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Article abstract

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Captives or Slaves? A Comparison of Northeastern and Northwestern North America by Means of Captivity Narratives

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Low status captives were present in many traditional North American Indian societies. This paper explores whether it is appropriate, in some of these societies, to label such captives as "slaves." In particular, captivity is compared in the Northwest Coast and in the Northeast. To improve comparability of data, narratives of Europeans held captive in each region are compared, specifically those of John Gyles and John Jewitt. It is concluded that in the Northeast it is best to speak of "captives," while on the Northwest Coast one can speak of "slaves."

Au sein de plusieurs sociétés indiennes traditionnelles d'Amérique du Nord existaient des prisonniers de statut social inférieur. Le présent texte est une étude de la pertinence de l'emploi du terme «esclave» pour désigner ces prisonniers. Nous comparons plus spécifiquement les conditions de captivité qui prévalaient sur la côte nord-ouest et sur la côte nord-est, et afin d'enrichir notre matériel d'étude, nous considérons les récits d'Européens maintenus en captivité dans chacune des régions étudiées, particulièrement ceux de John Gyles et de John Jewitt. En conclusion, nous avançons que, sur la côte nord-est, il est préférable de parler de «prisonniers», alors que dans la région du nord-ouest, l'usage du terme d'«esclaves» semble plus approprié.

Introduction

Captives were present in many traditional and early contact North American Indian societies.¹ By "captive" I mean persons who had been taken by force from their natal social setting and held, at least initially, against their will in their captor's society. Most such captives seem to have been children or women, although adult men were sometimes taken as well. New captives generally had low social status in the host society, although such low status was not necessarily permanent. Generally such captives were not numerically important in a local community, either in absolute or proportional terms. These captives are sometimes referred to as "slaves." This label seems to be used because captives might be a part of transactions that involved exchanging them for goods, because of their low status, or because they were sometimes badly treated, even killed. Many students of slavery, however, would be reluctant to call these persons slave—largely because they tended to be attached as individuals to a family and to be gradually absorbed into the family and the family's larger kin group and because children of such a person were ordinary members of the society. One might say that the model of absorption into the society is an adoptive one, not the model of alienation commonly present with slavery.² For these

reasons I prefer the term “captive” to label this status in most North American Indian societies.

In one cluster of North American Indian societies, however, those captured on raids generally became what can be termed slave. That is, their status resembles the status of slaves in other parts of the world, rather than that of “captive” in other Indian groups. These societies are those in the Northwest Coast culture area. Following Kroeber (1923) I would contend that this is one more important difference that sets the Northwest Coast culture area apart from the rest of traditional aboriginal North America.

In this paper I substantiate this point by making an explicit comparison between the status of “slave” in one Northwest Coast society with the status of “captive” in one society on the Northeast Coast of North America. To do this I use the firsthand accounts of two European captives, those of John Jewitt (Northwest) and John Gyles (Northeast). Thus, the paper is also a contribution to the study of one typical genre of North American literature, the captivity narrative, and its use as an ethnographic source. The existence of two well known and high quality captivity narratives, which offer numerous points of comparison, thus dictates the choice of the societies compared here: the Maliseet and the Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka).

Sources: The Captivity Narrative

An important genre of North American literature is the “captivity narrative.” Often lurid tales purporting to tell “how I was held captive by Indians” were popular for many decades and still hold a fascination for some readers.³ Most claim to be factual, firsthand accounts of the narrator’s sojourn as a captive among Indians. There are several hundred such accounts. Some are pure fiction, most are at least based on actual events, and a few have become important ethnographic sources. The two narratives used here fall into the latter category. Their overall ethnographic usefulness and veracity is well attested. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that both are examples of a literary genre and that their form and some of their contents reflect this fact.

The first full length separately published narrative which tells of a European captive among Indians was that of Hans Staden’s adventures in Brazil (*Warhaftige Historia*), which was published in 1557. The first tale of captivity in English was Job Hortop’s *The travailes of an Englishman* published in 1591 and which described a captivity in Mexico. Probably the best known of the early captivity stories (both at the time and in later

times) was John Smith’s brief account of his adventure with Pocahontas which appeared in his *General historie of Virginia* (1624) (Vail, 1949: 30). From the 1680s the genre developed rapidly, especially in New England where it quickly became important—perhaps because the stories of capture and escape (or rescue) were excellent vehicles for tales of moral peril and redemption,

Mary Rowlandson’s story, published in 1682, began the New England series and was one of the most popular captivities ever published (Vail, 1949: 31). The genre flourished in the 18th century, but by the early 19th century it had lost much of its quality and some popularity, although it continued to be added to through much of the 19th century.

