TRIBES AND CHIEFDOMS OF THE NORTHWEST COAST: THE TSIMSHIAN CASE

Donald H. Mitchell

Of the several schemes devised to classify cultures and societies, the one of greatest interest to recent students of cultural evolution is that developed in the late 1950s by Marshall Sahlins and Elman Service. It primarily scales society on the basis of some fairly subjective measures of increasing societal complexity -- and particularly with respect to the degree of political integration. The four classes -- band, tribe, chiefdom, and state -- are reasonably well entrenched in the anthropological literature.

That the framework is imperfect is obvious to anyone attempting to classify specific societies. Most notably, it suffers from a lack of precision in delineation of the levels of complexity as no scoring guidelines have ever been articulated for the assessment of what are obviously polythetic sets. Yet the scheme does provide a useful shorthand for the description of societies at different levels of complexity and one can feel comfortable with even the intuitive scaling of a great many societies. Perhaps its greatest importance is that it continues to draw attention to the fact that societies do differ in structural complexity and to keep before us the problem of how these differences relate to the general evolution of culture.

Northwest Coast societies have proven particularly fractious subjects for this classification process, but after Service (1963) the practice has often been to treat them as chiefdoms and to

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Donald H. Mitchell, Department of Anthropology, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia.

characterize them as therefore anomalous among hunters and gatherers. That the nineteenth century Northwest Coast society examined in this paper was unusually complex will not be denied, nor will the view that it and neighbouring Northwest Coast societies were unusual among hunters and gatherers in this respect. But I will argue that this particular society was not at the chiefdom but the tribal level of social complexity and that to characterize it as a chiefdom is to misinterpret its significance for an understanding of cultural evolution.

Tribes and chiefdoms may be distinguished from each other on a number of bases. Although no one has thought these through with the kind of rigour that would be necessary to permit their use in any unequivocal classification of societies, a compendium (see Miller, Appendix A, this volume) is offered, drawn primarily from three sources: Service's 1962 *Primitive Social Organization* and his 1963 Introduction to *Profiles in Ethnology* and Sahlins' 1968, *Tribesmen*.

The data discussed in this paper really only bear on leadership and polity but these would seem of primary importance in evaluating the position of a society on this particular progression of social elaboration. With respect to these characteristics, the tribal and chiefdom levels may be distinguished as follows:

1. For the chiefdom there is an identifiable and continuing office of chief while for tribes there is not;

2. Chiefs have authority over other lesser leaders including some in other communities and, in effect, this means two or more communities come under the control of the one leader who is chief. In contrast, leaders of tribal communities have authority over only their own group -- and this group itself may be only part of a village community.

THE TSIMSHIAN CASE

In the nineteenth century, the Tsimshian occupied a portion of the northern mainland coast of British Columbia centering on the Skeena River, but extending from the Nass River south almost to Milbank Sound. They were comprised of several named village groups or "peoples" who were designated by such terms as Kitkatla, Kitlans, or Kitsumgalum, each term usually meaning the people of some place or area. Each group had several seasonal villages. There were slight variations, but in general many went to the mouth of the Nass River in the early spring for eulachon, to their winter or "principal"

villages for a while after that, then to their salmon streams, and finally back to their winter villages. The groups that are here referred to as the Metlakatla Tsimshian followed this pattern. In summer they were ranged along the lower part of the Skeena River, in winter and late spring they were at Metlakatla Pass and on the coast north of there at a small bay known to the traders as Pearl Harbour, and in early spring at the Nass collecting eulachon. For much of the year the 10 groups that comprised the Metlakatla Tsimshian formed a kind of loose aggregation of settlements.

The Tsimshian have all the trappings of perfectly good tribes. They have matrilineages, including a sort of maximal lineage referred to as a "House," clans, and phratries -- and cross-cutting these are the dancing or performing societies, or "Secret Societies" as some of the literature would have it. There are certainly enough sodalities to indicate we are not dealing with band level society.

Prominent men within a village community are ranked with respect to one another and for inter-village affairs there appears also to have been a ranking of the individuals who participated in potlatches -- in this case, perhaps just lineage heads.

The contention that there was a Coast Tsimshian chiefdom is based mainly on the suggestion that one of these high ranking lineage heads achieved a measure of dominance over the members of lineages other than his own and even over the occupants of villages other than his own. And it is generally considered that he managed to do this through gaining control of the trade between the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Simpson and groups living up the Skeena River.

