

THE REMOVAL OF FISHING WEIRS AND THE EFFECT
ON THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE BABINE INDIANS

Burns Lake, British Columbia is considered one of the areas in the province where poor relations exist between the white and Indian population. Babine Lake, approximately twenty-two miles from the town of Burns Lake via a road used primarily by lumber trucks, is the traditional home of the Babine Indians who are considered unprogressive by most of the whites in the area. An examination of the history of the Babines indicates several reasons why their adjustment to the white man's culture has been difficult.

One of the events which created ill feeling among the Babines was the removal of the fishing weirs which enabled them to catch large quantities of salmon which was the major source of food and, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, was one of the major items of trade with the whites.

This paper will try to briefly reconstruct the political and social organization of the Babines, the events leading to the destruction of the fishing barricades in 1905, and the impact of this event on the social structure of these people.

The Babine Indians speak the Carrier language, but their social organization resembles that of the Tsimshian Indians to the west more than the Carrier tribes further inland in that the phratric structure is the dominant feature in Babine social life. The nature of these phratries has already been recorded (Duff 1951), and a detailed study of the social organization of the Bulkley River Carrier was made in 1925 by Diamond Jenness. (1943).

The Babines do not have an aboriginal term for their phratries. Something belongs to Iaksamasyu or a man is a Jilserhu. In explaining the phratric structure to outsiders the Babines use the word "company," a group of people working together like the Hudson's Bay Company. One older Indian, who spoke little English, used the term "nation." He seemed to describe the "company" as a group of people sharing a common culture and traditions. Among the Babines the phratries are exogamous units, having a hierarchy of nobles and sharing common hunting grounds. Potlatches are given by one phratry for the rest of the tribe, although support for a feast sometimes came from outside the phratry. In recent times particularly a father might finance a potlatch for his son to a greater^{degree}/than the maternal uncle who is in the same phratry as the young man.

Each phratry had its own hunting grounds and fishing stations which were used by the families of the men who were members of that phratry. Feuds could easily arise if a member of another phratry were to violate these rights. Since phratric affiliation was inherited matrilineally, the son belonged to the phratry of his mother rather than his father. After leaving his father's family to set up a household of his own, he must ask permission from the chiefs of his father's phratry in order to hunt on the land belonging to that group. This permission was rarely refused. Certain titles, crests, dances, and songs were also the property of a particular phratry; and while these intangible assets were inherited by other members of the phratry, they very rarely passed to another phratry. Occasionally a crest or a tangible asset like hunting rights to a certain piece of property could be given to another phratry in payment

for a killing or for aid in one of the few battles of a major size. Some of these intangible assets belonged to the phratry; others belonged to individuals. For example, only one man could perform the dance which ended with the dancer going to sleep, and he held the title Goc-wahk, i. e. to sleep. However, a member of the Granton phratry was willing to model a dance blanket belonging to someone else in the Granton phratry, whereas a man who belonged to another phratry could not. Anyone could display crests of his own phratry but not those of another. If a person were willing to give the necessary potlatches he could claim a crest or title which had never been used before. For example, Daniel Leone has claimed the title, "Centre Chief of B. C." This appears as part of a dance blanket which contains another personal crest - the Canadian flag. His wife has a dance blanket which shows a frog holding what appears to be the British flag.

The phratry was the most important social unit among the Babines. A man was inclined to think of himself as a member of a certain phratry rather than as a member of the larger group which we call a tribe. The feeling of kinship toward members of the same phratry even carried over to complete strangers who were members of the phratry in a different tribe.

The Babines are grouped into five phratries: Laksamasyu, Tsayu, Granton (or Cumbewotin), Jilserhu, and Iachibu (or Jitumten). The Laksamasyu and Tsayu phratries act as one at the present time as they do among the Bulkley River Carriers. At one time they were separated phratries but probably combined after an amalgamation took place between the two phratries on the Bulkley River about 1865 (Jenness 1943: 482). The Laksamasyu phratry, before

and after the amalgamation with Tsayu, was the largest and most important phratry at Babine Lake. Deo-tsum-tsak was the most important title in the Iaksamasyu phratry; therefore, the holder of this title could be considered the chief of the Babine tribe. In actual practice, however, few decisions of a tribal nature were made by Deo-tsum-tsak. The holders of important titles in all of the phratries were usually consulted when questions concerning the entire tribe arose.

