

WHO CARED FOR THOSE WHO COULDN'T CARE FOR THEMSELVES IN TRADITIONAL NORTHWEST COAST SOCIETIES?

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Abstract/Resume

The author reviews the possible ways in which Aboriginal people of the northern Northwest Coast ensured the maintenance of dependents. She examines in particular how people who could not fully look after themselves could survive.

L'auteur revoit les moyens possibles que les aborigènes ont employés pour assurer le maintien des personnes à charge. Elle examine en particulier comment les gens qui ne pouvaient pas se soigner complètement pouvaient survivre.

Many define our humanness by our long period of dependency, which allows us to adapt through learned behavior rather than strict biological programming. Human offspring are born less mature than those of other primates and few, if any, other species give extended care to the sick, disabled and the elderly. But certain aspects of our caregiving are not fully understood: the current life span of some 75 years for women, for example, a full 30 years—the equivalent of a generation—after her ability to contribute physical offspring, is a mystery which sociobiologists have yet to explain.

Besides being a defining feature of our humanness, the care of dependents is an important social issue everywhere. In our own society the longer life span has brought with it a number of problems. There is the by now familiar squeeze on middle-aged women who must care for their elderly parents and pay college tuition for their children at the same time. Here the prolonged dependence of the young in modern society, a result of their need to master specialized skills, has come into conflict with the lengthening of the life span itself. Yet these problems may not be unprecedented. Other societies have had dependents, both old and young. Did they experience such squeezes? If so, was the timing in the life cycle the same? Probably not, especially in societies with the extended rather than the nuclear family. What if any light does the experience of other societies shed on these kinds of problems?

Information is not lacking on a number of topics that would be needed to explore dependency in other societies—child rearing has long been a standard topic in anthropology and there has been a boom recently in studies of the elderly—but these are usually kept separate. And, despite their “coverage” in the ethnographic literature, key pieces of information are missing: illness is studied more often in terms of belief systems than biological outcomes; who really cares for the ill and how many there might actually be under Aboriginal conditions are not often described. We have little information about how long those who are unable to take care of themselves actually survive. The various pieces of available information haven’t been put together so that we know how much of a dependency burden any preliterate society can or does bear and how that fluctuates over time. Without this measure we are unable to compare the magnitude of dependency in different societies, nor can we explain why their ways of coping might differ.

Part of the reason may be that dependents were all but invisible to early travellers and even to more recent ethnographers because they usually didn’t participate in public life. And, the contact with outsiders these cultures

have had disrupted the Native arrangements on just this issue: diseases came and went, new technology altered the terms of the people's subsistence, and sometimes changes in the economy made it possible for certain categories of people who had once been dependent to care for themselves for the first time.

In what follows I sketch a framework for considering these questions in traditional Northwest Coast societies. There is so little information available on many of the important topics that I have decided to combine information on the three northern matrilineal societies with my own field experiences to put together a synthetic picture. My aim is to articulate the kinds of ethnographic questions that must be answered if we are to understand how these societies dealt with people who could not care for themselves. The first part of the paper discusses two of the important questions: the nature of the caring unit, including its degree of flexibility, and the growth rate. Societies that are growing rapidly have more dependents than those which are more stable. Then, I discuss three types of dependents in more detail: the disabled, widows and the aged.

The Northwest Coast contrasts with the "lower hunters" (e.g. Howell, 1979) in ways that should have made it easier to care for dependents. The abundance of the environment, the more sedentary lifestyle, the ease of transportation (by water, not by foot), and the existence of stores of food, all spelled fewer occasions when dependents would have been left behind than among "lower" hunters; and when this happened the food stores could have tided them over. But along with these amenities came a status system that had the potential, at least, for a degree of both paternalism and exploitation that was not possible among those "simpler" hunter-gatherers. Thus a discussion of these problems among Coast societies highlights important comparative dimensions.

