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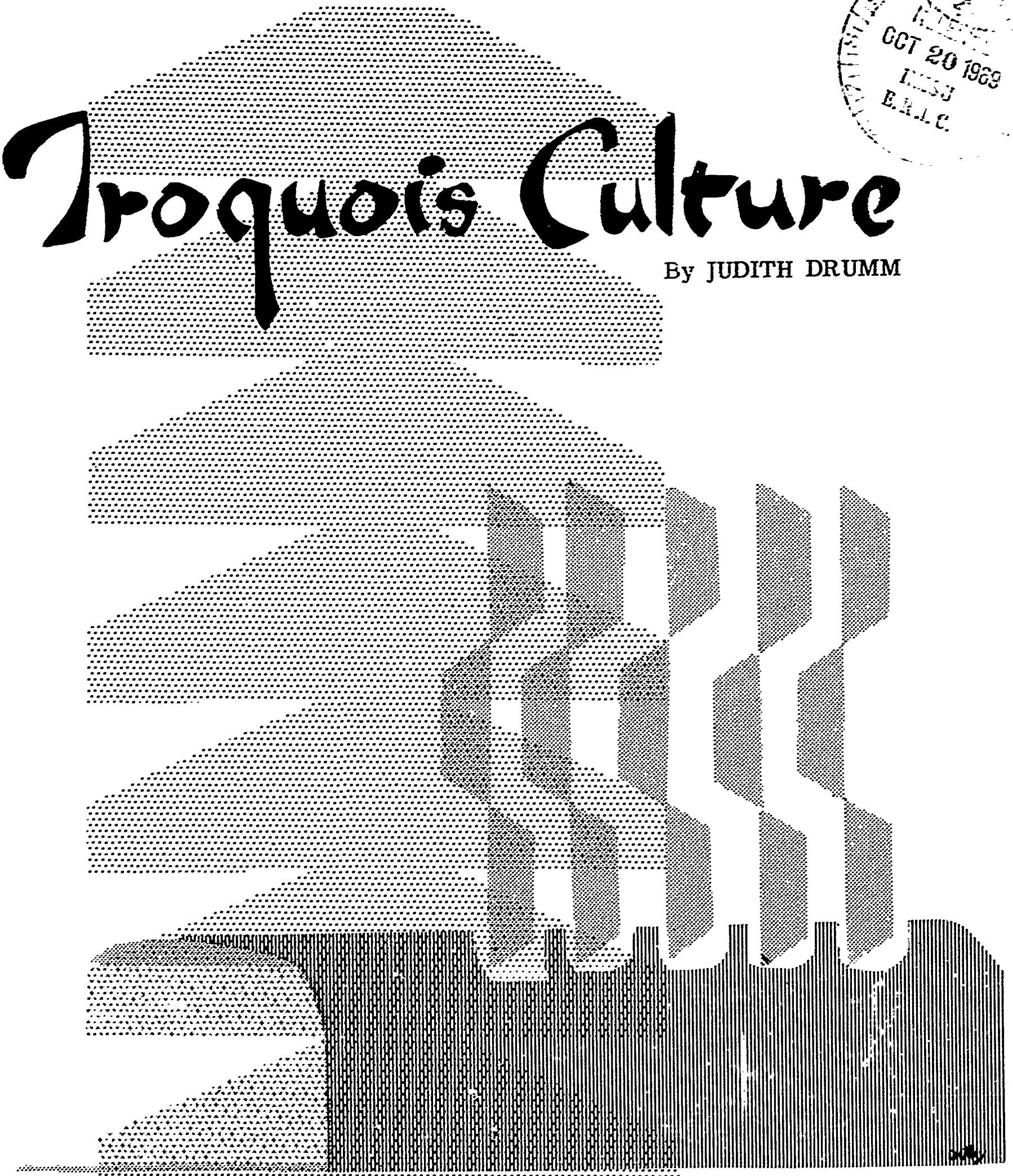
Iroquois society was characterized by several features. Among these were the position of social responsibility occupied by women in their matrilineal and matrilocal society. The basic social unit was the large matrilineal family and individual loyalty extended from this to clan, to tribe, and finally to the Iroquois League. This intertribal political organization was the major accomplishment of the Iroquois. The League, in turn, made the Iroquois a decisive force in the fur trade and in the conflicts incident to the European colonization of Northeastern North America. Religion was intimately involved in all areas of Iroquois life. Dreaming was an accepted method of communication with the spirit world. These aspects of the Iroquois culture are presented in an attempt to make the Iroquois and their society more comprehensible to teachers and to all interested adults. (Author/CM)

