

TRADE IN THE PLAINS: AFFLUENCE AND ITS EFFECTS¹

Polly Pope, Graduate Student
University of California, Davis

For the purpose of seeing how external culture contact may have acted as an initiator of change, it is proposed that an examination of Plains Indian society be made beginning in historic times at the onset of white and Indian trade relationships.

The impetus for this inquiry is Eggan's observation that "tribes coming into the Plains with different backgrounds and social systems ended up with similar kinship systems," a statement that he expands by going a step beyond the kinship system, to "similar social structure" (Eggen 1955:519). In the course of the paper it will be pointed out in broad terms where there are recurrent phenomena in the social structure and the role that trade played in bringing about these similarities.

Economists sometimes accuse anthropologists of putting on theoretical spectacles when it comes to interpretation of markets, money and trade, but I do not believe that Plains Indian trade can be legitimately tagged as either reciprocity or redistribution functioning in a cultural backwater.

Historical data indicates that in the early days of the fur trade, the late 17th century, the custom was for an Indian village or a band to trade regularly with one concern. Hudson's Bay Company, chartered by the English, soon came to the realization that a continuing and a prosperous business rested on nonextinction of fur bearing animals. Therefore, the company decided on a policy which left trapping to the Indians. Hudson's Bay also maintained a standard price for pelts and payment was in either cash or credit. There were to be no under the counter dealings and no liquor was sold--at least not until the company found itself competing with independent traders. These policies appear to have made for good trading relations. Indians with furs to sell took them to a post, where one of the chiefs was delegated to handle the business transaction.

A somewhat similar policy was instigated by the North West Fur Company in that they did no trapping and sold no liquor. However, the concern differed from Hudson's Bay in that some of the founders were independent French traders who sought out the Indian in his village or band. The French, even more than their competitor, acclimated themselves to Plains life. Many took Indian wives and frequently resided with them in the village.

Trade flourished for a time with a minimum of trouble and the trade network extended as far south as the Mandan villages. Although this was American territory, it was not until 1817 that the United States attempted to exclude foreign trappers. A decision by the government in 1796 that closer relations should be maintained with the Indians became manifest with the establishing of trading posts--posts which proved to be highly ineffective (Chittenden 1954:Vol. I).

The government posts extended no credit, sold no liquor, and being loyal to home production handled only American-made goods. By this time the

Plains Indian was a discriminating consumer accustomed to English woollens--blankets and materials of better quality. Cultural complexities began to compound with the arrival of the lone American who came to the Plains not only to trade but to trap, an encroachment recognized as causing no small amount of disruption among the Indians.

It is judged that many a shrewd trader took cognizance of the political structure in the bands in that he preferred to deal with an established chief, but if none were available (some chiefs already had made alliances, some were indifferent to trade) this did not deter the trader. The trader took the situation into his own hands.

Exemplifying this kind of action is the report of a L. R. Masson, trader, who said in reference to the Blackfoot: "After making the father a chief, you are sometimes obliged to do the same with his son in order to secure his hunt" (Ewers 1955:43).

Richardson in Law and Status Among the Kiowa Indians reports the Kiowa split in two factions, one led by a man named Baitalyi, who refused to traffic with the whites, and another faction, ". . . led by Kicking Bird, who played along with the whites . . . and built himself up into the chief mediator" (Richardson 1940:102).

Traders able to extend their influence to United States government officials could split authority in a pseudo-legal way by establishing what LaFlesche calls the "paper chiefs." It is these paper chiefs which divided the Omaha. LaFlesche says: "Medals were hung about their necks . . . and efforts were made to keep them loyal to the trading companies. . . . This outside pressure on tribal affairs complicated the life and thought of the people and disturbed the ancient forms and authority of the chiefs" (Fletcher and LaFlesche 1905:631).

Culture contact in the early days of the fur trade apparently reinforced the political authority of the legitimate chiefs, those who held office on the basis of inherited right and ability. But the more intensified white culture contact did affect political structure, mainly because the desire for trade goods overrode loyalty to legitimate chiefs. The unauthorized chief with access to Euro-American wares could be assured of a following.

