

**Christina Gish Berndt, “Kinship as an Assertion of Sovereign Native Nationhood,”**  
**accepted for the anthology, Tribal Worlds, edited by Brian Hosmer and Larry**  
**Nesper, SUNY Press.**

“As I use [the term tribe] and as I understand other Indian people using it, it means a group of people living pretty much in the same place who know who their relatives are.” -- Vine Deloria, Jr.

As a concept, the nation is maddeningly difficult to define. Like “spirit” or “health”, the term “nation” encompasses a multiplicity of meanings that shift depending on the context. John Carlos Rowe has argued that the “...use of the word national ...refers to a complex and irreducible array of discourses, institutions, policies, and practices which, even if they are in flux or in competition with other structures and allegiances, cannot be easily wished away.”<sup>i</sup> Despite its fluid and constructed nature, the nation is nevertheless quite real and has had, since its inception, power to order the world.<sup>ii</sup> Because the word has such a multiplicity of meanings, I use the term in a broad sense, to refer to a collectivity with political autonomy recognized by others outside of the scope of its influence. Exploring exactly how Native peoples understood their own collective sociopolitical organization sheds light on the multiple and often contradictory understandings that Europeans and Americans developed to define Native nations and the ambiguous actions government officials often took in relation to them.<sup>iii</sup> Euro-Americans recognized that Native people organized themselves as coherent political entities but interpreted these collectivities through Western political constructions. Although American understandings of Native nations have shifted over time, they have mainly been based on Western assumptions that all valid political formations mirror those of the nation-state. As the nation-state emerged and took precedence over other political forms, Europeans and Americans began to view Native sociopolitical organization as either comparable to the nation-state in form—even ascribing it political autonomy—or as chaotic and formless, and therefore opposed to the nation-state. Neither representation accurately reflected Native nationhood in its multiple forms. I seek to unravel the

distinctions between the nation-state as it was first defined in Western Europe and North America and the nationhood found among Native peoples of North America.

Assuming that Native sociopolitical organization and interaction mirrors the rigid constructions of the state both ignores the complexity of Native historical action and it also glosses this complexity in a way that benefits the U.S. nation's hegemonic narrative. According to such a narrative, if Plains peoples are divided into nation-like tribes with a unified membership and a bounded territory then a successful military campaign against a tribe results in the capture of the territory and in control over the population.<sup>iv</sup> If tribes were bounded like nations, they could be conquered and controlled. Conversely, if Native peoples were chaotic with minimal or unbounded political organization, they required subjugation and assimilation under the civilizing structure of the state.<sup>v</sup> The dominant narrative of U.S. history has included American Indians since before the earliest days of the United States, but has supported U.S. hegemony by telling the story from the perspective of the state.<sup>vi</sup> When scholarship considers Native perspectives, including the relationship between Native sociopolitical organization and Native historical action, the narratives of the same historical moments found in hegemonic tellings have the power to challenge the nationalist and empirical ideological presumptions of the United States.

In order to begin to develop a scholarly discussion of American Indian culture and history from a Native perspective, we must not only recognize the cracks in the idea of the nation-state as applied to Native peoples, but we must also develop a new scholarly understanding of Native collective assertions of sovereignty centered in Native understandings of social organization. For American Indian peoples today, sovereignty has taken on a specific meaning through the contestations with the United States over the extent of Native political autonomy recognized by the state. While I acknowledge the importance of specificity for current political issues, I use the term more broadly to refer to an autonomous self-governing political entity that may also construct a distinctive cultural identity. In order to do this, I explore the Cheyenne nation as a case study to help illuminate a nationhood that exercises sovereignty without relying on the mechanisms used by the state. Both the terms "nation" and "sovereignty" are problematic in such an

endeavor because of their current association with the political mechanisms of the nation-state.<sup>vii</sup> Nevertheless, I suggest that sociopolitical processes other than those that depend on bounded categories can establish a political organization with the autonomy associated with the term “nation.”

Benedict Anderson argued that members of the nation-state imagine themselves as a homogenous collective. One citizen is essentially equivalent to another through the mass distribution of print media, allowing citizens to imagine the nation-state as homogenous and bounded and also reproducible globally.<sup>viii</sup> American Indian peoples certainly do not imagine themselves in this way. In fact, they are adamant about not being reproducible; however, they certainly do imagine themselves as collectivities. Markers that scholars have used to distinguish Native nations like language, religion, or territory can be used to assert collective identity depending on context, but the medium that people use consistently use to imagine themselves as part of a larger whole is kinship. Similar to print media in the nation-state, kinship builds a network that extends beyond the family or the band—often even beyond known relatives—allowing members to imagine themselves as part of a collectivity. You know you are Cheyenne because your relatives are Cheyenne. You may also have Lakota relative but this usually plays out as something akin to dual citizenship, and you are Cheyenne if you live with your Cheyenne relatives and Lakota if you live with Lakota relatives. Such an identity can shift if the circumstances in your life demand it. What results is a collective socio-political group that is highly flexible and fluid because its membership is relatively open to those who can access it through familial relations of some type. Kinship is the main metaphor that is used when Cheyenne people talk about how they know they are Cheyenne.

The nation-state exercises its sovereignty by enforcing the boundaries it constructs both on territory and also on the person through legal and social contracts, and it determines both national and international political and economic action in relation to these boundaries. I propose that alternatively a Native nation exercised sovereignty by maintaining a web of kin-based relationships and strategically activating these relationships to take political and economic action and to access territory.<sup>ix</sup> Certainly, as

R. Brian Ferguson and Neil L. Whitehead argue, indigenous peoples respond pragmatically to changing conditions, including the dramatic changes that accompanied contact with state societies including the dramatic changes that accompanied contact with state societies, even if this means discarding previous social formations.<sup>x</sup> I argue, however, that Native peoples do not necessarily overhaul their sociopolitical organization to accommodate state encroachment; more often they respond to shifting circumstances by adjusting already flexible formations to meet the needs of the moment. By emphasizing the role of kinship in articulating and maintaining the Cheyenne nation, I use this case study to demonstrate that Native nations of the Plains were historically grounded in institutions constructed differently from those of the state, revealing an indigenous sovereignty that has neither emerged as a response to colonialism or depended on the confines of the state.

#### Imagining American Indian Nations Through the Legal Presumptions of the State

The political sovereignty of American Indian nations has most commonly been understood as emerging from a historical process between European and American nation-states and Native peoples. This assumes some pre-existing sociopolitical organization that is then classified as sovereign by Western powers. The federal government of the United States has categorized American Indian peoples as members of their own nations from its inception, even while recognizing varying degrees of sovereign status depending on historical circumstances. This is demonstrated by the fact that the United States constructed its interactions with Native peoples as nation-to-nation relationships and in turn encoded this construction into the policies and laws of the state. The nation-to-nation relationship established between the United States and American Indian peoples continued the relationship Great Britain already established on the assumption that Native nations were sovereign.<sup>xi</sup> For example, because the Iroquois helped to defeat the French during the Seven Years War, Great Britain recognized the national status of several large Native groups in the area and their rights to large pieces of territory.<sup>xii</sup> The United States continued the practice of recognizing Native sovereignty

after the Revolutionary War, particularly because they were interested in maintaining certain Native nations as military allies.<sup>xiii</sup>

When the United States formed its own nation, it recognized the sovereignty of Native nations in its founding documents, delineating the relationship between itself and these nations in the United States Constitution.<sup>xiv</sup> David Wilkins demonstrated that Native nations have an extraconstitutional status in relation to the United States because they were defined as distinctive polities in the Constitution and this was affirmed through treaties.<sup>xv</sup> In this way, American Indian nations were originally constructed in U.S. law as independent political entities that could rationally enter into relationships with nation-states, even though they were not always categorized as foreign nations.

The epistemology and the political constructions of Native nationhood in American legal and cultural discourse, however, have changed during the course of the nineteenth century. The recognition of certain American Indian political bodies as sovereign has held up throughout the history of the United States, although it has often been under attack.<sup>xvi</sup> For example, long after the United States established a nation-state on the North American continent, American Indian peoples maintained control over their own legal and political systems. Native nations made their own legal and political decisions, regulating themselves entirely, until Congress passed the Seven Major Crimes Act in 1885.<sup>xvii</sup> Furthermore, the U.S. negotiation of treaties with American Indian peoples indisputably demonstrates that the government considered Native peoples to be sovereign entities.<sup>xviii</sup> Although federal and local government officials have often broken treaties, these documents have never been fully discarded as markers of Native sovereign status. While American history has often constructed Indian peoples as conquered peoples, the United States did not deal with them as such for most of the nineteenth century; instead they negotiated with them as sovereign entities through treaties.

Today, when Native peoples, scholars, or legal and political officials in the United States refer to American Indian nations as sovereign, they are often referring to a specific legal status conferred by the state. This status currently grants important political powers and access to federal resources. Native sovereignty, however, has not always taken this

form. David Wilkins and Tsianina Lomawaima have argued that Native sociopolitical bodies have always been sovereign entities and that this sovereignty is inherent. They stated that although scholars may delineate various specific criteria for distinguishing a sovereign entity from some other form of human organization, inherent sovereignty always inheres in self-governing groups.<sup>xix</sup> The sovereignty of Native nations existed before the founding of the United States, before the drafting of the Constitution, and it continues to exist outside of the state or the Constitution.<sup>xx</sup> Although the United States has recognized the sovereignty of some Native peoples within its borders, the sovereignty of these nations does not depend on this recognition.

### Imagining American Indian Nations Through the Epistemological Presumptions of Social Science

During the eighteenth century, scholars also began to adopt the idea that American Indians organized themselves politically as tribal nations. This did not necessarily carry an assumption of sovereignty, however, but was instead based on the idea of a tribe as a bounded ethnic unit. As Eric Wolf has demonstrated, scholars developed a bounded understanding of human social organization with the rise of the social sciences. As part of this epistemological shift, scholars came to endow “nations, societies, or cultures with the qualities of internally homogenous and externally distinctive and bounded objects” and thus it became “easy to sort the world.”<sup>xxi</sup> As anthropology and sociology were gaining academic legitimacy, scholars of these disciplines began to embrace the widely held notion of the Indian tribe as bounded in a manner resembling the nation-state while lacking the political institutions of the state.

