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KUTCHIN POLYANDRY AND  
THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

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**KUTCHIN POLYANDRY AND THE CULTURE OF POVERTY**

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If there is any term in the study of social organization which one is well-advised to use with caution, it is "polyandry." McClennan's hypothesis that polyandry marks a stage in the evolution of marriage, during which matriliney originated, remains a curiosity in the history of anthropology. More modest ethnographic efforts in the identification of polyandry among such marginal societies as the Great Basin Shoshoneans or Eskimos, have been convincingly called into question, and the cautions and analytical clarifications of Cooper, Lowie, Steward, M.K. Opler, and Leach suggest great care in the examination of evidence. Indeed, except for the classic cases--Tibetan, Nair, Nilgiri Hills, Marquesan--the ethnologist is constrained to point out that polyandry is not only rare, but that reported cases may not really be marriage, (Cooper 1941: 52-53; Lowie 1948: 115), or may not be plural (Steward 1936).

Despite these reefs and shoals, I have been impelled by the evidence to recognize the occurrence of polyandry among the Kutchin Indians of the western Subarctic at the period of European contact, and its recurrence in recent years among Kutchin who have come to live in the shack-town periphery of certain northern Canadian towns.

It is proposed here to touch on ecological and structural factors preconditioning both types of occurrence and, further, briefly to relate these to the study of common themes in the life of the lower classes in diverse

complex societies; in other words, to relate them to what has come to be called "the culture of poverty." This phenomenon, I have come to view, if you will pardon a lapse into Greek, as *ἄγασ* as well as *πράγμῳ*. The people involved, the poor--like all other people for that matter--may be seen as actors as well as the acted upon, struggling as well as suffering; the carriers and creators of culture as well as the victims of circumstances;

As a former welfare worker myself--in California, as a matter of fact--I recognize the shack towns of the north, social problems similar to those of deprived people elsewhere. However, the value for social theory in recognizing these similarities is diminished by disregard of what I have called the *ἄγασ* aspect of the thing: the differing ways in which peoples seek to cope with the difficulties of life and derive some satisfaction from life.

## II

The Kutchin are an Athapaskan-speaking people living on both sides of the Arctic Circle in western Canada and eastern Alaska, who live by hunting, fishing and trapping for the fur trade. Attention is focused upon the eastern Kutchin, those of the Mackenzie River drainage. They reside at



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present in four main concentrations. Two of these are a century old: Fort McPherson and Arctic Red River, trading post settlements. The other two, which I shall call towns in contrast with settlements, are located just outside of the traditional Kutchin habitat. These are Aklavik, established in 1915, and Inuvik, wherein effective residence commenced in 1957. In both of the towns, eastern Kutchin share residence with Eskimos, halfbreeds, and a number of whites. Whites dominate community life.

On the basis of genealogies collected in 1946-47, of Anglican parish records studied at the same time, and of informants' statements in 1938-39 and 1946-47, there were, at the time of the Peel River band's conversion to Christianity in the 1860s 66 identifiable unions. Of these, 54 were monogamous, four polygynous, and eight polyandrous. Other cases were cited for still earlier generations.

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Roman Catholic parish records for the Arctic Red River band examined in 1962 indicate four polyandrous unions in the 1960s. The total number of marriages was not ascertained, but as the band was no more than a quarter

\*The approximate number of Kutchin living in and around these communities at present is given below. There is a considerable interchange of residence among these localities in all directions except between the two traditional settlements. The population of Inuvik is particularly fluid.

Fort McPherson	550	Aklavik	150
Arctic Red River	85	Inuvik	65

of the size of the Peel River group, the proportion of polyandry would seem to have been higher.

None of the plural marriages involved more than two co-spouses.

There was, and is, little restriction imposed by eastern Kutchin social structure upon the choice of mate for any form of marriage. There are three matrilineal sibs, theoretically exogamous; these are now almost obsolete, but even at the period in question, one-third of the marriages occurred between members of the same sib. Choice of mate was not prescribed by kinship; e. g. cross cousin marriage, levirate, sororate.

There is, however, a general, though not prescriptive, marriage preference along other lines. Within the rather narrow limits of a subarctic hunting economy, the Kutchin maintain wealth-ranking of bilateral extended families and, in an attenuated degree, of stem-kindreds. Although one finds no social stratification, no considerable range in standard of living, the Kutchin differentiate among themselves the rich and the poor.

