Social Organization
of the Attawapiskat Cree Indians

By John J. Honigmann, University of North Carolina

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Material for the following analysis of the social structure of the Cree Indians of Attawapiskat, Ontario, Canada, was obtained during a stay in that trading post lasting from July 1947 to June 1948. Field work mainly focussed on the subsistence patterns of the culture of these James Bay people. The Attawapiskat dialect may be identified as an “n-dialect” of Cree in which vowels receive the following approximate values: \(i\) as in English “it”, \(e\) as in “set”, \(a\) between “father” and “hat”, \(o\) as in “low”. Duplication of the vowel indicates lengthening (thus, \(ii\) as in English “eat”). The diphthongs which occur in final position are \(ew\), \(iw\), \(aw\), and \(aj\).

1. List of Kin Terms

Kin terms are presented below. Brackets indicate specifications that were unsystematically obtained from genealogies. Thus, although we collected FaFaBrWi and FaFaSi we did not secure the term for [MoMoBrWi]. The

*1 The larger study was sponsored by the National Committee for Community Health Studies with offices in Toronto. Professor G. Gordon Brown of the University of Toronto was the anthropological member of the Committee and supervised the work of the two field anthropologists who worked in James Bay. The present paper has benefited from a reading by Professor George P. Murdock, who not only made many suggestions for handling the data but predicted an inconsistency in my patterns of kin terminology. His prediction proved valid when an Attawapiskat informant was encountered in Moosonee, Ontario, in August 1950.
analysis which follows the list of terms is based on the method of analysis recently developed by George P. Murdock of Yale University and explained in his book "Social Structure".

nimocom’ My FaFa, MoFa
no’kom My FaMo, MoMo [FaFaBrWi, FaFaSi]
notaw’wii My Fa
nkaw’wii My Mo
no’komis My FaBr, MoHu (i.e., stepfather)
i’siikos My FaSi, SiDa (w.s.), WiMo (m.s.), [FaFaBrDa (m.s.), HuFaBrWi (w.s.)]
isis’ My MoBr, FaSiHu (w.s.), MoSiHu (w.s.), WiFa (m.s.), HuFa (w.s.)
nito’sis My MoSi, FaBrWi, MoBrWi, FaWi (i.e., stepmother)
nistlaw’ My FaSiHu (m.s.), MoSiHu (m.s.), FaSiSo (m.s.), MoBrSo (m.s.), SiHu (m.s.), WiBr (m.s.)
niko’sis My So
ta’nis My Da
nistes’ My eBr, FaBrSo, MoSiSo (latter two if they are older than ego)
nimis’ My eSi, FaBrDa, MoSiDa (latter two if they are older than ego)
niciim’ My yBr, ySi, FaBrSo, FaBrDa, MoSiSo, MoSiDa (latter four if they are younger than ego)
nii’tim My FaSiSo (w.s.), FaSiDa (m.s.), MoBrSo (w.s.), MoBrDa (m.s.), BrWi (m.s.), WiSi (m.s.), SiHu (w.s.), HuBr (w.s.)
nta’kos My FaSiDa (w.s.), MoBrDa (w.s.), BrWi (w.s.), HuSi (w.s.)
o’sism My SoSo, SoDa, DaSo, DaDa, [HuBrSoDa, HuBrSoSo]
nto’cim My BrSo (m.s.), SiSo (w.s.), [HuBrSo (w.s.)]
na’kaciim My BrSo (w.s.), SiSo (m.s.), DaHu, [FaBrSoSo (w.s.)]
nito’cimiskwe’w My BrDa (m.s.), SoWi (m.s.)
nha’kaniskwe’w My BrDa (w.s.), SiDa (m.s.), SoWi (w.s.), [HuBrSoWi (w.s.)]
ninapem’ My Hu (w.s.)
niwiikima’kan My Wi (m.s.)

