

# LEADERSHIP AMONG THE NORTHEASTERN ATHABASCANS

by

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## Introduction

The Northeastern Denes or Athabascans have gained a sort of anthropological renown for minimality of culture. This minimality is nowhere more striking than in the realm of socio-political organization.

The present essay is simply an exploration of the available literature to see what it can tell us of the traditional socio-political organization, specially as manifested in the patterns of leadership, of these peoples. In those instances where the literature seems especially inadequate I have drawn on information gained in my fieldwork among the Slave Indians to illumine or supplement the documented materials.

The term Northeastern Denes or Athabascans is here used to encompass those peoples classified by Osgood (Osgood 1936) as Hares, Satudene (Bear Lake Indians), Mountain Indians, Slaves, Dogribs, Yellowknives and Chipewyans. All share the simple or 'basic' Northern Athabaskan social culture -- that is, obvious borrowings of elements of social organization from either the Northwest Coast or the Plains cultures are lacking. Although they evince some obviously borrowed social features, the Beaver, the Sekani and the Kaska (following Osgood's classification) have a predominant cultural unity with the Northeastern Athabascans "proper" and information on these peoples may be judiciously applied to advantage to the problem of Northeastern Athabaskan socio-political organization. All these peoples represent the Arctic Drainage Athabascans of Osgood's classification and, except for the exclusion of the Sarci, are comprised under the three categories of Subarctic Denes, Eastern Denes and Intermediate Denes set up by Father Morice (Morice pp. 263-274).

Of the truly aboriginal condition of the Northeastern Athabascans, there is, of course, no direct knowledge. In even the earliest reports it

is evident that the contact situation had already wrought changes in the aboriginal way of life. Indeed, if Hearne is correct, the small pox epidemic circa 1781 so destroyed the population (90 per cent of the Chipewyans by Hearne's estimate) that North-eastern Athabaskan society must have been shaken to its foundations. (Hearne, p.200). Another indirect effect of the European world upon Dene society that preceded the first explorer was the stimulation given to the gun-bearing Crees to raid and plunder the defenseless Mackenzie River Dene for their furs. Whole populations fled their home territories in consequence (Mackenzie, A., passim). That these factors affected the socio-political organization may be well surmised, but the facts are unknown.

The major emphasis of this paper is upon leadership. But, first, a consideration of the social units within Athabaskan society is in order to determine which units have a political aspect, and in what way. Now, if the realm of the political in North-eastern Dene society is to be considered capable of investigation at all, it must be conceived very broadly. Accordingly, any social group beyond the nuclear family is here considered to have a political aspect whenever there are present aims, interests and concerns predicated in terms of that group, -- i.e., policy -- that are accompanied by actions, co-ordination and role and power differentiation, however slight, within or by that group designed to promote those ends. (1)

#### Northeastern Athabaskan Social Units

The nuclear family, which is outside the present problem, the kindred, and certain territorial segments that may best be designated, in descending order of inclusiveness, as tribes and macrocosmic groups, macro-assemblages and bands are the social units that crosscut the Northeastern Athabaskan peoples. This classification applies both to the historical past and to the present, if it is granted that some of the characteristics of the present-day territorial segments differ somewhat from those of earlier counterparts.

"The Athapaskans do not consider themselves as composing neat political or cultural units" Osgood rightly observes. (Osgood 1936, p.3). This

holds true in the case of the largest taxonomic unit -- the tribe. Due to this vaguity of outline, Osgood has refused to use the word "tribe" for the peoples he classifies as Hares, Satudene, Mountain Indians (2), Slaves, Dogribs, Yellowknives and Chipewyans. He employs the correspondingly vague term "groups." For convenience sake, I will use "tribe" to designate such major divisions as those just cited. For the Slaves, Honigmann (Honigmann 1946, p. 64) has further distinguished regional groups within the tribe which are almost equally nebulous in outline. These he calls "macrocosmic bands." This distinction is doubtlessly applicable within any of the larger tribes. Except for the degree of inclusiveness and of internal linguistic variation, the macrocosmic group (I prefer to reserve the term "band" for the true local group) has the same characteristics, or, more properly lack of distinctive characteristics, as the greater category "tribe."

The following set of conditions are all that investigators have to work with when staking out tribes or other major divisions of the Northeastern Athabascans (3): a set of peoples living in physical contiguity (but not together), speaking a mutually intelligible tongue (though often with regional dialectal variations), sharing a common culture (though not necessarily one distinct in essentials from neighboring tribes), and having at least a vague sense of common identity which may be based in whole or part on the foregoing conditions. Regarding the last point, we know that in earlier days its obverse aspect, namely, the lack of sense of affiliation with, or, more emphatically, the sense of being in opposition to certain other groups was sometimes actively manifested in hostilities against others. This negative expression is the nearest thing to political behavior that we have at the tribal level. And when there is evidence of it, as in the case of the Yellowknives versus their neighbors, (4) we feel justified in drawing clear-cut tribal boundaries. There is evidence that some inter-band recruitment and coordination between segments of a tribe might occur for purposes of warfare. (See below). A statement by Back, (Back, p. 162), however, indicates that in some of the retaliatory warfare between tribal groups, the kindred was the social unit involved in the aggression. (5) In any event, it is plain that consistent or all-inclusive tribal-wide coordination or

integration in regard to external relations was not the case. This condition has its parallel in the lack of any sort of "actions, coordination and role and power differentiation" regarding intra-tribal matters. The tribe has no internal affairs in the political sense. Nowhere in the literature, regardless of how the individual investigator combines sets of peoples into tribes or "nations," do we find evidence of an exception to this statement. Certainly none is presented in the contemporary studies by Honigsmann, (Honigsmann, 1946, 1949, 1954), Osgood, (Osgood 1931), Jenness, (Jenness 1932, 1937). In the earlier literature, Franklin, circa 1820, presents the richest material that we have on the relations between parts of a whole tribe, namely, the Copper Indians or Yellowknives, who totalled only 190 persons by his estimate. Imbedded in Franklin's narrative is a picture of friendly and occasionally cooperative relations between "chiefs" and between bands (of fluctuating personnel), but adventitious and without structure. Even the great Copper Indian leader Akaitcho, unique in the literature for his outstanding authority and prestige, was not the tribal leader in any overtly recognized sense; his "adherents" or acknowledged followers represented about half of the tribe (Franklin, p. 257); (1819-20-21-22).