Part One: Basic Issues

Ideals and Behavior

It is always important to compare what a culture says it does with what is actually practised, even more so in the case of dependents. In our own society, at least, we are well aware of the discrepancy between our feeling that we need to care for unfortunate people, and our behavior towards them. No American is very proud of the "street people" or the large number of older women living below the poverty level, who are practically invisible and who, themselves, make valiant efforts to remain so, given our own cultural ideal of independence. Here, then, we must make particular efforts to reach beyond the platitudes ethnographers generally collect to find the reality of

the situation. But, we lack the most basic statistics we would need: the age structure of traditional Northwest Coast societies. It is this from which demographers calculate "dependency ratios" by making assumptions about the age at which people start to contribute economically, and the age at which the economic contribution ends, anyone younger than the first age or older than the last being counted as dependent.

By the time they were studied by anthropologists at the turn of the century, Northwest Coast societies had experienced extreme depopulation. There was also probably sterility caused by venereal disease following on the episodes of prostitution described in the literature. Then came the measles epidemic of the 1920s that was quite deadly, and after that an enormous rise in population producing an age structure rivalling in its youth the most exploding underdeveloped countries (Duff, 1964; Stearns, 1981). Thus, very low dependency ratios in the early part of the century were followed rapidly by very high ratios in the second half of this century, that is, a large number of dependents, the burden for whom was lightened somewhat by the existence of family allowances and other programs, but which nevertheless was a great one, falling largely upon young parents.

One of the adaptations to this which I saw in the field some 20 years ago was for the dependents to live together. Elderly couples would live in their own homes, rather than in those of their children, but they would not live alone. A grandchild would live with them, doing the necessary chores they have always done on the Coast, chopping wood and hauling water. This not only helped the elderly, it also spread the multitude of children around, lightening the load for the parents. Old age payments and perhaps family allowances must have played a part in this system. Without these government payments these elderly could not have afforded to maintain separate households, let alone buy their own tombstones, which many had under their beds.

This example shows that the fate of the elderly has quite a bit to do with what happens to the children. And we must include others, such as orphans, widows, and the incapacitated, as well. They all have to be considered together in the same "dependency budget." There are only so many people available to care for those who cannot care for themselves. There have to be compromises and tradeoffs and, possibly, ways people can avoid disaster in their own lives by looking ahead and "investing" wisely in certain obligations.

The example also alerts us to influences on these arrangements that may be hidden from the casual observer, such as governmental subsidies and the like. We cannot really understand the treatment of dependents unless we understand the broader budget of the society, and the require-

ments for independence. But these are some of the most difficult of issues in Northwest Coast ethnography.

The Caring Unit

I propose that the burden of caring for dependents fell upon the traditional unit which the Gitksan called the House.¹ The House was thought of as stable, even eternal, the basic building block of the larger village where it was located. There was at least one, perhaps more, physical structures per House in the village where it “belonged,” i.e., had its place in a set of Houses on its “side.” But its members did not always live there. In fact, since children lived with their fathers when young, and the Houses were matrilineally assigned, children would have had to have moved from their father's to their mother's at some time. And, since women moved to their husband's House at marriage, they might never live in their own House.

The physical structure was a certain size and this set limits on its demographic extent as well. If we believe reports about families in corners, it could hold some 4 to 6 “families,” which, if they had some 6 individuals each, would mean some 25 persons. There are provisions for houses splitting and building new houses out behind, but my impression is that such branch Houses would be the same size as the old. This is perhaps something archaeologists could enlighten us about.

The existence of provisions for fission meant that the Houses did not stay at 25 always. Indeed it would be surprising if a unit that small could remain in perfect balance. The right to live there was based upon inheritance, but there would be fluctuations caused by the demographic lottery. But, if these branch Houses were the same size as the original ones, it would not be easy to use them to adjust to small fluctuations. It would not pay to build one for just the seventh family. How many excess would there have to be, and what alternatives were there to building the new branch House?

We need to know the minimum number needed to maintain a House. There is the wood to heat it, the labor to build it, or to pay the other side to build it, food for the people who lived there, and some Chief willing to lead it, in the case of Houses built behind, in a subordinate capacity to the original Chief. There would also be the prestige goods needed to be recognized as Chief, even of a subordinate House. Would such a man rather be a subordinate Chief, stay in the main House, or perhaps live with some other relatives?

