

HUNTING TERRITORIES, HUNTING BOSSES  
AND COMMUNAL PRODUCTION  
AMONG COASTAL JAMES BAY CREE

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Cet examen des différentes activités productives (chasse, trappe, pêche) des Cris de la Baie James indique que la production de la fourrure pour le marché ne parvient pas à expliquer la présence ou l'absence du complexe du chef de la chasse en territoire de chasse. En effet, ce complexe n'est pas, ainsi que l'ont cru quelques anthropologues antérieurs, un exemple de propriété privée naissante ou d'usufruit privatisé. Le chef de la chasse est un leader politique et un gardien de richesses, il n'est pas un propriétaire. Les caractéristiques des territoires de la chasse des Cris concordent avec l'aspect communal et égalitaire de leurs relations qui dominent les activités productives fondées sur le territoire. Cette analyse corrobore l'opinion que le complexe territorial et ses variations sont des adaptations ancrées dans la connaissance des Cris des caractéristiques du gibier, y compris les stratégies appropriées du contrôle de la chasse et du gibier.

This examination of the different productive activities of James Bay Cree hunters/trappers/fishermen indicates that fur production for the market fails to account for the presence or absence of the hunting territory-hunting boss complex. Indeed, this complex is not, as some earlier anthropologists believed, an instance of incipient private property or privatized usufruct. The hunting boss is a political leader and resource custodian, not a private owner. Cree hunting territories are consistent with the communal and egalitarian relations that dominate land-based production. This analysis supports the view that the territorial complex and its variations are adaptations anchored in Cree knowledge of the characteristics of game, including appropriate hunting and game management strategies.

The argument that commodity production precipitates private territories among hunting societies—a position that became orthodoxy in anthropology following its early statement by Leacock (1954) and its popularization by Murphy and Steward (1956)—has come under serious scrutiny by Marxist and non-

Marxist anthropologists alike. This development is connected to a new recognition of the resilience of the social relations of communal hunting, which, in many cases, have withstood centuries of involvement with capitalist economic and political forms.

Leacock (1982) continues to argue that tendencies toward privatized usufruct or ownership are typical of egalitarian societies that have embarked upon commodity production for a capitalist market. Partial support for this view is provided by other recent works (Bahuchet and Guillaume 1982; Morris 1982), but there is no longer a consensus or perhaps even majority allegiance to this view. Anthropologists are taking a second look at forms of ownership they encounter among modern hunting societies and are facing up to the complexities of distinguishing indigenous property forms from those that arose in the course of extremely varied colonial histories. Recent ethnography (e.g., Feit 1978, 1982; Hamilton 1982) brings to our attention various contemporary forms of individual "ownership" of resources that do not preclude communal access to the means of production, and that are instances of neither private property nor privatized usufruct, although they have sometimes been mistaken for such.

The misidentification of Algonquian territories as private property or privatized usufruct, and their misattribution to commodity production, are based on an incomplete ethnological understanding of the institution and an unreasonably narrow emphasis on fur as opposed to subsistence production. Hunters' dependence on trade notwithstanding, it has become clear from recent research that the economic importance of fur trapping, relative to subsistence hunting and fishing, was overestimated in the acculturative models of Leacock and Murphy and Steward; that trapping never displaced subsistence harvests as the principal source of economic welfare in most of the Subarctic; and that trapping as an activity was generally supplementary to and often compatible with subsistence hunting (see Note 1).

Closer attention to a more representative array of productive processes demonstrates that the Algonquian institution of "territories" with individual "owners" is hardly restricted to commercially-oriented production and that the institution is misrepresented by the application of property concepts more appropriately attributed to capitalism. This essay discusses the main productive contexts of the territorial complex among Wemindji Cree hunters of eastern coast James Bay, with special emphasis on subsistence goose hunting. This is to clarify the concept, practice, and *raison d'être* of the hunting territory-hunting boss system.

## GROUNDS AND BOSSES

Among the Wemindji Cree of eastern coast James Bay, *ntuuhuu uuchimaauch*, translated by English-speaking Cree as "hunting bosses," control certain productive activities on their respective *ntuuhuu aschii* (hunting grounds). Cree often gloss the hunting boss as the territory "owner" when speaking in English. But the relationship might more accurately be characterized as political rather than proprietary.

A boss *tapaiitam* (decides about, or governs) certain productive activities on his territory—literally, "He matches it, fits it to his thinking" (Vincent and Mailhot 1982). Etymologically, the *-im-* of *uuchimaaau* (boss, leader) suggests a relationship with *yimuu*, (he speaks), and perhaps there is also a connection between *uuchimaaau* (he distracts) and *uuchihaau* (he drives him from it) (Brian Craik, personal communication; see Note 2).