The term “tribe” as it has been used to refer to a type of human group has been defined in such multiple ways over time that it has developed an ambiguous meaning. Despite its varied use, however, its usage reveals nation-state assumptions about the nature of social organization.<sup>xxii</sup> Susan Sharrock demonstrated that scholars have presumed that tribes were bounded, homogenous entities, noting that scholars represented them as composed of members “of one ethnic identity who spoke a common language and shared a common lifeway in contiguous territories.”<sup>xxiii</sup> In his discussion of the

concept of “tribe,” Morton H. Fried noted that Lewis Henry Morgan applied this kind of bounded definition to the Iroquois, and even extended it to “the great body of the American aborigines.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Fried distilled Morgan’s definition into a group of multiple kin units that shared a language, territory, name, and structural government.<sup>xxv</sup> In Morgan’s original definition, the similarity between tribe and nation are clear—both are defined by a set of limiting categories such as language, territory, and political organization that act to delineate a specific named entity. Fried also noted that ethnographers have tended towards representing the tribe as “a reality transcending time,” that maintained integrity and homogeneity throughout history.<sup>xxvi</sup> Again such representations parallel constructions of the nation-state as eternal, emerging from a condition of purity, and made up of a diverse population unified in national purpose and recast as homogenous.

As Sharrock and Fried have demonstrated, the tribe was imagined as a political community that was limited, bounded, and emerged from a relationship with a particular, bounded landscape that produced a distinct ethnicity, even if it did not necessarily produce rational citizens. By the turn of the twentieth century, the concept of nation as bounded and homogenous so thoroughly governed scholarly thought on human organization that it generated a totalizing explanation for human groupings, including those that clearly lacked state structured societies. According to the thought of the time, all human communities could be clearly categorized into entities reflective of the nation-state that were uniform in language and culture and spatially bounded. In keeping with this line of thought, scholarship of this period claimed that American Indian tribes were no different.

### The Cheyenne as a Tribal Nation: Representations and Interpretations

Because the concept of nation as a bounded, uniform entity had become naturalized as the only way to order human organization, early anthropologists and historians studying American Indian communities had no inclination to critique the bounded construction of tribe as an outgrowth of this ideology. Moreover, early scholars of Cheyenne culture and history rarely challenged this model and often embraced it even when they were aware of its contradictions and inflexibility. Although this conception of

tribe grew out of a comparison of Native social organization with that of the nation-state, it effectively erased American Indian sovereignty and political agency, imagining American Indian collective identity as entirely related to culture. To conceive of Native group identity in terms of the Western nation-state denies the people an intellectual sovereignty to exist as a nation on completely different terms.

Even the most definitive scholarship on the Cheyenne has drawn on nation-state presumptions to understand the people. Perhaps the clearest example of this perspective can be traced through the writings of George Bird Grinnell, who presented the Cheyenne as a unified tribal people in his scholarship.<sup>xxvii</sup> He did not actually name the Cheyenne as a nation, but he laid out their history in a clearly nationalist light. In his ethnographies, Grinnell reconstructed the many different groups that came together over time to form the Cheyenne, noting that these groups once had been considered separate entities.<sup>xxviii</sup> He even noted that, “the Cheyennes have among them a strong infusion of foreign blood.”<sup>xxix</sup> Nevertheless, in his ethnographies, Grinnell portrayed the Cheyenne as a unified ethnic group with bounded and distinct cultural traits, based on a shared language and religion. For Grinnell, the Cheyenne—like many nation-states—were not a people until the bands united.<sup>xxx</sup> Once he could identify the sociopolitical body of a unified Cheyenne tribe, he wrote about the tribe as culturally singular, rarely even distinguishing between Northern and Southern peoples.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Writing in the mid-twentieth century, E. Adamson Hoebel, did directly identify the Cheyenne as a nation. He opened his ethnographic text on the Cheyenne by describing their migration onto the plains and then discussed the diverse peoples that came together to form as one group. He then declared the Cheyenne to be a stable, unified nation by 1800, but stated that from 1830 onward “the solidarity of the Cheyennes was stretched thin by the great distances separating the northernmost from the southernmost bands.”<sup>xxxii</sup> In Hoebel’s conception, the Cheyenne nation existed only for a brief historical moment because it could not maintain unity across its vast territory despite the people’s mobility. Although, like Grinnell, Hoebel indicated that both the membership of the Cheyenne nation and the boundary of the nation itself were flexible,

he only described the Cheyenne as a nation during the period he believed that the people were continuously unified and ethnically and culturally discrete.

Hoebel used a nationalist understanding of unity to describe the Cheyenne people, arguing that specific institutions brought the people together in common understanding. If the people no longer held ceremonies together, and more importantly for Hoebel, if they no longer made political and legal decisions together, they were no longer unified as one nation.<sup>xxxiii</sup> He argued that the 1851 treaty, in which the United States distinguished between the Northern and the Southern Cheyenne, demonstrated that the Cheyenne had split in two and lost their national unity.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Hoebel was clearly bounded by his deployment of the nation-state model, leading to his assertion that the Cheyenne could only sustain national unity for approximately thirty years.

Unlike Hoebel, Donald Berthrong and Peter Powell were not explicit in their use of a national model to describe Cheyenne social organization. Instead, their scholarship is marked by the absence of addressing the nature Cheyenne social organization. In this absence, both authors continued to assume the Cheyenne nation parallels the nation-state. For example, Berthrong pointed to Cheyenne government and religion as unifying national institutions.<sup>xxxv</sup> Thus religion and government became institutions that establish the boundaries of the tribe. Powell also pointed to Cheyenne religious and political organizations as defining criteria for demonstrating that the Cheyenne people were a unified tribe.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Nevertheless, he failed to describe the ways that the Cheyenne understood themselves as one people beyond these objective criteria. Both authors also use the term “tribe” without qualifying it, demonstrating an uncritical acceptance of a bounded understanding of Cheyenne sociopolitical organization. The absence of a detailed description of the nature of Cheyenne sociopolitical organization and the use of limiting criteria to define the group suggests that both authors continue to assume a nation-state model in their histories of the Cheyenne people.

Karl N. Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel also address the nature of Cheyenne sociopolitical organization in their seminal work, *The Cheyenne Way*, which seeks to illuminate Cheyenne legal systems. These authors argue that although many Plains peoples had amorphous political composition, the Cheyenne possessed a unified political

system constituting a council of chiefs and the military societies.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The chief's council, or the Council of Forty-Four, had legal authority to determine political action and regulation and to dole out punishment to those who overstepped the bounds. The military societies had the power to enforce order, particularly at times when the bands came together in large encampments for a summer buffalo hunt or the Sun Dance. So the authors point to unifying political institutions, but they also claim that the majority of Cheyenne people were versed in the legal expectations of the nation and that the act of exercising law and determining justice was not merely confined to these institutions and their members.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Llewellyn and Hoebel certainly viewed the Cheyenne as a homogenous and bounded sociopolitical group, often comparing it to modern nations, but they also suggested that the flexibility of the system and the ability of its members to interpret and shape its institutions to the needs of the moment gave the collectivity a certain resiliency in asserting political autonomy.

In his book, *The Cheyenne Nation*, John Moore recognized the limitations that tightly integrated models of Cheyenne sociopolitical organization have had for delineating Cheyenne sovereignty. Moore emphasized a more continuous and flexible Cheyenne nationhood, demarcating it as a "tribal nation" and defining the nation in terms of a distinct territory, citizenship, political unity, and language.<sup>xxxix</sup> To separate his understanding of the Cheyenne nation from older interpretations, Moore described Cheyenne social organization in great detail. He emphasized its flexibility and the value placed on incorporating outsiders. He also related the history of the many tribal divisions and mergers. Moore emphasized the complexity of the Cheyenne nation when he stated,

It is misleading, I think, to claim that the strength of the Cheyenne nation lay in its tight political integration, its homogeneity, and its maintenance of ethnic boundaries. I believe it is much more accurate to say that the political and military strength of the Cheyennes lay in their dispersal across broad reaches of the central plains, their economic and productive specializations, and their special trade relationships and intermarriages with neighboring groups.<sup>xl</sup>

He believed that such a flexible social system, which allowed bands to disperse and to incorporate outsiders for benefits of trade and alliance, helped form and strengthen the Cheyenne nation.

In assigning the Cheyenne a national status, however, he could not escape the definitions constructed by the Western nation-state. He continued to imagine Cheyenne nationhood in terms of nation-state presumptions: as based on certain bounded and unchanging cultural and political institutions. John Moore has argued that a set of common understandings unified the Cheyenne people. Such understandings included their shared sense of territory, their alliances against common enemies, and their communication with a single language.<sup>xli</sup> Although he allowed for flexibility and complexity within the tribal nation, adding important new insights to the study of Cheyenne history, ultimately he represented the outer boundaries of the Cheyenne as rigid, assuming that people were incorporated under a discretely defined and bounded Cheyenne nation. Although Moore recognized the importance of social relations for the Cheyenne, his emphasis on state-based conceptions of the nation led him to a definition of tribal nation that remained too rigid to reflect the full flexibility of Cheyenne socio-political organization.

In alignment with the Western standard for representing American Indian nations in the United States, scholars have represented the Cheyenne as a tribe, uniform in membership and culture, and bounded by a vast but spatially distinct territory. Yet at the same time, these authors recognized that the Cheyenne did not completely fit a bounded and homogenous model. They all acknowledged that the Cheyenne nation was not a continuously bounded, uniform cultural, political, or social entity. Thus, although these scholars have delineated internal tribal divisions and external intertribal relations, they failed to question the assumption that the Cheyenne resembled the nation-state, using the term “tribe” and sometimes even using the term “nation” uncritically.

### Reconsidering “Tribe”: Questioning the Naturalness of the Nation-State

Viewing Native nations as tribes has provided both scholars and government officials with a set of categories that facilitated their efforts to contain, define, and control Native peoples. Yet American perceptions of the American Indian tribe reflected a certain ambiguity about acknowledging the sovereign status of Native nations, present in both U.S. policy and scholarship about American Indian peoples. Throughout the history

of the United States, officials representing the government have treated Indian people as both members of their own tribal nations and as irrational non-citizens who should be incorporated into the American nation.<sup>xlii</sup> Regardless, both depictions reflect conceptions of American Indian peoples through the lens of the nation-state, but these portrayals can either define Native peoples as parallel to the nation-state for purposes of containment or as contradictory to the nation-state for the purpose of control. Representing Indian peoples as tribal nations provides an ambiguity that allows both scholars and officials to designate them either as bounded entities with a uniform membership, culture, and territory like the state or as chaotic, boundless, irrational entities lacking national formation depending on the agenda of the moment. Both constructions legitimate the state's domination of Native nations. If Native peoples are easily delineated tribal nations, their territory could be won or conquered and their people incorporated into the conquering nation. If Native peoples are nationless and therefore assumed to lack political formation, the state can justify control and assimilation of chaotic peoples within its borders through institutions like the military, the church, or the education system.