The ethnography makes much of a Chief's obligation to “feed the people,” a mandate to care for dependents. Reciprocally, accepting the food meant accepting the authority of the Chief whose food it was. Each House

owned hunting grounds and fishing spots and the Chief acted as the resource manager. In any case, there was little food available for people who had no access to resources owned by a House. I was told they could troll for salmon in front of the village but this option seems, for whatever reason, to have been secondary to the setting of nets at the owned fishing spots. So if a person needed food he would have to depend upon a Chief. To be sure, hunters from outside the House could hunt on its land but they had to get the Chief's permission to do so and would owe the skin (which would be exchanged at potlatch feasts) to the House Chief.

While food also came into the House from relatives living elsewhere, the majority of subsistence needs were probably met from the resources owned by the House in which a person lived. So in assessing who was actually dependent upon whom it is important to know where people actually lived. The rules are clear enough: a man lived in his father's House until puberty when he moved to the one in which he would inherit his name, his mother's brother's House. But, we always have had a view of the society biased towards the Chiefs, for very good reasons. The classic ethnography was done during a time of depopulation when people moved up to fill vacant chiefships and few commoners remained. Also, ethnographers had to talk to Chiefs or they would lose the respect of their hosts. In any society it is the etiquette of the higher class that is presented to an outsider.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Chiefs lived in the Houses to which they belonged. Gitksan told me they had to or they couldn't be Chief and there were only a few cases of Chiefs who did not live in the villages where their Houses were located when we were there 20 years ago. Those who did not were gossiped about, though they used their dependents as their proxies, usually their elderly mothers who were living in the village.

But, what of the commoners? Here there was more flexibility. While there was a provision for fission, there was no provision for House fusion. This encouraged Houses which were on the verge of dying out to adopt new members. So instead of being the 7th or 8th family in a big House, they could be the 3rd or 4th in a smaller one in, for example, that of their father, but the right to stay there lasted only until his death.

They could also live uxorilocally in their wives'—soon to become their children's—House, especially if the children were to inherit the Chief's position later.² A commoner was not supposed to marry a Chief so it should not have happened that a 7th ranking man in a large House would have children who would inherit a chiefship. But, given the demographic lottery, it must have happened. If he were from a large family with many brothers, even if his father were Chief, he might never become one himself, yet he might look like a good match for the scion of a small House on the other

side, or perhaps his children would be unexpectedly thrust forward on the early deaths of their cousins.

As Adams described elsewhere (1973), people would be passed from large to small houses much as the grandchildren were passed around on the Reserve 20 years ago. This, I suggest, held for the traditional period as well, so that some of those being fed had more choices than would seem to be the case from the published ethnography.

Many of those passed around were not strictly dependents, but able bodied men. And this, I suggest, was their major asset, for this was a labor poor society. People have said that the limit to the amount of food that could be gathered was set by the labor force not the resources themselves. Chiefs always wanted people to work for them. Certain resources were all the more abundant for being harvested. And an old Chief could not physically fend for himself, let alone finance the required feasting, without help.

The able bodied mature workers were in demand but they were not really independent. They needed a House to live in, a name to call their own (owned by the Houses), and a set of resources to exploit. We were told that the families in a House queued up by rank and each took turns at the salmon nets. It probably does not do to be 7th in line. The 7th may get only one day at the nets, while the first in line gets two: another reason for them to "shop around" for the best deal. This is not very different from a worker who needs an employer in our society. That employer takes care of many of his dependency needs, from health insurance to maternity leave. The House Chief functioned in much the same way. He owed the people who worked for him help if they became disabled.

But, how much help would a commoner really get if his most valuable resource, his labor, could not be relied upon? de Laguna (1972) talks of the "dried fish slave," a derogatory term for someone who was lazy whom other people had to feed. Clearly everyone was supposed to be working and a person who was helped too often was in danger of being called a slave. He might even have become one: if he had the bad luck to have been captured in war he might not have been ransomed back. This would be the ultimate kind of vulnerability.

