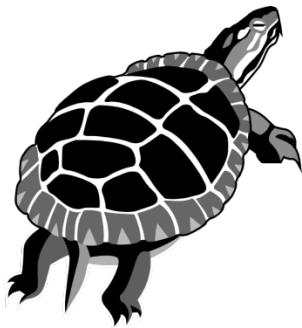




Oneida Cultural Heritage Department

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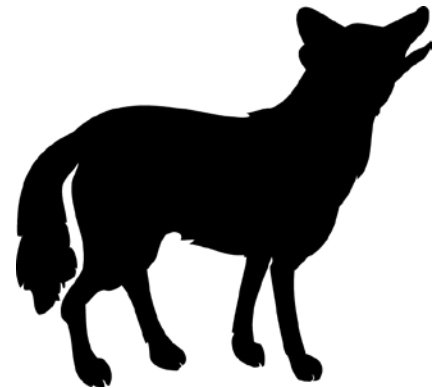
Iroquois Clan System: Clans of the Oneida People



1. Turtle



2. Bear



3. Wolf

The Clans are taken from the animal, bird, or fish life. Clan relationships are inherited from the mothers. This type of transmission of the clans is called matrilineal system. Spiritual, social, economic, and political life are interwoven; one without the other is not considered whole or complete. (Spiritual and political are inseparable.)

Introduction

The Following is a transcript of an interview with Bob Brown, Bear Clan Chief of the Oneida tribe. The interview was conducted in the late fall of 1996 by Dr. Carol Cornelius, Area Manager of the Oneida Cultural Heritage Department.

THE BEGINNING

What we have to do is go back to the beginning. Then we need to understand how everything that takes place is related. You can't just throw yourself in the middle of something and think that's going to be a solution because what that does is create more confusion. So we always go back to the beginning.

The first thing that we talk about is the time of the creation. There was the time of the

right handed twin, or the creator. He appointed all of the different forces and what their responsibilities were going to be how they were going to help with everything of the creation. He made those agreements with those forces.

The *hatuwi*, the false face, is one of those forces. *Kahtsi>sha*, the winds are another of the forces. The *Kahtsi>sha*, they are the ones that circulate the wind around us. All things in nature are related. That is just a part of what we talk about when we talk about our founders and their responsibilities.

Those appointments were made and not long after, the different animals and birds, they too came together. They too had things of knowledge; they could help with the creation of

the human beings that were going to walk about on this earth.

And so, all of the different kinds of animals and birds that could be imagined were given certain responsibilities to the human beings of what they had to offer. And so that came about.

ORIGIN OF THE CLANS

After a while, the human beings were created on this earth. As time went on there were families of human beings here and there. They started creating their own villages where they were going to live. Pretty soon they started branching off from these villages. They started going off into other areas and other places.

As in normal when many people are gathered, there began arguments and disagreements between these people. No one could agree with anything anymore. Even within their own families. There were disagreements.

Each time the elders of these villages would come together, they would come together; they would sit down and try to come to some sort of resolution. How could they be more helpful to the families and with things that were going on!

There was a young man who lived there. He would always attend these meetings and he would say to himself, "if there were a way that I could speak to the people, I would tell them of my plan, if they would allow me that time." They had come to know this young man as someone who rarely spoke out. He would attend the meetings, but he didn't really give any of his opinions. He just sat and watched how things were going.

One day the young man decided that maybe this would be the time that he should speak up. So he asked if he could address them. He said, "What we need to do is divide ourselves into different families. We know that we all have families here. But if we divide ourselves into different families, and if we follow the ways and responsibilities of those families, then maybe we can solve our problem."

And so he started giving examples of the different families in nature. "You know, there are different kinds of animal families here on this earth, bird families, and the different

kinds of trees and plants. There are all different kinds of families throughout the insect world and they all have responsibilities to each other. They all have a place on this earth. If we could fashion ourselves in that way, if we could live like those families and do things as they do things, then we could follow in that same way."

After he finished talking, the elders sat there and they thought about what he had said. They came up with the conclusion that maybe what he was saying was not that far off. So they asked him, "Is there such a way that we can do this?" The young man said, "Yes! What we need to do is go to different places. Then we will begin to find what is around us. First, what we need to do is prepare ourselves to travel."

And so they agreed that's what they would do. Each of them went back and prepared to go on the journey.

The next morning they all got all their things together and they began to travel. They followed one particular river that was close by their village. As they were going down along this river, pretty soon they came to a spot the young man thought would be the place.

He took some of the other young men that were with them and they pulled down a vine from the nearby trees. They took a vine and threw it as hard as they could across this river. As they did this, the vine got caught between some rocks and so it was able to hold.

He said, "Of all of the people that are gathered here, go across this river and as many people that go across before the vine breaks free, those people will stay on that side of the river. And those people that are left, they will stay on this side of the river. When we set up our campfires, then I will tell you what we will do."

