Is Your Cree Uniform the Same As Mine? Cultural and Ethnographic Variations on a Theme

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Introduction

Recently I have been systematically reviewing the ethnographic literature relating to the coastal communities of the James Bay Cree. The area is probably one of the most intensively studied in the north, yet ethnographers, since the early 20th century, have primarily confined their studies to one community, making little or no effort at comparison, but assuming a cultural uniformity for the entire James Bay area, including both coastal and inland communities.

Significant historical differences from community to community indicate this assumption may be unfounded. Interviews with a number of older Cree women in Moosonee and Moose Factory also contradicted this assumption, and prompted me to attempt an ethnographic comparison of the coastal communities. My efforts at a review of the literature have only just

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scratched the surface, but I have recognized a related and what I consider a far more subtle, and perhaps serious, assumption, that each community is itself a simple homogeneous collection of Algonquian hunter/gatherers. Except for recognizable differences between native/non-native or Cree/Inuit populations, ethnographers have for the most part neglected to consider the possible complexities that distinctions between inlanders, coasters, and company families may hold for these northern communities. This paper gives consideration to the influences these complexities may have had with regard to the results of contemporary ethnographic studies in the area.

Bear Stories

During the summer of 1984 I had the opportunity to interview a number of status and non-status native women living in Moose Factory and Moosonee. Some of these women were native to Moose Factory and had spent their lives there, others had migrated there from communities on the east coast of the bay, and still others were originally from the west coast. All the women referred to themselves as Cree, spoke one of two dialects of Cree, and acknowledged wide-ranging kin ties. This would suggest cultural similarity, if not uniformity. Responses to questions about life experience and women's work not only indicated individual differences of experience, but also indicated cultural differences defining experience, which were unexpected.

Two short examples should be sufficient to illustrate the point. Those women who spent their childhood at Moose Factory, in the early 1900s, had all attended the school operated by the Anglican church, where they all became literate in Cree. Some of the women recalled walking across the frozen Moose River to attend day school, others remembered attending the early residential school, where they studied half a day and worked at various chores half a day. None attended school for more than a few months a year or for more than a few years. What was common to all the Moose Factory women was that they were literate, the younger women in English as well as Cree, and most were descended from or related to company families. Although they might not have been company employees themselves, many had been married to company employees.

Those older women who had migrated to Moose Factory from the east coast had no formal schooling at all, with the exception of the woman who acted as my interpréteur. Her grandfather had been a well known conjuror inland from Washkaganish. She was somewhat younger and had attended residential school for several years in the 1940s, as had several of the other younger women who grew up in Moose Factory. This seems to have been about the time the first groups of children were sent south to residential
school. In contrast, those women who grew up in communities on the west coast, except for the few whose families were Anglican, had all attended the Roman Catholic residential school at Albany. They all stated, however, they were not taught reading and writing, they were taught religion.

At least three groups of women are identified; those native to Moose Factory, those native to the east coast of the bay and those native to the west coast. This raises some obvious questions not only about assumptions of cultural uniformity but also questions about what effect the church and literacy, or lack of it had with regard to what we refer to as Cree culture. I do not intend to explore these particular questions here; they will be included in the comparative study. My reading of the literature leads me to assume that these differences may have been overlooked because they may have been assumed to be minor. The second example, which may be related to the first, is more exotic and suggests that differences should not be set aside so readily. Skinner (1914) assumed that bear customs and rituals among both east and west coast Cree and northern Ojibwa were generally the same. The fact that these customs were not in evidence at Albany, on the west coast, was attributed to loss of the memory of their significance. More recently, describing the traditional culture of the West Main Cree, Honigmann (1981) stated that ceremonial activities expressing respect followed the killing of a bear, but traditional beliefs had been entirely eradicated and replaced through the efforts of Christian missionaries. On the east coast, however, traditional beliefs, ceremonial activities, expressions of profound respect, and dream symbolism relating to the bear continue to be of significance, especially to inlanders. A high value is placed on the meat as well as the grease. Malcolm Diamond once said of Edward Ottereyes, “He could kill bear whenever he liked” (Preston 1986). This is not only a statement about Edward Ottereyes’s skill as a hunter, but also a statement about the relationship he maintained with the bear.