Iroquois Culture

By JUDITH DRUMM



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Preface

To many people, the term "American Indian" evokes an image of skin-clad aborigines seated around a fire making arrowheads, pots and baskets. These objects, displayed in homes and museums, are often the only apparent evidence of the existence of the Indian. For this reason, adults often have difficulty visualizing the Indian in any context aside from that of his handicrafts. Yet these artifacts are products not only of an individual's skill, but of his entire culture. Some of the numerous American Indian cultures were as complex as our own.

This article describes some aspects of the culture of one group of Indians, the Iroquois, in an attempt to make them and their society more comprehensible to teachers and to other interested adults. The discussion is related to the exhibits in the Clark Hall of the State Museum in the State Education Building at Albany. I am indebted to Charles Gillette and William N. Fenton of the State Museum and Science Service for their invaluable advice and criticism.

IROQUOIS CULTURE

by

Judith Drumm

In 1600, when Europeans first entered the area, the Iroquois Indians occupied most of central New York east of Genesee river. The term Iroquois is used here to refer to the five tribes, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca, who composed the Iroquois League. The Iroquois lived in palisaded upland villages near small streams. The women tended gardens outside the village while the men hunted and fished. Elsewhere in the world, the term "prehistoric" refers to the period of human society before written history. In New York and in northeastern North America, however, "prehistoric" is used to refer to the period before European contact; that is, before 1600 A.D. "Historic" includes the period after that contact.

The name "Iroquois" possibly means "real adder", a term applied to the Iroquois by their Algonquin neighbors who were not overly fond of them. The Iroquois called themselves the "Ongwanonhsioni", "we longhouse builders." The longhouse was both the long barrack-like bark house which sheltered related families and the symbolic structure of the League which sheltered the five Iroquois tribes. (See Fig. 1, Educational Leaflet #7.) The League, a loose confederation, was founded, according to one Iroquois legend, a generation before the arrival of the whites by Deganawidah, a Huron prophet. He was assisted by Hiawatha, who had nothing except his name in common with the hero of Longfellow's poem. Deganawidah, as one legend goes, traveled in a glistening white stone canoe, from his birthplace near Kingston, Ontario to central New York, the territory of the warring tribes. He argued with various chiefs unsuccessfully until he came to the land of the Mohawk, near the lower falls of the Mohawk river, at the present site of Cohoes. There Deganawidah attempted to explain his message, The Good News of Peace and Power. The people were receptive but the chiefs hesitated. Finally they agreed to accept the Good News if Deganawidah would submit to a test. He was asked to climb a tall tree by a falls, and after he had done so, the tree was felled over the cliff. When the Mohawk returned the next day at sunrise to assess the damage, Deganawidah was seated beside his fire. The

Mohawk saw the light and accepted his message. After various other vicissitudes, all the tribes joined and the Good News became reality. The chiefs or sachems of the founding tribes became the chiefs of the League. All internal affairs were handled by the individual tribes; matters of mutual interest were discussed in League Council. The sachems of the League met when necessary at Onondaga (south of Syracuse) to discuss business. According to legend, they convened beneath the Evergrowing Tree of Peace, an enormous white pine which was surmounted by an eagle which attacked those who attempted to disturb the peace. In practice, the League enabled the Iroquois under the guise of extending this peace to wage war successfully on their neighbors. The League was increased by the addition, after 1710, of the Tuscarora. During the historic period, the League members controlled the lucrative fur trade.

