

The Western James Bay Cree: Aboriginal and Early Historic Adaptations

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ABSTRACT. Scholarly knowledge about the Cree culture at the time of first contact with the Europeans is at present largely conjectural. Primary sources of evidence, which can be effective in deciphering the protohistoric period, are first-hand European accounts of Indian life. Studies on the James Bay Cree illustrate the potential of these records and their use in "upstreaming." Similar records relating to the prairies may indicate as well a different but equally complex set of factors pressing for social and cultural changes.

RESUME

Les connaissances académiques sur les premiers contacts de la culture cri avec les Européens sont aujourd'hui largement conjecturales. Les comptes-rendus européens de première main sur la vie indienne sont les premiers témoignages pouvant servir à jeter de la lumière sur la période protohistorique. Les études sur les Cris de la baie James rendent compte du potentiel de ces récits qui peuvent être utilisés pour remonter le cours de l'histoire. Des récits similaires relatifs aux Prairies peuvent aussi présenter un ensemble de facteurs qui, bien que différents, sont tout aussi complexes et favorisent l'apparition de changements sociaux et culturels.

Introduction

Although a good deal is now known about the Cree Indians who inhabit the region from northwestern Quebec to Alberta, both from ethnological field studies and from ethnohistorical research, Cree culture at the time of European contact remains largely conjectural. Archaeological research which can provide information on subsistence activities, seasonal settlement size and location, and inter-group exchange relationships has barely begun. Likewise, ethnohistorians have been hampered by a lack of data pertaining to the protohistoric period, that important time span when European trade goods and other influences penetrated Cree domains but when there were no Europeans present to provide first-hand accounts of Indian life and the events that were affecting it (Bishop and Ray 1976).

One method of filling this void is to make use of the later, more detailed, written accounts and field-obtained information. Yet, while these data undoubtedly provide useful clues about aboriginal life, the fact that the Cree being observed were also involved in the mercantile fur trade, and often had been for a considerable time, renders reconstruction hazardous. As Indians adjusted to the fur trade, their social and economic life gradually altered. Thus, by the time that better information is provided, significant changes had already occurred. Traders' accounts, more often than not, describe the consequences. Indians are noted coming to the trading post with furs or food, or to acquire trade items or food donations. Likewise, they are noted leaving to trap or hunt geese for the post, or to hunt for themselves. Clearly, many of these activities reflect modified adaptive strategies, accom-

modations to the new fur trade economy. Nevertheless, despite such changes, many Cree customs continued on in the new context, indeed, continued into the twentieth century. The survival of these distinctive Cree customs, however, can create the illusion that other features of Cree culture also persisted unchanged. The degree to which this is so, however, cannot simply be assumed. It requires testing against the limited early evidence. That is the purpose here. Through an analysis of the sketchy evidence pertaining to the western James Bay Cree of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, insight can be gained about aboriginal culture and the adaptive modifications that were occurring. Also, given the above methodological caveat, such analysis provides a perspective that can be applied to other regions of western Canada.

The Western James Bay Cree: Circa 1625 to 1725

Almost nothing is known of the Cree prior to the mid-seventeenth century. We can, nevertheless, be confident that they were hunter-gatherers possessing some form of band organization. We can also assume that they didn't engage in trapping to the extent that the historical records indicate was the case in later times. In consequence, adaptive strategies probably maximized subsistence efficiency and social welfare. While some inter-group trade probably existed, it is unlikely that such trade interfered with basic subsistence activities. Different bands, related to each other through kinship ties, likely moved from area to area to exploit seasonally large tracts of land, fissioning and fusing when food was difficult to obtain or abundant. In the lowlands west and southwest of James Bay, an area of some 40,000 square miles, it is doubtful that there were more than ten such bands averaging, perhaps, 50 persons each. Whether Indians occupied the lowlands continuously throughout the year is uncertain, but it is doubtful that they remained near the barren sea coast in winter. Henry Hudson while wintering in James Bay in 1610-11 met only one Indian, suggesting that others had retreated inland. As will become evident, this is in marked contrast to the situation a century later.