So carefully they began to cross the river. There were quite a few of them. More than half of them were able to cross the river before the vine gave way from where it was stuck in between the rocks.

He told them to make their campfires and stay there and he would come back in a few days after he had talked with the other group of people first. So they all began to make their campfires and set up their lodges.

As he gathered the people that evening, he told them, "What we need to do is take all the eldest women that are here, the ones who are heads of these families. We will ask each of you, when you wake up in the morning and when you go to the river, or whatever you do during that time when you awaken, the first unusual thing that you notice, bring that information back to me and we will talk about what you saw." And so they all agreed that's what they would do. Then they all went and slept that evening.

In the morning they all got up and one older lady began to prepare her meal for the morning. She had gone to the river to get some water. As she was there dipping her bucket into the river, all of a sudden, she heard a noise from behind her. She stood up and looked around her and there was a wolf standing there, staring at her. The wolf didn't do anything, he just stood there looking at her. She didn't say anything and the wolf quietly turned and went away. So the old lady went back to where the rest of them were camped.

Later on that afternoon, the young man asked to meet with the people that were gathered and the old lady retold what happened to her that morning.

The young man, said, "That is a sign. You and all of your family members will be the sign of the wolf." She agreed that from then on everybody from her family would follow the ways of the wolf family.

And so as we go on in the story, each of the eldest women from each of the families told of the different things they saw, either when they were preparing their meal or during the course of the day. They each had seen different things that had happened.

Of all of the clans that we have, this was the first inception of how it all began. The Mohawk and the Oneida people each had three clans; the turtle, the wolf, and the bear. The other different kinds of clans that our people belong to in addition to the turtle, bear, and wolf, are the snipe, the beaver, the deer, the hawk, the eel and the heron.

CLANS OF THE ONEIDA

TURTLE: ENVIRONMENT

And then we have the *anowalu*, or *latiny<tha*. *Latiny<tha*, talks about the extended neck of the turtle and how the neck comes out of their shell. *Anowalu* talks about his shell and how he walks, hunched over, walking along as he's going about on this earth.

If we look at the turtle, it has a greater significance than the neck or the shell. It goes back to the creation story when the sky woman was placed on the turtle's back. In creation story, the earth began to grow after the muskrat brought mud from bottom of the sea and placed it on the back of the turtle. Life was created from that earth.

If you think about it, the earth represents what we refer to as the world and the turtle has the earth on its back.

Also, if you look at the different panels that are on turtles shell, there are 13 plates which are in a relationship with the different moons. There are thirteen moons within a year. Around the rim of those bigger panels, around the bottom of that turtle's shell there are 28 smaller plates. There are 28 days within each of those moons.

And so again, as we look at the turtle we are given reference how it is used as a calendar. So the turtle has all the responsibility of the shifting of the earth and the cycles of the moon. The turtle clan's responsibility is to look after our environment.

BEAR: MEDICINE

Latiskle>wake talks about the face of the bear which has some discoloration, like his face is powdered a lighter color than the rest of his fur. That's what our people saw and so they said that the bear was *latiskle>wake*. *Ohkwali* is another term used to describe the bear. *Ohkwali* talks about the color of the blanket of fur that he has around him.

The responsibility of the bear also goes back to the time of creation. There was a time when the creator formed himself into a very old man, a beggar who went through the whole village, to the different long houses, asking for a place to sleep and some food to eat.

He went to the wolf clan, then he went to the snipe clan, the beaver clan, the eel, the heron, the hawk and the deer clans. No one accepted him into their houses. They all said they didn't have enough food or they didn't have a place for him. They were too crowded. They gave every of excuse not to allow him to come in.

But, there was one particular elder lady of the bear clan who lived aside from the village. When he went to her house and asked for a place to sleep and some food, she allowed him to come in and she gave him a place to sleep, a place to rest his weary body.

After she did that, he began to regain his strength and to feel better about himself. He stayed there a few days. Each day she would be out preparing the earth getting ready for collecting her harvest.

One day, the old man became ill. He told her what he needed. She needed to get this particular kind of plant. When she brought it back, he instructed her how to prepare it. Then she administered it to him.

This went on for a few days and as time went on he would create different kinds of sicknesses, then he would give her different instructions on things to gather for those sicknesses.

After a time, after all was accomplished that was asked of her, she was coming back to her long house when suddenly there was a great, bright light that shown from within her long house. She didn't know what it was and when she came to her long house, there stood a man, a being dressed in very fine clothing. He revealed to her that he was the creator.

He thanked her for reviving him and doing for him all of those things that he had asked her to do. Because of her generosity and ability to gather the medicines, all of the people of the bear clan would be known as the medicine people. So the bear clan people became known as the medicine people as we understand it.

