

A Re-Appraisal of the Huron Kinship System

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RÉSUMÉ

La caractérisation ordinaire de la société Huron comme matrilineaire et matrilocale n'est pas en accord avec les données ethnohistoriques. Il a déjà été démontré que les Hurons avaient un modèle de résidence virilocale. Cet essai tente de montrer que dès le début ils n'avaient pas d'institutions pour faire s'accorder les situations incompatibles matrilineaire et virilocale et qu'en second lieu ils avaient une forte orientation agnatique. Cet essai conclut qu'il y a eu un changement d'une orientation utérine à une orientation agnatique en raison de l'adaptation des Hurons aux exigences du commerce des fourrures.

The Hurons have long been considered a matrilineal-matrilocal society. It is true that their economy was radically altered by the fur trade. Equally significant was the coming of the Jesuits. But these factors — plus the increasing scale and intensity of warfare with the Iroquois — do not seem to have had a measureable effect on the anthropologist's understanding of their socio-cultural system. One anthropologist who has dissented in part from the majority view is Cara Richards (1967). She demonstrates that it is most unlikely that the Hurons had a matrilocal residence pattern in the historic period. I agree with this proposition, but would further suggest that the forces that created a shift in residence patterns may have had additional implications for social organization.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the failure to perceive the possibility of this interaction has been a tendency to assume that the obvious cultural similarities between the Hurons and the Iroquois reflect social parallels. Accordingly, since the ethnogra-

phy of the Iroquois is more detailed it is a simple step to use it to fill in the details of Huron social organization. Thus, in a footnote to her discussion of the Huron descent system, Tooker (1967: 128 note 39) states that "there is very little material in the 17th century accounts that indicates the Hurons had matrilineal descent. As the Wyandot... and the Iroquois are matrilineal, the Hurons probably were also — the few statements in the early sources only tend to support this contention". Huron studies have suffered from this uncritical line of reasoning which equates Huron social organization with that of the Iroquois. Far from being comparative analysis, this is a highly dubious procedure given the fact that the socio-cultural system is a result of man's interaction with this environment, and that the ecological and historical circumstances of these two cultures differ (see Bidney 1967:xxx). The uniqueness of Huron social organization is one of the fundamental conclusions of this analysis.

In the introduction to her article, Cara Richards (1967:51) says that:

Although the Iroquois and the Huron have been considered exemplars of a matrilineal-matrilocal society in the anthropological literature, a review of the documents leads to the conclusion that the Huron and the Iroquois were not predominantly matrilocal, nor did they regularly practice local endogamy in the first half of the 17th century.

Having examined twenty-three instances in the sources in which residence patterns can be discriminated, she concludes that "the most customary residence pattern followed by the Huron and probably most Iroquois before their culture was seriously disturbed by European contact was virilocal with frequent village exogamy" (C. Richards, 56). These conclusions cannot be accepted without qualification. While my own research tends to substantiate those statements concerning residence patterns of the Huron, I do not agree with the context in which they are placed.

My reservations are based on both theoretical and empirical considerations. In theoretical terms, Cara Richards would seem to be arguing that while still primarily horticulturalists the Hurons were more likely to have a virilocal residence than they were during the period in which their society was seriously disrupted through French contact and the institutionalization of trade. Given

the women's control over resources in the first instance and men's control in the second, this is scarcely a plausible argument. On the contrary, horticulture is more likely to be correlated with matrilineal residence, while extensive trade networks would tend to presume a virilocal residence pattern (Aberle 1961). In short, I suggest that European contact was the efficient cause of the emergence of virilocality from a matrilineal-matrilocal base.

My empirical reservations are centred around the fact that Cara Richards (1967:51) presumably would contend that Huron social organization combined a matrilineal descent system with a predominantly virilocal residence pattern since she does not question statements to the effect of matrilineal inheritance made by Champlain, Sagard and the Jesuits. Given the presence of mediating institutions, such as the uterine group of the Ndembu or the avunculate as practiced among the Central Bantu, this is not an untenable hypothesis. With regard to the Huron, however, there is evidence to suggest that these aspects of social organization which allow for virilocality and matrilineity do not seem to be present. In addition, virilocality does not appear to have existed as an agnatic anomaly within an otherwise matriarchal structure, but rather it was part of a system that had a strong agnatic emphasis as a whole.