The French presence along the St. Lawrence after 1600 no doubt began to have an indirect influence on the Cree. The Cree may have received their first European items by the 1620s or earlier from Montagnais, Algonquins, and Nipissings to the southeast and south. These trade networks, which may have been prehistoric, grew in importance as the demand for furs grew, except when temporarily disrupted by Iroquois raids upon more southerly peoples. By the 1650s and 1660s, French *coureurs de bois* were trading directly with some Cree who visited the Upper Great Lakes. Pierre Esprit Radisson and Médard des Groseilliers described the Cree as being clothed in beaver skins in winter. Expert beaver hunters, they killed only adult animals, leaving the young to mature for future use (Adams 1961:95). Their seasonal

cycle saw them moving via the large rivers of northern Ontario from the coast of the "North Sea" (James Bay) in summer to their inland winter quarters. The apparent richness of their country ultimately led to an English exploratory venture to the mouth of the Rupert's River in 1668. Returning to England with some 3,000 pounds of beaver pelts in 1669, the English Crown, convinced by this success, granted a charter establishing the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670. The traders returned to Charles Fort at Rupert's River that same year.

We get some first-hand accounts of Indians during these early years on the Bay. Indians were reported to have subsisted on venison, partridges, geese, and fish taken with nets (Nute 1978:118). Of the several different groups who visited the post, one held a shaking tent ceremony, a Northern Algonkian custom that has continued to this day (Tyrrell 1931:386). Bands speaking different dialects came to trade, suggesting that they may have come from different directions. During the summer of 1674, the English explored the western shore of James Bay encountering the "Tabitsee" (probably the Abitibi from further south), the "Shechittawans" from the Albany River area, and some Indians who had suffered losses from starvation on the coast (Tyrrell 1931:390-91). Indian groups from different areas were led by "okimahs" who represented their band in their dealing with the English and who annually determined where different families or groups would winter (Tyrrell 1931:382). There are no explicit data on Cree social structure at this time, but it may be conjectured that they practiced cross-cousin marriage, polygyny, the levirate and sororate, all widespread Northern Algonkian customs. Also, given seasonal, annual, and regional fluctuations in resources, it is doubtful that band territories were exclusively exploited by any single group. Rather, Indians seem to have continued to move seasonally to areas where food and also fur bearers could be obtained. Some additional time and energy, however, were now being devoted to trapping and travelling to the trading post with furs and country foods for the English. Although many Indians continued to trade with the French, the opening of trading posts at the mouths of the Moose and Albany Rivers during the mid-1670s drew many more Indians directly into the trade. The new English posts and the resultant rivalry with the French benefitted the Cree who no longer had to trade at high rates through middlemen, or travel long distances to acquire French materials.

The advantages of rivalry were terminated in 1686 when the De Troyes expedition from New France forcefully took the English James Bay posts. Because the new occupants were unable to supply adequately the captured posts, the James Bay Cree suffered. Thus, when Captain James Knight regained Fort Albany for the English in 1693, the Cree rejoiced, and Knight, to reaffirm their allegiance, gave out lavish presents of guns, powder, shot and tobacco to the Cree leaders.

Thereafter, ritual gift-giving accompanied by speeches became an established pattern at Hudson's Bay Company posts. Indians within a hundred miles of the post became habitual visitors while those further inland came with their pelts when not lured away or threatened by the French and their Indian allies.

The quantity of furs obtained at Fort Albany, the only post operated by the Hudson's Bay Company in the western James Bay area after 1693, fluctuated annually depending mainly upon the conditions of rivalry, but also upon seasonal ecological conditions that affected hunting. Indians nearer to the post and in the James Bay lowlands usually traded a higher proportion of marten, whereas those further inland produced the bulk of the beaver. A high figure of 25,118 "made" beaver (the standard of value) was obtained during 1708-09 and a low figure of 8,907 during 1704-05.

In addition to furs, Indians supplied Fort Albany with various country provisions needed to supplement the limited supply of European foods consumed by the some twenty traders. These included fish, venison, small game, and especially geese. Several Cree families came to hunt geese regularly and others periodically both in the spring and the fall. After gathering at the post in April, Indians received a feast of oatmeal and sometimes other foods and were provided with guns, ammunition and other necessary equipment for the hunt. Transported by canoe from the coastal marshes, geese were packed with salt in barrels. Goose feathers were also kept. The spring hunt usually lasted from late April to early June, and the fall hunt from late August to mid-October. The quantity of geese killed varied with the number of hunters and climatic conditions from no more than a few hundred to over 2,000 in any given season. Later in the eighteenth century, the numbers increased as more hunters came to participate and techniques became more efficient. Also, in later times, a goose hunt leader came to preside over the hunt. Whether the goose dance held by the Cree was aboriginal or a custom that evolved in the eighteenth century is uncertain. During these seasons the Cree lived largely on geese and also received trade goods for their services.

