary for groups to incorporate other groups onto their territories, or to be incorporated themselves. It may even be that incorporating groups onto a single group's territory will create too much of a strain on the resources which could be exploited by a single local group with a greater margin of safety. Probably, this type of situation will exhibit attempts to make certain members of the local group the exclusive productive unit on its territory. In other words, the pressure may be toward increasing lineality and decreasing incorporativeness. In the second variational state where subsistence resources are not evenly distributed, it will be desirable to devise some means--probably alliances--to acquire access to these resources. Some means, that is, will be required to divorce a group's productive unit from its restricted territorial range. Lineal systems, by tying a productive unit to a given local group, do not permit such alliances without contradictions. This type of situation will probably be characterized by attempts to create alliances which increase territorial accessibility and create new productive units--that is, they become increasingly incorporative in character and decreasingly lineal. Both of these variational states move in opposite directions, one toward and one away from lineal systems. What they have in common is that they are both the result of

drastic and fundamental changes in the forms of social relations, economic relations and productive relations. The type of variations in kinship systems which can be most expected in these two types of "bands" will be of a substantive nature with deliberate attempts to restructure the system along new principles. On the other hand, much of the change occurring within either of the two basic "band" types will be of an evolutionary rather than substantive nature—they will be changes on the order of "logical play".

The typology described here has implications for any notion of territoriality or "ownership" on either the lineage or local group level, or the "band" level. It is probably the case that territory in a social system based on productive group unities is held somewhat differently from territory in a system based on the maintenance of diverse productive groups, and indigenous notions of proprietorship may reflect this difference. In a system of diverse productive group alliances, there is a relatively firm notion of tenure in which a lineage or local group occupies the same territory ~~ex~~clusively, and theoretically, in perpetuity. These groups are largely self-sufficient with respect to subsistence and engage in relations with other lineage groups for the purpose of maintaining a system free from conflict. In other words, in a "band" based on such a system of alliances, one should expect to find that the proprietary or "owning" group is to a very high degree congruent with the productive group (that group engaged in the primary economic activity of the group). In a system based on merged productive group principles, every group within the "band" "possesses" a territory but knows that it must permit people from other groups to gain access to their territory. They know that at some future time they will, themselves, require access to territories over

which they do not have the same kind of tenure claims as over their own. There is a sense in which, therefore, every group "possesses" a part of every other group's territory within the "band" to which they may have some access. It may, in fact, be claimed that it is the "band", on a higher level of organization than the local group which possesses (in a highly abstract fashion) territory, and distinct individual groups, by virtue of their participation, or membership, in the "band" have access to a delimited and well-articulated range of territories. This seems clearly to be a different form (and from the point of view of western notions of ownership, a weaker form) of "proprietaryship" than that entailed by a diverse productive group alliance system. With an alliance system based on incorporative principles there is, almost by definition, a significant difference between the proprietary, or owning, group and the productive group. The individuals of any specific local group are not exclusively tied to a single territorial range.

Certain distinctive cultural practices can be expected to be consequences of varying proprietary concepts and varying alliance systems. One may expect that since territory is held more firmly and exclusively in a diverse productive group alliance system than in a merged productive group system that the emphasis on practices such as witchcraft and sorcery which are related to violations of territorial rules will be significantly greater. In fact, witchcraft and sorcery may be definable as means designed to maintain territorial integrity. Where the "possessorship" is more firm, greater efforts will be engaged in to maintain boundary recognition. One possible example of this difference between productive group unity and productive group diversity systems, and the resulting proprietary difference may be reflected in the differences between Cree and Ojibwa. The

Ojibwa generally seem to demonstrate a greater interest in practices such as sorcery which may be relatable to fundamental social differences. These differences will be looked into later. In the way of a generalization it may be claimed that with a diverse productive group system it is the exclusive tenure of an individual territory which produces the stronger concept of possessorship and which may ultimately be responsible for cultural practices which emphasize the necessity for recognition of territorial integrity. With a productive group unity system of alliances, the resources which are to be gained have a greater importance than the territorial boundaries within which they are distributed. Rights, restrictions and prohibitions in a productive group unity system are concerned with specific, economically important resources; whereas, in a diverse productive group system, sanctions and prohibitions have to do with the crossing of recognized boundaries. It is probably the case in such a system that once one has properly acknowledged the territorial rights and possessorship of another group's territory, the access to resources, if it is necessary, is not strongly controlled. On the other hand, in a merged productive group system, crossing into another group's territory may not be so much controlled as is the way in which the available resources will be dealt with. Some resources will be forbidden to members of other groups (unless there are specific alliance ties), some will be tradable, and some will be freely accessible. Of course, specific sanctions and prohibitions of specific resources are all dependent upon local historical and economic factors.

Also, within a diverse productive group alliance system, there is a greater likelihood for the occurrence of phenomena such as sororal polygyny. Such practices follow from the regular renewal of alliances