

Cree: social organization

(! additional data: read Turner's piece on Cree on the course website !)

General

The Cree subsist on hunting, gathering, and fishing. In the summer they convene in large camps for communal activities: marriage, assigning hunting grounds, etc. In the winter they disperse for hunting and operate in small bands. The Cree live in politically autonomous, semi-nomadic bands of 30 to 100 (up to 200) that move across the band's range, which is fairly large: 1 person per 200 square miles (cf. Australia: one person per 35 sq. miles). The range is wide and variable enough to provide for the self-sufficiency of each band (cf. Australians that need to rely on other groups). However, occasionally severe conditions cause hunger. The ecological considerations of the subarctic forest region — the presence and amount of game and other resources — seem to determine the semi-nomadic lifestyle of Cree bands that are rather uniform in organization and very mobile. A decline in food resources makes the band move to another territory. However, there is usually enough resources on one territory for a long period of time, unless some drastic change occurs. Although there is no strict sense of land ownership, some sense of territory does exist: your territory is “where you trap” with other people. Especially clear are the boundaries between one band and another.

Social structure

The Cree system is based on production group unity. Structurally undifferentiated production groups use incorporative, inclusive principles of recruitment. However, there is a basic structural principle of organization that can be generally described as dualistic: all people are viewed as either insiders or outsiders.

Domestic level. A domestic group consists of parents and their children. Both parents are considered a unit (bilateral descent, “they become one body,” a type of incorporation). Their children are also a unit; they do not belong to either mother's or father's group (as, e.g., in Australia).

Brotherhood level. Brotherhood, or a small hunting group consisting of two-three families is the basic building block of the Cree social system. The backbone of the families within the brotherhood are either brothers or a father and sons. Within the brotherhood, the people of the same generation happen to be either siblings or parallel cousins (see Tables 1 and 2), or sometimes their “equivalent” (children descended from a variety of relatives on the mother's and father's side in the same generation, i.e., quasi-siblings). These generational groups working together (co-producing) are called *nisim / nistes* (“brother” / “sister”). Thus *nisim* are created both through sibling ties and through marriage bonds (see tables). The *nisim* are unmarriageable, thus making brotherhoods exogamous. *Nisim* can also be described as the people who produce together at some point in time. The ties established during co-production between the *nisim* continue later

on in life when they start having families: the *nisim* become hunting partners and form further brotherhoods. Brotherhood ties are determined to a great extent by co-production. After marriage, children live with their parents or nearby, in order to have access to equipment. Patri- or matrilocal residence of spouses depends on practical needs of production (thus the Cree are *ambilocal*).

Spousehood. Wives come to brotherhoods from other brotherhoods. It often happens that the offspring of those other groups and brotherhoods (potential wives) are cross-cousins of the members of the original brotherhood (see Tables 1 and 2). This group of cross-cousins or their “equivalent” (children in the same generation descended from that other group that provides wives for the original group) are called *nitim* (“sweetheart”) and are marriageable. These are people who have not produced together with their potential marriage partners, but can potentially produce. *Nitim* is not a prescriptive alliance category (as, e.g., in Australia), but an open-ended one that designates anyone within the band who is not part of one’s brotherhood, and therefore is a potential co-producer. Thus outside of the brotherhood, the choice of spouse is not strictly determined and is based on purely pragmatic considerations. “Outsiders” are viewed as potential producers and can be incorporated into the group through work or marriage association, without any prior kinship ties (as in Australia).

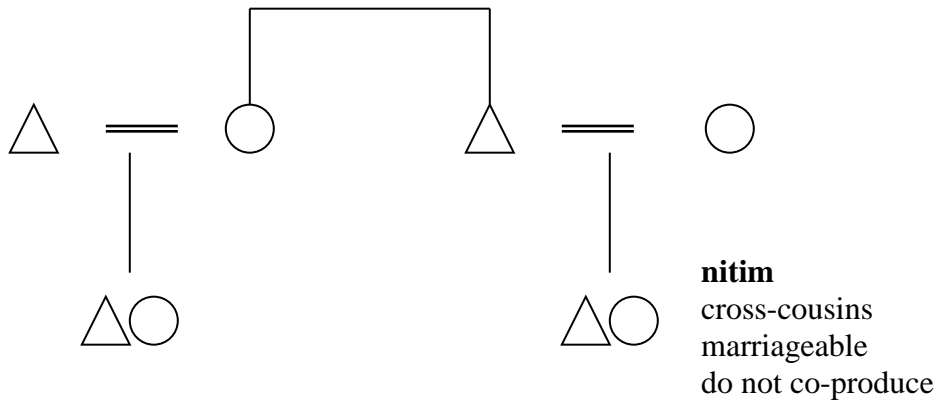
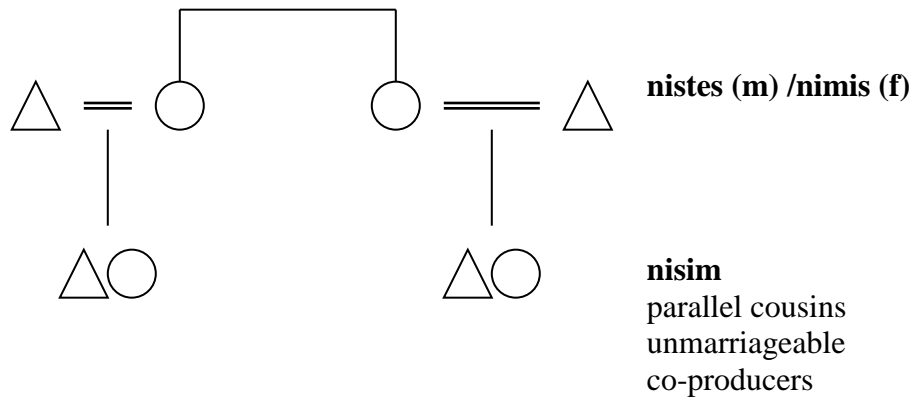
Band level. The band is formed out of the brotherhood-spousehood system. It has some territorial association and consists of fellow producers and potential fellow-producers. There are ties at the domestic, brotherhood, and band levels, but no ties to outside bands (as in Australia). The bands are agamous: there are no strict rules regarding exogamy or endogamy.

The main “logic” of Cree social organization.

The structure of Cree social relations is determined by the pragmatic considerations of hunting and trapping within a certain territorial range. All people are divided into two main categories (“affinal dualism”): those who produce or have produced together (the insiders, *nisim*, unmarriageable, since they already produce together, in order to avoid the limit to band’s expansion); and potential co-producers (the outsiders, *nitim*, marriageable; cross-cousins fall into this category simply because one is not likely to co-produce with them). The purpose of marriage and alliance is to create new production ties and draw more people into common production

Thus one can describe this social system as *incorporative*: the main idea is the unity of the people who live and work together, all is aimed at the idea of co-producing and incorporating more co-producers. For this reason all are divided into co-producers and potential co-producers.

The Cree system of social organization. Table 1



The Cree system of social organization. Table 2