Actually the chief of the Iaksamasyu phratry held a more influential position at Lake Babine than the holders of important titles usually held among their people in other Carrier groups, because he was theoretically the owner of the fishing barricades which enabled the Babines to capture the salmon in such large quantities during the fall of the year. A look at the accompanying map will show that the four barricades which blocked the river required cooperative efforts if the fishing activities were to be carried on effectively. The first and second barricades were owned by Tsayu and Iaksamasyu respectively, and according to informants, completely controlled the passage of salmon upstream. The third barricade only partially blocked the river and was owned by Jilserhu. The fourth barricade was owned by Iaksamasyu. The fishermen at the barricades upstream from the first barricade were dependent on the good graces of Deo-tsum-tsak to permit salmon to pass through the openings in the first and second barricades. The number of barricades that were built and used each year probably varied in number, but the Iaksamasyu phratry with its affiliate, Tsayu, was the owner of the surrounding territory and the right to build the fishing weirs. To get some

idea of the cooperative efforts needed to build and maintain these fences, a description from the 1905 report of the Department of Marine and Fisheries will be quoted:

The barricades were constructed of an immense quantity of materials, and on scientific principles; . . . There were posts driven into the bed of the river, which is 200 feet wide, and from two to four feet deep, and running swiftly at the intervals of 6 or 8 feet.

Then sloping braces well bedded in the bottom and fastened to the top of posts, then strong stringers all the way on top and bottom, in front of posts, then panel beautifully made of slats woven together with bark set in front of all, these were set firmly into the bottom, and reaching 4 feet above the water. This made a magnificent fence which not a single fish could get through.

On the upper side of [the] dam were placed 12 big traps or fish bins. Opposite holes made in the panels for fish to enter the traps, prepared with slides to open and shut, . . . (206-207)

Altogether the barricades presented a most formidable and imposing appearance. (206-207).

The construction of these barricades required leadership and united effort that was probably not as necessary in many nearby tribes. Although all of the Indians in that part of British Columbia fished for salmon or traded with those who did, no other weirs for capturing them seemed to reach the size of the ones at the outlet of Lake Babine.

Every summer practically all the Indians on Babine Lake would gather along the shores of Nilkitkwa Lake, on Smokehouse Island, and at the village which is now called Fort Babine to dry and smoke their winter supply of salmon. Indians from Takla Lake, who consider themselves part of the Babine people, would also leave their winter hunting grounds and make the annual migration to the outlet of Babine Lake. It is very likely that others came from Bear Lake, Stuart Lake, and sometimes the Bulkley River, since the Babine fisheries became known

as a dependable source of salmon. During bad years on the Fraser River watershed it is probable that Carrier speaking Indians from the inland areas made the trip to Babine. All of these people acknowledged Deo-tsum-tsak, chief of the Laksamasyu phratry, as the owner of the crucial barricades and paid their respects accordingly.

Another look at the map will show that Laksamasyu owned the property, or at least the hunting rights to the property, which bordered the fishing area near Fort Babine. Although this map does not show which phratry has fishing rights at the mouth of each small stream which enters the lake, it would indicate that the members of the other phratries traveled a fairly long distance and then became the "guests" of the Laksamasyu phratry. The ownership of this very important territory may have contributed to the agreement among the Babines today that Laksamasyu is still the most important phratry.

When the fur traders first made contact with the Babines a lively trade existed between the Tsimshian and the Carrier speaking tribes to the east using goods obtained from white traders who were making contact with the coastal tribes (Harmon 1820: 203; Morice 1906: 209). Since the Babines were able to get better rates of exchange for their furs through their Tsimshian neighbors than through the white traders coming from the east, they were quite unenthusiastic about the establishment of a Hudson's Bay Company fort in their midst. Instead of the Babines becoming dependent on the Company for supplies, the Company was largely dependent on them for a supply of salmon to supplement the irregular runs on the Fraser River. This

acceptance of the village near Fort Babine as a source of salmon is born out by the travelers in the latter part of the nineteenth century who referred to area as "The Fisheries!" (Horetzky 1874: 96). Many salmon taken at Babine provided an important food item for the trading posts located on Stuart, Fraser, and McLeod Lakes.