WOLF: THE PATHFINDERS

The wolf clan, *lati>kwaho*, talks about a wolf standing with his throat exposed and he is howling his acknowledgment. He is giving a message to others around that he is there. That is the way we refer to the wolf, *lati>kwaho*.

Another term is *lonatha>yuni* which talks about how they make a path on this earth. They are the ones that are the pathfinders. They give us direction in the way that we should go on the pathways of life. That is the responsibility of the wolf clan.

CLAN RELATIONSHIPS

The Great Law speaks of how each member of a particular clan is a relative to all of those people who are of the same clan. If two people are members of the Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, or whatever tribe, and are of the bear clan, it is the same as if they are brother and sister within the confederacy. Two people of the same clan cannot marry one another within that clan. Even though they may not be blood related, they're clan related. In that sense, it would be like marrying your brother or sister. That rule was highly regarded by the elders, especially the clan mothers.

The reason for that, in addition to preventing inbreeding, was to keep the clan memberships equal. If there are too many members of a particular clan, there isn't that round-about equality between the clans in making decisions for the benefit of all.

Another thing that the Great Law talks about is the structure of the Oneida people. The Wolf Clan is a cousin to the Turtle Clan and the Wolf Clan is uncle to the Bear Clan. The Turtle Clan is the older brother to the Bear Clan.

That is how the relationship goes on. And so in ceremony, when they go through the opening address, they say, "*kwalasehts< <swatah&shiyoste*." It means, "listen to what is being addressed to you, my cousins."

When they talk about the Mohawk and the Seneca people, *yukwatonih<*, they are referring to them as the older brothers. When they say "*<kwatateka*", they are referring to the younger brothers, the Oneida, the Cayuga, and the Tuscarora.

THE CLANMOTHERS

The responsibility of the clan mothers is to choose leaders of the quality to make the right decisions for the family, for the clan, and for the nation. A clan mother has a responsibility to everyone that is in the same family line.

Their responsibility also includes settling arguments or disagreements within their extended families. They ensure that the families are conducting their lives in the proper manner.

In addition, the clan mother is given the opportunity of naming the newborn children in the family. If not given by the mother or a grandmother, the family will ask the assistance of the clan mother to give a name to the child.

THE CHIEFS

The chiefs are chosen by the clan mothers. They are chosen according to their ability to make choices for the people on the issues that have been discussed.

The responsibility that the chiefs have to their clans is to make choices and decisions that are in the best interest of the families that they represent within that clan. For the decisions that they make, they look to the generations that are yet to be born.

THE FAITHKEEPERS

The faith keepers responsibility is in the ceremonies, to ensure that they are being held when they should be. When the seasons change, there are ceremonies that need to be conducted throughout the year.

They also have similar duties as a clan mother as a counselors, to help mend disagreements that come about within the families. Couples that are married and are having disagreements between themselves can come to ask of the faith keepers to intervene in their situation.

THE PEOPLE

All of the people, young and old, who do not yet have any kind of title, they have the greatest responsibility. They are the strength of the community. They are the ones that make them who they are as a people.

Without the people, there are no faith keepers, there are no chiefs and there are no clan mothers. Everything starts with the people. That is the beginning.

THE LANGUAGE

It used to be that all the nations could understand each other, but we have reached a point where this is no longer true. There was a time when all the people understood all the languages. Now that has all changed.

The language is an integral part of understanding, at Grand Council, at Kaliwiyo, or at any community meeting. Attending community meetings is important and wise to be able to better understand the language.

When the Grand Council is in session, there is a formality. Speakers send messages “across the fire” for discussion. Now the Oneida’s must ask the Cayuga’s to speak for their side and send their messages across. The Onondaga can understand Cayuga, but not Oneida. So during the discussion or the dialogue between the two sides, the Onondaga can understand what’s going on.

If anybody is learning the language, it is always good to go out into the other communities, to learn their ways and the sounds of their words. Sometimes you’ll find similarities and sometimes you won’t understand what they’re saying. But you’ll be able to sit down with the people and ask about particular words that you may have heard through the course of that day. This is where you pick up more understanding of the language.

Wherever you stay, at a persons house or where ever, you should ask questions. “What does this word mean?” When they tell you, then you know what the word means and you can begin to connect. If you hear key words, then you can pretty much connect what else is going to come after that word. That’s where language becomes more easy to understand.

There are a lot of people that are now coming back into our communities. They do not understand what the whole responsibility is to the clans. There are those that don’t know what their clan’s are anymore. But it’s not their fault.

It goes back to the times of the government taking the children, our grandfathers and our grandmothers, into the residential schools, taking away the language and culture. That’s where we began lose sight of our real identity as people.

