Tribalism among the St. Regis Mohawks: A Search for Self-Identity[1]

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RÉSUMÉ

La récente résurrection du tribalisme chez les Mohawks St-Régis de l'état de New York et du Canada est expliquée à la lumière de l'arrière-plan historique et des événements récents. L'auteur arrive à la conclusion que les pressions de l'acculturation ont renforcé et renouvelé le tribalisme chez ce groupement plutôt que de l'avoir affaibli.

During the past two years there has been a resurgence of "tribal" activity on the part of the St. Regis Mohawks of New York State and Canada. This paper will attempt to explore the nature of this tribalism.

Tribalism, as defined by Landy (1958:251) in his study of the Tuscarora Indians, refers to the "...self-identity of a group or society with a common territory, common traditions, and common values and interests." The notion of social self-identity is not made explicit in this definition and thus there is the need for specificity. Social identity, as defined by Lurie (1968:297), is

> The total and distinctive clustering of roles, cultural inventory, and social system experienced by a group and derived from the group's own viable historical tradition of changes through time.

Given this definition of self-identity, tribalism may be viewed as the process whereby a social group meeting the conditions set

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forth above — common territory, traditions, values, and interests — goes about establishing its self-identity. Tribalism can be viewed as a socio-cultural process with specific, historical, antecedent conditions.

The St. Regis Mohawks occupy a 24,000 acre tract of land along the St. Lawrence River at the juncture of New York State, Ontario, and Quebec. The community is bisected by the 45th parallel, which not only serves as the international boundary line between the United States and Canada, but also, quite effectively, divides the Reservation into two political entities. Located north of the international boundary, and further divided by provincial boundaries, are the Iroquois of St. Regis, the official designation for the Canadian segment of the community. The portion of the community that lies within New York State is known as the St. Regis Mohawk Indian Reservation.

The history of the St. Regis Mohawks is rather vague at times. The community was founded in 1755 by the French as a place to which families from the overcrowded mission at Caughnawaga could emigrate. More significant is the fact that the mission was to serve as a place where Mohawk converts to Catholicism could find refuge. The community also served, along with the mission at Oswegatchie (Ogdensburg, N.Y.) and Caughnawaga, as a buffer zone against English attempts on Montreal.

Historical documents, along with oral tradition, reveal that the early population at St. Regis was of varied ethnic origin. The Caughnawaga mission, founded in 1667, consisted of Iroquois converts from New York State, most of whom were Mohawks. However, there were also many Onondagas and Oneidas residing at the mission along with a few non-Indians who had been taken captive during the border raids into New England during Queen Anne's War. According to oral tradition, among the first families to settle at St. Regis were those of two white brothers who had been taken captive during a Caughnawaga raid on Groton, Massachusetts in 1707 The legend relates how the two brothers were taken to Caughnawaga and raised as Indians; here they later

married the daughters of two chiefs and moved to St. Regis when the community was established.

The emigrant families from Caughnawaga brought with them to St. Regis, a Christianized composite Iroquois culture. While it is difficult to ascertain how many families came from Mohawk Valley to settle at the new mission, it is most likely that many did come and they brought with them a "Mohawk" culture. The syncretizing of these two cultural systems would eventually emerge as a distinct "tribal" culture.

St. Regis was faced with an identity problem from its inception. Since the community was founded by the French, one would expect all the St. Regis warriors to have fought for the French during the Seven Years War. Ten warriors from St. Regis, however, accompanied Lord Amherst and the British in their assault on Montreal in 1760. The family of one individual who accompanied the English were still subject to local harassment some seven years later.

When the mission at Oswegatchie was taken by the British in 1760, the already composite community of St. Regis absorbed a considerable portion of the mission's predominantly Onondaga population. Up to this point the population at St. Regis, although made up of several different ethnic groups, was predominantly Iroquois. However, in 1759 the Abenaki settlement on the St. Francis River, some sixty miles below Montreal, was destroyed by Roger's Rangers and the remnants of the settlement dispersed to many areas. A considerable number of Abenakis moved to St. Regis where they were given refuge. Although their mission was rebuilt in 1767, the Abenakis remained at St. Regis for at least another seven years before returning to their own village. While the historical record is vague at this point, many St. Regis families today preserve their Abenaki heritage through oral tradition.

