



# Community Organization and Patterns of Change Among North Canadian and Alaskan Indians and Eskimos

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Guest Editor

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## RÉSUMÉ

Les articles contenus dans ce numéro spécial étudient l'évolution socio-culturelle d'un certain nombre de communautés indiennes et esquimaudes du Nord canadien et de l'Alaska. Ces travaux contribuent de façon importante à l'augmentation d'un ensemble de données ethnographiques, et, en cela, ils ont encore leur raison d'être.

Il est temps, toutefois, que les scientifiques qui font des recherches sur les groupes nordiques procèdent à l'élaboration et à la vérification d'hypothèses et de généralisations sérieuses en appliquant la méthode comparative. Il est assez facile, en effet, de déceler parmi ces groupes des constantes et des variantes qui expliquent les différences ou les similitudes de leur évolution socio-culturelle.

Les groupes décrits ici sont classés selon trois types de communautés et se distinguent par la qualité de leur adaptation aux conditions créées par la présence d'euro-canadiens. L'écologie, à elle seule, demeure impuissante à nous éclairer sur le processus de développement de ces types de communautés. Pour accomplir un travail fructueux, il faudra plutôt se placer dans une optique sociale et idéologique.

## I

This number of *Anthropologica* had its inception a few years ago when some of us came to the conclusion that it was time to take stock of recent anthropological research in northern North America and for that purpose to bring together persons who had contributed to knowledge of that area. The 1962 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association seemed to be an appropriate time to accomplish these aims and so, thanks to the efforts of Asen Balikci and Margaret Lantis plus a grant from the Arctic Institute of North America, a small conference

was held in Montreal in the spring of 1962 to outline a program and attempt to find a theme that would give comparability to the contributions. The papers which follow represent results of this planning.

The contributors manifestly possess that sense of history or process which Raymond Firth distinguishes from the kind of literary embalming in which a culture is described as somehow timeless and the anthropologist is more concerned with what has been lost than with positive implications of change (Firth, 1951: 81). Despite remarks disparagingly made to studying "tin-can cultures", the contributors have insisted on studying Indian and Eskimo cultures in terms of what they have become and are becoming. To study these communities as they are today does not appeal to every professional anthropologist. To a considerable degree cultural anthropology remains imbued with searching for glamorous or highly exotic phenomena. Only slowly has it gotten down to complementing sociology by studying relatively familiar western cultural forms. The contributors to this number are well aware that any living culture, whether its artifacts are made of sealskin and walrus ivory or blue denim and tar paper, is worth studying. It has information to reveal and can contribute to or help test the growing body of anthropological generalizations.

On the whole, however, northernists have taken little advantage of their data to test rigorously significant generalizations of the sort from which science grows. The North is an area where many factors can be held more or less constant while searching for differences theoretically postulated to exist in key explanatory variables. Such comparative study has begun but it has not been as rigorously pressed as descriptive ethnography, which it nicely supplements. For example, comparison of the Arctic-drainage and Pacific-drainage Athapaskans long ago indicated that ecological variables in the latter region are significant for the greater elaboration of culture. A more precise formulation of this relationship remains to be done. The Atlantic littoral may also turn out to have had a somewhat more complex aboriginal culture than the interior boreal forest. At least one astonishing difference between Eskimo and Indian responses to changing

cultural conditions in the Arctic and sub-Arctic appears in the papers gathered together for this volume. Eskimo social structure turns out to be much more adaptable to white pressures for community organization than Indian. How can this be explained? I think that at this point in development of anthropology we should avoid giving a blanket reason or two and then debating those reasons with examples selectively garnered for and against each point of view. Rather, what we are ready for is to take two specific communities — one Eskimo and the other Indian — and with theoretical justification look for significant differences between their histories, cultures, or sectors within their cultures, like social structure. Any generalizations arrived at by this micro-comparative method should then be tested against a fresh pair of communities to see if the original generalizations hold up, how far they must be rephrased, or if any are to be discarded. Of course, more detailed ethnography needs to be done, on the shoulders so to speak of the ethnographers who have worked in the North before, in order to secure ever more intensive coverage. Ethnography so executed will have comparability built into itself. But in addition, as I have suggested, the time is ripe for another approach as well, an approach that is as integrally part of cultural anthropology as descriptive ethnography, though a part hardly as conspicuous.