Another observation--this one on the Sioux--comes from Catlin who, while visiting at Fort Pierre in the late 1830's, states that the Sioux are divided into 42 bands, each band being subordinate to a head chief, but he adds: "This subordination, however, I should rather record as their former and native regulation . . . since the numerous innovations made amongst these people by the fur traders . . . soon upset and change many regulations, and particularly those relating to their government and religion" (Catlin 1926: 235).

The intensity of this contact for the Indians, the Comanche being an exception, is evidenced in the steady influx of American trappers and traders, the representatives of large fur companies, the innumerable men from small concerns, and the Pedlers--independent French and English traders.

French traders wishing to do business with the Missouri River tribes seldom had to improvise on the political situation. One route to trade could come by being allowed to join a clan where, as a member of a kinship group, the trader became a participant in a network of trade relations. Other times marriage to an Indian woman assured him of trade with her kin. No one could claim after reviewing Plains history that the kinship structure displayed elements of fossilization sometimes attributed to aboriginal society! In fact the malleability of kinship resulted in some unusual developments.² But trade had more far reaching affects on the marriage structure.

Catlin commenting on polygyny in the Plains says it is brought on by the desire for luxuries of life and he relates that: "Amongst those tribes who trade with the fur companies, this system is carried out to a great extent, and the women are kept for the greater part of the year dressing buffalo robes and other skins for the market; and the brave or chief, who has the greatest number of wives, is considered the most affluent. . ." (Catlin 1926: 133-134).

Women's activities in prehistoric times included tanning hides but not until the introduction of trade from outside sources was there the excessive demand for hides. It obviously became imperative for men with rank to increase their labor supply, but how? There was no pool of workers from which a man could hire individuals. Consequently the man who sought workers, in this case women, must have another solution; and on the Plains women were obtainable through marriage or by capture. In the latter situation it was probably wiser to marry the women, thereby gaining their loyalty.

Besides tanning hides, the additional females were needed for household maintenance since a successful man must also be a hospitable one. Guests must be entertained and the poor who appeared at the door must be provided for.

Technological changes freed Plains women from some duties. Women no longer had to participate in the buffalo hunt; iron kettles could be substituted for pottery; knives and axes of Euro-American origins were more efficient devices for many tasks; and supplementing this was the fact that a number of women cooperating in work could be more efficient. One Blackfoot chief pointed out his eight wives could dress 150 skins in a year but a single wife could only dress 10 (Lewis 1942:39).

The surveyor David Thompson who visited the Blackfoot in 1787 reported that a man might have three or four wives and a few men had six (Thompson 1916:347). On the basis of these figures Lewis (1942:38) concludes most men probably had one or two wives. By 1840 there appeared to be a definite rise in number of wives according to figures quoted by Lewis (1942:38-39). He says the genealogies he collected in the course of field work among the Blackfoot are in agreement in that they bear out increases recorded by Grinnell for that time. According to Lewis a Blackfoot in 1840 could have six, eight, or as many as twelve wives. The rise continues into the 1870's when the figures show some men claimed as many as twenty or thirty wives. While these statistics may be correct, it is quite possible that they are representative of only a few rich Blackfoot. Nevertheless the picture is one which shows a steady increase in polygynous marriage and this increase in number of wives

shows a correlation with a rising trade in buffalo hides. The date set for increased buffalo hide trade in the United States and Canada is 1833.

Polygyny, however, never reached the proportions in the Southern Plains that it did in the North. Among the Kiowa, Mishkin reports on the basis of a sample of 25 males that five possessed three wives; the remainder had either two, one, or none, circa 1830-1880. For the Comanche it is stated that, "The number of wives might run anywhere from one to six or more" (Wallace 1952:138). Although the Kiowa were more interested in trade than the Comanche, neither tribe seems to have had as many contacts with traders as did the tribes in the north. And finally both Kiowa and Comanche had a much more accessible supply of horses (from the south) to draw upon. Thus by comparison with the Northern Plains it can be seen that as trade declined in importance, so did polygynous marriage.