The broad interpretation given to the term political in the present discussion allows us to consider kinship units capable of having a political facet. In Northeastern Athabaskan society, however, the main significance of kin affiliations, politically speaking, is that they serve as the "in," the entree to band units. Bilateral descent is the rule in Northeastern Dene society, the kindred being the resultant kinship unit. The role of the kindred is seldom brought out in the earlier literature. (6) But the importance of kinship, bilateral and both consanguineal and affinal, in determining association and ties between individuals and the personnel within communities, as evidenced in the present-day local groups of "bush" Slavey along the Mackenzie must represent a tradition of long standing. Recent investigators have recognized this condition in neighboring areas (Honigsmann, 1954, p. 84); (Mason, p. 34). Probably there is so little information on the functions of the kindred because it is, in a sense, invisible. The kindred has no "shape" or boundaries and, as a correlate, no political manifestations

such as kin leaders or power hierarchies, or collective interests, activities or goals. We do have some record of the practice of blood revenge in earlier times (Back, p. 162); (Field); (Richardson, vol. 2, p. 26) of adjudication of wergild (Field); (Keith, p. 88), but apparently only sets of primary relatives or band-kin segments are involved, not total kin groups, i.e., the kindreds, per se. Indeed, the latter situation would usually be socially impossible. "Since kindreds interlace and overlap, they do not and cannot form discrete or separate segments of the entire society. Neither a tribe nor a community can be subdivided into constituent kindreds ... One result of this peculiarity is that the kindred ... can rarely act as a collectivity. One kindred cannot, for example, take blood vengeance against another if the two happen to have members in common." (Murdock, pp. 60-61).

All available data, then, lead to the conclusion that neither the kindred per se, nor, except in the segmental exercise of hostilities against other tribes, did the macrocosmic group or the tribe have a political component. To all knowledge (Honigsmann 1946); (Jenness 1937); (MacNeish, J.H.); (Osgood 1931) even the government invention of regional "chiefs" and councils, appointed or elected, has so far effected no significant change or innovation in the political orientation of these Athabascans at the regional or tribal levels.

It remains to view those territorial segments that are actual physical groupings-together of persons. Previous passages have already suggested that it is at this level that political manifestations may be found.

It is difficult to gain from the literature any clear picture of the norm, the variations and ranges in the size and the stability of the groupings of the Northeastern Dene. For one thing, it may be that there were tribal or regional differences. Petitot (Petitot 1876, p. 32) states, for example, that the Chipewyan characteristically were in very small local groups of single families, in contrast to other Denes. (7)

This problem aside, there were apparently two sorts of groups. First there was definitely the basic unit, the band -- a group of people who

travelled and camped together, sharing the take of large game in common. A single nuclear family might sustain itself as a discrete territorial and economic unit apart from others for an indefinite period of time (Franklin 1828, p. 300); (Great Mackenzie Basin, p. 102). This condition, may be taken as the extreme of population minimality of the local group. More commonly, several nuclear families grouped together to pursue their livelihood. The number of families involved might range from two or three (Petitot 1891, p. 76) to perhaps a dozen. The upper limit is difficult to determine. Perhaps it at times rose as high as twenty families (Franklin, p. 257), although a large group may have had relatively less duration and perhaps might better be considered a type of macro-assemblage (see below). There were no formal ties or commitments to bind the component families to the band. Any family might part from the group, either to go it alone or to join another band as economic circumstances and/or personal inclinations directed (Richardson, volume 2, p. 26); (Mason, p. 34); (Osgood 1931, p. 73). The group was therefore relatively unstable; personnel altered and bands fragmented and coalesced. As pointed out above, these bands were composed of kindred, in all likelihood with a linkage of primary relations extending between all the families composing the small bands.

Despite the chronic vaguity of the data, it seems justifiable to lump several other sorts of groupings under a type distinct from the band, although in some cases the line of demarcation may blur. The band had a sort of corporate life that commonly extended over a continuous and relatively long interval of time. The other type of grouping was intermittent and brief in nature; it was also characteristically larger than the band, drawing for its personnel either selected members from several bands or several band complements in their entirety. The several varieties of this type of grouping I have called macro-assemblages.

In historic times, one sort of macro-assemblage was what Hearne calls "the trading gang" (see below) -- a number of men assembled under a "chief" for the purpose of selling their furs through him as intermediary with the traders. All those Indians, under several "chiefs," who traded into a particular fort came to be another sort of macro-assemblage. Native terminology for regional groups

of the present day reflects this condition: intidi kwe<sup>n</sup>goti<sup>n</sup> (two-rivers-join house people) or Fort Simpson people, etse kwe<sup>n</sup>goti<sup>n</sup> (tar house people) or Wrigley people, to give two examples in the Slavey tongue. Besides coming in to trade, they gathered at the fort in large numbers for special events such as the New Year celebration, and, in more recent times, for Treaty.

Other kinds of macro-assemblages continued from aboriginal times. For the edge-of-the-woods peoples, large-scale caribou hunts drew together people from several bands into a camp prior to breaking up into small hunt groups (Russell, p. 104). Apparently, sometimes, as in the case of trading bands, the aggregation was limited to older boys and men (ibid). Some of these peoples in the wooded Mackenzie area drew together seasonally in large groups to exploit fish runs. A generation and more ago in the Simpson-Providence region they travelled to Great Slave Lake for fall fishing, gathering for a time in a great camp above Providence, enlivening their stay with gambling games, song and dancing. (8)

Besides exploiting the opportunity for unusual sociability and gaiety at assemblages of ostensibly economic purpose, in the summer season Denes apparently often gathered for the purpose of sheer sociability, using that opportunity to change their band affiliation. From a young Slave informant comes this account of what "old people" have told him: There used to be great gatherings in the summer on the island in the Red Knife River (a tributary of the Mackenzie below Providence.) The number of people was so great that when they held a "tea dance" the ring of dancers extended out to the edges of the island. It was at this time that people would shift from one band to another. This changing of bands was a very common practice. When children grew up they left the band of their father and mother. Customarily only one offspring remained with the parent's band.