Today, Iroquois communities exist on reservations in New York, Canada, Wisconsin and Oklahoma. A remnant of League government, and numerous customs and ceremonies still survive among them.

Information about the Iroquois has been gleaned from numerous sources. The early explorers, travelers and missionaries wrote extensively about them. Archeologists have excavated many sites and anthropologists have observed the customs of historic and modern Iroquois in the field.

Agriculture

Many characteristics of the social system of a group of people are related to their economy. An economy which produces large surpluses permits a more dense population, a more complex, more specialized society than does an economy which produces small surpluses. The Iroquois had a simple agricultural economy which produced surpluses sufficient to allow them to live in permanent villages of scores or hundreds of people and to allow for the development of handicrafts, government and elaborate ceremonies. The major crops were corn, beans and squash, the "Three Sisters" around which a body of ritual was built. These tropical plants were originally domesticated in Central or South America and diffused northward. Corn can be grown successfully in New York because it will mature in the 120 day period between killing frosts.

Iroquois women were the cultivators. They tilled the land with crude hoes of wood and bone. Several varieties of the three major crops were raised as well as tobacco, sunflowers and pumpkins. Each woman owned what she produced, although food was shared in time of famine. The major portion of Iroquois diet was composed of corn, beans and squash supplemented by game, fish, maple sugar, bird eggs, wild berries and roots. The women not only supported Iroquois economy by their crops, but they owned the houses and the household goods. Descent and succession were reckoned through the mother (matrilineal) rather than through the father (patrilineal) as is the case in our society. Iroquois women indirectly had a strong influence on the government. The Iroquois men were actively involved in hunting, fishing, war, trading and government. Both sexes engaged in religious ceremonies. The early explorers thought that Iroquois society was run by the women, but in reality each sex had certain perogatives and responsibilities.

Iroquois Woman

Personality

The stereotype of Indian personality as presented in books, movies and television has tended to be that of a taciturn, grim individual, capable of withstanding hardship and pain but devoid of tenderness, sensibility and humor. Anthropologists have utilized historical accounts and field observations in attempts to determine the personality of groups of primitive people. The ideal Iroquois personality seems to have been mild-mannered, polite and reserved. Arguments, personal remarks and gossip were theoretically avoided. This cooperative personality was not only an asset but a necessity in the society where a number of individuals lived at close quarters. However, it was permissible to joke with certain relatives and there were social occasions, like the war dance, where jokes, insults and ridicule were acceptable behavior. The Iroquois were strong individualists who resented authority. As a result, the chiefs had great prestige but little authority, parents were permissive with children, and even the warriors fought only when they wished.

Dreams served as outlets for aggression or frustration. They were regarded as wishes of a soul which must be fulfilled lest the dreamer experience sickness or death. Youths, warriors and the sick, who experienced the most conflicts, dreamed more and were more concerned about their dreams than the rest of the population. Dreams and visions were also involved in religious ceremonies.

A more drastic method of relieving frustration was suicide. Children were believed to commit suicide because of harsh parental treatment. Suicide by a rejected woman was condoned, but male suicides to escape physical suffering were condemned. The data on dreams and suicides suggest that the individual Iroquois suffered anxiety, fear and frustration behind the calm facade of his public personality. Iroquois men were required to maintain a hypermasculine role and to endure hardship; as a result, they seem to have had more personality conflicts than the women.

Life Cycle

The Iroquois child was born in a small hut outside the village, with a few women in attendance. Women in childbirth and menstruating women were considered harmful to the welfare of the village and the hunters, so they were isolated. These and similar customs are common among primitive people who do not understand feminine physiology. The child and his mother returned to the village after a few days. Babies were wrapped in skins with dried moss as a diaper and bound to a cradleboard. The mother nursed the child for two or three years, and gradually supplemented its diet with corn soup and gruel. The children stayed close to their mother until the age of eight or nine when boys joined gangs. The Iroquois were fond of their children. Discipline was enforced by throwing water on the delinquent or less frequently, scaring him by having a masked adult appear. Education was informal; within the confines of the village the child had the opportunity to observe most adult activities. A boy might receive training from his uncle, his mother's brother, his father and his father's kinsmen. Girls were encouraged to help their mothers and to assume a share of household tasks. As the child matured, he received various successive names, all of which were the property of the clan, none held by another living person.

