**Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Iroquois Influence Theory, and Nationhood**

In studying the structure and lifeways of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, as well as their history, we can better understand indigenous peoples of North America as sovereign nations.

**Haudenosaunee Confederacy (AKA Leagues of the Haudenosaunee)**

The reading from Talbot Chapter 2, as well as the Grinde/Johansen reading, trace an outline of some of the important features of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. As Talbot affirms, the Confederacy, which came into being perhaps around 1100 CE, was a coalition of united nations - five (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca) later joined by a sixth nation, the linguistically related Tuscarora. This coalition was united under the Great Law of Peace, which was established by Deganawidah and Hiawatha following a time of lengthy intertribal warfare. This Great Law of Peace established a confederacy form of governance, whereby the five (later six) nations maintained peace, met annually, and as required collectively made decisions. This form of governance, among other things, involved:

* The Grand Council of the Confederacy (at the uppermost level), a hereditary council with 50 *sachems*, which were clan chiefs, selected from each of the different nations. Each nation was represented, as was each clan. They were male but appointed and could be removed by clan mothers.
* Within this Council, there were the "Younger Brothers" and "Older Brothers," a division of the sachems into two bodies who would come to a consensus and then refer to the other body.
* The "Firekeeper" sachems, which would settle differences between the Older/Younger Brothers and provide a ruling on the decision.

**Iroquois Influence Theory**

As you are reading about the structure of the Confederacy, it no doubt brings to mind the structure of the U.S. federal government, with two chambers of congress (one upper, one lower) who are made up of representatives from each state, and who make decisions, refer to the other, and ultimately have decisions ratified (or not) by an executive branch.

Some feel these similarities are coincidental. Other scholars, such as Grinde and Johansen whose work you read, ascribe to the **Iroquois Influence Theory**, which holds that the Haudenosaunee Confederacy significantly influenced the thinking of some of the founding fathers as they were developing the United States federal form of government.

The evidence for such an influence are varied and strong, as you read about. Not only do the U.S. form of governance and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy bear a striking resemblance, but there is plenty of circumstantial evidence to suggest that various founding fathers knew of and even admired the Haudenosaunee Confederacy - such as Benjamin Franklin attending their meetings as a journalist prior to the Revolutionary War, Tom Paine expressing admiration of the political system, the familiarity of Thomas Jefferson with Native American societies, Franklin having reportedly mentioned certain Native American concepts to the Constitutional Convention, and on and on. Furthermore, in the absence of many other examples (in Europe) of democracy, there is a strongly intuitive logic to the idea that the founders would have been looking to other forms of governance - including those of a strong military empire at their borders (the Haudenosaunee). In fact, the U.S. congress itself issued a resolution in 1988, as you read about, recognizing the influence of the Six Nations on the early U.S. Republic.

Despite these various forms of evidence, there was early on significant push back from some scholars regarding this theory. In the interest of critical thinking, you might ask yourself the following question:

1) Why might there be resistance to the Iroquois Influence Theory? Who might *oppose* this theory, and why?

2) Why might there have been a renewed interest in these historical connections around the 1970s and 1980s? Who might *support* this theory, and why?

We should realize that there is a politics to scholarship, and that individuals may oppose a theory not only on evidential grounds but because it threatens certain narratives, or seems to support others.

**Haudenosaunee as Nation**

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy was composed of several allied nations, and they were truly sovereign nations, in any meaningful sense of that term. They controlled a (rather large) land base, they made treaties and alliances with other nations (including European ones, as we will see), they went to war, they had their own form of governance (both as nations and as a confederacy of nations), they even had a founding charter (in the form of the *wampum*articles you read about). In many ways the Haudenosaunee could even be considered a template or at least influence for the later US Republic, as some scholars have argued. Most importantly, they had sovereignty, or self-authority, including a territory and a developed mode of self-governance. It is without doubt that the Haudenosaunee nations were sovereign entities prior to European colonialism (and continue to assert sovereignty), and we should understand contemporary issues, such as the passport conflict, as one involving assertions of continued sovereignty by the Haudenosaunee.

