

Intergenerational Differences in Ethnic Identification in a Northern Athapaskan Community

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Introduction

This paper is a first attempt to explore various features of ethnicity present in the aboriginal community of Upper Tanana Athapaskans of the Yukon-Alaska borderlands. In particular, I wish to focus on the presence and nature of intergenerational distinctions in ethnic identification. It is clear that there are differences between those people born after systematic state intervention in the region—from about 1960 onwards—and those whose lives include the period before this intervention. What is less clear is whether these differences are best accounted for by the increasing hegemony of the state or whether they are differences due to the age of the individuals within a locally constructed cultural life cycle.

The concept of ethnicity that I am using here is based on understanding it as the social expression of group membership, which serves to maintain group identity, particularly in distinction with other groups, and the recognition that “ethnic identities are neither ascribed nor achieved; they are both. They are wedged between situational selection and imperatives imposed from without” (Ericksen 1993, 57). It is situational because ascriptive or proscriptive categories of ethnicity may vary with the particular social context in which it is applied (A. Cohen 1974). As a mode of consciousness, ethnicity is an emic—that is, from an insider’s point of view—category of ascribed individual status, which is recognized and validated etically—from the outside—by proscriptive social action. Moerman’s conclusions as to “Who are the Lue?” sum up this dual nature of ethnicity: “One is Lue by virtue of believing and calling himself Lue and of acting in ways which validate his Lueness (1965, 1219)”.

The Fieldwork Area

I am principally working with people who speak or are descendants of speakers of the Athapaskan native language known as Upper Tanana,

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more specifically the dialect of Scottie Creek—a people who identify themselves as the Scottie Creek *Dindeh*. Today, most of these people live in Beaver Creek, Yukon, and Northway, Alaska, two Alaska Highway communities that lie astride the international border, about 130 kilometers distant from each other. Although members of this group can be found in many other communities within and outside this region, having moved for marriage or economic opportunity, they maintain a primary identification as Scottie Creek people.¹

Until one hundred years ago, these people were exclusively foragers. In this regard they shared much with their Athapaskan cognates within the western Subarctic. Their economic adaptation of hunting and gathering natural resources followed a seasonal round within an ecological region defined by a geographical watershed. They aggregated within semipermanent villages for labor-intensive economic and ritual activity, and dispersed as small extended families during times of resource scarcity. They traveled widely for the purposes of trade and establishing and maintaining consanguinal and affinal kin relations (McKenna 1959).

Kin-based economic and ritual activity was promoted and regulated by clan membership bifurcated into moieties. This included prescriptive marriage and ritual relations between moieties, which were socially recognized through “potlatch” aggregations (Guedon 1974).² Political relations were egalitarian, with a strong emphasis on the authority and responsibility of the individual in determining and pursuing an appropriate choice of action (Ridington 1982, 1983; Goulet 1998). Extensive oral traditions provided the ideological basis for many aspects of social life, as well as support to a naturalistic worldview that understood humans and nature to be bound by reciprocal ties. The interpretation of dreams, visions, and communications from animals informed decisionmaking, contextualized experience, and explained misfortune (Easton n.d.; Nelson 1983; Ridington 1968).

The effects of the arrival of Europeans to the region were diffused along existing aboriginal exchange networks prior to their meeting. This included the trade of material goods (for example, metal and beads), the spread of disease (for example, small pox and influenza), and the communication of ideas (for example, shifting from cremation to burial of the dead). These effects increased in volume and intensity as the western fur trade escalated in geographical reach and intensity in the nineteenth century (Van Stone 1974; Helm et al. 1975), culminating in the estab-

ishment of permanent settlements associated with the gold rushes between 1896 and 1902 (Hosley 1981; McClellan 1981).

The territories of the borderlands, however, were little exposed to the new settlers, lying as they did outside the goldfields and their access routes. These lands remained largely unexplored until the first decade of this century, and practically inaccessible until the building of the Alaska Highway in 1943. As a consequence, with the exception of depopulation brought on by disease—which was significant—and the occasional intrusion by state representatives associated with border maintenance (Green 1982), the borderland peoples were not affected as much as many other interior Athapaskans by emergent state activity until the latter half of the twentieth century (McKenna 1981). With little formal state presence prior to the building of the Alaska Highway in the 1940s, and virtually no interference in their internal social and economic relations, it seems that the Scottie Creek Dineh retained almost complete control of their adaptations to the new nation-states that were evolving on their periphery—accepting and pursuing innovations that seemed useful and congruent with their values, rejecting those that were not.

