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# The Northern Ojibwa And The Fur Trade:

An Historical And Ecological Study

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count remains fairly constant at Osnaburgh. Either beaver increased rapidly in the Lac Seul area, or Indians from other posts were taking their beaver pelts to that post. Unfortunately, post journal records are not available at Lac Seul after 1853 which might help explain the returns at that post. Other appear to have been always slightly more numerous in the Osnaburgh area, whereas the figures indicate that approximately the same number of mink were obtained at both stores. On a number of occasions traders reported that Osnaburgh was a better marten country than Lac Seul. The rise in the number of marten and mink taken at both posts during the mid-1850's can be correlated with the availability of hares at that time as well as trade policies. Marten were of high value during the 1850's. The Lac Seul Indians relied heavily upon dogs to hunt lynx which may account for the higher figures. Again, lynx may have been more numerous at Lac Seul. Since lynx feed primarily on hares, there is a direct correlation between the high figures and the supply of the latter animal during the mid-1850's. Finally, Lac Seul seems to have been a better muskrat country and the Indians there appear to have devoted more time to their acquisition. Muskrat, however, were more valuable at Osnaburgh.

After 1850 both Osnaburgh and Lac Seul produced fur returns of approximately the same value. However, during the 1830's and 1840's when the Lac Seul post was managed by Charles McKenzie, it consistently outdid Osnaburgh. For example, in 1838, Osnaburgh produced 31½ packs of furs, while Lac Seul made 41½ packs<sup>60</sup>. The following year 100 Osnaburgh trappers made only 30 packs, yet 83 Lac Seul Indians produced 55½ packs. Again in 1840 Lac Seul outproduced Osnaburgh by 23 packs. It should be pointed out, however, that a valid comparison would involve the types of furs taken.

#### Land Tenure

Land tenure among northern Algonkians has been a topic of controversy for several decades. Speck (1915; 1928; 1928), Speck and Eiseley (1939; 1942), Cooper (1939), and Hollowell (1949) have argued that small patrilocal unit tenure—the family hunting territory system—was pre-contact; while Jenness (1935), Leacock

(1954), Rogers (1963a), Hickerson (1962a; 1967a) and Bishop (1970) have presented evidence that it was a product of trade, contact, and environmental changes. Although the latter view has gained general acceptance, there are still little data on the processes leading to the family hunting territory system, and on the conditions under which it emerges.

In the family hunting territory system among northern Algonkians, which was first described by Speck (1915; 1923), the hunting group habitually returns to a well demarcated tract of land bounded by natural landmarks. Within this area the group, presumed by Speck to be the extended family, possesses exclusive rights to the resources. Trespass involving the acquisition of furs by other families, unless for food purposes or in cases of starvation (Lips 1947:433), is strictly forbidden and is punished by supernatural sanctions (Landes 1937:87; Lips 1947:476-84; Hollowell 1955:227-280). The right to fur resources within the area tends to be passed to male consanguines preferably an eldest son (Lips 1947:435). Views concerning rights to food vary. Lips (1947:432) and Burgess (1945:12) state that food resources for the Montagnais were free goods; while Landes (1961) for the Eno Ojibwa and Cooper (1939) for the Tête de Boule have indicated that food within the territory is individually possessed. Cooper and Landes stress extreme individualism in property concepts. Kohl, in writing about the Ojibwa south of Lake Superior in 1859, indicates that beaver lodges, sugar bushes, and berry patches were owned by family units (1957:421). Actually there appears to be much variability in land tenure forms which Leacock (1954) and Hickerson (1967a) indicate represents a wide departure from aboriginal forms. According to Hickerson (1967a: 42) there has been a "shaping and reshaping to meet specific microecological and microhistorical variations".

Speck and Eiseley reject the view that family hunting territory systems are a product of the fur trade (1942:241). They state that small non-migratory fauna, especially beaver, could best be exploited by individual family units. They assume that small game constituted the primary food source for the aboriginal Montagnais, and that larger units would have starved on such a subsistence basis (cf. also Cooper 1939:81-82; Landes 1961:87-88). Related to well demarcated territories with rules against trespass were conservation policies regarding fur resources

(Speck 1915:293-94). Only where well defined boundaries exist and where game is nomigratory are such practices possible.

The forms of property concepts described by Speck, Cooper and Lips and assumed by them to have been aboriginal first came under extensive scrutiny by Leacock (1954). She demonstrated that private ownership of resources and individually inherited rights to land developed in response to the fur trade. Leacock states that there is no ethnohistorical data which would tend to support the existence of the family hunting territory during the seventeenth century. Indeed there is much evidence against it. The primary food sources for the seventeenth-century Montagnais seems to have been large game, moose and caribou, (1954:3) which require the cooperation of several hunters (Rogers 1963a: 80). Also there was no population pressure on resources, nor were there any attempts at conservation. Speck and Elisey do note the nomadism of groups in northern Quebec who pursue migratory caribou (1942:219). However, they account for the difference in property concepts in the north solely in terms of ecological factors ignoring historical ones. An allotment system of tenure where each group leader announces annually his group's intended hunting area appears to have existed in northern Quebec during the late nineteenth century (Turner 1894:276).