Probably some of these macro-assemblages represent gatherings of those regional populations -- the macrocosmic groups -- referred to earlier.

War parties (now extinct for more than a century) are a final and variant type of temporary group. The scant evidence available indicates that

they were often composed of members of more than one band (Honigmann, 1954, p. 93); (Hearne, passim).

Of all these various groupings, the band, the trading gang, and the war party are the ones in which policy, coordination, and role and power differentiation can be discerned.

### The Socio-Political Milieu

"As to forms of government, police and regulations, they have none," says Wentzel (Wentzel, p. 89) in 1807 of the Slaves of the Fort Simpson area. As for the "Dogribs" (9) who frequented Fort Franklin and Fort Confidence during Richardson's sojourn in 1847-48:

"Order is maintained in the tribe solely by public opinion. It is no one's duty to repress immorality or a breach of the laws of society which custom has established among them, but each opposes violence as he best may by his own arm or the assistance of his relations. A man's conduct must be bad indeed, and threaten the general peace, before he would be expelled from the society; no amount of idleness or selfishness entails such a punishment." (Richardson, vol. 2 p. 26).

Similarly, with the Dogrib bands of Fort Rae in 1913, " ... there is evidently little or no effective authority beyond the coercive sentiment of the band, which may be ignored or avoided by leaving the band or by changing allegiance." (Mason, p. 34).

It is plain that the ultimate locus of power and decision in Athabascan society was in the largely unorganized sentiments and opinions, coupled with not always effective diffuse sanctions, of the social body as a whole. These probably found their most effective expression at those times when the adult men of a group informally came together to exchange news and views of current events and problems, even as they do today. There is an early account (circa 1800) of such a gathering among the Chipewyans. The social "manners" described are still largely observed today.

"Their government resembles that of the patriarchs of old, each family making a distinct community and their elders have only the right of advising but not of dictating -- however in affairs of consequence the old men of the whole



camp assemble and deliberate on the subjects which have caused their meeting ... the women and children having been previously turned out, at last often a few groans and pious ejaculations from the old men which are answered by the young with great readiness, all this ceremony being done, Quaker-like the spirit moves one of the elders who gets up and makes a long harangue. The young men are permitted to be of the Council and even frequently interfere in their debates which they do with great asperity, particularly when they regard the Europeans or the neighboring nations of whom they entertain an implacable hatred -- however the sage councils of these old Patriarchs act as a counterpoise to the impetuosity of youth ... Some of them are great orators and are said to deliver themselves with great perspicuity and address but particularly they apply their speeches more to the passions than to the understanding; the greatest silence prevails and they make it a fixed point of never interrupting one another while speaking; in general they are grave but not serious and will either join in solemn or gay subjects of discourse." (Macdonell). The "Council" here referred to is obviously not a political organ of special and explicit function, but the totality of the socially responsible members of the community -- the men.

From Keith in 1810 comes a rare report of deliberate and formal assembly of interested parties (kinsmen) to deal with a "legal" problem.

"The Natives of this establishment (the Fort Liard Slaves) entertain very just ideas betwixt right and wrong, and decide matters of this nature as coolly and impartially as could be expected from a set of people who are much attached to their most distant relations and who have no determined principles or principal persons for settling such matters. We have had two instances lately of their conciliating disposition. Two Indians, not of the same family, were, at different times, wounded by their companions upon a hunting excursion; one died soon after of his wounds and the other recovered. The latter accident was soon settled by the aggressor giving his gun to the other, but in the former case was debated by a full convention of both parties

(evidently segments of the kindred of the two men), and at last, the affair being proved to be accidental and not wilful murder, the criminal was acquitted on giving up all his property." (Keith, p. 88).

Though not unique (see 4) this is an infrequent occurrence evoked by an uncommon, crisis situation. There is no regularity of assembly or personnel.

In this unstructured milieu of group "government" by consensus and custom the only differential in role and power to be discerned is in the figure of the leader. The problem of leadership can perhaps be best approached through a survey of kinds of leaders or areas of leadership.

### Varieties of Leaders

In earlier times three kinds of at least putative leadership may be distinguished: the leader of the basic band, the trading chief, and the war leader. Also, those shamans who by virtue of their powers of prediction and manipulation of the supernatural exercised influence over group behavior might be considered a fourth variety. As subsequent documentation will bring out, several or all of these roles were often or commonly assumed by a single individual.

The trading chief was a deliberate invention of the fur traders. Hearne describes the position of this chief at the beginning of the historic era:

"It is a universal practice with the Indian leaders, both Northern (i.e., Athabaskan-Chipewyan) and Southern (Cree), when going to the Company's Factory, to use their influence and interest in canvassing for companions; as they find by experience that a large gang gains them much respect. Indeed, the generality of Europeans who reside in those parts, being utterly unacquainted with the manners and customs of the Indians, have conceived so high an opinion of those leaders, and their authority, as to imagine that all who accompany them on those occasions are entirely devoted to their service and command all the year; but this is so far from being the case, that the authority of those great men, when absent from the Company's Factory, never extends beyond their own family; and the trifling respect shown them by

their countrymen, during their residence at the factory, proceeds from motives of interest." (Hearne, p. 284).

We may infer from Hearne's statement that the chief's trading "gang" of that period, at least, was a macro-assemblage and did not represent just the chief's band associates. Hearne goes on to give a good account of the behavior and motives of the trading chief in enacting his role:

"The leaders have a very disagreeable task to perform on those occasions; for they are not only obliged to be the mouthpiece, but the beggars for all their friends and relations for whom they have a regard, as well as for those whom at other times they have reason to fear. Those unwelcome commissions, which are imposed on them by their followers, joined to their own desire of being thought men of great consequence and interest with the English, make them very troublesome." (*ibid*).

Russell characterizes the later-day Dogrib chiefs in much the same way (Russell, p. 155).