In short, I think there was a gulf between commoners and Chiefs, which widened when a man was unable to work for a long time. A Chief would always be cared for, if only by some sychophant who wanted to become the next Chief, or because people would be afraid of his spiritual power to harm them. But a commoner might not be cared for except by his wife and children, if they were old enough. A commoner with children too young to work might be attractive to a Chief if the children, when grown, would work for him but we don't know whether the Chief would have the labor available

to take on the burden in the meanwhile. Children did do useful work themselves, besides hauling water and chopping wood, and they were probably also useful in processing food and producing other items, but most Chiefs would have their own children, or slaves, who could perform these duties. He could fulfill his chiefly duty to take in dependents only if he were successful in holding a labor force of contributors recruited from his sons and his nephews. Commoners from the Houses with Chiefs who had already attracted a following would be cared for; but those from Houses which had dwindled would probably have little recourse.

Clearly there were some people who were more expendable than others. The very notion of chiefly authority, bound up as it was with feeding unfortunates, requires a group of unfortunates to whom chiefly largess really made a difference, but we have not seen this group ethnographically because of the depopulation that had occurred before the first ethnographers came. Perhaps we will only see them now that the population has come back to its original size, or surpassed it. But today there are "safety valves" for these people: they can leave the villages, they are supported by the government, and their children are healthy and long lived. Rather than waiting in line for a turn at the nets, they can work for wages.

How Fast Were Northwest Coast Societies Growing?

The welfare of dependents varies with the rate of growth in the society as a whole. If, for example, the society were in a decline, the need for labor would be all the greater, making it more likely that people would want to care for people who needed it, but at the same time they might not have the wherewithall to do so, a process of negative feedback. If the population were expanding, on the other hand, there would be many more dependents and they might be more expendable. The able bodied population would bear a greater burden.

My conclusion is that Northwest Coast societies were not expanding; they had reached the limits of their resources and probably were curbing their population growth. We desperately need more information on this point; I base my conclusion upon the need for labor and the social structure. Even if there were no resource limits, there were social limits. The Houses were conceived to be permanent units, each with a set of resources attached. This in itself implies an equilibrium with resources. Houses could not be added indefinitely or the village structure would radically change. Was this when people would go to war? Or expand inland?

Archaeologists tell us the area had been occupied for thousands of years by cultures quite similar to those there at the time of contact. They must have reached a demographic maximum, at least as far as foraging

close to the village was concerned, especially where land was limited as it was on islands and right on the coast. Since the region was considered to be abundant, despite its long occupation, and humans are capable of extremely rapid population growth, they must have been curbing their growth.

How did they do this? I collected some information to the effect that it was unseemly to have children in such rapid succession as I observed 20 years ago. The proper thing to do was to space children at least 2 years apart, and I even heard 4, but that is the “sacred number,” so it may have been an ideal which was not followed.

How would such spacing have been accomplished? Breast feeding inhibits conception, but the length of time this works may depend upon the adequacy of the diet. Frisch (1978) suggested that ovulation depends upon a “critical fatness.” But, although there was a lack of fat in the diet—the Gitksan went to great lengths to get oolachen and to render bear fat—this did not mean that the women were excessively thin. Recent research (Ellison, 1990) has documented infertility caused by lack of ovulation in response to seasonal fluctuations in diet and workload in Africa, but conditions on the Northwest Coast do not seem to have been as stressful as in this case. The diet was good and the work of women on the Northwest Coast was not nearly as strenuous as among African horticulturalists where it interferes with ovulation. On the Northwest Coast it was probably the periods of prescribed abstinence—to improve the luck of hunters and on other occasions (see Olson, 1967)—rather than “stress” that regulated fertility. Warfare was probably also quite important. Women were taken as slaves.

If the Northwest Coast populations had reached a point where they were regulating themselves, they would have been in a better position to care for older and disabled dependents. Such populations carry a smaller burden of young dependents and would, therefore, be able to manage more of the others.

