

anthro notes

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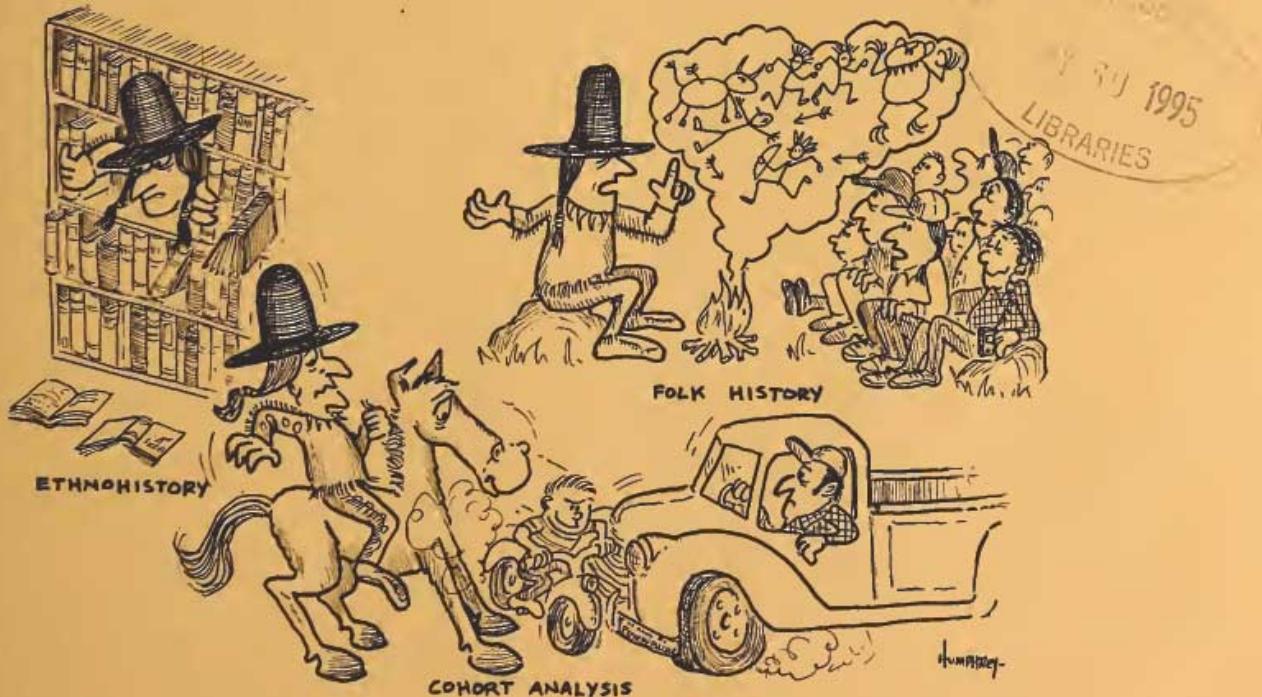
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WHOSE PAST IS IT ANYWAY? THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF HISTORY

(Editor's Note: For the past 18 years, Loretta Fowler has studied patterns of adjustment and change among three closely related Plains Indian groups: the Arapahoe of the Wyoming Wind River Reservation; the Gros Ventres, or northern division of Arapahoe at Fort Belknap, Montana; and the southern Arapaho of Oklahoma. Dr. Fowler's book Arapahoe Politics; 1851-1978, Symbols in Crises of Authority (University of Nebraska Press) was published in 1982; her book on the Fort Belknap work, Shared Symbols, Conflicted Meanings:

Alternative Views of History Among the Gros Ventres, 1778-1984, will be published this spring by Cornell University Press. She is presently working with the Smithsonian developing the Plains Indian volume for the Handbook of North American Indians. The following article, based on a lecture presented to the participants of the Smithsonian Institution/University of Wyoming teacher training program, summarizes her newest book.)

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My work with Plains Indians began in Wyoming, where I studied the way of life of the Arapahoes on the Wind River Reservation. I went to Fort Belknap, Montana because the Gros Ventres there are a related people. In fact the Gros Ventres and the Arapahoes used to be one people. They speak the same language, though different dialects. But when I got to Fort Belknap, I was amazed to find the Gros Ventres so different culturally from the Arapahoes.