The factors responsible for the emergence of the family hunting territory system according to Leacock are as follows: the weakening of cooperative bonds between group members as economic ties are transferred from within the group to the trader; the increasing self-sufficiency of family units supplied with store foods who can best exploit nomigratory fur bearers separately; the increasing scarcity of game, both large animals and fur bearers, forcing larger groups to splinter into family units; the preference of traders to deal with individuals rather than groups; and the increasing dependence on a single trading post thus hindering mobility (Leacock 1954:7-9).

As I understand Leacock's contention, individual family hunting territories are incompatible with subsistence activities (1954:6-7; 24-26). She maintains that it is only when food hunting does not compete with trapping, and when furs are deemed more important than food, that true family hunting territories can emerge. This, according to Leacock, apparently can only occur when store foods reduced the Indians' "dependence

upon meat... to the point where hunting need not seriously compete with trapping" (1954:26). Leacock has also noted a definite correlation "between early centers of trade and the oldest and most complete development of the hunting territory" (1954:12). It is probably not coincidental that these early centres of trade were located in areas aboriginally inhabited by Algonkian groups including the Ojibwa. It will be shown (see Chapter 9) that later interior posts in northern Ontario were built as roving groups of Ojibwa moved into areas occupied only a few decades prior to their construction. Thus, Leacock would argue that well-defined territories would be less likely to exist in regions surrounding the latter posts. So long as Indians were wandering in a random fashion after furs and large migratory game animals, conservation policies would be impossible. As we shall see, the family hunting territory system did not emerge until the late 1820's or early 1830's in northern Ontario. Although store foods may hasten the development of tenure in severalty and intensify individualism as seems to have been the case in southwestern Labrador, the other causal factors may also produce "true" family hunting territories. Although the Osnaburgh Ojibwa were not obtaining the bulk of their food from the store until the last few decades, they did indeed have trapping territories by the middle of the last century. Yet the boundaries in the Osnaburgh region, and to the north of it, were not as rigidly defined as were those in regions slightly to the south of that post. The task now is to present data on the conditions at Osnaburgh.

One factor that seems to account, in part, for the formation of hunting territories, is the form of food pursued. The subsistence basis for the Montagnais of southeastern Labrador where territories are not fully developed seems to have been migratory caribou (Leacock 1954:24-25). This in itself would produce a more nomadic existence mitigating the formation of well-defined territories since caribou migrations are not restricted by any artificially bounded regions. The Osnaburgh people, from the 1820's until late in the century, however, subsisted primarily on small nomigratory game, hare and fish. Hence, since hare snares required constant daily observation, Indians would be less likely to rove over large areas than if they were pursuing large animals. When subsistence patterns changed from large game to small during the 1820's, the Archival documents indicate a marked

decrease in both the amount of mobility and the distances traversed by Indians. Their mobility restricted to a more precisely delineated region, members of hunting bands might also come to view the furs within the area as the property of group members. It has also been shown that store foods merely supplemented native foods at the end of the century.

There is some evidence that cooperation under harsh environmental conditions was a more important value, especially in regard to food-sharing, than was competition. There is good evidence for this even in regard to fur bearers prior to 1821, as will be demonstrated (Chapter 8).

The cultural practice of not hunting fur bearers when a close relative died may have been an additional factor mitigating the formation of stable territories. For example, in 1844, six Cranes arrived at Osnaburgh 105 made beaver short of their debts. "Death among them, the Chiefs Wife & one of his Sons died which stopped them from hunting"<sup>61</sup>. Further examples of the same practice come to light at the Lac Seul post in 1845 and at Osnaburgh in 1875.

Trading policies also influenced the formation of hunting territories (cf. Leacock 1854:6-9). For example, George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, had been instructing traders to encourage individualism:

On the subject of nursing the country . . . my Despatch from Moose of allotting certain tracts of country to the different bands can only be carried into full effect in extended Districts such as Albany, where the population is very thin; but in small Districts frequented by Rein Deer and where the Fisheries are not numerous the Indians are under the necessity of going sometimes from one extremity thereof to the other, in search of the means of living, on these journeys which are usually performed during the season of open water, they discover Beaver, which they were in the habit of destroying out of season, until by entreaties and threats we succeeded, in prevailing on them to discontinue their summer hunts; but in the winter they retrade their steps to where they discovered vestiges of Beaver in order to make their Hunts. We are endeavoring to confine the natives

throughout the country now by families to separate and distinct hunting grounds this system seems to take among them by degrees, and in a few years I hope it will become general, but it is a very difficult matter to change the habits of Indians, altho they may see the ultimate benefit thereof to themselves and families<sup>62</sup>.