At the time of her first menstruation a girl fasted for a few days in a hut in the forest. A pubescent boy stayed in an isolated hut fasting, meditating and undergoing various trials to obtain a vision or a dream of a guardian spirit who would aid him throughout his life. On his return to the village he became involved in the fall hunt, war parties and other masculine activities.

The Iroquois practiced avoidance between the sexes. If a man was seen emerging from a forest path a short distance ahead of a woman, he was suspected of having seduced her. Although they permitted pre-marital intercourse between eligible people, their ideal was chastity. To be considered eligible for marriage, young people had to belong to different clans. Marriage was a secular rather than a religious affair, and was arranged by the prospective mothers-in-law. The bride made corn bread for the marriage feast and the groom supplied the meat. The couple then moved into her mother's longhouse. The women owned the food, the houses and the household furnishings. Although the mothers-in-law exerted pressure to prevent it, divorce sometimes occurred. The wife would notify her husband of a divorce by placing his belongings outside the door. Divorce among the Iroquois was not as disruptive as it is in our society since the children were always raised by their mother's family.

The Iroquois were not long-lived; according to a study of skeletons from a historic Seneca cemetery, half the children died before they reached adulthood, (twelve years), and of those who survived, the average life span was thirty one years.

The Iroquois believed that after death the spirit of the deceased left the body and haunted the area. If offerings of food and tools were made, the main soul would depart for the land of the dead beyond the setting sun, but the ghost spirit continued to linger around the village. The dead were dressed and buried in a flexed position in a bark-lined grave about 3 ft. deep. The offerings were placed in the grave. In later historic times the dead were buried in an extended position in a wooden board coffin. The lingering ghosts of the dead received offerings of tobacco, food and song at the semi-annual Feast of the Dead. This ceremony, which is still performed on reserves in Canada, is intended to propitiate the dead and to protect the living from them. The dead are believed to enjoy it as much as the living; there are many stories about encounters with the dead which are similar to the ghost stories of our folklore.

Religion

The Iroquois believed in a multitude of supernatural beings. They developed various ceremonies to please the spirits and to insure their kindly attitude toward the Indians. There were five major deities: Ataentsic, the grandmother of the gods, a divinity of both life and death; her grandson, Teharonhiawagon, the creator of all good things; his brother Tawiskaron, the evil one and the god of all things harmful and poisonous; Heno the Thunderer, who brings the rain; and Agreskwe, the war god. In addition to these, there were the Earth Mother, the Three Sisters, False Faces, Husk Faces, pygmies, monsters, demons and a host of other spirits

False Face Dancer

(see "Legends of the Longhouse," and Leaflet #7). The spirits were appeased at thanksgiving festivals held at intervals through the year, including the Planting Festival, Green Corn Festival, Harvest Festival, Sap Dance, Strawberry Festival and Midwinter Festival.

The last of these was the greatest festival of all. It began on the fifth day of the second new moon following the winter solstice, usually early in February, lasted nearly a week and was dedicated to Teharonhiawagon, the God of Life. The Iroquois felt that he was weakened by his constant struggle with Tawiskaron, the Evil One, and must be strengthened by various rites or else he would not be able to bring the spring. The old fires were doused and new ones lit. The New Year was then announced. The community gathered in the council house to listen to a long prayer of thanksgiving to Teharonhiawagon for all the good things he had bestowed on them. Fire rites to expel evil spirits were performed. The three day "Dream Festival" followed during which various medicine societies held their dances and the people told and enacted their dreams. On the last day of the festival, the white dog which had been ritually strangled, painted, and decked with wampum, was burned with sacrifices of tobacco and offered to Teharonhiawagon for his continued blessings.