Fort Belknap turned out to be a very complicated community, with two different tribal groups--the Gros Ventres and the Assiniboines--sharing a single reservation. Between these two groups there was a lack of agreement about the meaning of shared cultural symbols and about the interpretation of their common past. In addition, there was a pronounced generation gap between Gros Ventre elders' and youths' views of culture and history.

This cultural complexity within a small, "face-to-face" reservation community forced me to ask some very difficult questions. Should I treat this complexity as factionalism, as many anthropologists have done in their work on the Plains? Should I adopt one particular interpretation, such as one age group's views, and ignore the others'? Should I concentrate exclusively on the Gros Ventres, even though they literally live side by side, interact intensively, and intermarry with the Assiniboines?

My decision to confront the cultural complexity at Fort Belknap led me to some new ways of doing Plains anthropology. I decided to use a variety of methodologies to understand this contemporary Indian society. The three methodologies I used in examining the relationship between past and present were ethnohistory, cohort analysis, and the analysis of folk history.

Ethnohistory

Ethnohistory is a term used differently by many people. I use it to mean interpreting documents from an anthropological perspective. For example, one aspect of the anthropological approach is to try to see interconnections between different aspects of life: how politics is affected by economics; how art work is tied to world view; or how religion is related to economics. For example, in my first Arapahoe study I obtained important information about politics from looking at museum files on art. These documents became, in a sense, my informants, enabling me to learn something about the whole culture from one aspect of it.

For my Gros Ventre work, the first thing I did was study every document written over the past 200 years that I could find about these people. I looked at records of traders in Canada and Montana. I also consulted anthropologists' field notes, including those of Regina Flannery who did an excellent study on the Gros Ventres in the late 1930's and 1940's. Her unpublished notes were a wonderful source of information for people born in the 1820's and 1830's. She had recorded their conversations--what they thought of life, of each other, of particular families and events. Several women, for example, had grown up in polygynous households, where they had been one among several wives. They had tanned buffalo robes and forded the Missouri River to trade their robes at Ft. Benton and elsewhere.

In doing ethnohistory, you have to play detective. You try to put yourself back in time and figure out where people would have left a trace of what they were doing and then try to find that trace. This ethnohistorical approach taught me a lot about Ft. Belknap. For one thing, it demonstrated quite clearly that, contrary to what other writers have

reported, there were real continuities in Gros Ventre culture, in what Clifford Geertz has called "ethos", the kinds of motivations and perceptions people have about things, the style they have in coping with life.

ENEMY-FRIEND RELATIONSHIP

One of the continuities was that the Gros Ventres, as far back as the late 18th century, were very competitive with other Gros Ventres and with other peoples. For example, in the late 18th century through the early 20th century, Gros Ventres had an institution called the enemy-friend relationship. A man would pick another Gros Ventre, and when he went to battle and captured a trophy, perhaps a shield, he would bring it back as a gift to his enemy-friend. The gift meant that the enemy-friend was obligated to do something just as brave and generous in return. Sometimes an enemy-friend would feast widows and orphans and then his enemy-friend would be obligated to do something equally generous. Competition reinforced sharing, establishing a system in which goods, food, and property circulated through the society. In this way people who could not go out and hunt would still eat, and people who could not obtain hides would be able to clothe themselves. Competition for war honors became more intense, escalating inter-tribal fighting, after the introduction of guns by European traders.

There are recurrent references to the Gros Ventres as the most competitive of the northern Plains people in late 18th century and early 19th century traders' accounts. Traders noted that the Gros Ventres always brought in the best prepared robes, and that they took pride in getting a higher price for their robes than other tribes. The Gros Ventres' emphasis on competitiveness and on the pursuit of public recognition of prominence through generosity (as in large public

giveaways of property) is evident. It can still be observed today. By looking at a culture over a long time span, by studying documents as well as living people, I can see continuities that other researchers have missed by looking at only one particular era. I can correct other kinds of misinterpretations as well. Gros Ventre cultural identity was not anchored in particular ceremonies or customs. Rather, it hinged on the Gros Ventres' interpretations of change. The giveaway held at powwows (intertribal celebration, including dancing)-- although a 20th century phenomenon-- expresses the same value on competitive generosity as the enemy-friend relationship, and thus is viewed by the Gros Ventres as "traditional."