To document this thesis, I have divided my paper into two sections. In the first part, I shall attempt to substantiate my position through the ethno-historic accounts, while in the second part, I shall try to relate the structure that I have delineated to the process of change in Huronia between 1615 and 1649.

Evidence from ethno-historic accounts

It should be noted that it is not my intention in this section to divest the Huron of a matrilineal label only to replace it with a patrilineal one. I merely wish to indicate that the importance of the agnatic principle in Huron social organization during the first half of the 17th century is such as to make the characterization matrilineal-matrilocal untenable.

According to Audrey Richards, there are differing types of matrilineal kinship organization which vary according to the rela-

tive strength and form of "the marriage contract, the distribution of domestic authority, the residential units and the primary kinship alignments" (A.I. Richards 1950:211). Because information is inadequate with regard to many facets of Huron social organization, these criteria must be generalized somewhat if they are to be used to determine the relative strength of the matrilineal and agnatic principles. Hence, I shall speak merely of succession to office and inheritance of wealth, marriage and divorce, control of children, and kinship groupings.

During the period 1615-1649 — the period of documentation — Huron social organization had obvious matrilineal underpinnings. Champlain (vol. 3:140) observed that "... they have a custom which is this, namely, that the children never succeed to the property and honours of their fathers, being in doubt, as I have said, of their begetter, but indeed they make their successors and heirs the children of their sisters, from whom these are certain to be sprung". Sagard (1939:130) also mentions matrilineal inheritance, affixing to it the same rationale as Champlain. Father Brébeuf lends support to the earlier chroniclers by saying that the captains "reach this degree of honour, partly through election; their children do not usually succeed them but properly their nephews and grandsons" (Thwaites vol. 10: 233). Other statements in the Jesuit Relations would also tend to confirm matrilineal descent. "There have been near relatives such as nephews", according to Father Lalemant, "who at the death of their uncles did all they could to make them say that it was we who made them die... to solace themselves for the death of persons whom they tenderly cherish" (Thwaites vol. 17: 123). There is also the remark that a niece was a surer support for a man than were his own children (Thwaites vol 26:297). Following Huron kinship terminology, an uncle is the mother's brother and a niece is the sister's daughter, indicating that the customary social networks may have been focused on the uterine line (Kinietz 1965:92).

Although a basic, normative matriliney can be established, the question arises of its relationship to actual social behaviour.

With regard to succession to political office, insufficient attention has been given to Brébeuf's statement that "formerly only worthy men were Captains, and so they were called Enon-

decha, the same name by which they called the Country, Nation, district — as if a good chief and the Country were one and the same thing. But to-day they do not pay so much attention to the selection of their captains; and so they no longer give them that name..." (Thwaites vol. 10:232). As mentioned above, nephews and grandsons usually succeed to office but this is conditional on their having suitable qualifications, accepting the position and being accepted by the whole country (Thwaites vol. 10:233). These statements certainly do not prove the absence of an operative kinship principle in the succession to political office, but they do indicate the intervention of non-kinship factors beyond what the Hurons considered — or Champlain indicated — to be common or traditional in the functioning of their system. If I may draw an interpretation from these accounts, I would suggest that under the impact of the fur trade — an hypothesis to which I shall return later — the matrilineal system of succession had to a degree broken down and exogenous political contingencies were beginning to override the dictates of kinship. In this light, the second of Brébeuf's statements (Thwaites vol 10: 233) is misleading if taken out of the context of the first, (Thwaites vol. 10:232). That is, there are indications that the strength of the matrilineal principles was waning.