If Indians had been able to maintain an existence primarily upon large migratory fauna, it is doubtful whether the instructions issued by George Simpson would have been followed. Mobility in the quest of caribou which could supply many Indian needs would render a concept of rigidly-defined territoriality impractical. The furs procured, however, could still be considered the private property of individual trappers without the land necessarily being viewed as such even where big game constituted a primary food source. This latter situation seems to have been the case in some regions during the 1820's.

While traders dealt with Indians individually, encouraging private ownership of fur resources within bounded areas by family units, competition between Hudson's Bay posts in different districts operated to reduce the importance of fur resources, and indirectly the need for hunting territories. Indians were able to travel to nearby posts unrestricted to take advantage of better trade bargains. In some cases, Indians delivered only a part of their furs to the post while threatening to trade elsewhere if their demands were not satisfied<sup>63</sup>. Nevertheless, the evacuation of many trading locales after 1821 reduced the mobility of Indians considerably.

Another factor that might account for the early formation of hunting territories in some areas is population pressure both on furs and food. For example, the areas closer to Lake Superior and the American border seem to have been overpopulated. The factor at Fort William, in 1829, reported that the native population there was "By far too many for the District and the furs"<sup>64</sup>. There is additional evidence from Nipigon House, Lac Seul and Rainy Lake that the population had grown far too large to effectively exploit the fur resources by the middle of the nineteenth century<sup>65</sup>. All of these posts lay to the south of Osnaburgh House. However, there is evidence that by the late nineteenth

century, the Onaburgh population was increasing. It is significant to remember that trespass and overtrapping were noted by the 1880's.

Under conditions where a population is great and furs scarce, it is probable that family territories would emerge due to the pressure on resources although ideas of conservation might not arise where all available resources are needed. Population pressure might necessitate the partitioning of lands to maximize the exploitation of game and furs. Such seems to have been the case south of Onaburgh.

Contrary to Rogers' view (1963a:77) that there is no functional relationship between the hunting group and the hunting territory, historical evidence indicates that the two are, in fact, intimately connected. To support this hypothesis, data are presented on two areas where the population was dense, and where food shortages were frequent. These will then be compared with Onaburgh materials. The areas chosen are Mattagami situated about 240 miles southwest of James Bay and Lac La Pluie west of Lake Superior near the American border.

Alexander Christie, wrote in his Mattagami district report for 1826:

The Indians who are from the West, to the North ward and Eastward of the house possess a much more valuable Fur country, and from the circumstances of each Indian having a certain allotment of land for himself and family, a portion of which he hunts annually, which gives the remainder a little time to recruit, but from the great population and the small space which falls to each family, they generally go over the extent of their hunting grounds, once in two years<sup>66</sup>.

In addition to fully developed hunting territories, Christie has emphasized population pressures and the small size of winter hunting units. In 1829, at the same post, Hugh Faries, related the endemic shortage of food and rather frequent occurrence of cannibalism:

My Report regarding the occurrences of this quarter differ very little from that of last year, the same dismal tale to

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relate of the distressful situation & disasters of the Natives, they suffered still more this last winter then the proceeding—several have died through want of food—actually starved to death—& what is most painful to relate, destroying one another to save themselves, a Father & Mother having subsisted some time on their children three in number & the Mother at last dispatched the Father for the same purpose & subsisted on his flesh . . . this is not the only instance of the Kind this winter, several similar *Catastrophes* occurred<sup>67</sup>.

Again, in the Lac La Pluie region, the population numbered 563 Indians in 1830<sup>68</sup>. This was more than double the population for Onaburgh about the same time, yet the total area inhabited by Lac La Pluie Indians appears to have been somewhat smaller. Food at Lac La Pluie was a constant problem and family hunting territories may have emerged relatively early there (cf. Hickerson 1967a)<sup>69</sup>. Ruth Landes, who did field work among the Ojibwa of the same general region during the 1930's has described conditions as they may have existed during the late nineteenth century:

All accounts of old Ojibwa life are shadowed by fear of starvation, and each man hunts for himself, alone on his trails, the hunters scattering as widely as possible in order to make the most of the thin supply of game. The household of wife and children who depend upon the man's hunting lives in complete isolation during the winter season (1961:87).

And,

On his isolated estate, the husband hunts as though he were alone in the world . . . Surrounding him at accessible distances are fellow Ojibwa all trying to keep off starvation (1961:88).

Although individual families may have possessed trapping territories, it is doubtful whether the winter co-residential unit was equal to the conjugal family. Landes herself modifies this view when she says,

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