

Otters, Water Monsters, and Yellow Stars

A Rare Example of Combined Blackfoot Tent Designs

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Introduction

Much has been written on Blackfoot Tent designs in the scattered literature, hence there are some detailed descriptions which include notes on the symbolism of the paintings and – if a painted lodge was acquired through a vision or dream – on the origin myths and stories, the bundles belonging to it, as well as the restrictions and rules which have to be obeyed by the owner (e.g., Brasser 1978; McClintock 1936a, 1936b). One publication contains the information that a person who ritually owned several tent designs could combine them on one tent cover (Brasser 1979: 32). This is particularly interesting, as the literature on Blackfoot tents which was available to me contains almost no examples of this feature in the form of descriptions or visual illustrations. Hence, one might come to the conclusion that the statement is wrong or that it only describes a theoretical possibility.

Neither is the case, however, because an example of a combined tent design has now been discovered. The original of a Blackfoot winter count version kept by the Provincial Archives of Alberta at Edmonton includes a drawing of a tent to which the chronicle itself makes no reference. Hence, I did not mention the illustration in my dissertation on Blackfoot winter counts (Siebelt 2005). The last author of the chronicle was Many Guns, who belonged to the North Blackfoot or Siksika, one of the tribes of the Blackfoot on the northern Plains. Whereas no information on him could be found in published sources, another version of his winter count (Many Guns 1938) and an account perhaps published (Hugh Dempsey, pers. comm. 1997) by the writer Frederick Niven (n. d.) reveal that Many Guns obtained the winter count around 1900 from its previous owners, that an earlier specimen made by him once existed, that he used Blackfoot syllabics and some pictographs, and that he was monolingual (Siebelt 2005: 94 f.).

Description and Analysis of the Drawing

In the original document the picture extends almost over the whole page which is sized 30.5 by 18.8

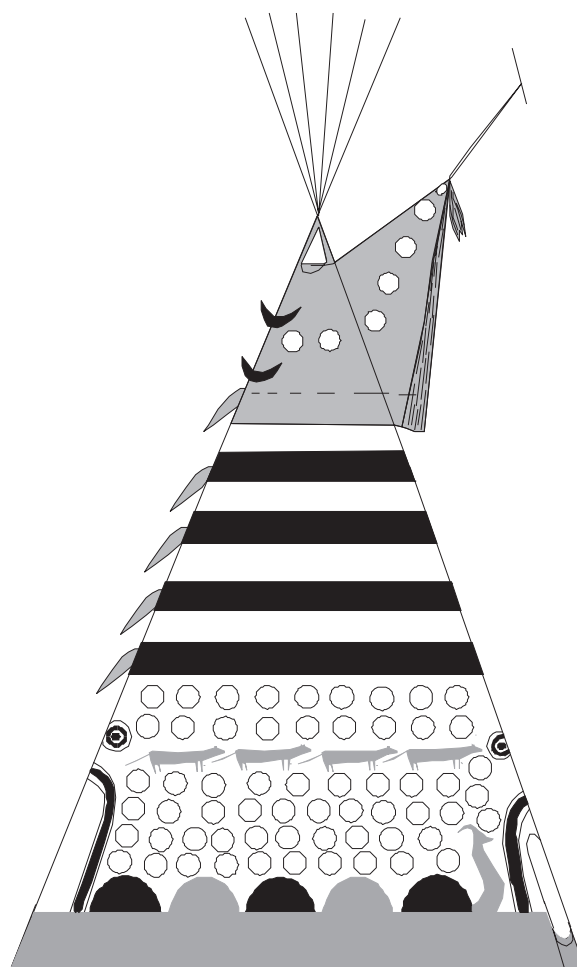


Fig. 1: The tent depicted in the Many Guns winter count.

centimeters; hence, Fig. 1 shows the tent in a small scale copy (Many Guns 1963). As the tent is depicted in an erected position, only half of its painting is visible. It is a composition of three different designs, viz., that of an Otter Tent, a second one depicting a water monster, and a third ornament called “Yellow Star Design” (Paul Raczka, pers. comm. 2003). In order to make room for more than the usual single design, the standard patterns were changed in some details.

