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Peter M. Gardner

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CYCLICAL ADAPTATIONS ON VARIABLE CULTURAL FRONTIERS

by Peter M. Gardner

Forty seven years ago Gregory Bateson descried the fact that, in our efforts to study cultural contact, we had been directing our gaze toward new frontiers, toward times and places of dramatic, «violent» change. We had been equivalent to would-be students of gravity, he held, restricting data collection to «observation of houses collapsing in an earthquake» (1935:180).

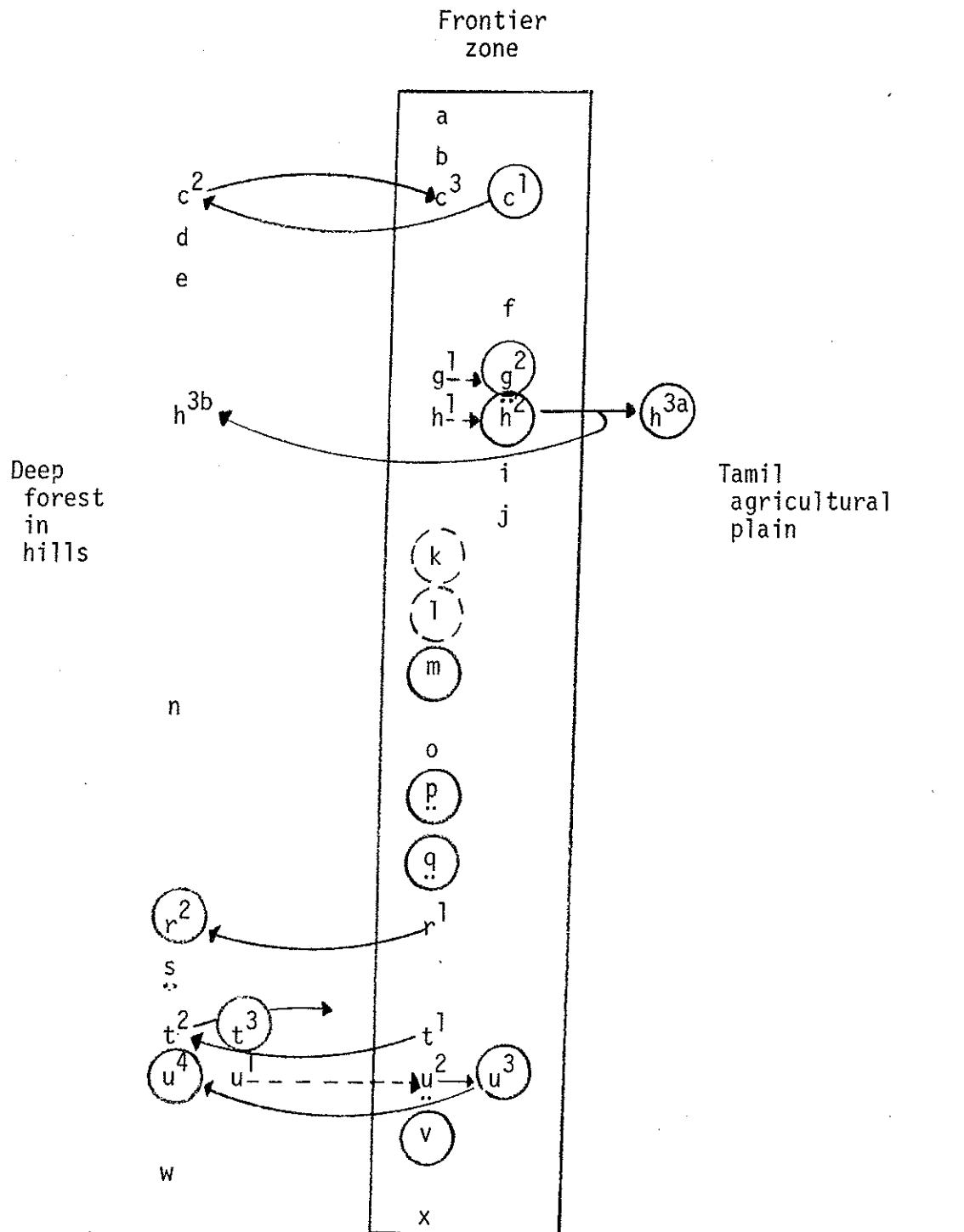
How much have we learned in the last half century about mature frontiers and long-term culture contact processes? As recently as 1969, Barth levied a series of related but complementary complaints against problematic presuppositions and oversimplifications in our characterizing of cultural boundaries in general (1969:9-11, 15-6). There have been solid case studies (eg., Lattimore 1934, 1937, 1938, 1940). But, except for Barth's contribution as regards conceptualization of processes at ethnic boundaries, anthropologists have developed little in the way of general models of adaptive problem solving along lines or zones of long-term culture contact. As far as theory goes, our perspectives and priorities have undergone little substantial change since Bateson's protest.