Among the several Iroquois medicine societies were the Little Water Society, Otter Society, Bear Society, Eagle Society, and the False Face Society. The purpose of these was to cure illness. Both the ritual and the impetus for a medicine society traditionally originated from a supernatural being or beings whom an Indian had encountered either in life or in a dream. One of the best-known societies, the False Face Society, began when a hunter offered some of his corn soup to the hungry False Face spirits who inhabit the woods. In return, they taught him the curing ritual. Individuals who dreamed of the False Faces carved masks to wear in the dance. The masks were carved from a living tree, usually basswood. The carver first burnt tobacco and prayed to the spirit of the tree to apologize for mutilating it. He roughed the features out on the trunk and cleaved the carving off. When the features were finished, the mask was painted and hair attached. If the mask was carved in the morning, it was painted red; if carved in the afternoon, black. Small bundles of tobacco were tied to the mask as offerings to the False Face spirit. A turtle shell or hickory bark rattle, used in the same ceremony, was wrapped with the mask for storage.

As part of the Midwinter Festival, masked False Face dancers entered the houses hooting and whining to scatter hot ashes on the inhabitants to prevent illness during the coming year. The False Face dance was sometimes prescribed for sick individuals, especially those with ailments of the joints, shoulders and head as toothache, sore eyes, bloody nose or earache. Those who were cured by the rites became subsidiary members and sponsored a yearly feast for the society in thanksgiving.

The exhibit at the State Museum portrays the False Faces visiting a log cabin near Cayuga Lake during the Midwinter Festival, circa 1800. Changes in Iroquois material culture caused by European contact are evident. During the colonial period, roughly 1750-1850, the Iroquois were actively engaged in the fur trade and consumed quantities of trade goods such as hatchets, kettles, firearms, beads, cloth, jewelry and rum. Their cabins

had fireplaces and were furnished with rude furniture. Cloth clothing decorated with trade beads and silk ribbon replaced deerskin outfits. Nevertheless, the period was a difficult one for the Indians. The fur trade and ensuing conflicts disrupted their economy and government. They suffered from the ravages of smallpox and alcohol and were defrauded of much of their land. During times of conflict, when a culture is severely disrupted by alien influences, new religions and religious cults often arise. The founder and prophet of the new Iroquois religion was Handsome Lake (1735-1815), a Seneca who led a dissolute life until the age of sixty-four when he had a revelation of a better way in a dream. His doctrine, which contains elements of the Quaker religion, stresses temperance, cooperation, unselfishness and self-control. He encouraged various native religious ceremonies and preached against the evils of rum, violins and witchcraft. The Handsome Lake religion revived and strengthened Iroquois cultural values when they were in danger of destruction. Today, his followers, the "Longhouse People," about a third of the Iroquois population, still perform the traditional ceremonies, as the False Face Dance, and maintain much of the form of League government. Most of the remainder of the modern Iroquois are Christians of various denominations who do not participate in these ceremonies or do so only as a social courtesy.

Social Structure

Iroquois society and government are difficult for us to understand. We are accustomed to a hierarchal society, one in which the limits of power and responsibility are clearly defined. Our government depends on the will of the people and there are various established methods by which citizens can express their opinions. Our society today is not only wealthier but enormously more complex than was that of the Iroquois. Although there are probably gaps in our knowledge of Iroquois social structure, they appear to have had a loose democratic society in which even the chiefs had only nominal authority.

The basic unit of Iroquois society was the matrilineal family. A matrilineal family was composed of all the male and female descendants of a woman through the female line, including adopted members. It numbered from fifty to two hundred persons and was presided over by a matron, usually the oldest or most respected woman. The family disciplined its members, defended the individual from blood feuds, wreaked vengeance, adopted captives and provided successors to chiefs and ceremonial officials. Certain hereditary offices were held within particular families.