Part Two: Types of Dependents

The Disabled

Societies on the Northwest Coast do not appear to have been especially generous. Putting together some scattered bits of information, I have concluded that Northwest Coast societies were not kind to the disabled. There were proscriptions a pregnant woman had to follow to avoid having a child who was not normal (see Blackman, 1982:31). Stories speak of the taunting of orphans, the blind, and of orphaned animals. And, de Laguna

(1972) reports that an informant who was crippled was laughed at so much that her relatives had to give a feast to expunge the shame. The example is obviously from the chiefly class and it seems to be a matter of keeping up appearances, but if people were so hard on those of high status, they were probably even harder on the commoners who could not afford feasts to wipe off their shame.

Here is a society that could have been more tolerant of these people than some others. After all there were stable home villages where people could be comfortably left with a supply of preserved food and a couple of kids to get wood and water, much the same scene we saw in the summers in the 1970s when the productive Gitksan were off at the canneries. If movement were needed there were boats available to transport those who would have not been able to walk. The stories exhort people to take care of orphans and blind old people. But the stories were needed, I suspect, because people did not always do so. Disabled Chiefs could probably demand help, even pay for it, but the commoners would be in a more precarious situation. They would be at the mercy of chiefly generosity.

The sanctions for this generosity were largely spiritual. In the stories, Chiefs who leave the unfortunate behind during famines are punished by having their spiritual power passed to those very unfortunates they spurned, obviously a message of hope to those unfortunates and a warning to Chiefs. At the same time there were no legal sanctions to prevent abandonment.

The belief in reincarnation apparently acted, in at least some cases, to ensure the acceptance of those with congenital defects. Mills (1988:406) mentions a case where a woman accepted the congenital lameness of her daughter because the daughter was the reincarnation of her late, lame, mother-in-law.

The northern part of the Northwest Coast had an extreme division of labor by sex. It was impossible, I believe, for males to survive without a female and vice versa. Certain foods could be obtained only by males, others by females, and both were probably needed during the year. In addition there was a spiritual incompatibility between the fluids and activities associated with each sex. Certain female activities could nullify the powers needed for men to hunt and fish successfully (Blackman, 1982:29ff), for example, changing babies (Blackman, 1982:34). So the labor of women was as much a necessity as that of men. But, it was more sedentary, and since women did more food processing than did men, incapacitated women might have been able to contribute more usefully than incapacitated men. Perhaps this is why they were taken slaves while men who were wounded in war were killed instead.

Widows

The fate of widows is a leitmotif of the ethnography of the Northern area of the Northwest Coast. The emphasis on widows rather than widowers suggests that they were a special problem. Otherwise women were usually younger than their spouses, judging from information from the past 50 years, so it might have been simply the age difference that led to more widows than widowers.⁴ This does not, however, explain the kinds of difficulties widows endure. Their troubles highlight the tension between the matrilineal and the affinal ties, a tension we have already discussed in their children in our discussion of the divided loyalties of sons towards their fathers and their matrilineal kin.

There are innumerable accounts of young princes marrying old hags left to them by their uncles. This was a way for the former Chief, or perhaps his House as a whole, to indicate a successor (Olson, 1967). Widow inheritance was used to distinguish the chiefly line from several competing lines within the House (see also Kasakoff, 1974). The problem of determining the heir was probably more severe when the chieftainship passed to the next generation and that is why we hear so much about the age difference between the widow and her young husband.

Being inherited in this way also gave her and her children the right to remain in her husband's House rather than returning to their own. This would be attractive in terms of the young heir's need for labor. The greatest demand for labor came when a Chief was about to succeed to his title and had to give a big feast to validate it. This is the time of "squeeze," if you will, in this society.

But, he may not even have been married, let alone have adult sons to help him gather what he needed for the feast required, especially if the office were passing to the next generation rather than to a brother of the former Chief. If he married his predecessor's widow, however, he could call upon the labor of her children, who might then elect to stay on in their father's House rather than move to their uncle's House.

As I have said, I think few people moved to their Uncle's while their father was alive, particularly if he were Chief, unless they were to be the heir to their uncle. When the old Chief died, however, his labor force would scatter. Once it became clear they would not inherit, any other nephews who had been living with their uncle might decide to look for better pickings elsewhere. Perhaps they moved with their children to their children's Houses. A very young heir, in any case, would probably be the oldest of a set of brothers, with few brothers old enough to help out and the cousins who were passed over as Chiefs unwilling to do so.