John Gyles, an Englishman, was captured in 1689 at Pemaquid, Maine by a raiding party of Indians—at least some of whom were Maliseet. He was then ten years old. He remained in Indian hands for six years and then in French hands for a time. At the age of nineteen he was finally released by the French and reunited with the survivors of his family. For many years after that he served as a translator and negotiator with the French and Indians. He died about 1755. His narrative was published in Boston in 1736. The *Memoirs...* purport to be “written by himself,” but it was possibly “written and embellished” by Joseph Seccombe, a minister. The work has been aptly described as “one of the most diverse accounts of New England captivity: part horror story, part ethnography, part natural history, and part sermon” (Vaughan and Clark, 1981: 94). It deserves to be one of the better known accounts of the “Puritans among the Indians.”⁴

John Jewitt and a fellow seaman were captured in March, 1803 by the people of Nootka Sound when the Indians stormed and destroyed the ship *Boston*. The rest of the crew were killed. He and his companion were released in July of 1805. Jewitt was nearly 20 when captured. He was English born and raised, having joined the *Boston* at Hull in 1802 as armourer. After release, Jewitt spent most of his life in New England, dying in Connecticut in 1821. He kept a journal while in captivity and this was published in 1807. This journal was not a popular success and has been seldom reprinted. The *Narrative of the Adventures and Sufferings* was published in Connecticut in 1815. It was written by Richard Alsop, a professional writer, who interviewed Jewitt to obtain additional information to allow expansion of the very brief journal entries. The *Narrative* was popular, being reprinted at least 18 times in the 19th century. After he returned to Euro-American society one of Jewitt’s activities was to perform in a play recreating his life as a

captive. He also sold copies of the *Narrative* door to door in various New England towns. He played no significant role in the North Pacific trade. Although care must be taken because the *Narrative* is a work of literature, it is easily the most important source of ethnographic information about the Nuu-chah-nulth of the numerous accounts available from the maritime fur trade period.⁵

The differences and similarities between these two captivity narratives can be summarized as follows:

1. Both captivities occurred relatively early in the respective groups' contact periods (Gyles/Maliseet about 80 years of initial contact; Jewitt/Nuu-chah-nulth about 30 years).

2. Both accounts are based on prolonged contact (Gyles was with the Maliseet for 6 years; Jewitt was with the Nuu-chah-nulth for 2 years, 4 months).

3. Both men were comparatively young when taken, although at 10 Gyles was clearly in a different circumstance than Jewitt at 19.

4. Both accounts contain religious passages—in Jewitt's case perhaps a tribute to the demands of the genre.

5. Both finished accounts were probably written by others.

6. Gyles' account occurs rather early in the tradition of the captivity narrative, Jewitt's rather late in this tradition.

7. Gyle's account is only one of many from the New England area. Although there were a number of other European captives on the Northwest Coast, Jewitt's narrative is the only extensive first-hand account known to me, except for a very obscure Russian account of a period of captivity among the Makah (see Chevigny 1965).

8. Jewitt's *Journal* formed a contemporary written basis for the later *Narrative*, whereas there was no contemporary written basis for Gyles' account.

9. Gyles' seems to have learned the language well; Jewitt made strong claims to language competence, but, while he clearly had some fluency in Nootka, his claims are probably exaggerated. (All of the Wakashan languages [of which Nootka is one] are notoriously difficult for Indo-European speakers to learn. By the time Jewitt was held at Nootka Sound several Nuu-chah-nulth had learned some Spanish and English. In addition, the so-called Chinook Jargon had developed as a major medium of communication between many groups of Northwest Coast Indians and Europeans. Thus, Jewitt did not have to master Nootka fluently in order to communicate with his captors.)

10. Both men turned their captivity experiences to account in later life, although in very different ways.

11. Jewitt had one only European companion throughout his captivity (a middle-aged adult). Gyles was often alone with his Indian captors, although there were other English captives present from time to time and occasionally he had brief contact with the French

(who frightened him more than the Indians in the early period of his captivity).

