FUR TRAPPING AND FOOD SHARING IN FORT GEORGE, QUEBEC

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Résumé. Le présent article émet l'avis que le partage était et est encore un élément adaptatif de la culture cris de Fort George. Il a permis à des gens possédant des aptitudes diverses de gagner leur vie en dépit des changements qui peuvent survenir dans le domaine de l'écologie et du marché des fourrures et d'autres variations conjoncturelles. L'auteur essaie de voir comment sont intégrées, à tout moment, les techniques d'exploitation. Le partage, comme les techniques de chasse et de piégeage, incorpore de nouveaux éléments dans la structure préexistante.
Discussions of land tenure among Northern Algonkians have correlated changes in hunting/trapping strategies, technological and population changes. One of the central issues has been the role of food sharing as a mechanism for structuring personal relationships. Leacock (1954:24) suggests that food sharing and fur trapping have been inversely related in the past. As communal hunting gave way to individual fur trapping, food sharing decreased with dependance on store food increasing. This change may be understood as an acculturative one. It may also be understood as arising out of certain aspects of the indigenous culture. This paper presents an account of changes in hunting/trapping strategies and the effects of the changes on group composition. A simple correlation between involvement in a monetary economy and a re-definition of family relationships is not seen. The important factors are not just the ecological and fur market fluctuations, but the way in which different opportunities and lack of them fragment any grouping. Sharing counters this by allowing for the inclusion of the various people. It distributes among people the benefits to be derived from various kinds of opportunities. Sharing has been reshaped rather than undone over time.

The following is a sketch of inland and coastal adaptations and how these have changed. It presents the different periods as distinct strategies for making a living. At any one time, there are those who do well, and those who are left out. But, the integrative nature of sharing is seen throughout.

For the Inlanders, in the years around 1900-1915 (see Appendix A) when people arrived at the place they would start hunting.
There was hardly any snow on the ground, we saw caribou tracks, but we didn't follow them. There was no use, because they're moving if there is hardly any snow.

(Informant #1)

For freeze-up, people tried to locate at a fishing place. Freeze-up was always a hard time of the year. Some people arrived late at their freeze-up waiting place, the snow was wet and the lakes sometimes had a skim of ice. Freeze-up meant getting wet, meant walking over portages in wet snow, breaking the ice ahead of the canoe with a paddle. After setting up camp, people tried to kill a bear, ducks, geese, porcupine or sometimes beaver, as well as fish. Even when the ice had formed and one was freed to travel, it was difficult to kill caribou. They were still moving in the thin mantle of snow.

The men spread out in search of whatever food was available and sometimes camps were widely separated after searching for days. In some areas, the caribou were frequently scarce. However, when a few caribou were found or a lodge containing a number of beaver was found, other men were located. Beaver were few during this period though they had been plentiful earlier. During this time, netting was the usual way to kill beaver.

They usually got them all by using the net, usually brought them all back.

(Informant #2)

The finder of a lodge received the fur and a portion of the food. He also presided over the moko5han (feast) held after the kill. Sometimes a man gave the lodges to another, who was often his father. The giver received half the fur and food as well.
Some men were noted for their ability to kill beaver and these were frequently sought. For a variety of reasons, others were sometimes not called in to help. In this event, the whole family may come and net beaver. Around December when the snow had acculuated to a sufficient depth, caribou were found basking on lake ice and from this time until after they moved to white-moss muskegs for Spring, caribou were killed regularly.

In caribou hunting, people moved around, but if one person located some animals, he informed as many men as possible.

One of the men saw these caribou before they (the hunting party) went out. It was quite a distance away, so that's how they knew it was quite a space of time since the man had first seen them and that's why there were so many men on the hunt.

There were six of us. We saw these caribou and we were each situated at different places. They were on the ice and two men went up to the caribou, one of them went really close to the animals. Then he shot. That's when they started running. We kept firing. There were three that were running towards me. I shot them all. We killed over forty from that group, but we didn't get all that there were.

(Informant #1)

When a kill like this one was made, people camped together for awhile.

When there were many caribou, the men used to go after them and the women waited in camp. If the men killed caribou a long distance from camp, they would leave that particular camp and journey to another, taking all their belongings to the caribou they killed. They'd move anywhere they wanted to, they didn't have a particular territory.

(Informant #1)

In some ways, netting beaver was similar to caribou hunting. If a large kill of beaver was made, people banded together. Also, for beaver and caribou there was a leader in any hunting group,
one who was known to be good at killing that particular animal and knew the area.

Concentrating on caribou meant difficulty in getting furs, but it was quite possible to eat well. Following the caribou meant a temporary attachment to any one area, but the time between caribou kills was used in killing more sedentary fauna.