This paper will be devoted to examination of one kind of adaptation along persisting but variable frontiers. Two cases will be studied. One is contact between Paliyan food-collectors and South Indian society, the other is contact on the inner Asian frontier of China--the zone in which Mongol pastoralists encounter Chinese states. Despite obvious differences between the two cases, if Owen Lattimore and I are correct in our reconstructions, it can be shown that (for the smaller scale societies) the long-term processes along both boundaries are similar. The nomads in both instances are bicultural. Possessing two images of a good life, they cycle back and forth between use of one adaptation and the other in partial response to variable frontier conditions. Let me profile both situations.

Paliyan Cycles

Recent ethnographic study (Gardner 1966, 1972, 1978, 1982) allows one to say that the majority of Paliyans live in small bands near the foot of the forested range which extends into the southernmost tip of India. They look to the east out across the ancient irrigation works, cities, and villages of Tamil speaking cultivators. Although members of these particular Paliyan communities subsist largely upon dioscorea yams, other wild vegetable foods, honey, fish, and small game, they make themselves available for occasional contract labor in the forest or more regular work in plantations and fields at the forest's margin. For these several kinds of employment they are usually paid in rice and condiments; in some instances they receive cash, metal implements, or cloth. Such forest-edge bands vary from semi-nomadic groups of 18-30 to more sedentary groups of 20 to 60 or more in size. De facto band membership is constantly changing because retreat from an aggressor is a major means of social control. From week to week there may be

Figure 1. Schematic Representation of Paliyan Band Locations and Movements in Relation to their Frontier



- KEY:
- $\textcircled{c^1}$ band studied
 - \textcircled{k} band contacted
 - a band of known current location
 - p closely related bands
 - q
 - $c^2 \rightarrow c^3$ documented band movement
 - $u^1 \rightarrow u^2$ reconstructed band movement, based on interview data
 - $h^{3a} h^{3b}$ segments of a former band after fission

note: forest edge meanders near the foot of several close or connected ranges of hills.

loss from a band or addition to it of individuals, families, or groups of related families, in movements which take precedence over labor agreements.

Other Paliyans live far from the forest's edge, subsisting solely upon collection of the wild foods and maintaining a self-sufficient economy. Their bands are the size of semi-nomadic bands (18 to 30), with possible temporary fission into yet smaller groups during periods of dry heat (March to August). Depending on weather and the degree of mobility they wish to maintain, they use rock shelters and quickly erected, temporary huts or lean-tos, as do semi-nomads, or else they sleep in or under trees in accordance with circumstances.

Paliyans have two ways of life. Study of ten bands and contact with two more (during 1962-64 and, briefly, during 1978), make it possible to discuss Paliyan decisions in a number of instances of change from one way of life to the other. Moves toward nomadism and self-sufficiency were always seen or said by informants to be responses to harassment by their cultivating neighbors--verbal abuse, threatened violence, physical blows, rape or murder. Moves to the frontier zone are less well documented; they could generally be attributed to economically advantageous contacts, at times when intercultural relations promised to be relatively unthreatening.

Three bands have been settled in the frontier zone for over a century. It is unclear, though, as to whether this has not been punctuated by temporary withdrawals (segments of all three communities have certainly come and gone). Aloofness may be relatively short-lived, by contrast. My data do not permit speaking of mobile aloofness for periods longer than one or two decades. Few bands are fully nomadic at any given time and, by their own accounts, the most wary, most self-sufficient bands are those which have not long before experienced serious difficulties at the border. A bias towards frontier settlement can be seen in Figure 1.

Mongol Cycles

Owen Lattimore's ethnohistorical reconstructions (eg., 1934, 1937, 1938, 1951, 1962) give us a broad sketch of the options of Mongols. One choice was to live symbiotically with border-land Chinese (1951:333-4) in «complicated political structures» combining many economic specialities (1938:7). Mongols herded, traded, served as warriors, or ruled and drew tribute and revenue from non-nomad subjects (1951:520). The results were diverse. For some nomads, huge debts accrued at the hands of Chinese traders (1951:95). Mongol chieftains occasionally pulled together the military means not just to raid or exploit, but to overcome and rule the border states, with their intensive agriculture, their surplus, and their easy revenue (1951:504). Such leaders would eventually get drawn into Chinese patterns of rule and consumption, the result being that they would «devolve away from the norm of pastoral nomadism» (1951:505).