The variety of responses I received when I began to ask women at Moose Factory about eating bear meat was particularly interesting to me because I had assumed the bear held significance of some sort for all Cree. Not so. Several of the women, who were descended from company families, said they had tried bear meat but couldn’t eat it because, they said, “The bear looks too much like a person when it is skinned.” Two of the women told stories of encounters with bears which reinforced for them a respect and/or fear for the animal, but they were not about to eat bear meat. One woman, married to an Ojibwa, said her husband would not kill a bear or eat the meat for fear the bear would be a conjuror, and therefore have negative repercussions for him. This man’s mother-in-law, a Cree from Washkaganish, is reported to have asked of him if he thought a conjuror would let himself be killed. Another person, from the west coast, was
reported to have referred to the bear as "damned Ojibwa food". Finally, my interpreter and others who were originally from the east coast, spoke of the bear without referring directly to him, indicating respect, and considered the meat to be a delicacy. The men in their families were not concerned that killing bear might somehow be detrimental for them. These are obvious and interesting, but more than that, they are also significant differences which are overlooked when ethnographers assume cultural uniformity.

Simply Algonquian Hunter/Gatherers

Not only has there been an assumption of cultural uniformity from one community to another for the James Bay Cree, there has also been a related and far more problematic assumption that the native peoples of James Bay are simple hunter/gatherers, more or less settled in homogeneous communities which are themselves structurally uncomplicated reflections of simple social organizations; people whose social, mental, and material culture can readily be observed, recorded, explained and generalized by ethnographers with very limited experience in any one of the communities. Often studies and reports have been based on one summer's research, or less, raising the question, for me at least, of the limitations of short term field study. One result of these assumptions of cultural uniformity and homogeneous populations and the limitations of short term field study has been a reliance on simple models of community, of land tenure, of kinship, of social organization, of social change. These models have not necessarily provided scholars with an adequate understanding of northern Algonquian peoples and in some cases have led to questionable theoretical assumptions.

Historical differences among population groups in the East James Bay area have been adequately documented, thanks to Toby Morantz (1983). A distinction continues to be made in contemporary coastal communities between "inlanders", "coasters", and "company families". Inlanders, also known as "hunting Indians", lived sufficiently far inland from the post to prevent most of them from returning there more than once a year. Life history narratives and oral tradition which I have recorded with three generations of the Diamond family from Washkaganish indicate that this practice continued through the 1950s, and, for some members of the family, into the 1960s. Coasters, also referred to as "homeguard", lived in the vicinity of the Hudson's Bay Company posts. Historically they provided game food for the posts, and eventually became more and more involved in working for the company, although often only on a casual basis and they did not necessarily reside at the posts (Morantz: 1983). Through the generations the "homeguard" and the employees of the Hudson's Bay Company gradually intermarried and their descendants, employed by the company on a
more permanent basis, became known as "company families". Many contemporary company family descendents identify as readily with their Scots or English ancestry as they do with their native background.

I have previously characterized this situation as follows:

The distinction between Indian and company servant can be noted in the childhood experiences of the older women interviewed in Moose Factory. Some led much more bush-oriented lives, learning traditional domestic and survival skills from both parents, with little or no formal education. On occasion when game was scarce, these women faced the very real possibility of starvation. Others led much more settlement-oriented lives, perhaps attending school for a few years and acquiring domestic skills at home which could later be transferred to employment with the Hudson's Bay Company or Revillon Freres. Their lives were not entirely settlement oriented; they did spend time with their families camping nearby, fishing, and hunting geese and other game food which supplemented the ration provided by the Company to its employees. Although life may have at times been difficult, especially when employment opportunities were limited or when the Company let people go, these women were not faced with the possibility of starvation. (Preston 1985:140).

The life style of these groups of people was, and remains, somewhat distinct. The majority of the ethnographers including Skinner (1911), Cooper (1946), Flannery (1946), Michelson (1936), Honigmann (1949, 1962), and more recently, Knight (1965), had to rely on informants on the basis of who was available and at ease and therefore willing to spend time with strange whitemen; informants who spoke English and were willing as well as capable of acting as interpreters. These informants have been, for the most part, company family men and women. Representation of the traditional patterns of inland and coastal subcultures, made almost exclusively by informants from company families, needs to be critically re-assessed for informant bias. For example, ethnographers have noted that Cree informants tend to refer to their own experience and opinion more readily than generalizing for a group or community.