At other times Indians traded birchbark canoes and other materials and occasionally provided certain services needed by the Hudson's Bay Company employees. They also supplied information pertaining to the trade and the whereabouts of the French. Since the fort had already been captured once, the English kept a constant vigilance, although many reports were only rumors. Nevertheless, in 1709 a contingent of French and Mohawks that attempted to take the post was driven off, thanks to advance warning by the Cree (Davies 1965:xxxviii-xxxix).

In return for their furs and services, Indians received a wide range of trade goods. For example, in 1694-95 some 396 guns, 288 ice chisels,

5,329 knives, 1,384 awls, 1,146 hatchets, 118 arrow heads, 30 net lines, 634 pounds of twine, 348 kettles, 430 coats, over 1,000 yards of various types of cloth and 2,308 pounds of tobacco, as well as considerable quantities of many other items were traded (HBCA B.3/d/5). In addition, band leaders, the "captains," annually received a captain's coat, tobacco and other presents at gift exchange ceremonies (see Ray and Freeman 1978:55-59, 66-75). It is to be noted that the above list of goods was received by local "homeguard" Cree as well as "unpaid" Indians. There is no way of determining the proportions different groups received.

To an extent, the band organization of the Cree is reflected in the names of groups that traded at the post. One group headed by captain "Tick-aw-tucky" exploited the Albany River area west of the post. Another group (or perhaps two related groups) called the Salkemies occupied the Moose River region and during the 1690s was led by "Old Noah." Kesagami Lake, fifty miles south of Moose Factory appears to have been named after this group. Still another band, the "Metlawarith," appears to have wintered northwest of Fort Albany. In addition, a number of other Indians are named in the early records, but whether they belonged to one of these groups or some other unspecified group is uncertain. The names of more distant groups, however, are also occasionally mentioned, including the "PakanaSheas" from east of Moose River, the "Tibitiby" from the Lake Abitibi area, the "Rabbit Indians" from far to the northwest of the post, the "Ta-mishka-mein" from Lake Timiskaming, the "Clisteens" from north of Lake Superior, the "Ka-chi-ga-mien" from the Great Lakes, and the "Ryga-meas" perhaps from the same area. On occasion a few canoes of Assiniboine from near Lake of the Woods visited the post. Most of these more distant peoples were in the outer orbit of trade at Fort Albany but their visits were no less coveted.

The evidence dating to the early eighteenth century indicates that Indians in the lowlands experienced periodic food privations. Some actually starved to death, while others ate their furs and a few even turned to cannibalism. Still others who wintered within reach of the post came to receive donations of fish and potatoes. In cases where they were too weak to travel, others carried food to their tents. Such hardships, however, were not experienced every year, or by all groups. Some appear to have lived in a condition of relative abundance while others in a different direction starved. Or the same group might experience both feast and famine at different times during the same winter. Food shortages, then, were a regional and/or temporal phenomena, often the result of adverse climatic conditions that prevented hunting or local game scarcities.

A basic question is whether similar hardships were experienced by aboriginal Indians. Although starvation was often attributed to too

much or too little snow or radical fluctuations in temperature, both of which made hunting difficult or impossible and which also must have occurred in prehistoric times, there appear to have been other factors that intensified the effects of weather conditions. That is, although starvation may have occurred periodically in prehistoric times, it may have been less frequent and less severe than the records of the early eighteenth century indicate was then the case. There are three primary and interrelated reasons why post-contact stress may have been greater. These are: 1) the introduction of a new technology for obtaining food and fur; 2) changes in labour patterns involving an intensification and specialization of energy to acquire materials for trade; and 3) a reduction in the total subsistence resource biomass involving beaver and caribou.

The Hudson's Bay Company account book lists of goods traded indicate that many items had gradually come to replace aboriginal ones. It is unlikely that Indians had forgotten how to produce traditional goods at this early date; rather new items were, in some cases, more efficient than stone or bone ones. Still other materials such as tobacco, combs, hawk bells, etc. came to have social and/or ritual value. But regardless of the function of an item, all trade goods required the expenditure of additional energy because hunters had to devote more time to trapping and women more time to preparing fur pelts. Time devoted to trapping was not time devoted to food hunting, even though the meat of fur bearers was consumed. The quantity of meat from these animals, however, was probably less than would have been the case had Indians focused solely or mainly on food hunting. Also, beaver which do contain more flesh than most other fur bearers appear to have been relatively scarcer in the lowlands than further inland. Thus, Indians who tried to survive on the flesh of marten, mink and fisher, supplemented by the periodically unreliable snowshoe hare and a few straggling caribou, indeed would have been vulnerable to the effects of inclement weather.

