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Group Identities in the Boreal Forest: The Origin of the Northern Ojibwa

Adolph M. Greenberg and James Morrison

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GREENBERG & MORRISON

GROUP IDENTITIES IN THE BOREAL FOREST: THE ORIGIN OF THE NORTHERN OJIBWA

Adolph M. Greenberg
James Morrison

Miami University
Native Law Centre
University of Saskatchewan

Abstract

This article examines the major hypotheses regarding the migration and emergence of the Northern Ojibwa. Documentary evidence is provided which suggests that groups known today as Northern Ojibwa have inhabited the boreal forest at least since contact. Rather than a migration or general population movement, as Bishop (1970, 1974, 1975, 1976) argues, the "emergence" of the Northern Ojibwa was nothing more than the diffusion of the term "Ojibwa" to ethnic units known at contact under a host of different names—among them Kilistinon or Cree, Monsoni, Muskego, and Gens des Terres.

Introduction

The nature of aboriginal Ojibwa socio-territorial organization is predicated on the location of the precontact Ojibwa "homeland," as well as the specific direction of culture change in Ojibwa groups following contact. For quite some time, ethnologists simply assumed Ojibwa had always inhabited the boreal forest zone north and west of Lake Superior (E. S. Rogers: personal communication). Accordingly, ethnologists had posited a bilateral, flexible, socio-territorial organization for the precontact Northern Ojibwa, which is consistent with cross-cultural knowledge of responses to harsh environmental conditions (Lee and DeVore 1968). This view was first challenged by Hickerson, though indirectly, in a number of papers based largely on historical evidence (1960, 1962, 1966, 1967). Hickerson argues that the Shield region north of Lake Superior was a wasteland without permanent residents prior to the arrival of Europeans in the later seventeenth century (1966:8). He states that this area was first populated by Cree, who, influenced by the fur trade, moved down from Hudson Bay; subsequently it was occupied by roving groups of proto-Ojibwa, offshoots of unilineal descent groups which had until then resided in clan-named villages associated with extensive fisheries along the north shore of Lake Huron (1966:10-11). In the areas west of Lake Superior, these proto-Ojibwa lineage segments had displaced the aboriginal Cree and Monsoni-Cree inhabitants by the mid-eighteenth century (1967:47). By the time the contemporary ethnologists Dunning (1972) and Rogers (1962) arrived to conduct their fieldwork, the "Northern Ojibwa" were residing in small, isolated

conduct their fieldwork, the Northern Ojibwa were residing in small lake-band communities; bilateral forms, Hickerson (1966:2) notes, had replaced unilineal band units.

A similar argument had been advanced directly by Charles Bishop (1970, 1974, 1975, 1976). The first ethnologist to deal seriously with the important archives of the Hudson's Bay Company, Bishop believes that the historical data prove conclusively that the precontact Ojibwa were marginal to the boreal

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