# AMERICAN INDIAN COMPOSITIONS REFLECTING THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE TRIBES

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ONE OF THE MOST important factors influencing the Indian's point of view was the social and political organization of the tribes. It was also a circumstance productive of several notable pieces of literature. The egocentric or individualistic point of view of the redskin has already been illustrated through selections quoted in the preceding articles of this series. Nevertheless, the Indian was not a solitary; nor in spite of all his wood craft was he able to survive alone in the wilderness. The hostile environment, especially in the winter, the uncertain food supply (particularly among those tribes which depended most on hunting), and the continual warfare with enemy bands forced him to lead a communal existence. He was therefore gregarious in the extreme, always herding with his kind in villages or settlements, for protection, shelter, warmth, and food. No member of the group, whether it was large or small, was economically independent of the rest; nor could a few individuals remain safe and prosperous when others were in hard circumstances. There were, it is true, plutocratic tribesmen, noted for their ability to collect scalps and steal horses; but these riches mostly served to lend distinction. In such important matters as food and skins or blankets for winter, all shared to a large extent alike.

The existence of the individual tribesman was generally uncomfortable and often extremely hazardous. Let anyone who has experienced even an average winter in the lake region of the Middle West imagine himself living in a draughty tipi in a ten-below-zero spell, and dependent for his entire food supply on his ability to shoot with a bow and arrow—always with the hazard of being toma-

hawked from behind by members of a hostile tribe. The thought of returning to find his whole village in ashes, and a few bloody rags the only remaining traces of his family and friends occasionally rendered thoughtful even the toughest savage. The following songs are indicative of his state of mind on such occasions.

"The *Haethuka* are dead,
I weep,
I walk around the village."[1]
"The odor of death,
I discern the odor of death
In the front of my body."[2]

The obvious result of such conditions was the communal system, whereby the food supply and other necessities of life were apportioned to each family. In many cases a large part of the food was obtained in great tribal or village "hunts", in which all available members took part. The plains Indians, especially, followed the herds of buffalo, and moved back and forth in large groups as they drove the neighboring tribes before them, or were in turn defeated.[3] Within villages of the more sedentary tribes there were often communal houses where several families lived together.[4] This close relation of the individual to the economic and social life of the whole group is characteristic of primitive society, and becomes even closer in the smaller groups down to the single family.

The interior organization of the Indian tribes led into the production of notable pieces of tribal literature, of which the most remarkable is the famous Iroquois "Book of Rites", a ritual of important ceremonies. An explanation of the leading features of Indian social and political organization is necessary, however, to the proper understanding of this piece of Indian literature. The basis for the government of all or most Indian tribes was the clan and council system. The clan or gens was a group of people inside the tribe, actually or theoretically related by blood. The organization was both social and political in its nature, and was usually named after some tutelary animal deity.[5] In the *clan*, lineal descent, inheritance of personal property, and the hereditary right to public

[1]Fletcher "Omaha Music", p. 258-9.
[2]Densmore, "Chippewa Music", II, p. 114.
[3]McGee, "The Siouan Indians", p. 186.
[4]*Ibid.*, p. 172. See also accounts cited of the Iroquois tribes.
[5]See J. R. Swanton, "Names and Naming", *Hodge* II, pp. 16-18, and Appendix G.

office are traced through the female line, while in the *gens* they devolve through the male line. The laws and privileges of the clan or gens, which of course had its own council, were numerous and well defined. They related to marriage,[6] voting for chiefs and other leaders, obligations of mutual help, and re-dress of injuries.[7] All the clans in a tribe, varying in number from two or three to ten or fifteen, were interlocked by marriage.

Many if not most communities were organized by a further development of the clan and council system, the fratry or group of clans. These frateries, of which there were any number from one to four in any given community, seem to have been political and ceremonial units. Occasionally they were exogamic; so that a man was compelled to marry outside his fratery.[8] Among some tribes the fratery organization was temporary, and resorted to only on special occasions such as war or a buffalo hunt;[9] among the more advanced and best organized tribes the fratery was the controlling political unit. A typical fratery organization of a village might divide the people into two halves, "the summer people" and "the winter people", each having charge of certain functions peculiar to their season.[10]

Tribes were made up of any number of communities or bands, either sedentary or migratory; and their organization showed every degree of complexity. Where there was any tribal government at all, it was based on the council system. The clans held their councils and elected chiefs who in turn formed the tribal council to assist the tribal chief. In most tribal governments the civil and military functions were carefully discriminatel. "The civil government was lodged in a chosen body of men usually called chiefs, of whom there were commonly several grades. Usually the chiefs were organized in a council exercising legislative, judicial, and executive functions in matters pertaining to the welfare of the tribe. The civil chief was not by virtue of his office a military leader. Among

[6]Most clans or gens were exogamic, *i. e.* allowed no members to marry within the group. A few were endogamic, to the exclusion of outside marriages. See Clark Wissler, *The American Indians*, p. 157. Horatio Hale, *The Iroquois Book of Rites*, and Appendix H.