The increased desire for wealth helped bring about this growth in polygyny, which, in turn, gave rise to more changes within the framework of marriage.

Catlin reports that one Ponca man married four girls on the same day. All were between twelve and fifteen years of age. Although there was some consternation when four sets of parents arrived on the scene at the same time, parents kept their word and each father received two horses, a gun and tobacco (Catlin 1926:239-240).

Among the Mandan, Catlin says, some girls married between the ages of twelve and fourteen and others as early as eleven (Catlin 1926:137). His account covers the period between 1832 and 1839.

Denig, writing about the Crows in the 1850's states: "Consequently if such a thing as an honest woman can be found in this tribe it is one who has been raised under the husband's own care . . . and taken for a wife at the age of 10 to 13 years" (Denig 1961:153).

Thompson states that in 1787 Blackfoot girls were marrying between the ages of sixteen and eighteen while the men were twenty-two or older (Thompson 1916:350). However, in the latter half of the nineteenth century girls could marry between the ages of ten and sixteen and the men were at least thirty-five (Lewis 1942:40).

These are a few instances but a change in the social patterning is obvious. Brides were evidently quite often very young women--husbands were considerably older. Marriage for the men was deferred to a time when a man had accumulated property, meaning horses and trade goods--both of which had much appeal to prospective fathers-in-law. It was this need for horses which leads directly to the next topic, warfare.

Descriptive accounts of early Plains warfare are few. One source which ethnologists rely on is the report by Thompson who relates an old Piegan chief's story of a battle between his people and the Snakes in 1730. Warfare at that time consisted of tribes meeting, displaying their strength by dancing and parading, and ultimately doing battle, a battle in which there was a minimal loss of lives. Thompson presents data which indicate the

Piegan maintained both a civil and a war chief through the early 1800's. The civil office was one which was inherited while the war chieftaincy rested on prowess in warfare (Thompson 1916:346-347). With the introduction of the horse it seems only logical that this pattern of warfare would alter.

The horse served as an ideal vehicle for small raiding parties, those groups organized by individuals for the purpose of stealing horses and whatever plunder happened to be available. The logic of the raid lies in the fact that males could increase both their wealth and prestige. Horses signified buying power. With horses a man might obtain trade products and wives. The raid also performed another service. A poor man, provided he was skilled, could organize a raiding party; thus in an open society like the Plains almost every man was a war chief in his own right. There was less room in the political structure for a single war chief, only in the event that some form of tribal war was planned. Warfare turned into an individualistic type of exploitation, but a more costly one in terms of mortality because it hinged on an unending series of raids.

The desire for horses, for more wealth, altered Plains warfare first in that the smaller war party replaced the large body of massed forces; second, in that the increased number of raids made for a great number of war casualties; and third, the authority of the war chief was weakened and in some cases disappeared as individuals planned their own war exploits.

In the examination of the mechanics of raiding, the interdependence of social institutions comes sharply into focus. If, for example, one considers how raiding affected marriage structure it is clear that a high mortality rate among males served to reinforce polygyny; second, that material gain from the raid gave men more purchasing power. A man could afford more wives; polygyny received further reinforcement.

The interdependence of these units--raid, trade, and horses--becomes more and more obvious; it is a topic which will be discussed in more detail shortly, but there is one more area for investigation in the social structure. There is apparently a relationship between the economic and the ceremonial or religious; that is, the latter felt the impact of trade.

Seemingly as trade and wealth became more important in the Plains this, in turn, affected the mode of behavior in ritual transactions. The sacred medicine bundles tended to take on secular qualities in that frequently the bundle became regarded as a sound purchase. Lowie says: "To buy a bundle was a safe investment, for it was readily negotiable and the new buyer was under pressure of public opinion to offer at least the price exacted at one time from the seller" (Lowie 1963:129).

This transition from the sacred to the secular is illustrated by Blackfoot attitude. In 1833 they are reported to have been most reluctant to transfer a bundle. This is also the date for the beginning of buffalo hide trade among the Blackfoot. - If a bundle were sold then the price might come to nine horses; however, in the period from the 1850's to the 1880's, bundle prices ranged from 30 to 60 horses (Lewis 1942:44-45).