In addition to these terms certain little used descriptive terms may be mentioned. Great grandfather and great grandmother are sometimes designated nitanisko’tapan and nitaniske’nimocom. The particle -aniske indicates a successor. Derivative denotative terms are also available to distinguish between kinship categories normally classified together. Thus, while a child uses no’komis (FaBr) to address his MoHu, the term of reference used may be niitaniske’otaw’wii. Similarly a stepmother may be referred to by the term niitaniske’okaw’wii. Parallel cousins may be designated regardless of

sex by the term niitce'kwesua. The term nii'wa, used at Great Whale River, Quebec, for one's wife, was not heard at Attawapiskat where the wife term, niiwikima'kan, designates a companion.³

Examination of certain features of the kin term structure reveals a system unequally conforming to the bifurcate collateral and bifurcate merging types. Bifurcate merging tendencies result in the grouping of siblings with parallel cousins. A lineal tendency is noted in the first ascending and descending generations where FaBrWi and MoBrWi, MoSiHu and FaSiHu, and BrSo and SiSo are terminologically equivalent. These tendencies may be shown as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mo, MoSi, FaSi} & \quad \text{Fa, FaBr, MoBr} \\
\text{Mo, FaBrWi} = \text{MoBrWi} & \quad \text{Fa, MoSiHu} = \text{FaSiHu} \\
\text{Si} = \text{FaBrDa, FaSiDa} & \quad \text{Br} = \text{FaBrSo, FaSiSo} \\
\text{Si} = \text{MoSiDa, MoBrDa} & \quad \text{Br} = \text{MoSiSo, MoBrSo} \\
\text{Da, BrDa, SiDa} & \quad \text{So, BrSo} = \text{SiSo}
\end{align*}
\]

Murdock has presented evidence that non-sororal polygyny (typically associated with patrilocal residence) favors bifurcate-collateral terminology while patrilocal residence exerts a counter influence in favor of merging such relatives as siblings and patrilineal parallel cousins. Attawapiskat Cree social structure gives internal evidence of patrilocal pressures. In pre-contact times (prior to 1850) the Indians of the northwest corner of James Bay were organized into bands whose nominal leadership was patrilineally inherited. Marriage, associated with patrilocal residence, normally followed matrilocal bride service that lasted one or two years. Informants also reported patrilocal residence for the Indians of Fort Albany, in the southwest corner of James Bay. This information is partially confirmed by Skinner.⁴

A cross-cousin constituted the preferred mate during the aboriginal period. Certain kin equivalences point to cross-cousin marriage, a pattern which, in distinction to the levirate and sororate, weakly survives in present-day Attawapiskat and is even tolerated, although somewhat ambivalently, by the local Catholic missionaries. Examples of such equivalences include the classification of FaSi with WiMo, which follows when a paternal aunt is expected to become a mother-in-law; that of FaSiDa with WiSi, when other cross-cousins may be sisters to one's wife, and that of FaSiDa with BrWi from the expectation that a brother will marry a cross-cousin of ego who is also a sister of ego's wife. Conversely the terminological grouping of MoBr with WiFa accords with the expectation that ego will marry his maternal cross-cousin. The term for cross-cousin of opposite sex, nii'lim,

³ J. J. Honigmann, Field Notes. 1950.
⁴ Skinner says: "Descent was in the father's line... Usually, a man hunted with his sons and their families." The same author quotes Mackenzie to the effect that the "Eastern Cree" followed matrilocal bride service lasting until the birth of a child when patrilocal residence became the rule. Sororal polygyny is also identified. (Alanson Skinner, Notes on the Eastern Cree and Northern Saulteaux. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History [New York] 9. 1911. pp. 56-57.)
while not corresponding to the wife term, generally signalizes interaction patterns of easy familiarity and is freely translated as "my sweetheart". Premarital sex relations with a cross-cousin in the past met with tolerant regard. Public joking still obtains between these relatives even though one of the pair may be married. Such behavior is very striking in a community where an unmarried girl in the presence of a young man typically hides her face in a shawl with signs of pronounced shyness and confusion.