Blackfoot Tent decorations which include animals mainly belong to the “framed” type (Brasser 1979: 35, Fig. 4e). This means, that if the lodge painting is seen as divided into three sections (from the bottom to the top), animals are depicted in the middle section which is framed by rather symbolic designs. In the case of Many Guns’ drawing, this central space is covered by four otters. These animals were rather common on Blackfoot lodges. At least two classes of Otter Tents existed with regard to distinctions in the transfer ritual and the contents

of the bundle involved (Wissler 1912: 221 ff.), three different origin myths are mentioned in the literature (Wissler and Duvall 1908: 92, 98 f.; Grinnell 1901: 664), and even more variations of Otter Lodges can be found there.¹

If the otter painting was the only depiction on the cover, very likely the usual “framed” pattern would have been used to decorate the bottom area. This decorative element normally consists of a dark background covered with one or two rows of white discs representing stars or fallen stars. The latter term is the Blackfoot designation for puffballs, which can grow in circles, and hence, resemble this bottom pattern. The usual bottom “frame” is often topped by a row of round or pointed elements of the same dark color, which represent hills or mountains (McClintock 1936a: 123). In our case, this part of the “framed” pattern is omitted in order to make room for a second animal design, viz., that of a water monster. Thus, a small horned head and the long neck of the animal emerge from a colored stripe which shows no white star discs. Whereas the head and the neck are of a similar color as the stripe beneath, the same only goes for two of the five semicircles, which represent the visible body parts of the water monster. The first, the middle, and the last of these semicircles – they, maybe accidentally, resemble mountain symbols to a certain degree – are darker than the rest. At least, one drawing of a water monster design has been published (Wissler 1912: 239, Fig. 31). The specimen described by Wissler is different from our example insofar as, first, it was placed in the usual position expected for animals in a “framed” pattern, secondly, parts of the water monster’s body have a rather angular shape, and thirdly, four colors were applied to distinguish the various sections of the animal instead of two; stripes of the same colors were used to decorate the entrance cover, which Many Guns omitted in his drawing, as well as for the colored lines which form part of the upper “frame” (where a black one is added to the four others). These bands, numbering up to six, commonly symbolize the trails of the animal depicted on the tent (Wissler 1912: 241). According to a second source, only stripes of the same color stand for animal paths, whereas bands of different colors symbolize a rainbow as the sign of a clearing storm (Hungry Wolf 1977: 73). Additional examples from the literature include a lodge with a raven design in which three lines, two of them red and one yellow, stand for the color of the clouds at sunrise (McClintock 1936a: 129), and the six alternately

red and yellow bands on a Snake Tent represent red and yellow clouds (Grinnell 1901: 662). As in Many Guns’ drawing the bands above the animals are all of the same color, they are probably trails. Aside from these animal paths, his picture also shows the animals’ homes, which are symbolized by the horse-shoe-like structures around the entrance and at the back of the tent (Wissler 1912: 241). These representations are also parts of the “framed” pattern (Brasser 1979: 35, Fig. 4e) and can occasionally be discovered on photographs and other illustrations of Blackfoot lodges, if the tents are shown in the right angle (e.g., Hungry Wolf 1977: 69, bottom right).