Among the Mandan the "rights in the medicine bundle could be sold four times by the original owner" (Bruner 1961:224). The Crow too were willing to sell their medicine bundles and if a man had failed to have a vision he need not give up hope--providing he had the price. Power could be purchased. Lowie states the idea that: ". . . compensation should be paid for the benefit of a vision was, indeed, so firmly rooted an idea that some ceremonial privileges had to be paid for even if a son got them from his own parent" (Lowie 1956:249).

From the economic standpoint the bundle possessed three possible values: (1) It was a good investment since it could be sold again. (2) Bundle possession assured the owner of fees because individuals in a community would pay to have ceremonies performed. (3) Ownership of a bundle gave prestige.

On the Southern Plains money also brought power. For the Kiowa, where the population was divided into four groups ranked on a basis of inherited status, those who belonged to the first order, the "distinguished or fine persons," could go off to raid without a shield or medicine. However, those with wealth usually bought a shield which already possessed supernatural power or in some instances the "fine ones" paid to have medicine performed. Poor men got their protection by having a vision. In time a great amount of ceremonial paraphernalia was for sale on the Plains; no one questioned its efficacy.

The fact that a supplicant in his prayers often would make a contractual arrangement with the supernatural was a fairly commonplace phenomenon in many places. The prayer of a Kansa war captain below needs no interpretation and it is presented because it does seem to be particularly representative of the Plains attitude toward religion: "I wish to kill a Pawnee! I desire to bring horses when I return. I long to pull down an enemy. I promise you a calico shirt and a robe. I will give you a blanket also, O Wakanda, if you allow me to return in safety after killing a Pawnee" (Lowie 1963:185).

Throughout the Plains one sees this complex of raid, trade and horse surplus--a continuing circle of events. The man who possessed many horses could do more trading but in so doing he depleted his supply, consequently he had to obtain more horses in one of two ways: (1) by raiding or (2) by trading. Although raiding implied danger, it meant prestige. There might be a chance to count coup and if a man was both skillful and fortunate he got horses at no cost. Why should he pay when raiding was such an acceptable practice.

Although the raid, trade, horse complex is spoken of as a generality for the Plains it should be noted that each component in the complex may vary pending the area or the tribe under discussion. Among the Comanche raiding and a surplus of horses predominated in the scheme; trading was of secondary importance since the Comanche so frequently just appropriated the goods they desired. By contrast trade was of much greater import among the village tribes on the Missouri River. But as a phenomenon there is an over-all cohesiveness which may well fit into what Kroeber terms a "systemic pattern" defined as: ". . . a system or complex of cultural material that has proved

its utility as a system and therefore tends to cohere and persist as a unit . . ." (Kroeber 1948:312).

He states that the pattern fundamentally limits itself to "one aspect of culture" such as religion or economics; however, it is not limited to one culture or area. The distinguishing feature is the "specific inter-relation of their component parts" (Kroeber 1948:312-313). Two further qualifications are that the pattern becomes more evident when viewed historically and that it, so to speak, "dies a hard death." In retrospect--raid, trade and horses proved their utility as a system holding Plains culture together. When the pattern ceased, the disintegration became apparent.

Conclusively then one can point to the media of Euro-American trade which is seen as a factor in precipitating change in the political structure of many Plains tribes. First, legitimate chiefs in a number of cases found themselves sharing authority with the unauthorized but ambitious chiefs who could attract a following on the basis of trade. Second, the desire for trade and horses on the part of many men affected the marriage structure, especially in the Northern Plains where polygyny increased and there was the trend for women to marry younger and to men older by far than themselves. Third, warfare patterns altered with the raid replacing the massed battle, consequently the war chief's authority diminished and in some cases the position disappeared. Fourth, religion lost some of its sacred qualities in that in time, with increased trade and wealth, ritual objects and ceremonies could be readily purchased.

These are the responses of a changing Plains society, one subject to an intensive culture contact situation where the desire for trade goods in part brought about these similarities in social structure.

ENDNOTES

¹This paper was presented at a meeting of the Southwestern Anthropological Association at San Francisco State College on March 27, 1964.

