CLAN PROLIFERATION AMONG THE CAUGHNAWAGA MOHAWK:
AN EXAMPLE OF SELECTIVE ACCULTURATION. *

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The subject of acculturative readjustment has become a commonplace in current anthropological literature. However, all too often, the subject of cultural transition is predicated on the idea that such a situation cannot proceed without the gradual dilution of various aspects of the basic culture of one of the participating societies. When confronted with the necessity of change, in the face of rapid and massive adjustment, it is widely believed that, not only the objective but many of the subjective aspects of such a culture will be minimized and dissipated.

However, such a solution fails to take into consideration the enormous flexibility of human adjustment and the equally powerful resistance to subjective alteration. Under normal situations, every culture is adequate to the needs of its people. While the performance of certain elements may not be ideal, they are, at least, acceptable. Subjectively, they may have acquired the "sanctity of antiquity". But,

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culture change demands that these time-tested patterns be revised in the light of newer, untried methods. If we accept the basic patterns of habit, such a situation should be impossible under ordinary circumstances.

But, of the multiplicity of elements which comprise even the simplest culture, there is a vital functional relationship. A single element may function simultaneously in several cultural contexts. In addition, no society is so primitive that each human need is satisfied by a single complex. Therefore, culture change demands, not only the alteration of these basic elements, but their reintegration into the total society.

Since each complex contributes to the satisfaction of several needs, society may simply shift the functioning of a primary trait complex to a secondary function. It may take on a completely new series of meanings and become integrated into a completely new sequence of elements. Contacts with other groups and the resultant application of new stimuli inevitably lead to alterations. Therefore, culture change and the application of new social stimuli have the effect of altering the complete social and cultural environment of the society involved. Conversely, however, it may also be applied to the need for adjustment, when faced by the demand for massive social reorganization.

Under these circumstances, the resultant changes may
develop in a variety of ways. Therefore, there could be the apparent paradox of a seemingly functionless trait undergoing massive expansion in form. But, this would be symptomatic of the drastic need for adjustment to a new social situation and indicative of its cultural importance. Such apparent paradoxes would be especially noticeable in the non-material aspects of the culture.

Such a revision of cultural form and value is uniquely demonstrated by the redevelopment of clan patterns among the modern Caughnawaga Mohawk.

Authorities are in universal agreement on the patterns of Iroquois kinship and the extreme importance of the system in the total social configuration of the people. Indeed, the basic foundation of Iroquois life was the matrilineal family and its various extensions into households and lineages. These households and lineages were further incorporated into the system of clans and phratries which was carried throughout the Six Nations. These clans were matrilineal, exogamous and maintained close relations for the purpose of mutual aid, revenge against personal injury and the settlement of disputes among members. Clans generally derived their names from quasi-totemic birds and animals. The Iroquois, however, felt no sense of kinship toward these clan animals. They were simply regarded as convenient brand names.
The number of clans varied from tribe to tribe, eight being the most common number. However, all writers concur that the Mohawk and the Oneida were unique in possessing only THREE clans.

The particular band of the Mohawk, the Caughnawaga, presently under discussion, has had a rich and eventful history, contributing to a series of unique adjustments to a variety of changing cultural conditions. For example, the band itself, despite the fact that both the Indians and the Dominion of Canada regard the Caughnawaga as a true section of the Mohawk tribe, is "Mohawk" only through the original convenience of language.

Caughnawaga owes its beginning to those members of the Society of Jesus who followed the first French explorers into the new lands of Canada. While they were not received by the Indians with a universally high degree of enthusiasm, they had some limited success and some converts were made among the tribes. However, the Jesuits soon learned that these converts could not be left to themselves and in 1647, they decided to concentrate all of their converts into one village. Within three years, this village had become the refuge of Christian Indians of all tribes. By 1672, twenty-two Indian nations were represented at the settlement. Since unusually, the majority of the converts were Mohawk and the Mohawk language was widely understood both by the other
tribes and the Jesuits, Mohawk became the language of the community.