Many Guns’ drawing exhibits a further trait which belongs to the “framed” pattern, viz., the dark section at the top of the lodge. This part of the tent decoration represents the night sky, hence, as can be expected, it includes symbols such as light-colored discs for star constellations. There are seven discs in the night sky part on the side shown in the drawing. The uppermost disc is much smaller than the other six. The reason for this was probably accidental, as Many Guns just seems to have mistaken the space available for these elements. The line of seven discs stands for the constellation of the Great Bear or Big Dipper, which has been described and illustrated in connection with various tent designs of the “framed” type.² The written descriptions of these paintings include an example showing snakes in the “frame” (Wissler 1912: 237). In this case, the Great Bear symbol is depicted on the south side, but some sources also mention several other designs of the “framed” type which bear the seven discs on the north side (Grinnell 1901: 663–666; McClintock 1936a: 129, 131, 133; 1936b: 170, 175), and in two cases the animals depicted on the tent are otters (Grinnell 1901: 664 f.). Although this information indicates that Many Guns’ drawing more likely shows the north side of the tent, it is not absolutely certain that this side is depicted. What can be said with some certainty is that on the basis of the sources mentioned above the opposite side of the Great Bear symbol is decorated with a cluster of discs which stands for the Pleiades. The two halves of Blackfoot Tents are created through the fact that the entrance faces to the east (Laubin and Laubin 1971: 177, Fig. 27), but this is only obvious for designs which have two different halves (Brasser 1979: 35, Fig. 4e). The “framed” types do not just vary in the upper section. They can also bear differences in the middle part of the painting, i.e., as regards the animal representations. In the great-

1 E.g., McClintock (1936a: 124, Fig. 3); de Bruyn (1990: Figs. 1, 4, 24, 43); Brasser (1995: 59, Figs. 6, 7; 60, Figs. 8, 9).

2 Grinnell (1901: 662 f.); Wissler (1912: 237); Brasser (1979: 35, Fig. 4e; 1995: 56, Fig. 3).

er part of the examples of the “framed” type these animals are arranged like the pattern given in Many Guns’ drawing, viz., according to the specimen’s size, one or more of the animals, which are facing the east, are depicted on each side. Whereas those on the north side should represent the female originator, those on the south side stand for the male part (e.g., Grinnell 1901: 662–666; McClintock 1936a: 123 f., 129, 133). Although many written descriptions of this “north female, south male animal complex” can be found in older publications and the difference should be distinguishable by genitals, minor color changes, or horns (Hungry Wolf 1977: 72), visual illustrations in the available literature are rather rare. Perhaps the photographs used for these works show few details, but it is also possible that the majority of the animals are depicted without any clear evidence of gender. The painted covers of the buffalo lodges in which male animals are sometimes portrayed with genitals are an exception. Another difference between the usual pattern of the “framed” type tents and these covers is a change of direction: the female buffalo is shown on the west side of the lodge and the male on the east side above the entrance (e.g., Brasser 1995: 57). Another example of a tent depicting animals with genitals can be seen on one of Edward S. Curtis’ photographs (1997: 676).

A further common feature of the sky section in the upper part of the “framed” designs and other lodge paintings of religious origin is that they have an additional symbol at the back or on the west side of the tent. This either has the shape of a Maltese cross as a symbol for a butterfly (Grinnell 1901: 655, 661 ff.) or for a moth, which is thought to bring sleep (McClintock 1936a: 123, 125, 129, 133) as well as meaningful dreams (Brasser 1978: 9), or the morning star or Venus (McClintock 1936a: 123; 1936b: 175 f.), a disc which represents the sun, to which a horse or buffalo tail might be added (Grinnell 1901: 663; McClintock 1936b: 170), or a crescent (Brasser 1979: 32) as a symbol for the moon (McClintock 1936a: 133). According to basic Blackfoot Tent designs (Brasser 1979: 35, Fig. 4a–e) as well as to some other illustrations which show the back of the upper part of the tent and describe this section of the cover,³ it seems that usually only one symbol is depicted and that the most common one is the Maltese cross. Thus, a crescent occurs on a tent rather occasionally. Both Grinnell (1901: 665) as well as McClintock (1936a: 129) mention it on the “Single Circle Lodge”, which bears an otter de-

sign. Two of the five basic tent paintings depicted by Brasser (1979: 35, Fig. 4a–e) also show a crescent. One of them is placed on a “Night and Day” pattern, which consists of two halves with different basic colors. The other one is included in a “Hailstone or All Stars” pattern. In this case the whole tent is covered with discs.