Year-round village nucleation remained unconsolidated until the 1960s, accompanied by increased numbers of non-native settlers in the region and the building of state infrastructure to support their occupation: schools, nursing stations, police outposts, electrical generators, hotels, taverns, and stores. Despite these changes, the population remains predominantly Native, about 80 percent of the approximately 350 people living in the region year-round.

Contemporary Ethnic Identification

Today, there are numerous ethnic identifications that may emerge in social interaction in the region. Practically all Athapaskans consider themselves to be “Natives” or “Indian People” in relation to the frontier settlers of the past half century (predominantly of north European descent). This identification is principally, though not exclusively, supported by physical characteristics, such as black hair and brown skin, so much so that numerous people share a notion that the indigenes of Southeast Asia “are our relatives—we come from the same place. I think they speak our language too” (TJ). This affiliation is supported by firsthand accounts of Southeast Asia brought back to the region by Natives who participated in the war in Vietnam.

Without the physical appearance of Indian-ness, the recognition of other Natives seems to require the intersection of two social factors, cultural practice and filial relationship. There are, for example, a number of individuals who bear little, and for some no, discernable Native physical characteristics and yet are regarded by both themselves and others as "Indians" because they both behave like other Natives and are related, either by descent or marriage, to a Native. Thus, TW, a man born in Europe, who married NK, a woman born in the Scottie Creek valley, and had two children with her before they divorced, is considered "one of us" because he lives the life of other Indians, raising his children in their community, and is a member of a Native family. I, on the other hand, despite my participation in hunting, fishing, gathering and processing vegetation, and tanning and sewing hides, but with no filial relations, remain a "White man."

It is clear, however, that physical appearance is the dominant means by which Indian-ness is determined. Two examples bear this out. The first example involves GT, a Lower Laberge Tutchone man who worked with MK as a Special Constable of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the late 1920s in the region. In the 1940s GT gave up his Canadian government Indian Status in order to receive a big game guiding license, which at that time was not available to Indians. Recounting this, one of MK's children noted that "they gave him a blue card and turned him into a white man—that's bullshit. They can't brainwash me. I'm an Indian. That guy's an Indian, too, still" (SL). The second example involves the arrival of an Interior Salish man from British Columbia in Beaver Creek in the summer of 1995. He was an indigent traveler seeking work and he quickly fell into staying with a couple of the younger men in the community. While cutting meat in Bessie John's smokehouse one afternoon, I asked her who the fellow was as he passed by on the road. Looking at him through the poplar branches she said, "I don't know; an Indian from somewhere, I guess. Gee, I feel sorry for him," and then she called out "Hey you! You want meat?" The man gratefully accepted the offer of several slices of dried moose meat. I think that Bessie's recognition of the man as an Indian, as one of her people, compelled her to offer to share meat with him; it was a necessary generosity required in order to ensure that moose would give itself to her hunters in the future.

This second example leads us to one of the contemporary intergenerational distinctions apparent in local Native ethnic identity. Broadly speaking, this cleavage occurs between those adults born from the

1960s onwards and those born before, which I will conveniently label the younger and older generations. This date marks a distinction between those who grew up "in the bush" and those whose lives have been almost exclusively within settled village or city settings.

Among the older generation an important expression of Indian-ness is subsistence hunting and gathering and an accompanying moral imperative to share the resources of their harvest widely (see Nelson 1983). These conditions of identity are not so apparent among the younger generation, who neither actively forage to the degree of their elders nor share as widely the bounty of their labors.

The sharing of available resources by older members, even their limited capital resources (obtained, for example, through pensions, fur or other petty commodity sale income, or wage labor proper), remains a compelling moral imperative, a distinctive attribute of being a Native person. This is evidenced daily in the actions of the older generation and frequently in their public discourse, particularly when speaking to state representatives, in which they identify the principal distinction between Indians and Whites as the former's willingness to share the land and the latter's desire to alienate Indians from it. Several examples of these actions and discourse follow.