When Catholic missionaries reached Babine in the last half of the nineteenth century they found these Indians unreceptive to the new teachings. The proselyting Christian missionaries found a large measure of success in those areas where the fur traders had effectively established their supremacy. At Stuart Lake the fur traders quickly dominated the Carrier Indians who lived in the area, and the person who could explain the religion of the invader was naturally given a hearing. The Babines were not subdued as easily. Their political, social, and religious organization was flexible enough to cope with the situation for some time. The dried salmon was a commodity which formed a sort of legal tender at ten to the dollar and was in demand by every storekeeper, miner, and owner of dog teams. They were not dependent on the Hudson's Bay Company for supplies. As a result they were in a better position than the Stuart Lake Carrier to resist the new culture which eventually overwhelmed them.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the fisheries at the outlet of Lake Babine was a full scale industry. In 1905 Hans Helgeson, a fisheries official, estimated that three-quarters of a million salmon were either drying in smokehouses or being prepared for smoking on the shores of Nilkitkwa Lake. The Fisheries Department was concerned that the spawning areas which surrounded Lake Babine were being cut off by the Indian barricades. Commercial fisheries were beginning to take their

toll of the migrating salmon and the government was investigating the spawning grounds to consider methods which would insure the continued reproduction of the species. A fisheries inspector had ordered the Babines not to put in their barricades in 1905, but they had gone ahead with their normal fishing operations. As a result Inspector Helgeson was sent to remove these barricades in September of 1905. Fortunately for Helgeson the Babines had completed most of their fishing operations for the season. Informants say that Big George held the title of Deo-tsum-tsak at that time, but he was not available when Helgeson arrived at Babine. Chief Atio was the representative for the tribe at the time and Helgeson explained the government regulations concerning the trapping of salmon and the reasons for these rules:

The chief advanced many points and some of them were well taken, he said they have had an indisputable right for all time in the past, that if it was taken away the old people would starve, that by selling salmon they could always get iktahs [gifts], and he wanted to know to what extent the government would support them, he thought it unfair to forbid them selling fish when the cannery men sold all theirs, and I had to promise him to tell the government to compel the canners to let more fish come up the rivers, as some years they did not get enough, that the canners destroyed more spawn than they . . . I met all his arguments in a prompt manner, and set back those who showed a spirit of resistance, by telling them that they had committed a gross breach of law, that they had put in their barricades this year notwithstanding the inspector had by letter forbid them to do so, and that if they resist and do not destroy the barricades nothing will save them from punishment or imprisonment (Department of Marine and Fisheries 1905: 207).

Some of the Indians were convinced that the barricades had to be removed and began to destroy them. After two hours work they objected and the fisheries officer had to hire six other Indians to complete the job.

Other barricades were destroyed along Babine Lake that month, but this did not end the issue. Inspector Helgeson

comments that removing the barricades would not amount to much unless guardians were appointed to enforce the regulations.

To show how the Indians feel about loosing [sic] their barricades, I beg to call your attention to what occurred [sic] at Babine, I was asked to attend a meeting of Indians, when I was informed by one who claimed to own the barricades, that if he had been present when the barricades were destroyed they would not have been touched, that unless the government sends him \$600 before the fish run next summer, the barricades would surely be constructed again, though he should die for it, this he repeated several times and I had to tell the government so. (Department of Marine and Fisheries 1906: 211).

The next year the Babines again erected their barricades with the result that some of them were arrested and imprisoned. The trouble was of such a magnitude that a final arrangement was made in a conference in Ottawa with the Minister of Marine and Fisheries. The Indians were to receive gill nets to replace the loss of their barricades. It would be difficult to compare the work involved in constructing and maintaining a huge fishing weir with the use and care of gill nets, but one can be sure that the Indians found the cooperative efforts involved in using the fences more satisfying than the use of the nets by individual families.