Although political representatives of the United States often imagined Native peoples as nations, they did not consistently treat Native nations as politically sovereign. Because the nation-state strives for uniformity within its borders, the United States has used the apparatus of the state to control all peoples that live inside its boundaries. Therefore, sovereign Native nations have often been viewed as incompatible with the state. During the nineteenth century, the anxiety steadily increased in the United States concerning the establishment of U.S. sovereignty over the entire landscape from the Atlantic to the Pacific and over a diverse population of newly encountered indigenous peoples, new citizens in territories captured from Mexico, and new immigrants. These new peoples had to be incorporated under the umbrella of the state to assert U.S. sovereignty over its land and the inhabitants. In the aftermath, the government began to conceive of Native communities less as distinct sovereign nations and more as domestic ethnic and racialized communities.<sup>xliii</sup>

As the nineteenth century came to an end, federal and local officials began to design policy that abandoned the idea that American Indian people were sovereign

nations and reconstructed them as chaotic, irrational, and helpless entities that needed to be bounded by the state to maintain order.<sup>xliv</sup> At the height of the United States' nationalist assertions, policy-makers were attempting to disrupt the membership, identity, and land base of Native nations and incorporate their members into the state. Recent scholarship has related how colonial and imperial powers have trapped and incorporated indigenous peoples through creating space and enforcing boundaries.<sup>xliv</sup> Empires incorporated outsiders through the trappings of the state, creating documents like censuses and maps to legitimize their presence and to place both people and space under surveillance.<sup>xlvi</sup> Representatives of the United States used all these tactics to impose the order of the state onto Native people before the imposition of the reservation system and later using the reservation system. The idea that national formations can easily be seen from the outside because they depend on objective criteria has led both political representatives of the United States and Western scholars to assume that they can easily demarcate distinct American Indian tribal nations.<sup>xlvi</sup> These classifications have been understood as objective because they are based on criteria like language, religion, territory, cultural traits, and sometimes even racialized traits. By imposing these boundaries onto Native nations, Western political officials could gain a sense of control over peoples who appeared boundless.

Recently, scholars have begun the work of disrupting the naturalized constructions of the nation-state, arguing that it emerged as a sociopolitical formation in Europe at a specific historical moment.<sup>xlvi</sup> Because of its origins, the nation-state clearly has little relevance to the historical sociopolitical formations of indigenous groups separate from their interactions with the United States. Nevertheless, scholars must be wary that their understandings of Native sociopolitical organization do not unwittingly duplicate nationalist constructions. In 1967, Morton H. Fried argued that anthropologists had been too simplistic in their definition of the term "tribe." He took issue with the boundaries anthropology had used to separate tribes, declaring that, "most so-called tribes seem at close range to be curious *mélanges* rather than homogeneous units."<sup>xlix</sup> While Fried demarcated the terms of this critique, Susan Sharrock illustrated the problems with the term "tribe" on the ground. In her seminal study of Cree and Assiniboiné social

organization, Sharrock demonstrated that American Indian groups rarely aligned with the tribal designations imposed by scholars. These designations often assumed the group to be an ethnic unit, a linguistic unit, a territorial co-residential unit, a cultural unit, and a societal unit all at the same time.<sup>1</sup> These critiques posed the pivotal argument that social units were rarely discretely bounded or coordinated in their membership.

Frederick Barth also recognized that scholars fall into dangerous assumptions when they accept the naturalness of a given ethnic identity. Barth warned scholars against assuming bounded ethnic identities for Native peoples. In order to understand group formation, he argued, scholars must make studying ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance on Native terms a part of their methodology.<sup>li</sup> Barth developed a more fluid model of ethnic group formation by describing ethnic groups in relation to membership. He argued that the members of an ethnic group develop the defining characteristics of their group themselves but these characteristics are also organized through interaction between peoples. What's more, group members do not simply define themselves in opposition to other peoples, nor does group self-definition depend on exclusion or assimilation. Cultural differences can persist despite interethnic contact and even interdependence.<sup>lii</sup> Furthermore, important social relations also exist and continue across ethnic boundaries and can even be based on differing ethnic identities.<sup>liii</sup> The categories that are relevant to the members of the group may not be obvious to those outside of it. By exploring the processes involved in generating and maintaining ethnic groups, Barth conceived of a distinct group identity that can allow for overlap and interaction among groups. Extrapolating from Barth's argument, it is apparent that the supposedly objective criteria used to distinguish between American Indian groups has often not been the way Indian people distinguish themselves.

Fried elaborated on the idea that ethnic groups formed through interactions with outsiders, arguing that tribal organization was a historically specific sociopolitical manifestation constructed in response to contact with European states, resulting in the deterioration of earlier political formations.<sup>liv</sup> Whitehead agrees that tribes are the product of the historical violence of European occupation, while groups who come together through increased contact and cooperation fall under other categories of ethnic

formations.<sup>lv</sup> This definition of tribe reveals some of the markers of nation-state constructions. It emphasizes homogenous internal composition and depends on solidifying the boundary between the tribe and those outside it. Furthermore, this notion of tribe assumes a dramatic break from previous sociopolitical formations to something completely new. This suggests that tribes emerge from bounded entities that are stable in one form, break apart, and form some new bounded entity. It erases the historical continuity of a Native nation, assigning the state with extensive power to undermine non-state sociopolitical formations.

Thomas S. Abler describes tribes as tenuously held together by institutions like intermarriage, age-grades, or military and religious societies that crosscut primary segments like bands.<sup>lvi</sup> I argue, on the other hand, that such connections facilitated by kin relationships created flexible bonds that actually strengthened a Native nation's solidarity. Because Native nations exercised sovereignty through kinship channels that cut across its own boundaries, these entities had the flexibility to continue to take autonomous political action in the face of engagement with the state. Instead of establishing a fragile sociopolitical formation, channels of kin could be constructed and activated strategically depending on someone's needs in the moment. By maintaining multiple kin relationships through intermarriage and societies beyond the family and band, every group had numerous channels through which to gain access to land and resources, to gather military alliances, and to take refuge in times of crisis. Such practices helped Native nations to maintain their own categories, to assert their own economic and political agendas, and to avoid classification by the colonial state. Every state has struggled to differentiate and categorize the ethnic and political groups it encounters during encroachment, often because non-state groups maintain this type of flexible sociopolitical organization. Avoiding categorization benefited non-state peoples and aided them in asserting autonomy. While they resisted the categories of the colonizers, they were able to continue to order their own world. Retaining social, political, and cultural categories today remains a way that Indigenous people continue to assert sovereignty.

Imagining tribal nations as culturally unitary, socially connected by political institutions, and spatially defined by rigid geopolitical boundaries clearly fails in its simplicity. Although imagining tribes as emerging from specific political and historical circumstances might explain shifting sociopolitical institutions within non-state groups over time, it does not account for the durability of entire sociocultural entities that asserted continuous political autonomy. The Cheyenne existed as a group despite migrations from the Great Lakes to the Plains and the incorporation of outside bands and individuals. For this to be possible, this Native nation must have relied on something other than the maintenance of rigid social and political boundaries. To understand the ways that such flexible groups asserted a sense of sovereignty, scholars must explore how Native self-definition of group identity differed from that of the nation-state. We also must explore where American Indian sovereignty was located historically, how it was defined, and how people utilized earlier expressions of sovereignty when faced with involuntary engagement with the nation-state. The realization that state-based constructions of tribal nations have misrepresented the historical sociopolitical organization of American Indian peoples calls for the development of an understanding of American Indian sovereign communal organization that more accurately reflects an indigenous understanding. The idea of Native nationhood allows for flexible political expression that does not deteriorate earlier political formations and hence provides a deeper understanding of the ways that Native people were able to retain sovereignty on their own terms in the face of encroachment and even violence by the nation-state.

### Cheyenne Membership and Identity

Discarding the idea of the American Indian tribe as unified by a distinct set of cultural and political categories begs the question of how Native people established a sense of group solidarity and how the group asserted political autonomy. I propose the term “Native nation” to describe the sovereign sense of nationhood that Indian peoples asserted. The paper explores one example of Native nationhood, using Cheyenne social organization to illuminate the exercise of sovereignty. I use the term “Cheyenne” to refer to this Native nation throughout because although its organization shifted over time, the

people used one term, “Tsistsistas,” to refer to the body of the entire nation. This term was a meaningful category to both members of the nation and other Native nations who came into contact with the nation. I use the term “Cheyenne” because it is easily recognizable to any reader and is used to today by both Northern and Southern branches of the nation to refer to the entire collectivity.<sup>lvii</sup> In order to understand the Cheyenne nation as a meaningful entity to its members, we must consider processes of Cheyenne membership and its importance to the political exercise of sovereignty. Ultimately, demonstrating that the Cheyenne had their own socially ordered processes to regulate their membership, as well as the economic, political, and cultural activities provides evidence that the Cheyenne exercised a sovereign sense of nationhood through kinship relations.

Every Cheyenne person’s identity was marked by several memberships. A person identified with their kindred but was identified in speech by their band affiliation, not their camp.<sup>lviii</sup> Camps were simply made up of like-minded people, often from several kindreds, who lived and worked together, but band identity was determined at birth. Sometimes all the members of a camp identified mainly with one band and sometimes the members identified with several different bands. A person could choose a camp, but could not choose a band. Band identity was meaningful in that it marked a person’s place in the tribal circle and told others something about that person’s family and history. Membership in a military society or the quillworking society was also meaningful in that it told others about a person’s personal accomplishments and about the kind of responsibilities that he, or occasionally she, had accepted in relation to the Cheyenne nation.<sup>lix</sup> These memberships established a person’s identity in relation to the whole but did not establish an encompassing identity for the whole.

The Cheyenne did identify themselves as a whole, but this identity manifested at various levels. Tom Weist stated that in the Cheyenne language the word which names their nation means “like us” or “people like us”.<sup>lx</sup> Such a description of Cheyenne identity could be viewed on the one hand as exclusionary and ethnocentric. Only those like the Cheyenne could be considered part of the nation. But on the other hand, it has inclusionary possibilities because it refers not simply to the biological descendants of

Cheyenne people but also to all those like the Cheyenne. If a person had been around the Cheyenne way of living long enough, there could be a possibility this person would be considered Cheyenne. Cheyenneness was therefore a state of being, not based on birth and not based on a political organization. Therefore, Cheyenne identity could fluidly incorporate outsiders who had become like the Cheyenne. Cheyenne identity was not simply a way of being; however, it was also an external relationship identified by others—both Cheyenne and non-Cheyenne—who recognized a person as Cheyenne.