Tommy Johnny is widely regarded as the last "bush Indian" of the region, living by himself on the borderlands pursuing a subsistence and trapping lifestyle. He is also regarded as a preeminent hunter with considerable spirit power. During the period of June to September 1995, Tommy killed three moose and numerous waterfowl. The meat of each moose carcass, about four hundred kilograms each, was totally distributed within three weeks of each kill, at times leaving him with no meat at all in his camp. While the majority of the meat was taken by immediate consanguinal relatives (siblings)—some travelling from Whitehorse and Copper Centre (distances of 500 and 350 kilometers respectively)—a notable proportion of about 20 percent was given to other Natives who visited his camp once word of the kill was transmitted.³

At first Tommy explained his generosity as an expression of how the failure of others to obtain meat through their own efforts made him feel sorry for them. "Those guys down in Northway are starving, man. They don't get nothing." Later he expressed his sharing in metaphorical terms: "When I eat my own meat, it tastes funny, like rags, but when I eat someone else's, boy, that's good." Finally, in the dark over tea one evening he spoke at length on his relationship to the animals that he kills, how he dreams their presence

and respects their offering to him by sharing the meat with others. "If you don't do that, they [animals] know. They're not gonna come back to you, boy, no way. If you don't share that'll be the last one you ever get."

In contrast, SQ, a younger man in his thirties, who shot a moose in September, shared it exclusively within his own household and that of his married brother, despite the fact that his father had not yet succeeded in his own kill. This became a topic of general conversation among the older generation during the subsequent week, in which the younger man's selfishness was scorned and his generally poor capacity as a hunter (this was the second moose of his life he had killed on his own) explained by his stinginess. For his part, SQ explained his behavior thus: "Hey, I got a family to take care of. There's not many moose around this year and we gotta eat this winter."

Sharing, or the lack of it, is also a frequent theme in public political discourse. Following a visit by the territorial conservation officer to check on a report that a moose had been killed by an American Native visiting Beaver Creek, Bessie John opined, "Government should not tell Indian people how to eat, how to live. My people share all this land with them, give them everything to use. They should share too. If I was Queen Elizabeth that's what I would do. Tell the government to share. If I want I could ask my people from Arizona to come here, live here, have garden. They got no water there. We could bring all the Indian people here [laughing at the thought]—all Yukon one big garden."

In its reference to Arizona Indians, this text also implicitly reflects another important distinction between the older and younger generations. Ethnic identification among the older generation tends to be more inclusive than exclusive, that all Native peoples are related as one people and that even the demonstrated distinctions between Native and non-Native can be erased through attribution of a common humanity and their needs. Notwithstanding their individual affiliation with a local area, a dialect or language, a lineage or a clan, a notion of inclusiveness pervades much of their personal and public discourse. "Indian and White," says Bessie John, holding her hands apart and then bringing them together to join as an intertwined clasping of her fingers, "both live here on this earth. We got to share with you this place here, for all people, Africans, Chinese, White, and Indian. We all work together for a good life here. My grandchildren go to white school, learn to read, math, and I tell them my life and then together we gonna make this world a beautiful, beautiful place.... Then I can go on my trail to heaven."

Even the nation-state boundary between Canada and the United States is superseded by this inclusiveness among the older generation. According to an American native living in Northway, "we're all the same family, both sides of the border, Canadian and Alaskan." CU, another Northway resident native, expressed greater antipathy to the state's assertion of citizenship differences among the borderland peoples, in particular through state regulations on the movement of potlatch goods and labor: "When they put in that [border]line everyone got fucked." Bessie John concurs: "My people help each other. Someone there [Northway] wants to bring me fur coat, shirt, that's what I like. Rabbit skin, martin, potlatch food. They [customs] want tax. It hurts my heart.... Where do government people think I came from? A hole in the ground?... Who is that Queen Elizabeth anyways? Who made her? We are queen here, we all are queens, Native people."

The younger generation discusses and plays out greater levels of distinctiveness, however. Principally engaged in wage labor, they share their capital resources almost exclusively within their immediate kin group: spouses, children, siblings, and parents. In their conversations on the politics of Beaver Creek there is frequent distinction made between the Tanana and Tutchone descended families and the distribution of resources within the community between them. There is more frequent antipathy displayed by the younger generation towards the non-Native as well, who are seen as responsible for alcoholism and other drug use, fighting and marital breakdown, and seizure of children by the state's welfare agents, because "they [white people] destroyed our culture." They also dominate positions in seasonal wage labor opportunities.

