
From the Selected Works of Robert K. Thomas

Fall January, 1984

Community and Institution among American Indian Groups

Robert K. Thomas



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/robert_thomas/17/

COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTION AMONG AMERICAN INDIAN GROUPS

INTRODUCTION

I was raised in that vast expanse of hill country that occupies the lower Middle West, most of the Mid-South, and the neighboring regions of the Southwest. Most of this area is "backward" even today and so it was in the days of my childhood, in the 1920's and thirties. Many millions of Americans were raised in this region and in that era. I am sure the portrait of the kind of life I am going to try to paint for you would be recognizable to most of them.

My home was a log house along a creek far out in the hills. My family had lived in that area since the 1830's and our roots were deep in that land. All around me lived my relatives. Most of the houses in the 4-miles radius housed close or distant relatives. We visited constantly, either "dropping in" for a while or else going for protracted stays. Most of the time as a child, I "floated around" from house to house. My life took place in the context of the familiar and the loved. There were some outsiders who lived among us, a few houses of non-kin. Although we were not close to them, we were "neighborly", helping in times of crisis and even trading farm labor on occasions.

My relatives loved me, respected me, encouraged me, and disapproved when I behaved badly. They not only socialized me, but also educated me as well. Many times I dropped off to sleep hearing discussions of wise, old men seated around the kitchen table or the fireplace. My grandfather was my history teacher. I rode up behind him on his horse as he travel led about and he related tales of landmarks as we rode by them. My uncle taught me to shoot, track, hunt, and fish. Another uncle was a great runner and passed along his skill to me. I learned much from my kin, but by my choice and at my own speed.

We made most of our living from the land. My grandmother, the "manager" of our household, grew a large garden. In the Spring all our relatives gathered at our house to help

break the ground and plant. We ate together at a great table, growing with food, under an arbor in the yard. And, of course, we were soon at their homes helping them plow and plant and eat and laugh together. In the fall we gathered together again to harvest. And after the "workings" the women helped each other dry and preserve the food for the winter. Our meat was the wild game. Young men hunted continuously, especially in the late Fall and Winter, and we younger boys tagged along to help. Women and children gathered wild plants in the Spring, berries in the summer, and nuts and wild grapes in the Fall. Some in our small community kept hogs and chickens, but this was supplemental to the wild meat.

There was a country store in our area, but we bought little there—coffee, spices, salt, needles and thread, and an occasional "pop" or some candy. We had little money in those days. My grandfather made a small wage as constable in a nearby small town. But most of the men in our community cut and sold railroad ties or else worked sporadically for large farmers and ranchers in the region and had little cash income. The cash we accumulated went for clothes which soon were much patched and mended. Adult men wore boots and Stetson hats which they passed along to the boys. And in those days there were no pensions, unemployment insurance, relief, welfare payments, or even old people's homes. But we shared our worldly goods and helped one another in any way we could.

We were a self-contained unit. When we became sick we called on my grandmother or her sister who were combination herb doctors and midwives. There was also a spiritual healer, a distant kinsman, who lived in a nearby community. And if worse came to worse we could get a "country doctor" who would take produce for his fee or wait long months for a cash payment. Once a month there was a dance in our community to which we eagerly looked forward. At times in the summer we traveled to other communities for dances and to visit distant relatives. There was a small Baptist church on the neighboring creek and we always attended the periodic hymn singing "conventions" there.

Law and government were very far away from our life. And although my grandfather was the local constable and the "high" sheriff was a kinsman, we settled most of our troubles

among ourselves. The local political boss was a southern patron in the old style. He knew your name when he met you and always inquired about your loved ones. Even though he knew that my family did not vote, he was ever ready to intercede in our behalf if we asked him. The local country school was foreign to us as well, but some of our neighbors were on the school board and we were at least able to "hang together" with one another in the small, one-room, school building.