The representation of more than a single cross, disc, or crescent at the back of one shelter occurs very rarely. The only example described in the literature cited below is a lodge with a water monster design, which shows both a crescent and a Maltese cross (McClintock 1936a: 133). Although it cannot be proven, the few examples at least indicate a connection between an otter painting and the crescent as well as between the occurrence of two symbols in the western uppermost part of a tent and a water monster representation. Unfortunately, because of the existence of the example including a water monster, a crescent, and a Maltese cross one cannot be sure whether the occurrence of two crescents in Many Guns’ drawing is the result of the combination of several designs or of the water monster component alone.

Whereas the tent paintings discussed above, which include otters or water monsters as representations of their mythological donors, belong to the “framed” type, the third pattern on Many Guns’ lodge belongs to the “Hailstone or All Stars” category as depicted by Brasser (1979: 35, Fig. 4d). As already mentioned, it shows a crescent, and hence, this might explain the existence of at least one crescent in Many Guns’ drawing. In its pure form, a “Hailstone or All Stars” pattern covers the whole space available on a tent with discs (Brasser 1979: 35, Fig. 4d). Because several designs were combined on the Many Guns’ drawing, this third pattern, of course, did not cover the whole tent. Nevertheless, the pattern was applied in the usual way, i.e., the space which was not already filled with the two “framed” patterns is dotted with discs. Thus, as the areas at the top and the bottom part of the tent were not available, the middle part around the otters was used for the third pattern of the lodge, which is called “Yellow Star Design” (Paul Raczka, pers. comm. 2003). Unfortunately, this term does not appear in the available literature, hence, only the general description of the “Hailstone or All Stars” pattern and some examples of tent designs belonging to that category, which are rather rare, can be contributed. A photograph of a Hailstone Tent, the owner of which was One Gun, was taken in a North Blackfoot camp in about 1950 (Brasser 1978: 16, Fig. 5); the visible part shows a dark ground color with an overall pattern of light-colored discs, which

3 Grinnell (1901: Figs. 2, 4, 661–663, 665 f.); McClintock (1936a: 123, 125, 129, 133; 1936b: 170, 174, Fig. 15, 175); Wissler (1912: 240).

omits only some space at the upper rear part of the lodge. Wissler's list (1912: 221 f.) of Blackfoot Tent designs includes a design called "All Stars" from the Blood.

The five items Many Guns depicted hanging down from the rear of the lodge (Fig. 1) are a more common feature of Blackfoot Tent decoration. Although the picture itself is not detailed enough to give clear evidence of the nature of the items, which are fastened to the back side of the cover, one of the two stories, which describes how the three designs were combined, mentions that Many Guns added horsetails to the rear of the tent (Paul Raczka, pers. comm. 2003). The use of horsetails, as a decoration for lodge covers, is frequently documented in the literature. For example, four horsetails were included in a tent design which probably belongs to the "framed" type and shows large arrays of rocks in the middle part. In this case the tails stand for the four horses stolen by the lodge's maker. Another tent with a "framed design" – the undulated stripes depicted here are interpreted either as a snake, the rolling prairie, or a river – has a horsetail fastened to the Maltese cross at its back.

The reasons given for including the tail in this decoration are that it generally brings good luck and that it brings good luck especially in horse-keeping. A further suggestion is that the payment for this painting consisted of horses (Grinnell 1901: Pl. XXII, Fig. 1 and pp. 662 f.). A second description of the above mentioned Buffalo Rock Tent, the name of which points to the fact that bison used these glacier boulders to rub themselves, also refers to the four horsetails fixed to the back as the representations of animals stolen by the founder (McClintock 1936a: 130 f.). Additional examples include the Snow Lodge with a horsetail on each side of the door, which should bring good luck with horses (McClintock 1936b: 170), a Raven Tent design decorated with five horsetails at the rear, and the Big Stripe or Single Circle Lodge, which shows otters on the stripe running around the cover in the middle part and a horse tail attached to a crescent (McClintock 1936a: 129). These are examples for which we have written descriptions. Although a few more illustrations of Blackfoot Tent designs with objects fastened to the cover have been published, they are not detailed enough to decide what exactly is being represented, as horse tails are not the only items attached to a lodge. For instance, the smoke flaps of the Black Buffalo Tent are decorated with bison tails and bison hoofs (Grinnell 1901: 661; McClintock 1936a: 125). It is also possible to combine body parts of different animals on a single lodge. One tent with a snake design carries some

