

On Iroquois Incest

by THOMAS H. CHARLTON

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente plusieurs déclarations contradictoires au sujet de la règle de l'inceste chez les Iroquois. L'auteur suggère que la règle de l'inceste n'est pas matrilatérale mais bien bilatérale.

INTRODUCTION

While carrying out research for a seminar paper dealing with the Iroquois kinship system, I encountered a great deal of ambiguity, uncertainty, and a general lack of specific data on things Iroquois.¹ This situation held true for such specific features of the kinship system as the incest tabu, the nature of descent, and the kinship terminology. Other aspects of Iroquois culture, such as post-marital residence, also lacked precision of definition.

Although there were some original contributions both from more recent field work and from historical studies, much of the literature I examined relied quite heavily on Morgan's classic studies of the Iroquois. It is possible that a detailed analysis of the many historic documents pertaining to the Iroquois would clear up some of the difficulties encountered. For such a task I possessed neither the time nor the resources.

I would like, however, to present a survey of various statements made about the Iroquois rule of incest, with their consequent implications for the Iroquois rule of descent. It is my contention that any kinship system which has been used by many authors as a major "type" in their schemes of kinship classification should have much better documentation than that of the Iroquois. Through an examination of the various statements in the literature concerning the incest rule I shall illustrate the lack of consistent documentation on

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this aspect of the Iroquois kinship system. Subsequently I shall offer an explanation to reconcile these differences.

STATEMENTS ON THE IROQUOIS RULE OF INCEST

Morgan, in 1851, indicated that marriage was prohibited only between members of the same matrilineal clan, and that this prohibition at one time extended to include moieties. The rule did not apply to paternal relations (1954:79). He stated again, in 1857, that an individual could marry into his father's clan, but that marriage was forbidden within his own clan, and formerly within his own-moiety (1857:134). He repeated essentially the same statements in 1877 (1877:90) and 1881 (1881:10).

In the work of Morgan one can see an extension of basic incest tabus to members of the matrilineal clan and moiety. Murdock (1949:303-306) suggested that the Iroquois had, in his terms, a Normal Matrilineal Extension of the incest tabu. He defined this type of incest rule extension as "marriage prohibitions extended matrilineally to sibmates or other persons with whom kinship is assumed but cannot actually be traced genealogically" (1949:303). He also noted an absence of any bilateral extension of marriage regulations beyond secondary relatives and an absence of such extensions in the patrilineal line.

Carr (1887:219) supported Morgan's earlier work with the statement that there were no marriage restrictions aside from the restrictions against marrying a member of the same matrilineal clan. Parker (1916:42) has shown that the Iroquois constitution included a clause prohibiting marriage between members of the same clan through all the tribes.

In 1917 Barbeau (1917:392-396) stated that the original exogamic units were the clans although the rules of exogamy previously had included members of the same moiety. He suggested that with the decline in importance of the moiety in the social structure there had been a recession of the rule of exogamy from its extended position.

Later authors have reiterated the general position on Iroquois incest regulations as first expounded by Morgan. Murdock (1934;

1949; 1957), Quain (1937), Fenton (1940), Lowie (1948), Voget (1953), Jenness (1958) and Driver (1961) have accepted Morgan's statements. Yet there are other works pertaining to the Iroquois which indicate features of kinship and social structure which, if correct, differ fundamentally from the position outlined by Morgan.

Beauchamp (1886:86) pointed out certain inconsistencies in Morgan's data on Iroquois clans and political structure. He indicated the possibility of patrilineal descent and clan membership among the Oneida and/or Onondaga.

Speck (1923:285) recorded a case of patrilineal inheritance of land privileges among the northern Mohawk. He interpreted the presence of patrilineal inheritance among an otherwise matrilineal people as being due to diffusion from the Algonkian people to the north.

According to Quain (1937:266) there was a "tendency for seasoned warriors to take charge of the early military training of their sons and grandsons." This fact is suggestive of some affiliation with patrilineal relatives.

The possibility of patrilineal descent and kinship affiliation received its greatest elaboration and discussion by Métais (1956) who suggested that the Iroquois possessed a form of double descent, with named matrilineal clans and unnamed patrilineal clans (1956: 297, 385, 393, 400). An individual would inherit different essential elements from each of these clans. The patrilineal clan was a territorially localized group.