Informant Bias

How does one critically re-assess for informant bias? Very carefully. In the process of reviewing the ethnographic literature of the James Bay area, I have re-read the Speck, Cooper, Leacock, Knight debate on land tenure. I have also reviewed the series of papers presented at the 1985 CESCE sessions on Algonquian territoriality. And finally, I have read, with particular care, Knight's fieldnotes, which are deposited at the ethnology archives, National Museum of Man, Ottawa. I do not intend to launch into that debate, but I do have some comments which may shed some light or may raise more questions.
Knight was predisposed to look for what he found. In his field report he stated his agreement with Leacock’s theoretical approach and indicated that he had attempted to duplicate it. He assumed that his research at Washkaganish supported her thesis that private or family hunting territories were not aboriginal. In contrast to Leacock however, he thought that as the community became more dependent upon trapping, there had not been a related change toward a more organized private control of land. He assumed those changes which had taken place were the result of government and Hudson’s Bay Company decisions regarding beaver conservation. He also assumed that hunting groups were based on friendship rather than kinship or territory.

On the basis of one summer’s research Knight argued that hunting and fishing were of reduced importance to the people of Washkaganish. He also thought that because furs acceptable to the HBC are taken in a limited period during the winter, families did not stay long in the bush. If Knight’s informants were primarily coasters or company families, which they were, they did not have a tradition of staying long in the bush. Company servants customarily received a subsistence ration from the HBC in partial exchange for their labour. This practice ended in the 1930s. Once a man married, this ration may not have been sufficient for a family. Company families were encouraged to supplement their income with furs and their ration with game food. Since most of these people were either coasters or related to coasters, they were hunting or trapping close to the post, which allowed for frequent or early return to Washkaganish. Narratives recorded for me by older women at Washkaganish indicate that those who married inlanders found the life style to be very different from that experienced by people living in or near the post.

One of Knight’s older informants, Mathew Cowboy, was the HBC cattle herder as a boy, around the turn of the century. He later worked freighting supplies inland to Nemiscau and Mistassini for both the HBC and Revillon Frères. He and other informants often commented on the scarcity of game food to be had when they were young compared to the present, year of 1961. In his notes to himself Knight questioned the validity of these statements, deciding with little apparent evidence but strong personal bias, that the informants experienced a scarcity of large game animals due to “forced concentration on fur bearing animals to the considerable exclusion of hunting larger food animals” (Knight fieldnotes 1961).

These statements about the scarcity of game food, apparently referring to the 1920s and 1930s, correspond with statements made to me by many older women from Washkaganish, Moose Factory, Moosonee, East Main, and Attawapiskat. There has been also sufficient documentation (Preston 1985) supporting these statements of the lack of large game as well as fur-
bearing animals for this period. I raise this point, not because it sheds light on hunting territories, but because it provides an insight into Knight’s method. I suggest that more than once he bent his data to fit his theory. The statements of scarcity are contradicted by another informant’s statement of killing 15 moose in 1930. That, however, may well have been a rare and isolated incident.

Another informant, Charlie Hester, father of David Hester and brother of Sidney Hester, who was Silda Diamond’s father, was employed by Revillon Frères. The Hesters were born at Washkaganish and trapped mink and fox close around the post. Charlie worked freighting up-river, and according to Knight’s notes, he apparently understood land control to be in the hands of the HBC, referring to the beaver allotment. He also stated that a person had to make his own arrangement about with whom he might trap. To me this is a clear example of a coaster/company family individual who knew the system, but either he did not elaborate it to Knight or Knight did not understand the implication of what he was told.

Joseph Hester, the catechist at Waskaganish, knew neither of his parents. He grew up around post and at 15 began freighting to Nemiscau and Mistassini. He ran the mail packet before he was married, then he began trapping. His wife was a Katapatuk, a coaster. Knight recorded that geese could be taken on Katapatuk land if one asked permission. He wondered if there might be a degree of communal ethic in the minds of older people. Joe Hester told him, “No, nobody owned any piece of land. People could hunt and fish anywhere they liked, but nobody could take skins there [Cabbage Willows, where the Katapatuk land is] unless they stayed with us.”