[7]Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society*, London 1877, p. 71.

[8]Wissler, *The American Indians*, p. 158.

[9]Dorsey, "Siouan Sociology", pp. 221-2.

[10]Wissler, *op. cit.*, p. 158. See also J. O. Dorsey, "Siouan Sociology", pp. 238-239; Francs La Flesche, "The Osage Tribe", *36th Ann. Rep. B. A. E.* 1914-15. J. R. Swanton, "Osage", *Hodge* II, pp. 156-7. J. O. Dorsey, "Omaha Sociology", pp. 226.

the Iroquois a civil chief in order to go to war had to resign his civil function during his absence on the war path."[11] The manner in which a chief was chosen varied considerably. In some loosely organized California villages the richest man was chief. Among the Sioux, leaders were chosen because of bravery and generosity, and Sious, leaders were chosen because of bravery and generosity, and were deposed when incompetent.[12] It is notable that the war chief was by some tribes considered second in rank to the civil chief, whose office was hereditary.[13] In a few cases the civil chieftainship was hereditary in some leading clan; but the rest of the tribe had the right to veto the candidate proposed by this clan, and cause it to nominate another.[14]

The largest organization of Indian government, usually within the linguistic family, was the confederacy or alliance of whole tribes. At the time of the discovery, tribal government was the usual form; confederacies were temporary, and were resorted to only for war emergencies. Most Indians had not yet attained the power of largely extended and cohesive organization.[15] One outstanding exception to the above statement must nevertheless be remarked. The five Iroquoian tribes inhabiting New York,— the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca, later (1722) reinforced by the Tuscarora—succeeded sometime between the years 1570 and 1600 in forming a powerful political and military league.[16] It was this league which was the occasion for the famous *Iroquois Book of Rites*, perhaps the most notable work in all the literature of the North American Indians.[17]

Only the main features of the League need be mentioned here. Its basic unit was the organized tribe. The governing body was a supreme council composed of representatives elected from the constituent tribes. The individual chiefs, members of the supreme

[11]Hewitt, "Government", *Hodge* I, p. 498.

[12]Dorsey, "Siouan Sociology", pp. 223-4.

[13]Warren, "History of the Ojibways", p. 319.

[14]Hewitt, "Iroquois", *Hodge* I, p. 617.

[15]Wissler, *The American Indians*, pp. 150 ff. Hewitt, "Government, *Hodge* I, p. 498, and "Confederation", pp. 337 ff.

[16]Wm. Beauchamp, "A History of the New York Iroquois", *N. Y. State Museum, Bulletin* 78, p. 153. See also the accounts in, Horatio Hale, *The Iroquois Book of Rites*, Lewis H. Morgan, *The League of the Iroquois*. New York, 1904, and *Ancient Society*. London, 1877.

[17]Dr. Brinton declares the *Iroquois Book of Rites* to be "one of the most remarkable native productions north of Mexico. Its authenticity and antiquity are indisputable."—*Aboriginal American Authors*, p. 21.

federal council and the sub-chiefs of each tribe constituted the local council of the tribe. Both local and supreme councils were conducted in accordance with long established rituals, and had regularly appointed officers; namely, a speaker, a fire-keeper, door-keeper, and wampum-keeper or annalist. The supreme council acting as a court without a jury, heard and determined causes according to precedent, decided the policy of the confederacy, declared war and peace.[18]

*The Book of Rites* is really a set of traditional rituals by which the civil, and mourning councils of the confederacy were conducted. It represents the Indian's highest expression of his social and political organization. Since the political organization of the Iroquois was superior to that of any other group north of Mexico, the *Book of Rites* is quite complete, and is even meritorious from the literary point of view. Composed by a chief or chiefs now unknown, the *Rites* were first recorded on wampum belts.[19] Later they were reduced to writing in the early eighteenth century by chief David of Schoharie. Many people attended these "condoling councils", which were affairs of the greatest importance.[20] The only surviving rites are the ceremonials incident to the death of a chief of the grand confederacy council and the installation of his successor.