With this descent system he has associated bilateral cross-cousin marriage occurring between two moieties, each composed of several matrilineal clans. The incest rule originally included matrilineal clan members, but was extended later to include the moiety, from which it had recently receded (1956:293). The preferred, and possibly only marriage, was between two individuals who stood in the relation of cross-cousin to each other (1956:384). Métais also agreed with Quain in stating that the paternal grandfather and a male grandchild had a particular friendship relation (1956:373, 377).

Eggen (1955) also suggested that Iroquois social structure may have been based on cross-cousin marriage. Richards (1957:40) men-

tioned that an informant told her that the Mohawks reckoned descent through the father.

There are no statements in the literature about the application of incest tabus to these patrilineal relations, with the exception of the bilateral incest tabus to be discussed later. Yet the existence of socially significant patrilineal relationships, which appears to have escaped notice, is a fact which should be accounted for if an ambiguous situation is to be cleared up. Are they aboriginal or are they diffusions from a dominant patrilineal society? Are there incest tabus associated with them?

Although I do not possess any information about the extension of incest regulations to patrilineally based social groups, there are definite suggestions that these regulations did apply to the matrilineal clan of one's father. In the terms of Murdock (1949: 303) this would be Maximal Matrilineal Extension of marriage regulations, "marriage prohibitions extended to the actual or assumed matrilineal kinsmen of the father, as well as to those of Ego and his mother."

Swanton (1905:668), cited Hewitt, when he stated that: "The same abhorrence to marriage into the clan of one's father exists among the . . . Iroquois . . ." He used the term clan to refer to an exogamic matrilineal descent group. There was no reference to any publication by Hewitt concerning this statement.

Two years later, Hewitt (1907c) made a similar statement in an article on the family. He stated that with the birth of a child certain rights and obligations of the father's clan to the child became effective. The child's family contained both the mother's clan and the father's clan. He (1907c:450) added:

These two clans are exogamic groups, entirely distinct before the child's birth, and form two subdivisions of a larger group of kindred — the family — of which any given person, the *propositus*, is the focal point or point of juncture. Strictly speaking, both clans form incest groups in relation to him.

This is the only reference made by Hewitt to such an extension of the incest tabu. In his article on Clan and Gens (1907b) he did again mention the obligations which existed between the husband's clan and the clan of his wife and children, but merely indicated

that individuals practiced clan and moiety exogamy. He mentioned the presence of this type of incest tabu in articles on the Cayuga (1907a), the Iroquois (1907d), the Mohawks (1907e), the Oneida (1910a), the Onondaga (1910b) and the Seneca (1910c).

He repeated the clan and moiety exogamy regulations in 1914 at which time he also mentioned that the two moieties represented the masculine and feminine in nature. This classification appears to have greatly influenced the work of Métais in his elaboration of a basic bipartite social organization of the Iroquois and in his statements concerning both patrilineal and matrilineal clans associated with a division of the external world found in the world view of the Iroquois.

In 1932 Hewitt made several more specific statements about Iroquois incest rules. He (1932:476) described the clan as being composed of a number of *ohwachira* or matrilineal extended families. An *ohwachira* is :

an organized body of persons tracing descent of blood from a common mother, the members being bound together by the ties of common blood, the strongest bonds known to primitive men, and so forming an exogamic incest group by a rigid inhibition of sexual relations among its members formerly under the penalty of death to the guilty couple.

This incest tabu extended to the clan formed by the combination of several *ohwachira*, creating larger exogamic units. He does not mention any further extension to the clan of the husband, although he (1932:481) again indicates the important obligations and duties which existed between the husband's clan and that of his wife and children.

So strong was the tabu of incest among the members of an *ohwachira* that, in the event that a child was engendered by an incestuous act, it was declared to have no father's kinsmen, and so could not share in the rights due it from a father's clansmen and clanswomen.

Quain (1937:274) pointed out the important relationships which often occurred between boys and men of their father's clan. "Though friendships thus established were essentially of a ceremonial nature, the older man often took a permanent interest in the child." Fenton (1951:44) also mentioned the importance of the father's

clan to the individual. Métais (1956:366) indicated that the two clans were linked through marriage and the birth of children to the couple.