By stimulating greed or arrogance, the European-made institution of trading chief on occasion encouraged high-handed behavior by that chief. Concerning the "Dogribs" of the Fort Franklin-Fort Confidence area, Richardson tells us,

"The power of a chief varies with his personal character. Some have acquired an almost absolute rule, by attaching to themselves in the first instance an active band of robust young men, and using them to keep in order any refractory person by claiming his wife after the custom of the tribe. (A man may "legally" take another man's wife at any time by besting him in a wrestling match.) It is in vain in such cases that the poor husband, dreading to be deprived of his most valuable property, retires to a remote hunting group; for he is sure to receive a message, from some passing Indian, expressive of the chief's intentions; and he generally comes to the conclusion that submission is the best policy. He is certain to fall in with the chief and his band sooner or later, either as he goes to the fort for supplies or ammunition or elsewhere." (Richardson, vol.2, p.28).

The fact that a trading chief might use the White man's evaluation of his status as an argument for the imposition of his desires is illustrated in a first-hand account by Petitot of a clash between a Slave chief and his band. While visiting a Slave village in 1878, Petitot spoke to the assembled people on the need to render respect and obedience to the chief "whose authority is derived from God."

"Young Hunter (the chief) was pleased with my speech. Without knowing it, I had put my finger on a sore spot ... the chief enjoyed only slight respect ... His orders were openly scorned, his authority was challenged, and his own sons themselves were not free from insubordination. The reason ...? This man wished to impose his wishes instead of making them accepted through his kindness. Father, he had been obeyed. Tyrant, he furnished a pretext for insubordination."

Later that day, "building on (Petitot's) discourse, the chief commenced a harangue in which he signified to his people that he was ready to lay down his charge if he was not better obeyed. (The formal aspect of his "charge" would be his position as trading chief.) Then "one of his peers, Old Sabourin, rose and spoke in the name of the village. He charged the chief, as one of his main faults, with forcing young people to marry against their will. "This is why there is trouble among us."

"At this moment an indescribable uproar was made in the lodge of Young Hunter. Twenty girls, twenty married women raised themselves all at once against their poor chief, to reproach him to his face for the same wrong. Seeing himself condemned by the public voice, he remained silent."

Further vehement attacks convinced Petitot that the chief had been imposing upon his group for a long time, no doubt presenting himself as master through God "but especially through the English commercial agent of Fort Providence, who, I know, opposes us (the Oblate Missionaries) in secret." (Petitot, 1891, pp. 324ff., my translation).

The fur traders attempted to enhance the authority of trading chiefs by giving them clothing and medals and according them gun salutes (Franklin, p. 142); (Richardson, vol. 2, p. 27); (Mason, p. 34).

And, in line with this concern in having as trading chiefs men of authority, they endeavored to appoint as chiefs those men who already enjoyed especial influence and respect among their countrymen (Mackenzie, 1889-90). Accordingly, McLean says, the "best hunters" were those selected to be trading chiefs (McLean, p. 341). Several other sources indicate more or less directly that being a superior hunter was a usual precondition to the achievement of a superior status and influence within the Northeastern Athabaskan band (Hearne, p. 101); (Keith, p. 114); (Wentzel, p. 89); (Osgood 1931, p. 74).

Richardson's summation of the nature of leadership in Athabaskan society is pertinent here.

"Superior powers of mind, combined with skill in hunting, raise a few into chiefs, (leaders) under whose guidance a greater or smaller number of families place themselves, and a chief is great or small according to the length of his tail (i.e., the number of his followers.) His clients and he are bound together only by mutual advantage, and may and do separate as inclination prompts. The chief (leader) does not assume the power of punishing crimes, but regulates the movements of his band, chooses the hunting-ground, collects provisions for the purchase of ammunition, becomes the medium of communication with the traders, and extends his sway by a liberal distribution of tobacco and ammunition among his dependents. At present, the rank of a chief is not fully established among his own people until it is recognized at the fort to which he resorts ... A free expenditure by the chief of the presents he receives from the traders, and even of the produce of his furs, is a main bulwark of his authority, in addition to the skill which he must possess in the management of the various tempers with which he has to do." (Richardson, vol. 2, pp. 26-28).

Here we see that to attain leadership of a band three sorts of attributes were necessary. In historic times the final validation was the recognition as chief by the trader. But to establish preëminence, the individual must first be successful in the vital activity -- hunting. With the further attribute of certain favorable aspects of character, he had the requirements of leadership. It is to be noted that the individual

so endowed was a nucleus around which a band might form and grow. We will recur to those personal qualities of the successful leader later.

It is questionable in what way and to what extent the individual who gained preëminence within the band by his superior hunting skill actually regulated or directed the activities concerned with the chase. Honigmann's Slave informant stated that in earlier days "recognition was ... given to a leader ... who directed people in hunting. Not to obey him might mean starvation ..." (Honigmann 1946, p. 65). But no details of his contribution were given. (10). In those tribes that relied heavily on the large animal herds of the barren grounds (or, in the case of Beaver, buffalo) (Goddard, p. 266) he may have been of some importance in the planning and coordination of group hunting projects, such as the impounding of caribou. Osgood says that caribou hunting among the Satudene "was done generally by a band or group as a communal affair initiated by either of the two most important men, the best hunter or the oldest man." (Osgood 1931, p. 40). Richardson, however, reporting on the use of "reindeer pounds" by the "verge of the woods" Dogribs says, "But, as they (the pounds) need the exertions of all the community for their construction, the indolence of the major part causes them to be rarely made" (Richardson, vol. 2, p. 25), suggesting that the requisite leadership and/or coordination was usually lacking. The only other comments I find regarding the role of the leader in hunting activities are that he "regulates the movements of his band (and) chooses the hunting ground" as previously quoted from Richardson (Richardson, vol. 2, p. 26), and similarly, from Petitot on Dene chiefs in general, that they "régler l'ordonnance des chasses" (Petitot 1876, p. 34). If Richardson's attribution is correct, the decision of when and where to move the hunt would have been the most important act of the band leader.

War leaders existed into the first three or four decades of the historical era. The last recorded incident of warfare between Northeastern Athabascan tribes occurred in the 1830's (Simpson, p. 318). Athabascan-Cree warfare had evidently ceased by that time. Possibly a few hostile incounters between Chipewyan-Yellowknife and Eskimo occurred in later times, but I have found no record of it.