Feit (1978) has argued that the Waswanipi territory leader acts, on behalf of the group, as custodian of certain ecologically sensitive resources. The point is equally valid for Wemindji Cree. The hunting boss decides about the times, places, and methods for taking certain animals on his territory, so that good hunting will be available on a perennial basis. The hunting boss's right to govern the exploitation of certain resources does not entail the right to deny others access. A number of households typically have usufruct rights in a given territory and cannot be refused access by the hunting boss. If he fails in his responsibility to promote the productive success of others who have rights to the territory, or inhibits their access without reason, his control slips. His decisions will be ignored, and a replacement will eventually be installed, by consensus of the hunting group and the wider community.

A given household is not necessarily restricted to the territory where it possesses primary right of access. Most people frequently use more than one territory, from season to season and year to year, by obtaining invitations from different hunting bosses. The system of territories, bosses, and invitations provides, then, for orderly redistribution of hunters to resources.

## THE CONTEXTS OF TERRITORIALITY

The hunting territory-hunting boss complex is not present in all productive contexts. Different territorial patterns are associated with the three principal land-based production processes: winter hunting and trapping, fall and spring goose hunting, and summer fishing. In attempting to explain these differences, it becomes clear immediately that production for subsistence versus production for the market is not the central criterion. Territo-

ries and hunting bosses are as strongly developed for subsistence goose hunting as for winter hunting and trapping (see Note 3). Nor should it be supposed that, historically, this complex arose in the productive context of trapping and automatically invaded other contexts. While territories are strongly developed for goose hunting, the strategy for summer fishing and some small game hunting remains practically aterritorial.

Cree knowledge of the characteristics of game, coupled with social relations for its exploitation, provides the best explanation of these variations in territorial practice. When I say available "social relations," I am referring to three strong tendencies in Cree society. The first is respect for the knowledge and leadership of hunting bosses and elders, anchored in these individuals' ability to make effective decisions about activities on the land. The second is the cooperative kinship and friendship groupings that surround these core individuals. The third is the relative autonomy of the household, which possesses most of the basic skills needed to make a living on the land. These three features are of course central among those identified by Sahlins (1972) as typical of societies organized around domestic production.

As a production process, fishing normally requires only the cooperation inherent in the complementary roles of husband and wife within the household. Fishing camps are comprised of usually one, occasionally two, households (see Note 4). A husband and wife team sometimes has a site where it customarily pitches its tent and sets its nets. As a matter of common knowledge and courtesy, the spot would be used by others only if it were unoccupied. Beyond this consideration, however, people are free to fish where they choose. The larger territorial divisions for goose hunting and winter hunting and trapping, and the authority of hunting bosses, are largely irrelevant for fishing.

There is never any shortage of good fishing sites for those who wish to use this resource. The intervention of a hunting boss under these conditions would usually be regarded as unwarranted interference (see Note 5). Here, then, household autonomy is most fully apparent. People enjoy the variety implied by productive autonomy in some seasons and communal production in others.

In winter hunting and trapping, occasions for cooperation among households are more numerous. Winter hunting and trapping are typically conducted by camps comprised of three or four male hunters, a similar number of adult women, and five or six children. Each camp hunts and traps on one of twenty territories within the Wemindji community area, which is about sixty miles in width from north to south along the James Bay coast and over 180 miles in length, extending inland. Experienced hunters from a camp often trap beaver alone, but sometimes work in teams, and

all the hunters in a camp cooperate to kill and transport moose, caribou, and black bear.

Household autonomy is also offset by the authority of the *amiskw uuchimaau* (beaver boss), who leads activities on each territory. At Wemindji, beaver is the most important winter food species, as well as the most important fur species. By annually rotating camps within his territory, and limiting the kills of larger sedentary game, the beaver boss ensures continued good hunting of animals that could potentially be overexploited (see Note 6).

### GOOSE HUNTING

Goose hunting during seasonal migrations along the coast of James Bay is the activity to which this essay devotes particular attention (see Note 7). Of all productive activities, goose hunting is the most communal in nature, owing in large measure to the particular characteristics of the game and the coordination demanded of hunters for best results. Inland families join coastal families for the hunts. During goose migration, population along the coast is therefore much denser, especially during the universally popular spring hunt. Camps are bigger, with six or seven male hunters in a typical camp, as many adult females, and a dozen or more children.

Usually, the beaver boss of a coastal territory will also be a boss for goose hunting on that territory. Some territories are subdivided to accommodate the larger number of hunting camps, and each of these camps will usually have a senior hunter (*paaschi-chaa uuchimaau*), who is called the shooting boss. The shooting boss regulates the times and locations at which geese will be hunted, with a view to maintaining their optimum long-term availability to hunters.

