

Sekani: The Tribalized Band

The Sekani of the north-central regions of the Rocky Mountains have always been few in number. Pushed into their rocky homeland in the middle of the 18th century by the neighbouring Beaver Indians who had obtained European arms from the westward-moving fur trade, they moved into an area that apparently was claimed by other peoples but which was never occupied full-time due to the lack of easily obtained big game. Nonetheless, the Sekani had no choice and fought several battles with the Shuswap to the south and the Cree to the southeast. There are reports in the historical records of conflict with the Gitksan Tsimshian to the west. In fact, the only people with whom the Sekani were at relative peace in the early historical period were the Kaska and Tahltan people to the north.

Establishing a valid claim by travelling over their new homeland was not only complicated by hostilities with neighbouring peoples but also by the economic relationship established with the Hudson's Bay Company. The first European traders arrived in 1805 to McLeod Lake, and a post was later established in northern Sekani territory around 1840 (becoming permanent in 1870; the post was founded because the northern Sekani would no longer trade at Bear Lake in Gitksan country). Temporary 'trading visits' to outlying Sekani groups were begun in the 1820's. The Sekani were continually caught up in a conflict between a desire to obtain European goods through trade, and they could not easily trade with their neighbours, with whom they were on hostile terms, and, on the other hand, with the scarcity of food around the trading post, which made staying around the post for any length of time an insecure proposition. The situation was certainly aggravated by the constant pressure on the Sekani to keep moving around the parts of the Trench region that they claimed as theirs but which the records indicate had been visited and used by outsiders. Occupation was the only effective deterrent to such visits.

The year 1870 presented the northern Sekani with a problem: the temporary trading post around Fort Grahame was made permanent by the Hudson's Bay Company, and the moose population increased. On the surface, this undoubtedly resolved many Sekani preoccupations

with scarce food supplies and obtaining European trade goods. On the other hand, the confluence of these two factors brought the northern Sekani together around the trading post and left the outlying areas of their homeland empty. The trade records immediately note that more and more outsiders were trading at Fort Grahame, undoubtedly drawn by the presence of the moose around the post and the fact that they were not encountering wandering Sekani groups. It was normal Hudson's Bay Company policy to suspend all trade in a region that experienced widespread conflict in the vicinity of the post, and the traders well knew that Indians usually preferred to call a truce rather than lose any opportunity to get trade goods.

We cannot be sure of the exact motives, but around 1870, the year of the founding of the trading post, the Sekani adopted a matrilineal phratic system, and it seems to have died out when the Sekani started making, in the words of the post journal, 'farther hunts' around 1890. Like clan systems found in many traditional African societies, lineality depends very much on organizing people into categories that are abstractly defined, and that do not depend on mundane or practical conditions. Its presence among a North American Indian hunter-gatherer Band is somewhat unusual.

Lineality, for the Sekani, is manifested in a tendency towards exclusivity at all levels: community, patronymic category and family. In the past matrilineality was limited to regulating membership in one of three phratries. Phratries, in other words, only functioned when there was a question of regulating or adjusting membership in specific categories: at birth, marriage and death.

There is no doubt that some of the formal characteristics of interior Athabaskan phratic systems were the result of Northwest Coast influence. The move towards phratic organization can be placed in a wider ethnohistorical and theoretical context of the origins of matrilineal phratic organization on the Northwest Coast of North America and its spread to some of interior groups. The Gitksan Tsimshian particularly influenced the Sekani (see Kobrinsky 1977, Jenness 1931, 1932, and Dyen and Aberle 1974). Despite the obvious influence of the Coastal people, there is little doubt that the Sekani system was attuned to independent ends. There is, for

example, no strict correspondence between the phratic systems of the Carrier, the Tsimshian, and the Sekani (see Jenness 1937:44-46).