At least once a month, on a Saturday, we went by wagon and horseback to "town", the county seat, some number of miles distant, over rough dirt roads. "Town" was filled with noise, excitement, forbidden pleasures, strangers, and the unknown, but there were always old friends and relatives from other areas to meet and visit, exotic foods to taste, and sights to see. "Town" was threatening and strange, yet compelling and thrilling. We leaned against buildings and got our "eyes full" by the hour. But it was not our world and we were always glad to return to the sanctity of the known and the loved, our community. Such was my childhood in the southern hill country.

COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTION

Most of us today in modern America live in large metropolitan areas. We live in that condition of life referred to by many social scientists as mass society, a collection of unorganized and unrelated individuals qua individual. There are few real communities in these large metropolitan areas at all. If a community is a social unit where people live their lives together in intimate association with and dependency on one another, then few of us live in such a social arrangement. Further, if institutions are ways in which a human community arranges itself to accomplish life jobs, such as curing the sick, educating the young, and so forth, neither are there real institutions in urban America. What we call institutions in these days, I'm suggesting that this is a misnomer, are the large centralized bureaucracies staffed by specialized professionals which regulate our life in all its aspects and deal with us as categories - as worker, as student, as

patient, as welfare recipient, and so on. In no instance does any of these large bureaucracies relate to total social groups but simply to individual categories.

There are, of course, households in large metropolitan areas in the United States, households that consist of isolated nuclear families - man, woman, and children or in the case of older couples perhaps only man and woman. Relatives are seen only rarely in such a milieu and functional contact with neighbors is impersonal or else purely "social" and sometimes very conformist rather than personal. Even an ethic of "togetherness" makes for little closeness among people in such a society since there is little direct mutual interdependence, and it is difficult to either be of help to one another or to have an impact on another's life even in a nuclear family setting.

In some large sense, these households, in the extreme, are simply residences of people who, although they may be blood kin, are individuals; each one pursuing goals, interests, and social ties in their own life. Most of the time of men in these households is taken up in occupational roles; most of the life of children lived in school; and women either suffer the loneliness of an empty house, go into the work force, or hunt for friends in co-participants in "community" activities. The relations to others in common bureaucratic roles tend to be the definitive relations: professional to professional, student to student, etc. Each person's significant experience lies outside the home. If there is a generation gap or if communication has broken down between husbands and wives, it is small wonder. Modern middle class life certainly maximizes individual freedom, personal choice, growth, fulfillment, career opportunities, social and physical mobility, material success, a high standard of living, experimentation with different life styles, and the like; but close family ties, community, a firm identity, and a strong sense of values suffer in the process.

Now of course this is an extreme picture I am painting here. Even in the most fragmented of families, there are personal ties. I am simply drawing this picture for contrast. For indeed, this is a very new and very deviant style of life. Most city Americans under forty can remember no other condition of life. But many of us over 50, myself included, are aware in some vague, undefined manner that our lives have changed appreciably during our lifetime. Perhaps the more conscious among us are aware that in our childhood we lived in real communities in large extended family network.

More sophisticated travelers of the world know that the majority of the population of the world still lives in communities in the sense I have defined them here, and that family ties are still of primary importance in most areas of the world. However, most urban Americans simply live our lives and assume that this very deviant style of life that we live in the modern middle class is somehow the norm in history and over the world's surface today. Even social scientists, like myself, have to be reminded that our own life is not typical in time and space. As a matter of fact, sometimes it takes something of a jolt to remind us that such is the case. I had an experience in recent years which very vividly brought home to me the contrast between the quality of life in large American metropolitan centers and life in most areas of the world.

In 1977, I took a tour of peasant Indian villages in Guatemala and in the neighboring state of Chiapas in southern Mexico. My interest was partly scientific and partly to satisfy a personal curiosity. It was in Chiapas that an "insight" stirring in the back of my mind finally came to my awareness. I was interested in visiting a village in Chiapas well known in anthropological literature. It was located near the capital of Chiapas, a small city in that remote part of Mexico. I hired a driver, a native of the village I wanted to visit, and proceeded to drive to my goal, a distance of probably 12 or 14 miles. The area is extremely over populated but does not appear to

be "misused" in the way we see large parts of the U.S. and other sections of the world. Crops were growing in the fields and as we proceeded along the road in our car, I could see many groups of local Indians working in their fields. Some of these groups appeared to be what we would call in the U.S. a family – a man and his wife and older children working together; perhaps his younger children would be either carrying water or playing at the edge of the field. In some fields there appeared to be larger groups which I guessed were extended families.