²Bruner describes a father-son adoption ceremony which was set up to enable members of "warring tribes to trade in peace." A fictitious father in another tribe would adopt a Mandan as a son, then in the event of war both parties could be granted sanctuary for the purposes of trade only (Bruner 1961:201).

REFERENCES

BRUNER, EDWARD M.

1961 Mandan. In *Perspectives in American Indian Culture Change*, Edward H. Spicer, ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

CATLIN, GEORGE

1926 *North American Indians*. Vol. I. Edinburgh, John Grant.

CHITTENDEN, H. M.

1954 *The American fur trade of the Far West*. Vols. I and II. Stanford, California, Academic Reprints.

DALTON, GEORGE

- 1960 A note of clarification on economic surplus. *American Anthropologist* 62:483-490.
- 1961 Economic theory and primitive society. *American Anthropologist* 63:1-25.

DENIG, EDWIN THOMPSON

- 1961 Five Indian tribes of the Upper Missouri, John C. Ewers, ed. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press.

DODGE, RICHARD I.

- 1959 The Plains of the Great West. New York, Archer House, Inc.

DRIVER, HAROLD E.

- 1961 Indians of North America. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

EGGAN, FRED, ed.

- 1955 Social anthropology of North American tribes, 2nd ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

EWERS, JOHN CANFIELD

- 1955 The horse in Blackfoot Indian culture, with comparative material from other western tribes. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 159. Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office.

FLETCHER, ALICE C. and FRANCIS LaFLESCHE

- 1905 The Omaha tribe. Bureau of American Ethnology, 27th Annual Report. Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office.

GREGG, JOSIAH

- 1954 Commerce of the prairies. Max L. Moorhead, ed. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press.

HERSKOVITS, MELVILLE J.

- 1952 Economic anthropology. New York, Alfred A. Knopf.

HOEBEL, E. ADAMSON

- 1960 The Cheyennes; Indians of the Great Plains. Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology. New York, Henry Holt and Co.

JAELOW, JOSEPH

- 1951 The Cheyenne. Monographs of the American Ethnological Society, Marion W. Smith, ed. Vol. XIX. New York, J. J. Augustin.

KROEBER, ALFRED L.

- 1948 Anthropology. New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co.
- 1963 Cultural and natural areas of native North America. 1st pub. 1939. Berkeley, University of California Press.

LAVENDER, DAVID

- 1954 Bent's fort. Garden City, Doubleday & Co., Inc.

LeCLAIR, EDWARD E., Jr.

- 1962 Economic theory and anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 64: 1179-1203.

- LEWIS, OSCAR
 1942 The effects of white contact upon Blackfoot culture, with special reference to the role of the fur trade. Monographs of the American Ethnological Society, Vol. 6. New York, J. J. Augustin.
- LOWIE, ROBERT H.
 1935 The Crow Indians. New York, Holt Rinehart & Winston.
 1963 Indians of the Plains, 1st pub. 1954. New York, American Museum of Natural History.
- McDERMOTT, J. F., ed.
 1940 Tixier's travels on the Osage prairies. Translated by A. J. Salvan. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press.
- MISHKIN, BERNARD
 1940 Rank and warfare among the Plains Indians. Monographs of the American Ethnological Society, Vol. 3. New York, J. J. Augustin.
- NEWCOMB, W. W., Jr.
 1950 A re-examination of the causes of Plains warfare. American Anthropologist 52:317-330.
- RICHARDSON, JANE
 1940 Law and status among the Kiowa Indians. Monographs of the American Ethnological Society, Vol. 1. New York, J. J. Augustin.
- TEIT, JAMES A.
 1928 The Salishan tribes of the Western Plateaus, Franz Boas, ed. Bureau of American Ethnology, 45th Annual Report. Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office.
- THOMPSON, DAVID
 1916 David Thompson's narrative of his explorations in Western America, 1784-1812. J. B. Tyrell, ed. Toronto, Champlain Society.
- WALLACE, ERNEST and E. ADAMSON HOEBEL
 1952 The Comanches, lords of the South Plains. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press.