As VanStone noted (1974), the Sekani were more aggressive than other Athabaskan groups in making claims of ownership; they were willing to fight to keep outsiders out. Yet they themselves were outsiders to the Trench and sometimes fought to claim land from others. Hence it is not surprising that Sekani territorial claims were expressed more concretely than by mere occupation and were not dependent on some sort of jural expression of ownership before ownership would be defended. On the other hand, their small numbers and the dispersal of the hunting groups rules out the constant use of force as a means of establishing their claims. It could be expected that a more sophisticated ideological stance would emerge under these conditions. Yet it must have been clear to the Sekani that merely developing statements of greater subtlety or ideological complexity would hardly get their claims recognized by rivals. Sekani statements about the ideology of land ownership reflect this ambivalence, as do their actions. Conflict between the Sekani and the Cree, the Beaver, the Shuswap and the Gitksan was the norm rather than the exception in the late 18th and early 19th century. In a word, they can hardly have been expected to successfully resolve the question of ownership once and for all and still maintain the flexibility which an organization based on small and mobile hunting groups gave them. The Sekani solution is a compromise: discontinuous occupation accompanied by the occasional use of force on the one hand, and a definite basis for the emergence of ideologies of ownership and unity on the other. This compromise lies somewhere between occupation and sovereignty, between the purely concrete and the purely legal.

Given their small numbers and a history of troublesome contacts with neighbours with conflicting claims to slices of the Trench, it is not surprising that the Sekani have continually shown concern with regulating access to areas whose occupation is discontinuous. Such marginal areas, more often than not at the periphery of Sekani territory, have naturally invited occupation by foreigners. In Band societies there are always problems of demonstrating ownership by means of intermittent occupation. Despite their newly emergent Tribal identity, the

Sekani were little more than dispersed interlopers in the Trench during the first half of the last century. This made their claims of ownership precarious indeed. After the failed attempt at southern expansion into Shuswap territory, the northern Sekani had reversed direction and were moving northwards. This in turn was temporarily halted by the aggregation of people around Fort Grahame in 1870. This was the turning point, coming on the heels of the problems engendered by strategic marriages which encouraged the Sekani to adopt phratries. The period immediately after the 1870 founding of Fort Grahame, which drew Sekani and outsiders into its immediate area, was a temporary interlude in process of northwards movement which probably began around 1850, when tensions in the western sector at Bear Lake trading post were on the increase.

The evidence which bears on this point is admittedly scant. We know, for example, that the Sekani had unfavourable relations in the south, east, and west. They were relatively friendly with the Kaska to the north, however (Jenness 1937:50); very likely because the Kaska were not middlemen in trade with the Sekani (Allard 1929:24-25). We also know that migrating moose were likely to arrive from the north following the valley formed by the Trench rather than cross the continental divide in the south. At some point moose also encouraged a northern orientation among the northern Sekani, who tended to walk north in their hunts and raft south with their kill. Fourth, we also know that at some point after the 1850's and definitely before 1870 White trappers and prospectors were moving into the area from the south. Some were interested, towards the end of the last century, in using the Trench as a corridor of transport to the Klondike gold fields. Well before this time, however, some were interested in exploring for gold in the area, especially in the Omineca mountain range where gold was discovered in 1868 (Patterson 1969:68).

This push to the North alone did not urge the Sekani to adopt phratries. It is, however, the retrenchment of this northern orientation which was the touchstone for the change. In 1870 an economic problem with political overtones arose which precipitated the adoption of phratries. Between 1870 and 1885 the Fort Grahame Sekani increasingly restricted the range within which

they hunted and trapped. It remains compelling that phratries were adopted at the same time and reached their strongest expression in Fort Grahame rather than in McLeod Lake, since Fort Grahame was the newest post and the tradition of sedentarism was recent. Without movement over the entire Band range there is little alternative to which the Sekani could turn in order to demonstrate the claims of the regional Band over its territory.