The "mourning council", at which the new chief was to be installed in the grand council, was called by the councilors of the "elder brother" tribes of Mohawks, Onondagos, and Senecas, Members of these tribes then assembled on the appointed day to wait for the arrival of the representatives of the "younger brother" tribes (Oneidas, Cayugas, Tuscaroras). The first ceremony of the council is a song called "At the Wood's Edge", sung by the "elder" councilors while the "younger" tribesmen were approaching the council fire. The song expresses gratitude that the visitors have escaped every peril while on their mission of love, and ends with a long recital of the early villages of the three principal Iroquoian clans. When the song is ended at the fire, all the councilors form a procession and go to the council house, the members of the elder tribe as hosts leading the way.

[18]J. N. B. Hewitt, "Confederation", *Hodge* I, p. 337.

[19]Wampum belts were strings of vari-colored shells whose arrangement constituted a mnemonic devise. See Beauchamp, "Civil, Religious, and Mourning Councils", pp. 350 ff.

[20]For complete account of manuscripts and proof of their authenticy, see Horatio Hale, *The Iroquois Book of Rites*, pp. 39 ff.

Inside the council house each party takes its proper end, while one member of the visiting ("younger") tribes paces back and forth chanting a ritual called "The Old Way of Greeting". In this chant the visitors express their sympathy for the loss of the chief who is dead, and attempt to restore the grief stricken "elder" members to a sound condition. Many of the songs composing the ritual recall the history of the Iroquois league, and the laws established by its founder. The original fifty chiefs of the league are named, and reference is made to the three great clans (Bear, Wolf, and Turtle), and to some of their early towns.[21]

Since the ritual is long and monotonous, only a few of the more striking and significant passages will be reproduced here as specimens.

The Preliminary Ceremony Called, "At the Wood's Edge".

"Greatly startled have I been today
By your voice coming through the woods to this clearing.
With troubled mind you have come
Through obstacles of every kind.
. . . . . .
Great thanks, therefore, we give, that safely
You have arrived. Now then together
Let both of us smoke. For all around indeed
Are hostile powers, which are thinking thus:
'I will frustrate their plans.' Here are many thorns,
And here falling trees, and here the wild beasts wait.
Either by these you might have died, my children;
Or here by floods might you have been destroyed,
My children; or here by the hatchet,
Raised in the dark, outside the house.
Every day by these we are wasting away.
Or by a deadly and invisible
Disease might you have been destroyed,
My children. Great thanks, therefore now,
That safely you have traversed the forests.
. . . . . .
Now these are the words of the mutual greeting,
The opening ceremony, called the old way
Of mutual greeting .. . . .
. . . . Now this day

[21]Beauchamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 352-3.

We are met, because of the solemn event
Which is now our lot. Now into the earth
Has he been borne to whom we always looked.
Even in our tears then together let us smoke.
. . . . . .
. . . . Every day
You are losing your great men. Into the earth
They are borne; also the warriors,
Also your women, and your grandchildren as well;
So that in the midst of blood
You are sitting. Now therefore, we say,
We wash the blood stains from your seat,
So that it may be for a time
That happily the place may be clean
For a few days, where pleasantly
You rest and are looking all around.
. . . . . .
Hail, my grandsires! Thus ye have said:
Those are to be pitied who in later days
Shall pass through this life.
. . . . . .
Hail, my grandsires! This they said
. . . . . .
'As soon as a chief is dead,
Even then shall the horns be taken off."[22]
. . . . . .
We might all die, if invested with horns
He is borne away to the grave."

The "condoling" ceremonies in the council house were ended by a consoling address by a representative of the visiting "younger brothers".

Speech of Consolation by the "Younger Brothers",

"Now—now this day—now I come to your door when you are mourning in great darkness, prostrate with grief. For this reason we have come here to mourn with you. I will enter your door, and

[22]An Iroquois chief's insignia of office were horns, which were placed on his grave when he was buried, and then later removed to be given to his successor in office. The horns were significant of power to the Iroquois as to the ancient Hebrews, the Iroquois belief being that if the chiefs were buried with insignia of office, and if the offices in the council were not filled, the structure of the League would perish.—Beauchamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 355-385 *passim*.

come before the ashes, and mourn with you there; and I will speak these words to comfort you.

Now our uncle has passed away, he who used to work for all that they might see the brighter days to come. . . . . He who has worked for us has gone afar off; and he will also in time take all these—the whole body of warriors, and also the whole body of women—all these will go with him. But it is still harder when the woman shall die, because with her the line of descent is lost.[23] And also the grandchildren and the little ones who are running around—these he will take away; and also those who are creeping on the ground, and also those that are on the cradle boards; all these he will take away with him. . . . .