Not only was more energy being expended in trapping and pelt preparation, the records also suggest that trapping efficiency combined with limited food resources required that families remain spatially separated from each other for lengthy periods in winter. Groups usually no larger than families arrived at the post except when caribou were being killed. Small herds of caribou can be more effectively hunted by several adults, usually belonging to three or four related families, and, in turn, the flesh of these larger animals will support larger social groups as long as it lasts than will the meat of small game. There is, however, some indirect evidence suggesting that both caribou and beaver were declining in the lowland area. Near York Factory, Indians were draining beaver dams and destroying lodges in winter,

practices that would have resulted in the death from exposure of any animals not killed outright (Tyrrell 1931:235–36). Whether Fort Albany Indians were doing the same thing is uncertain but not unlikely given the value of beaver pelts. Likewise, the caribou herds appear to have been reduced through over-hunting. At different times between 1693 and 1705, presents of 36, 40, 80, 105 and even 200 “deer” tongues, as well as smaller quantities of meat on other occasions were given to the Fort Albany post. After 1705, relatively less venison was given. Perhaps Indians were simply consuming the flesh themselves, but more likely there were fewer animals to be killed. It may have been that the caribou population had been sufficiently thinned to make hunting them less reliable and productive, unless there were signs that animals were nearby. Also, by concentrating more on fur hunting, many families may have wintered in areas where there were few big animals. In consequence, they would have been forced to live on what was locally available. In contrast, in prehistoric times when food hunting did not compete with fur trapping, and when there were no traders to feed, the movements of Indians would have been far less restricted. They could have ranged over larger areas, even far inland to the more productive Shield country. But the quest for furs, combined with the relative scarcity of foods nearer the coast, came to intensify food stresses within a mere three decades after Fort Albany was established, creating the numerous instances of starvation reported after 1700.

Families prevented by starvation from acquiring a sufficiency of furs to meet with trade needs, nevertheless, could later earn these by goose hunting. This, combined with the knowledge that food could be obtained from the traders in times of hardship, worked to inhibit some families from travelling beyond reach of the store in winter. Also, unless curtailed early, the fall hunt could be especially disruptive since it conflicted with Indians’ ability to lay up a larder of food and prepare for the approaching trapping season. Traders had to allow goose hunters to depart early or promise to feed families should they arrive starving. These same promises may also have had the effect of encouraging hunters to engage in fur trapping at times when they formerly would have been food hunting.

The scattering of families to areas to trap under conditions where survival came, in part, to depend upon the acquisition of certain trade goods were preconditions for changes in property relationships. By 1700, near York Factory, Indians were marking beaver lodges to “be sure no one else will be so unfair as to hunt it” (Tyrrell 1931:233). Given similar ecological and trade conditions near Fort Albany, it is probable that similar concepts were developing there too. If heeded, such marks designating private ownership by families could, in time, lead to game management.

Conclusions

The reciprocal bond between Indians, within a hundred odd miles of Fort Albany, and the traders there involved the production of furs, geese and venison by the former, in exchange for trade goods and periodic food donations, had by the early 1700s generated subtle and important social and economic changes. Regular participation in new economic activities came to alter Cree social organization and the habitat Indians exploited. Although many traditional beliefs and customs persisted in the new context for many more years, scholars, nevertheless, should not be deceived into believing that distinctive Cree traits give evidence that other aspects of their culture remained unaltered, or that the fur trade was simply grafted onto traditional culture. Notwithstanding, the Cree were not passive recipients. Rather, they reacted to the fur trade and modified it. But all the same, the consequence of this reaction was the narrowing of their range of options, a fact reflected by the term "homeguard" applied to those who hunted geese or remained near the post. The changes experienced by these lowland Cree also foreshadow in a general way what other Indians further inland and to the west would later endure. The case of the western James Bay Cree, then, is instructive in two ways. Provided caution is employed, it is possible to upstream from the early records to aboriginal baseline conditions. Second, materials can be used to gain comparative perspective on Indians involved in the fur trade in other places and at other times.

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