In spite of this ethnic conglomeration, the Mohawk language, somewhat modified, emerged as the language of the St. Regis community. Mohawk, or more properly 'Iroquois,' customs dominated the cultural scene, although modified by the influence of the Jesuits and other missionaries. The clan system reveals the influence of this multi-ethnic background. While the Mo-

hawks had only three clans — the Turtle, Wolf, and Bear — the St. Regis Mohawks have four major clans — the Turtle, Wolf, Bear and Snipe; one also finds individuals who claim membership in the Deer clan. Both the Snipe and Deer are Onondaga clans.

When the Canadian Iroquois, notably those of Caughnawaga, fought against their non-Christian brethren in 1684, they were renounced by the members of the Iroquois Confederacy. During the ensuing French and Indian wars that were fought for the next 175 years, the Christian Iroquois, including Caughnawaga, Lake of the Two Mountains, and, later, St. Regis, fought on the side of their benefactors, the French. Thus, St. Regis shared with Caughnawaga the role of outcast as far as the Six Nations or Iroquois Confederacy was concerned.

Sometime during the eighteenth century the French organized a loose confederacy of their Indian allies known as the Seven Indian Nations of Canada. After the breakup of the Oswegatchie mission a council was held, and it was agreed that St. Regis would become the seventh nation to fill the vacancy. The Seven Nations were, in reality, nothing more than a loose religious confederation; in each place the Catholic Church had established a mission. St. Regis continued as a member of this confederation until, because of the lack of any unifying bond except for the Church, it eventually became defunct. All of the treaties between St. Regis and New York State were negotiated as a member of the Seven Nations.

After the Revolutionary War ended, the Mohawks, led by Joseph Brant, left New York for lands along the Grand River in Ontario, and the St. Regis Mohawks, along with the Caughnawagas, made a claim on behalf of the Seven Nations for these lands. New York State rejected this claim on the grounds that the title to these lands did not belong to either St. Regis or the Seven Nations. The chiefs at St. Regis made several more attempts to try to reach a settlement with New York State and each time they were given the same answer. However, on March 5, 1795, the New York legislature passed an act making it lawful for the

Governor or his agents "...to make such agreements and arrangements with the Indians of St. Regis... respecting their claims to any lands within this State... (Hough 1853:133)." In 1787 the Mohawks who had earlier moved to the Grand River sold their remaining lands in New York, but this sale was declared void by New York State.

On May 23, 1796, the St. Regis Indians, acting on behalf of the Seven Nations of Canada, began negotiating with New York State. The Seven Nations claimed that although the Mohawks surrendered their title, they, the Seven Nations, had *never* relinquished theirs. On May 31, 1796 the matter was finally settled when the delegation from St. Regis accepted the New York State offer of a six square mile Reservation and a small annuity to be shared with Caughnawaga (Hough 1853).

Under the terms of the Treaty of Paris, which formally ended the Revolutionary War, the International boundary was drawn along the 45th parallel. Although the St. Regis community was divided into two entities, both sides of reservation were treated as one distinct tribal unit at this time. In 1802 the New York legislature appointed three chiefs to act as trustees for the New York segment of the tribe, thus creating a dual political system. There had already been in existence a system whereby twelve chiefs were appointed for life by the matriarchs of the four major clans.

The approach of the War of 1812 caused some apprehension over the boundary at St. Regis. Most of the community endeavoured to remain neutral; however, many rallied to the American cause. The British stationed a garrison at St. Regis village and pressed many of the Indians into their service. The international boundary was redrawn in 1817 and the two segments of the reservation became separate political entities.

After the War of 1812, the American party at St. Regis contended that the Caughnawagas, who had rallied around the British, should be cut off from further annuity payments. The New York State authorities felt that this would be a breach of the 1796 settlement and continued to pay the annuity to both Caughnawaga and St. Regis until 1841. Since that time, the annuity has been paid only to those individuals who are registered members of the American party of the tribe. This apparently, was the

end of the Seven Nations of Canada as a functional social institution.