Notwithstanding their individual affiliation with a local area and dialect or language, several members of the older generation have spoken out against the formation of fourteen separate First Nation governments within the Yukon Land Claim Agreement, arguing instead that there should be only one Indian government: "We are one First Nation—Yukon. We are Indian on our land. We should share our land now, together" (BJ).

Again, this positioning stands in sharp contrast with younger people's acceptance of defining "traditional territories" separating the administrative spheres of each First Nation held by the state in land claims negotiations. Within Beaver Creek this difference is further emphasized in the village factionalization between descendants of Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone speakers, who refer to themselves as Scottie Creek

and Snag people, respectively. These latter designations refer to previous village locations prior to the establishment of Beaver Creek with which each group identifies. The fact that their older relatives may have lived in both (and other) locations, and that many are competent in both languages, is generally unacknowledged by the younger generation. Within the context of building an identity as a modern "First Nation" and negotiating the transfer of governmental powers within the land claim process, the younger generation seem to be operating under Renard's dictum that "it is the business of nations to forget their past" (paraphrased in Anderson 1991).

This circumscription of identity is currently being further defined in formal terms as the White River First Nation (WRFN, the administrative entity of Canadian Natives in the region) develops its constitution under the Yukon Land Claim process. This includes the definition of membership categories, responsibilities, and benefits in the First Nation, and its executive, judicial, and bureaucratic structures.

Two examples speak to intergenerational differences in the articulation of identity within land claims. The first concerns the delineation of a claims boundary between the WRFN and the Kluane First Nation, whose territory lies to the immediate southeast. Each laid claim to territory that overlapped the claim of the other. Their claims legitimately reflected traditional / historic usage in which the boundaries between language and residential groups indeed overlapped. It was seldom the case that a firm line could be, or was, drawn across the geography of the landscape delineating one group from the other (John and John-Penikett 1990; McClellan 1990).

Previous studies in ethnicity emphasized the maintenance of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969). If ethnicity is conceived as the social expression of group membership, it is sensible that it becomes most apparent when that membership is challenged, whether from within or from without. "Conspicuous forms of boundary maintenance become important when the boundaries are under pressure" (Eriksen 1993, 68); that is ethnicity becomes most visible when ethnic identity is under a perceived challenge, which motivates even greater levels of display of membership or difference.

However, in contradistinction to Barth's claim, historically in this region, boundary maintenance was not where distinct ethnicity emerged; rather at the boundaries everything—language, dress, kinship—was permeable and it was indeed the "cultural stuff" at the centers that reified

differences. SC, a thirty-eight-year-old woman of the "Tutchone" group, maintains that the Snag people were and are Upper Tanana people: "we speak Northern Tutchone not because we are Northern Tutchone but because they are our neighbours who we traded and married with." I have not yet a full account of this group's history to comment on whether this is so or a contemporary attempt to "forget the past," but it is of considerable interest that it may be only within the central occupation area of the Upper Tanana that we find their identity most strongly asserted.

Nevertheless, the state negotiators pressed for discrete boundaries of administrative control for each First Nation. For four years this was a principal hold-up in both First Nations' claims process, since neither would agree to give up jurisdiction in the overlap area. Finally, at a meeting in August of 1996 between Kluane and White River First Nations, there was a predetermined effort on the part of the Elders to break the impasse. Two members from each nation addressed the meeting, recounting the history of the relationship between the two groups: kin ties, trapping and hunting partnerships, potlatches, their "war" during the last century and its resolution through intermarriage. Each could point to a close kinsman living in Burwash or Beaver Creek who had come from the other place. And each concluded with the proposition that the overlap land was in fact common property to both groups, an area that through their sharing had served to consolidate them as "one great people, Indian people." Bill Blair summed up the Elders' feelings: "I don't know about borders. We never had borders. Now we have to make borders. I think that's unfortunate. Very, very unfortunate.... I think we should share. I don't see nothing wrong with that." At their urging a resolution was passed that the overlap region would be jointly administered by both First Nations, a position now held in their claims and agreed to in principle by state negotiators.

