

The Nature of Descent Groups of Some Tribes in the Interior of Northwestern North America

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RÉSUMÉ

Une étude des Indiens de la partie nord-ouest de l'Amérique septentrionale semble indiquer que le système de parenté (descent group) en vigueur était ambilinéaire. Bien que les données ethnographiques soient plutôt maigres pour certains groupes, pour d'autres, tels les "Lower Carriers", les détails sont abondants et indiquent clairement la présence d'un système de descendance du type ambilinéaire, conditionné par le besoin de contrôler l'exploitation du saumon.

INTRODUCTION

For many years the nature of descent groups among the Lower Carrier, Shuswap, and Lillooet has been a puzzle. The rather incomplete ethnographic data has been interpreted by anthropologists in various ways. The interior tribes were thought to have either degenerate clans or simple bilateral bands, rather than any descent groups at all.

In recent years, the concept of the nonunilineal descent group has been used to clarify social systems all over the world. White (1959) and Davenport (1959) have noted that these descent groups were present in the Northwest Coast of North America.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that several interior tribes had nonunilineal descent groups also. Murdock (1960) and Fathauer (1942) have noted briefly the presence of nonunilineal groups among several tribes of the interior. The

existence of a special type of nonunilineal group, the stem lineage, among certain tribes will also be discussed.

Northwestern North America had two types of descent groups: unilineal and nonunilineal (ambilineal). Most of the unilineal descent groups were matrilineal.

In a culture that has unilineal descent groups, an individual can claim membership in only one descent group of a certain type, i.e., a person can claim membership in only one lineage and only one clan. In a culture that has nonunilineal descent groups, a person can claim membership in several descent groups of a certain type, i.e., a person can claim membership in several lineages and in several clans.

In a culture that has unilineal descent groups, actual membership in a descent group is established as soon as the individual is born. In a culture that has nonunilineal descent groups, a person becomes a member in a descent group by establishing residence in the territory of the descent group. Some tribes in Oceania have membership in a nonunilineal descent group by securing land holdings in the descent unit's territory (Firth, 1957:4). In northwestern North America, residence is the sole factor in establishing actual membership.

Firth appears to have been the first anthropologist to recognize the existence of nonunilineal descent groups. While describing the Maori descent unit, the *hapu*, Firth realized that this group was not a typical unilineal clan. A Maori could claim membership in the *hapu* of his mother or father. Firth could not use the concept of unilineal descent to describe the mode of descent group affiliation among the Maori. Therefore, he developed the concept of ambilineal descent (Firth, 1929:98).

Later Firth pointed out that unilineal descent means that one traces descent consistently through one kind of parent only to the exclusion of the other kind of parent in order to establish descent group affiliation. Ambilineal descent means, on the other hand, that one can use both parents' descent lines to establish a choice for descent group affiliation (Firth, 1957:5).

Several terms are used for nonunilineal descent groups. Firth has used "ambilateral group" (Firth, 1929:98) and "ramage"

(Firth, 1957:6). Davenport (1959:568) and White (1959:177) use the term "sept" for nonunilineal descent group. Murdock (1960) uses "cognatic group."

Lower Carrier Descent Groups

Most of our information on Lower Carrier descent groups is derived from the Alkatcho. However, Goldman has remarked that the social systems of the various Lower Carrier sub-tribes are similar (Goldman, personal communication). Therefore, our analysis will examine the descent system of the Lower Carrier as a whole.

The basic unit in the social system of the Lower Carrier was the *netsi* (crest group), "Alkatcho informants describe a *netsi* as a local group whose members lived together as one family in the same village, shared common fishing sites, and hunting territory; participated jointly in potlatches, and used as a crest the totemic animal designating the group" (Goldman, 1941:401).

The core of the crest group was the *sadeku*. It was composed of siblings and their descendants. "The *sadeku* comprised all individuals descended through the line of grandfather, while beyond that was the *sadekuka* 'distant relatives' descending through the line of great-grandfather" (Goldman, 1940:354). The core was based on patrilocal residence and patrilineal descent.

Primogeniture was the basic principle of the Lower Carrier system. The first born in a line of first born would be the family head or *detsa* (first one). The eldest member of the line of siblings that traced direct descent from the ancestor of the *netsi* was the *teneza* of the crest group. The other members of the sibling group that provided the *teneza* were the *szeza* (persons of high rank).

