

Concerning Clans: Part 1

A commentary by Teiowí:sonte (Thomas Deer)

teyowisonte@hotmail.com

Pursuant to my previous article on the issue of heredity in Haudenosaunee leadership, this week's issue will focus on the Clan System of the Haudenosaunee and its state within Kahnawake. This treatment will be divided into two parts; with this week's focusing on the ancient history and purpose of clans in Haudenosaunee society, while next week's part will focus on more recent developments and misunderstandings of clans within Mohawk Territory.

Again, as the movement towards traditional government gains more momentum and popularity, many questions need answering before any faction can push a real plan of action upon the people of Kahnawake. With many people who have rigid and uncompromising views on the matter, this subject is very controversial and debatable for some and likewise is written to inspire discussion on the matter. Both sensitivity and open-mindedness are required to appreciate both sides of this argument, as they are essential elements in any peace process.

It is the observation of this author that most Kahnawa'kehró:non have varying opinions on the subject of clans and their function in our society. Indeed, many know what their clan is, but when asked to comment on its purpose; they often draw a blank or mention its role in traditional government. After years of studying the matter, I feel I can offer a point of view on the subject that can clarify many points of contention and aid the movement towards a unified traditional government.

In order to discuss and understand the function of clans, we must first understand the origin of the clans. This author will now attempt to articulate the Story of the Clan's Origin to the best of my ability. The story of how the clans came to the Haudenosaunee takes place after Creation and the Origin of Four Ceremonies, in the era before Tekanawí:ta and the formation of the Great League of Peace. During this expansionist period in Iroquois history, it was said that its population grew so much that the people, who know seemed to be strangers to one another, began to forget the teachings of the Creator and neglected their duties and responsibilities. It was further said that as the population grew, as did the amount of deaths suffered by the people. The amount of deaths became plague like and was especially significant in the lives of the people since mourning periods lasted an entire year at this time.

With so many obscured by sorrow, the social structure of the Iroquois was breaking down due to the numbers of people who neglected their duties and responsibilities as a result of being crippled by the mourning period. The leadership could not find a solution to this dilemma and decided to call a council to look at this issue. During this council, a young man presented to the people and leadership, an idea for a new social organization that would resolve the epidemic. This idea was clans.

The young man, thereafter named as Ro'nikhrowá:nen (He has great ideas), proposed a system whereby families would take identification with an element of the natural living world. In order to articulate his point, he asked the people to look at the waters. There are rivers, lakes, streams, and oceans; yet they are all still bodies of water. The same was true for all elements of nature.

The people agreed to do this and after a series of events (which will not be embellished upon due to brevity constraints) it eventually became so that two sides or "moieties" (defined in this context as a collection of clans) were created and consequently separated by a river. One moiety consisted of the deer, bear, snipe, and eel clans; while the other belong to the peoples of the wolf, beaver, turtle, and hawk clans.

With this separation of the moieties, a relationship status of cousinship was established between the two sides. Therefore, in the event a person of a clan within a particular moiety passes on into the next sphere of life, the people of the opposite moiety would intervene and condole the mourning that now suffer his or her loss. This was the first instance where the Iroquois invented a social system based upon clans, designed here to remove the burden of sorrow and despair from those mourning by a process of unrefined condolence.

In time, the people strayed away and eventually forgot this unique concept and thus came the emergence of the five troubled nations. This was an era of violent reproach and blood feud and with so many people dead from campaigns of carnage and vengeance; the people left behind the concept of condolence and accumulated a heavy burden of despair. In time, Tekanawíta the Peacemaker, then brought forth the good tidings of peace and power, thus revitalizing and refining the concept and procedure of condolence using the clans again as a model to accomplish this. Furthermore, he refined the organization of the clan system to accomplish two primary objectives as a means for achieving peace, righteousness, and power.

The first objective was a means to deal with the sorrow of death through the condolence of the mourning by the clear-minded moiety; similar to the way funeral rites are practiced for individuals as explained in the clan's origins. Within the Kaianere'kó:wa, two moieties were created, the Elder Brothers (Mohawk, Senecas, and Onondagas) and the Younger Brothers (Oneidas and Cayugas). These two sides were responsible to condole the other in the event of a leader's death, and also act as deliberating parties in the political spectrum of the Haudenosaunee.

The second objective was created to practice an efficient political decision-making process using the clans as deliberating parties. Included in the domain of both of these objectives is the installation process of leadership within the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which is greatly dependent of the clan system. Actually, it is recognized that both of these objectives are symbiotic and are quite interdependent.

After taking this information into consideration, it is easily deciphered that the purpose of clans in the Haudenosaunee way is all about efficiency and mutual aid. It seems that in

communities like Kahnawake, some have elevated the concept of clans to a level equivalent to a European class system; whereby one's clan is considered a status symbol as opposed to a tool of efficiency and mutual aid. In order to really achieve a working unified traditional government in Kahnawake, the ideology and purpose of clans must be clearly understood and appreciated if it is to work. It is vital to understand that the Kaianere'kó:wa and the great Clan System of the Haudenosaunee is only as good as the people's commitment to the principles of peace, righteousness, and power.

Part 2 of this article will appear within the next couple of issues.