The community was now, more than ever, spit into two distinct political entities, although it remained a single socio-cultural unit. The creation of the Indian Act by the Canadian Parliament in 1876 served only to amplify this political cleavage. The Indian Act provided for the registration of band members according to patrilineal descent. According to this legislation, an Indian was defined as someone who was entitled to be registered on the band membership list; all others were not legally Indians in the eyes of the Canadian Government. This meant that a Canadian Indian woman born at St. Regis who married an Indian man, born on the American side of the reservation, was no longer legally an Indian in Canada. If such a union took place — and many of them did and still do — the woman lost her Indian status and the husband, if he chose to reside with his wife's family, had no legal status in Canada whatsoever, and the children of such a marriage were not considered Indians; this is still true today. On the other hand, if a non-Indian woman marries a Canadian Indian man, she and her children are accorded the legal status of Canadian Indians.

In 1888, the St. Regis Indians were admitted to the New York version of the Iroquois Confederacy as successors to the Mohawks who vacated their place as the "eastern door-keepers" when they moved to Ontario. While it is not clear why St. Regis was admitted to the Confederacy, it has been suggested that since the United States had made treaties with the Five Nations (and later with the Six Nations), it was necessary that there be a "Mohawk nation" in the Confederacy (Converse 1908). Nine chiefs were selected according to the Iroquois constitution, although two of these chiefs were also trustees of the American party of the tribe (USDI 1894:475).

The coming of the Six Nations government, although it had no legal recognition, served as a focal point around which the community could unite. At this time, shortly before the turn of the twentieth century, there were three political systems in operation at St. Regis. Two of these systems, the twelve life chiefs on the Canadian side and the three elected trustees on the New

York side, had legal power. The third system, that of the Six Nations, had no legal power. In 1898, the Canadian government planned an election to be held at St. Regis village in Canada, for the purpose of electing chiefs according to the provisions of the Indian Act. The government was anxious to see the life chief system replaced by a "more democratic one," but the people objected to this encroachment upon their rights. Despite this opposition, the government, through the use of force, held an election in 1904 in which only a handful of individuals participated.

The community remained divided, politically and socially, for many years to come. In the late 1930's, the Handsome Lake Code or Longhouse Religion came to St. Regis where it picked up a small following. By the 1950's the Longhouse had grown in both political and religious stature and was recognized as a functioning institution. Many veterans of World War II returned to find this nativistic institution able to satisfy their need for establishing a self-identity. Although the Longhouse remained devoid of any legal power, it was able to attract a sizeable following in the community.

The expropriation of St. Regis land for the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway in the late 1950's again stirred the emotions of the people. During this period, the feeling of tribalism ran high in this and other Iroquois communities in both the United States and Canada. One individual from St. Regis went so far as to reclaim the Mohawk lands in the Mohawk Valley by erecting a longhouse on some vacant farm land (Wilson 1960). The young boys at St. Regis could be seen sporting "Mohawk" haircuts and many people joined various groups to learn more about their cultural heritage. After the Seaway was completed, things again quieted down and the men returned to pursue their trade as workers in high steel.

Recently the feeling of tribalism has been intensified at St. Regis. The longhouse is again becoming popular and, in the light of the civil rights issues confronting society as a whole, the search for an ethnic identity is being pursued with new vigour.

Several events involving the St. Regis Mohawks serve to illustrate this renewed interest in an ethnic identity. Economic

issues are not paramount at St. Regis. There has been a long and healthy tradition of "ironworking" — work on high steel construction gangs. Most of the males, as long as they are physically able, have tried their hand at ironwork. Local 440 of the Ironworkers Union maintains a union hall in Hogansburg, New York (on the Reservation). Jobs are readily available except for the brief period of inclement weather during the winter months; the pay is good, averaging about six dollars an hour with an opportunity for overtime. Two aluminium plants, Alcoa and Reynolds, and the Chevrolet plant in nearby Massena, New York, also provide many jobs for the residents of the Reservation community, both American and Canadian.