For American Indian people on the plains, a person's identity at the level of the nation could shift during his or her lifetime. Over time, people both within and outside of the nation could recognize a non-Cheyenne as Cheyenne. Such people were incorporated through intermarriage or adoption. Eventually all those incorporated gained the full status of Cheyenne membership. Moore demonstrated this point, stating:

Adoptees and captives of all stripes, after a period of residence, became citizens of the nation. According to modern elders, there was no onus of "mixed blood" in those years. Although captives and adoptees were sometimes denied certain ritual roles because of their inability to speak Cheyenne, their Cheyenne-speaking children were full citizens. The basis of citizenship was not "racial" or biological but was established by birth in a Cheyenne band. In aboriginal times a captive or adoptee was accepted merely by consensus of the camp.<sup>lxi</sup>

Moore claimed the Cheyenne had clear-cut distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. According to him, at some point, non-Cheyenne incorporated into the nation gained full citizenship.<sup>lxii</sup> Their previous affiliation remained in collective memory, but it did not taint their status as Cheyenne. It is evident that those who were brought into the Cheyenne nation were fully incorporated at some point. Cheyenne today will literally say, in the same breath, that their great-grandmother or grandfather was Pawnee or Crow or Lakota, and that they are full-blood Cheyenne.<sup>lxiii</sup> For them, these two statements are not contradictory. Depending on the circumstances, even an enemy could become a full member of the Cheyenne nation.

Within the nation, Cheyenne identity was not homogenous either. Collective identity for the Cheyenne was not as simple as marking all people who participated in the tribal circle and the societies as Tsistsistas. Every Cheyenne person was considered

Tsistsistas or Suhtaio. The Suhtaio were once considered a separate band.<sup>lxiv</sup> Over time, however, the Suhtaio became incorporated into the main body of the Cheyenne, but every Cheyenne man or woman could still trace ancestry to one group or the other.<sup>lxv</sup> This identity was, and is still important today, because the two most sacred bundles of the Cheyenne that influence the health and welfare of the people belonged in the care of these divisions. The Suhtaio cared for the Sacred Hat and the Tsistsistas cared for the Sacred Arrows. This was an important level of identity that bifurcated the people as a whole, but did not divide them in two.<sup>lxvi</sup> The divisions of Tsistsistas and Suhtaio affected Cheyenne identity at a level above both the bands and the societies but below the nation.

The terms discussed above marked a collective identity, but it is important to note that they did not mark a bounded and unified ethnic identity. These names were used to identify membership in a flexible way. Names did not confine people to a specific membership. Someone who identified as Cheyenne participated in a certain community, lived his or her life in a certain manner, and recognized others who were like-minded. Within this community there were several other levels of communal identity, that of the kindred, the band, and the society. Each of these identities was fluid and their delineations could change over a lifetime. A person could join another Native nation altogether through marriage, adoption, or captivity and shift their national identity. The flexible nature of this identity established a social organization very different from the concept of ethnic or tribal identity placed on Native peoples by scholars, government agents, or American popular conceptions.

Patricia Albers noted that on the plains, for indigenous people, “Ethnicity in the generic and highly abstract sense of a ‘tribal’ name did not always function as marker of geopolitical boundaries.”<sup>lxvii</sup> In other words, names like Tsistsistas (as it was used to mark the entire sociopolitical body of the nation) did not necessarily mark a stable, unified political entity, nor did it mark a homogenous cultural group, nor did it mark a nation with a bounded territory, nor did it mark a uniform biological group. Albers continued, stating that for people of the plains, “...ethnic categories did not have a high level of salience or any a priori power to organize and distribute people across geographic

space.”<sup>lxviii</sup> The terms Tsistsistas or Suhtaio imbued a person with an identity that had saliency in very specific contexts and relationships. Nevertheless, these identities were not the only factors organizing social relationships or cultural identity. One’s affiliation with a kindred, a band, and a society also shaped his or her social relations and cultural identity. These were fluid categories; they marked people who saw themselves as part of a collectivity in the moment it was used. The members of each group could shift and the meaning of the collectivity could shift as well.

### Peoplehood as a Way to Conceptualize Native Sovereignty

In their article reconceptualizing Native concepts of group identity, Tom Holm, J. Diane Pearson, and Ben Chavis laid out the theoretical concept of peoplehood. They have argued that a complete understanding of indigenous peoplehood reveals the inherent sovereignty of Native groups. In developing the concept, the authors attempted to move beyond the rather ambiguous term “ethnicity” and also to transcend the notions of “state” and “nation” as well as “tribe.”<sup>lxix</sup> The authors defined the concept of peoplehood in terms of four factors--language, sacred history, religion, and land.<sup>lxx</sup> They argued that each of these factors combine to form the matrix that supports a group’s distinctive identity. The authors noted that scholars and politicians have considered American Indian peoples to be pre-states or tribes, and as such, their sovereign status has always been questionable in the eyes of the United States. A peoplehood, on the other hand, exists beyond the state. They stated:

A people, united by a common language and having a particular ceremonial cycle, a unique sacred history, and knowledge of a territory, necessarily possesses inherent sovereignty. Nations may come and go, but peoples maintain identity even when undergoing profound cultural change.<sup>lxxi</sup>

For the authors, the sovereignty of indigenous peoples is not dependent on the state. A peoplehood exists beyond the state, can continue without the state, and at times, in spite of the imposition of the state.

Vine Deloria and Clifford Lytle have also argued that indigenous peoples have an inherent sovereignty that exists above the state. The authors stated that for American

Indians, “The idea of the people is primarily a religious concept...” which has its beginning in time immemorial.<sup>lxxii</sup> Frequently The People lived together but didn’t see themselves as a distinct group until they were instructed through a holy man or other figure of cosmic importance and were given ceremonies and rituals.<sup>lxxiii</sup> They noted that indigenous peoples point to a moment of origin when the people were united and taught how to live. The Cheyenne themselves point to the moment that Sweet Medicine came to the people to teach political organization and religious ceremonies as the genesis of their nation. Previous to this moment, according to oral histories, although the Cheyenne existed, they did not exist as a people with a distinct sociopolitical order. Deloria and Lytle argued that all Native people had a clear conception of their own sovereignty, and furthermore, these nations controlled specific territories and protected the boundaries of these territories from outside intrusion.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

An indigenous peoplehood, as the above theorists have defined it, constructs itself in a way unique from the nation-state. These scholars have asserted that despite their distinction from the state, peoplehoods are inherently sovereign entities comparable to the nation. John Carlos Rowe has demonstrated the diversity and power of nationalisms while suggesting that such constructs also have limits and exclusions. Rowe distinguished between nationalisms that are “...aligned with the nation-state and those which challenge ‘official’ nationalism.”<sup>lxxv</sup> American Indian nations today define their own national status according to both of these distinctions. Many American Indian peoplehoods have constructed a tribal nationalism aligned with the nation-state by asserting a state sanctioned sovereignty and by adopting some of the structures of the state. Nevertheless, these peoplehoods also challenge official nationalisms by maintaining their sovereign sense of cultural identity and utilizing sociopolitical formations that exist above and beyond nation-state recognition. Recognizing nationalism as both constructed and diverse has demonstrated that indigenous peoplehoods can also be considered sovereign nations, even though they do not always align with the nation-state.

Native nations in the United States have adopted some of the trappings of the state in their efforts to gain the United State’s recognition of their sovereign status. Vine

Deloria and Clifford Lytle recognized that since contact Native ideas of peoplehood or nationality have gradually been transformed into ideas that resemble European concepts of nationality. They agreed that Indians adopted a European form of governance to survive, but demonstrated that they were also able to retain their own forms of governance and the respect for their own laws that had characterized an earlier way of self-rule. Deloria and Lytle stated, “Although they were willing to adopt some of the white man’s political institutions, they could not bring themselves to surrender the idea of peoplehood that each tribe represented.”<sup>lxxvi</sup> Deloria and Lytle demonstrated that although Native peoples adopted some state-based institutions, they also retained their own ways of distinguishing themselves from others and their own sense of sovereignty.

To separate the state-based understanding of sovereignty that some Native groups have adopted from an inherent sovereignty, Deloria and Lytle distinguished between nationhood and self-government. The authors argued that nationhood “implies a process of decision making that is free and uninhibited within the community” and isolated from outside factors while it considers its options.<sup>lxxvii</sup> Self-government “implies a recognition by the superior political power that some measure of local decision making is necessary,” but also implies that the state must always monitor the process.<sup>lxxviii</sup> Although tribal nations have accepted self-government to a certain extent during the twentieth century, I argue that Native peoples have also retained a sovereign sense of nationhood as Deloria and Lytle use the term.<sup>lxxix</sup>

Holm, Pearson, and Chavis’s concept of peoplehood provides a framework for illustrating that the Cheyenne shared an identity based on the cultural formations of language, sacred history, religion, and land.<sup>lxxx</sup> The Cheyenne people shared a language across kindreds and bands and over vast distances. They shared a sacred history embodied in certain central narratives. In terms of religion, all Cheyenne relied on the power of their medicine bundles--the Sacred Arrows and the Sacred Hat--to protect the well being of the people. The Cheyenne also shared a relationship with the landscape, pointing to specific places that were connected to their sacred historical narratives and to their religious ceremonies, most prominently Bear Butte. According to this definition, the Cheyenne unquestionably were a peoplehood.<sup>lxxxi</sup> For Holm, Pearson, and Chavis,

these four elements make a group distinct and give the group sovereignty without the state, allowing peoplehoods to maintain identity even in the face of profound change.<sup>lxxxii</sup> This seems simple enough, as long as the language, sacred history, religion, and landscape of one peoplehood can be neatly distinguished from those of another. Of course, for indigenous people on the plains, this is seldom possible.

None of these four elements indicated a distinct Cheyenne identity by themselves. For example, many Lakota people also spoke Cheyenne fluently, some participated in Cheyenne religious rituals, the territory of the Lakota and Cheyenne overlapped (for example they shared the Black Hills), and both pointed to Bear Butte as a center of religious power and even shared some of the same religious narratives. The Cheyenne and Lakota had a strong and lasting alliance, but each group certainly understood itself as sovereign. These international relationships suggest that Cheyenne nationhood historically could not be delineated using the categories that define the concept of peoplehood. The nation was flexible and could not be bounded or defined by these factors. Instead these factors acted in concert, and when shared and tied together by kinship, helped to approximate a sense of unity. Kinship formed the channels through which people learned and accessed language, sacred history, religion, and the characteristics of their known landscape and its resources. All these variables formed a loose configuration that could be called on at specific moments in time to express unity when it was needed.

A Native nation, as opposed to a tribal nation or a peoplehood, must be seen as not simply shaped by a distinctive language, sacred history, religion, and landscape, but instead as shaped by a matrix of relationships with a language, sacred history, religion, and landscape that are developed, exercised, and maintained through kinship. Furthermore, the term Native nation refers not only to an autonomous cultural identity, but an entity that exercises political autonomy through channels created by kin networks. Cheyenne and non-Cheyenne could speak the same language, share a landscape, participate in the same ceremonies, or even share religious or historical narratives, but each element would retain cultural meaning for the group depending on the relationships in which it was embedded. Elements from nations with distinct histories could also be

incorporated into the Cheyenne nation without fear of erasing Cheyenneness. Language, sacred history, religion, and landscape reflected something considered Cheyenne through their activation, interpretation, and utilization along kinship channels. The people shared pieces of all of these with non-Cheyenne, but made the elements Cheyenne by passing them on, regulating them, and ordering them through kin relations.