Only the eldest son of a *teneza* had the right to provide potlatches for his village after the death of his father in order to validate his title. The new *teneza* had the full support of his lineage in giving feasts, since he represented the crest group and the members shared in his prestige.

The *teneza* regulated the use of the hunting territory and the fishing sites of the group. He attempted to settle disputes among

members of the crest group. The group leader organized potlatches and directed the construction of the lineage house where potlatches were held.

While the membership of the administrative core was restricted to a permanent cadre, the composition of the crest group outside the core was flexible. Goldman states that "children were assigned to the crests of either the paternal or maternal line or to both. Thus some men at Alkatcho inherited and validated membership in three crest groups" (Goldman, 1941:399). "The fact that crests may be drawn from both sides of the family makes it possible for brothers to validate different crests and so assume economic and ceremonial privileges in different groups..." (*ibid.*: 405-6).

Certain crests in a group could be displayed by persons of high rank after they validated their status by potlatches. Persons of low rank could not participate in these activities because they were not eligible for high positions. However, these individuals had rights to the resources of the lineage, although they lacked ceremonial privileges. Goldman points out that "since the first born of a line of siblings was responsible for the economic well-being of that group, the group necessarily shared in his economic privileges as a member of a crest group, although they were denied the honorific prerogatives with membership" (*ibid.*: 404).

The crest groups were agamous. A Lower Carrier could marry a member of his own *netsi* or another crest group, depending on his personal preferences (*ibid.*: 405).

The groups had rights to certain sections of streams and lakes for purposes of fishing. Families might have their own fish traps, but they had to share fish with all the members of the group (Goldman, 1940:367).

Each *netsi* had its own hunting territories. All animals that were killed in the territory of a crest group were shared by the members of the lineage.

Crest groups conducted funerals for their members. The *tenezas* organized potlatches for the dead.

Each group had certain exclusive animal crests and ceremonies. Only members of the Beaver *netsi* could carve beaver crests on houses and on the tops of mortuary posts. "The ravens had this prerogative: a member of the group climbed up on the roof of the house and cried out, 'kaw kaw,' imitating the sound of the raven" (*ibid.*:357).

If a village had several lineages, there generally was a village chief. "The village chief, *meotih*, the most important noble, was responsible for organizing potlatches and for the adjustment of hunting and fishing territory disputes. He was generally one who had inherited the position through a direct line of primogeniture" (Goldman, 1941:398). The groups were probably related to each other and the *meotih* represented the common line of ancestors for the entire village.

The Nature of the Crest Groups

Goldman believes that there are contradictions in the information that was supplied by his informants (Goldman, 1940: 337-8). The differences between the *sadeku* (group of siblings) and the crest group often are not clear. Goldman resolves the confusion with a theory that assumes that the Lower Carrier crest groups are really matrilineal phratries (similar to the matrilineal descent groups of the Upper Carrier) that have been modified by contact with the bilateral Bella Coola. Goldman hypothesizes that the fur trade with the bilateral Bella Coola stimulated the Lower Carrier to add bilateral features to unilineal groups in order to facilitate trade and intermarriage between the Coast and the Interior (Goldman, 1941).

I believe that we can regard the Lower Carrier crest group as a distinct type of descent group rather than a mixture of bilateral and unilineal traits.

Another writer had some similar ideas on the Lower Carrier crest groups. In 1942, Fathauer stated: "Goldman's analysis is based on the assumption that the Alkatcho Carrier had a phratry system similar to that of the Bulkley River Carrier before the fur trade stimulated the Bella Coola to make closer contacts with the Alkatcho group. This is quite an involved explanation and the validity of some of the assumptions may be questioned. The

bilateral type of social organization which is found among the Bella Coola is becoming recognized as a fairly common and well-defined type. It has been called a 'ramage' by Firth" (Fathauer, 1942:84). Since Firth often uses the term "ramage" as a synonym for "ambilineal descent group" (Firth, 1957), we can assume that Fathauer realized that the crest group is an ambilineal descent group. However, he did not develop his suggestion and his idea was not widely disseminated among anthropologists since it was presented in an unpublished M.A. thesis.

