

The Heredity Question

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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. This commentary will examine the concept of heredity in the realm of Haudenosaunee governance. With hardliners in both camps, 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.

To some, heredity is the very essence of Haudenosaunee governance and an integral factor in leadership selection. In this context, the term heredity implies that candidates for leadership positions must not only have the necessary personal qualities and clan affiliation, but a direct maternal blood lineage to a specific title family. To others, this concept represents an infiltration of European corruption into Haudenosaunee leadership selection and the fortification of a class system invading our traditional concept of democracy with notions of royalty. Likewise, advocates against the heredity concept believe it to be a non-traditional convention that is a fairly recent development resulting from colonization.

One argument used by the pro-heredity camp that is difficult to ignore, is the fact that only Mohawks primarily in Kahnawake and Akwesasne choose not to follow this concept of heredity while the rest of the Confederacy does; particularly the Younger Brothers Condoling Council. To which, a common rebuttal suggests that a European social infiltration or the influence of the Handsome Lake Code has possibly sabotaged the original method of leadership selection. It is further refuted by the anti-heredity camp that an underground Long House movement probably existed amongst the so-called “Praying Mohawks” and managed to preserve the original process in secrecy.

Since the first Long House was built in Kahnawake around 1927, the now various Haudenosaunee regimes here had devised their council’s leadership through a selection process that attempts to find the most qualified individual in a particular clan for a specific position. A concept that is perfectly logical and efficient. However, it is still quite possible that perhaps this system of heredity is actually the way it’s supposed to be. If so then, why and how did we in Kahnawake come to believe otherwise?

Some two years ago, a teacher of mine from Akwesasne revealed to me that only now in his life is he realizing that much of what he thought was Long House ways or aspects of the Kaianere’kó:wa, were actually elements of the so-called Seven Nations of Canada government; a former alliance of St. Lawrence Indigenous groups (including Kahnawake, Akwesasne and Kanehsatake) whose central Council Fire was situated here in Kahnawake.

This revelation could possibly hold the answer to this mystery, since being so thoroughly absorbed into the political ways and monopoly of the Seven Nations government since around 1760, it is logical to suggest or presume that the gaps which our, at the time, traditionally deficient people, did not understand with reintroduction of Kanohsonni'kéha in the 1920's. Thus, replacing these gaps of missing knowledge with elements that were well accustomed to during the reign of the Life Chiefs of the Seven Nations; who were still alive during the period when the Kaianere'kó:wa came back to the three northern Mohawk townships. These elements being that of the old Rotinonhkwiseres Council, whose council fire was only extinguished around 1889 in Kahnawake and surprisingly in 1969 at Akwesasne. Some who remember when both the Mohawk Nation Council and Rotinonhkwiseres Council operated simultaneously in the 1950's at Akwesasne have noted the confusion that existed due to the similarities between both governments, ultimately leading to an exodus of some Life Chiefs to the Long House and the collapse of their council.

Evidence would suggest that the government of the Seven Nations was somewhat inspired and modeled after the Haudenosaunee's, however due to the membership of non-Iroquoian nations; the clan system of this government had to be adjusted to accommodate the members within this alliance as well as its provisions. For example, the Chiefs and Clan Mothers of this alliance were not associated with any title or family lineage and simply chose the best-qualified candidates from the entire clan. By this reckoning, it is a logical deduction that from this practice did the three Mohawk townships become innately accustomed to this method of leadership selection.

When contemplating the matter further and discussing it with other Haudenosaunee friends, I figured that heredity probably did historically exist in Haudenosaunee governance. During the heyday of the Haudenosaunee, before European contact, it is justifiably assumed that clan relatives were blood relatives; therefore the process of grooming one for a leadership position was made from process of heredity. Moreover, those who belonged to a particular clan also belonged to a specific family or sub-clan. For example, one individual may be a member of the Wolf Clan and at the same time be a blood relative to a specific lineage within that clan; thus making this individual an eligible candidate or successor for that family's clan title (i.e. the Sharenhó:wane clan family).

Who is right and who is wrong is a debate that will continue for sometime, but solutions to this debate should be focused on now as we move closer to a possible unified traditional government here in Kahnawake. In such an extensive community like Kahnawake, it is unrealistic and impractical to incorporate a system of heredity for a community government whose majority population are probably not practicing traditionalists, unless or course it is decided to start fresh and assign clan family associations to all community members.

Indeed it should be noted that this concept of heredity is basically only applicable to national titles, and as the Kaianere'kó:wa makes no provision for the structure of community councils; it could be an effective arrangement to create a community traditional government that chooses its leadership according to general clan affiliation and

personal quality. While leaving the management of national titles in the hands of the Long House people at Kahnawake; as it is universally recognized throughout Iroquoia that the Haudenosaunee are the inherent custodians of national affairs. Regardless of what your opinion is on the matter, discussion on this topic must be considered if we want to get things right once and for all. Temporary confusion is better than permanent blindness.

Ever onward towards the good tidings of peace and power!