Each of the markers of peoplehood that Holm, Pearson, and Chavis discussed were not distinct enough on their own to distinguish a person as Cheyenne, but when coupled with the person's access to each marker through kin relationships, they became meaningful. Even if a person was intermarried or adopted in, he or she still pointed to these newly formed kin relationships as evidence of membership and rights to access certain landscapes, participate in ceremonies, or relate historical narratives. Lack of relations definitely marked a person as non-Cheyenne.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> The Cheyenne obviously saw themselves as a distinct group, and the only way to be considered Cheyenne was to be or to become a relative. Shared beliefs about language, sacred history, religion, and land were not enough. Relatedness, however, was not a definitive marker of Cheyenne identity either. Cheyenne people had relatives, especially ones who had joined non-Cheyenne communities, who were not considered Cheyenne.

Holm, Pearson, and Chavis argued that indigenous peoplehoods were and are culturally distinct, self-perpetuating, sociopolitical entities, and therefore, are sovereign. Because of the flexible nature of plains social organization and membership historically, some scholars have found it difficult to pin point exactly how plains peoples were sociopolitically and culturally distinct—and therefore sovereign. The point is not to look for the binding nature of communal Cheyenne identity, but to understand what it meant to call someone or some group “Cheyenne”—when it was used, who it was applied to, and why. Ultimately, Cheyenne communal identity was based on relatedness among people that could be sealed by many things, including kinship, language, sacred histories, religion, and a connection to a landscape. These elements could come together in different ways. The combination of elements, their importance as markers, and their meanings all shifted over time and from one context to another. This was the power of the Cheyenne nation as a sociopolitical entity. The concept of Cheyenne identity marked

a collective, but eluded definition when approached concretely.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> It was flexible and could accommodate diverse definitions without any preordained rigidity. Group symbols, language, histories, religion, kin ties, and relationship to land all could be invoked to put forth a Cheyenne identity, but none defined or bounded this identity. None of these things by themselves bounded or defined the Cheyenne nation, either.

### The Centrality of Kinship to the Exercise of Sovereign Native Nationhood

None of the scholars discussed above delineate how Native peoples exercise a sovereign sense of nationhood without relying on the bounded constructions of the nation asserted by the state. Deloria and Lytle's idea of *The People* assumes that Native nations asserted sovereignty through retaining control over a specific territory. In this way, they rely on state based constructions of sovereignty that depend on establishing boundaries to assert control. Although Holm, Pearson, and Chavis's delineation of the concept of peoplehood depends on flexible categories like language, religion, and history, these categories must be fixed under this construction to assert a sovereign sense of peoplehood because they stand for *the* language, *the* religion, *the* sacred history, and *the* territory of a peoplehood. This is not to say that Native peoples did not assert a sovereign relationship with land or claim a specific membership through a matrix of markers including history, religion, and language. On examination of the political and economic actions of American Indian peoples historically, however, it becomes clear that such bounded expressions of nationhood cannot account for the multiple and often overlapping assertions of sovereignty by Native groups.

Historically, American Indian groups rarely asserted sovereignty by neatly delineating and then protecting geopolitical boundaries or categorizing members in terms of citizenship and maintaining group unity through social contracts. Benedict Anderson has clearly demonstrated that such nation-state constructions are specific to a particular historic moment in Western Europe that then is reproduced outside of Western Europe under another set of specific historical circumstances.<sup>lxxxv</sup> Furthermore, group identity for Plains peoples was defined within a shifting political, economic, and cultural matrix rather than fixed categories like language, religion, territory, or other cultural traits.<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

So if Native peoples did not organize politically using the bounded categories constructed by the state, but they had a sense of sovereignty recognizable by the first Europeans, how did they assert this sovereignty? Furthermore, how does this sovereignty get expressed if not through the maintenance of a set of clearly marked categories? Using the Cheyenne as a case study, this paper suggests that for Native peoples, kinship ordered social, political, and economic life and determined a people's relationship to the landscape and its resources; therefore, kinship was central to expressing a sovereign sense of nationhood.

In *Speaking of Indians*, Ella Deloria emphasized the importance of kinship to American Indian social life. She related that all peoples who live communally must find a way to with order and harmony.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Deloria stated that historically the Dakota people accomplished this through kinship, binding all the members of the community through a system of obligations and rewards that followed channels of kin.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> She described the people as caught up in “a fast net of interpersonal responsibility.”<sup>lxxxix</sup> This net organized the way the people interacted, binding them together through reciprocal obligations and duties delineated by kin relationships, affecting all aspects of Dakota life. Deloria's description of kin as the organizing element of the Dakota people can be instructive in understanding other Native nations as well. The state ordered people through an imagined solidarity shaped by allegiance to the polity and articulated the relationship between an individual and the collectivity through the transferable and homogenous category of citizenship. Instead Native nations ordered people through kin based networks and articulated a person's place within the collectivity through membership based on his or her connections by marriage, blood, and adoption to the vast network. Kin not only organized Native social life, it also affected internal political and economic organization and helped to determine the actions that individuals and groups took in relation to trade, war, political discussions, and ceremonial life.

Eric Wolf has argued that kin based groups institutionalize political power through “the management of consensus among clusters of participants.”<sup>xc</sup> Political power is not established or regulated through national contracts, but instead through the process of establishing and maintaining a consensus within the group. Members take social,

political, or economic action by accessing the specific kin ties that will aid them in their endeavors. As Wolf noted, however, these aggregates of kin will disperse again when the conditions change, and when new conditions arise, new arrangements will form.<sup>xc<sup>i</sup></sup> As a consequence, Wolf stated, “the extension and retraction of kin ties create open and shifting boundaries of such societies.”<sup>xc<sup>ii</sup></sup> Despite its flexible nature, however, a Native nation still asserted political autonomy in relation to other nations and entities beyond its membership.

While Native peoples maintained membership through kin ties within their own nation, a person was also embedded in a wide range of social relations with people who did not identify with the same nation. These kin ties could be activated to negotiate political and economic action taken in relation to other nations. For example, plains nations often incorporated outsiders through marriage and adoption of both allied and enemy plains groups.<sup>xc<sup>iii</sup></sup> This created kinship ties with Plains Indian people who claimed different national affiliations. Native peoples relied on wide-ranging webs of social relations that cut across groups when determining access to land and resources or when confronted with political or social conflict.<sup>xc<sup>iv</sup></sup> Discussing the importance of these networks of kin, Patricia Albers and Jeanne Kay stated, “Although American Indian populations maintained distinct ethnic identities, unique culture patterns, and even differentiated sociopolitical structures, they did so while embedded in geographically far-ranging and ethnically-mixed systems.”<sup>xc<sup>v</sup></sup> While Plains nations distinguished themselves from others through a distinct matrix of cultural markers and a shared sense of solidarity, each one also incorporated people of many different national backgrounds. Susan Sharrock demonstrated that, for plains people, the ethnic unit, linguistic unit, co-residence unit, cultural unit, and societal unit were not discretely bounded and did not always correspond in membership.<sup>xc<sup>vi</sup></sup>

Nevertheless, kin ties that stretched across national boundaries did not necessarily splinter Native nations. Instead they regulated political, economic, and social relationships between these nations.<sup>xc<sup>vii</sup></sup> Kin ties also connected American Indian people to the landscape associated with their sovereign sense of nationhood. Importantly, geopolitical structures on the plains did not rely on borders, but instead used social ties

that the people themselves defined. In Patricia Albers' discussion of ethnicity on the Northern Plains, she argued that groups organized around pluralistic patterns of land use and alliance making. Furthermore, she stated that ethnic categories had little a priori power to organize and distribute people across geographic space.<sup>xcviii</sup> Instead, social ties determined access to land, labor, and resources.<sup>xcix</sup>

This historically was certainly true for the Cheyenne. The nation was multilingual, multiethnic, and culturally diverse. Introducing an interethnic analysis to the discussion of Cheyenne history demonstrates that the incorporation of outsiders resulted in the complex layering and mixing of ethnicities under the umbrella of the sociopolitical body of the Cheyenne nation, resulting in heterogeneous membership. The Cheyenne's ability to incorporate and assimilate outsiders as members of the nation rested on certain dimensions of kin organization. Establishing beneficial interethnic relationships by making new relatives succeeded because the process was based on certain shared understandings between Plains peoples that outsiders were incorporated through intermarriage and adoption, and that all kin relations engendered obligations. Such knowledge transcended both the cultural and sociopolitical boundaries of Plains nations. Interethnic kin relationships acted as the channels through which relations between Plains nations took place.<sup>c</sup>

Groups with similar kin organization more readily understood the categories, the norms, and the obligations associated with each other's kin systems. The Lakota and Arapaho kin systems closely resembled the Cheyenne in kin categories and in the reciprocal obligations and behavior expected in most relationships.<sup>ci</sup> Therefore a Cheyenne married among the Arapaho or the Lakota or vice versa could easily and quickly respond correctly to the expectations and obligations of his or her new family. The peoples of the Missouri River had a different type of kin organization, so an adopted or intermarried Cheyenne would have to learn the normative expectations of a different kin system. Establishing interethnic relations demanded certain cultural negotiations that varied in complexity depending on the differences between the groups. Yet each party also drew on shared understandings of kin roles and requisite expectations to build the relationship. Everywhere one had a responsibility to his or her family--by blood, by

marriage, or by adoption. Although the specifics of these responsibilities were played out in distinctive ways in different communities in all Native nations, reciprocal obligations established internal national solidarity and opened channels between nations based on kin.

The Cheyenne used kinship to advance their agency and interests throughout Cheyenne history by not only expanding their web of social support through obligation engendered by kin ties but also by strengthening ties with allies and creating new ties with enemies by establishing or activating kin relationships. For example, to establish foreign trading partners and military alliances at different points in their history, the Cheyenne intermarried with the Mandan, Arikara, Kiowa, Arapaho, Teton Sioux, and later with Americans. Large-scale intermarriage created hybrid bands, such as the Masikota, Wotapio (Cheyenne/Kiowa), and the Dog Soldier bands (Cheyenne/Lakota), that played key roles in Cheyenne history.<sup>cii</sup> Often, when a camp of Cheyenne met with another camp from another nation for social reasons or for trading, the young men and women would court someone from outside their own nation.<sup>ciii</sup> When these young people married, they reinforced or even established beneficial kin relations across two nations. These marriages created channels of kin through which families, bands, or even the nation could take strategic political or economic action.