Even if we assume that the nets were satisfactory as a means of gathering the necessary food supply, the Iaksamasyu phratry had lost its most valuable piece of property and the power to control the most important asset to the Babines. Perhaps it was Big George who demanded the \$600 from the government. It is certain that the importance of the title, Deo-tsum-tsak, was greatly diminished by the loss of the barricades. The government officials did not realize that the barricades nominally belonged to one man even though the privilege of using

this property was always extended to all Indians in the surrounding territory.

The sale of dried fish to the Hudson's Bay Company and other white men not only provided a source of revenue for the tribe but also provided Deo-tsum-tsak with a certain amount of influence with the whites. In 1905 Inspector Helgeson writes that the Hudson's Bay Company purchased 9,000 salmon. In earlier years they sometimes purchased 20,000 salmon. While it is likely that this demand was met primarily by individual families it is just as likely that the phratric chiefs, and especially Deo-tsum-tsak, were in a position to provide a sizeable portion of this demand and procure for themselves large amounts of money. It is also quite certain that this wealth was in turn distributed among members of the phratry during feasts and other members of the tribe during potlatches. This manner of distributing the wealth further enhanced the prestige of the leaders and their positions in the phratric structure. When the regulation forbidding the sale of salmon to white men was enforced, the Babines lost one of their rapidly diminishing means of being independent of the white culture. The phratric structure lost a source of wealth which was important to the potlatch system. Wealth passing through certain channels in a traditional manner tended to maintain the social organization and keep it functioning despite the many pressures from the outside.

With the removal of the barricades the individual families were more inclined to disperse over a larger area. They still fished in areas which were claimed by their individual phratry or received permission to use areas from those chiefs who "owned"

the territories, but gill nets could be used in a variety of depths of water and did not require community efforts to use or maintain them. Fishing activities became an independent effort by each family.

The next forty years brought no major change in the Babine way of life. The market for furs fluctuated, but trapping had always been an individual activity. In the last decade lumbering and lumber mills were introduced on Lake Babine, and with this dramatic change in the economy more intensive contact with the white population resulted. The problems which inevitably arose served to accentuate the fact that the Babines were not prepared to live comfortably within the new culture and lacked a traditional social structure that could handle the new situations. It is possible that a strong phratrie system would have made the introduction of the lumber industry even more difficult and would have postponed assimilation, but an appreciation of the void that presently exists makes it easier to understand the insecure position of the typical Babine Indian who has few strong cultural forces to provide guidance.

Certain changes should be noted to illustrate the loss of vitality in the phratrie structure. In 1956 a controversy existed over who held the title of Deo-tsum-tsak. About ten years ago another Big George held the title Deo-tsum-tsak; but when he moved down the Lake to settle at Pendleton Bay, he no longer attended the potlatches which were held at Fort Babine every September. The attendance at these ceremonies, which have a seating order according to rank similar to potlatches

on the coast, was a prerequisite of a claim to a certain title. The title is currently claimed by Sam Patrick, but he is also inclined to treat his ceremonial duties lightly. Another claimant to the chief title of the Iaksamasyu phratry is Paddy Leone. Still another, Moses Denis, has expressed an intention to claim the title. The significance of the situation lies not only in the dispute but in the apathy with which the Babines regard it. It doesn't matter who holds the title any more. No informants had any strong feelings about the question, except Paddy Leone. Deo-tsum-tsak is now merely an empty title; he no longer is the owner of the piece of property which enables them to obtain food for the entire winter.

The removal of the fishing weirs which required the teamwork and leadership that the phratric structure had been able to provide was a major step in the deterioration of the social organization. The phratric organization was probably largely intact in 1905, but once the need for this teamwork was eliminated, the importance of the leaders of the various teams also declined.