In any unilinear descent system one would expect that some property would go to the males and some to the females. Items such as hunting equipment and charms, for example, would probably be inherited by the sons, while cooking utensils would go to the daughters, barring the possibility that these goods are placed in the grave of the deceased. In terms of unilinear inheritance, therefore, one must deal with property that has considerable social and/or economic value. Huron villages were moved approximately every fifteen years (Sagard 1939:92) or about once a generation. Land was held in usufruct and every village household could farm as much land as it needed. Since the right to land devolved upon a person as a result of being a member of a household in a village and since the village moved every fifteen years or so, land does not figure in inheritance. The other major sector of the economy was connected to the fur trade. In this area there were rules of inheritance. According to Brébeuf, "several families have their own private trades, and he is considered Master

of one line of trade who was the first to discover it. The children share the rights of their parents in this respect as do those who bear the same name... it is in this that most of their riches consist" (Thwaites vol. 10:225). The statement "as do those who bear the same name" is somewhat ambiguous. During his lifetime, a man may go through a number of names selected from a large stock of traditional ones (Kinietz 1965:90). If he were to become famous, he could resurrect the name of a celebrated man and henceforth be known by it (Sagard 1939:209). Names, however, do not seem to follow any particular line of descent. With regard to the "riches" or trade goods, it is not clear whether they belonged to individuals, conjugal families, or compound households (Herman 1956:1045). Thus, although matriliney played a role in the succession to office — a role whose influence was diminishing — its importance seems negligible with respect to the most significant element in property rights, which was being inherited agnatically.

It was the custom at marriage for the groom to pay bride price. Champlain (vol. 3:138) says that:

The lover or suitor will give a present of some wampum necklaces, chains and bracelets; if the girl finds this to her taste she accepts his presents, whereupon the lover will come and sleep with her three or four nights without saying a word to her during that time... [if they are incompatible] she will leave her suitor, who will remain pledged for his necklaces and his other gifts, receiving in return only a little pastime.

Sagard (1939:122-123) adds significantly to this description. A man must gain the consent of the girl's parents before they may sleep together. The second part of the marriage ceremony consists of a feast with friends and relatives in attendance. Only after the giving of presents and the feast are the couple considered married. Father Le Mercier tried to arrange marriages between Frenchmen and Huron girls with some Huron captains. Le Mercier was asked:

What a husband would give his wife; that among the Hurons the custom was to give a great deal... whether the wife would have everything at her disposal, third, if the husband should desire to return to France, whether he would take his wife with him; and in case she remained, what he would leave her on his departure. Fourth, if the wife failed in her duty and the husband drove her away, what she

could take with her — the same if, of her own free will, the fancy seized her to return to her relatives (Thwaites vol. 24:19-21).

First of all, it is clear that as both Cara Richards (1967:56) and Kinietz (1965:98) point out, post-marital residence is assumed by all to be neolocal or virilocal. Secondly, only the parents of the girl take an active part, the rights or obligations of a corporate group are not referred to. Thirdly, the avunculate, if it is present, does not seem to be at all pronounced. The fact that the wife could take certain things upon divorce as well as being paid bride price, suggests that children were filiated to the father's group or at least to his household.

The Jesuits approved of Huron marriage on two counts: the prohibition of marriage in direct and collateral lines of descent, and monogamy (Thwaites vol. 8:119). Their objections centred about the high incidence of divorce (Sagard 1939:124; Thwaites vol. 10:63). Although marriage was customarily stable after the couple had had children, nevertheless divorce did occur and the custody of the children became a problem. Initially it was Sagard's opinion that upon divorce some agreement was made between the ex-spouses as to the care of the children. Usually, says Sagard (1939:125), they remained with the father. In a later work, he amended his statement to the effect that the parents shared the children — the boys staying with the father and the girls with the mother as they judged expedient (Kinietz 1965:98). Once divorced, they remarried as soon as possible (Tooker 1967:125). Unlike those matrilineal societies described by Audrey Richards, the mother's brother seems to exert little influence over his sister's children. They do not return to his village at puberty; nor does the father share his authority with the mother's brother, except possibly in regard to daughters; nor is there a uterine sibling group as among the Ndembu. Hence the supporting institutions one would expect in a matrilineal-virilocal society appear to be entirely lacking.

