
The Red Earth Crees, 1860-1960

David Meyer

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David Meyer's book on the Red Earth Crees adds to a small and slowly developing body of literature on the Algonkians of the Western Subarctic region. Ethnohistorical in nature, the book concentrates on the development of a marriage isolate, or "*deme*," among the Plains Cree of Red Earth and the Swampy Cree of Shoal Lake, both in east-central Saskatchewan. However, Meyer also provides valuable information on developments in the Saskatchewan River delta area in general for the period 1860 to 1960, particularly for the Indians and Métis in and around Cumberland House, The Pas and Fort à la Corne.

Through the use of archival materials, and perhaps more significantly, the extensive use of oral histories provided by Red Earth residents, Meyer traces the development of the *deme* among the two groups of Indians who, prior to the middle 18th century, had very little contact with each other. Indeed, with the Red Earth Crees following a plains-oriented lifestyle and the Shoal Lake Crees following a bush-oriented lifestyle, the development of such a *deme* provides an intriguing story, and one which Meyer fully documents.

According to Meyer, the formation of the *deme* followed a number of other changes that were occurring in the Saskatchewan River Delta at the time. Contact with European traders and missionaries had resulted in a process of sedentation and acculturation for many Indians of the region. The Red Earth people, however, were reluctant to embrace Christianity, and forced a variety of company and free traders to offer favourable terms of trade. As a result, the Cree of Shoal Lake, noticing the fierce independence of the Red Earth people, initiated a more regular contact. Beginning first with attendance at traditional religious ceremonies, followed by a few inter-marriages in the 1870s, contact became so regular that by the 1910-30 period, 85 percent of the marriages occurred within the two communities. Such a rate of endogamous marriage, Meyer notes, compares favourably with marriage isolates found in many other hunting and gathering societies. Further, Meyer argues that such marriage groups were characteristic of precontact Subarctic Indian societies, and that *deme* formation in the post-contact period represents "the maintenance of an ancient social form in a new situation" (p. 135).

This report was initially a doctoral dissertation, and as such proves once again that such documents make for poor reading. The extensive detail and documentation required for a dissertation renders Meyer's work ponderous in the extreme. This, of course, is not Meyer's fault, since authors in this publication series are rarely afforded the opportunity for extensive revision or editing. Interestingly, what the academic might find tedious—the detailed discussion of four generations of *deme* development—probably ensures the valuable nature of the work for the Cree people of Red Earth. Meyer's document is an excellent local history, the kind very much in demand by Native communities across Canada.