Wentzel, writing in 1807, describes the status of the war chief among the Slave of the Fort Simpson area:

"When war is declared upon them, they elect a chief from among the old men; to him they submit for advice and commandment; so soon as peace is obtained, this chief is no more obeyed or attended to any further than to support him and his family when old, and ask his opinions in time of trouble. These chiefs (and apparently Wentzel is still speaking of war chiefs here) hardly merit the title they enjoy. Na-kan-au-Bettan or Great Chief is the only one who is a little respected and obeyed; he is a middling sized corpulent fellow, not without a competent share of common sense, at least enough to procure skins and provisions without hunting for them." (Wentzel, p. 89).

In 1821, Franklin says:

"The chiefs among the Chipewyans are now totally without power ... This is to be attributed mainly to (the Chipewyans) living at peace with their neighbors, and to the facility which the young men find in getting their wants supplied independent of the recommendation of the chiefs which was formerly required. In war excursions boldness and intrepidity would still command respect and procure authority, but the influence thus acquired would, probably, cease with the occasion that called it forth." (Franklin, p. 142); (1819-20-21-22). Is the implication here that one or more of those men currently acting as trading chiefs would be the ones to assume war leadership should hostilities commence? We know from Richardson that the great Yellowknife chief Akaitcho combined the three roles of trading chief, war leader and band headman (Richardson, *passim*). Apparently the same was true for the "Northern" or Chipewyan (11) chief Matonabee with whom Hearne travelled to the Coppermine River. (Hearne, *passim*). Honigsmann, however, says that among the Kaska "the war leader was not identical with the band's headman" (Honigsmann, 1954, p. 93) (never identical or not necessarily identical?), going on to surmise that the war leader recruited from several band groups.

From Hearne we have the only eye-witness description of a war-party in action -- at the massacre

of the Eskimo by the Chipewyan at Bloody Falls. In this case, however, a travelling group (escorts for Hearne) turned into an adventitious war party -- at least as far as Hearne knew, it was not the primary purpose of the trip. As far as Hearne's data goes, there was no recruitment or other special activities on the part of any leader. One passage describing the preparation for the assault is suggestive, however;

"Soon after our arrival at the river-side three Indians were sent off as spies, in order to see if any Esquimaux were inhabiting the river-side between us and the sea. (Two days later the spies and the main party joined up, the spies bringing news of five tents of Eskimos, now about 12 miles away.) When the Indians received this intelligence, no further attendance or attention was paid to my survey, but their whole thoughts were immediately engaged in planning the best method of attack ..."

Just before describing the actual attack Hearne says:

"It is perhaps worth remarking, that my crew, though an undisciplined rabble, and by no means accustomed to war or command, seemingly acted on this horrid occasion with the utmost uniformity of sentiment. There was not among them the least altercation or separate opinion; all were united in the general cause, and as ready to follow where Matonabbee led, as he appeared to be ready to lead, according to the advice of an old Copper Indian, who had joined us on our first arrival at the river where this bloody business was first proposed." (Hearne, pp. 174-177).

The tenor of this passage (and in the remainder of the account) is that there is no real leadership involved in the attack except, perhaps, for the Old Yellowknife (who with three companions had joined the party only two days before) serving a tactitian prior to the assault. Was he accorded this role by virtue of his age as the prior quote from Wentzel would suggest? As for Matonabbee, Hearne states "... when we went to war with the Esquimaux at the Coppermine River in July 1771, it was by no means his proposal: on the contrary, he was forced into it by his countrymen." (Hearne, p. 330). (12).

It seems likely that successful leaders in secular ventures such as hunting were commonly



attributed with exceptional powers in the supernatural realm. The only clear affirmation of this supposition, however, is Mason's statement regarding the Dogrib of Fort Rae. Indeed, his description of their socio-political organization can probably stand as a characterization of that of earlier Northeastern Athabascans as a whole and for this reason is quoted fully.

"These leaders are elderly men as a rule, often the paternal patriarchs of the band, and being generally good hunters, experienced woodsmen, and more efficient than the majority of their fellows, their judgment is respected by the members of the gang ... The chiefs or leaders were neither elected or appointed but were those whose powerful "medicine" caused them to be feared and respected and whose authority, knowledge, and competency were admitted to be superior."  
(Mason, p. 34).

An early manuscript by Roderick Mackenzie speaks of a "great Chief (of the Chipewyans) who is also their High Priest." (Mackenzie, Roderic). Here we apparently have a direct equation of the leader with the shaman. It is very questionable, however, that Mason's Dogrib leaders, although in possession of powerful medicine, should be considered shamans. It is quite possible for a man to employ his strong medicine for personal and (as in the case, for example, of hunting) communal benefits without entering the ranks of those who, by virtue of powerful medicine, regularly divine and cure on a semi-professional basis. (13). Certainly being a shaman was not a necessary requirement for leadership.

Hearne presents the shaman operating as an equivocal agent of social control. Speaking of the Northeastern Athabaskan custom of one man forcing another to yield over his wife by besting him in a wrestling match, Hearne says, "Some of the old men who are famous on account of their supposed skill in conjuration have great influence in persuading the rabble from committing those outrages ..." But he then goes on to say that they seldom interfered in cases where one of their own relatives was the aggressor, but rose to the defense when the challenged husband was a kinsmen. Fear of the shaman stifled protest from others. (Hearne, pp. 143-144). Concerning several of the most powerful "doctors" of a generation ago in the Liard-Simpson area, Angus Sherwood (14) states that they were, by their prestige and exertion of moral pressure, in a sense

special agents of a social control.

Osgood describes an apparently unique situation in regard to leadership among the Hare Indians of several decades ago. According to his informant the "Oldest Man" was the primary "chief." Second to him with less authority, was the "Best Hunter" (Osgood 1931, p. 74). This is the only unequivocal statement we have making leadership an ascription due solely to age. And we have at least one case, that of Akaitcho, where an important leader was not even the eldest of a set of brothers (Franklin, p. 270); (1819-20-21-22).