Now another thing we say, we younger brothers. You are mourning in deep darkness. I will make the sky clear for you, so that you will not see a cloud. And also I will cause the sun to shine upon you, so that you can look upon it peacefully when it goes down. . . . . Now I have hope that you will yet see pleasant days. . . . . Now we will open your ears, and also your throat, for there is something that has been choking you, and we will also give you water which shall wash down all the troubles you have in your throat. We shall hope that then your mind will recover its cheerfulness. . . . . .

Now I have finished. Now show me the man!" (The newly elected chief.)[24]

Another interesting speech, part of the Onondaga council ceremonies, deserves to be considered along with the *Rites*. This speech or sermon forms a part of a manuscript book in the Onondaga dialect, discovered by Hale, and printed in the *Book of Rites*.

"Now the smoke of the council fire rises and ascends to the sky, that everybody may see it. The tribes of the different nations where the smoke appeared shall come directly where the smoke arises, if, perhaps, they have any business to consider. . . . .

"What is the purpose of the smoke? It is this—that the chiefs must all be honest; that they must all love one another; and that they must have regard for their people,—including the women, and

[23] This is a reference to the peculiarly important place held by women in the political system of the Iroquois, and also to the custom of tracing descent through the female line.

[24] Beauchamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 355-385. I have used Beauchamp's version of the *Rites* rather than Brinton's, because the former is a later edition, and because the text is not buried under so much critical matter.

also our children, and also those children whom we have not yet seen; so much they must care for, that all may be in peace, even the whole nation. It is the duty of the chiefs to do this, and they have the power to govern their people. If there is anything to be done for the good of the people, it is their duty to do it."[25]

These speeches and chants have been solemnly delivered at the council fires for centuries, and occasionally are revived even to this day.[26] They represent a high standard of pagan morality and ethics. They reveal strong patriotic respect for history, tradition, and the Iroquois national organization. There is stoical recognition of the hardships and perils of life and the inevitability of death. There is also a spirit of grim and fearless resolution, together with a courageous cheerfulness not obtained through glittering and ephermeal religious hopes. Indeed "a moral tone may be said to run through all, but there is no religious instruction, nor does religious feeling go beyond a mere expression of thankfulness. There is no act of worship from beginning to end."[27]

A few incidental references to the natural environment might be noted; but in this respect other works, to be cited in succeeding chapters, will prove more fruitful subjects for analysis.

Besides the League of the Iroquois there were other Indian confederacies. These were all of a more temporary and causal nature. Most notable among them were: the Powhatan and Pawnee groups, the "Seven Fireplaces" league of the Dakotas, and the informal alliance of the Blackfeet, Gross Ventres, and Sarsi.[28] All these no doubt had traditional ceremonies by which they conducted their councils. Certainly there exist historical and religious rituals among many of the separate tribes; but none in all probability were so notable as the *Rites* of the Iroquois.

It is therefore evident that although the Indians north of Mexioc were all, roughly speaking, under tribal government, yet they represent a very wide range of development, from a mere collection of families in a village, to a widely extended, closely organized state, with a senate, a feudal army, and definite peace policy of "war to end wars." Nevertheless, all Indian organizations were evolved according to environment and were varied in much the same way to meet

[25]Hale, *Book of Rites*, p. 169.
[26]Beauchamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 389 and 393.
[27]Beauchamp, *op. cit.*, p. 379.
[28]Wissler, *The American Indians*, p. 151; Hewitt, *op. cit., loc. cit.*

analogous conditions. Small and isolated groups, such as prevailed in California developed but little from the simple family stage; tribes of the plains, such as the Dakotas, occupying widely extended areas, yet subject to pressure from surrounding enemies, occasionally achieved a confederacy; the Iroquois, in a more favorable environment, but compelled to combat most fiercely for their existence, had begun a governmental system not unlike that of the early Roman tribes in similar circumstances.

In no case was the Indian a social unit by himself; in all stages he belonged to a group with definite rules, to which he conformed. It is curious that the social organization of these groups in the lower stages of culture is no less definite—in fact is often more definite than that of the more advanced peoples.[29] Thus, the Indian occupying a definite place in a social scheme, was constrained to think of the rules under which he lived, and to voice his thoughts in compositions concerning his society, as well as of the other circumstances governing his existence.

[29] McGee "The Siouan Indians", 15*th Rep. B. A. E.*, pp. 200-201.