There is little data in the ethno-historic sources dealing with kinship groupings. What material there is is circumspect. On the basis of Bressani's account of gift giving in the *Breve Relation* (Thwaites vol. 38:241-243), Tooker feels that the Hurons may have had eight clans. Other writers give various total numbers

(Tooker 1967:55 note 82). Kintetz (1965:61-62) argues in a circular fashion that the existence of matriliney indicates the existence of clans and exogamy. Le Mercier mentions that each family had an emblem (Thwaites vol. 15:181) which may also give credence to the notion that some type of kinship grouping existed. While kinship groupings probably were present, a precise definition is tenuous. The four major groupings in Huronia — the Bear, Deer, Cord and Rock — are referred to in the French as *nations* which has been translated in English as clans. Lalemant in 1639, however, defines them as "four nations or rather four different collections or assemblages of grouped family stock — all of whom having a community of language, of enemies and of other interests, are hardly distinguishable except by their different progenitors, grandfathers and greatgrandfathers..." (Thwaites vol. 16:227). If this is strictly true then what we are dealing with are patrilineages of very little depth. A moment of reflection, however, will tell us that four lineages, each of which is three or four generations in depth, could not possibly encompass the population of Huronia numbering some 15,000 in 1639. In addition, Lalemant notes that "these four nations may increase their number of people by adopting other families or some may withdraw to form a new nation" (Thwaites vol. 16:227).

With regard to these four groups, Fenton (1940:177) says that "it is erroneous to call them clans, which they may have originally been. They have grown far beyond the proportions of any known Iroquois clan, and they were very probably divided into smaller intermarrying lineages." We would imagine that through time the processes of schism and accretion had reduced such entities as the Bear and the Rock nations to mere geographical groupings with the predominant clan or lineage in an area lending its name to that area (see Quain 1937:262).

The arrival of the Wenrorono in 1639 is one example, — albeit extreme — of this process of accretion and disruption. They settled primarily in one village, being readily accepted into the existing households (Thwaites vol. 17:25-29). Initially cultural differences would exist, but Lalemant reported that a process of blending acted to gradually remove these distinctions (Thwaites vol. 17:195). In addition to the incorporation of large tribal

groups and captive women, there was a certain amount of tribal exogamy. In all likelihood, tribal exogamy was largely restricted to the captains and the trading masters in order to make trade relations more secure. Father Le Jeune mentions that the wife of the captain of Ossossoné "was of a strange nation and spoke a language that I did not understand so well..." (Thwaites vol. 13: 199). It is also mentioned that one Huron man had relatives among the Petun, while another had relatives among the Neutrals (Thwaites vol. 20:59; vol. 25:27). In view of this process of accretion it seems likely that the clan ceased to function as a local corporate group and was replaced by the village and the village council.

In support of this hypothesis, we might note that it was the village council which attended to matters of reparation, trade, participation in the multi-village feasts (e.g. the Feast of the Dead) and defence. Every year a village council was convened to decide how many should remain to guard the village (Kinietz 1965:60) and how many should fish, trade and go on raiding parties. In time of war, captains went from village to village procuring the support of men for war parties (Tooker 1967:29). It was the village council's decision whether to fortify or abandon the village in the face of an enemy attack (Sagard 1939:156) and it was also their decision to establish a new village (Thwaites vol. 10:237). "In 1636, the Bear Band (nation) was split by dissension due to the alleged disregard of the villages at the band level" (Trigger 1961:19). Brébeuf mentions the "Assembly or Council where all the Old Men and Chiefs of the Nation of the Bear met to deliberate on their great feast of the dead..." (Thwaites vol. 10:27). Attendance at this council was entirely voluntary as was adherence to any decision that might be made. In fact, five of the villages of the Bear Nation did refuse to participate in the Feast of the Dead at Ossossoné (Thwaites vol. 10:279). In matters of reparation, if one Huron were to commit a crime against another, it was the village of the criminal that had to pay reparations, not his lineage or clan (Thwaites vol. 15:157). Later in this period, Huron villages were racked by the rift between pagans and Christians which caused profound and fatal divisions in Huron society (Trigger 1961:38-40). The evidence points to the fact that it was the village and not the

clan that attracted the loyalties of the Huron. Again this is a situation unlike that found in the material presented by either Audrey Richards or Schneider and Gough. The clan is of little if any importance as an organizing principle. Moreover, the only description we have of a grouping approximating a clan is one delineating a structure of little depth and following the agnatic line. If the matri-clan was functioning, it was beyond the notice of the Jesuits.