horsehair on the Maltese cross, whereas below this element four "cow" tails are shown (Wissler 1912: 237). Another example is the Snow Tent mentioned above. Apart from the horsetails on both sides of the entrance, a buffalo tail is fastened to the disc at the upper back side, and crow feathers and small bells are attached to the tops of the poles used for the adjustment of the smoke flaps (McClintock 1936b: 170). Furthermore, Wissler (1912: 221) classified painted Blackfoot Tents according to the ritual and bundle involved, and one group he called the "flag painted tipi" because an animal skin from the associated bundle was tied to the top of a lodge pole like a flag. These various examples show that it is rather difficult to decide only on the basis of small-scale images what kinds of objects are fastened to a tent. Hence, it is better to leave the question open what Many Guns has depicted as hanging on the smoke flaps.

The last element of his drawing, that shall be discussed here, are the concentric circles painted above the entrance and on the opposite side of the cover. Unfortunately, the available literature includes only one written description of such a decoration; it is stated there that if the pictorial symbol of the home of the "framed" animals – the above mentioned horseshoe-like paintings around the entrance and at the rear – is omitted, the cover instead bears a disc representing the universe's spiritual center or an ornament shaped like a bull's eye, the circles of which symbolize the sun, the moon, and the earth on the back of the lodge (Hungry Wolf 1977: 72). But neither Many Guns' Tent, which depicts the animals' den as well as concentric circles on the back and the front, nor the other visual examples, which can be offered, suit this description. The decoration which shows the most similarities to that in Many Guns' drawing can be found in a representation of a Yellow Otter Tent, which shows a green dot surrounded by a yellow ground and an outer circle in red (Gerhards 1980: 18). Another Otter Lodge with two diagonally oriented animals, facing each other above the door and above a depiction of their home on its rear side, is also decorated with a disc surrounded by a circle in a dark color between the otters' heads (Brasser 1995: 59, Figs. 6 and 7). A photograph of a partial camp circle shows a tent with a Bald Headed Eagle design. Beside the entrance one sees a disc-shaped item. Although the picture is small, it seems clear that the decoration is arranged according to the segments of a circle rather than to a concentric pattern (McClintock 1936a: 126, Fig. 4). The latter pattern can be detected on a photograph of a children's lodge with a snake design taken by Edward S. Curtis (1997: 698).

Origin Myths

Various Otter Tents are described in the literature.⁴ One source includes an origin myth in which the first owner goes to a lake in the north to seek a vision. Being not successful, he makes a raft and undertakes a second attempt on the lake. This time, he is visited by a mink, who invites him to his relative's lodge. He leads him to a decorated tent on the bottom of the lake and introduces him to the otter, his relative. The otter tells him that he has heard about his search for spiritual power and that he takes pity on him and will transfer some of his power to him. He teaches the man several songs and dances as well as which items he shall use in the ceremony. The otter advises the man that if he follows all his teachings faithfully, he may call on his power whenever he needs it. Thus, when the man awakes and returns to his people, he prepares a decorated tent and other related objects according to his vision (Hungry Wolf 1977: 68–70). Another version of this myth is rather similar to the one described above (Wissler and Duvall 1908: 92).

Unfortunately, the available literature does not include any detailed information on the origin of the water monster design. Two short descriptions only mention that the horned serpents as well as their appearance on a tent cover, the supernatural power, and the ritual connected with them are believed to have come down from the sun (McClintock 1936a: 133; Wissler 1912: 238). As to the yellow star design, it is not even possible to give hints on its origin, because the name does not occur in the published sources used here and no similar design has been described in these works.