The hunting of large migrating and small non-migrating game was welded into one strategy. Though it helped to know an area, it was not always necessary. People could locate fish in an unfamiliar area.

You can tell by the colour of the ice that there are fish there.

(Informant #3)

Trapping methods were used which preserved the catch in case of an extended absence.

They had to be careful of the ice, so if they caught a beaver it wouldn't get stuck to the ice, so you could go after caribou. They had to have their trap under the water. A man could also use a spring trap (spring pole snare), they used it so other animals can't reach the animal that is hanging up.

(Informant #4)

As the caribou 'went away' to the north, people were faced with lean times. Those who were good caribou hunters followed the last remnants inland. There was a growing dependance on fish and more sedentary animals. Those inland trapped marten and mink, those not so far inland made do without as many furs. As a knowledge of particular areas grew in importance, people often chose to stay in an area they knew well. There were a few who spent a winter or so with coastal families. Skills were different there and the food
tasted differently enough to sicken one. As opportunities changed, there were some who stayed nearer the post. Ecological fluctuation influenced decision-making.

That was the main reason other people went so far inland, they couldn't find any of a certain animal that they wanted so they would have to move to another area in search of that animal. Not all men were alike, some were not healthy. The men who usually hunted far were strong. That was one of the reasons sometimes it was that they liked a certain area.

(Informant #5)

During this period, a regular supply of fish and hare had become important all year. Porcupine, ducks, geese and other small game were important. A knowledge of the location of bear dens was valued as bears were sought all year (see Appendix B). Locations of particular stands of dry wood, particular kinds of tamarack and birch were important as movement was not conditioned by the movement of caribou.

A difficult time during the lean years was the freeze-up. Previously, there had sometimes been dried caribou for freeze-up, but now that did not last, nor did the store food.

Before the beaver was closed, there wasn't much that you could take with you because there wasn't much fur sales at this time.

(Informant #1)

Some people tried to cache a little tea or flour for use later as a luxury, not as a staple.

After the program of planned beaver exploitation (or the beaver conservation program) had started to increase fur sales in the mid 50's, families jointly or singly had provisions flown into where they would trap. After canoeing to the cache and feasting,
provisions were divided up and put toward weathering freeze-up. Around Christmas some families had another plane of provisions flown in, while others went to a small inland post of the Hudsons Bay Company (Kanaaupscow). Following the get-together, families splintered off for some intensive trapping. The fresh supplies freed one of the necessity of an immediate meat return in beaver trapping. With the increase in store food when beginning to trap, and with the increased use of steel traps and increase in number of beaver, beaver netting declined in importance. With steel traps you could not get them all with one set as with the net. But, with the increase in number of traps set, overall productivity increased. In fact, to 'get them all' would be disadvantageous to 'management of resources' (Feit 1973:116) because it would deplete the area of fur quickly.

The use of planes increased and changed. As opportunities at the post grew (intermittently jobs, social services of one sort or another and schooling), it became usual for a family to fly inland to trap. Those who were inclined to trapping did so. A few who were not so able in the furs to be trapped, tagged along.

That's the way it is with Freddie, he traps every year, but he has a hard time getting anything.

(Informant #7)

On the coast, the situation has been different. In the early period, goose hunting supplied cash (through sale of geese to the Hudsons Bay Company) and food, while fall fishing supplied food for freeze-up. After freeze-up, while the women, children and others stayed at the fishing place, the men went sealing and fox hunting. As winter set in, they moved the main camp into the tree-
line, away from the coast. From the winter fishing place, after Christmas, the men went ratting towards the inland. For ratting, strong legs are needed as muskrat supplied little food or cash and to get enough requires moving often. (The cash return per pelt for muskrat is 1/10th to 1/20th that of beaver and about 1/10th the meat return [Brochu 1964: Salisbury 1972].) Those who were unable for ratting stayed on the coast. Many of them were good goose hunters. So, although left of of one activity, they excelled in another.

When the bottom fell out of the fur market in the late forties, some Coasters went inland as chances for a good year were getting better there. Others weathered the coast with traditional competences and little cash and at times, little food return. Opportunities for wage earning have been met most often by Coasters. Combining a traditional coaster life with wage earning was more possible since Euro-Canadian activities centered on the coast. The Coasters invested in finished canoes, outboard motors and later, skidoos which facilitate combining work in town with work in the bush.