The Jesuits were not simply passive observers. Their role in the destruction of Huronia has been described by Trigger (1961). Among other things, they acted to de-emphasize whatever authority the matriline may have had. The Jesuits in their missions worked through the males: "We pay especial attention to the Old Men inasmuch as they are the ones who determine and decide all matters and everything is ordered by their advice" (Thwaites vol. 10:15). Lalemant regarded the men as the heads of the families (Thwaites vol. 17:33). "Formerly, each one [of the councillors] brought his fagot to put on the fire; this is no longer the custom, the women of the Cabin take this responsibility; they make the fires, but they do not warm themselves thereat, going outside to give place to Messieurs the Councillors" (Thwaites vol. 10:251). The implication throughout is that the men they are speaking of are the husbands of the women. In all their dealings with the Huron, the Jesuits do not mention the authority or degree or persuasiveness embodied in the matriline.

On the basis of available information it would be presumptuous to identify the Huron as either matrilineal or patrilineal. Corporate groups are extremely difficult to define and rights and obligations within groups are even less apparent. Since the Huron conform to the ideal matriarchal society in but one respect and in that only partially, namely, succession to office, the matrilineal-matrilocal classification becomes untenable. Equally untenable is a patrilineal hypothesis, for despite Lalemant's description of an ostensibly patrilineal grouping, these groups appear to act no more corporately than the former, and in addition, they have little depth. Huron society between 1615 and 1649 may best be characterized as simply having a strong agnatic bias evident in inheritance of property, custody of children and kinship group-

ings. I do not feel that the data is of sufficient quality to support more particular conclusions.

Social Change in Huronia: an Hypothesis

The re-analysis of the Huron kinship system has implications for the study of change within Huronia. In general, change in the economic sector of a society has implications for other facets of social organization as well. While this theoretical statement finds wide support among anthropologists, its applicability to the study of the Hurons has been largely minimized. Trigger (1961: 28, 34) says of the period 1609-1640 — the general period dealt with in this paper — that "neither expanding trade and the influx of new goods, nor the presence of French traders appears to have effected major changes in the Huron social structure or in their social behavior." and "At the end of this period, the basic ideology and social behavior of the people remained virtually unchanged". Trigger, however, assumes that the Huron were matrilineal and practiced both matrilocal and patrilocal residence. On the other hand, I have indicated that Huron social organization had a definite agnatic bias. This emphasis on the agnatic principle and the establishment of the village as a governing precept in conjunction with the rapid expansion of the fur trade, demonstrates that indeed there was change and that in fact Huron society from 1615-1649 represents a reaction to a crisis situation. It is unfortunate in this regard that no time scale for change in kin-based societies has been constructed. Trigger supposes that all significant changes occurred in the period 1640-1648. I would argue that changes had taken place prior to 1615 as a result of the introduction of the European trade goods and that the period 1640-1648 merely represents an intensification of these processes following the loss of half of Huronia's population during the epidemics of 1636-1639. The large number of converts to Christianity in 1640's is a reflection of the desire for security during a time of increasing cultural incoherence.

The fur trade was of great importance to the Hurons. Since European trade goods appeared about 1600 (Tooker 1967:25), the parameters of the trade had been established prior to the arrival

of the French in 1615. In 1646, the Hurons arrived at Montreal with more furs than the French had merchandise to buy (Hunt 1960:83). According to Trigger (1961:33), "friendship associated with trade was expressed in the form of fictional kinship." Thus Sagard was referred to by kinship terms (Sagard 1939:71), and the Jesuits reported that Huron wanted them to participate in the Feast of the Dead as Ossossoné so that the Huron could claim them as relatives (Thwaites vol. 10:311). The idea of friendship and fictional kin ties was an integral part of Huron trade relations and thus became a mechanism for managing their relations with people outside Huronia (Trigger 1961).

