Commentaries on Raymond J. DeMallie’s
“Community in Native America: Continuity and Change among the Sioux”
« Community », « communauté », « collectivité »

Isabelle Schulte-Tenckhoff

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/56674
DOI: 10.4000/nuevomundo.56674
ISSN: 1626-0252

Publisher
Mondes Américains

Electronic reference
Isabelle Schulte-Tenckhoff, « Commentaries on Raymond J. DeMallie's "Community in Native America: Continuity and Change among the Sioux" », Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos [Online], Workshops, Online since 13 June 2017, connection on 20 June 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/56674 ; DOI : 10.4000/nuevomundo.56674

This text was automatically generated on 20 June 2019.

Nuevo mundo mundos nuevos est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.
Commentaries on Raymond J. DeMallie’s “Community in Native America: Continuity and Change among the Sioux”
« Community », « communauté », « collectivité »

Isabelle Schulte-Tenckhoff

EDITOR’S NOTE


1 Raymond DeMallie describes the changes of « community » among the Lakota under the impact of colonialism and of a succession of federal policies. Through his case study, one learns about the various meanings that the term « community » has acquired for the Lakota when approached historically, and about the sometimes contradictory criteria that reference to « community » may imply for indigenous peoples at present.

2 To further the debate in connection with the problematic set out for the symposium, on a more conceptual level, I wish to raise a somewhat provocative question : can the term « community » as used by Raymond DeMallie be translated as « communauté » ? My thoughts on this matter are informed by previous work undertaken for the Law Commission of Canada on the juridical relevance of « community » in the context of Canadian multiculturalism (as legally defined) with regard to, both, Aboriginal peoples and recent immigrants.

3 The Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988, inter alia, seeks to promote the cultural heritage of the numerous groups that compose Canadian society. The beneficiaries of the
Act are « communities of all origins » or, in French, « collectivités de toutes origines ». Interestingly, in the Act, « community » is not translated as « communauté ».

In the little time at my disposal, I cannot dwell on the finer points of the legislation, its interpretation and implementation. I would simply like to underscore what appears to me as a fundamental ambiguity of the community/collectivité issue, i.e. the difference between a culture (understood empirically, like in anthropology, as a population with a set of given characteristics), and an entity circumscribed in spatial terms mainly for administrative purposes.

In the relevant official documents, the expression « Aboriginal community » is translated as « communauté autochtone » or « collectivité autochtone ». In Canada, the « collectivité autochtone » is generally defined as a group inhabiting the same locality, namely a reserve. The term « collectivité » appears here as a category useful for legal and administrative purposes. As such, it rests on a spatial conception of the entity in question. In this sense, it is also somewhat artificial, for it exists only to the extent that the State establishes it as an object of law. In this manner, the notion of « Aboriginal community » as « collectivité autochtone » (Aboriginal reserve) points to the (conceptual, legal and political) gap between legally and administratively recognised « collectivités » (in terms of the Indian Act, or of measures undertaken by Canadian Department of Indian Affairs), and peoples or nations reclaiming their history and, on that basis, demanding recognition of a form of legal personality. This gap illustrates what may be termed the founding dilemma of Canada as a former European settler colony built on processes of exclusion and dispossession of the indigenous population similar to those described by Raymond DeMallie for the Lakota. However, when viewed solely from the angle of positive law, the term « collectivité » masks this dilemma, thus raising questions with regard to the allegedly contingent nature of indigenous rights.

Conversely, when applied to immigrant groups, the « collectivités de toutes origines » / « communities of all origins » of the 1988 Multiculturalism Act are rather identity-based groups (since the law calls for the active promotion of the cultural heritage of such groups). Here, the concept of « collectivité » overlaps with that of « communauté » as understood in anthropology, i.e. a sociocultural group that is more or less clearly defined in terms of « culture traits » and regarded as spatially bounded. This empirical understanding of communities (in the plural) must be set off against a conceptual-analytical use of the concept (community in the singular) as a construct, and even, at a further level of abstraction, from community as an « ideal type ». More so than the English « community », the French « communauté », rather than simply referring to « cultural groups » to be studied empirically, also suggests a certain ideal of the social bond; it is value-laden and, as such, recalls a number of well-known dichotomies (Tönnies’s Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft including its underlying evolutionism, and similar dichotomies elaborated by Durkheim, Redfield, even Weber...).

It is my contention that the study of « communities » necessarily involves a three-tiered approach that problematises « community ».