The issues are definitely socio-cultural in nature: 1) the long standing legal classification of the St. Regis Mohawks as either Canadian or American; 2) problems of passage across the international boundary; 3) inadequate school programs in the area of American Indian studies; 4) the constant fear of losing all of their "Indian" cultural heritage; and 5) the relative ineffectiveness of the reservation governments.

Ever since the passage of the Canadian Indian Act in 1876, including its subsequent revisions and replacements, the St. Regis Mohawks have faced the problem of legal identity. As mentioned above, this legislation has effectively divided the community into two political entities, according to which country — United States or Canada — an individual "belongs." The feeling being generated at St. Regis is that the community is neither American nor Canadian, but more properly "North American Indian," a claim based upon the fact that the Mohawks were part of the Six Nations Confederacy and were never conquered by either the French, English or their successors. The people at St. Regis are quick to cite many treaties between England and the Six Nations. This problem of "National identity" is related to the duty free passage rights as outlined by the "Jay Treaty" of 1794.

The Mohawks claim that their right to duty-free passage across the border is guaranteed by Article III of the Jay Treaty which states that:

> No Duty on Entry shall ever be levied by either party on peltries brought by land, or inland navigation into the said territories respectively,

> nor shall the Indians passing or repassing with their own proper goods and effects of whatever nature, pay for the same any impost or duty whatever. But goods in bales or other large packages unusual among the Indians shall not be considered as goods belonging bona fide to Indians.

For many years the Indians at St. Regis, especially those on the Canadian side of the Reservation, have been permitted to bring groceries and other personal effects across the border without having to pay any duty. However, in 1956, the Supreme Court of Canada, in *Francis vs. the Queen,* ruled that Indians were not exempt from payment of duty (Hawthorn 1966:219-220). The issue at St. Regis is not solely a legal one; an overwhelming majority of the St. Regis Indians work in the United States and find it more convenient — and economical — to purchase groceries and other personal effects in the United States.

After the *Francis* case, things quieted down until a few weeks before Christmas 1968, when the Canadian immigration officials began, once again, to demand duty on items purchased in the United States. On December 18, 1968, more than 200 residents of the Reservation gathered on Cornwall Island, Ontario (reservation land) and blocked the roadway to the International Bridge across the St. Lawrence River. Forty-eight individuals, all but two of whom were residents of the Reservation, were arrested by Cornwall municipal police for violation of Section 110, subsection A of the Criminal Code of Canada — obstruction. The blockade and the subsequent arrests brought attention, through the news media, to the Mohawks' problem and aroused a new feeling of tribalism. People rallied around the Longhouse and some of the younger members emerged as spokesmen during this period. However, the Longhouse is a religious institution, albeit nativistic, and the majority of the Reservation is Christian. Nevertheless, a sense of unity emerged from this action; Catholic, Methodist, and Longhouse, American and Canadian, Progressive and Traditionalist, all sat down together and organized a "people's committee" to deal with current problems concerning the entire Reservation community.

These events were foreshadowed by a school boycott carried out earlier in the year in protest against education policy. Although the Mohawks who are enrolled on the tribal list in New York State are considered citizens of the United States, the local

school board, acting in accord with the New York State Education law, has denied the Indians the right to vote in school elections.

In the spring of 1968, the Indians learned that the New York State Legislature had appropriated $1,750,000 for the construction of a new school. The children of the New York residents of the reservation attended an all Indian school built during the 1930's on reservation land in Hogansburg, New York. Neighbouring white children, although they might live across from the Mohawk school, were bussed to a new modern facility some fifteen miles away. It was near this school that the new Indian school was to be built. The Mohawks wanted to retain their own school and to have a new facility built near it to alleviate the overcrowded conditions. Angered over the fact that they were neither told nor consulted about the new school plans, the Chief of the American party of the tribe called for a boycott of classes in the local schools. All of the Indian children, except for graduating seniors, were to be kept out of classes until certain demands were met.