The other choice of Mongols was to dwell purely in the steppe with a nomadic pastoral economy offering complete self-sufficiency even in metal working. It was combining production of sheep, the mainstay, with production of transport animals which enabled Mongols, at least for periods of time, to avoid contact with the border and live entirely from steppe resources (1938: 12; 1951:74-6, 329).

Lattimore talks about changes between the two ways of life in terms of both choice and the cyclical build up of inexorable forces. The initial move toward full nomadism occurred about the fourth century B.C. Mongols had, by then, become horseback archers and Chinese had spread their intensive cultivation to the furthest point at which running water allowed irrigation, that is, into the land previously used for mixed food production by borderland tribal peoples (1951:63; 1962:410-2, 505). Thereafter, when they occurred, changes toward a more mixed Mongol economy in the frontier zone resulted from growth of power of Mongol leaders at times when the frontier was ripe. Wider rule led to both (a) surplus stock production, which could be disposed of profitably in border trade, and (b) command of enough warriors that trade could be controlled and raiding or conquest also made profitable (1938:7, 12, 14; 1951:332, 518-9). The composite states formed through actual conquest broke up quickly. Mongols returned to nomadism under new leaders from «lower strata of the ruling class» (1951:72) when, after three or four generations, Mongol state rule became ineffective. Conditions of sophisticated rule prevented efficient central leadership and control of Mongol fighting forces; making matters worse, new vested interests of Mongol rulers left them vulnerable to any resumption of Chinese pressure (1938:15-6; 1951:520-1). The full cycle took centuries to complete for those who did become involved with frontier developments. Lattimore holds, however, that «a homogeneous nomad pastoralism prevailed most of the time» in the steppe (1951:248).

Discussion

Some parallels between the Paliyan and Mongol cases are immediately apparent. Each involves two settlement patterns and two corresponding stances of the people in relation to their neighbors. Each involves two subsistence economies--one self sufficient and the other symbiotic, entailing exchange of various sorts at the border.

Both peoples have been described as bicultural in their frontier situations (Gardner 1978:312; Lattimore 1951:543, 546). Given their short cycles, it is realistic to characterize Paliyans in general, not just those at the frontier, as being bicultural. Their behavior suggests that each person, in time, is likely to possess two separate sets of understandings and expectations which allow fairly effective behavior in the two contexts. This situation approaches what Goodenough refers to as a «macrocultural» level of multicultural competence (1975:1, 4-5). Collectively, Mongols no less than Paliyans carry with them two distinctive adaptations, two separate cultural options, each relatively complete in and of itself.

The Mongol cycles lasted from the fourth century B.C. to the late nineteenth century; the South Asian cycles continue even now. In their durability the overall systems within which the cycles take place appear to be de facto closed systems. What would explain an apparent long-term limitation of major choices just to two? The provisional nature of the reconstructions renders it difficult to draw confident conclusions solely on empirical grounds. There are several ways of broaching explanation, nonetheless. First, despite the relative completeness of each way of life, each offers people relief from the limitations or organizational problems encountered in the other. That is to say, they are not merely different; their complementation is practical. Secondly, each way of life has a distinctive, continuing appeal. One is said explicitly to allow «moral»

behavior and the other is called economically «profitable» or «rewarding» (Gardner 1982:464, 467; Lattimore 1934:65-6; 1951:332). Finally, after initial experiences with the two choices in question, the peoples may have developed a tradition of resorting periodically to one way of life then the other. This would entail a degree of consciousness of being systematically bicultural.

Recently anthropological ecologists (eg., Alland 1975:64-5; Hardesty 1977:16; Vayda and McCay 1975:298-301) have picked up on the view of earlier systems thinkers and ecologists from several disciplines (eg., Ashby 1956; Bateson 1963; Holling 1973; Holling and Goldberg 1971; Lewontin 1958) that «versatility,» «resilience,» or «flexibility» in the face of hazards is a system property which enhances the chance of a system's survival. Because frontiers may be characterized by zone-specific hazards or opportunities, there is reason to expect that, for relatively mobile people in such zones, versatility would often be manifest in the form of recourse to moves from one zone to another (eg., moving into or out of the frontier zone *per se*). With variable conditions, this kind of hazard avoidance could become cyclical. The idea that cycles are expected at such frontiers may eventually be testable; Nugent's devastating attack on Leach reminds us though that even the best known cycles are poorly documented, aggravating the problem we already face in cross-cultural testing of the theory, namely, small sample size (Nugent 1982:508-27). Accordingly, at this juncture, it might prove most productive to broaden the question and test a more general version of the same idea. That must wait for another paper.

NOTES

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Peter M. Gardner
Department of Anthropology
University of Missouri-Columbia
Columbia, Missouri 65211
U.S.A.