The extension of the female cross-cousin term (m. s.) to BrWi is also consistent with the levirate. Indirect evidence of the levirate was given by informants, who reported the familiar Northern Forest pattern whereby a brother-in-law took a widow under his guardianship for one or two years. The extension of the female cross-cousin term, by a man, to the WiSi is also consistent with the sororate or sororal polygyny. While most marriages in the aboriginal period of necessity remained monogamous, informants reported that sororal polygyny was the common pattern of polygamy and non-sororal polygyny occurred only rarely. The sororate was normal.

2. Contemporary Attawapiskat Social Organization

Summary

In present-day Attawapiskat the kinship structure delineated above constitutes one feature of a social system generally corresponding to the Neo-Yuman type. A summary of relevant data follows after which we will discuss the salient features of the Yuman pattern.

Descent: Bilateral. Sibs are absent.

Inheritance: The right to exploit trap line territories, which were apportioned among the families and mapped by the Hudson's Bay Company some thirty years ago (ostensibly on the basis of traditional patrilineal rights), is ideally inherited patrilineally. Children of both sexes are supposed to share equally, although it may be expected that sons will share exclusively, inasmuch as the wife will live with the husband on his ground. In practice a son-in-law may take up trapping on his father-in-law's land and claim inheritance. Other departures from the ideal pattern also occur. Mobility between trapping grounds is common to the distress of the Hudson's Bay Company manager. The program of the Company, whereby certain areas of the country are being restocked with imported beaver, will further encourage trapping without regard for traditional rights. The Company has already begun to shift trappers to where the animals are numerous and therefore safe to kill.

Cousin terminology: Iroquois. Thus FaSiDa = MoBrDa and both are distinct from FaBrDa and MoSiDa. Parallel cousins are classed with siblings.

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6 In the third person singular this becomes wii'tcimos. Perhaps this is related to the root wiiitci-, with the meaning of intimacy and consorting. Thus the verb wiiitciuwew is a euphemism for sexual intercourse and also indicates coresidence. One informant gave niwiitciema kan as the wife term.

6 MURDOCK, pp. 231-232.
Residence: Initially bilocal soon followed by the establishment of independent nuclear families. Aboriginally residence was matri-patrilocal.

Clans or demes: Clans are absent but exogamous patridemes may possibly have been a feature of aboriginal social organization.

Kin group: Evidence of a bilateral kindred is to be discussed below.

Exogamy: Normal bilateral extension. The situation is confused by a tendency on the part of Roman Catholic missionaries to discourage cross-cousin marriage. Continued influence by the missionaries makes extension to second cousins likely to occur soon. Patrilineal extension appears to have been the aboriginal tendency.

Marriage: Monogamous.

Family: Independent nuclear families predominate but the first and second years of marriage are spent in bilocal extended families. Aboriginally extended families were patrilocal.

Aunt-uncle terms: Bifurcate collateral, i.e., with distinct terms for Mo, MoSi, and FaSi. Uncle terms follow the same pattern.

Niece-nephew terms: Bifurcate collateral for Da, BrDa, and SiDa but lineal for BrSo and SiSo.

An organization of Yuman type, according to Murdock, often shows an absence of exogamous unilinear kin groups and and Iroquois cousin terminology. It is adapted to bilateral societies undergoing transition toward unilinear organization as well as to groups, characterized by Iroquois cousin terminology, making the transition from unilinear to bilateral organization. Among the several sub-types of the Yuman system which are associated with the latter type of transition the neolocal variety best fits the Attawapiskat case. The outstanding quality of the Yuman pattern, namely its instability based on "uncompleted transitions in descent" 7, is well illustrated by the Attawapiskat data. We turn now to a more extended analysis of some of the features in the contemporary social structure of the community.