The boycott was orderly and effective. The presence of legal counsel greatly speeded up the capitulation on the part of the school board. The Indians were granted the right to vote in the upcoming school elections for both a bond issue concerning the construction of a new school and the general school board election. The campaign to defeat the bond issue and to elect an Indian to the school board were both hastily organized and, in both cases, the Indians lost. The right to vote in the school board election is in conflict with the State Education law, and a long court battle ensued. In April of 1969 the New York legislature amended the Education law, giving the Indians living on reservations in New York State the right to vote in local school board elections; this paved the way for more local control over reservation schools.[2]

One of the major grievances against the schools was the lack of any programs dealing with the cultural history of the American Indians. To remedy this situation, the Longhouse began teaching

[2] At the time of writing, this bill was awaiting the signature of the Hon. Nelson Rockefeller, Governor of the State of New York.

classes on Mohawk language, culture, and history. At first these classes were taught in the Longhouse, then they were moved to the Catholic Community Center and finally into the schools. Recently, an order was issued by the Indian Agent (in Cornwall, Ontario) to cease teaching Mohawk culture at the Cornwall Island school because the teachers were not certified. The results of this action led to a new wave of protests by many residents of the Reservation; many harsh charges have been leveled at the Canadian Band Council for not supporting the teaching of Mohawk culture and history. Tribalism is again running high and the people are talking about an identity. A recent letter to the Band Council asks: "how can anyone deny one's own people their culture and their own being?" The authors of the letter express their fear of being culturally assimilated; they maintain that

> ... the culture, if taught in the schools, will neutralize the objective of education of attempting to assimilate the Indian into the mainstream of middle class society by helping the Indian to keep his identity[3].

Another way of expressing the fear of total cultural assimilation into "middle class society" is the lack of involvement in local tribal and national elections on both the American and Canadian sides of the Reservation. The majority of the people choose not to exercise their right to vote for Band Councillors on the Canadian side and elected Chiefs on the American side. More significant, as a manifestation of tribalism, is the lack of participation in federal elections. The main reason offered for the failure to exercise the franchise is that by voting in the white man's elections, the Indian acknowledges that he is either a Canadian or an American; this would be contrary to the idea that the Iroquois, including the Mohawks, are a sovereign people. Another reason offered is that the franchise is the first step towards taxation. The feeling against the exercise of the franchise runs high at St. Regis. Although there are some two to three hundred individuals who are eligible to vote in the United States elections, only some fifty or sixty are registered; and there is no way to tell how many of these people actually voted in the past presidential election. On the Canadian side of the Reservation the refusal to participate

[3] *Watertown Daily Times,* April 21, 1969, p. 22.

in the franchise is more pronounced. In the past Canadian federal election, less than ten residents of the Reserve exercised their right to vote. Recently, when a band councillor participated in an Ontario provincial election, an attempt was made to induce him to resign his position. A circular was distributed by an organization called the "International Committee of Mohawk Arts and Traditions." The circular quoted by Hawthorn (1966:260) stated:

> When Indians vote, they can no longer be a Sovereign Nation... The Redman is morally obliged not to vote in the federal and provincial elections... It is to be deplored that a covey of irresponsible Redmen, sick with racial inferiority complex, shall flock to the polls and *give up their National Identity and Sovereignty* forever!

The current attitude at St. Regis, coupled with the community's common territory, traditions, values, and interests all point to an increased feeling of tribalism. All of the current social action movements at St. Regis can be viewed as reinforcing the self-identity of the Mohawk community. A small mimeographed newspaper called the "Akwesasne News" appeared on the scene in fall of 1968. Most people who live on the Reservation speak Mohawk and when asked for the word for a Mohawk Indian, usually reply *akwesasronon,* "people of St. Regis." St. Regis is called *akwesasne,* "the place where the partridge drums." It is only the Longhouse people who refer to themselves as *kaniekehaka,* "people of the flint;" the original designation for the Mohawks.

An important issue raised by Landy in his discussion of Tuscarora tribalism is whether or not tribalism can survive the pressures of acculturation. At Tuscarora, Landy (1958:251) felt that the "pressures of acculturation continue to weaken the cement of ... tribalism." However, I think that I would be on safe ground to say that the reverse is true at St. Regis; the pressures of acculturation, rather than weakening the feeling of tribalism, have served to reinforce and renew Mohawk tribalism. It appears as though the St. Regis Mohawks are closer now to *establishing* a self-identity than they have ever been before.

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