Hunting group exogamy is the strongest expression of regional Band unity and is the social counterpart of spatial displacement of the hunting groups. When the absence of movement into one area results in a weakened claim, marriage to other hunting Bands who are more closely linked to such areas will succeed. Yet in 1870 the Fort Grahame Sekani were diminishing their range of movement and increasing the frequency of marriages to outsiders because outsiders were now arriving in increasing numbers in the Fort Grahame region. As the boundary around the hunting group became less significant in terms of exogamy and of membership in the regional Band, the Sekani defined a new context for exogamy. The newly emergent categories of phratric descent bypass those problematic criteria, location and proximity. The major consideration here is the influence of the fur trade which, as Jenness argued and as the Hudson's Bay Company records show, emphasized the independence of the hunting group. Jenness was unequivocal on this point: family hunting territories "have come only in recent times" (Jenness 1937:44). Before this the solidarity of the family as such did not even exist, a point which agrees with observations from the fur traders. There is not much doubt, whatever the source of evidence, that the bureaucratic structure of the fur trade led to pressures on individuals which eroded traditional ties in much the same way as Leacock described (1954) social change among the Montagnais-Naskapi. These pressures undoubtedly were exacerbated by the hunting opportunities offered to the Sekani by the Trench environment. The subsequent development of a patrilineal bias in the inheritance of land use rights by the hunting Band must have been, at that particular conjunction of events, particularly distasteful to the Sekani. In sum, the weight of circumstances all urged the Sekani to re-think the exogamic rule by which the boundary around the hunting groups was inexorably reinforced. Phratries bypassed these problems; or so it

seemed at first. Phratries, like hunting groups, divide people without, however, creating smaller corporate units. They do not constitute people in networks which are automatically imbued with the attributes of corporateness.

I am suggesting that phratries were introduced in part to counter the weakened sense of Band solidarity that resulted from a combination of forces impinging on the political autonomy of the Sekani. It is a perhaps unusual argument, largely because our commonsensical instincts tell us that when people aggregate more, not less, solidarity should emerge. But in the Sekani case, and I suspect in similar Band societies, the exact opposite outcome is engaged whenever people come together beyond a particular threshold. When exogamy is defined in terms of a hunting Band, and a hunting Band implies a common and unique history of occupation, and when it is no longer feasible to imbue the hunting Band with a unique status, then everything that is implied by the hunting Band is also threatened. In this case, circumstances created a crisis which the Sekani met by redefining exogamy so as to re-create wide networks, while bypassing the criteria which were at the root of the problem. In fact, not only were these bypassed, they were, in a sense, inverted. The tangibly limiting criteria of location and proximity became the abstract and, in theory, universally applicable criterion of phratric brotherhood.

In brief, phratries are linked to the emergence of a triad of problems facing the Sekani in the last century. First, they helped regulate trade, and hence were used as a means of gaining access to iron before the Sekani had their own supply. Second, phratries provided a counterpoint of unity to the increasingly divided Sekani, who accentuated the process of fragmentation while attempting to minimize conflict by marriages to rivals from the outside. Finally, phratries allowed a new definition of unity to emerge against the background of a crisis of political self-definition which had been precipitated by the arrival of foreigners in the Trench during a period of relative security and wealth. 'Unity', as I have warned, is just a word; a newly-defined rule of exogamy was the actual mechanism by which people re-affirmed their ties to one another despite divisive economic and political forces. Larger networks were created, and, more important, these

networks could leave in place the other mechanisms by which mundane social arrangements were developed.

We therefore would expect a Sekani myth to be operating simultaneously on several different levels; for example, that of matrilineal phratries *and* incorporative local hunting groups. It could also be expected that a Sekani myth is not so much an exploration of a problem as a charter, since alternative configurations <197> abstract rather than residential definitions of the group <197> are already validated by Sekani political philosophy. In fact, the story of Squirrel Dog's Master, a story collected and translated in the late 1960's at McLeod Lake by D. Wilkinson reveals several such attempts. Note that the English is close to a transliteration from the Sekani and attempts to preserve the original structure by adding English words in brackets where the Sekani has multiple or ambiguous meanings.