The clans were composed of matrilineal families and functioned as extensions of them. The clans were also matrilineal and the individual married outside his clan. Clan names were those of animals such as Bear, Turtle, Wolf, Heron, Deer, etc. Many clans were present in all the Iroquois tribes and functioned as a cohesive factor in the League, since every person in one's clan, whatever his tribe, was considered a relative. The decisions of the clan council, like those of the League, were unanimous. As in other areas of Iroquois government, the women participated only through their influence on the men. Probably clan affairs were greatly influenced by the elder, more experienced members of both sexes. (The State Museum exhibit depicts a meeting of the Onondaga Turtle Clan.)

The affairs of a village were discussed in the democratic, partisan village council where all could speak. The village council dealt with matters of common concern as farming, hunting, fishing, defense, religion and ceremonial affairs. The tribe was composed of all the villages within an area, (see Fig. 1, Leaflet #7, for the territories of the Iroquois tribes) which were united by a common dialect and military interests. The tribal council, composed of chiefs representing the clans, would first hold a secret caucus to clarify and formulate policy while the public meetings which followed were devoted to announcements and ceremonies. The tribal council was primarily a forum for securing public consent, but lacked any absolute authority. Individual families, clans and villages could refuse to be party to an action.

The Iroquois League was a loose confederation of member tribes. Fifty sachems representing the five tribes composed the League council. Their titles, the names of the original founders, belonged to various matrilineal families within the several clans. Each sachem was chosen by the women of his family and he held office for life, or until he was removed from it. If the women were displeased with him, they would depose him by removing his "horns of office," and name another chief. Each sachem had an assistant who was often named to succeed him. Gifted men and women were honored by being named "Pine Tree Sachems" who had no vote but acted as counselors to the other chiefs. All the Iroquoian dialects were used in discussion, but Mohawk predominated. Following an established order, the sachems of one tribe would discuss a problem before they would pass it on to the next tribe. No action could be taken unless opinion was unanimous. The sachems had no absolute authority and were very sensitive to public opinion. The League was probably not as decisive a force for peace as the legend of its origin would indicate. The League did arbitrate disputes between member tribes and legalized various transactions and treaties but most important, it gave the impression of unity to outsiders, although there is no historical record of all five tribes fighting as a unit.

The treaties were recorded by wampum belts woven of small purple and white shell beads arranged in various designs. The belts were made in duplicate and each party to the agreement kept one. Other wampum belts were symbols of the authority and sincerity of the chiefs, and were held in their hands as they spoke. Wampum was used as a pledge of loyalty and goodwill in various ceremonies. Payment in wampum was demanded by the family of a murdered individual "to wipe away their tears." In prehistoric times the Iroquois obtained wampum as tribute from the Indians of the Hudson Valley and Long Island. During the colonial period it was manufactured by the Dutch and English for use in the fur trade as currency. (Some of the wampum belts of the Iroquois League are on display in the State Museum.)

Warfare

Although the Iroquois League was founded to promote peace, it may have encouraged war by protecting member tribes from attack from each other. The Iroquois extended their original territory by either adopting or destroying various enemy tribes. The civil chiefs had little control over the warriors and there was no organized execution of an aggressive policy. The blood