Stories of Combination and Change

There are two stories that give hints as to why the designs described above were combined. According to the first one, which was told by Ben Calf Robe, Many Guns combined the designs of the otter, the beaver, and the water monster on his tent on the occasion of a rivalry between his society and another. Because they were all painted on one tent, Ben Calf Robe called the design “Bites Everything.” According to the second story Many Guns received a tent design already including the otter and the water monster or “Big Sucker” from his father's brother in 1920. This uncle was said to have obtained the design from a dream in 1850. Many Guns was al-

lowed to separate the designs. Instead, he added the yellow star design to the tent as well as the horse tails to the rear of the lodge and an elk design to the door. The latter story seems more convincing if one considers the drawing in his winter count, but Many Guns is said to have painted various pictures of the tent (Paul Raczka, pers. comm. 2003).

Finally, there is a photograph of Many Guns, which shows a part of his tent in the background (Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton: Ob. 10, 510). The picture was taken on the occasion of the visit of the King (George VI) to the Calgary Stampede in 1939. This is stated on the label on the back and confirmed by Many Guns' winter count and a photograph of the royal visitors (Siebelt 2005: 309; Hanks and Hanks 1950: after 112). In comparison to Many Guns' drawing, the part of the design shown in this photograph reveals that the discs are of a lighter color than their background, that the otters are represented in a darker color than in the drawing and depict some details not shown in the small-scale pictograph, such as a lifeline and perhaps some organs, which appear quite commonly on the animals of Blackfoot Tent designs (e.g., McClintock 1936a: 123, 125, 129; 1936b: 169; Grinnell 1963: 660–662, 664–666). If we look at the circle elements above the door and on the opposite side of the tent, we will see further differences between the lodge drawn by Many Guns and the part of the cover visible on the photograph. Whereas the drawing depicts concentric circles, the photograph only shows a single circle above the entry. Although Many Guns omitted a door cover in his drawing, one of the stories told above mentions that he decorated the door with an elk. Actually, an entry cover can be seen on the photograph, and it bears some sort of painting – two men and a large diamond-shaped structure are clearly recognizable. The diamond-shaped structure is divided by a horizontal and a vertical line. Its corners are adorned with pendants – but no elk seems to appear on this door cover. This does not necessarily mean that the entry cover with the depiction of an elk described in one of the stories above never existed; one might rather assume that Many Guns changed some of the details of his tent decoration over the years.

It seems that this tent design has survived until today. A tent showing this design – but with no signs of beaver, elk, and horsetails – was part of a Sundance camp among the Siksika in 2000 or 2001 (Paul Raczka, pers. comm. 2003). Although one story about how the different paintings were combined mentions a Beaver design on the tent, the 21st-century lodge cover included none; neither did the tent drawn by Many Guns or the photograph from 1939.

4 E.g., Grinnell (1901: 664f.); McClintock (1936a: 125, 129); Wissler (1912: 222–229).

The same is true for the elk design on the door, which exists neither on the drawing nor on the photograph nor on the contemporary specimen. Why the horsetails, which appear in one combination story as well as in Many Guns' drawing and could be on the rear of the tent, when the picture from 1939 was taken, were missing on the lodge during this Sundance is difficult to say. It is, of course, possible that the old ones had to be replaced by new tails so that their absence was only a temporary one.

Summary

Although it seems at first sight that Many Guns suffers from some a sort of *horror vacui* as no space on the lodge drawn by him is left empty, he obviously had the ritual rights to all designs depicted and their arrangement is in accordance with Blackfoot conventions for tent paintings. Nevertheless, some changes were necessary so that all three designs could be combined on one cover. The major difference between Many Guns' drawing and the single designs is that parts of the single designs are left out in the way that the parts depicted resemble a pictographic shorthand: none of the designs is shown completely, but all of them include characteristic features, which are recognizable for persons who have some knowledge of Blackfoot Tent decorations. Thus, the upper part with the star constellations and the animal figures is sufficient if one wants to represent the two designs of the "framed" type, whereas the space that is not used for these two paintings and shows discs is a sufficient hint of the third design, which usually spreads over the whole tent. The doubling of elements, when several designs are combined, is perhaps a minor change; this might apply to the representation of two crescents on the back of the lodge, but the details found in the literature give no clear evidence. Although the decorations mentioned in this summary so far definitely belong to the category of essential elements of Blackfoot Tent designs, this might not apply to both the horsetails fastened to the back of the tent and the concentric circles above the entry and on the opposite side. The former are more likely a good luck charm and a further decoration added in the rivalry mentioned above, whereas it remains rather obscure, why the latter was included.