12. Finally, the larger historical context of the two captivities was somewhat different: Jewitt's occurred near the end of the strictly maritime portion of the North Pacific fur trade, a period marred by sporadic violent clashes between Euro-Americans and Indians; in Gyles' time the contact between white and Indian was the result of the growth of land-based European colonization, and occurred in the context of the Anglo-French struggle for supremacy in northeastern North America as well as other parts of the world.

The comparison of "slavery" and "captivity" that follows will be based almost exclusively on the materials contained in the two narratives just compared. This means that a full-scale comparison of the two culture areas is not undertaken here. Thus, some of the variation present in each area is overlooked. The advantage gained by the narrower focus is that the two accounts not only provide ethnographic data, but allow us insight into the experience of *being* a captive or a slave that is missing from other types of sources.

Maliseet and Nuu-chah-nulth Society Compared

The societies in which Gyles and Jewitt found themselves held captive were rather different. Maliseet subsistence was a mixture of horticulture, hunting and gathering;⁶ Nuu-chah-nulth subsistence depended primarily upon fishing and maritime hunting.⁷ Despite the presence of salmon in both environments and despite the presence of maize and other plant crops among the Maliseet, Nuu-chah-nulth levels of productivity seem to have been considerably higher than Maliseet levels of productivity. Both narratives support this view, for while both Gyles and Jewitt faced hunger at times, the situation of Gyles and his Indian captors seems to have been the most serious. For example, one winter Gyles and the family group he was then living with were often without food for three or four days at a time (Vaughan and Clark, 1981: 103), while neither the Nuu-chah-nulth nor Jewitt seem to have been without food for such periods.

Differences in production levels would also partially explain the differences in the size of the two groups. The entire Maliseet population was probably no larger than that of the single summer community where Jewitt was held at Nootka Sound. Each group followed a seasonal round that meant (according to season) different locales and different sizes and social composition of the local community. The smallest group Gyles found himself in (a winter hunting party) contained only

eight or ten persons, while Jewitt probably never lived in a local group of fewer than 100 persons.

The basis of Maliseet social organization was the bilateral extended family, while the basic unit among the Nuu-chah-nulth was a non-unilineal descent group of the "patrilineal stem lineage" type.⁸ The Maliseet were a part of the Abenaki confederacy and had both "peace" and "war" chiefs, but when one compares the accounts of Gyles and Jewitt one of the most striking differences to emerge is the power of strong local leaders among the Nuu-chah-nulth in contrast with the virtual absence of such figures among Gyles' Maliseet.

Maliseet and Nuu-chah-nulth Captivity Compared

With this literary, historic, and ethnographic background in mind we can now consider the problem of Maliseet and Nuu-chah-nulth captives. In reading the two narratives one of the most striking differences is the attitude of the two narrators. Gyles thinks of himself as a prisoner, continually exposed to either of two even worse fates—death by torture or sale to the French; but always hoping to return to the English. Jewitt recognizes that he is a slave and that there is some danger of death or of sale to another Indian owner; his hope is rescue by a Euro-American ship. It is not simply a matter of vocabulary, although Gyles calls himself a captive or prisoner and Jewitt usually uses the term slave. It is also a matter of comparison with others of similar status in the society. In Gyles' case these are other English captives—some of whom are tortured and killed. In Jewitt's case these are other Indians, obtained by purchase or capture, and subject to treatment and expectations similar to his own.

The context of the risk of being killed in the two narratives is very revealing of the differences in Maliseet captivity and Nuu-chah-nulth slavery. At several times both Gyles and Jewitt feel that they are in danger of being killed. The threats to Gyles occur in association with torture and involve generalized violence against English captives or the desire of specific Indians to take revenge against an English person for the death of a relative at English hands. The threats and torture often occur in a clearly ritual context. Gyles is spared when his Indian master follows the custom and lays "down a ransom such as a bag of corn, or a blanket, or such like, by which they may redeem them from their cruelties for that dance so that he shall not be

touched by any" (Vaughan and Clark, 1981: 100). Each new situation requires a new ransom from the master.

The threats to Jewitt occur primarily when some members of the community feel he should be killed in order to reduce the chance of reprisals from Euro-American ships or when he or his white fellow-slave have violated some important local custom. Jewitt is not killed because his owner, Maquina, the leading title-holder of the group, refuses to agree to his being put to death. This indicates both a difference in the nature of the position of the "master" in the two societies and also a difference in who held captives or slaves.