We proceeded to the village center which was simply a public square with public buildings around it - city hall, the church, and so forth. This village is what is called an open village in Latin America. Most people live in houses close to their fields and only the village center has much of the appearance of a town, although this village consisted of several thousand people. We pulled up into the village square and my driver, a very gracious loquacious gentleman, wanted to introduce me to the president of the pueblo and the village council. I had told him on our journey that I was an American Indian and he was sure that the village officials would like to meet me. However, the council was in normal session in the city hall so we waited in the village square.

While we were waiting, I noticed, along the nearby creek, a man butchering a sheep. Since I have always been interested in butchering techniques in Latin America, which contrast quite markedly with the same techniques in North America, I went down to the creek to better observe the process. Quite a crowd of children were already gathered there, some of whom helped out from time to time. Others simply observed and, I would presume, learned as well.

In a few minutes the council session was over and my friend called me to the city hall. I was introduced to the president and the council. I shook hands with all of them and answered their questions about Indians in the United States. Most of the village council were elderly men

and very interested in the conditions of Indian life in the United States, in contrast to their own life. After an engaging few minutes my friend and I took our leave in order to "tour" the village center. The president of the town appointed one of their local policemen to guide us around. The policeman was a young man in his late teens or early twenties who was dutifully serving his year as a policeman as do many of the young men in the village.

We were particularly interested in the church and he guided us through their ceremonial plaza and into the church. When we entered the church, I was surprised to find that there were no pews such as one finds in a North American Catholic church and several curing rites were taking place in the church. Small knots of people were arranged in front of images of various saints around the church. These were small groups of perhaps a dozen or 15 people consisting of a local Indian doctor and his patient, several elderly men standing silently, elderly women chanting prayers, and the family of the patient.

As we came out of the church a truck pulled into the square and people began unloading from the back of the truck. Most of these were families who were returning from shopping in a nearby town; others had been selling their home-made wares at one of the many markets or trading fairs that take place in that part of the world. We also met a young lady disembarking from the truck who was a registered nurse and worked in the local health clinic in the village, a clinic maintained by the federal government. However, this was the one and only outside professional specialist I met in the village, and she, although professionally trained, was a local Indian woman.

We were soon on our way back to the nearby city. On the road I noticed groups of young people walking along. One of these groups was made up primarily of young men, one with a guitar and all singing together. On our way back, my driver friend, who was very proud of his

village, told me about their great ceremony in January which installs their yearly compliment of village officers, who at the end of the ceremony walk the some dozen miles to the nearby city to be blessed by their Catholic bishop.

As we passed nearby to another village on our return, my friend, began to tell me some local gossip about his neighbors. He said that this village was involved in a very serious factional fight and that most people felt it was because the Indian judges in the local village court had been in power too long, and were beginning to favor their relatives in an obvious and public way. He was impressive in his conceptualization of the dynamics of Indian village social structure and peasant Indian culture and worldview. His knowledge obviously came from long experience; involvement in significant activities together with his fellow Indians, experience that gave him a view of how they reacted and behaved in many different kinds of situations. It struck me that very few people today in the U.S. have such an intimate knowledge and understanding of their fellows.

Later in the day, as I was thinking back over my experience, it struck me that nearly everything that happened to people in that village, and in fact in all the villages I had gone through in Western Guatemala as well, happened because of decisions and activities of their fellows. All that happened to them took place as a result of decisions and activities within a several mile radius of where they lived. This is not to say that there is no outside pressure and intrusions into these villages but they are minor, to say the least, as contrasted to the life we lead in the large metropolitan areas of the United States. In other words these were real communities of people; communities that are real social units and that consist of people who live their lives together in intimate association with one another. Further, these villages have a real local institutional structure. They govern themselves, they judge themselves, they police themselves,

they conduct their own ceremonial life, they grow their own food, they make their own clothes, and they arrange themselves into the necessary social arrangements to accomplish their life jobs. I was fortunate, as a social scientist, to have observed many of these social arrangements (institutions) in operation in the short space of time I was there. This does not mean that there is not exploitation by outsiders, or that the "democratic" central governments of these regions do not make demands on the village. Certainly the central governments levy a medium of taxes. They "approve" the local village government. And as I mentioned earlier, the local bishop must sanction the officialdom of the village. However, most of these demands from the outside are easily "fielded" by the village council and these villages are able to preserve their autonomy and social cultural independence.