Fortunately, Jesuit Relations gives us a valuable insight into the family and clan structure of the Caughnawaga during these early years. In 1735, Father Nau reported "We have in the village three families (clans), that of the Bear, that of the Wolf and that of the Turtle. All newcomers become members of one of these three families" (Thwaites 1896-1901: Vol 68:268). It would appear, therefore, that the Caughnawaga considered themselves to be Mohawks and were so considered by the other Iroquois nations. This belief is strengthened by the fact that the other Iroquois tribes made repeated efforts to persuade the Caughnawaga to abandon the village and return to their original people.

Father Nau's statement also poses an interesting problem, as a sidelight. It would seem that all converts were immediately given a clan affiliation upon their entry into the Caughnawaga, regardless of their past family relationships. Was this to insure loyalty to the Caughnawaga or to symbolize a break with the past? This concept was not without precedent in the traditional Iroquois adoption system and may well have been used by the Jesuits for their own purposes.

The balance of Caughnawaga history, dramatic and eventful as it was, does not concern us until the year 1858, when
an event of major importance occurred. The Victoria Tubular Bridge was built across the St. Lawrence River, with one end abutting on the reservation. The Indians demanded employment on the bridge in exchange for their permission to build on the reservation. It was soon discovered that the Caughnawaga possessed qualities that would make them superlative bridge and iron workers.

More and more young men drifted into the professions. Many of the younger steel workers began to look to the United States, where opportunities for employment in their specialized craft were greater. In 1938, the steel workers began a wholesale migration from the reservation to New York, Chicago, Detroit and other industrial cities. The largest group congregated in New York City.

The Caughnawaga concentrated themselves in one particular residential area in Brooklyn, New York. Within a few years, the profession of steel-working had attained the status of a tradition and few Caughnawaga men had not followed the trade at one time or another.

Needless to say, the Caughnawaga family system underwent some changes in this new cultural setting. Complete adherence to a matrilineal system would pose certain difficulties in contemporary American society. In the American social system, the inference is always accepted that the husband is, theoretically at least, the head of the
household. However, the Caughnawaga had already been exposed to this system for a considerable period of time. They quickly recognized the necessity for a family name and the delegation of a person to be representative in family dealings. They also recognized that they must conform to the system in operation in the larger society of which they were a part. The Caughnawaga, therefore, in their overt activities, at least, conformed to popular American usage.

Details, such as the family name, inheritance of property, etc., were swung over to conform to the system in vogue in American society. Other privileges, which were once the exclusive right of the matrilineal line, became equal rights for both sides of the family.

In traditional family matters, however, the Caughnawaga retained other patterns. Every individual held a tribal name, in addition to the family names of European origin, predominantly French. These tribal names were matters of great personal pride and were retained throughout life. Certain families, which possessed the exclusive rights to certain names of traditional or historical significance, were quite jealous of the retention of this prerogative.

This preliminary historical sketch is necessary to set the stage for the major topic of discussion. It would appear obvious, from the foregoing presentation, that the urbanized Caughnawaga were no longer in a situation where
the original family or clan structure would be necessary or even desirable. Therefore, understandably, it should have been one of the first areas of Caughnawaga culture to be discarded. The traditional Mohawk family could no longer function in the urban centers as a viable aspect of culture. Therefore, any extension of such a system would appear to serve no useful purpose.

However, the reverse situation is actually true. In recent years, despite a steady decline in clan functions, the Caughnawaga increased the number of clans to SIX. These clans, in order of their social importance, are TURTLE (Ra-ti-nia-ton), BEAR (Ro-ti-nen-io-tro-nen), WOLF (Ro-ti-swa-ho), SNIPE (Ro-te-ni-si-io), ROCK or BALL (Ro-ti-nen-io-tro-nen) and PIPE (0-sen-na-ke-te).

The first three clans are the traditional ones of the Monawk and have, by far, the greatest membership among the Caughnawaga. Indeed, the three lesser clans are of markedly limited distribution and social importance. Although nearly every informant could name all six clans, it was difficult to find anyone who was not a Bear, Wolf, or Turtle. Despite extensive questioning, no member of the Pipe Clan could be located.¹

¹The Pipe Clan is an enigma of the first water. No satisfactory translation of the Mohawk name was available, although most informants agreed that "Pipe" was the most logical. It was represented by a pipe on the clan banner of the Caughnawaga. However, no member of the clan could be discovered among the people of the Brooklyn colony. It is the only clan not represented in the clan lists of the other Iroquois tribes. But for the insistence of the informants, one might well doubt its existence.
actions due members of one's clan. Joking relationships or avoidance patterns are completely unknown.