The statements I have examined so far have referred to unilineal relations, and the possibility of an extension of incest tabus to include any or all of them. Besides these there are also statements in the literature indicating a bilateral application of incest rules, which would include the unilineal relations mentioned as well as the mother's patrilineal kinsmen.

Goldenweiser (1914a, 1914b) affirmed the presence of regulations prescribing clan exogamy for the individual and suggested that these regulations had previously extended to include the moiety. At the time of his field work this extension was no longer in effect. He (1914a:467) did note, however, the presence of bilateral kindred among the Iroquois.

On the one hand a family was constituted by one's relatives on the father's and the mother's side. This group was united by ties of the classificatory system of relationship . . . The group also figured in a number of family ceremonies, and was important in connection with marriages; it was also appealed to by the individual in numerous matters of personal behaviour . . . Of far greater significance, however, was the group we may designate as the maternal family.

He also mentioned (1914b) that the incest rule among the Iroquois had no totemic implications, although it extended to all persons bearing the same clan name despite lack of actual genealogical relationship.

Goldenweiser (1922:73-77), however, failed to mention this family group, which in his earlier statements appears to have been a bilateral kindred. Instead he put forward the usual statements that the smallest unit in Iroquois society was the maternal family, which combined with others formed the clan, several clans in turn being combined into moieties. The incest rule formerly applied to the moiety, although by this time it had become restricted to the clan.

I have interpreted Goldenweiser's statements to indicate the presence of a bilateral kindred among the Iroquois. Fenton (1941:44), however, has described a kindred among the Iroquois which consisted of a combination of the clans of the two parents.

Locally the household is a powerful unit of public opinion and the core of Iroquois polity. It is balanced on the father's side by his maternal household or lineage, one's father's kinsmen (*agadoni*) and by extension his clansmen presided over by the father's sister, or her female forebear. The two comprise the kindred, one's body of relations.

Statements by Swanton (1905) and Hewitt (1907c) also suggest the presence of a body of relatives comprised of the matrilineal clan of each parent. It is perhaps this group to which Goldenweiser (1914a) refers.

Voget (1953) suggested that in recent times there had been a shrinking of interaction with one's relations, and that one knew very few beyond the limited segment of the bilateral kindred with whom he was on intimate terms. Voget considered this bilateral kindred a recent emergent, resulting from changed economic conditions and residence patterns. He (1953:391) indicated that the emerging bilateral kindred was coming to play an increasingly important role in the regulation of marriage through an extension of the incest tabu to kindred members.

Murdock (1957) noted that the bilateral kindred had been reported among the Iroquois, but he indicated no incest regulations attached to this group. Earlier (1949:302) he had suggested that the Iroquois possessed a Bilateral Non-Extension of marriage regulations, the "absence of any bilateral extension of marriage prohibitions beyond secondary relatives; marriage fully sanctioned with some or all first cousins." He further noted, in 1957, that marriage with a patrilineal parallel cousin was prohibited. This rule conforms to a Bilateral Non-Extension of marriage regulations and Murdock apparently considered this sufficient explanation. However, in the fully functioning moiety system, such a relative would be a member of Ego's moiety.

Shimony (1961:30,31) has recently given one of the fullest descriptions of incest regulations in a modern Iroquois community. Her statements on them are worth repeating here.

In general marriage and incest rules are at present diverse, due to the changes in social organization which have taken place, so that informants are confused... The common opinion is that marriage is prohibited with any known relative...

In the definition of incest tabus the relevant connections are not limited to the more common Iroquoian uterine, or matrilineal, relations, but also include agnatic links. Therefore, an Iroquois is forbidden to marry into his *ohwachira* (his matrilineage, or, as the informants say, "the main family") and into his father's kindred (*agadónihó'no?*). The group of persons termed *agadó'nih* includes all bilateral relatives related to ego through an initial ascending link, i.e., through the father, but not the father himself; some informants also omit from this group the lineal relatives in the second and higher ascending generations, e.g., the *FaMo*, *FaFa*, etc., but this causes no confusion, since marriage with one's father is obviously forbidden and unlikely. The group does include siblings and cousins of lineal ancestors, therefore precluding marriage with a patrilineal uncle or aunt, and it does include all degrees of patrilineal cousins, be they parallel or cross. The group termed *kheya'?**dawéh* includes all the bilateral relatives through an initial uterine line in the ascending or same generation, i.e. through ego's mother or ego's siblings. This of course means that the *ohwachira* is a subgroup of the *kheya'?**dawéh*. To the Iroquois, however, the two groups seem quite distinct; the *ohwachira* is always considered more closely related and is "my own family" or "my main family". While the marriage prohibition is more stringently observed in the *ohwachira*, it also applies to the *kheya'?**dawéh*.