To a large degree, this was a kind of life that many of us lived in the United States before World War II. But even social scientists over 50 must be reminded periodically that this was the normal state of the world before World War II and it is still the normal state of the world in most areas of the world today. This is not to say that there are no real communities at all in the United States or any semblance of communities in the United States. Certainly, small towns in the Midwest and New England have at least a semblance of community in these days and many underdeveloped areas such as Appalachia have a large degree of community life. Rural populations in other areas, such as the Mexicans in northern New Mexico and even a few city ethnics live in at least partial communities, with some semblance of an institutional structure remaining.

However, the population in the United States that is most tenacious in preserving community life is American Indians, and it is American Indian community life that is the focus of this paper. We are not suggesting that modern American Indian communities are as complete

institutionally as the village in Chiapas described earlier but they are far more complete than most other communities in the U.S. If one were constructing a bi-polar scale with one end representing mass society and the other end cohesive community, American Indian groups would at least be at a midpoint on such a scale and certainly further toward the community end of the scale than nearly any other group in the modern United States. For American Indian groups do live in small communities in the real sense of that word. They do live their lives together in intimate association; and much like the life I lived as a child in a small Cherokee community in the southern hill country.

American Indians in rural areas live their lives surrounded by kinsmen. They are descendents of kinsmen, groups who have lived together throughout history as kinsmen. They live in small settlements of 100 to 500 people. In many cases this small settlement is one large kin group or if it numbers close to the 500 population limit it may consist of several kin groups linked together by marriage ties. Unfortunately, many of the formal institutions of American Indian communities have been pre-empted by the federal government, by the great central bureaucracies, or perhaps by the agents of the local power structure in non-reservation settings. American Indians no longer have, of course, any military institutions. Further, they are usually policed and governed by an extension of the federal bureaucracy called the tribal government. The one formal institution left in the hands of “grass-roots” American Indians is religious institutions. Many times these religious institutions reflect the aboriginal religion of Indian groups; other times they may be a native form of Christianity under the control of the local community. However, it is in the formal arena where one sees most institutional activity and where one sees American Indian groups function as communities. In economic life one can get a clear view of the dynamic of informal institutional movement.

These local kin groups are economic institutions and extremely efficient ones. Albert Wahrhaftig demonstrates this efficiency graphically in his research on Cherokee communities in eastern Oklahoma in the 1960's. The young men of Cherokee communities still do a lot of hunting of wild game and manage to quickly distribute this meat to all the households in their area; and they are very knowledgeable and successful hunters. More mature men may work in cities like Tulsa some 60 miles away, but they arrange their work schedules so that they can share rides and expense in their community. Thus, Cherokee men, even those working away from "home" share their lives and resources together in their community. The women of the kin group community work together making quilts, making and sharing clothes, canning vegetables, and the like.

It is partly the productive capacity of the Cherokee kin unit which makes for the efficiency, but more importantly it is the distribution system, the sharing together of resources which enables American Indian groups to live as successfully as they do at such an extremely low poverty level. If American Indian groups consisted simply of nuclear households then poverty would be dire indeed. There is always sharing daily in American Indian communities and many times much gift giving as well, but on an informal basis. In some tribes gift giving is also done formally and ceremonially.