The Caughnawaga still retain a very strong sense of mutual aid in time of emergency but this is an activity in which all Caughnawaga participate. It is not restricted to assisting only members of one's own clan. For example, the cash collections made for an injured or disabled steel worker are made totally without regard to any clan affiliation.

There is a tendency among the Caughnawaga to refer to the clans as "nations" and equate them, therefore, with the SIX Nations of the Iroquois. In logical sequence, there were six nations: therefore, there should be six clans. This is, of course, an excellent example of post-facto rationalization.

Some informants were quite insistent in claiming that the six clans had always been present but that the minority status of the latter clans or careless observation prevented them from coming to the attention of any previous field workers.

Although Caughnawaga families are much smaller than in the past, there is still evidence of great family solidarity. The marked difference in family size is undoubtedly an accommodation to the present urban situation, where housing for a large family would be difficult to obtain.
It was suggested by one informant that these lesser clans might have originally been composed of aliens adopted into the tribe, but such a suggestion was quickly discounted by other informants. The Caughnawaga, in general have no idea when the other clans were added and universally insist that all six have existed "from the beginning".

The clans themselves retain absolutely no regulatory functions over the people today. Some of the Caughnawaga might be a trifle hazy over the exact number of clans or their specific names, but all could name their own clan with considerable precision. Strict clan exogamy has long since ceased to exist and intra-clan marriage is common. One informant jokingly remarked that she was absolutely certain of her clan affiliation, since she was a "double wolf".

The clans do not own or control any of the property on the reservation or in Brooklyn. There is no delineation of the reservation into clan areas, restricted to members of a specific clan and clan members make no effort to live in close association with each other in New York.

Clan members experience no special feelings toward each other. The clan "brother-sister" relationship has, obviously, been disregarded and there are no special
No known culture has ever sprung, full blown, onto the stage of history; no known culture has ever remained in an absolutely static condition. Alteration is a constant and unending process, whether it deals with the trivial details of everyday life or, in a wild, sweeping gesture, subjects the entire body of cultural knowledge to intensive modification. Cultural change is as certain and inexorable a process as biological evolution.

As all persons differ, so do all cultures differ. This is not a question of superiority or inferiority, of good or evil, of utility or futility. It is simply that the divergences of human personality make it impossible for two identical cultures to exist. Even in the case of inter-cultural diffusion, the habits, customs and patterns, which pass from one group to another, are accepted fragmentarily or given a new and sometimes radical interpretation.

With all of the influence of cultural change and its concomitants, there remains, in each social group, a residual continuity of the basic culture. In all societies, regardless of their apparent acquiescence to introduced forms, there is retained a breath of the old. Within the bounds set by the conventions of his society, the individual is free to make his own adjustments to the traditional framework. Yet, no one will dare to venture too far from the time honored patterns of conformity. Within the area fenced
about by convention, are sown the seeds of change.

The Caughnawaga Mohawk began their first experiment in cultural adjustment with the founding of the band. The mixture of diverse tribes, which fled to the refuge of the Jesuit fathers, slowly realized that they must learn to live with each other before they could begin to function as a social unit. Ultimately, despite conflict and disorganization, there developed a way of life acceptable to all.

However, the boundaries, fixed by the new society, were forced to remain flexible, for the scope of the dissimilar cultures that had entered among them offered far more than any of their previous individual limits could assume. Each choice brought the Caughnawaga closer to the inevitable time when they must make the final decision to enter upon this strange new world on its own terms.

The transition was neither sudden nor the result of external force. It ultimately required only the final stimulus of an adequate urban vocation to make the transition complete.

In this final cosmopolitan environment, any existing barriers to cultural readjustment went down completely. As the new culture proposed other alternatives, the range of custom became so much wider that the opportunities for innovation were practically without limit. In the anonymity of the metropolis, the ancient ways could be discarded without reticence. Exposed to a practically unlimited choice of
custom, the Caughnawaga could develop, if they wished a completely new mode of life in tune with their surroundings.

