

## Ceremonies of contact: warfare and exchange in traditional North America

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### Summary

*Pre- and protohistoric North American Indians lived in complex relations of warfare and exchange. Both forms of contact could occur simultaneously and were conceptually close social institutions. Peace and war were alternative behaviors in regard to the (human) environment, especially, but not necessarily neighbouring groups. They are seen here, therefore, as having primarily ecological, not economical functions.*

Warfare among North American Indians usually receives more attention than peaceful interaction, and statements such as «[The Amerindians'] one great social imperative, however, was war» (FEHRENBURG 1994: 60) are not uncommon. With its «wild and dangerous existence» (MCGINNIS 1990: ix), one could sometimes really take traditional North America for HOBBS' (1955: 82-83) living example of existence in a permanent state of war. In fact, strangers really were generally classified as potentially dangerous by probably all groups. However, «a cultural prohibition on peaceful contact» (BIOLSI 1984: 153) between groups was not entailed by this, not even between so-called hereditary or traditional enemies at war. At the arrival of the first European traders, exchange networks had spanned North America for at least centuries (BAUGH and ERICSON 1994; ERICSON and BAUGH 1993; SWAGERTY 1988: 351-353), and the very same people that made war on each other met for exchange (BRAUN 1996; JORGENSEN 1980: 148-150; MCGINNIS 1990: 15, 22; WOOD 1980: 104).

LÉVI-STRAUSS (1942: 145) says that «os conflitos guerreiros e as trocas econômicas não constituem unicamente, na América do Sul, dois tipos de relações coexistentes, mas antes os dois aspectos opostos e indissolúveis, de um único e mesmo processo social.» In North America, too, exchange and war were alternative modes of external relations closely associated, one social process. Trading expeditions or meetings could end as raids or battles, and vice versa; the inherent ambiguity of intergroup meetings always made encounters an uncertain business. Living in traditional North America did neither mean living in a state of war nor living in a state of peace; it meant living in a state of peace and war.

### Exchange, economy and warfare

The decision on peaceful or violent intergroup exchange was basically taken by individuals on account of their cultural value sets and complex socio-political reasons such as historical patterns of interaction between two groups, exchange partnerships, the want or need to gain prestige by war deeds or prestige goods, different exigencies of loyalty based on actual and ritual kinship, the estimated difference of power, or actual treatment by partner/enemies. Intra- as well as inter-group expectations and exigencies had to be met, and often, of course, rather than going consciously through all of these reasonings, a purely situational, spontaneous decision would have been taken on the spot. Usually, all involved people of both sides knew each other fairly well, for most tribes were not strict units and had various connections to adjacent, ethnologically different groups. This is not to say that ethnicity was no factor in the decisionmaking. There always were preferential groups to have peaceful or violent contacts with.

Exchange networks were a part of safety nets against «local environmental unpredictability» (BRAUN and PLOG 1982), and determined by economic and socio-political relations (BENDER 1985: 52-55). «Environmental unpredictability», in my view, not only encompasses subsistence problems, but amounts also to human relations, for neighbouring groups are part of the environment, and one basically acts the same toward human and non-human environment. This is particularly true for cultures that do not place much emphasis on a general distinction between humans and non-humans, but rather on the one between members of the own group and other beings. Ecological relations, of which intergroup relations are a part, should be kept in a certain harmony. If lost, it should be restored; by rescinding one's own position, measuring of forces to define a new balance, or defeating and in the extreme destroying the power that seemingly unsettles harmony. One could thus interpret ceremonial exchange and BAMFORTH'S (1994: 99) two modes of prehistoric Plains warfare – large-scale, but relatively ritualized battles and annihilating surprise attacks on small groups – while historical, mostly unbloody raiding was probably rather a consequence of intragroup pressure on prestige.

It must be emphasized that in complex systems, harmony or balance does not mean equality on every level; economically, inter- and intragroup exchange did not have to be equal, but could take on very

unequal forms, as in the Northwest or in the South-eastern chiefdoms. Going for one's own advantage was not a strange concept, as is also shown by the power games for European trade monopolies. The French (LIPS 1975: 358), the Dutch (BRASSER 1978: 154), the Russians (BRAUN 1996) and the English (MERRELL 1989: 204), all had to overcome resistance of their direct trade partners to gain access to remoter regions themselves. Popular stratagems included the exaggeration of distances and dangers of travel to or warlikeness of neighbours. But as the numerous misunderstandings and North American Indian frustrations show, economics always entailed and were embedded in social relations.

The system on which historic trade grounded had already been in place, but that does not mean it functioned on the same terms before and after the increased mobility afforded by the horse and the intensification by European influence. As MERRELL (1989) shows, European traders learned to turn the customs to their own advantage. With the passing of European wares from prestige goods to necessities, because the colonists, and dependent on them their direct trading partners, now had the power to dictate conditions, exchange took on a purely economic face, and the growing economic competition also fostered economic wars.