Cree hunters contrast highly mobile geese to the sedentary beaver and moose. From autumn to spring, beaver are confined to the area of their lodges and accumulated food supplies. They generally remain in the area even when relocating to a new lodge in summer. Local populations of moose, similarly, tend to remain in particular areas. Experienced hunters, especially bosses, are well aware of trends in these populations and regulate them by controlling exploitation. Geese cannot be controlled in the same way. Although a number of goose hunting practices do have a conservation effect, habitat availability and kills by sport hunters on the Atlantic and Mississippi flyways are the major determinants of population trends (see Berkes 1978, 1982).

In the hunting of geese, a separate and no less important resource management issue arises. Geese anticipate hunters in the coastal James Bay environment and communicate appropriate behav-

ioral responses to other geese. They will not return to a hunting spot that has been used too regularly or where they have been frightened too badly. A flock that notices that another flock has flown a safe path will tend to follow, rather than fly an independent course. Young geese learn their flying and feeding patterns from older, experienced ones. These responses are cumulative. Learned responses to human hunting practices, therefore, can easily spread through entire populations of geese. This consideration makes territorial exploitation, under the coordination and supervision of shooting bosses, especially important (see Note 8).

Hunters say that they always wait to see which way the shooting boss is going to go. The boss is expected to be a model of wise hunting practice and able to lead other hunters in productive hunting. He is also capable of indicating appropriate measures of hunting restraint to ensure that attempts to maximize kills on a day-to-day basis will not undermine long-term access. All experienced hunters discuss when and where to hunt and what strategy to employ. Action independent of the shooting boss is regarded as an open challenge to his authority (see Note 9).

Ideally, the Cree will allow only those geese actually fired-on to become aware of human presence. Elaborate precautions are taken to minimize all visual and auditory signs of hunters' presence. Camps, equipment, and hunters are meticulously camouflaged. Shooting on calm days is avoided because the sound of shooting carries a considerable distance without a wind to muffle and disperse it. After a particularly productive day, when a high proportion of geese in the area have been exposed to shots, hunting is called off for a day or two to give the geese a "rest." Shooting after dusk is taboo, because the flare from a fired shotgun is said to be especially visible and frightening to geese at night.

Of particular importance is the rotation and "resting" of hunting sites. Each goose hunting territory includes one or more coastal bays where migrating geese gather for two or three weeks to rest and feed, as well as peripheral islands, ponds, creeks, lakes, and ridges to which geese fly from the bays for diurnal feeding. At any given stage in a seasonal migration, a territory must have at least two or three hunting sites in rotational use so that no site is visited on two days running. All hunters who use a territory on a given day are expected to accompany the shooting boss to the one site, allowing all other sites to rest. In this way, the geese who sojourn on the territory will not learn to expect hunters in a particular place and indeed will be able to find refuge at most sites on any given day.

The bays where geese concentrate require the most careful handling. To disturb these concentrations too early in the migration discourages the build-up of a large population on the

territory and damages hunting later. It takes the kind of experience a shooting boss possesses to discern at just what point in the season the optimum local population has been reached, so that the highly productive goose "drives" in the bays can begin (see Note 10). The prime moment varies from year to year, depending on weather and habitat quality.

The leadership of the shooting boss ensures that hunters will act in unison at sites that have been saved for a communal drive. A hunter who enters such an area on his own can spoil a good hunt for all others who depend on the area and will be made to endure considerable disrepute and embarrassment.

Major concentrations of geese must be hunted during the correct wind conditions, which vary according to the topography of hunting spots. Otherwise, the harvest obtained will not warrant the disturbance to so many geese. Again, it requires intimate knowledge of a territory to know the flight and feeding preferences of geese under variable conditions of weather, feed, tides, etc.

As the season progresses, wind patterns change. Hunting geese in the bays with an adverse wind can cause their premature departure. Geese driven from a bay late in the spring migration, when there is a south wind, for example, might fly to points north rather than return at the end of the day.

If management considerations of the kind discussed are ignored, a number of negative consequences ensue. Fewer geese stay around for shorter periods of time. Geese on the territory become increasingly anxious about the presence of hunters and adjust their behavior accordingly. They avoid spots where they have been badly frightened or over-hunted. They begin to fly higher between feeding grounds, staying out of shotgun range. They fly increasingly after dusk, when hunters have stopped shooting. By day, they fly in greater numbers to inland feeding spots, which are widely scattered and represent more difficult human access. Or they begin to fly safer inland migration routes. Inasmuch as these forms of behavior are socially transmitted, it can take years for damage, produced by careless or uncoordinated hunting, to mend.