The Cheyenne established a wide-ranging and flexible web of social support built on kinship. Using this support, the Cheyenne people were able to journey onto the Plains and spread across them, and yet remain a nation.<sup>civ</sup> They were also able to create multiple alliances with outsiders—through intermarriage and adoption of both allies and enemies—and remain a nation. The flexibility of kinship organization allowed them to spread across vast geographic distances and incorporate a wide range of outsiders into their families and yet retain a sense of internal solidarity. In fact, Cheyenne people often used kin relationships to gain access to resources, landscapes, and political and military support through alliances created by intermarriage with and adoption of non-Cheyennes. Therefore, kinship is an essential element in understanding both the exercise of Cheyenne sovereignty and the trajectory of Cheyenne history before and after encounters with representatives of the United States.

### Kinship as a Vehicle for Cheyenne Sovereignty

Kin relationships established social, political, and economic relationships across Native nations through the incorporation of outsiders who could open the channels that Native people accessed to take political and economic action, thereby asserting a sovereign sense of nationhood. Native nations utilized channels of kin to come together for trade, alliance, war, religious ceremonies, or access to territory. Patricia Albers has distinguished three types of interethnic relationships: those “based on war (competition), merger (cooperation), and symbiosis (complimentarily).”<sup>cv</sup> Plains peoples used obligations created by kin ties to stabilize these international relationships, to facilitate negotiations, and to encourage lasting ties. By activating obligations, Plains nations strategically used channels of kin to pursue their social, political, and economic agenda.

Groups in symbiotic relationships exchanged goods “through established social channels created by either marriage or fictive adoption.”<sup>cvi</sup> Plains peoples understood that intermarriage with or adoption of outsiders could open doors to build a politically or economically beneficial relationship with communities of different national origins. Men could become conduits for trade through kinship, particularly by adoption. Patricia Albers and Jeanne Kay note that the adoptions that sealed a trade relationship between indigenous nations were most often organized as a parent-child relationship.<sup>cvi</sup> These types of adoptions usually occurred between men, establishing a father-son relationship, however, women occasionally participated in the adoptions as well.<sup>cvi</sup> When women acted as conduits for trade among the Cheyenne, they usually established ties through intermarriage with non-Cheyenne men, creating new channels for trade and facilitating alliances in trading networks.<sup>cix</sup> Mutually establishing a marriage between two different groups forged continuing relationships between the peoples. Therefore, as wives, women became human conduits who facilitated contact and encouraged trade between peoples. Uterine bands, organized for trade, often encouraged groups of sisters to bring husbands in from outside.<sup>cx</sup> Chief’s families especially practiced such strategic marriages, encouraging young women to marry outside of the nation in a match that would facilitate trade.

Plains people also established interethnic ties for other purposes, such as military alliance. Patricia Albers stated that merger resembled symbiosis because in both forms the two nations used a common territory, unified against shared enemies, collaborated in ceremonies, intermarried, and resided together.<sup>cxvi</sup> Merger, however, “evolved under conditions of economic parallelism rather than differentiation.”<sup>cxvii</sup> Unlike the symbiosis between the Cheyenne and the Missouri River nations, which was based on each group having access to different goods, merger was based on each group sharing an interest in similar resources. Albers argued that merger was more common on the plains after each Plains nation gained direct access to European trade goods.<sup>cxviii</sup> Plains nations no longer relied on each other for trade, but still needed their neighbors to advance and protect their mutual land-use rights from outside intrusion.<sup>cxix</sup> Merger created a distinct social form only when members of separate nations functioned in most encounters as one political economic unit.<sup>cxv</sup> This kind of merger did develop in Cheyenne history, particularly with the Lakota. Cheyenne bands, however, also formed alliances with other groups involving less incorporation than a full merger, but still based on shared interests in similar resources.

Intermarriage frequently sealed relationships between merging bands. Like alliances created for trade, families encouraged marriage with people outside the nation to build military alliances.<sup>cxvi</sup> Young Cheyenne men and women intermarried extensively with Arapaho and Lakota men and women. According to Albers and Kay, interethnic marriages were an institutionalized feature of mergers, necessary to establishing the connections that made the joint use of territory possible.<sup>cxvii</sup> Adoption between peoples also helped cement merger relationships. When two groups wanted to establish “a relationship involving continual, reciprocal obligations and sharing, the adoption was structured in the manner of a sibling relationship.”<sup>cxviii</sup> Adoption of a sibling linked two people just as parent-child adoption, but the nature of the reciprocal obligations was different. Cheyenne, Lakota, and Arapaho military societies already developed brother-brother adoptions among the members within the nation. To bring outsiders into the collectivity, this relationship was simply extended beyond the nation.

Establishing kinship connections with other groups not only helped Plains people to form relationships for trade and military alliance, but also aided in gaining access to territory and resources. Many distinct American Indian groups used territories and resources jointly. Although they sometimes shared use rights only for short periods, they often based this shared access on stable relationships lasting for generations.<sup>cxi</sup> Although the peoples of the northern plains did not hold land as inalienable and private property, each nation certainly controlled access to a certain territory and its resources. For example, the Cheyenne placed markers on the landscape indicating that they were connected with specific places.<sup>cxx</sup> Groups also had a concept of usufruct rights, associating certain peoples with the right to use the resources of certain landscapes.<sup>cxxi</sup> On the Northern Plains, there were no geopolitical lines marking where one group's territory ended and another's began, but "there were social relationships which stipulated how groups would separately or jointly occupy a given landscape."<sup>cxxii</sup> Groups at war usually remained geographically separate, but groups at peace often shared the same landscape, regulating access through extensive kinship ties.<sup>cxxiii</sup> In fact, Plains people used kin relationships to gain access to resources and territory much more frequently than they used military power to drive another nation from the region.

On the plains, even people at war were bound by social relations and ultimately were connected by kin. Albers described war as a "condition of total competition."<sup>cxxiv</sup> She noted that this system of exchange was based on raiding; enemies took horses and also captured women and children.<sup>cxxv</sup> Both merger and war took place in the absence of the specialization that formed symbiotic relationships between neighbors.<sup>cxxvi</sup> Warfare was a serious endeavor that affected a nation's economic and political position on the plains. In historic times, groups not only fought over territory for its ecological features and its value for production, but also for the economic advantage the geographic position provided in relation to trade.<sup>cxxvii</sup> Warring nations, however, did exchange women and children through the practice of captivity.<sup>cxxviii</sup> Captured women and children were then incorporated through intermarriage and adoption, creating kin ties even between enemy groups.

Unlike the kin ties established by symbiotic or merged groups, interethnic kin ties created by war were not meant to establish and maintain relations between two nations. The Cheyenne fully incorporated captured women and children, considering them Cheyenne once they had become part of a family and particularly once they spoke the language.<sup>cxxix</sup> A group only infrequently activated the kin ties established across plains nations by warfare, but these ties did become useful when two enemy groups required a peaceful encounter. For example, two groups at war sometimes attended the same trade gatherings and even traded directly with one another on occasion. Sometimes a nation depended on an allied nation to help them trade with an enemy. For example, the Arapaho were able to trade with their enemies the Arikara, using their close allies, the Cheyenne, as go-betweens.<sup>cxxx</sup> Such an encounter was a delicate undertaking and violence could erupt. Although tensions between enemies were often high, individuals could even visit relatives across enemy lines. These visits were conducted through kinship channels created by intermarriage with captive women and adoption of captive children.<sup>cxxxi</sup> Captive women and children incorporated into a kindred of an enemy nation had the power to open a channel between these enemies at any time. Although captivity severed a person's relationship with their community of origin, the relationship could be renewed under certain circumstances for trade, for political negotiation, and even to establish peace.

Historically creating connections with non-Cheyenne peoples was not a rare occurrence. The Cheyenne encouraged ethnic mixing. In fact, the Cheyenne placed a high value on exogamous marriages not only outside of the bands but outside of the nation as well.<sup>cxxxii</sup> John Moore declared, "...The Cheyenne nation was predicated not on preserving the biological separateness of the population, but on extending and hybridizing the nation with other groups."<sup>cxxxiii</sup> Being able to incorporate outsiders facilitated establishing beneficial political and economic connections with many different communities. The Cheyenne valued these connections and encouraged their establishment. The participants understood they also might be called to take on the role of conduit between the nations. These relationships were established strategically often for political or economic purposes and sealed with the power of reciprocal obligations

that a kinship tie demanded. For the nation-state, the influx of people of other national affiliations can be disruptive to the national unity, but incorporation of outsiders at different levels did not threaten Cheyenne national stability.<sup>cxixiv</sup> Having multiple, widespread allies gained through kin gave the Cheyenne far-ranging political support and access to diverse resources.

### Conclusion

Kinship created the channels through which the Cheyenne exercise sovereignty, both internally and internationally. A Native nation approximated a sense of unity by maintaining a web of kin-based relationships that could be strategically activated in order to take political and economic action and assert rights to resources and territory. Therefore, kinship was of the utmost importance when a Cheyenne person took action in any situation. The Cheyenne depended on their web of kin relationships for social, economic, ceremonial, and political support. When a Cheyenne person needed something, he or she activated a kin relationship to get it done. From something as simple as borrowing a knife to something as complicated as pledging the Sun Dance or rallying a war party, the Cheyenne turned to relatives for help. They activated the appropriate relationships to accomplish political or economic goals, using their social knowledge of which relatives were obliged to take on which tasks. Furthermore, forging kinship ties linking peoples on the plains provided an important vehicle for relationships between nations. Remaking Cheyenne bands and camps through intermarriage and the incorporation of outsiders did not diffuse the nation, but made it more able to negotiate and defend its position on the plains. In the past, incorporation of members of outside ethnic groups facilitated trade, created alliances, and helped to bring peace to warring groups. By incorporating individuals into the kinship system, the Cheyenne could reinforce close relationships with outside groups for political and economic purposes.

As life on the plains began to change dramatically with the increased American presence, Cheyenne people continued to draw on this flexible kin system to help them trade for new goods, retain rights to hunting grounds and territory, defend against the new enemy of the United States military, and even to establish peace with these American

newcomers. Throughout the nineteenth century, the disruption caused by the American presence, first to trade and then to access to territory, did affect Cheyenne social organization. Despite changes in the way kin was organized, the Cheyenne retained a kin-based political and social system and deployed it in strategic ways, just as they had in the past, to maintain a Cheyenne identity, to order political and economic relationships with non-Cheyenne, to maintain their presence in their homeland, and most importantly to assert a sovereign sense of nationhood in resistance to the imposition of state-based political, geographic, and cultural borders.