A favorite--indeed, an ideal--Kutchin marriage is one uniting a "rich" and a "poor" person. One hears this over and over again in Kutchin recitations of their own and their families' histories, and it is a frequent theme in historical lore. Six weeks ago, in the beer parlor at Inuvik, I was again reminded of the strength of this sentiment, when an old friend, a successful trapper, expressed his satisfaction at having married "a very poor girl."

From proto-contact times until as recently as the 1940s it has been customary for a high-ranked family to adopt, or to assume a benevolent surveillance over, a "poor" but promising boy as a future spouse for a daughter. The youth was "promising" in that he showed indications of attaining to the well-defined Kutchin ideals of manhood: he was industrious, even-tempered, and the apparent possessor of "luck" or power. Hopefully, he was also docile.

Among the Kutchin--as among other northern people--there is a tendency for kin-groups to attract and hold to themselves as many able-bodied men as possible. Higher-ranking kin-groups have been the more successful in achieving this end; to the Kutchin, being "rich" and "having many kin" are synonymous.

Higher ranked groups have even been able to abrogate the rule of matrilocality and keep their sons. Toward the same end, cicisbeism was practiced among the highly polygynous chiefs of the western Kutchin: that is, by allowing henchmen access to their junior wives the Yukon chiefs strengthened bonds of allegiance and increased the numbers of young men in their kin-group.

Eastern Kutchin polyandry appears to have originated in two types of circumstance. In one type, a high-ranked family chose for an elder daughter two poor boys instead of one. In the other type two poor youths

taking the initiative, clubbed together as it were to win a highly esteemed young woman. In Kutchin lore an important part is played by the outstanding woman: clever, good-looking, indomitable, and somehow connected with wealth.

All but one of the reported polyandrous unions were non-fraternal. The non-fraternal co-husbands addressed each other as cà, which means: "male affinal age-mate of my generation with whom, and with whose family of procreation, my family of procreation and I commonly share residence," usually translated as (man speaking) "my brother-in-law."

During much of his adult life, a Kutchin man works and travels in close cooperation with one or another of his brothers-in-law, sharing shelter and meals with him and his family, sharing proceeds of the hunt, and responsibility for the support and protection of dependents. Yet the brother-in-law is also an object of almost institutionalized distrust, a distrust which is reflected in the colloquial Kutchin term for wolverine: naxwihâ, 'our brother-in-law'. There is a regular word for wolverine: neht'ro. The colloquialism half-jocularly, imputes to the brother-in-law, the crafty, voracious, hateful qualities implied, to any northern trapper, by the image of that animal.

Nevertheless, brothers-in-law do choose to trap and live together, and the frictions that result seldom cause a permanent rift in relations.



Brother-in-law is a joking relationship; as such, it is expected to combine friendship and aggression.

The modal tie between brothers-in-law camping together is marriage to a pair of sisters. This was observed still to obtain at camps along the Peel River this past summer. In the polyandrous family, the pair of sisters has, as it were, coalesced into one and the relationship of co-husbands was evidently modeled on that between brothers-in-law. There is some indication that, during the eight months of winter, the co-husbands took turns on the hunt and thus alternated cohabitation with the wife. How this was regulated when both husbands were present, I do not know, but it may be noted that in traditional Kutchin culture, there were many restrictions on sexual intercourse in marriage, and that the wife, in most situations, held the initiative as to sex activity.

All of the firmly evidenced polyandrous marriages were broken up by missionary activity. There was no senior husband, since the men were age-mates who married simultaneously. I suspect, although informants were not clear on this point, that such marriage in earlier times tended to resolve themselves into two monogamous ones as the 'poor but promising' young husbands rose in status. Almost all status among the Kutchin, including wealth-ranking, is largely achieved (Slobodin 1960). There is scant mention of polyandrous unions involving middle-aged or elderly persons.

In summary, eastern Kutchin polyandry (1) occurred between a woman and two men of lower status; i. e., wealth-ranking; (2) were non-fraternal in all but a single reported case, the relationship between co-husbands being structured along the lines of the partnership of age-mates monogamously married to sisters; (3) in some cases constituted one of the social mechanisms whereby young men were attached to a high-ranked kin-group; (4) represented one type of social and economic adjustment to the periodic absences of husbands; (5) at the same time were, as a marital arrangement, facilitated by the alternate absences of co-husbands.