## CONCLUSION

Knowledge of the game and attendant hunting strategy is essential in accounting for the presence or absence of the hunting territory-hunting boss complex and its specific variations, in a given productive context. Goose hunting territories are respected and maintained because they are socially recognized as effective units for the coordination of hunting by expert hunting bosses. All mature hunters know that the institution

contributes to the collective good by fostering maximum harvests within the longer-term limits imposed by the geese's capacity to adapt to hunters.

This recognition is tempered by a strong egalitarian ethic. If a hunting boss's authority fails to result in collective benefit, due to inexpert decisions or unwillingness to share hunting opportunities, other hunters do not respect his decisions about the use of his grounds and a localized breakdown of the informal rules may occur until new leadership is initiated and accepted.

Certainly it would be a mistake to regard hunting territories at Wemindji and neighboring eastern Cree communities as forms of privatized tenure or as direct responses to commercial fur production. It may be that this statement applies more generally throughout the Subarctic. The custodianship of sensitive animal resources by senior Cree leaders has valid parallels, perhaps, in such institutions as the ownership of waterholes by senior !Kung of the Kalahari Desert. The social relations needed to reproduce the Cree territorial complex—that is, the relative autonomy of the household, cooperation in production for mutual security and benefit, and respect for the authority of knowledgeable individuals—are commonly encountered among aboriginal societies having a domestic mode of production.

In certain ecological contexts, trade may have reinforced the institution of territories through increased emphasis on beaver, aboriginally an important subsistence species. Management of beaver by knowledgeable custodians is socially and ecologically beneficial. As well, there are equally important advantages to hunting territories in the management of important non-fur subsistence species.

In no productive context at Wemindji is the hunting territory-hunting boss complex a symptom of the decline of communal production; indeed, it is precisely where cooperation between households is most important that the complex is strongest. It does not appear that mere involvement with capitalist economies at the level of commodity production is a sufficient condition for the erosion of indigenous systems of tenure or for the fundamental transformation of communal productive relations.

#### NOTES

1. It is clear from a variety of research that, dependence on trade items notwithstanding, subsistence products remained the primary economic "income" of most northern natives throughout the fur trade period and well into the post-1945 "wages-and-welfare" era (Salisbury et al. 1972a, 1972b; James Bay and Northern Québec Native Harvesting Research



Committee 1976-1980; Berger 1977; Feit 1978). During the wages-and-welfare period, transfer payments and employment have displaced fur income as principal sources of monetary income.

2. Another derivation is suggested by Braroe (1975:144). The equivalent of *uuchimaaau* in the Plains Cree dialect is a derivation of the verb "to give." Perhaps Braroe is referring to the verb "he gives him food," or *shimaau* in the East Cree dialect. Certainly, generous sharing of resources is closely related to the ability of the hunting boss to secure respect for his authority.
3. In terms of the economic replacement value of the product, winter hunting and trapping have generated far more value in food than in fur up to the present time. Although hunters became dependent on fur income for firearms, metal tools, some clothing, and emergency supplies during the traditional fur trade period, this did not eliminate their primary dependence on bush food.
4. Summer fishing for trout and whitefish along the James Bay coast is most often conducted by single households. In summer sturgeon fishing, it is more common for a pair of households to share air charter costs to inland fishing locations and to camp together.
5. A similar observation applies to snaring hare and shooting grouse on forays from the settlement, activities for which hunters are not expected to consult a hunting boss or to respect the territorial divisions pertaining to manageable game populations, which are more sensitive to Cree predation. Although hare, grouse, and fish are subject to the same general principles of respect and non-wastage as all game, their population cycles are not seen as responsive to game management. At high points in their population cycles, they are almost inexhaustible; at low points, virtually unavailable.
6. Here, I make only passing reference to this system. It is carefully documented by Feit (1978) for the nearby community of Waswanipi.
7. Although over ninety percent of the geese harvested are Canada geese, significant numbers of snow geese and brant are also taken. The territorial strategy discussed here applies to the hunting of Canada and snow geese.
8. The hunting territory-shooting boss system described here is also practiced in the adjacent Cree communities of Eastmain and Chisasibi.

9. There are, however, certain zones that are less sensitive from a goose management point of view, where hunters may go on their own initiative. Space does not permit a discussion of these here.
10. This procedure and others are discussed in detail in Scott (1983). There are important differences in hunting methods at each stage of migration and between spring and fall migrations. In the interest of brevity, I have confined myself to goose hunting in general.

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