Another Blackfoot Tent design, which is the result of a combination and which is described in the literature, has a quite different origin history from that of the lodge discussed in this essay. The Gambling or War Tent, which usually shows the war

deeds of the owner and of some of his friends, was not obtained through a vision or dream, and thus, lacked a religious basis with a bundle and a ritual. As designs of religious origin were in higher esteem to the Blackfoot, the decoration was united with the Big Man design, which was obtained through a vision (Brasser 1978: 15, 17, Fig. 7; McClintock 1936b: 178, Fig. 18, 179). Thus, the combination added religious significance and prestige to a lodge. The owner of several designs who wished to combine them on one tent could not create a painting on the basis of his own ideas. Instead, he had to consult an elder with traditional knowledge, if he obtained a vision for a new design, so that every element involved was in accordance with Blackfoot traditions. Other decorated tents which lacked a religious background because they came from war raids or had lost their bundle and ritual could receive a substitute complex. The custom of combining designs was dropped in the 1930s. As the use and ritual transfer of painted lodges became more seldom, too, the number of designs also generally decreased (Brasser 1978: 15, 17, Fig. 7). These last examples indicate that the number of tents with combined designs must have been rather small and that the main motive to combine decorations seems to have been the connection of designs which lacked a visionary and ritual background with designs that had such a basis, so that "enhanced" versions were developed. Taking into consideration that Many Guns' painted lodge not only includes three designs, which are all vision-based, but also that the cover decoration has survived rather unchanged to the present, one can say that the tent he once owned is extraordinary in this respect.

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Sociocultural *Malaise* of India under the English East India Company Rule

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For centuries long, the inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent, being overwhelmingly of Hindu faith, have been known for their attachment to their customs and traditions which are unmatched anywhere worldwide. Probably the most significant charac-

ter that distinguishes the Indian society from other societies throughout the world is its unique social composition: the caste system. Yet, the latter had been subject to a *malaise* during early British rule, namely, under the rule of the English East India Company until the mid-nineteenth century. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to shed some light on the historical circumstances in which the East India Company got involved in the sociocultural tissue of the local population in India as well as the natives' reaction. But, before dealing with that, it is useful to give, briefly, an outline of this main social structure, namely, the caste system.

According to the Shastra, a sacred scripture of Hinduism, the Hindu society is divided into four castes, or social classes: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (farmers and tradesmen) and Shudras (serfs and menials) (Galbraith and Mehta 1980: 51). People outside these groups were known as “untouchables” and were regarded as the dregs of society (David 2002: 20). Each caste was considered inferior to those above it and superior to those below it. Also, members of different castes did not mix socially. In other words, in all social matters such as marriage, career, and even the type of food to be eaten, each group formed an exclusive unit.¹

According to the Indian sociologist A. R. Desai (1959: 224), the status of a man born in a particular caste was usually determined by the position that his caste occupied in this social stratification. Once born in that caste, his status was predetermined and could not change. In fact, birth was an essential element that decided the status of a man within his community in India, and this could by no means be changed, regardless of any talent or wealth that an individual could acquire. This leads to the conclusion that it was the caste which determined what vocation a person should pursue.

Besides that, each caste had its own conception of the norm of conduct by which its members had to abide. Any failure to observe these ethics was interpreted as a sin and so the offending member was subjected to punishment such as excommunication, fines and even flogging. For instance, to marry or even to accept food from a person from a lower caste was regarded as a serious sin (Desai 1959: 226). A. R. Desai stated that the caste system was “sanctified by the sanction of religion. Its very genesis was attributed to God Brahman. If a member of

1 Desai (1959: 224). Galbraith and Mehta stated that intercaste marriage was strictly forbidden by caste rules, and if something of this type occurred, the “culprits” would be considered as “outcastes” (1980: 52).