A second example of intergenerational difference in identity within the land claims process concerns the formulation of the WRFN Constitution, particularly benefits for out-of-claim area members. At a meeting in October 1995, for the purpose of considering benefits for American citizens / residents descendent from the Scottie Creek local group, two different positions emerged. The first, held by the older generation, was that the international border should not divide the unity between kinsmen on either side. For example, it was pointed out, through an enumeration of lineal relations and residence, how Walter Northway, the late chief of Northway, was really a Canadian. His daughters, who were present at the meeting, have rights to this land and the benefits of the land claim,

argued Bessie John, so too his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Similar arguments were presented for the legitimacy of inclusion of the Sam, Demmit, and Sanford families (the latter now married even further west into Ahtna land), all ostensibly "American" families, as full members and beneficiaries of the WRFN.

A Canadian Immigration bureaucrat in attendance at the meeting then laid out the various statutory and policy restrictions that constrained this inclusion. Non-citizens, without landed immigrant status, cannot have voting rights, nor can they have subsistence hunting rights, or exclusion from taxation on earnings, and assistance to kinsmen that involves labor is regarded as "employment," for which a work visa is required and on which appropriate taxes must be paid. These restrictions on crossborder intercourse are federal laws, which would prevail over self-government provisions in the claim unless specifically excluded by act of Parliament.

Younger members of the discussion then alluded to these restrictions to state that, while they were perhaps unfair, they did constrain what the WRFN could offer as benefits to nonresidents. Several also argued that, to receive benefits, individuals should be committed to the community of Beaver Creek and choose to live there to make a contribution to its future. This notion was also applied to Canadian citizens; individuals born and raised in Beaver Creek but who had moved away to other communities for work or marriage were similarly classified as having given up their rights to direct benefits by the younger generation who remained in the community.

There emerged at this meeting, then, two very different concepts of the White River First Nation community and its membership. The older generation put forth the notion of a community of people linked by kin ties and reciprocal obligations between them that cut across geography, nationality, and residence. The younger generation's view was more restricted to a place on the landscape that contained certain people who by their residence defined the composition of the community.

Discussion and Conclusion

While admittedly anecdotal, I suspect that real differences do exist in ethnic identification between the older and younger generations in the region under study. Further exploration of these differences is called for through additional fieldwork before a satisfactory explanation for them might be constructed, however several possibilities may be suggested.

Clearly the principal means of explaining these differences lies in correlating them with differences in other aspects of social identity, both its initial construction and subsequent maintenance. It is perhaps simplistic (though not necessarily inaccurate) to suggest that a principal distinction lies in the differences in the early socialization and subsequent political economic roles between each generation: the older generation's direct experience with a culturally cohesive traditional upbringing in the bush and lifelong participation in a foraging economy; the younger generation's experience within the non-Native system of schools and electronic media and their reliance on wage labor or government transfers to gain the capital resources for their consumptive needs.

There is a notable difference in the active political roles assumed in each generation as well. By political role, I am referring to the individual's participation in the allocation of resources. Resources here can be divided into two classes: capitalist and subsistence resources. While both older and younger generations have roles in both resource areas, each group is dominant in only one: the older in subsistence and the younger in capitalist. It is the older men who consistently hunt, older women who consistently gather, fish, and process bush resources. And it is the younger generation who work most consistently in seasonal wage labor occupations and the administration of state-sponsored capital proper, principally Department of Indian Affairs transfer payments for local social programs.

One question to be asked is whether these differences represent a kind of intergenerational division of political labor, a cultural adaptation to the changed circumstances of the late twentieth century, or reflect the transformation of the ethnopolitical culture of the people in the region. That is, does this represent the emergence of capitalist hegemony among the younger generation or a form of creative cultural resistance? Will the younger generation retain their more restricted notions of ethnic identity as they themselves age into the "elders" of their own offspring or will they begin to assume a broader perspective as their status and role in the community change?

The situation of those individuals between the ages of about thirty-five to forty-five suggests the latter may be the case. Some of these people have recently taken over traplines or begun to more aggressively pursue subsistence resources in support of their older relatives' declining ability to provide for themselves. These "emergent elders" tend to share their resources, both capital and subsistence, more widely than those in their twenties and participate more fully in potlatch rituals as dancers, singers, and speakers.