The primarily socio-political perspective of exchange seems to be true for prehistoric (EARLE 1994: 422-425), as well as for protohistoric times (e.g. MERRELL 1989: 198). Great quantities of goods could only have been transported on vessels. The most prominent use of vessels occurred on the very resourceful Northwest Coast and among the economically diverse, and therefore rather secure, eastern societies. WOOD (1980: 103, 106) thinks that, except for exotic materials or goods, Plains and Plateau tribes were not necessarily dependent on one another, but could have produced the exchanged goods or substitutes themselves. The same can be seen for Arctic/Subarctic, Great Basin and Californian Coast exchange (BRAUN 1996: 115; JORGENSEN 1980: 142, 146). As elsewhere (SASSAMAN 1995: 233), exchange alliances – social outside contacts – might have been considered more important than, and were a deliberate choice against economic autonomy. In this context, the acquisition of exotic knowledge probably played as important a role as that of exotic goods.

Even if more subsistence goods than expected were exchanged between groups, one could not deduce from that an economic exchange. Goods that can be used for utilitarian or subsistence goals do not have to be used in that way and can carry other than economic messages. In the prehistoric Southeast, for one example, the spread of maize and its rise to a dietary staple centuries later is rather due to its ties to socio-religious contexts than its possible economic/political advantages (HASTORF and JOHANNESSEN 1994; BROWN et al. 1990: 257; BROWN 1996: 29-31). Even though exchange for sure did invite economic transactions, economic risk assurance was a part of external relations, not the reason for them.

Regarding warfare, North American Indian tactics – mostly ambushes, surprise attacks or rather ritualized battles – show that the losing of lives had to be

avoided. If warfare was such a risky business and the acquisition of goods could be achieved by exchange or shared resource areas, then one can hardly assume that warfare served mainly economic needs. The conceptual and practical nearness of not primarily economic exchange and warfare can only underline this point.

### Ceremonies of ritual kinship

BOYD (1979: 218-222) shows how North American Indians posit others in their identity models. Compared to SAHLINS (1974: 194-199), there would be the choice between «balanced» and «negative reciprocity» in intertribal relationships, temporarily «generalized reciprocity» in times of crises between trade partners of different band affiliation a possibility in areas with overall rather loose ethnic differentiation or strong interband kinship ties (BRAUN 1996). Following Sahlins, for a successful exchange relationship, one needed to create – temporarily or on longer terms – a «positive social relationship» (HENNIGH 1972: 93). Either actual kinship ties had to be created through exchange of people or intermarriage, or ceremonies of ritual kinship had to be performed. Such ceremonies would take place between individuals, but most often in a public setting.

The most famous of these ceremonies is the calumet ceremony of the Plains. The sacred pipestem(s) probably replaced flutes or sticks in the pre- or protohistoric Southeast in similar ceremonies. In the Northeast, the wampum kept its central place in ceremonies of intergroup kinship affirmation, despite the historic introduction of the calumet ceremony. Pearls could also have played a role in Mississippian ceremonies (BROWN 1989; FOSTER 1988: 24-27; HALL 1989: 255-256). Trading links among the Plateau tribes might have been facilitated by the exogamous order of the societies, systematic intermarriage between tribes creating networks (WOOD 1980: 105). In the Northwest, the potlatch and potlatch-like ceremonies, such as the messenger feast of Arctic and Subarctic groups, enabled exchange in relative peace and created an opportunity to discuss regional relations (BRAUN 1996: 118-119; TOLLEFSON 1995), just like other ceremonies in western North America (JORGENSEN 1980: 275). A comparison of the wampum ceremony described by FOSTER (1988: 24-27) and an invitation to a messenger feast (e.g. CLARK 1974: 237-239) shows structural similarities, such as the sending of the invitation, or the meeting of the coming party and escorting them to the village (see also McWILLIAMS 1991: 58-59, 67-68 for the calumet ceremony; JORGENSEN 1980: 264-267 on «Big Times» in the West).

Games or contests took place at almost every meeting. HOWARD (1968: 61) mentions the South-eastern ball games between rival towns or tribes as having been universal among the peoples well into the historic period. Games in general, notes GILLESPIE (1991: 345), served to mark a disjunction «while maintaining a balanced relationship» between participants. Ballcourts would most often be placed either at the edges of territory, for games with neighbouring societies, or at the center, indicating divisions within the

society (GILLESPIE 1991: 341), but thereby also its unity (CHESKA 1979). Following this, intergroup games show the unity or peace of two participating societies, as both play against each other, but also together.

For the prehistoric Southwest, WILCOX (1991: 122-125) interprets Hohokam ballcourts as sites of a ceremonial exchange network, others, namely Mogollon and Anasazi, marked by great kivas. JOHNSON (1961) names one Mogollon site with both great kiva and Hohokam ballcourt. Such sites could have been meeting grounds between two ceremonial exchange systems. Meeting grounds would fit the pattern of trade centers identified by WOOD (1980: 101) and SWAGERTY (1988: 352); sites such as The Dalles on the Columbia, the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara villages or Zuni pueblo that served as primary exchange hubs. Both also claim the Shoshone rendezvous as an indigenous meeting, but there are doubts (MORGAN and HARRIS 1987: 18-19). If it was an innovation of the fur trade, the neighbouring tribes were in any case up to the concept, as is proven by their quick adaptation. The same can be said of Tadoussac on the St. Lawrence (LIPS 1975). In the dense prehistoric Southeast networks, administrative/ceremonial centers are usually thought to represent exchange hubs.