Squirrel Dog's Master

Once there was a woman named Squirrel Dog's master. Her dog was named Squirrel. That dog was very smart <197> like a man. They [the family] travelled around with a group of people. One time those people they were travelling with grabbed her younger brother and her older brother. And they stretched them out [in the sun] and left them there to die. After that they travelled on until they came to one place and made camp and slept. After that Squirrel Dog's Master told Squirrel, "Go look for my brothers and chew the ropes off and run back to me again. Bring [take] the things they would need for making fire with, their moccasins, all [the things they need] <197> take all that to them," she told him.

Afterwards, the dog went running back [to the brothers] from there. He kept on towards them until her older brother [and her younger brother]. He chewed the ropes off and ran back until he arrived by his master.

She looked at that thing tied around his neck and said to her son, "They are still alive. [Bring] whatever they need to eat and then their moccasins, their mitts to them."

With things like that the dog ran back again at night towards [the brothers] and arrived and gave them [those things]. From that time until the beginning of Fall it was like that. [The brothers stayed in their camp]. Then before those two brothers went looking for them [those people], they tied a red cloth around the dog's neck and then he ran back and arrived by his mother [master]. His mother [Squirrel Dog Master] looked there [at the dog's neck].

That evening she pretended to cry; then her daughter and her son, her grandchild, all gathered around by her and said, "tell us, what are you crying for?" "I'm just lonely; that's why I'm saying that [crying]. My brothers are dead, that's why I say I'm lonely. Come gather by me and sit by me in my camp," she told them.

They sat by her until daylight. "My son [people], tonight is not going to be alright with you. Those two that were stretched said they are coming back tonight to kill all the people. Stay right here with me until [daylight comes, or until everything is alright]. The thing that was tied around his [Squirrel Dog's] neck was red. I'm going to stick [it] up on top of my camp [on a pole on top of the teepee]. They will know my camp by the red cloth; then they won't kill us," she told them. "Alright," they told her, and they sat there by her until it started to get daylight.

Then people started crying and screaming all around them. People were killing each other. One man ran out with a knife and the younger brother's knife poked him and he called out "*Xuhdalj!* [a proper name; untranslatable], my [younger] brother!" From then on they never heard any more sounds. They killed all the people, but they didn't kill Squirrel Dog's Master, her daughter, her grandchild or her son [son-in-law].

The story begins with an allusion to several structural problems in Sekani society. At the outset, a group is travelling around the homeland, and there is at least a hint that the group in the

story, as in real life, is internally differentiated. On the one hand there is a woman (Squirrel Dog Master), her 'son' (Squirrel Dog), an elder brother and a younger brother and, as we later find out, her daughter and granddaughter. On the other, there are the 'others', whose relationship to one another and to Squirrel Dog Master's network are not specified.

Squirrel Dog is in fact a dog and not merely a name, as the story makes clear. There is no real marker of gender that separates 'master' from 'mistress' in Sekani, and so the heroine's name is not an inversion. He (Squirrel Dog is identified as 'he' and 'my son' by the teller) is "very smart <197> like a man", leaving open the possibility that he has an ambiguous marital or sexual relationship to his 'master', Squirrel Dog Master. Later events leave little doubt that he plays the role of the protector, much like a husband, who is otherwise conspicuously absent from the story. The Sekani, like many northern Athapaskan groups, kept dogs for packing and pulling sleds, but also had a small though otherwise unidentified breed used for warning against attacks by bears. Their Chipewyan congeners are known to have problems classifying dogs in the natural and cultural domains (dogs are like wolves, wolves are like man), though it is not clear that this also applies to the Sekani (Sharp 1976).

Squirrel Dog is also ambiguous by virtue of his name: squirrels are den creatures with limited mobility. They do not travel much, especially in winter, which is the opposite of Sekani practice in the historic fur trade era, in which small residential groups like families would aggregate in the summer and disperse in winter. Since they do not travel, they can hardly be considered a symbol of the incorporative Band, which bases its proclamation of ownership of the homeland on constant movement. It may be, therefore, that by exclusion the imagery of squirrel configures lineality, a theme that definitely emerges later in the story.