According to Jewitt only title-holders were allowed to own slaves among the Nuu-chah-nulth. Gyles' account of his master is not as clear as would be desired, but first claim on a captive clearly belonged to his captor and his relatives. Gyles' master does not seem to have held particularly high status among the Maliseet. In addition Gyles' master is never named nor does he emerge as a personality in Gyles' account despite the fact that, some years after Gyles had returned to New England, his former master visited him, "where I made him very welcome" (Vaughan and Clark, 1981: 125). Maquina is not only named but emerges as a vivid personality. This is not merely due to Alsop's literary skill, for other contemporary accounts give similar impressions of Maquina. Jewitt describes several large scale ceremonials that were sponsored by Maquina and in which he took a leading role. Gyles described no such activity by his master. Nor do the Maliseet ceremonials that Gyles does describe seem as elaborate or as clearly focused on a single strong figure as do Nuu-chah-nulth ceremonials. Contrast Gyles' description of a ritual connected with success in hunting (Vaughan and Clark, 1981: 114) with Jewitt's description of the rituals surrounding whaling (1975: 60) or the "wolf dance" for Maquina's son (1975: 52-53). One can also contrast the elaborate rituals that immediately followed the capture of the *Boston*, where Maquina hosted visiting leaders from other Nuu-chah-nulth political groups and exercised his rights to preserve Jewitt and his companion as his slaves (Jewitt, 1975: 17-20), with the initial ritual torture of Gyles and other captives where Gyles was saved after a present was given to the assembled Maliseets by his captor's relatives (Vaughan and Clark, 1981: 102). Thus, the difference is between an ordinary member of Maliseet society who has a captive attached to his household and a powerful man, who occupies an office, and who has added a desirable slave to his already extensive group of slaves.

With respect to numbers there are also clear differences between the two societies. Gyles is sometimes in the company of as many as six other English captives, but he seems to be the only captive attached directly to his master's household. In addition, whenever several captives are in the same community, some are either killed or dispersed to other places. Thus, captives represent a very small proportion of the regular population of the communities Gyles lived in. Jewitt estimated that Maquina owned about fifty slaves beside himself. Other title-holders in the community had as many as twelve. If Jewitt's various estimates of community size and so on are even approximately correct this means that at least fifteen to twenty per cent of the population of the Moachat federation was slave.⁹

Maquina received a number of offers for Jewitt from the title-holders of other Nuu-chah-nulth groups. His skills as a blacksmith made him especially valuable, but this value did not make offers for Jewitt unique. Slaves were exchanged for other slaves, for goods, or were a part of title-holder marriage transactions on frequent occasions, so that economic transactions involving slaves were not uncommon and may even have been frequent among the Nuu-chah-nulth. This is in marked contrast with Gyles' situation. Two Indian masters had some joint interest in Gyles. When one of them died a dispute arose over who now held Gyles—the deceased master's widow or the other master. One solution to the quarrel that was given serious consideration was to kill Gyles. But a Jesuit persuaded the contenders to sell Gyles to the French instead. This they did and after three years with the French Gyles returned to the English. The important point to note here is that when the idea of sale came up it was introduced by an outsider and the sale was to outsiders as well.

Finally, we can consider the living conditions of the two Whites. Both suffered hardships and privations, absolute and relative. Yet, if we except torture and related unpleasantness, Gyles' hardships were essentially those of his captors: when they suffered cold or hunger, he suffered cold or hunger. (See, for example, Gyles' description of a winter's hunting, when both he and his Indian masters suffered equally from the cold and shortages of food (Vaughan and Clark, 1981: 103-104).) The work that he was required to do was also clearly like that which would have been expected of a Maliseet of his age and sex. Although Gyles clearly felt that he did a disproportionate amount of the drudgery (especially hauling wood and water) (Vaughan and Clark, 1981: 111-112), the fact that he was undoubtedly less skilled than a

Maliseet youth of comparative age at either hunting or manufacturing tasks should not be overlooked. Jewitt also knew times of hunger and want. These seem to have been associated with times of relative scarcity in the Nootka Sound community as a whole, although there is no evidence that if Jewitt was hungry this meant that Maquina was hungry as well. Having been ship armourer, Jewitt was often kept busy making metal objects for Maquina. Even though this made him particularly valuable to his owner, Jewitt was also frequently put to hauling wood and water as well. Indeed, the narrative contains many complaints about being "put to drudgery." At one point in his narrative Jewitt claims to be, himself, the owner of six slaves, adding "my situation was rendered more comfortable... my slaves generally furnishing me" (Jewitt, 1975: 73). However, later in the same paragraph he complains, "I suffered more than I can express from the cold, especially as I was compelled to perform the laborious task of cutting and bringing in of the firewood." The passage from which this quotation is taken makes it clear that Jewitt was not assisted at his task by any of his alleged slaves. Leaving aside the possibility that Jewitt's six slaves are another of the exaggerations and romanticizations found in the text, this passage makes clear that, however special he might be because he was White or, more importantly, because of his skill as a smith, Jewitt was still merely one of Maquina's many slaves, with his share of the labour to perform. Unlike Gyles, Jewitt did not perform the tasks done by all of his age and sex — title-holders certainly engaged in different kinds of activity and even commoners probably undertook a somewhat different range of labour.