Cohort Analysis

The method of cohort analysis comes from the sociologist Karl Mannheim who developed this approach to better understand the relationships between generations. Mannheim argued that people who are born within a particular time span often have shared experiences that significantly distinguish them from other cohorts in their society.

The first step is to identify cohorts and to determine what distinguishes them from each other. I found two cohorts at Fort Belknap, one I called the elder cohort, the other the youth cohort. Members of the elder cohort, today ages 56 to 90, were born between 1895 and 1929. They were all children when Gros Ventre ceremonial life was in its heyday. As children or young adults they were not considered mature enough to hold positions of ritual responsibility, but they attended the ceremonies. They attended secular dances in which they saw elderly warriors acting out what they had done in battles.

The elder cohorts' parents encouraged them to speak English, and their school teachers threatened with

severe punishment those who continued to speak their native language. But although they spoke English in the schools, they spoke Gros Ventre with their grandparents.

Their elders did not encourage them to pursue an interest in native religion. They were told that Gros Ventre religion would not be of use to them in the future. Elders insisted that it was more important for them to learn skills that would enable them to compete successfully with non-Indians. Gros Ventre adults in the early 20th century wanted their children, those born between 1895 and 1929, to compete successfully with non-Indians so that they would not be exploited or abused. In so doing they could continue to compete successfully with other peoples. When elders told one young boy (now 70 years old) that he was not going to be a warrior like his grandfather, but that instead he must get an education to learn to compete successfully with the non-Indian, the boy saw schooling as a kind of warfare. He would not ride into battle against the Piegan or the Sioux, but instead compete against non-Indians. As a child, the elder cohort of today was strongly motivated to go to school, get an education, and find a trade. Nothing was too difficult for the Gros Ventre child who was reared by the old warriors and medicine men.

Members of the youth cohort, today ages 30-55, were born between 1930 and 1955. What sets this group apart is that they were too young to have experienced Gros Ventre ceremonial life in its heyday. They never saw a medicine man cure a patient nor did they attend a religious ritual. They never went to a dance in which warriors acted out their battle exploits. Youths did not speak the Gros Ventre language as children. Many of them had grown up off the reservation with only occasional contact with Ft. Belknap.

On the other hand, they were the right age to take full advantage of new opportunities in the late 1960's and 1970's--the affirmative action programs, the educational grants for Vietnam veterans, and self-determination legislation affecting tribal governments. New jobs opened up to them through minority recruitment. And many moved back to the reservation to accept the new jobs. In school they were exposed to a positive view of Indian culture and history through Native American studies programs. The youth cohorts, then, experienced the 1960's and 1970's differently than the elders who could not take advantage of college or job opportunities to the extent that youths did.

THE GENERATION UNIT

In my cohort analysis, I also found Mannheim's concept of a generation unit useful. Within a single cohort or generation, there are people who experience life differently, who make different choices. At Ft. Belknap there were two generation units that I called the education clique and the militants. The education clique were people who went to college in Montana. Their concept of Indianness developed or was embellished on Montana campuses, at Missoula, Bozeman or Billings. Even though as children they had not been involved with Gros Ventre religion, at college many of them had roommates from other tribes where native religion was more important. The college campuses also had Indian clubs that put on powwows to which they invited singers and dancers from other tribes. This was the first ceremonial experience of this kind for many of the Gros Ventres. They became part of a network of powwow people and made contacts throughout Montana. They also got involved in politics by going to the state legislature and convincing the legislators to make college tuition free for Indians on Montana campuses.

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This group of Gros Ventres became aware of their potential and, with the encouragement of their parents, they set high goals for themselves. They returned to Ft. Belknap and set out to achieve greater self-determination for the Indian people and to revive ceremonial life.

The militants were people who developed or embellished their concept of Indianness outside of Montana, where they lived in urban areas. Many of them attended colleges such as the University of Washington in Seattle, the University of California at Los Angeles, and Harvard in Boston. They took jobs in urban poverty programs and became involved in social protest movements that were much more active than those in Montana. Many took part in confrontations such as sit-ins or marches.