The local Band, for that is what this little group is, is travelling when for some unspecified reason the 'others' who are not part of Squirrel Dog Master's group set upon and tie up Squirrel Dog Master's two brothers. The manner of what should lead to their death, exposure through excessive immobility, is also significant since it alludes to a real problem in Sekani society: what

happens to the Band when people stop moving around the homeland? They are abandoned and the others move on, including Squirrel Dog Master and her family.

All the major social relationships mentioned or that can be deduced are skewed: Squirrel Dog Master's 'family' is without a husband at the beginning, and when later we find out that Squirrel Dog Master is an older woman, the significance of her having an elder brother is clearer. This is an abnormal grouping in Sekani terms, since younger sister is the link through which an older hunter would trace his relationship with his partner. The abnormality is heightened by the removal of all the human males in the family. Bereft of protection, Squirrel Dog Master has no choice but to follow the rest of the Band.

Here, the references to social organization are already complex. After having worked and gained experience with partners drawn from his own patronymic network, a young married man will usually select partners from his wife's patronymic network (which is, of course, not his own, since the Sekani follow a rule of patronym-network exogamy). As a man gets older he will once again favour his own patronymic network by selecting junior partners who already have a link with his own patronymic group, most likely his younger sister's husband. In this case, Squirrel Dog Master's elder brother has acted out a tendency inherent in the partnership system that binds men in wide ranging networks, but he has mistakenly activated a tie with his younger sister and not his younger sister's husband. This incongruity only heightens the ambiguous relation between Squirrel Dog and his 'mother' since Squirrel Dog frees the older brother from his bonds, implying that the brother and Squirrel Dog are partners and that Squirrel Dog is indeed the husband of Squirrel Dog Master.

Another incongruity is alluded to at the outset of the story: not only are the two brothers travelling with their sister as a sort of family unit, they are travelling together. That is, the problem of a skewed family unit is underlined by the fact that the two brothers are together and not in separate groups. If they are unmarried, then it is conceivable, in Sekani terms, that they would collaborate. But if they are indeed married (and no wives are mentioned in the tale), there is less likelihood that they would be with their sister and her 'husband', Squirrel Dog (we later

find out that Squirrel Dog Master not only has a daughter but also a granddaughter, suggesting that she was or is married).

As the tale continues, the theme of movement is used to underline the initial problem: the group moves on and instead of the two brothers being killed outright, they are abandoned and immobilized during the summer. This is another ambiguity, since the group would not normally move during the summer months, when people aggregated around fishing lakes and spawning streams. Squirrel Dog Master sends her 'son' to free her brothers, which he does but they do not re-join the group. The freed brothers send a message to Squirrel Dog Master by way of their 'partner', and Squirrel Dog Master continues to support her two brothers with moccasins and fire-starting materials. Hence, two camps are established and the situation remains unchanged until the Fall. This is underlined by the image of Squirrel Dog twice going to the brothers and offering them their moccasins and their twice declining to move. In one sense, the giving of gifts by Squirrel Dog to his 'partners' is a normal incorporative gesture, since men who stand in this relation to one another do collaborate, but not in summer, especially since the theme is one of movement (moccasins) or the lack thereof. Hence, the separation between the two camps and the constant movement between them underlines the inverted representation of Sekani society in the beginning of the tale.

The differences are not only between the tale and everyday reality, however. The two camps are organized differently: Squirrel Dog Master's camp extends 'vertically' over several generations though it has no lateral ties, and the brother's ties extend laterally (two brothers) but not vertically over time. Squirrel Dog provides an ambiguous resolution or counterpoint. When he is with the brothers he is effectively their partner; that is, another 'brother'; when he is in Squirrel Dog Master's camp he is a son, a person with few well developed lateral ties. The constant movement of supplies between the two camps points to a reality the Sekani would instantly recognize as self-evident: neither configuration can survive autonomously for very long. A camp of collaborators who do not have lateral ties with other Band members or who only acknowledge the lateral ties that bind one to the other can only be successful in the short run

(they have no wives). Similarly, a camp with offspring but no lateral ties cannot survive even in the short run (they have no husbands; that is, members of other patronym networks).