Holm, Pearson, and Chavis argued that the concept of peoplehood explains the resiliency of a group's sovereignty in the face of colonialism.<sup>cxxxv</sup> These scholars, however, have not grappled with how this sovereignty has historically been exercised or how the exercise of it facilitated the successful resistance to colonialism. I argue that because Native nations unified around a matrix of cultural institutions passed along and accessed through channels of kin, they had a flexibility that allowed them to maintain a national identity even in times of dramatic social, cultural, and political change. By contrast, the rigidity of the nation-state makes it susceptible to destruction: if old contracts are overthrown and remade by a new power, then the old state disintegrates and a new state is formed. A Native nation, on the other hand, continues regardless of the states that rise and fall around it. It is exactly its flexible nature that provides a Native nation with the resiliency to sustain cultural and even political solidarity despite the onslaught of colonialism and the imposition of nation-state boundaries.

If sovereignty is the establishment and exercise of collective political autonomy, clearly Native nations have existed as sovereign entities independent from the nation-state. By recognizing kinship as an important element in the exercise of Native sovereignty, it becomes clear that the state has not had the level of power to absorb and subsume outsiders that it has been granted. In fact, the flexibility and fluidity of Cheyenne communal identity resisted a rigid definition which in turn provided the power to remain sovereign during the dramatic cultural changes of the nineteenth century, when faced with the imposition of fixed nation-state boundaries by the United States. This flexibility also allowed Cheyenne people to retain control over membership and identity,

to access land and resources despite encroachment, and even to make and execute political decisions in the face of colonialism. Regardless of colonial efforts at containment, as long as Native people could activate kinship channels, they could take political action on their own terms. Certainly through both physical and social violence, the state eventually asserted a degree of control over Native nations, but never fully subsumed or assimilated them. Viewing American Indian history from the perspective of the Native nation emphasizes a narrative of persistence over resistance and assimilation, negotiation over surrender, and the flexibility and sustainability of kinship over the rigidity and ultimate fragility of the institutions of the state.

---

i John Carlos Rowe, ed., *Post-nationalist American Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 2.

ii To understand the power of the concept of the nation to order social, political, geographic, and cultural organization, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

iii I will use the term “American” throughout to refer to a person who identifies him or herself with the political entity of the United States, accepting membership in the nation regardless of race or heritage. Although I employ this term, I recognize that historically the term “American” can sometimes become a monolithic reference that either subsumes or erases the existence of neighboring nations, such as Mexico and Canada. I have chosen the term “American” for its ease of use and employ it in a very specific sense. The term, as I use it, refers to all people who imagine themselves to be a part of what Benedict Anderson terms the deep, horizontal comradeship of the nation. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. I am not simply talking about people whom the United States recognizes as citizens, but all people who claim membership in the nation. At a certain point in history, American Indian people also become Americans in the way that I use the term. However, American Indian membership and citizenship in the United States is complicated by their continuing membership and citizenship in their own nations.

iv Certainly the term “tribe” has taken on multiple meanings over time. I do not use the term to designate a general stage in sociocultural evolution as it is commonly used in anthropological literature or more specifically as a form of sociopolitical organization that integrates bands or villages through institutions like age-grades or clan systems. See Elman Service, *Primitive Social Organization* (New York: Random House, 1962); and Marshall Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968). I will use the term “tribe” throughout to designate a Western understanding of American Indian social and political organization based on rigid categories that mirror those of the state as it is represented in U.S. policy and Western scholarship. I distinguish this notion of “tribe,” that is sometimes based on anthropological categories and sometimes is not, from a Native understanding of collective sociopolitical organization.

v Neil L. Whitehead argues that “the key definitional characteristic of savage society is the supposed lack of ‘polity,’” implying that no public political system exists and control is exerted through private force, so that the society is marked by the absence of authority and anarchy reigns. Neil L. Whitehead, “Tribes Make States and States Make Tribes,” in *War in the Tribal*

---

*Zone: Expanding States and Indigenous Warfare*, eds. R. Brian Ferguson and Neil L. Whitehead (New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1992), 129.

vi Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 4.

vii For the purposes of this article, I define sovereignty broadly as the ability of a group to assert autonomy. A sovereign entity controls its own membership, maintains recognized rights to a given territory and access to resources, applies a set of teachings, beliefs, and/or laws internally, and determines the cultural and historical trajectory of the group. Through their legal, political, and military relationship with European and American nation-states and the colonial efforts of these states, sovereignty has taken on a specific meaning for American Indian peoples in the current political climate. This article, however, seeks to address the mechanisms Native people have used to assert sovereignty that do not rely on state-based institutions or political practices. It is important to recognize that contact with European and American states have had dramatic impacts on Native exercise of sovereignty. See R. Brian Ferguson and Neil L. Whitehead, eds., *War in the Tribal Zone: Expanding States and Indigenous Warfare* (New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1992). Nevertheless, it is clear that while Native people understood and manipulated Euro-American institutions for the exercise of sovereignty, they also drew on their own sociopolitical mechanisms of asserting autonomy.

viii Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

ix I use the term “nation” because although it has taken on a specific meaning in current political discourse, it also has the flexibility to encompass a myriad of sociopolitical organization. It also carries an assumption of cultural and political sovereignty which terms like “tribe” or “ethnic group” lack. It is useful because of its multiplicity of meaning and its weight.

x Ferguson and Whitehead, *Tribal Zone*, 17.

xi Vine Deloria, Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle, *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 2. Early in the period of European exploration of the Americas, the Catholic church articulated the Doctrine of Discovery, which was designed to secure title to land through discovery by Europeans but marked American Indians as the original occupants and required them to give up the land willingly, establishing a frame for Europe to legally recognize Native peoples as sovereign entities. For more on the Doctrine of Discovery, see Lindsay G. Robertson, *Conquest By Law: How the Discovery of America Dispossessed Indigenous Peoples of Their Lands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Stuart Banner, *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Robert J. Miller, *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, and Manifest Destiny* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006).

xii Vine Deloria Jr. and David E. Wilkins, *Tribes, Treaties, and Constitutional Tribulations* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 5.

xiii Ibid., 6.

xiv Deloria and Lytle, *Nations Within*, 3. Most notably, the United States Constitution described Indians as “not taxed,” implying that they did not pay taxes and therefore could not be counted as part of the population of each state. Only American Indians who assimilated into the nation-state and paid taxes would be counted as citizens.

xv David E. Wilkins, *American Indian Sovereignty and the U.S. Supreme Court: The Masking of Justice* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 4, 21-25.

xvi It is important to note that not all historically autonomous Native nations were recognized as sovereign by the United States and many are fighting for this recognition today.

---

xvii Deloria and Lytle, *Nations Within*, 4. This act gave the federal government the right to try and punish members of Native nations that committed serious crimes, such as murder.

xviii Deloria and Wilkins, *Tribes*, 7; and Deloria and Lytle, *Nations Within*, 8.

xix David E. Wilkins and K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *Uneven Ground: American Indian Sovereignty and Federal Law* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 5.

xx Ibid. See also Wilkins, *Masking of Justice*.

xxi Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 6. For further exploration of the connection between the construction of human societies as bounded objects and the rise of the social and natural sciences, John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

xxii I refer to anthropological, sociological, and historical scholarship which has assigned the term specific meanings. The term "Indian tribe" has certainly developed more nebulous but equally powerful meanings in American popular culture. It's important to note that the term has also been appropriated by Native peoples, even in political discourse, using it to refer to their own sovereign cultural communities.

xxiii Susan R. Sharrock, "Crees, Cree-Assiniboines, and Assiniboines: Interethnic Social Organization on the Far Northern Plains," *Ethnohistory* 21, no. 2 (Spring, 1974): 95.

xxiv Morton H. Fried, "On the Concept of 'Tribe' and 'Tribal Society'," in *Essays on the Problem of Tribe*, Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society, 1967, ed. June Helm (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 8.

xxv Ibid., 9.

xxvi Ibid., 14.

xxvii Grinnell was an ethnographer who began working with the Northern Cheyenne in 1890 and worked with both the Southern and Northern groups throughout his career.

xxviii George Bird Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 2.

xxix Ibid., 4.

xxx Ibid.

xxxi By the 1830s the Cheyenne lived from Montana to the Platte and Arkansas Rivers and had created varied alliance networks. Some scholars believe that the Cheyenne on the northern plains lived too separately from those on the southern plains to consider the Cheyenne a unified people after 1830.

xxxii Hoebel, E. Adamson, *The Cheyennes: Indians of the Great Plains* (University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 10.

xxxiii Ibid. Hoebel stated that, "One of the last great ceremonial gatherings of the entire Cheyenne nation was held in late August, 1842."

xxxiv Ibid., 11. For Hoebel, the Northern and Southern Cheyenne would exist as two distinct entities in terms of their political and legal dealings with each other and with the United States.

xxxv Donald J. Berthrong, *The Southern Cheyennes*, The Civilization of the American Indian series, 66 (1963; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 50, 75.

xxxvi Peter J. Powell, *The Cheyennes, Ma?heo?o's People: A Critical Bibliography* (Bloomington: Published for the Newberry Library [by] Indiana University Press, 1980), xx. See also, Peter J. Powell, *People of the Sacred Mountain: A History of Northern Cheyenne Chiefs and Warrior Societies 1830-1879* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981).

---

xxxvii Karl N. Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Cheyenne Way: Conflict and Case Law in Primitive Jurisprudence* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), 67.

xxxviii Ibid., 335.

xxxix John H. Moore, *The Cheyenne Nation: A Social and Demographic History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 12.

xl Ibid., 189.

xli Ibid., 12-14.

xlvi For a discussion of the nation-state as a colonizing political entity that seeks to incorporate all peoples within its borders, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

xlvi Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: the Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001). Also see, Jacki Thompson Rand, *Kiowa Humanity and the Invasion of the State* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

xlvii Philip J. Deloria, *Indians In Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 15-28; and Hoxie, *A Final Promise*, 2-39. For an in depth discussion of the ambiguity of the nation-state and how it allows Europeans and Americans to both transpose the conception of a bounded ethnicity onto indigenous groups while at the same time viewing indigenous peoples as chaotic and irrational, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

xlviii For a discussion of the ways that establishing boundaries between ethnic groups became part of a system of colonial domination, see Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (Feb., 1992): 47; and also Willinsky, *Divide the World* and Rand, *Kiowa Humanity*.

xlix Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Ibid., 93.

l Throughout the article, I will use the terms ethnic formation, ethnic group, and ethnicity to mean a particular form of human social organization in which the group distinguishes itself from other groups using a particular set of signals that can shift over time and that have meaning to members of the group, but that are not necessarily visible to those outside of it.

li Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

lii Ibid.

lii Sharrock, "Interethnic Social Organization," 97.

lii Fredrick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969).

lii Ibid., 10.

liii Ibid.

liii Morton Fried, *The Notion of Tribe* (Menlo Park, California: Cummings Publishing, 1975).

liii Whitehead, *Tribes*, 128.

liii Thomas S. Abler, "Beavers and Muskets: Iroquois Military Fortunes in the Face of European Colonization," *War in the Tribal Zone*, eds. R. Brian Ferguson and Neil L. Whitehead (New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1992), 152.

liii Today Northern Cheyenne people use the term "Cheyenne" when speaking in English to refer to their own collective identity and the cohesiveness of the people. They also use the term to encompass both Northern and Southern Cheyenne peoples as one nation. The word "Cheyenne" comes from the D/Lakota word "Shahiyedan" or "Shahiyelan" used by these peoples to refer to the Cheyenne. English speakers adopted the term from these Sioux speakers.

liii For a full explanation of the organization of Cheyenne kindreds, camps, and bands, see CHRISTINA GISH BERNDT, KINSHIP AS STRATEGIC POLITICAL ACTION: THE NORTHERN CHEYENNE RESPONSE TO THE IMPOSITION OF THE NATION-STATE, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA, DISSERTATION, June 2008, 332-342.