Among the Lower Carriers, as we saw in the preceding description of the crest group, an individual could claim membership in several crest groups by tracing descent through the descent lines of both father and mother. "Residence, by and large, determines hunting and fishing rights among the Lower Carrier" (Goldman, 1941:406). The crest groups controlled the hunting grounds and fishing sites of the Lower Carrier. In order to use the resources of a group, a person had to show some kinship with the members of a group, and the person had to reside in the territory of the group to establish actual membership. These facts, I believe, demonstrate that the Lower Carrier crest groups were non-unilineal descent groups. The use of demonstrated descent indicates lineages.

Since the membership of the crest groups fluctuated, Goldman stated: "The crest group could therefore not have been either a clearly defined local group or a stable social unit" (Goldman, 1941:399). How could the crest group maintain itself as a corporate group and maintain control over resources? I believe that the problem is resolved if we regard the crest group as a stem lineage.

Sahlins formulated the concept of the stem lineage to describe the nature of certain descent groups in Polynesia. "A stem lineage has a core of patrilineal relatives supplying the lineage head — in Tokelau and Manihiki [Polynesian islands] evidently through primogeniture. To this patrilineal stem are attached cognates of various description, affiliated with full and equal rights save that of succession. The lineage holds land corporately, but administration is vested in and monopolized by the core line" (Sahlins, 1957: 298).

The administrative core of the crest group was the *sadeku*. This unit was based on patrilineal descent, primogeniture, and patrilocal residence. The *sadeku* maintained the crest group as a corporate unit. Other members of the crest group had full economic rights, but these persons could not become heads of the group. These persons could become members of any one of several crest groups since they followed rules of ambilineal descent and variable residence. The crest group, therefore, was a stem lineage.

The Chilcotin

One anthropologist, Lane, maintains that the Chilcotin did not have a social system based on descent groups. "I have indicated that, in so far as I was able to determine, the Chilcotin now deny ever having any sept or honorific system; and my field work failed to produce any evidence of their ever having had such a system" (Lane, 1952:186). Lane believes that the Chilcotin only had a loose band system.

However, there are reasons for the lack of information on the Chilcotin descent system. In 1862 a smallpox epidemic killed most of the members of the Chilcotin tribe. Only a few persons who were in the mountains survived (Morice, 1905:307). Goldman adds some details: "The Chilcotins, for example, met the full brunt of an expanding money-mad White population. Settled in good ranching country, and almost in the heart of the Caribou gold fields, the Chilcotin were soon overwhelmed by the whites. Smallpox, venereal disease, and wars with the whites quickly decimated the population" (Goldman, 1940:372). The Shuswap had a similar history in the nineteenth century; no trace of the old Shuswap social structure remains today. There are ample reasons, therefore, for the lack of knowledge of the pristine social system among the modern Chilcotin.

In the early 1900's, Teit gathered some information on the Chilcotin descent system. He probably had some informants who remembered the customs of the Chilcotin before 1862. The meager facts on the social organization are as follows:

From the assertion of the Shuswap and from little information I managed to gather from the Chilcotin themselves, it appears certain that

the tribe was organized in a manner similar to that of the Coast tribes. They seem to have had three classes — nobles, common people, and slaves. A clan system also prevailed, and there are traces of numerous societies. ...It seems that the child belonged to both the father's and the mother's families.

The Raven seems to have been a strong clan among the Chilcotin. Nobles took their rank according to the amount of wealth they were able to distribute at potlatches. If one man gave a greater potlatch than another, he ranked higher, and the same seems to have been true of clans. It seems that some bands of the tribe had hereditary chiefs, and others had none (Teit, 1908:786).

Teit's clans were probably nonunilineal lineages, since Teit's statement that a child belonged to the families of both his parents suggests ambilineal descent.

The Shuswap

Teit's comments provide some understanding of the social organization among the Shuswap:

The Shuswap may be classed as a hunting and fishing tribe; the former occupation, on the whole, predominating. The Fraser River and Canyon bands were the most sedentary, the latter almost entirely so; while the North Thompson bands were the most nomadic. Salmon was of greatest importance to the Fraser River and Canyon people, trout and small fish to the Lake People, and game to the rest of the tribe. Fishing, however, was of great importance to every band (Teit, 1908: 513).