When the old age pension came to the Coasters, those receiving the pension paid fixed amounts for game given to them. The idea of this is probably based upon the Hudsons Bay Company and the R.C. Mission buying of geese. Similarly, people bought shotgun shells and gave them out. This too was based on a Hudsons Bay Company precedent and there also was a fixed return expected here as well. This is not to be understood as necessarily a break with tradition. People without money are still given game and there has always been a calculation of need and ability to pay made in
transactions. The paying for game using fixed returns places a positive though non-negotiable value upon the killing of game. Prices are fixed by the buyers of game in a seller's market, and rather than barter, there is an either/or situation of participating in the transaction at these rates or not doing so. The paying of fixed amounts has the effect of preventing the dissipation of the cash though the sharing network. It also gives those hunting an extra source of cash. The people who manage to accumulate sufficient resources convert the cash into capital goods which are also shared.

Among the Inlanders, cash expenditures for capital goods or plane fares are shared by the group.

If I want to buy something that is rather expensive, they might ask me to help pay for it. So any time I want to use it, I could use that certain thing.

(Informant #6)

Integrating the traditional hunting/trapping with money incomes has been different than for the Coasters. First of all, communication to the territories is more difficult than for Coasters. Before the plane era, a job in the community would mean being cut off from relatives trapping. For those trapping, pooling of food typified group meetings and sometimes pulling out of crises. Later, growing out of this intermittent pooling of resources, cash expenditures made by Inlanders and inputs into the village of meat, have been in lumps. When a family goes inland, others may help to pay the plane fare.

If his parents were leaving, he'd be expected to pay. Usually not all of it, maybe 1/2 or 3/4 of the fare.

(Informant #6)
The unity of Inlander families is not expressed as with Coasters by how a regular flow of cash and meat is distributed, but rather by the large commitments and contributions made by individuals at specific times and places.

In conclusion: store food has been important at different times of the year, and has not been important in the same way everywhere. Migratory animals have been important, but not all year, and the same is true of more sedentary animals. In keeping with this, the skills required to make a living change throughout a year, have changed over the years, and have been and are variously distributed among individuals. However, sedentary resources have always been important.

While some Coasters try to stop Inlanders hunting geese, other Coasters are taking the Inlanders hunting. While some old men grumble about those Inlanders infringing upon their traditional goose territories, they are making money on Euro-Canadian sport hunters. The younger Coasters are working in town alongside young Inlanders and these people are hunting in the most accessible though not always for the Coasters present, traditional family territories.

Food sharing involves a number of different contexts. It is the giving of food to those without food, the giving of certain kinds of food to those without that kind. It is the giving of certain parts of the food to those without those parts. It is an important integrative mechanism because it allows people to participate in a structured activity. Structured because there is a way it is done which is participated in by all, but is not wholly
created by any one person.

Food sharing is a part of personal relationships. It both creates and reflects the state of these relationships. In the early days, there was little in the way of personal possessions, except food which was shared consistently. People had the goods required to separate into smaller groups. In recent times, many people are living together when in Fort George and there is an increase in the incidence and number of kinds of goods being shared (i.e. skidoos, motors, canoes, money).

Sharing food or other goods implies participating in the ability of another to produce something of value. This ability varies with opportunities conditioned by individual competences, ecological variables, fur market fluctuations and other impinging factors such as the state of health. Everyone has and is having their opportunities conditioned by a variety of these factors.

Sharing is the way in which the variety of abilities are significant in the social process. Those who are out of the running for creating a sharing network, are an important part of the social process. In Henriksen's terms, they provide 'the audience'. There is not therefore any simple correlation of sharing and involvement in a cash economy.
APPENDIX A

Before there was hardly anything, the bear was very numerous, but the caribou was already gone by then, when he first started to hunt.

(Informant #8, Age 65)

Well, at the time when he was able to hunt, there was only a small amount of animals.

(Informant #9, Age 65)

When he was able to hunt the game was about gone from the area.

(Informant #4, Age 72)

The caribou were just on the edge of declining when he was able to hunt.

(Informant #10, Age 80)

He doesn't remember the fire...but he remembers people talking about it, as though the whole area (Roggan River) had been swept...all the animals were almost completely gone.

(Informant #11, Age 61)

Back as far as I can remember, this land was poor.

(Informant #12, Age 45)

People were a little different when he was young...They didn't have a particular territory, just moved all over the place (after caribou).

(Informant #1, Age 74)

The caribou therefore declined drastically between 1890 and 1915.
APPENDIX B

As soon as you get to this river (Sasibi-Fort George-La Grande) to come down, you have to be really quiet. Also, the children were told to be quiet because the people were always looking for a bear and when they saw one they usually were glad to try and kill it. If they got it there would be a lot of food for the people. People were always trying to be quiet on this river because the bear has a keen sense of hearing even though his sight is poor, he can hear a long distance and this bear might be just around the next bend. People hadn't seen it, but he heard the people coming, that's why he was able to run. Even when they were carrying the canoe, when they were portaging, they had to be careful not to make too much noise. The people were always looking for a bear.

(Informant #9)
REFERENCES CITED


