

Women in Haudenosaunee Culture

Objectives:

- Describe matrilineal descent.
 - List some of the benefits of social organization based upon matrilineal descent
 - Discuss how matrilineal organization differs from a patrilineal organization.
 - Define: matriarchy, patriarchy, matrilineal, patrilineal, clan, descent group, kinship, moiety, bilateral kinship.
 - Create a family genealogy.
 - Compare differences between Haudenosaunee and US societies.
 - Identify maternal ancestors in a kinship diagram.
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Every community defines its own roles for men and women, and each culture has its own structure of relationships. In the United States, an individual's basic identity is first defined by his or her family. One's identity is further defined through the community, then state of residence, and finally by nation of origin. Although US society is changing, most people inherit their legal identity (last name) from their father. For many years, property rights and family finances have most commonly been controlled and/or managed by the male parent. While the US has traditionally been a patriarchal society, we trace descent bilaterally, through both our mother's and father's lines.

In Haudenosaunee culture, the clan is the strongest element in determining people's identity. One's immediate community is next in importance, followed by the reservation to which they, or their ancestors were born, followed by nation or tribe. Again, the ties of kinship form the basic organization of society; a clan functions just as the American family does – it is the central source for economic, moral and emotional support, defining status and interrelationships. The Haudenosaunee divide their society into two main descent groups (anthropologists call each half a "moiety") of four clans each; in the bird group are the snipe, heron, hawk and deer; in the animal group are the wolf, beaver, turtle and bear. A Seneca is directly related to any member of his or her clan, and members can include other Senecas, or other members of the League: Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, Onondaga or Tuscarora tribes. Historically, the two groups of Haudenosaunee clans have been exogamous, meaning that their tradition demanded that members of the bird clans marry members of the animal clans, never within their own clan. A man would retain allegiance to the clan of his birth, but live "matrilocally" in the longhouse of his wife's clan. Descendants of a marriage between a woman of the Turtle clan and a man of the Hawk clan would belong to the Turtle clan. Thus, kinship ties were spread across all eight clans in a wide kinship structure, resulting in a cohesive group, unlikely to wage war internally.

Women are highly respected in Haudenosaunee society because of the roles they have played in the creation (Sky Woman) and in the formation of the Great Law (Jigonsaseh, the Mother of Nations). The earth itself is seen as a woman from which all things are born, creating new life that allows all of the living things on earth to continue into the future. In Haudenosaunee society, clan, national/tribal identity, and property rights are all determined through the maternal line; this is in keeping with the Six Nations' Great Law, which emphasizes a balance of male and female roles. Historically, Haudenosaunee women took care of all things that concerned village life, such as internal affairs, property and crops. Men took care of the group's external factors, such as hunting/fishing, warfare, diplomacy, etc.

Today, Haudenosaunee women retain strong roles:

- National and family identity is recognized through the maternal line. If your mother is/was a Seneca, you are a Seneca. It is that simple. It is also true that if your father is a Seneca, and your mother is not, you would not be a Seneca.
- Property is owned and inherited through the maternal line, and in traditional communities is "controlled" by the clans. There are sections of land that belong to the wolf clan, of which Ely Parker was a member. Ely Parker lived on wolf clan land when he was at Tonawanda. This land is still inherited through the maternal line.

- Women select and depose the chiefs, both to Grand Council and local councils. of chiefs. For the traditional Senecas today at Tonawanda, the Clan Mother has the ultimate power to "dehorn" (depose) the chief of her clan.
- Clan Mothers assign names from the pool of names that are associated only with that clan. Upon death, the name of the deceased goes back into the pool to be given to someone else, connecting people of the past to people of the future.
- Women are always part of the decision-making process. And if the men are not considered to be doing the right thing, the women will step in to correct them.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

Middle -- Elementary School Levels

- Visit <http://www.rmsc.org> and explore Ely Parker's family tree. Talk with your own parents and grandparents and draw up a simple genealogy of your own family.
- In Haudenosaunee communities, all members are important. Elders are respected figures; they are the wisdom keepers, the ones who impart oral traditions, and help raise their nation's children. Discuss the roles elders play in their family and community. Why is it important for all members of a community to be involved in maintaining the well-being of that community?
- Complete the chart below:

COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING FOR →	US SOCIETY	HAUDENOSAUNEE SOCIETY
trace descent or ancestors through____	mother and father ("bilaterally")	
inheritance (for example, property) is through ____	father	
identity is most closely linked to____	family	
surname is ____	father's name	
society is ____	patriarchal	
after marriage, the couple lives____	neither patrilocally nor matrilocally	
the role of elders is_____	not significant	

High School Level

- Terms to define together (use any resources, including the web, dictionary, encyclopedia). How do these terms help us understand current issues both in mainstream American communities and in Haudenosaunee communities?:

Matrilineal
 Patrilineal
 Matrilocal
 Patrilocal
 Bilateral or double descent

Clan
 Descent group
 Kinship
 Exogamous
 Moiety

- In the United States, most people trace descent bilaterally, meaning through both the maternal and paternal lines. Based on what you discover about matrilineal societies, what would you expect to be the differences between matrilineal and patrilineal societies? If you were part of a large space expedition charged with setting up life on the asteroid "Ordinal 1" what kind of society would you create? What roles would you give to men and to women?
- Why do you think the matriarchal structure of the Haudenosaunee has successful for them in the past and in the present? How do you think American society would differ if it were a matriarchy?
- Ely Parker married a "white" woman. Can you think of some reasons why he and his wife never chose to live at Tonawanda after he left Washington? Do you think the Tonawanda Senecas accepted their daughter as part of their community? Why or why not?

ON-LINE RESOURCES

Six Nations Web site

<http://www.sixnations.org>