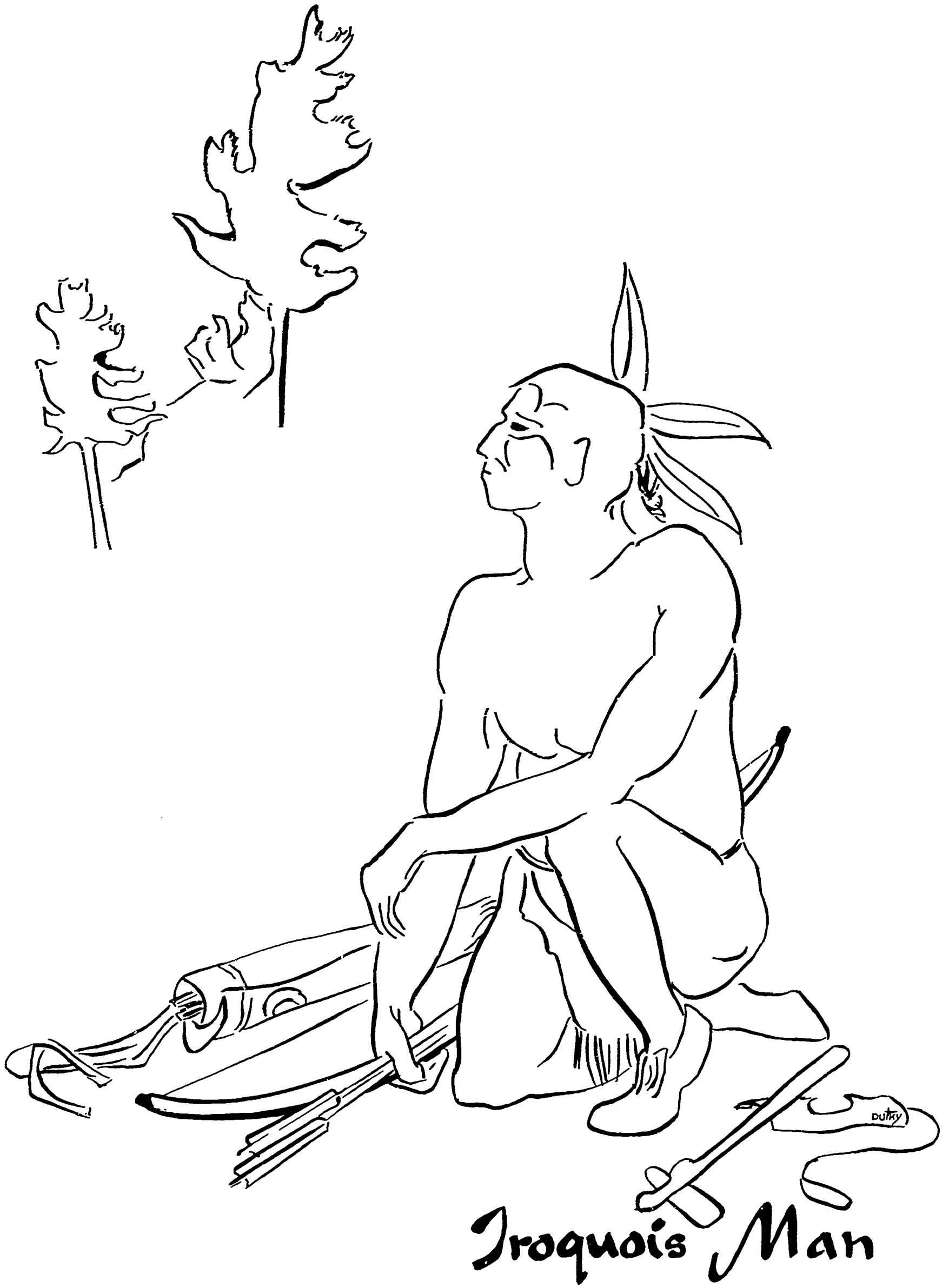
feud was the ostensible reason for fighting although some conflicts continued long after the original cause was forgotten. Glory and prestige seem to have been private motives for fighting. There is some evidence that women encouraged the men to fight to obtain captives for adoption.

After long deliberation, a village or a tribal council declared war as an element of tribal policy. On occasion the war party would delay a year or more to fool the enemy. Any man who wished to lead a war party requested others to accompany him and gave a war feast at which they sang, danced and prayed for victory. The war chief had no connection with the civil government. In the interval before the war party left the village many warriors fasted to develop their endurance. Quantities of powdered maple sugar and parched corn flour were prepared for them. On the day of departure, the war party, painted and dressed in ceremonial clothes, left the village in a procession with the women following. A day's march from the village, they halted, discarded their ceremonial clothes, which the women collected, and took up their provisions and weapons. The Iroquois arsenal included bows and arrows, knives, tomahawks and clubs of wood and stone. The warriors carried shields of reeds, bark or skin and wore armor of woven reeds. They developed the techniques of guerilla warfare. War parties were small; the maximum strength of the League never exceeded 2,000 warriors. The immediate object of warfare was to take scalps and prisoners while saving their dead and wounded from a similar fate.