If such had been the case, there would be no point to this discussion. The fact remains that, in their acceptance of the new, the Caughnawaga could not entirely relinquish the old. For a combination of sentimental and practical reasons, much of the culture that they had known was transported to the new area, to be fitted in where it could in the new situation. The Caughnawaga did not simply abandon the old ways; they adjusted them to the new.

To those persons ignorant of the dynamics of culture, it might seem highly probably that the more "primitive" aspects of Caughnawaga culture would be quickly thrown off and that, given the opportunity, the Caughnawaga would be eager to assume the facets of a more "progressive" society. The student of acculturation is not surprised to find that some of the features of an earlier situation will persist, despite any apparent anachronism. For "progress" is simply that subjective evaluation that man has used to account for change.

The reasons underlying the retention or discontinuance of cultural characteristics are not the result of conscious reflection. It is simply that, in all cultures, there are certain forms of behavior which transcend minor individual
differences. These basic structures of culture are considered important enough to remain intact, against the impact of diverse cultural settings. In such areas of human existence, the competition between conformity and innovation is strictly "no contest". The innovation MUST conform.

In the case of the Caughnawaga clans, one must first reckon with the homogeneous character of Caughnawaga community and family life, as a major factor. Although the Caughnawaga have readily joined in many of the activities of the larger urban group, they have retained certain aspects of their traditional culture, as a means of maintaining their identity. These factors are covert and not readily expressed; they are unrecognized by the casual observer. But, this does not minimize their importance.

The Caughnawaga hold enormous pride in their Indian ancestry. It is not something to be minimized or forgotten. Rather, it is a quality to be consciously held as a standard. Connection with the band makes them a unique people with their own traditions of a glorious past. As lineal descendants of the great league of the Iroquois (although, from a strict standpoint of historical fact, the Caughnawaga were never members of the League), it is a heritage of dignity.

The clan organization persists, therefore, as an important cultural link. Although it has lost all of its former regulatory functions, it has developed other functions
of equal importance. Although logically one might have predicted the early disappearance of the clan structure, the fact remains that it has expanded in size and, to a different degree, in scope. This fact alone underscores its importance.

Since the pattern itself is implicit, Indian informants can provide no solution to the reasons for its reorganization and remain under the erroneous impression that the clan system has remained unchanged throughout the centuries.

But, possibly, the primary reason for its continuity is the fact that the clan organization provides a connective with the earlier patterns of matrilineality, extended families and community structure. The Caughnawaga were forced, by the exigencies of a new culture, to switch to a pattern of patrilineal families. The clans remained as a last bridging of the old and the new, in one of the most vital areas of social life.

Among the people, the facts of clan structure might not always be clearly remembered as a totality, but the personal clan affiliation of each member of the Caughnawaga was never in doubt. In brief, one must have a clan to be a Mohawk and any such lack of family connection puts the individual beyond the bounds of Caughnawaga society.¹

¹This was demonstrated in several cases of Mohawk-non Mohawk intermarriage. If the mother was Mohawk, the children were so considered. If the father was Mohawk, the children were not.
The governments of the United States and Canada, with their amorphous delineation of Indian nationality, are free to designate almost any person as "Indian", provided that he meets certain minimal standards. The Caughnawaga are more specific.

It cannot be definitely established when the additional clans were incorporated into the Caughnawaga social system. But, as a point of fact, it is unimportant, except for a certain limited historical interest. Certainly, it would appear, from Father Nau's statement, previously cited, that there was a certain flexibility in clan structure, even in the early years of the 19th century. The fact remains that the Caughnawaga felt this outmoded system to be of sufficient value to retain.

It would appear, therefore, that the proliferation of the Caughnawaga clans is one of the ways in which the Caughnawaga have reached a satisfactory equalization between the traditions of their Indian heritage and the demands of modern urban existence. By its use, and other associated patterns, they have managed the perpetuation of their identity as a buffer against the modern world. They have entered into the complexities of modern living without the loss of those basic concepts of existence which make them unique.

But, of equal importance, the Caughnawaga clan pattern illustrates the importance of the dynamics of persistence in
cultural change. Even when the situation presents itself and the opportunity for new experiences and readjustment of values is open, man cannot fully free himself from the demands of convention. When he must change his patterns, he does so within the comfortable confines of accustomed behavior and creates rationales for his own approval. Innovation can only occur within the framework of conformity.