Teit separates the social organization of the southern Shuswap from that of the northern Shuswap. The former group was supposed to have a simple band structure while the latter was supposed to have a complex ranking system based on crest groups borrowed from the Carrier and Chilcotin (*ibid.*:581). It seems that there is some confusion in the interpretation of the data. I believe that the bands and crest groups of Teit were really identical; these units were stem lineages.¹ Teit presents the following facts:

¹ Teit believes that the crest groups were introduced in 1850. Perhaps some ceremonial features were diffused from the coast and became associated with some lineages. Teit stated: "In fact, the information is now so meager that it is very difficult to draw exact conclusions regarding the real status, privileges, and ceremonies of any of the various classes, crest groups, and societies, *some informants having very vague ideas regarding the differences between these groups*" (582). *Italics* supplied by the present writer.

The people of all the tribal divisions are further divided into a number of bands wintering in certain definite localities, with headquarters at a principal village. These bands, although in olden times somewhat better defined than those of the Thompson Indians, were not so well marked fifty years ago as now. This was owing to the far greater number of small villages existing at that time. The inhabitants of those situated at equal distances from two central villages or headquarters of different bands sometimes affiliated with one band, sometimes with the other. Besides, the small wintering-places were frequently changed, and even the main locality or village of a band would have more families one winter, and less another. Some families were more nomadic than others, and each band would have people from neighboring villages living with them every winter. Yet, on the whole, each band was composed of a group of families closely related among themselves, who generally wintered within a definite locality, at or within a few miles of a larger village or centre. (*ibid.*:457).

In the salmon area lineages were the groups that maintained permanent residences in villages during the winter season. It is unlikely that the Shuswap were an exception in the area and maintained regular villages with loose bands rather than with corporate descent groups. The shifting membership suggests stem lineages.

A core of chiefs based on primogeniture is suggested by these statements:

...the Shuswap had one chief for each band, the office descending in the male line... There was hardly ever any trouble about the succession. If a chief died leaving two adult sons, both very capable and anxious to fill the position, the male relatives and the people of the band decided, generally choosing the elder one. A man's son took precedence over all the others — the eldest son, if he was capable, and if he were willing to accept the office; failing a son, a grandson; and failing, a brother; and failing a brother, a nephew (*ibid.*:569).

Teit was confused on the point of chiefs when he stated: "It is difficult to state whether chiefs were heads of bands or leaders of crest groups. It seems probable that each crest group had a chief, and not each band. In some places both may have existed. Chiefs were hereditary, as among the rest of the tribe" (*ibid.*: 582). If we regard the bands and crest groups as being the same things, the confusion is resolved.

Teit presented the following data on the crest groups:

The people of these bands were divided into three classes — noblemen, common people, and slaves. The first class were called “chiefs,” “chiefs’ offspring,” or “chiefs’ descendants,” and constituted in various bands from nearly one-half to over two-thirds of the whole population... The nobles had special privileges, and generally were married within their class. Nobility was hereditary, and seems to have descended in both the male and the female line. Hereditary chiefs of the bands always belonged to the nobility, but it seems that they tended to become rather chiefs of clans than of bands.

The nobles appear to have been divided into hereditary groups. ...A person marrying a member of the crest group did not acquire its privileges, although they belonged to his children, both male and female. Each crest group had an hereditary chief or leader.

It appears that members of a man’s crest group, as well as his relatives were bound to avenge his death.

Most of the groups into which the common people were divided were not strictly hereditary. Any man could become a member of any one of these groups by passing through a short training and fasting a few days. ...However, a son generally became a member of the group to which his father belonged, in preference to others. Membership in some of these groups, as in that of the Black Bear, which it appears admitted members only from among the common people was more strictly hereditary.

It seems that these groups interested the hereditary family groups of the nobility; so that common people, and perhaps also members of the nobility of any crest group, may have belonged to any of the groups here discussed.

Fishing sites belonged to the crest group. All land and whatever grew upon it, all hunting grounds with the game therein belonged to the nobility. ...The land, with the waters pertaining thereto, was divided among the various bands, although their hunting grounds were not in all cases well defined. The hunting territory, root digging grounds, berrying resorts, and camping places in the mountains of each band belonged to the nobility of the band in common, but the trapping grounds and fishing places were divided among the crest groups of each band. Apparently some of the principal village sites were also divided among them; or at least in some instances, the land was divided so that each crest group had its inhabitations and graveyards on its own grounds. In other cases it appears that members of different crest groups dwelt in the same village, and buried in the same graveyard, but members of different crest groups did not live in the same house (*ibid.*:576-83).