#### **A North American exchange and warfare pattern ?**

Despite important differences, there rests enough conformity to outline a traditional North American exchange pattern. Correspondingly to «culture areas», one could speak of «exchange areas», regions in which intergroup exchange was made possible by a certain ceremony or ceremonial complex in its variations. While there existed considerable differences between key ceremonies of various tribes, the similarities must have been great enough to allow the ceremony to be recognized. Regional variations in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, for example, could thus indicate different, more closely associated exchange subregions.

All North American Indians sponsored ceremonies to which outsiders were invited, some sacred, some profane. These mourning, harvest, moiety, winter, or other ceremonies served also to create and maintain nonhostile intra- and intergroup contacts. The mourning complex seems to have been especially important; by honouring the same dead together, two groups behave like descendants of the same ancestors and thus become relatives. Exchange ceremonies, if they were ever performed isolated before European reinterpretation, probably evolved as parts of these gatherings.

All the networks were dominated by a local elite. To maintain exchange relationships with different extragroup individuals, themselves part of an elite, actually may have been the *sine qua non* of social and/or political leadership in all North American Indian societies (BRAUN 1996: 105-106; LIGHTFOOT and FEINMAN 1982; WOOD 1980: 105). Besides trying to create stable relations to the human outside environment, exchange also secured the acquisition of exotic goods needed for religious contexts and prestige enhancing of elites, and thus enabled stable

intragroup relations. The individual level of decision-making and/or participation in warfare and exchange probably only diminished with a rising political complexity, i.e. developing chiefdoms. Apart from chiefdoms, however, there was neither exchange nor war between two peoples, just between members of these peoples.

Exchange relationships probably absorbed a lot of pressure, but it was not their cultural function to stop intergroup violence. Warfare was not in any way dysfunctional to exchange, or vice versa. In societies which place emphasis on distinction in courage, do not condemn what is regarded as necessary violence – though killing was far too dangerous to be taken casually – and grant a great deal of individual autonomy, warfare can not be stopped, and indeed is not desired to be stopped. Exchange was the alternative to warfare in identity definition and affirmation, in intergroup as well as intragroup relations. Both were the primary status enhancing activities. Both were by their nature embedded in the same socio-political and cosmological contexts. Violence or ceremonial exchange – these were just the two alternatives of ecological interaction for human intergroup relations.

Returning to Lévi-Strauss, without implying diffusionism, the exchange and warfare-complex could probably be filed right along other numerous, basic American culture similarities in North, Meso- and South America (e.g. BOHRER 1994; GILLESPIE 1991; HALL 1989; WEBB 1989).

#### **Some general concluding remarks**

Following RENFREW (1993: 8-10), even apparently economic gatherings can be seen as «the pretext used to legitimize the social and ritual activities which take place». Doubting to a certain degree «traditional» (but see MALINOWSKI 1992: 516) materialistic and economic models of exchange and, traditionally separately, warfare, and instead claiming exchange and warfare as alternative parts of ecological relations, may – on the first view – not fulfil the request for «more complex, embedded models» (EARLE 1994: 423). However, exchange and warfare in traditional North America were conceptually closely interconnected and can not be viewed isolatedly. Cultural contacts, whether peaceful or violent, entailed so many consequences that they escape classification under a single term. A purely functional explanation along modern European, dichotomous concepts must fail. Just the connotations of «peace» and «war», which to the modern European are mutually exclusive, makes it difficult to understand interactions that work upon both. This does not mean that «we» can not understand what was going on, but we still have to try to «treat the beliefs and values of another man from his point of view» (MALINOWSKI 1992: 518). And while the currently dominant interpretation of the world seems to be the economic one, leaving open whether that can correctly interpret any culture or not, including the dominant cultures of its origin, it can not be applied like that to cultures to which the concept of economics detached from their social embedment was strange and which therefore did not act upon it.

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## Résumé

Les Indiens d'Amérique du Nord pré- et protohistorique avaient des relations complexes avec leurs voisins, marquées simultanément par des actes de violence et d'échange. D'un point de vue conceptuel, ces deux formes de contact étaient des institutions sociales proches. Les actes de violence et d'échange avaient valeur de comportements alternatifs envers l'environnement, ici les groupes de voisinage, et avaient par conséquent des fonctions écologiques plutôt qu'économiques.

## Zusammenfassung

Prä- und protohistorische nordamerikanische Indianer lebten mit ihren Nachbarn in komplexen Verhältnissen von Krieg und Frieden, respektive von Gewalt und Austausch. Beide Formen von Kontakt waren primär soziale Institutionen, was besonders an den Formen des Austausches gezeigt werden kann. Gewalt und Austausch waren konzeptuell eng zusammengehörende alternative Verhaltensformen in der Auseinandersetzung mit der Umwelt, nämlich anderen Gruppen, und hatten somit nicht ökonomische, sondern ökologische Funktionen.