POWWOWING

What insights were obtained by comparing elders' and youths' interpretations of culture and history? It is clear that the contrasting experiences of these cohorts, and of the educated clique and the militants, have shaped the way Ft. Belknap culture and society are changing today. We sometimes tend to think that change in Indian communities comes only from ideas and customs introduced by non-Indians. But a great deal of change and the way change is made culturally acceptable comes from the interplay and exchange of different interpretations held by cohorts. To youths, reviving Indian ceremonies such as the powwow is an important goal. Thus, they have organized and expanded these dances.

In the powwow, sponsored by the educated clique, one major theme is hospitality to visiting tribes. Much effort is exerted to raise money for dance contest prizes and to purchase groceries to distribute to visitors.

Moreover, the veteran plays a prominent role in the powwow. There are flag raising ceremonies and special dances done by veterans. But to the militants the U.S. Army represents an oppressor, and so they deemphasize flag symbolism or veteran participation in the powwow they sponsor, the Chief Joseph powwow. An aspect of this powwow is the laying of wreathes or other kinds of grave offerings at the site of the Nez Perce's battle with the U.S. army. The battle site is 20 miles west of Ft. Belknap. There Nez Perce were killed by the army while trying to cross the border into Canada. For the militants, Chief Joseph symbolizes resistance to an unjust U.S. government.

Both elders and youths participate in powwows to varying degrees. But the powwow has come to symbolize different things to elders and youths and to the educated clique and the militants. For example, the powwow is for the educated clique a vehicle for expressing Gros Ventre competitive drive. One of their goals is to attract bigger crowds than do other reservations' powwows. Militant youths interpret the powwow as a vehicle for the expression of protest against the U.S. government. These interpretations reflect the youths' contrasting involvements in the Native American pride movement of the 1970's.

FOLK HISTORY

The third method I used was the analysis of the stories that people tell about their past. Gros Ventres and Assiniboines have shared a reservation since 1878, and they have participated in the same events. Their ancestors sat together at the same councils and attended many of the same ceremonies. Although they were participants in the same events, they perceived them very differently. I was interested in looking at folk history as an entry to contemporary symbols and their meanings, not in looking at the stories in terms of whether or not they were

accurate or compatible with the documentary record.

Gros Ventre and Assiniboin versions of the history of the U.S. government's relations with Ft. Belknap peoples are quite different. In stories about events from the late 19th century to the present, the Gros Ventres portray themselves as fully capable of managing their community by themselves and capable of competing successfully with Whites if given a fair chance. Reservation problems are attributed by the Gros Ventres to the Assiniboines' failures--that Assiniboines are not assertive enough with federal officials. Assiniboines portray themselves as expert in living harmoniously with others. In their stories, reservation problems are attributed to the Gros Ventres' obstinate nature. Folk history serves to orient social action. The contrast in Gros Ventre and Assiniboin interpretations of history work to stimulate flexibility, maneuverability, and creativity. Individuals have a wider range of potential strategies and choices. Variant interpretations encourage intertribal competition as well. Each tribe presents the other somewhat negatively. The competitive component of symbols of identity fosters a sense of cultural distinctiveness that is important to Indian people today. As one youth told me, "When the new Indian awareness came, it wasn't enough just to realize you were Indian; it was what kind of Indian [that mattered]."

Each of the three ways of interpreting the past contributed to my understanding of Ft. Belknap. Ethnohistory made clear how long term cultural continuities were possible even though the Gros Ventres had to change their way of life to cope with their changing environment. Cohort analysis revealed age groups' different interpretations of their past. Folk history was a good way to learn how images of the past contribute to cultural identity, and how these same

images motivate behavior.

By combining the three approaches, I was able to reach an understanding of the dynamics of culture change: how change actually occurs, and how people accept it or initiate it. At Ft. Belknap innovation has come about as generations and tribes, Indians and Whites, continually adjust and reformulate their notions of the past and the present in order to cope with the conflicting interpretations of one another. By influencing each other, they influence how their society changes. The anthropologist by confronting the complexities of culture can see things about a society that would not otherwise be seen by focusing on one group's perspective or on one point in time.

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