During a recent study of the Hudson's Bay Company post journals for Fort Simpson it became obvious to me that they contained information on this "chief," Legaic, and his trading activities -- and while the journal entries do not seem to throw much light on the process by which Legaic gained his monopoly, they do tell us something about when it happened and something about the extent of political integration that ensued.

The period covered by these historical sources runs from 1832 to 1866. Fort Simpson was founded in 1831 on the Nass estuary then moved in 1833-34 to its present location on Tsimpsean peninsula near the entrance to Portland Canal. This was a few miles from Pearl Harbour, where some Metlakatla Tsimshian groups wintered.

By 1840, many, but apparently not all, of the Metlakatla Tsimshian had shifted their winter quarters to the post and by 1852 (perhaps earlier) all seem to be residing at Fort Simpson. That

place continued as their principal settlement for at least a decade until, in 1862-63, the missionary William Duncan took a considerable number of them back to a portion of Metlakatla Pass.

So the post journals provide a reasonably good view of Metlakatla Tsimshian activity for the period 1834-1863 and more remote observations for a few years before and after this. However, we should remember two additional characteristics of that view:

1. It is incomplete in the sense that some journals are missing. We have entries for the periods 1834-42, 1852-53, 1855-59, and 1863-66.

2. The observations are of quite uneven quality. Over this period there are at least seven writers and they differ in their interests and powers of observation.

Despite these problems, the journals do permit examination of several questions concerning Legaic's trading activities and the extent of his control.

1. *What do we learn about the native trade with the interior?*

There are no entries referring to the trade at all until 1836 but from that date on they continue until the journal series ends in 1866. Over that 30-year period are references to trips during 13 of the 18 years for which there are journals. These 13 years record at least 32 different trading excursions up the Skeena River. Seven refer only to Tsimshian trading; ten identify the traders as Gispaxlaots -- the local group to which Legaic belonged and of which he was head; and 15 make specific reference to Legaic as the trader.

In the late 1850s the names of two other individuals turn up. One whose name appears twice, is a Gispaxlaots; the other, whose group affiliation has not yet been discovered, appears once and that is as someone who accompanied Legaic on a trip.

It seems clear that Legaic and his group, the Gispaxlaots, did monopolize the Skeena River trade and that they did so for at least 30 years. Indeed, on October 28, 1840, the post journal makes specific reference to this exclusive privilege: "A canoe with 4 Indians of Illegaich Gang (no other gang of the Chym. tribe being allowed to trade there) arrived from Skeena River." Within that 30-year period the number of voyages recorded reaches a broad peak in the late 1850s although Legaic's own trading trips were consistent at one or two a year from the start.

2. *What do we learn about the question of "chief-ship"?*

From 1832-1839 the sources do not single out Legaic for special attention although he is obviously an important leader. A few examples from the post journals and related documents should make this clear.

1832 -- In Donald Manson's account of his exploratory trip from the Nass to the Skeena he refers to "the two Pearl Harbour chiefs Neeshoot & Cacus" and on his return journey mentions his visit to "all the chiefs" at Pearl Harbour.

March 15, 1835 -- "The three Chiefs started and all their followers left today."

March 2, 1836 -- "Gave a suit of clothes to each of the Chiefs Cockas, Noshoot & Illegayauch."

April 1, 1837 -- "One of the Chymsyan chiefs ... "

June 20, 1838 -- "... one of the chief's Neeselkameek..."

The 1840's record is fragmentary and although Legaic's name comes up, it is never in a context that tells us anything about his status among the chiefs.

From 1852-63 are many references of the sort just quoted.

January 21, 1852 -- "... every chief has left the village ..."

January 30, 1852 -- "All the chiefs still away ..."

May 30, 1852 -- "One of our chiefs arrived back from a war excursion."

June 2, 1852 -- "Nistowack one of our chiefs ..."

February 13, 1853 -- "All the Chimshian chiefs were present."

March 18, 1853 -- "All the chiefs but *one* are still here."

November 19, 1855 -- "One of the 'Kit-lan' chiefs gave a feast of rice to all the 'upper ten.'"

January 10, 1857 -- "Most of our Big Chiefs started in Eight canoes for Sebassa."

March 24, 1857 -- "Camp quite deserted of Chimshians except the Chiefs who are *all* here and will remain."

During this period there are also references that indicate Legaic had a different status than just "one of the chiefs."

August 11, 1852 -- "'Ligyeek' or 'Ilgeth' the principal chief here headed the party."

March 26, 1857 -- "Ilgeth the chief is the most persevering beggar in camp."