From the outset, Raymond DeMallie underscores the moral underpinnings of community, while drawing attention to the prevalence, today, of community as characterised by « communality of purpose ». More recently, indeed, the study of communities in the social sciences has shifted from viewing communities as homogeneous and territorially anchored social groups to viewing them as heterogeneous symbolic entities resulting from (individual) processes of social construction, with the purpose of pursuing common
goals. Used in this manner, reference to community is often intended as a means to combat inequality or marginalisation within the liberal and pluralist polity. It is in this context that one is faced with the problem of establishing legal norms in response to the strategic invocation of community ties with a view to legitimising or, conversely, contesting collective rights claims: as in the case, say, of the cultural legacy of recent immigrant groups, or that of territorial claims advanced by indigenous peoples.

But can community acquire intrinsic analytical or normative value in law? In Canada, setting legal standards in favour of particular identity-based groups (« communities ») has turned out to be a rather delicate exercise. On what conditions and according to what modalities are communities likely to claim special rights? How does the recognition of such rights affect other communities finding themselves in a similar position? How to maintain group diversity without neglecting the fact that the communities in question are part of a larger (and often hegemonic) structure that tends to promote uniformity?

In teasing apart the semantic interferences between « community » , « communauté » and « collectivité », one is led to put to the test a number of assumptions implicit in all three concepts. Moreover, translation is properly revealing here, especially with regard to the French « collectivité » whose legal connotations exclude (at least to all appearances) identity-based criteria like those raised by « communauté ». But if culture is to remain the main criterion of differentiation in present-day processes of communalisation (in the Weberian sense), academics ought to question the way in which cultural references are being used in law and politics and, in this manner, stabilised.

The anthropologist thus finds herself facing a paradox: essentialism is no longer in, but if « community » is to be made legally relevant, it must be essentialised ... which is then very much a matter for debate.

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**APPENDIXES**

**Community in Native America: Continuity and Change among the Sioux**

Raymond J. DeMallie
The idea of « community », because it embodies the moral sense of a group integrated by common interest, is an important concept for understanding the social realities of American Indian life. In historical times, variations in community size and composition throughout the year brought about realignments of people according to seasonal activities. Since the creation of reservations, most American Indian communities have become sedentary, year-round settlements. This paper examines the Sioux Indians of the Great Plains ethnohistorically to track changes over time in the composition and meaning of community. In recent times, new definitions of community based on ideologies of blood and race are competing with older definitions based on kinship and face-to-face social interaction, common language, and common culture.

North American Indians, Sioux Indians, community, kinship, race

La communauté amérindienne : continuité et changement parmi les Sioux

L'idée de « communauté », parce qu'elle incarne le sentiment moral d'appartenance à un groupe soussé par l'intérêt commun, est un concept important pour la bonne compréhension des réalités sociales de la vie des Amérindiens. À l'époque historique, les variations de taille et de composition des communautés, au cours d'une année, étaient dues aux diverses occupations saisonnières des personnes. Après la création des réserves, la plupart des communautés amérindiennes sont devenues des établissements sédentaires l'année durant. Cette étude examine les Indiens sioux des plaines d'un point de vue ethnohistorique, afin d'établir les changements qui ont eu lieu dans la composition et la signification du terme « communauté ». Récemment, de nouvelles définitions de ce concept fondées sur les idéologies de sang et de race rivalisent avec les anciennes significations construites autour des notions de parenté, d'interactions sociales, de langage et de culture.

Amérindiens, Amérique du Nord, Sioux, communauté, parenté, race.

La comunidad en la América indígena : continuidad y cambio entre los siux

La idea de « comunidad », porque incluye el sentido moral de pertenencia a un grupo ligado por interés común, es un concepto importante para entender las realidades sociales de la vida de los indígenas norteamericanos. En los tiempos históricos, las variaciones en el tamaño de las comunidades durante el año generaba configuraciones variables según las actividades de la estación. Después de la formación de las reservas, la mayoría de las comunidades indígenas se volvieron sedentarias durante todo el año. Este artículo interroga los Siux de las grandes Llanuras en términos etnohistóricos para seguir los cambios en la configuración y el sentido de « comunidad ». En tiempos recientes, nuevas definiciones de la comunidad basadas en las ideologías de la sangre y de la raza competen con las más antiguas basadas en el parentesco, la interacción social, un idioma común, y una cultura compartida.

índigenas norteamericanos, siux, comunidad, parentesco, raza.

INDEX

Palabras claves: comunidad, indígenas norteamericanos, parentesco, siux

Mots-clés: amérindiens, Amérique du Nord, communauté, parenté, Sioux

Keywords: community, kinship, North American Indians, race, Sioux Indians
AUTHOR

ISABELLE SCHULTE-TENCKHOFF
Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID)Geneva, Switzerland
isabelle.schulte-tenckhoff@graduateinstitute.ch