It seems apparent that there was confusion over the differences between descent groups and ceremonial societies from the

coast. The best interpretation of data, in my opinion, is to conclude that the Shuswap had stem lineages. There seems to have been a patrilineal core of chiefs. Persons of low rank (distant from the line of ancestors) could claim membership in several descent groups under the system of nonunilineal descent. The core would supervise the use of the resources of the lineage since the stem was the only stable part of the lineage. Each lineage had its own house.

The Lillooet Indians

The data on Lillooet social organization are as follows:

All Lillooet bands were divided into clans. It would seem that originally all the people of one village were supposed to be descendants of a common ancestor. They had a single tradition relating to their origin. It seems, therefore, that at one time each village community consisted of a single clan.

Membership in the clan descended in both the male and female line. A man could not become a member of his wife's clan, and *vice versa*; but children could claim membership in the clan of both their father and mother, for by blood they were members of both clans. There were no restrictions regarding intermarriage between clans. In cases of intermarriage between different villages, new clans were therefore easily introduced. If, on the other hand, a community, for one cause or another, split up, and its members settled in different places, the new communities were considered as branches of one social unit. Sometimes a clan would move from its original home and settle with another clan. Therefore it happens that people of a large community consist of two or more clans descended from different ancestors.

Each clan... had an hereditary chief. Children and grandchildren of these chiefs were called "chief's children." They formed an aristocracy of descent, but had no privileges of any kind. The hereditary chief was the chief of the families composing a village. When a clan spread over several villages, the branches still had one chief in common. He resided at the original home of the clan. In a village that contained several clans, the chief of the original clan was the head chief.

If the hereditary chief of a community died, he was succeeded by his eldest son; and if he had no sons, by his eldest daughter. If a chief died without offspring, his nearest male relative was considered chief.

The right to fish at places where large and important fishweirs were located, was considered the property of the clan that erected the weir every year.

Hunting and root-digging grounds, trails, and trail routes were the common property of the tribe (*ibid.*:252-6).

The meager information seems to indicate that nonunilineal descent groups were present among the Lillooet. The ability to claim membership in groups either through the mother or father suggests the ambilineal nature of the group.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Although the facts are incomplete, I have attempted to demonstrate that several tribes in the interior of Northwestern North America had nonunilineal descent groups. The case for the Lower Carrier is very strong since the ethnographic picture is detailed. The interpretation of the social systems of the other tribes is hampered by the lacunae in the ethnographic data.

Some doubt has been expressed that the Chilcotin and the Shuswap had any descent groups in the first place. However, the neighbors of these tribes had descent groups (e.g. Lower Carrier). All these cultures are in the salmon area in which descent groups are generally present in order to maintain control of the rich sources of the salmon. There is no apparent reason why the Chilcotin and the Shuswap should be exceptions in this respect. Disruptive culture change has confused and obscured the evidence for descent groups among some tribes in Northwestern North America. We must interpret the few facts in terms of modern anthropological findings and theories.

I would like to offer some speculations about the origin of the stem lineage in Northwestern North America. There are no historical facts to support these ideas, but I believe that the conjectures have some heuristic value in the study of nonunilineal descent groups.

If we assume that the original form of social organization in Northwestern North America was the patrilocal band (see Service, 1962, for a discussion of patrilocal bands as the original type of human social unit above the family), it can be deduced that stem lineage would be the natural result of the adjustment of the patrilocal band to the salmon area. A group of brothers with their

spouses and other relatives would find it desirable to maintain permanent control over sources of salmon. The residential group (patrilocal band) would be transformed into a descent group in order to maintain control of the salmon sources by the male relatives and their descendants. Agnatic and consanguineal relatives of various types would attach themselves to the core of brothers in order to share the bounty of the resources. The principle of ambilineal descent would enable persons to establish claims to membership in several descent groups. This choice would have advantages in times of food shortages.

It is possible that the stem lineage was the original type of descent group in Northwestern North America. This type of social unit appears to be a logical descendant of the patrilocal band. The matrilineal descent groups in the area may have been a result of historical factors. Some anthropologists believe that matrilineal descent was derived from Asia and that its spread was stopped by the coming of the Europeans (Murdock, 1955).

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