Another indication of the importance of the trade was the relative increase in the volume of trade. The first Huron nation to come in contact with French goods — the Rock Nation — found it could not handle the trade itself and hence allowed the other Huron nations to participate in it. Moreover, the great quantities of furs brought to Montreal in 1646 were collected after the population had fallen from 30,000 in 1634 to 15,000 in 1640 (Tooker 1967:11). The extent of the Huron trade can be measured by the fact that Huron became the *lingua franca* of the southern Great Lakes area (Sagard 1939:86).

Correlated with the increased importance of the trade was an aggravation of status differences. Gift giving was the custom at curing ceremonies and ideally anything that the person who was sick dreamed of and asked for should be given. Usually, however, only when the individual was of some importance did it become a community project (Herman 1956:1052). During the feast following a cure, the best morsels were given to the most notable and to those who had made the best show in giving valuables to the sick person (Herman 1956:1054). According to Bressani, "... there were ... among them both poor and rich, noble and plebian" (Thwaites vol. 38:247). Brébeuf also mentions divisions in wealth (Thwaites vol. 28:51). "It seems as if they vied with one another according to their wealth and as to the desire for glory and of appearing solicitous for the public welfare urges them to do on like occasions" (Thwaites vol. 28:51). Sagard (1939:204) writes that "there are even some poor sick folk who are carried about, hoping to get what they dreamed of..." The

implication is that the poor were of little consequence. We may surmise that persons of wealth had some influence in village affairs. Brébeuf's description of the selection of captains indicated that the giving of gifts played a large part in selecting a particular person (Thwaites vol. 10:231). The fact that trading masters could impose a form of duty on people moving through their territory (Thwaites vol. 10:224) demonstrates that persons of wealth did in fact have the basis of power. Thus, we can be reasonably certain that the polarization of status differentiation was a function of the appearance of trading masters and that status differentiation had political implications.

Since there are no data on the Huron prior to 1615, the argument for the correlation of social and economic change must rest, to some extent, upon analogy. Speck (1923:220, 225) studied the Oka Iroquois near Montreal and was struck by "the encroachment of the paternal line of descent in the inheritance of land for both agricultural and hunting purposes. ... The Oka seem to have been no less agricultural than other Iroquois, the difference... lying chiefly in their combined dependence on hunting, trapping and cultivating of the soil". Speck regarded this peculiarity to be a result of cultural diffusion from the Algonquins. Such an explanation lacks casual force however, since a close proximity of cultures need not result in diffusion. I would reinterpret the Oka data, in the light of Schneider and Gough's work, as being an instance of the correspondance between ecological and social change and tentatively suggest that it represents a parallel with the Hurons.

In conclusion, I propose that the Huron data fit very well into the theoretical outline for the collapse of matrilineal kinship systems constructed by Audrey Richards and by Schneider and Gough. Audrey Richards' analysis demonstrates that virilocality can lay the basis for the subversion of the authority of the matrilineal descent group. Aberle adds that matriliney is likely to disappear if one or more of a number of conditions is present: 1) an increased importance of large scale co-ordination of male labour; 2) an increased importance of divisible and reproducible property in the hands of men; 3) male control over the major tools of production; and 4) the regulation of economic and political life through non-kinship devices (Aberle 1961:670).

That a number of these conditions apply to Huron is not so much a threat to the matri-lineage as a dismissal of its existence in any corporate sense. It is my conclusion therefore, that a multiplicity of ecological factors and historical events, beginning with the introduction of the fur trade, combined to radically alter Huron social organization. Throughout the period 1615-1649, it was undergoing rapid and sustained changes which tended to re-inforce one another. The social disruption that appears in the ethno-historic sources can be thus better interpreted as a process of adaptation to a bewildering set of pressures.

Finally, I would argue that since the shift from matriliney to patriliney was never completed, the Hurons ended their occupation of Huronia in a state of "perpetual transition". Thus any attempt to fit Huron society into a simplistic matrilineal/patrilineal dichotomy is misleading. What is necessary is a model of the intermediate position.

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