Comparative research need not be concerned solely with differences. It may look at similarities of a less than obvious sort and for variables capable of accounting for those similarities. Asen Balikci has not used his Vunta Kutchin data for the paper he presents below. In manuscripts (Balikci, n.d.) he continues his ecological interest by citing organizational changes in Kutchin culture that followed from the fur trade. He describes the instability of marriage, indicated by numerous extra-marital relationship and "lax" premarital sexual standards that verge on promiscuity. Are these traits products of social disorganization (perhaps better stated as reorganization) or are they local expressions of a traditional northern Athapaskan pattern fundamentally similar to Kaska behavior? (Honigmann, 1949: 158-164; 250-257; 287-304) Balikci and I both suspect it may be the latter. Northern Athapaskan culture, it may turn out, gives individuals great leeway with respect to sex as well as a large share of indi-

vidual autonomy. But this is a hunch, one that requires careful testing and more precise formulation, requirements that can come only by some application of the comparative method, including fresh field work instituted with this theoretical problem in mind.

## II

At the Montreal meeting contributors decided to center several papers around a typological approach to northern community organization. As a result several papers were written to illustrate three rough types of communities, all representing adjustments to white contact. In the contact-traditional type described by June Helm in published monographs (Helm, 1961; Helm and Lurie, 1961) and in association with David Damas in present number, social life continues to be cut off from immediate day-to-day contact with persons of European descent. That type contrasts with more familiar trading-post communities, such as those examined below by Asen Balikci, Ronald Cohen, James W. VanStone, and Wendell Oswalt. The Indian or Eskimo population segment (sometimes both are present) during at least one part of the year exists in day-to-day interaction with an intrusive ethnic group composed of the trader and his family, missionaries, teachers, police, and, perhaps, other non-indigenous persons. Such a community may be described as being "focussed" around some institutions, like church and store, which give it a large measure of overall unity and solidarity (Honigmann, 1960: 11-12). Communities of the type described by John Trudeau and Norman Chance represent a recent development of the trading-post type. They too are mixed but the focus holding social relations together is different. The Hudson's Bay Company store and mission, although each may still be on the scene, have yielded dominance to a facility like a military air base or radar station which, at least during the construction phase, offers wage employment to the local population. Jacob Fried's paper does not deal with yet another type of community but rather takes the mixed type in Canada and analytically formulates the character of Euro-canadian life, its components, and the interdependence of Euro-canadians with the indigenous local population whose members

have been drawn to the community. His paper brings out very well the focal organizational role exerted by the intrusive population. In all mixed communities the pattern of living depends largely on what foci of organization Euro-canadians provide. To these stimuli native people more or less grudgingly, and with a variety of intended and unintended meanings, respond. In studying those responses the contributors pursue another aim of the symposium, describing patterns of change that have occurred in the Canadian and Alaskan North to foster the native people's adaptation.<sup>1</sup>

Students of social organization who look mainly at the native segments will perceive in both the early type of trading-post community and in its later form, described by Trudeau and Chance, a variant of the composite band to which Julian Steward has called attention (Steward, 1955: Ch. 8; Service, 1962: 63). The mechanism creating "trading-post bands" that are integrated into pluralistic trading-post or military communities is not purely ecological. Hence ecological theory cannot but itself adequately describe the adaptation or organizational dynamics of contemporary northern people. The underlying mechanism is better viewed in social and ideological terms. Social organization and values link the northern people with the wider society and provide them with sustenance drawn from a variety of world areas. Note that I do not deny an ecological variable to be at work. There is, of course, but it is not to be observed by looking solely at a northern community and it doesn't explain all that is to be explained.

Charles C. Hughes' concluding observations on change in northern communities integrate the specific papers of the various contributors. His cultural evolutionary treatment organizes the other papers' analytical data into a general and therefore abstract theoretical framework whose key concept is control strategy. His essay provides a dramatic illustration of the power of any high-level theory which abruptly transforms the things we have been

<sup>1</sup> For a similar study involving only Eskimo groups see J.W. VanStone and W. H. Oswalt, 1960.

talking about, transposing them to a new level, and revealing hitherto unknown features they possess.

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