During 1859 and 1860 P.N. Compton was at the Fort as a clerk. Much later, in 1878, he provided H.H. Bancroft with a description of the Tsimshian which refers to the Tsimshian at Fort Simpson being divided into 10 tribes each under its own chief, but all owing a species of allegiance to the head chief of the Kishpocholots (Compton 1878:98).

After 1863, Legaic had moved to Metlakatla with Duncan and the two references from this period are from 1866 when there is mention of "The Methlakathla Chief Legaic" (October 15) and "The Chief Legaic" (November 17).

When these and other entries are examined, they disclose a pattern to use of the term "chief." Between 1852 and 1859 there are 30 times that the words "chief" or "chiefs" are used. Twenty-five are of the "a chief" or "one of the chiefs" kind and five of the "the Chief" of "principal chief" kind. All five of the latter refer to Legaic and he is never referred to as just "one of the chiefs." I would conclude that in the period 1840-1851 either Legaic's status changed or else his high rank became apparent to the Hudson's Bay Company traders and I would incline towards the former view.

3. *How much authority did Legaic, and the other Tsimshian "chiefs," have?*

A few incidents and observations from the journals are offered in chronological order. Afterwards we can see what impression has been gained.

July 1, 1837 -- Some Kygarnie (Haida) arrive. "The Chimsyans to whose camp they very foolishly went, felt disposed to take their goods from them and give them just what they chose in return. Legegh done all he could to prevent any disturbance but like all the rest of their chiefs he has no influence among them when interfering with their own interest."

May 30, 1838 -- Five canoes of Tongass arrive. Some Tsimshian go out to meet them to invite them "to their huts." Some other Tsimshian fired on the two parties. Shots were returned by Tongass and by their Tsimshian hosts.

June 20, 1838 -- Shakes visits Legaic; and Quatke, a Stikene chief, visits Neeselkameek or the Crippleman, "chief" of the Kitlans. "When Quatke was here last spring he had a quarrel with Elgegh's people and threw away a large copper a valuable article amongst them, which was reckoned a great insult to Elgegh whose people were now threatening to take vengeance but the above chief interfered and no molestation was offered."

May 26, 1839 -- A number of Skidegates who have been visiting Neestoyogh's people are preparing to leave. "Numbers of the Chimsyans who were friendly to them mixed with them and assisted them to get their canoes in the water and loaded but before they had all embarked they were treacherously fired upon by Neeselcameek's people." In this incident, too, Tsimshian end up firing at Tsimshian.

October 22, 1855 -- Edensaw of the Massets arrives. "He had just landed at 'Ilgeths' house when Cush-what took an axe out of the canoe and split it. Ilgeth could do nothing to stop the fellow... The Chiefs here nowadays have little or no influence and the bad characters do as they like."

July 5, 1856 and October 30, 1856 -- Two incidents of Gispaxlaots and other Fort Simpson Tsimshian firing at one another. In each case Legaic and the other "chief" settle their difficulty.

July 3, 1858 -- "Two canoes of Skidagate people arrive at 'Nistoacks' camp, 'Cascas' people fired into them." Nistoack's people returned the fire, "both parties now went into the 'fun' with a will."

November 28, 1863 -- "Neshwakes (Nistoacks) chief of the Keenahtoicks (Ginadaoxs) came round to the various camps to invite the chiefs to a feast, his canoe was fired at by the Kishpocolats." A two-hour battle ensues.

January 19, 1865 -- "The cannibal chief died at 10 a.m. upon which a great shooting match took place between the Kishpocolots, Kittandaws and Killowtsaas."

These data provide no support at all for the notion that the Metlakatla Tsimshian had achieved a higher than tribal level of political integration. The so-called "chiefs" -- even Legaic, the "principal" one -- appear in these incidents to have very limited authority. And when you find sub-units of the putative chiefdom allied with outside groups and both in armed conflict with other members of the "chiefdom," the case for its existence is exceedingly thin.

CONCLUSION

It seems undeniable that Legaic and his people -- the Gispaxlaots -- had some kind of exclusive right to carry the fur trade up the Skeena River and into the interior. It also seems obvious that Legaic was or became the individual of highest rank among the Metlakatla Tsimshian lineage heads. In this sense he was the "principal chief" of the Tsimshian although he may not have attained this status until the 1840's.

But the contemporary observations of Fort Simpson traders make it seem most unlikely that Legaic headed a political unit that could in any useful sense be termed a chiefdom. He ruled over no group but his own, and even there his hold seems fragile. In short, there was no chief and I would argue that the Tsimshian case provides us with no evidence for a Northwest Coast chiefdom.