But they haven’t been able to, even through Christianization, make us forget who we

are as a people. The clans that we have are a very important part of our lives. It is what we will have for generations to come.

It is the responsibility of the women to hold those things, to make sure that when they have children and their children have children and so on, that it continues on. We must not back away as we almost did at one point through the influences of European thinking.

CLAN MEETINGS

Each clan has a certain number of chiefs which are chosen by the clan mothers from their own extended families. Each clan governs itself as well as joining with the other clans to govern the villages and the tribe.

The people of the wolf clan are known as the fire keepers. They are the ones who hold all informational things. They are the ones who put together the agendas and direct the discussion for a meeting.

The turtle clan people are known as the *tsy%awelot*, the well of information. They have all the information pertaining to whatever issues are brought forward. If they don't have the information, then for the next meeting, they would gather all the information for each particular issue.

The responsibility of the bear clan is to give recommendations that are in the best interest of the clan and the nation.

So when an issue comes about, the wolf clan puts it to the floor. This means they give it to the turtle clan. The turtle clan accepts the issue. Then they "cross it over the fire", to the bear clan. The bear clan deliberates, and then makes their recommendations.

They then send their recommendations back to the turtle clan to see what thoughts and recommendations they have. A dialogue begins between the two sides, the bears and the turtles, until they come to an agreement on the issue. If one side gets off track during their discussion, the wolf clan can interject to get them back on course.

Or, if there is something that the wolf clan hears during the discussion or if something has been overlooked, they can interject. Again, the discussion continues between the bears and turtles until they can come to an agreement.

After they both have made recommendations and are in agreement, the turtle clan then passes it back over to the wolf clan to have it ratified. All have come to one mind and all agree. *Skantikulat wahununi*.

So the understanding to all of this is that everybody has to be of one mind, to agree with what is being discussed. What they are doing is hashing out the particular issue that is being discussed.

Before they can pass anything "across the floor" on a particular issue, they all have to be of one mind. They all need to be in agreement before they say, "These are our recommendations. This is what we have agreed to."

THE CONFEDERACY

The confederacy follows a similar pattern. Each clan is a nation within the confederation. The structure of the confederacy is based upon the same principle as the clan, or extended family. Each clan governs itself and also joins other clans in governing the village and the tribes. The clan chiefs become the confederacy chiefs.

The Onondaga are the fire keepers, *Lonatsistan#*. The Mohawk and the Seneca people are considered the well of information, *yukwatonih*< And then on the other side are the Oneida's, Cayuga's, and the Tuscarora's. They're the ones that would give recommendations to issues.

In a bigger picture, the same procedure goes on, that they all have to come to one mind on any decision. One nation can't decide how it is going to be. All nations have to have a discussion. All must become of one mind.

That's where that understanding of consensus comes in. All have to agree. If anyone has any feelings that the issue on the floor is no good, a reason has to be given why they disagree. If the majority is in agreement with a decision and it is passed, they can't come back later saying that they don't agree with it because they didn't give their input. So whatever is passed is passed.

Also, if there are people not present at a meeting, whatever is passed, that's it. If they can't make the time to be there for a meeting, then it's not very important to them. No one can

come around the back door and say that they don't agree with the majority rule decision. And we'll leave it like that.

THE GREAT LAW

The Great Law talks about the lives of Hayenwatha and Tekanawita, and the events that lead to its formation.

Originally the tribes that made up the League of the Iroquois were like any other tribes. They each were independent bodies with similar languages and customs, but no political commonality. Often individual tribes waged war against each other.

The Mohawks were the first to accept Tekanawita's plan for peace among the tribes. They had suffered much from the warring and readily welcomed the Great Peace, as it is sometimes called.

Tekanawita was then joined by Hayenwatha to spread the message of peace beyond the Mohawk villages. Together they proposed the confederation, or family of nations. As each tribe accepted the Great Law they would become a part of the confederation, also known as the League of the Iroquois.

They drew on a structure that was already familiar with them, the extended family or clans. It was this clanship-type government

that they would apply to the whole confederacy.

The next to accept the plan was the Oneida, the People of the Standing Stone. A treaty was made between the Oneidas and the Mohawks, which laid the foundation of the League of Peace.

The Cayugas readily and with great relief accepted the proposal for they had suffered greatly at the hands of the powerful Onondagas.

Eventually, and with much persuasion, Tekanawita and Hayenwatha convinced the Senecas and the Onondagas to join the rest in the movement for unity.

The date of when the Confederacy of the Five Nations is still unknown except that when the first Europeans met the Iroquois, the confederacy was very old.

The history has been handed down orally for hundreds of years. As each person told the story, it changed slightly, so there are many versions. No two accounts agree totally on details or order of events. Fact became mixed with legend. But the exact details are not as important as the significance of what our ancestors had accomplished in establishing unity and purpose in life.

Ta>neth