3. Residence

Reasons for believing that patrilocal residence normally obtained in aboriginal Attawapiskat culture have already been indicated. In the present day the pattern is very mixed. We obtained a number of instances in which young couples upon marriage joined the wife's family and an almost equal number of cases of initial patrilocal residence. In one instance we perceived a couple shift from the wife's family's dwelling back to the husband's after a child was born to the wife. In expectation of this delivery the young man announced his intention of spending the winter on his father-in-law's trap line. Later that winter, following the extended families return to the trading post, he shifted residence. At the same time that he moved he undertook independent trapping not on his father's line but on the Hudson's Bay Company's beaver preserve. Later in the winter he joined forces with

7 Murdock, p. 231.
his wife’s sister’s husband and the two brothers-in-law went off together for the spring hunt. These details reveal the current possibilities for independent economic production which are undoubtedly related to the tendency to establish independent nuclear families as soon after marriage as possible. Neolocal residence immediately following marriage is very rare and no case was recorded.

Under present-day conditions of bilocal residence the personalities of the male parents appear to play the largest role in determining where residence is to be established. Other factors include the relative distance of the parents’ trap lines from the post and the productivity of the different territories. Spouses may press for a particular residence choice. In one case a man persuaded his wife to follow him for the winter and “they nearly starved” on his father’s trap line. Thereupon the wife successfully insisted on matrilocal residence but considerable friction developed between the nuclear families which was reflected in bitter quarrels between husband and wife. In general there is a strong tendency to establish independent residence as soon after marriage as possible.

In connection with residence rules it is perhaps useful to point out that the Attawapiskat Indians are divided into two major local groups, those trapping in the southern part of the area and regularly trading at Attawapiskat post and those trading in the northern part of the area who, during most of the year, trade at Lake River outpost north of Attawapiskat post. The latter people visit Attawapiskat every summer and are often referred to as Lake River Indians. The conclusions in the present paper should be understood as applying to the southern part of the area inasmuch as little contact was had with the Lake River people. Marriages tend to be endogamous with respect to these divisions which are probably enlarged versions of aboriginal bands. In pre-contact times the people trapping along every major river were specifically designated, although these groups were not endogamous. The closest replica of such an aboriginal division is found in the case of Alec Wesley, commonly known as Lawaciis Alec, and his family. The name is derived from the river along which he and his sons live and trap. The Lawaciisiiipii is immediately north of the Fort Albany Indians’ land. The latter were converted by Protestant missionaries and Alec’s family also mainly belongs to that faith and secures wives from Fort Albany. These women rarely visit Attawapiskat, presumably because they lack kin ties in that post.

4. Kin Groups

It is unfortunate that the author did not explicitly attend to the presence of the kindred when engaged in Attawapiskat field work. Examination of field notes indicates visiting cliques which appear to be constituted of small bilateral kindreds. Our evidence on this point also includes the custom of related families to locate their town dwellings in proximity or at least in the same general area of the settlement which stretches along the river bank for nearly a mile. Residential propinquity is related to consistent
visiting between, for example, married siblings located near each other. The children of the respective families were also observed freely moving between the various dwellings. In some cases visiting cliques reach from one end of the settlement to another and reexamination of the data reveals that such visits and (more rarely) accompanying food gifts generally connect consanguinely and affinally related families. In this connection we can cite the pattern whereby Alec Wesley when he visits Attawapiskat with his sons to trade locates his tent near his brother's and invariably visits relatives like his father's widow (i.e., his stepmother) and married half-sister. This particular brother as well as the women are Catholics and never spend long periods on the Lawacii River. Economic cooperation between relatives is slight, each nuclear family (whether or not it is dependently attached to a larger family structure) being expected to secure its own income from trapping. However, borrowing of food by married persons even from a parent is not uncommon.