It is interesting to consider bride service, which the Tlingit and Haida

had, from the point of view of dependency. A man would gain the labor from a son-in-law at just the time when he might need it most. In many societies young couples have trouble making ends meet while their children are very young, all the more so when fertility is high. While the House functioned as a unit, fathers were still expected, I suggest, to provide food for their own children, if they could. Daughters married younger than sons, let's say at age 14 or so, to men 10 years older. In the case of an oldest daughter, a man would get another hand, while the rest of his children were quite young.

This might also be the time he would need to accumulate resources for the feast at which he might inherit the Chiefship from his uncle. Despite the stories of widow inheritance by a young heir, normally men would inherit the position of Chief later in life. If people survived past childhood they were apt to live quite a while longer, so let us just say that the old Chief would die at age 65. Making various assumptions,⁵ the son would be 43 years old at his uncle's death and if he married at age 25, he might have a child about 16 years old, if a daughter, quite ready to bring in a groom to serve him. At this point in his career he would have his own sons, not yet married or living at their own House, his son-in-law, and perhaps the sons of his predecessor to help him accumulate the resources he needed to take on the chiefship.⁶

Whatever the case, the custom of widow inheritance shows that the widows of Chiefs were not neglected. We must ask after the widows of commoners, however, especially those with large numbers of small children. Would a man take them on rather than start his own family with a younger woman? If he were not married already, they might be attractive as an insurance policy as they would be productive workers sooner than any children he might have on his own. Also, a commoner man may not have had his pick of women, especially if there were a system of polygyny on the part of Chiefs.

Many widows did not remarry. Instead, they tried to stay in their husbands' Houses but their husband's relatives wanted them to leave. Conflicts between the widows and his heirs over who owned the physical structure were frequent. So, there must have been some advantage to widows to staying on rather than returning to their own Houses. Blackman confirms this, saying that if they were not remarried to someone in their husband's House they would have to leave it and would be lucky to escape with a few personal belongings. Such women were the objects of pity (1982:33) and of charity on the part of higher ranking people. If a widow did not remarry and had to live under the Chief of her own House she would become a "second class citizen," but not if her own son were the Chief. So this is the fate of the commoner widow. When we realize that she probably had never lived in this household before in her life, we can begin to see how

difficult the adjustment would have been. Within the House, without a son to hunt for her, she would be dependent on handouts from others.

The decline of the communal house in post-contact times exacerbated the widow's problem. Once people built houses considered to be theirs, instead of the group's, did the old rule of inheritance through matriline apply, or did it go to the wife? Missionaries did not approve of her marrying anyone as a second wife or perhaps her young nephew, even as a first wife.

If a widow were to return to her own House, unmarried, perhaps the ideal solution from the Chief's point of view, would be to have her brother support her. His obligation to provide for his nieces and nephews could be used to bring him back from his father's House to his own where he would provide for his sister's children, the skins going to the House chief to be used in the prestige economy. This would be a "cheap" solution. The children so raised would never contribute their labor to their father's House.

The incompatibility of female fluids and hunting made it just as necessary that widowers have someone to care for their small children as widows to have a man to hunt and fish for them. For the commoners, the brother-sister bond must have been more of a safety net than the rule of widow inheritance. Injunctions recorded by de Laguna to the effect that brothers help sisters (but it seems more often sisters helping brothers) take on new meaning in this perspective.

In the Gitksan case, I remember a widow who had clear title to the physical structure, but belonged to a House in a village far from her husband's. She wanted to stay and her children had paid an enormous "haircut" at her husband's funeral in order to have the right to do so. This was explicitly said to guarantee her gathering rights to a berry patch owned by her husband's House. This particular woman was past reproductive age. Most older widows did not remarry. Widowers, however, did so more often, usually to younger women by whom they had more children.