The varieties of leadership discussed have of course undergone changes along with the rest of the Dene way of life in the course of one hundred and seventy years of contact with the Western world. Christian teachings and Whites' attitudes in general slowly undermined shamanism or the possession of powerful medicine as a source of prestige and opening for dominant status. They have been unimportant for a generation now. War and war leaders, though perhaps stimulated at the beginning of the fur trade era, died out over a century ago. The trading chief flourished in the hey-day of the Hudson Bay Company (which governed the Territory until 1870) in the nineteenth century. Today, his function as "mouthpiece" for his followers has been partially filled by the "government" chief, who is supposed to mediate between his constituents and the local government officials. But just as the present-day Indian deals directly with the fur trader, so he is apt to go personally to present a problem or complaint to the appropriate local official. The transformation of part of the Indian population into permanent fort residents, the immobilization of the rest (the "bush Indians") into spaced segments with permanent personnel on legally circumscribed traplines and trapping areas, the decline in the importance of the hunt as the Indians become increasingly dependent on the trapping-money economy -- in all these respects the old milieu of the band leader no longer exists. But in some bush communities of today men in a dominant position can still be found. Details of the contemporary situation, however, are outside the province of this paper.

## The Pattern of Leader-Follower Relations: Conclusions

Closely following the words of previous investigators, we have so far considered the areas of activity in and through which an individual might achieve leadership. At the risk of some reiteration, it is now possible to block out the generalized pattern of socio-political relations between the Northern Dene leader and his followers. Then there are the related questions of the universality of leader figure in Northern Athabaskan groups and those social, historical, and personal variables that come into play.

The domineering and exploitative behavior of those Dogrib leaders cited by Richardson who were actually able to exercise physical coercion over their constituents by employing gangs of strong-arm men stand out in the literature because, except for a rather vague statement by Keith (see final paragraphs) suggesting an oppressive quality in Dogrib leadership, they are so at variance with the picture gained by other observers. Petitot's detailed descriptions of the Slaves exemplify the more common condition of leader-group interaction. The case of Young Hunter will be recalled -- the Slave chief whose "authority was challenged because the man wished to impose his wishes." Young Hunter found that his "authority" existed only so long as his aims were deemed right and desirable by the group. Cued by a responsible male (who was perhaps in turn cued by the advent of a prestige-ful alien) even the women and girls felt free to express open insubordination. Besides certain unspecified demands upon his sons being rejected by them, the chief found that the group refused to accord him, "demand-right" (see 10) regarding marriage unions. Indeed, the general tenor of the literature indicates that the Dene leader or chief had no firmly established demanding right in any area of activity.

Along this line, another incident from Petitot may be cited. It took place in a Slave village on what is now the Petitot River (East-south-east of Fort Liard). Nadi, the younger brother of the chief, asks Petitot, "Who is master, a woman or her husband?" He goes on to explain, "We have a chief, you see, who lets himself be guided and ruled by his wife. He listens to our advice, but his wife is of a contrary sentiment, and he gives way to her. 'I agree with you' he says (to us), 'but my wife does not wish it.' What do you say to that? Is he a chief?" (*italics and translation mine.*)

Petitot informs the reader, "Less than two years later, a letter from Providence apprised me that the old chief had been removed and that Nadi had been chosen (élu) in his place." (Petitot 1891, p. 347).

Nadi's complaint is not that the chief is not acting independently, but only that he is yielding to the wrong influence, that of his wife instead of his male peers.

The view that the power and control of the chief and/or leader over his group was ordinarily trifling is to be found in most reports. Hearne's generalizations on the lack of authority of Chipewyan chiefs have already been cited. Another observer at the beginning of the contact period, Alexander Mackenzie, writes that "none of the "principal men" of the "Red-knives" living around the Slave Lake fort have "sufficient authority" to be appointed a trading chief. (Mackenzie, A., 1889-90, p. 36). And Hearne reports that more than once the chief Matonabee was so enraged by the pilfering of his property "and other insults" by his followers that he threatened to leave his own people and go live with the Slave Indians. (Hearne, p. 223). In the early decades of the nineteenth century, we find that "(the Liard Indians) are ungovernable in some respects by their chiefs, whom they obey only in hopes of being recompensed ... They pay no external marks of respect to their leaders, and indeed the latter are little regarded. A boy will often refuse to run an errand for them unless he happens to be a nigh relation." (Keith, p. 69, p. 90). And the "Long Arrowed Indians" (probably Hares) of the Bear Lake area "have no leaders of any authority or note amongst them." (Keith, p. 123).

One hundred and twenty years later, Russell says, regarding Dogrib chiefs, that Hearne's remarks are "equally true today" (Russell, p. 164) and Franklin, (Franklin 1819-20-21-22, p. 142), McLean, (McLean, p. 341), Mason (Mason, p. 34) and Petitot, (Petitot 1876, p. 34), pass similar judgments in different decades on the chiefs of, respectively, generalized "Chipewyans" (including Dogribs and Yellowknives), the "Mackenzie River Indians," the Indians of the Slave Lake area and the Northeastern Athabaskan tribes generally.

In sum, the leader characteristically had a very tenuous position in Northeastern Athabaskan

society. He might serve as adviser, coordinator, director and perhaps initiator of specific military actions and/or of occasional and particular economic activities beyond the day-to-day hunting and snaring routine. Also, by virtue of his prestige gained from his superior abilities and his awe-inspiring powers he might act as the prime opinion-giver in social matters within the band. His "authority" lay in putting his stamp of approval upon decisions or viewpoints arrived at by the group as a whole or, more specifically, his male peers. The wise chief or leader had his finger upon the pulse of individual and group opinions. He had to woo others to his way of thinking or, that failing, to alter his course accordingly. His position might be buttressed by the attribution of powerful medicine and by the Europeans' evaluation and use as "trading chief" of his already dominant role. But the power of a strong or "great" leader lay in his influence, rather than his "legal" authority. Ordinarily, he had neither the moral or physical resources to impose his will. Birket-Smith's characterization of the Chipewyan chief as primus inter pares (Birket-Smith, p. 66) keynotes the position of the Northern Dene leader.