Iroquois villages were protected from attack by log palisades broken only by narrow, easily closed passages. On the inside of the palisade were platforms for defensive use. Pots of water were placed in convenient places to be used to douse fires started by flaming arrows. In prehistoric times these villages were vulnerable only to fire or to surprise attacks at night. (A State Museum diorama shows a victorious war party returning to a prehistoric Mohawk village on the Mohawk river in the vicinity of Sprakers.)

Victorious war parties returned to the village rejoicing with the scalp bearers trailing behind. The warriors often made designs on trees or houses depicting the battle. (Such a sign is painted on the inside of the bark-house at the Museum.) The village first mourned their dead and then rejoiced over the captives. Prisoners were often required to run a gauntlet of women armed with sticks and clubs. If one ran through without falling, he could be adopted. Prisoners were adopted into families who paid for the accompanying feast. The "Life of Mary Jemison" by Seaver contains a good account of an Iroquois adoption. Less fortunate captives were tortured and killed by the women and warriors.

During the colonial period, Iroquois warfare was intensified. The fur trade caused many conflicts; the Iroquois eliminated the Erie and the Huron in a successful effort to obtain a monopoly. Tribes and fragments of tribes were adopted wholesale. This policy enabled the Iroquois to maintain their numbers while other tribes were decimated by war, disease and alcohol. Firearms and trade hatchets made the colonial Iroquois warrior more formidable than his forebearers or other Indians. As a result, the Iroquois were the major Indian military organization and as such were the choice target of the colonists for alliance, self-defense or mercenaries. The British hired Iroquois warriors for various campaigns, including those of the American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Iroquois Man

Revolution. Iroquois war chiefs, like Cornplanter and Joseph Brant, became prominent during this period.

Hunting

Wild game was a necessary supplement to Iroquois diet. In addition, game animals provided raw materials for tools and clothing. A number of animals were hunted, but the deer was most important single game species. Its skin was used for clothing, its bones and antlers for tools, its flesh for food, and its sinew for thread.

The Iroquois believed that game animals were among the good things placed on earth by the Creator and were to be used carefully and respectfully. Animals were considered intelligent, conscious beings who inhabited the same spiritual world as humans. Both the hunter and his prey understood their roles. If the hunter did not observe certain rules, the spirits who inhabited the woods would trick him and hide the animals from him. A good hunter left entrails of his kill for other animals.

The Iroquois hunter utilized a variety of hunting techniques. The bow and arrow was the major weapon although in later times blowguns were used for squirrels and small birds. Traps were set for birds and small game. Deer were sometimes captured in snares and dead falls. Quantities of fish were taken by traps, weirs, nets and to a lesser extent with hooks and lines. Fresh water clams were also collected for food.

During most of the year, the men hunted in the vicinity of the village but in the fall after the harvest, small family groups would travel into the hinterland areas to camp and hunt for a few months. Game population near the villages soon became depleted so it was possible to accumulate a large store of meat and hides only by hunting in a wilderness area. Women accompanied the hunters to prepare the meat and hides. Similar expeditions were made in the spring to passenger pigeon nesting sites and to sugar maple stands. (A State Museum diorama shows an Iroquois hunting camp on Canandaigua Lake.)

Summary

Iroquois society was characterized by several features. Women occupied a position of social responsibility; the society was both matrilineal and matrilocal. The basic social unit was the large matrilineal family and the loyalty of the individual extended from this to his clan, to his tribe, and finally to the League. This intertribal political organization was the major accomplishment of the Iroquois. Although many details of its operation are unknown, the League made the Iroquois a decisive force in the fur trade and in the conflicts incident to the European colonization of Northeastern North America. Religion was intimately involved in all areas of Iroquois life. Dreaming was an accepted method of communication with the spirit world. A 19th Century nativistic religious movement, the Handsome Lake religion, has continued to preserve Iroquois religion, language and portions of League government to the present day.

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Key to Abbreviations

BAEAR --- Bureau of American Ethnology, Annual Report

BAEB ---- Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin

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