Summary and Conclusions

The preceding sections have shown the following differences in the nature of captivity among the Maliseet and Nuu-chah-nulth; these differences being reflected in the Gyles and Jewitt narratives:

1. The labour of slaves is distinguished more sharply from that of some other members of the society among the Nuu-chah-nulth.
2. There are more slaves, in both absolute and proportional terms, among the Nuu-chah-nulth. In addition most Nuu-chah-nulth slaves were Indian, while Maliseet captives were primarily White.
3. Ownership was concentrated in the ruling elite among the Nuu-chah-nulth; it seems to have been more widely dispersed among the Maliseet.
4. There were regular intra-Nuu-chah-nulth transactions in slaves; while transactions in Maliseet captives were Maliseet/French.

These and other differences suggest that Maliseet captivity was much like that found in most other North American Indian groups and that the marked differences in the Nuu-chah-nulth case enable us to speak of slavery rather than captivity on the Northwest Coast.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on material collected for a large scale research project on Northwest Coast slavery undertaken by my colleague Donald Mitchell and myself with research funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the University of Victoria and the Province of British Columbia. I have benefited from conversations with Pierrette Désy on Indian captivity and captivity narratives. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1984 meeting of the Canadian Ethnology Society, Montreal. I wish to thank Donald Mitchell and Kathleen Mooney for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2. Slavery is one of the main forms of servitude found in the world's societies. Analysts often have difficulty in deciding whether a particular social form is best labeled as slavery or as some other type of servitude. The problem is compounded by the fact that slavery is often not the only kind of servitude found in a particular society. For example, clearly the status of slave was very common in West African societies, but a good case can be made for calling some servile persons in some of these societies "serfs" rather than slaves (see Derman, 1973: 27-42). Patterson's recent discussion of the problem suffers from treating slavery in isolation rather than as one of many servile statuses. Nevertheless, his discussion of the definitional problem is one of the best. He downplays the property side of slavery and emphasizes social alienation, defining slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons" (1982: 13). The distinction between captives and slaves recognizes that, in those societies with captives, the norm is not the permanent alienation of nor dishonor for captives, but rather the transformation, via indoctrination and adoptive kinship, of captives into group members. Watson's distinction between "open" and "closed" slavery is relevant (1980), although I argue that most aboriginal North American societies were so far along on the "open" end of the continuum that it is no longer useful to think of them as slaves.

3. For a good discussion of the captivity narrative and the problem of the "White Indian" see the introduction to Désy 1983.

4. For convenience and accessibility I use the reprint contained in Vaughan and Clark (1981), which also contains a good discussion of the Puritan version of the genre.

5. For an account of Jewitt's life after his rescue see Meany, 1940. The most useable edition of Jewitt's

Narrative is the 1975 Ballena Press Edition (see Jewitt 1975 under References). It contains a very useful introduction by Robert F. Heizer and notes compiled with the assistance of Phillip Drucker. The Nuu-chah-nulth are better known in the ethnographic literature as the Nootka. I use the term Nuu-chah-nulth here in deference to the wishes of the current day descendants of the people indigenous to the West Coast of Vancouver Island.

6. For Maliseet ethnography see Erickson 1978 and the sources cited there.

7. For Nuu-chah-nulth ethnography see Drucker 1951. For Nuu-chah-nulth slavery in particular see Donald 1983.

8. In patrilineal stem lineages descent group leadership is vested in a formal office that is inherited patrilineally. Outside the chiefly line, individuals demonstrate claims to group membership by means of non-unilineal ties (Donald 1983: 109).

9. Several of the winter villages in the Nootka Sound area resided together in a single summer village under Maquina's leadership. This federation (or confederation in Drucker's terminology) was one of several among the Nuu-chah-nulth.

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