Needless to say this kin group community operates as an educational institution. Young Cherokees learn to hunt from their uncles and from their older siblings. Later in life a young Cherokee male may learn ceremonial knowledge from an older kinsman. Women of all ages are in constant interaction with each other, manage Cherokee society, and share the tasks of childcare and housework. Most young Cherokee girls, particularly the oldest daughters, are skilled in childcare and housework by the time they are 12 and are masters of scarce means. This

kin group further operates as a broadly based welfare institution. For instance, if one is short of groceries one can always go to a kinsman and "borrow" some of his food. If one is in need of some money, a kinsman will always help out. The aged are cared for as a matter of course and they have a tremendous amount of power, influence, and prestige when they are the least productive quite in contrast to the care of the elderly in middle class American life.

Many Indians now utilize hospitals but there is a great deal of curing of children by grandmothers and the curing of serious illness among adults and children by native doctors, in most cases a local kinsman. And, of course, you are helped into the world of birth by kinsmen and you are put in your final resting place at death by kinsmen. Although there are no formal police functions in North American kin groups, kinsmen do exercise a great deal of social control relative to one another. In most kin groups withdrawal is the main negative sanction and is devastating to a personality whose very being is immersed in his relationships with his kin.

However, in all honesty, we should say at this point that these American Indian kin groups manage to function in spite of continual encroachments by the general society. Simply the gross time a child must spend in school limits the amount of time a kin group can both socialize and educate. Further, conflicting values taught by the general society undercut socialization and the control of deviant individuals. But even though, in some Indian tribes, American Indian kin groups show some evidence of social breakdown, they still function as I have outlined above. Even in American cities there are networks of kin and friends who perform life "jobs" for urban Indians as we have portrayed them in the local rural kin groups. In fact, for many residents in urban centers this network may not only include friends and kin in the city, but friends and kin back home in rural areas, no matter how great the distance involved.

However, at this point in history Indian communities, the local Indian kin groups, are involved in a silent and unrecognized struggle with the great bureaucracies which impinge on their lives even with their own tribal governments. Many times it is a competition which involves the best of intentions on both sides, and herein lies the dilemma. The helping agencies and the professionals who are trained to staff these great bureaucratic agencies are in the business of helping individuals in a mass society. This is the legal rationale and the prescribed function of the agency. Such a stance is even reflected in the training of social workers. Categories of individuals receive help, not human communities. If a human community is still functioning and powerful bureaucracies enter the arena to help individuals there, such help pre-empts the community and weakens relationships among people. Even providing an alternative, such as an old folk's home, weakens the helping networks. Therefore, the bureaucracy tends to create more of a mass in order to further its efficient functioning. There is an unfortunate correlation between amount of outside help in Indian communities and social breakdown. Those Indian communities in the best social shape are those which are the most isolated, the most "neglected", the most uneducated, and the like. Those communities which have been "helped" by the central bureaucracies for a long period of time now most show social pathologies such as family breakdown, crime, etc. This is not to say that the social work professions are villains or are unfeeling. It is simply to point out that the way a mass oriented bureaucracy deals with people is antithetical to the preservation of community and ergo, to what are called the indigenous helping systems of any truly functioning community of people.

It seems to me at this point of time that social workers are facing a critical juncture relevant to groups like American Indians. As a social scientist I would suggest that social workers worry less about helping techniques and try to learn how the community they want to

help functions, and then to exercise a little social and political creativity; perhaps even "protecting" their clients from the smothering love of the bureaucracy and to find their clients a little institutional "elbow room" in which to operate. Further, there are significant cultural differences in values, worldview, perceptions, cultural assumptions, and the like between American Indian groups and white society. And even though American Indians as a whole share much culture in common, each Indian group is unique and particular as well. One must understand those features of Indian life, as well as understanding the institutional dynamic of an Indian community, if one is to truly be effective in helping Indians act in their own behalf.

I am suggesting that social workers find ways to keep from further eroding American Indian communities; and, more, to find ways to help Indian communities grow and rejuvenate. To my mind a good social worker among American Indians must be a sensitive social and cultural observer, a community developer in the best sense of that word, superb institutional politician, and a general humanist. I am not of course discounting social work training. I am only suggesting it must be added to and modified in order for one to work reasonably with North American Indian groups. One must be ever socially creative and ever redefining, as well as a superb institutional politician, in order to balance the benefits, requirements, and demands of both bureaucracy and community; and thus be of real service to modern American Indian Communities.