Shimony has further noted that the clan and moiety exogamy rules are no longer important. In her work the incest rule is presented as essentially a bilateral extension from the nuclear family. Charles Torok (personal communication, 1965) has reported a similar situation on the Tyendinaga Reserve near Deseronto.

Quain (1937:250) citing Fenton also pointed out that the importance of the clan in regulating marriages had disappeared. Fenton (1951:46) confirmed this and stated that: "To marry in the same maternal household is a far greater sin than to marry in the same clan." Thus, at the present, the matrilineal extension of a rule of exogamy applies only to the *ohwachira*, and then not alone, but with other rules which apply to those related to ego equally through his father and mother. The modern incest rule among the Iroquois is bilateral in application.

All of the material I have discussed above is of relatively recent origin, the oldest data being those of Morgan, collected around 1850. Europeans have written of the Iroquois for several centuries. I shall

now present summaries of the work of two authors who deal with some of the many historic documents available.

Beaugrand-Champagne (1939:275-276) working from documents from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, described the matrilineal clan as the nucleus of social organization and indicated that it was an exogamous social grouping. He (1939:279, 283-284) also mentioned that one could marry neither within his own clan nor that of his father. These marriage regulations extended collaterally in the patrilineal line to include first and second degrees of relationship, and possibly more distant relations.

Richards (1957:40) who in her own fieldwork had received information which indicated that for the naming of a child both the father's and the mother's sib had to be known, and that a person could shift his moiety and sib affiliation to that of his father, examined documents with an eye for evidence of Iroquois social change. From the documents she consulted, she concluded that it was quite apparent that the incest regulations (as well as other aspects of social structure) had undergone changes since Cartier first encountered the Iroquois on the St. Lawrence River (1534-35).

According to Richards incest regulations had originally (ca. 1624-35) extended indefinitely in a bilateral direction. This type of extension is equivalent to Murdock's (1949:303) Maximal Bilateral Extension of marriage regulations, in which marriage is forbidden "with any relative, however remote, with whom an actual genealogical connection can be traced in any line."

By 1724 this bilateral extension had receded from its wide application. In the matrilineal line the incest rule applied only to members of the matrilineal clan with whom an actual relationship could be traced. This would be a Minimal Matrilineal Extension of marriage regulations, "marriage prohibitions extended further in the female line than in at least some other, but not further than an actual genealogical connection can be traced" (Murdock 1949:303). In the male line the incest rule extended only to include relatives in the first degree and possibly in the second. As I have already indicated, by 1851 the incest tabus extended to include the matrilineal clan and formerly the moiety, but had completely receded from any application to patrilineal relatives.

SUMMARY

In the literature I have found statements of four different, but interrelated, incest rules of the Iroquois :

1. There is substantial agreement concerning the orthodox statement on Iroquois incest rules, that the incest rules applied to the maternal family, the clan, and the moiety, and that recently they have receded to apply only to the maternal family.

2. There are some statements which indicate a further extension of the above incest rules to include the father's clan.

3. Other statements mention an extension of the incest tabu to include members of the direct and collateral patrilineal line.

4. A bilateral extension of the incest tabu is described both for the early historic period Iroquois, and for the modern Iroquois communities.

DISCUSSION

The four incest rules stated in the literature are by no means mutually exclusive or antagonistic. They can all be reconciled by positing the bilateral extension of the incest tabu, which includes the three rules, as primary, and by indicating that the others are associated only with particular social, political, economic and religious groupings of kin selected from those kin found within the group formed by the bilateral extension of the incest tabu.

This, of course, places what has been considered to be the diagnostic feature of Iroquois social structure, matrilineality, into the position of being merely one aspect of a bilateral extension of incest tabus. It also rejects a theory of change in Iroquois incest tabus from bilateral to matrilineal to bilateral in a period of 350 years (Richards 1957).

