

The Social Organization of the Northeastern Algonkians

JACK A. FRISCH, Indiana University

The Northeastern Algonkian Indians are those ethnic units who speak mutually intelligible dialects of the Algonkian language family, and inhabit the lands of eastern Canada and northern Maine. Driver (3) assigns these ethnic units to the Eastern Sub-Arctic culture area. Included among these people are the following groups: the Abnaki (including the Penobscot), the Malecite (including the Passamaquoddy), and the Micmac. The Northeastern Algonkians inhabit an area that, in aboriginal times, supported a hunting economy. The aboriginal mainstay of the area was the hunting of large game animals like caribou and deer. Cooper (1) ascribes these ethnic units to three ecological areas: in the north, caribou was the principal means of subsistence; moving a little to the south, sedentary fur-bearing animals are found in addition to deer and woodland caribou; in the southernmost ecological area, hunting as the main source of subsistence was supplemented in varying degrees by maize cultivation. The climate of this area ranges from a sub-arctic climate with temperatures rarely rising above 50° Fahrenheit in the northern section to a humid-continental climate with cool summers in the southern portion. This kind of climate, along with the natural land base, sustains a coniferous forest covering. The flora and fauna of this region was capable, in aboriginal times, of supporting a simple hunting economy; this level of subsistence was a determining factor in the social organization of the inhabitants of the area.

Because of the reliance upon the fauna as the principal means of subsistence, the Abnaki, Malecite, and Micmac were organized in such a manner that hunting could be performed more effectively. To accomplish efficiency in hunting, the Northeastern Algonkians were organized along family lines into what Speck (7) calls the family hunting group or band. Speck defined the family hunting band as a kinship group "composed of folks united by blood or marriage, having the right to hunt, trap, and fish in a certain inherited district bounded by some rivers, lakes, or other natural landmarks (7:290)." One feature of the band organization of the Northeastern Algonkians is the incidence of ambilocal residence; that is, the members of one band were able to shift their residence to that of another band, as long as there was some demonstrable genetic or affinal tie between the groups. It is this latter fact that has led me to characterize the social organization of these Indians as demes. The introduction of several new concepts and the application of these concepts to the social organization of the Northeastern Algonkian Indians allows the anthropologist to compare the organizational structures of these Indians with the kinship organization of other ethnic groups throughout the world.

The fact that the social organization of the Northeastern Algonkians is based upon cognatic ties rather than upon unilinear rules is

not new, however, former descriptions of the social organization of these people are inaccurate and often misleading. Driver postulates bilateral descent for all of the Northeastern Algonkians, however, he ascribes patrilocal residence for the area (3). Devereaux (2), following Driver, ascribes patridemes to the tribes of the area, thus assigning them patrilocal residence. If Driver's functional theory (4) is tenable, then the clustering of certain traits would demonstrate that ambilocality is more compatible with bilateral descent than any form of unilocal residence. In my analytical models presented elsewhere (5, 6), bilateral kinship structures are characterized by small domestic family units, ambilocal or neolocal residence, the importance of the kindred as a functioning social unit, community groups structured as demes, Eskimo cousin terminology, and lineal or bifurcate collateral avuncular terminology.

While it is apparent that the "ideal" bilateral society is not present among the Northeastern Algonkians, their social structure is closer to being bilateral than it is to any other type of kinship organization. The small domestic family is the basic unit of Northeastern Algonkian social organization. On the level of the intermediate kin group the kindred is a functional unit. The community structure approximates that of a deme, with an ambilocal rule of marital residence in operation. Only the kinship terminology deviates from the model; bifurcate collateral avuncular terms are present among the Abnaki and Malecite, while the Micmac possess lineal avuncular terms. Hawaiian cousin terms are found among the Abnaki and Malecite, while the Micmac have an Eskimo cousin terminology.

It has been impossible in these few lines to present all of the ethnographic evidence supporting my use of the deme as the unit of social organization among the Northeastern Algonkians; the reader is referred to earlier works of mine in which I have demonstrated the validity of the concept of the deme (6) and its application to the Northeastern Algonkians (5).

Literature Cited

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