When Fall arrives and the two brothers decide to move, ostensibly to their traplines and hunting grounds, they warn their sister before rejoining the group. Once more, ambiguity is the order of the day: the men move, as they should according to Sekani practice, but they want to rejoin the group, which is not normal in the Fall. Yet they must rejoin the group since they are alone and have no wives with them.

There is another disturbing though minor element in the decision to move: they decide to warn their sister through a message carried by Squirrel Dog, which expresses a typical theme in territorial Band society: people should gain knowledge of other's intentions vis-a-vis their homeland but should not give information away about their intentions. But like flesh and blood people, the brothers have no choice: they must warn their sister before they kill everyone in the 'enemy' camp, just as people must form alliances with outsiders no matter how ambiguous these alliances can be. This simultaneously guarantees them security from surprise attack yet leaving the door open to claims by these outsiders who are no longer outsiders but in-laws, partners, and friends. Significantly, both they and their sister acknowledge the need for the warning, because after the long period of separation they will no longer recognize each other. This is underscored by the fact that the attack is in daylight and not at night as Squirrel Dog Master expected. Here it is incorporation that has the upper hand since identity is defined by co-residence and, conversely, a lack of identity by its absence. Again, a real possibility inherent in Sekani social organization is acknowledged: that people who live apart take on the social identities of the groups and people with whom they are living.

Squirrel Dog carries back a badge of warning from the brothers who are planning their revenge. There may be some significance in the fact that the flag used as a warning is red, as was the Canadian flag throughout much of its history (before 1962). Red represents safety in the story just as it once represented relative safety and the final recognition of the Sekani claims to

their new homeland. It was since the Hudson's Bay Company, the RCMP and the Canadian government who put an end to hostilities between Indian groups stemming from land disputes.

Before the final battle, Squirrel Dog Master undertakes one last structural changeover that brings the story to a climax and, incidentally, transforms incorporation into lineality: she gathers together all 'her' people so that they are not wounded or killed in the coming attack.

Significantly, she does this through crying, and 'water' in Sekani thought is definitely associated with summer gathering places. Places such as lakes and 'fishing streams' where people would come after their Fall hunts and stay together for the summer months to trade, re-form partnerships and court.

In the myth, Squirrel Dog Master addresses those around her as 'my son' (*sets^{wh}se* in the original) and yet creates a matrilineal and matrilocal group: the matriarch (Squirrel Dog Master), her daughter and her granddaughter. In fact, she has turned a matrilineal Sekani phratry into a matrilocal group, a possibility the Sekani recognize but disdain, since it exactly re-creates the situation of immobility that led to the problem of unoccupied land that the phratries were supposed to obviate in the late 19th century. Trading records indicate that the Sekani phratries developed into regional Bands. This is a social category with a definite spatial orientation.

At the end of the tale, the local Band is attacked and everyone is killed by the two brothers save Squirrel Dog Master and her immobile camp. Hence the story has not presented a resolution on the issue of how a camp is to be defined. Although the original Squirrel Dog Master contingent is re-united, those within are even more isolated than before without the 'others'. This isolation is underscored by the failure of one of the victims to incorporate Squirrel Dog Master's brother when he shouts, "younger brother" before he is killed. All is silence, and the tale ends.

In brief, the story has explored two 'real' possibilities by which the group defines itself, and like the Sekani throughout their history, the story alternates between one and the other. The fact that Squirrel Dog Master creates a matrilineal group at the climax of the story is an exact recreation of Sekani history when matrilineal phratries were adopted in the 1870s at a time of immobility and arrival of foreigners into the Sekani homeland. The ambiguity of some of the

relationships outlined in the story (between Squirrel Dog Master and Squirrel Dog; between Squirrel Dog and Squirrel Dog Master's older brother) alludes to the basically incorporative nature of Sekani social groups and networks; that is, that the Sekani are not a fully developed Tribal society and so are prey to the same uncertainties and structural problems which mark the Cree and other Athapascan and Algonkian groups.