This is a good statement of a principle of land use rights. It is, however, drawn from the experience of coastal land use by one who must ask. The people who must be asked for “staying with” are the stewards of the territories. Unfortunately, Knight did not interview a single one of these men, coaster or inlander on the topic. This was a major omission. Knight’s marginal comments on Hester’s statement suggest he really did not understand Hester’s intent or that he ignored the intent: “Still, I get the impression that it was not too difficult to get an invitation to stay with such a family. A visitor would be under the camp leader’s direction and therefore not be allowed to press to heavily on other subsistence animals, I presume.”

Knight recognized that wage labour income was not sufficient to support a family, noting that it was not until after they were married that the men he interviewed began trapping. What he failed to recognize was that this was a part of company family tradition. He correctly assumed that while coastal people might do well one year and poorly other years, in one year it was possible acquire sufficient credit to go inland. He wrote, “the
ability to move inland to take advantage of the furs there was dependent upon getting sufficient credit from the HBC. Only those with a generally good record of catches could get sufficient credit for supplies needed for a trip inland" (Knight 1961). The problem is that Knight did not bridge the gap between having enough credit to go inland and being invited to go inland. His informant may not have been in a position to explain this because being invited inland may not have been a part of his experience. Coasters and company families did and do not have inland territories. It is, however, to their best advantage to maintain an image of ready access to hunting territories because they have to rely on invitation from inlanders in order to accompany them. People do not readily acknowledge an inability to get along with their neighbors, neighbors who may be relatives and upon whom one may someday find oneself dependent.

David Salt worked for the HBC at East Main until he was 32, at which time he took over the mail run. During the summer he and his dogs were “kept”, that is, the HBC maintained him with a ration. The mail run was replaced by aircraft in the 1940s when David was 47. At that time he and his wife came to Washkaganish. The HBC was controlling access to and distribution of beaver quotas on the Rupert Beaver Preserve. At age 47 David began trapping, at first receiving a share of another man’s furs. In 1961 he had a subsection about a days walk from Washkaganish which was very poor in beaver. Knight did not indicate how he had received the subsection.

The final example is Frank Moar, whose father Daniel Moar ran the mail packet from Mistassini to Washkaganish around 1900. Daniel Moar never did any trapping in his adult life. Frank supported himself without trapping until 1928. Then he began to go with his wife’s father just in and out of Washkaganish, returning to the settlement in March. He and his wife’s father and brother worked at the HBC canoe factory, which employed only six people, at Washkaganish. Frank Moar was considered one of the best carpenters around the bay. His experience conforms to the HBC tradition of encouraging company families to rely on the land and country food as well as on the company store. This interview could have confirmed for Knight his assumption of the reduced importance of hunting and fishing at Washkaganish, but it is not sufficient evidence from which to generalize to the eastern Canadian subarctic. Interestingly, Knight recognized and made note of Moar’s Scots accent.

Conclusions

Knight spent nine or ten weeks at Washkaganish and a week at East Main during the summer of 1961. The following summer he spent a short
time at Nemiscau. As far as I know he never returned to the area. In 1963 Dick Preston and I arrived at Washkaganish, to discover that non-native outsiders were not really very welcome. By the end of that summer a few people had accepted us, and Dick Preston, being the soul that he is, decided he had too much invested in trying to make sense of what seemed incomprehensible not to return. We’ve been sojourning in Washkaganish, and other James Bay communities since then. This is why when reading Knight’s notes, I was able to recognize who his informants were, and understand the implications of what they told him.

When ethnographers of northern Algonquian peoples are not in the field long enough to know their informants well, they may not be able to understand the meaning of what they are told. They also may not know of the gaps in their informants’ experience. When this is the case, we have a potential problem. We may be in murky waters for the formulation of theoretical hypotheses which then may become accepted as adequate explanations of Algonquian behavioural and mental culture, contemporary, historic, and pre-historic. And we can continue to remain at odds, and probably in the dark, over issues of belief, social organization, land tenure, or cross-cousin marriage. When we combine unspecified informant bias and a strong predeliction for a particular theoretical perspective on the part of the ethnographer, we lose touch with ethnographic reality.

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