### III

Most of the foregoing information was obtained a good many years ago. Revisiting eastern Kutchin in 1962 and 1963, I could learn little more about old-time polyandry except as it occurs in the oral literature. Even in former years, when it was possible to obtain a fairly clear picture of proto-contact polyandry, my informants, most of whom are now dead, displayed little apparent interest in the subject.

However, although surviving eastern Kutchin have little interest in or knowledge of pre-Christian polyandry, the fact is that some young Kutchin are at the present time involved in polyandrous unions.

Modern Kutchin polyandry does not occur in the predominantly Indian settlements of Fort McPherson and Arctic Red River, but in the newer towns

of Aklavik and Inuvik, where Indians and Eskimos constitute the lowest class in a markedly stratified social order, dominated, especially at Inuvik, by Euro-Canadian purposes and activities. In these towns, poverty associated with social class in the sense experienced in complex societies is an emergent phenomenon.

In referring to a "lower class" in the larger northern towns, I am oversimplifying for the sake of exposition, since, as Canadian observers have noted, this sector of the population is far from uniform socially or culturally. Nevertheless, certain striking social phenomena appear within it. One is the matrifocal (R. T. Smith 1956; M. G. Smith 1962: 16) or woman-headed (Adams 1961: 43) household. In September-October, 1961, J. R. Lotz found, in the tents and unserviced shacks adjacent to the serviced area of government housing in Inuvik, out of forty Kutchin, Eskimo, Metis and white households, five headed by a woman living alone. (1963). Two years later, I noted eight out of thirty-seven households headed by a lone woman, while in others a man was temporarily resident. The number of these which I happened to note seems not very significant, since the incidence of such attachments fluctuates violently. Most of the women, both those living alone at the time and those with men, had had children by several different men.

The "serial polygyny" reported for Caribbean societies, and found in some "components" of many city populations, is a marked feature of native family structure in Aklavik and Inuvik. I do not know why it is not called "serial polygamy,"



since from the woman's point of view it is "serial polyandry."

Alongside the cases of serial union, and sometimes involving the same persons at other periods of their lives, polyandrous households exist in the Kutchin population of the two towns. Much remains to be learned about them, but the six cases which came to my attention have the following features in common:

1. All but one are non-fraternal.
2. All involve young adults. The oldest male participant is 37; the oldest woman is in her early thirties.
3. In three of the households, the men call each other "my brother-in-law." The fraternal co-husbands call each other "my (elder or younger) brother." I did not meet the men involved in the other two cases.
4. Of all but one case, it is stated that the men joined the woman simultaneously.
5. In all cases, the major occupation of at least one of the men is trapping. In three cases, both of the men are trappers.

All of the men have been absent from the household in employment for periods ranging from one month at a time to over a year. The trappers, full- and part-time, are absent on several occasions during the year for one or two months at a time. The absences of the wage-laborers have been less regular, but longer.

6. Although all participants occupy low status within the national society, the polyandrous women enjoy high esteem in terms of the native value system;

they approximate the "clever woman" traditionally associated with polyandry.

On the question of the relative wealth-ranking, in Kutchin terms, of the participants, information obtained so far is incomplete. Two women of "wealthy" kin-groups are living with rather "poor" men, but there seems to be little difference in the ranking of other women and of the men attached to them.

The factors involved in traditional eastern Kutchin polyandry were permissive rather than compelling. The polyandrous household was one of several types responding to the needs and possibilities of Kutchin life. These preconditions still exist; one of them, indeed, has become more compelling in recent generations and especially in postwar years. This is the lengthy absence of the husband from the household. Throughout the Canadian subarctic, the trapper's family has tended less and less to accompany him to his trapping area ( v. inter alia VanStone 1963). The household, even in a stable monogamous marriage, is woman-headed for a part of the year. One adjustment to this is that the woman simply remains alone with her dependent children. Another--and this is the most common at Fort McPherson and Arctic Red River--is that she forms during her husband's absence part of household along with her parents, or a married sister, or a sister-in-law, or her female 'partner'. Another adjustment is that she takes a lover, in a relationship that may be sporadically renewed during the husband's absences.

This is found not--to my knowledge--in the "Indian" settlements of Fort McPherson and Arctic Red River, but in Aklavik and Inuvik--as well as in many other white-dominated towns of the Northwest Territories and the northern prairie provinces. This type of situation is sometimes indistinct from, and sometimes develops into, that of the woman with dependent children but without a more or less permanent husband.