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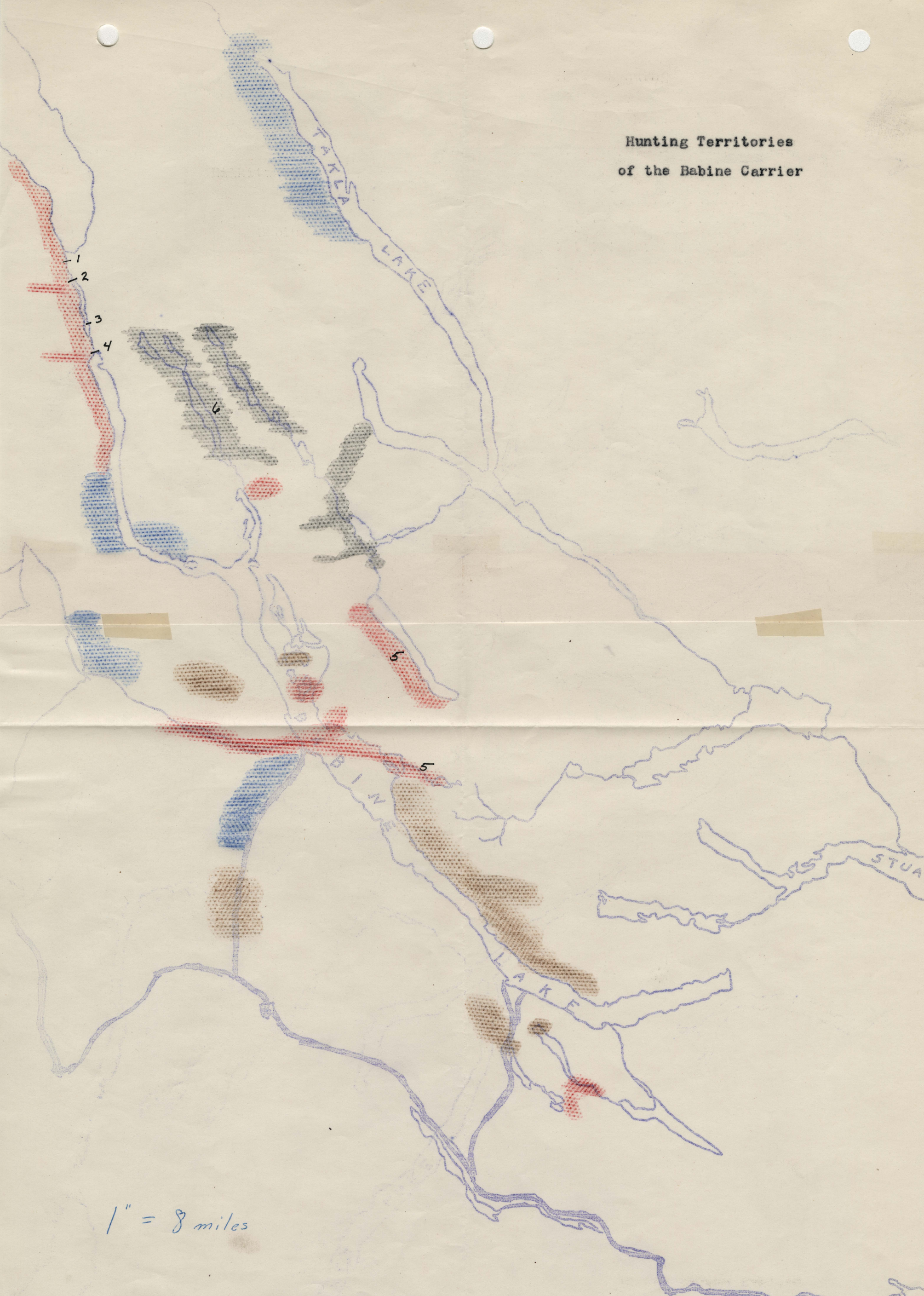
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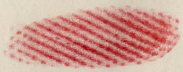
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Hunting Territories
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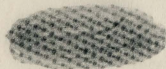
1" = 8 miles



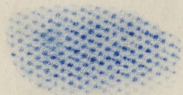
Area claimed by the Laksamasyu Phratry



Area claimed by the Granton Phratry



Area claimed by the Jilserhu Phratry



Area claimed by the Laxibu or Jitumten Phratry

The number 1 shows the location of a fish weir claimed by Tsayu.

The number 2 shows the location of a fish weir claimed by Laksamasyu.

The number 3 shows the location of a fish weir claimed by Jilserhu which only partially blocked the river and was located across from Smokehouse Island.

The number 4 shows the location of a fish weir claimed by Laksamasyu.

The number 5 - Although this area is labelled Laksamasyu it probably belonged to Tsayu.

The number 6 - This territory is now used by a Laxibu man for trapping. He made use of the white man's laws of inheritance to obtain it.