5. Family

As already indicated, most dwelling units in Attawapiskat are occupied by independent nuclear clusters of spouses with or without children. In somewhat more than a dozen of the eighty-two such units counted nuclear families are extended through the inclusion of one or both living parents of the spouses. In several of these dozen cases the nuclear families are extended merely by the addition of a widowed parent, who, it would appear, has been accepted into the nuclear family rather than vice versa. Despite the fact that nuclear families tend to occupy their own homes, which are easily and inexpensively constructed of tent canvas that is obtained through government relief and a little lumber for floors and side walls secured in exchange for labor from the mission, such residences are not located without reference to parents and siblings. This pattern has already been described. When a nuclear family is located near the home of the parents of one of the spouses we would not speak of the two households as comprising an extended family. The degree of organization and cooperation appears to be too weak to warrant such classification. Of genuine extended families not broken by widowhood we tabulated five extended through the parent-daughter tie and seven through the parent-son tie.

6. Conclusions

Murdock points out that the relatively uncommon Yuman type social organization "is not stable, for all its sub-types represent uncompleted transitions in descent". Particularly "the bilocal and neolocal sub-types provide for certain previously unilinear societies which have lost their kin groups or their exogamy in consequence of the adoption of bilocal or neolocal residence. Such a society, if characterized by Iroquois cousin terminology, will commonly become bilateral in descent before the kinship terms have
completed the adaptive change to either the Eskimo or the Hawaiian type". In Attawapiskat the dissolution of the patrilocal mobile band or exogamous patrideme has been succeeded by transitory bilocal residence yielding to neolocal residence adjacent to kindred. Among the factors responsible for the shift in organization were, first, the introduction of a commercial fur trapping economy (the Company reached Fort Albany in the late 17th Century but established a post in Attawapiskat only toward the end of the 19th Century); second, direct missionary pressure against polygyny, the sororate, and levirate (missionaries first began to visit the community about 1850), and, finally, indirect support by the new socio-economic patterns of nuclear family self-sufficiency and individual initiative. The latter factor is being strongly furthered by a new pattern of fur trapping in which a man will not exploit the resources of his personal trap line but will "harvest" a fixed quantity of beaver from a large beaver preserve under the direction of the Hudson’s Bay Company manager. Neolocal residence is also favored by the ease with which a nuclear family consisting only of husband and wife can, with the aid of government relief and family allowances, provide a dwelling for their use with relatively little expenditure of money or effort.

It is our inference, arrived at with considerable assistance from Professor Murdock, that the present Neo-Yuman pattern of social organization is in process of growing out of a normal Yuman pattern with matri-patrilocal residence and exogamous patridemes. The social organization of the Naskapi remains normal Yuman. Preceding the normal Yuman type the Attawapiskat Cree Indians probably evidenced a Patri-Hawaiian or possibly Patri-Eskimo system in which parallel and cross-cousins were grouped together. Such a system may trace back to a Normal Hawaiian type and more remotely to some matrilocal structure whose survivals persisted in matri-patrilocal residence and sororal polygyny. Such an interpretation is consistent with the view that the eight tribes of the Algonquian linguistic stock analyzed by Murdock all "appear to converge in the past toward a common ancestral structure of Hawaiian type". It is interesting to note that the Cree-speaking Indians of Great Whale River, P. Q., conform to the Yuman pattern shared by the Naskapi of the interior with bilocal residence as the rule.

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8 Murdock, p. 231.
9 Relief and family allowance issues for children are no insignificant factors in the economic picture of Attawapiskat. About one half of the total income of the Indians is derived from these sources. Almost every family derives food and equipment from each source once a month. The amount issued at any time is expected to last at least until the following month although in early winter advance relief rations are furnished. Cf. Honigmann, Incentives to Work in a Canadian Indian Community. Human Organization (New York) 8. 1949. No. 4. pp. 23-28.
10 Arapahoe, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Fox, Kickapoo, Micmac, Naskapi, and Ojibwa. Murdock, p. 347.
11 Honigmann, Field Notes. 1950. Reference to the work of Mr. Nathan Altshuler with these Indians is also acknowledged.