One reason why this is more common in the white-dominated towns than in the more traditional settlements is the fragmentation of kinship structure in the towns. From the point of view of the young mother, in the town she frequently has no reliable person or family with whom to share a household. Moreover, there is no one important to her in the immediate vicinity, to discourage or to disapprove of behavior which in the more traditional society would be obviously disruptive socially. The kind of public opinion that is important to the woman, including that which is formulated and enunciated by Christian religious institutions, carries much less weight in the town than in the settlement. This, of course, is a characteristic urban-rural contrast.

Even where it is relatively stable, the husband-wife-lover arrangement is not polyandry. The men involved do not live together; the husband does not openly recognize the other man's role in the household and his right to a share in authority. In the six cases of modern polyandry, on the other hand, we find coresidence, commensality, and mutual recognition of rights.

Modern Kutchin polyandry, then, like its pre-contact counterpart, may be seen as one of several types of adjustment to economic uncertainty and the



lengthy separation of spouses. The modern phenomenon is found in the class-stratified towns rather than in the more traditional settlements for the same reasons that "serial polygamy" are distributed in this way, so found, but I feel that it could not have re-emerged under modern conditions but for the preconditioning factors noted in association with pre-contact polyandry.

#### IV

We have noted two aspects of poverty in complex societies: pathesis and agon--deprivation and reaction--which stated in broader terms, as the necessities of the human condition and as human creativity, are aspects of all human life. One of the conditions of Kutchin life, as for that of many peoples, is severe limitation of resources. Among the products of human creativity are the varied methods of coping with this condition.

An important function of marital, household, and kin-group structure among such peoples is the distribution of these limited resources. This was true of traditional Kutchin family and household arrangement. In pre-contact society, the social mechanisms whereby the wealthy secure subordinate personnel, the marriage of rich and poor, the cicisbeism surrounding the polygynous western Kutchin chief, all serve not only to enhance the power and authority of a kin-group; but they also contribute, as mechanisms for redistribution, to the welfare or survival of the community. The Kutchin are aware of this. In their culture a person of rank is not only a leader and a model; he (or she) is an agent

for distribution. The latter function is integral to leadership, as, in recent years, some Kutchin leaders have discovered when, governed by their understanding of individualistic economic precepts learned through intercourse with the whites, they have found themselves no longer leaders.

The same function is served by the marital and household arrangements among the contemporary Kutchin town-dwellers. This function is, it would seem, as universal in the lower classes of complex societies as it is in non-industrial societies. If, however, the function, and the necessity which it meets, are universal, the specific mechanisms which serve this function are diverse. Polygyny and concubinage among high-ranking men is widespread, though not universal; cismarriage is of more limited distribution; polyandry is notoriously rather rare.

It is important to recognize the universals and near-universals among the sub-cultures of the deprived. A too great emphasis upon these, however, may result in doing less than justice to the complexity of cultural forms within and among the lower classes of various societies. In his practice, the anthropologist is very unlikely to fall into this error. Certainly Oscar Lewis, whose name has become associated with the concept, "culture of poverty," does justice to complexity in the rich material of his Mexico City studies (1959, 1961). Yet, as the concept diffuses to a practitioner anxious to find a theoretical directive for policy and method, it may, and in fact it does, lead to the simplistic fallacies of which the sociologist Hyman Lewis has warned (1963).

Commenting on a study of social change in a Yukon-drainage Kutchin community, Honigmann notes "the instability of marriage ... and 'lax' premarital sexual standards that verge on promiscuity." He asks whether these are products of social disorganization (perhaps better stated as reorganization) or are they local expressions of a traditional northern Athapaskan patterns...?" Opting for the latter explanation, he suggests that "Northern Athapaskan culture, it may turn out, gives individuals great leeway with respect to sex as well as a large share of individual autonomy". But this is a hunch, one that requires careful testing and more precise formulation..." (1963: 5-6).

Employing a more structural approach than that implied by Honigmann's comment, this paper has suggested, as do his remarks, that a concern with contemporary welfare problems widespread similarities in the condition of the underprivileged need not obviate, and in fact should stimulate, research into the ways in which this majority of humans adapts and uses, to meet its needs, its immense fund of pre-existing cultural forms.