There is little reason to suppose that all or most local groups had a headman or leader by even the feeble criteria given above. The fluidity and lack of structure of all groupings argue against the likelihood of a leader as a characteristic figure in every group. The intermittent nature of the macro-assemblages did not allow for continual exercise of the leader role, and apparently only in the trading gang and the war party was it ever enacted at all.

In the hunt band there is no firm evidence that the "leader" had any really vital function in economic or other matters. His decisions regarding change of hunting grounds came the closest. Rather, his superior prestige-cum-status was an outcome of his individual skills and endeavors. He was a superior provider and therefore, in a society where communal distribution of large game is a cardinal rule, a good man to fall in with. If he was also a man of sound social judgments and techniques his influence and following was so much the greater. But it is quite likely that in many hunt bands no adult male could be singled out as consistently exercising more influence and being accorded more deference than any other. This was probably especially true in the smaller band of but a few

families. Indeed, its small size may have been at times a function of its lack of a "drawing card."

Certain situational factors did encourage the establishment of headmen. A superior hunter and/or quasi-leader who was made by Whites a trading chief would find his position stabilized within his band and some recognition of his status would be called forth from all individuals who used him as an intermediary in their dealings with Whites. Such exigencies as war or White exploration parties needing Indian helpers (as in Akaitcho's case) might call an individual of superior endowment to the fore. The authority gained in this role might color his relations with other men after the end of the immediate event.

I would like to reemphasize two immediate and basic conditions, suggested in earlier passages, operative in the establishment of leader-follower relations: kin relationships and personal qualities. The importance of kin relations in band composition has already been examined. Such bits of documentation as do exist, plus an extrapolation from my present-day observations, indicate that the sentiments of kinship have been the base upon which the leader builds his influence and his following. "To become a general leader requires numerous relations ..." says Keith, (Keith, p. 109). Primary relationships -- i.e., sibling or parent-child or those at one remove, classificatory father-son or brother, -- probably characteristically formed the core of the leader-follower syndrome. In Franklin's account of the Yellowknives, we find Humpty, the older brother of the leader Akaitcho, mentioned several times in a way that suggests he served as a close associate and lieutenant of his younger sibling. On one occasion Akaitcho "deferred giving a final answer (to Franklin regarding a proposed journey) until the arrival of Humpty ..." (Franklin 1819-20-21-22, p. 270). In a small family band, the father would be the usual source of any leader behavior (e.g., Keith, p. 109). In a larger band of several fully mature (related) men, a specific kin status would not be a necessary condition of leadership.

Regarding the small family band, we have from Jenness an account of a strong leader of recent times who started with a family band and expanded both the band and his authority. Old Davie, a French and Sekani breed, "raised a family of four daughters. He selected

husbands for them with great care ... Another family of breeds, probably kinsfolk of Davie's wife, joined the band, which in 1924, numbered forty individuals. Davie wielded the authority of a Hebrew patriarch. He kept his party in its hunting grounds aloof from all settlements except for two or three weeks in the early summer ... and at the posts he camped away from other Indians ... As hunters and trappers their reputation was unsurpassed in the whole of British Columbia. But Davie, the leader, was an old man in his seventies, and none of the younger men seemed capable of taking his place." (Jenness 1937, p. 14). Undoubtedly parallel situations could be found among the Northeastern Athabascans proper.

As to those personal qualities that enable a man to attain and maintain the position of leader the literature gives us few details. Success in hunting, in manipulating the supernatural, and in war as paths to dominant status have already been emphasized.

A leader of any real accomplishment had to possess, in Richardson's words, "skill ... in the management of the various tempers with which he has to do." But, except for Keith's vague phrase that a leader needs "some address and ability" (Keith, p. 109), Richardson is the only observer to speak of good social technique -- the ability to attract, influence, manipulate others -- as a quality of leadership. This is probably because the casual observer would not be likely to encounter or to recognize this faculty in action. The only specific social technique cited is that of generosity, again by Richardson. Generosity may also be considered an ingrained aspect of character, but for a chief, at least, the distribution of gifts obtained from the trader was a social requirement, whether it was a natural impulse or not. We may well suppose that the exercise of the opposite trait, that of niggardliness, much condemned today, would be a serious handicap in commanding prestige.

Courage as an attractive aspect of character is mentioned more than once, (Keith, p. 109); (Jones, p. 325). "Superior powers of mind" (Richardson, vol. 2, p. 26), "superior understanding and conduct" (Keith, p. 114) and "superior knowledge of competency" (Mason, p. 34), unhappily vague phrases, are also cited as attributes of the successful leader. In King's description of Akaitcho's behavior are exemplified further

qualities necessary to a leader of real stature -- the willingness to give most fully of his energies and persistence and endurance in the face of difficulty or crisis, promoting the morale of his group. That these qualities are prerequisite both to outstanding hunting success and to leadership is supported by my field observations.

"Akaitcho, during this appalling season of calamity (a great winter famine at Fort Resolution) proved himself well worth the rank of chief of the Yellowknives .... He set the example of hunting early and late every day, and, by continued exertion, made every attempt to alleviate the distress which was pressing heavily upon his tribe. The bold manner with which he encountered every difficulty, mitigated in a great measure the growing evil and dispelled the gloom which had seized both the old and the young." (King, vol. 1, p. 173).

Jenness speaks of "force of character" as a quality for leadership among the Sekani, (Jenness 1937, p. 44). From Keith's comments on Dogrib leaders comes a less complementary phrase, "ferocity tinged with an inclination to dominate" (Keith, p. 109), recalling Richardson's Dogrib bullies. The urge or will, suggested in these last two characterizations, within the individual toward exceptional influence or control over events and people, must we may surmise, always be a factor in the attainment of effective non-ascribed leadership. But for a Dene, this trait of character is highly idiosyncratic in a way that the preceding ones are not. The attributes previously mentioned fulfill certain Athabaskan cultural ideals -- the hard worker and good provider, the supernaturally adept, the wise man, the generous man, and so on. But in the Dene view the will to power per se is not conceived to be admirable or socially desirable. The reaction to this will when encountered nakedly is not just indifferent, it is negative.