The role of potlatch aggregations in ethnic identification, display, and recognition has been overlooked in this discussion, although it is clear that they are a principal contemporary mechanism in the construction of local native identity (Simeone 1995). It is significant, as well, to note that younger-generation participation in these gatherings is high. A separate discussion of this topic is deserved.

Nor have I given attention to ethnonationalism in this paper. Within Canada and elsewhere, the contesting by others of ethnicity, whether wishing to include or exclude, combined with the hegemony of the nation-state, has stimulated the reactive emergence of ethno-nationalism (Levin 1993a). Whether in its "strong" state—"the demand of a state for every people"—or its "weak" state—"the right to self-determination" within a larger state polity—ethnonationalism presents additional claims of rights inherent in holding a particular ethnic status. "Aboriginality is a more refined claim to distinctiveness based on historical experience... [which] emphasizes status as the original occupants of a place" (Levin 1993b, 3-4). However, I will make two observations on ethnonationalism in conclusion.

The first is that the Yukon Land Claim itself must be considered an example of the "weak state" of ethnonationalism, since it seeks to accommodate the Aboriginal claim to nationhood within the existing nation-state of Canada. Furthermore, the division of Yukon's aboriginal peoples into fourteen separate First Nations may effectively mitigate against the coalition of a body politic of a size significant enough to form a "strong state" of ethnonationalism, which seeks to establish its nationhood outside the bounds of the Canadian state completely.

However, the assertion of separate First Nation status within the Yukon does seem to lend itself to a situation of "strong" ethnonationalism between Yukon First Nations, in which each asserts its "national" independence from its neighbors. The existence of co-management agreements between First Nations on overlap claim lands (there are several others besides that agreed to between the White River and Kluane First Nations) may counterbalance this apparent tendency.

A final intriguing factor is the emergence of print language in the past two decades and its role in the creation of "the imagined community of the Nation" (Anderson 1991). Many of the older generation hold a multilingual ability in several dialects or languages of Athapaskan. Ruth Tom Tom and Bessie John, for example, are native speakers of Northern Tutchone and Upper Tanana respectively, but each holds a competent

conversational ability in the other's language. Interestingly, when they converse with each other they do so each largely in her first language, with occasional lapses into the other or English for specific words or phrases. But while their language usage must surely serve some purpose in their individual identity, the topics of their conversation concern aspects of their shared experience: common kinsmen, travels to the same place together or separately, historic events of common interest (John Ritter, personal communication, 16 September 1995). Neither reads nor writes her own language, although both have contributed to its development as a print language in collaboration with the Yukon Native Language Centre.

Is the teaching of their language in the Yukon school system as a separate language making a contribution to the reification of distinctiveness between the language groups among the younger generation learning these languages within Beaver Creek and elsewhere in the Yukon? Anderson's proposition suggests that it might well be crucial, and this, too, deserves further investigation. Finally, we need to give increased attention to the contribution that television and, in particular, the Northern Native Broadcasting channel, may be making to the consolidation of an overarching northern Native identity. Is it possible that, in the electronic age, this medium is effectively replacing the print medium as a vector for ethnic homogenization and greater inclusiveness?

NOTES

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1. While many features of Athapaskan culture of the western subarctic had been described prior to my fieldwork, which began in 1993, there has been little direct ethnographic, historical, or archaeological work with the Scottie Creek *Dineh*. McKennan conducted fieldwork among the Upper Tanana in 1929-30 but, due to transportation difficulties, he was unable to visit the territory of the borderlands (McKennan 1959, 3). Other ethnographic work amongst the Upper Tanana contains no or only tangential reference to the Borderland peoples.

2. The term "potlatch" is used to describe formal inter-community gatherings in which gifts are exchanged between clans in payment for services rendered, such as preparing the dead (see Guedon 1974).

3. The genealogical relationships between these other Natives and Tommy show that they are also kin, through either a more distant consanguinal tie (cousins, nephews) or affinally through marriage, or the culturally constructed "fiction of kinship," which is facilitated by clan and moiety memberships and which classifies everyone as a sibling, cousin, or ascendent or descendent bilateral relative.

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