Her case underscores the predicament of a widow, especially one who did not want to return to the village where she belonged. This woman had the money to make the large payment required to stay. Before the days of government benefits, she might not have had it. It might have come from her grown children. But where would they have obtained it? Would they go back to their own House Chief in another village and would he want to pay this woman off to stay away? Or would he want her back or at least the labor of her children? These children were in the process of being adopted into a House that was dying out in their own phratry, so they had the support of at least one faction of the village.

The example also illustrates how important sons were to the welfare of the widow. If hers had had full status in their adopted House there would

have been no problem. Without sons, she might become the equivalent of a slave. Even with them, if they were commoners, she might not be so well treated. If her sons did not help her, she would have to turn to the House Chief for support.

The Aged

We have seen how important ideas about spiritual power were for enforcing the “rights” of dependents. The elders, in particular, were thought to be closer to the spirit world and thus needed to be respected. They were granted special favors whether or not they were Chiefs. de Laguna (1972) talks of a special status for the oldest person alive whether or not he was a Chief. Among the Haida too there are indications that some people had a special status due to their age (Blackman, 1982): a group of elderly men and women among the Haida divined who had been reincarnated. The people are merely old, not necessarily Chiefs. We don't know, however, how many people survived to the critical age, much less whether survival rates were higher for Chiefs than they were for commoners. In the Tlingit case, it is interesting that there is just one such honored person, apparently, per village.

Researchers in modern society distinguish between the old and the very old (Neugarten, 1974). The difference is between the elderly who are able to manage on their own and those who are not. But the oldest people may, in fact, be very healthy especially in societies or subgroups that experience a great deal of physical stress. Once people reach a certain rather high age, they have been so tempered by life's trauma, that they are apt to continue for a very long time. Thus, there might be a group of very old people in just those societies where one might least expect them, people who may be quite likely to outlive all of their children. Perhaps these “oldest old” were the ones specially revered for their spiritual powers. If so, there were probably not very many and the status was reached quite late in life.

Beliefs in reincarnation provided an even broader protection. After death, the elders would soon be back. The returning “children” would have to be treated well or they might decide to leave, i.e., die. Similarly, the elders needed to be treated well or they might not come back. This could lessen their mistreatment but this too would depend upon demography. If a society were contracting, everyone would not be able to come back, or there would be a longer wait before doing so. Perhaps multiple reincarnations of the same individual (Mills, 1988) are more common now because of the recent expansion of the population.

Among the Gitksan, elders were able to create a special relationship—presumably a good one—with a couple in the younger generation which

was resumed when they were reborn. They would let the couple know before they died that they planned to return through them. This could well have led to competition between couples for the favor of parenting the older person in his next life, and, if so, it would encourage better treatment of older people. Returning elders could even take revenge for mistreatment in a former life.

Over 90% of Gitksan reincarnations occurred within the House; since the sick and the elderly are the closest to death and reincarnation occurred relatively quickly, the system reinforced the obligation of the House Chief to take good care of those people within his House. If he did not, vengeance might be taken by the dead returning through his sister or her daughters. If the old Chief himself were not well looked after by his nephews he could reincarnate in a different branch of his family. The more recent idea that "the disembodied spirits of all deceased house members act as guardians to all the embodied house members and their children" (Mills, 1988:402) shows that such ideas of mutual responsibility have been broadened in recent times to extend to all the members of the House.

Future Research

It should be possible to answer several of the questions I have raised using the several household censuses available for this area. These would show where various sorts of dependents lived and how many there were and, as the period covered encompasses the shift from low to high rates of growth, comparison could show how the growth rates affected the care of dependents. Censuses taken after the epidemics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries would not reveal the precontact situation, but they could still be quite useful for they would show where dependents were living when the society was under stress.

The censuses would need to be supplemented with models of the population and of the timing of life cycle events. The models could be manipulated to show how different variables affected dependency. How would the age difference between husband and wife affect the rate of widowhood, or the age at which a man would have a son-in-law? Models can at least rule certain ideas out, even if they can't provide absolute confirmation.

Other questions I posed could be addressed by ethnographic observation. Nowadays, people break their legs, and worse. Is there really as much jeering as the ethnography leads one to expect? We have widows today. How do they get access to traditional food? Are they under pressure to leave their husband's village if it is not also their own? Are they all equally likely to remarry, or does it depend upon age? Ideas about reincarnation

and the closeness of the elderly to the spirit world, indeed, the meaning of death, can still be studied (Mills, 1988).