This distaste for subjugation to the authority of another, or, phrased in positive terms, the motivation toward personal autonomy, is a dominant aspect of the ethos (15) of the Northeastern Athabascans. (Honigmann 1946, p. 84); (MacNeish, J.H.); (Mason, p. 43). The existence of what may be called the cultural theme of autonomy might be suspected from the very fact of the unstructured nature of the social groups that our



documentary survey has given us. Explicit reference to this emotional quality may occasionally be found in the early writers. "The whole of the Chippewayan (Northeastern Athabascan tribes seem averse to superior rule." (McLean, p. 341).

A full exploration of the many-faceted theme of autonomy in the Dene way of life is beyond the scope of this investigation. To the reader is recommended Honigmann's recent study of the psychology of the Athabascan Kaskas, immediate neighbors of the Northeastern tribes proper. His discussion of "egocentricity" as one of the "dominant motivations" of this people is especially pertinent.

"Egocentricity refers to a dominant motivation charged with a high evaluation of individualism and self interest ... In his ingroup relationships the Indian is ... self-centered and non-authoritarian. He does not seek authority in interpersonal relations, and others can scarcely tell him what to do ... Egocentricity thus leaves little room for patterns of leadership." (Honigmann 1949, p. 250, p. 254).

This ingrained dislike of the authoritarian figure in the Athabascan mind has remained over the decades an intangible but enduring barrier with which that aberrant individual who is impelled toward a dominant role must cope.

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## NOTES

- (1) The common usage in anthropology appears to be to define the condition of being political exclusively in terms of a territorial group, its political nature being manifested either simply in its possession of "some kind of corporate title to all the territory normally occupied by resident members of that group" (Oliver and Miller, p. 119), or in its ability to achieve concerted action and maintain law and order (McLean, p. 86), or in the foregoing characteristics plus its ability to coordinate its members "for the employment of force against others" (Nadel, p. 187). The customary kinds of actions of a political unit, as designated by the above quotes, are comprehended under my characterization of the nature of the political. But much of the behavior that we call political in or out of Western society (and that would fall within my definition), as evinced by "pressure groups," terrorist or revolutionary groups and so on, does not arise from territorially discrete groups. Weber calls these types "politically oriented groups" to distinguish them from as distinct from the territorially based "political group" proper. (Weber, pp. 141-142).

The same sort of behavior may be also manifested by kin groups, in or outside of the Western world. Lineage groups, for example, may achieve concerted action, maintain law and order (within the lineage), and employ force against others (blood revenge).

For a recent view of "politics" as broad or broader than my definition, see Slotkin. (Slotkin, p. 480 ff.)

- (2) Actually, I would doubt that, in the present times at least, the Mountain Indians should be set apart from the Slaves. Casual conversations with Fred Andrews, son of the late "chief" of the Mountain Indians, indicate that they consider themselves a regional variety of Slaves. The peoples who today consider themselves to belong to the unit "Slave" (which they distinguish in their own tongue by the word Dene, as against terms for Dogrib, Chipewyan, etc.,) would probably not have included themselves in so broad

a category in earlier times. See Honigmann on macrocosmic groups.

- (3) Besides Osgood, other workers who have presented comprehensive attempts to block out the major subdivisions of the Northeastern Athabascans are, in order of their writings, Franklin, (Franklin 1819-20-21-22), Richardson, Petitot, (Petitot 1876, 1885, 1891), Morice and Jenness (Jenness 1932). Each one has sliced the cake somewhat differently.
- (4) Franklin (Franklin 1819-20-21-22, p. 257, 1828, p. 10) for example, cites cases of hostilities between Copper Indians (Yellowknives) and Chipewyans, and between the Copper Indians on the one hand and the Dogribs and Hares on the other (these last two groups in Franklin's terminology include what would today be called Slaves.)
- (5) "(Two Indian acquaintances) informed us that, in a dispute between a Chipewyan and their countrymen, the Yellowknives, the former had been killed; but as he was an orphan, no one would avenge his death." (Back, p. 162).
- (6) I find that I should not be surprised at this omission from the records of most writers on the Northeastern Athabascans, most of the nineteenth century non-professional observers, for Murdock notes that "Bilateral kin groups (of which, he states, the kindred is the commonest type) have received little attention from anthropological theorists. Consequently, ethnographers rarely notice their presence and almost never report their absence." (Murdock, p. 57). Two of the early observers who do mention kinship relations as important in Northeastern Athabaskan life are Keith (Keith, p. 88, p. 109) and Richardson, (Richardson, vol. 2, p. 26).
- (7) But another source, the 1888 report on the Great Mackenzie Basin (Great Mackenzie Basin, p. 102), stresses the scattered, family by family condition of the forest peoples.
- (8) From a Slave informant.
- (9) Some Hare and Slave Indians are probably included under Richardson's general appellation "Dogrib."

- (10) One of my major Slave informants was questioned regarding a "boss for the hunt" in earlier days. He said that there were such men; they decided which route individual hunters would take for the day, to circumvent the possibility of one glimpsing another accidentally and shooting him in mistake for game. This is a very minor act. The informant may have been thinking of a father-leader of a family band directing inexperienced sons. The informant said he had never heard of a leader acting as a coordinator for a group hunt.
- (11) Morice has identified Matonabbee as a Caribou-Eater, rather than a Chipewyan proper. (Morice, p. 234).
- (12) It is possible, however, that Hearne's obviously strong affection and admiration for Matonabbee induced him to overestimate Matonabbee's reluctance on this "horrid occasion."
- (13) Goddard makes this distinction -- that of "the fortunate individual who had personal supernatural aids" as against the shaman proper -- in speaking of the Beaver. He also distinguishes the "prophet", "one man of unusual power who directs the religious activities of the tribe" in which they "seem to have considerable liberty in initiating new movements in religion." He gives us no details regarding possible socio-political aspects of their role. (Goddard, pp. 226-231).
- (14) Personal communication. Sherwood, a long-time resident of the Northwest Territories, has achieved an unusual degree of knowledge and understanding of Indian life.
- (15) Ethos is here used in the sense employed by Bateson: "The emotional emphasis of the culture as revealed in a series of emotional toned behaviors." (Bateson, p. 32).

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