Christina Gish Berndt

---

lix See BERNDT, KINSHIP, 339-342. For a full discussion of these societies, also see Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians*, 48-86, 159-169; Hoebel and Llewellyn, *The Cheyenne Way*; and Hoebel, *The Cheyennes*, 40-42.

lx Tom Weist, *A History of the Cheyenne* (Billings: Montana Council for Indian Education, 1977), 14.

lxi Moore, *The Cheyenne Nation*, 191.

lxii The term “citizenship” to refer to Cheyenne sociopolitical status is problematic because it implies a specific contractual relationship to the polity only found in states. Membership is a better term to describe the more flexible status granted to those within the Cheyenne nation.

lxiii Interviews by the author, Lame Deer, Northern Cheyenne Reservation, Summers 2005 and 2006. The term “full blood” as it is used in this instance by Cheyenne people does not represent biological descendancy but cultural identity.

lxiv See BERNDT, KINSHIP, 338, Figure 18.

lxv This is still true today. A Cheyenne person identifies as either Suhtaio or Tsistsistas.

lxvi According to Cheyenne oral history, the Suhtaio and the Tsistsistas were once the same people who had separated and then generations later found each other again and discovered they spoke the same language, so they reunited.

lxvii Albers, “Changing Patterns,” 91.

lxviii Ibid.

lxix Tom Holm, J. Diane Pearson, and Ben Chavis, “Peoplehood: A Model for the Extension of Sovereignty in American Indian Studies,” *Wicazo Sa Review* (Spring 2003): 11.

lxx Ibid., 12.

lxxi Ibid., 17.

lxxii Deloria and Lytle, *Nations Within*, 8.

lxxiii Ibid.

lxxiv Ibid., 9-10.

lxxv Rowe, *American Studies*, 2.

lxxvi Deloria and Lytle, *Nations Within*, 27.

lxxvii Ibid., 14.

lxxviii Ibid.

lxxix For this reason, I will use the terms “nation” and “nationhood” when referring to the sovereign sociopolitical organization of the Cheyenne people, and I will distinguish this manifestation of sovereignty from state-based forms of nationhood by referring to them as nation-states.

lxxx Holm, Pearson, and Chavis, “Peoplehood,” 12.

lxxxi They remain a peoplehood today.

lxxxii Holm, Pearson, and Chavis, “Peoplehood,” 12.

lxxxiii Anne S. Straus, “Northern Cheyenne Ethnopsychology,” *Ethos* 5, no.3 (Autumn 1977), 346.

lxxxiv This power has helped the Cheyenne elude the United States and its imposition of nation-state boundaries. The United States attempted to bound the Cheyenne as a concrete entity both geographically and socially, but were never able to entirely on their own terms. The Cheyenne used this ambiguity to their advantage. For a full exploration, see BERNDT, KINSHIP.

lxxxv Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

lxxxvi Both Barth and Albers and James have demonstrated that ethnic groups do not simply respond to encounters with outsiders in terms of exclusion or assimilation, but instead respond in

multiple and fluid ways depending on their position and that of the outsiders. Nevertheless, the response of Native people to their encounters with Euro-Americans has often been couched in terms of resistance; however, the symbols of identity for a group could be discarded, reshaped, or constructed anew as the community responds to social changes both within and outside the group. Encounters with Euro-Americans usually did not simply respond in either the wholesale abandonment of cultural markers or in the strict preservation of cultural traits. Karen Blu and Loretta Fowler both challenged scholars who have assumed that distinctive cultural differences (customs, crafts, language, arts, and symbols) or formal organization are needed to maintain differences between a group and its neighbors. See Loretta Fowler, *Shared Symbols and Contested Meanings: Gros Ventre Culture and History, 1778-1984* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 3; and Karen Blu, *The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 2.

lxxxvii Ella Cara Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (New York: Friendship Press, 1944; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 24.

lxxxviii Ibid., 24-38.

lxxxix Ibid., 31.

xc Wolf, *People Without History*, 99.

xci Ibid.

xcii Ibid.

xciii Patricia Albers, "Changing Patterns of Ethnicity in the Northeastern Plains," in *History, Power, and Identity*, ed. Jonathan Hill (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996).

xciv Ibid.

xcv Patricia Albers and Jeanne Kay, "Sharing the Land : A Study in American Indian Territoriality," in *A Cultural Geography of North American Indians*, eds. Thomas Ross and Tyrel G. Moore (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 50.

xcvi Sharrock, "Interethnic Social Organization," 116, 97.

xcvii Albers, "Changing Patterns."

xcviii Ibid., 91.

xcix Ibid.

c Several authors have discussed the importance of kinship for establishing interethnic relationships on the plains including Albers and Kay, "Sharing the Land"; Sharrock, "Interethnic Social Organization"; Gary Clayton Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650-1862* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Moore, *The Cheyenne Nation*; and Patricia Albers, "Symbiosis, Merger, and War: Contrasting Forms of Intertribal Relationship Among Historic Plains Indians." in *Political Economy of North American Indians*, ed. John Moore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

ci Cheyenne kinship was both generational and bilateral. Within consanguineal relationships, relatives of the same generation and same sex were grouped together, and within each generation, were ordered by age. Furthermore, each person's kindred incorporated both the father and mother's side of the family. Unlike unilinear kinship systems, a person did not socially or legally belong to one side of the family or the other, and both parents were equally important in their children's lives. Nevertheless, they did distinguish mother or father's side in the kin terminology used for certain relatives. A Cheyenne child recognized not just the children of his or her mother and father as siblings, but also the children of his or her mother's sisters and father's brothers as siblings. Cheyenne youth called their mother's sisters "mother" and called their father's brothers

---

“father” as well. These classificatory mothers and fathers also called the children of their same sex siblings “son” and “daughter”. The children of these classificatory fathers and mothers called each other “brother” and “sister”. Only the children of the mother’s brothers and father’s sisters were considered cousins. The mother’s brothers were called “uncle” and the father’s sisters were called “aunt”. All grandparents were recognized on both the father and mother’s side and were called “grandpa” and “grandma” by their children’s children. Each of these kin relationships prescribed certain obligations for both parties. CHRISTINA GISH BERNDT, *KINSHIP*, 312-328.

cii Moore, *The Cheyenne Nation*, 9. Moore discusses three ways in which hybrid bands can be formed. Hybridization occurs when a generation of new bands is created by intermarriage with other bands or ethnic groups. Fusion occurs when one band joins another without intermarriage and becomes merged. Dispersion occurs when one band is very weakened by disease or other devastating effects and its members disperse to seek refuge with relatives in other bands. Moore, *The Cheyenne Nation*, 54.

ciii Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians*, 313.

civ For a full description of the use of kinship during Cheyenne migrations across the Plains, see BERNDT, *KINSHIP*, 61-84.

cv Albers, “Symbiosis, Merger, and War,” 99.

cvi *Ibid.*, 110.

cvi Albers and Kay, “Sharing the Land,” 74.

cvi Virginia Bergman Peters, *Women of the Earth Lodges: Tribal Life on the Plains* (North Haven, CT: Archon Books, 1995).

cix Albers and Kay, “Sharing the Land,” 74.

cx For a discussion of how groups of sisters built uterine bands, see CHRISTINA GISH BERNDT, *KINSHIP*, 325-327. Also note that these kinds of international relationships were established between portions of the two nations—often bands. A very good example is the Masikota. Only one Cheyenne band had allied itself with the Kiowa. This was not disruptive to a sense of Cheyenne solidarity until the wider body of the Cheyenne nation decided to go to war against the Kiowa. At this point, the band had to decide which side to take and chose the Cheyenne. It is highly likely that specific families with closer ties among the Kiowa decided to break from the band at this time to join their Kiowa relatives. This example demonstrates clearly that a solidarity based on kinship can withstand external disruptive elements. Even if the Cheyenne lose some members, the nation itself is not torn apart by a conflict, it simply readjusts to accommodate the new circumstances. Because the sociopolitical organization is based on kin, it has the flexibility to do this.

cxi Albers, “Symbiosis, Merger, and War,” 113.

cxi *Ibid.*

cxi *Ibid.*, 114.

cxi *Ibid.*, 112-114.

cxi *Ibid.*, 113.

cxi Albers and Kay, “Sharing the Land,” 64.

cxi *Ibid.*, 74.

cxi *Ibid.*

cxi *Ibid.*, 49.

---

cxx Interviews conducted by the author, Northern Cheyenne reservation, Summer 2006. For example, the Cheyenne would leave rocks piled in certain ways to mark a trail or specific location and they would often leave tipi poles in their favorite camping locations.

cxxi Albers and Kay, "Sharing the Land," 54.

cxxii Ibid., 55.

cxxiii Ibid., 52.

cxxiv Albers, "Symbiosis, Merger, and War," 123.

cxxv Ibid.

cxxvi Ibid., 122.

cxxvii Ibid.

cxxviii When plains warriors raided an enemy camp, they often took women and children of the enemy who had not been able to reach safety.

cxxix For a more detailed discussion, see CHRISTINA GISH BERNDT, DISSERTATION.

cxx Albers, "Symbiosis, Merger, and War," 127.

cxxxi Ibid.

cxlii For a detailed discussion of band exogamy among the Cheyenne, see Moore, *The Cheyenne Nation*, 251-263.

cxliii Ibid., 9.

cxliv Modern nations, of course, incorporate outsiders of differing national affiliations. The United States prides itself on being considered a multicultural nation. At the same time, the United States considers foreign nationals who are not fully incorporated into the nation-state a threat to national unity. Consider the fear over illegal immigration. Illegal immigrants participate in the national life of the United States on many levels, yet are not only considered outsiders by many Americans, who believe they should not be granted the benefits of citizenship, but are also often seen as a threat to the stability of the state that therefore must be contained.

cxlv Holm, Pearson, and Chavis, "Peoplehood," 17.