My underlying theoretical assumptions hold that incest tabus are a human invention, creating relations and lines of descent among people by removing the competition for sex from among them. With this group of people freed from sexual competition kinship based social institutions can be formed to carry out essential functions of a human society. The incest tabu itself, however, has the sole function of creating a descent group and a body of relations among

whom sexual competition is removed. It has no necessary connection with any of the social institutions created using this group of people, social, economic, political or religious, except insofar as people to whom the incest tabu applies are found in the institutions. The institutions may select all or only a few of the people considered related through the presence of a particular incest tabu. Thus in our own society, with a rather restricted bilateral incest tabu, we have patrilineal inheritance of name, goods and title.

I suggest, therefore, that the incest tabu is primary in the social structure of any society and not a mere adjunct to other social institutions which I view as being constructed on the personnel released by the incest tabu. These persons may include all or only a few of those related through an incest tabu.

It is with reference to these theoretical assumptions that I believe the incest rules stated in the literature at our disposal may be reconciled. The basic or primary rule of incest among the Iroquois is that which is definitely documented for 1624-35 (Richards 1957) and 1961 (Shimony 1961), the Maximal Bilateral Extension of marriage regulations. This rule, I believe, has always been present in Iroquois social structure. However, during the intervening period, the presence of rather outstanding (to a patrilineal European) social, political, economic and religious institutions, the matrilineal clan and moiety, overshadowed the presence of bilateral incest tabus to most observers.

Some scholars have suggested that matrilineal clans and moieties were not original parts of Iroquois social structure but had diffused to the Iroquois or developed after white contact in response to a particular contact situation.

The situation included constant warfare with a necessity to recruit new members rapidly; pressure from Europeans to alter behaviour patterns; and observation by Indians of alternative procedures among the Europeans. Such circumstances combined with population loss from diseases, and pressure from increasing European settlement produced a condition of cultural stress wherein change was inevitable and even essential for social survival (Richards 1957:40).

“With such radical shifts in economy to trading and dependence on metal tools, we may expect comparable shifts in social structure

and political organization" (Fenton 1961:266). Quain, citing Fenton in a footnote indicated that moieties and clans may have diffused to the Iroquois (1937 159, footnote 4). Shimony also postulated that clans "are not a very old and therefore not a very integrated element of Iroquois culture..." (1961:32) as one of two explanations for the loose integration of clan and phratry divisions.

Only matrilineal relatives were selected to be members of these groups, clans and moieties. Yet the probability is that the bilateral incest tabu remained but was not recorded by ethnographers who were more concerned with these matrilineal institutions. This would explain the scattered references to the application of the incest tabu to patrilineal and bilateral relatives which I have noted.

It is only when the clans and moieties began to lose their functions toward the end of the nineteenth century that the exaggerated importance given to the incest tabus associated with them was reduced and the other incest tabus which had been present were again seen. Shimony (1961) has clearly stated the diminished importance of the clan and moiety in the regulation of marriage. Even when Morgan was working the moiety had lost its importance and the reduced importance of the clan can be traced through the work of Goldenweiser (1914a, 1914b), Barbeau (1917), Hewitt (1932), Quain (1937), Fenton (1951) and Voget (1953).

This, of course, suggests that works which interpret the recently noted bilateral extension of the incest tabu as something new in Iroquois kinship, resulting from changed socio-economic conditions, miss the main point. It is not new to the Iroquois, but only to the ethnologists who had failed to note it during the period of well developed matrilineal clans and moieties.

CONCLUSION

Statements concerning Iroquois incest rules, differing as they do through time, have been explained as examples of change in incest rules through time (Richards 1957, Voget 1953). Rather than concede that there had been, within a period of 350 years, a complete change in incest rules from bilateral to matrilineal to bilateral, I have offered an alternative explanation for the differing statements on Iroquois incest rules.

I have postulated that the Iroquois incest rule has always been bilateral in application. I have considered the clans and moieties as institutions with social, political, economic and religious functions which have been added to the Iroquois social system at some time and have selected their membership on a matrilineal basis, thus giving the impression that Iroquois society was matrilineal, with a matrilineal incest tabu. Prior to their addition and after their demise the incest rule was recorded as bilateral. While they were strong it was recorded as matrilineal with some observers noting variations. It is my contention that the clans and moieties distracted observers from recording the bilateral incest tabu and influenced them in recording only that aspect of it associated with them.

University of Iowa

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