Most important, I think, would be to learn what people receive from those for whom they care. On the Northwest Coast, the elderly may have been important as repositories of social memory, furnishing information on events in the past such as marriages, feuds, genealogical connections that could affect the present. The disabled may have had the skills and time needed for producing goods that others lacked, or provided child care that made them worth supporting. Did the dependents earn their spiritual protection or did they need it because they gave so little in return? Evidence suggests the latter, but we need more information.

Conclusions

The Northwest Coast offers one of the few ethnographic examples to contrast to the more ubiquitous examples of simpler hunter gatherers. These simpler hunter gatherers seem more likely to have been backwaters in human evolution rather than the universal foundations of human life they have been made up to be. So it is all the more important to use the more complex hunters for our models of human social origins.

On the Northwest Coast we find societies which might well have reached the point of limiting their populations, and, if so, would have had low dependency ratios. But despite the favorable demographic situation, there seems to have been considerable pressure on lower status individuals who could not hold their own: disabled men, widows and orphans.

Among the simpler hunter-gatherers, the pressure was most likely environmental. Those who could not walk risked being left behind should resources where they were run low. But, despite the lack of such pressures, the Northwest Coast societies were, it seems, no kinder to their dependents. The environmental pressure was replaced by social pressure. Through supporting dependents, Chiefs were able to demonstrate that they were indeed entitled to such a status at the same time as they controlled access to the very resources that might have made the commoners more independent. Ideas about spiritual power lay behind the rules of generosity. These ideas supported the power of the Chiefs, but they also provided the only sanction for the care of the dependents.

And, the pressure on dependents would have been cyclical. A crisis in the form of war or unusual weather leading to lack of food, would create a need for those very dependents that had been neglected in more plentiful times. One might redeem slaves that had been living elsewhere, and make up to the orphans, as one sees so often in myths—but only if they could

magically bring food.

The problems we are facing in our own society are not new ones; the evidence from the Northwest Coast shows us that they have been experienced by other "affluent" societies too. Questions of dependency are particularly important in societies like those on the Northwest Coast where, as in our own, status distinctions were deep and pervasive. In these societies, where social value is at the forefront of every social relationship, the unproductive bring such issues to the fore. On the Northwest Coast people manifest their power and privilege by caring for those who cannot care for themselves. Their care is backed up by the supernaturals who will see that justice is done if they do not provide the care they should. It was the aged, however, who benefitted most from religious beliefs, which brought them not only respect but economic support as well.

This examination of the underside of Northwest Coast society shows that the care of dependents is difficult in any society, whether "affluent" or not. So, we should not be ashamed of our efforts. And, as Northwest Coast dependents had few legal guarantees, ideology was the ultimate safety net.

Notes

1. I use the term "House," following the Gitksan for a group similar to what the Haida and Tlingit would call "clan."
2. I leave the thorny issue of preferences to marry the mother's brother's daughter or the father's sister's daughter for another time. While these marriages would seem to have solved some of the residential problems, my work has shown that the marriages to an actual first cousin, which would have done so, were rare. They were made only under special circumstances: when the mother's brother had to designate a new line within the House to inherit from him (see Kasakoff, 1974).
3. Whether this was true on the Coast as well as further inland, and under what demographic conditions, is not clear. We must remember that we have observed these people largely under a time of demographic decline.
4. Cases in which very young men married older women seem to have been limited to the chiefly class.
5. His sister had gotten married at age 14, and let's just say she was a younger sister. If they follow the spacing rule, she would be 2 years younger, but if we allow for what was likely a 50% rate of child mortality, she might be 4 years younger. She would marry at 14, have a child at 16 and, allowing for child mortality and her having girls not boys, let's say for the sake of argument that her first son to survive would be born when she was 18 years old.

6. But if it is so convenient, why, then, didn't the Tsimshian also have bride service? Perhaps labor requirements differed, or they had other ways of recruiting it.

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