**Differentiation and the Longhouse**

**Non-differentiated Societies**

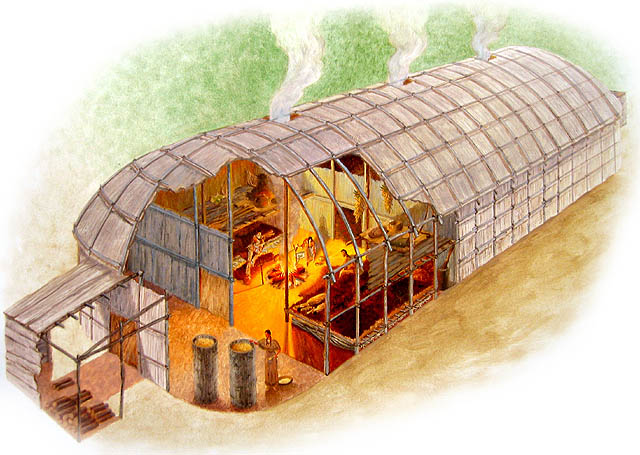
In thinking about the Haudenosaunee, let us consider now a theoretical framework raised in the Talbot reading, that of **differentiated**vs. **non-differentiated** societies, an explanatory model proposed by Duane Champagne (Turtle Mountain Chippewa). Champagne argues that in some societies (differentiated) various aspects of social life are relatively distinct from each other and developed as separate institutions, while in non-differentiated societies, the various aspects of social life tend to be unified in certain institutions of people.

For example, we could think of the modern United States as an example of a fairly differentiated society - meaning there are separate institutions of government, religious bodies, kinship units/lineages, economic corporations, and so forth. Of course, all of these bodies can and do impact each other (sometimes very strongly) but we can point to them as separate institutions at least on an analytical level, in Champagne's model.

By contrast, some societies, those which are non-differentiated, have a relatively large degree of overlap, with many aspects of society being found in a single institution. In pre-colonial Hawai'i, the complex chieftan/monarchy political system was intimately interwoven (and indeed given its justification for existence by) the religious system, with the chief playing critical ceremonial roles due to their connection to gods; the chief/monarch was also part of a certain lineage, and the land system for growing food was largely controlled by the chief/monarch and the chiefly elite. Thus, economy, religion, and kinship were strongly correlated.

**The People of the Longhouse: A Non-differentiated Society**

Talbot argues that we should think of the Haudenosaunee as a non-differentiated society; doing so can help us better understand the Confederacy as a holistic society, rather than just a form of governance.

If we were to think of the Haudenosaunee in this way, we would want to focus on how much everything is connected to, and flows from, the kinship system (broadly) and, more specifically, domestic life in a Longhouse, a traditional Haudenosaunee home made of wood and bark.

(Source: [http://iroquoistribe.weebly.com/shelter.html (Links to an external site.)](http://iroquoistribe.weebly.com/shelter.html))

Let us start with the name of Haudenosaunee. While they are often referred to by the Algonquian-derived term "Iroquois," their **autonym** (name for themselves) is Haudenosaunee; it means **People of the Longhouse,**as explained in this video of Haudenosaunee people discussing the two terms,

[Haudenosaunee or Iroquois? (Links to an external site.)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSXL33JiKLY)[](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSXL33JiKLY)

It makes sense that they would prefer the term Haudenosaunee, as the idea of the Longhouse - or, more broadly, the domestic/kinship relationships implied by a longhouse - are central to the lifeway of these nations.

For example, the hereditary council of sachems previously mentioned literally met in a large Longhouse. Furthermore, the workings of the council were modeled on kinship (remember the Younger Brothers and Lower Kinship). However, this was not just a metaphor - the council was itself made up of the building blocks of the kinship system. Each of the sachems (representative chief positions) came from a different clan.

***A Note on Clans***

A clan is a kinship unit, typically a quite large body of people recognized as related to each other by common descent (whether or not the precise descent lines are known. Among the Haudenosaunee, there are several separate clans (Bear Clan, Turtle Clan, etc.) The clan system was incredibly important because the political leaders of the confederacy, the sachems, came from these clans - the leadership positions were in that sense broadly hereditary (meaning, although they did not necessarily pass from parent to child, each clan had a certain number of sachems that 'belonged' to them).

Interestingly, the clan system may have also been one of the foundational reasons, beyond the Great Law of Peace and the Council, that the Five (and later Six) Nations were able to keep peace so well. Because of people marrying outside of their villages, people from any given clan could be found in any of the Nations - i.e. Turtle Clan individuals could be in the Onondaga, Cayuga, and Mohawk nations. Any individual would thus hve two identities (their nation, such as Mohawk, and their clan, such as Turtle). The political/geographic division of nations was cross-cut by the kinship system. Think for a second of the effect this would have on peace between nations. How likely are you to go to war with a nation where many of your close relatives live? It would not be unheard of - but it would be uncommon. The kinship system further helped to mitigate any tensions which might develop between these nations.

***A Note on Gender***

When we speak of kinship we inevitably speak of gender, and gender was also intertwined with the Council and the Confederacy System. The Sachems were males from each respective clan; however, prominent women in the clans, known as **clan mothers**(as well as other women) had a a powerful role in the process of appointing certain men as sachems from each clan, and in removing them as needs be. They also had a great degree of influence on when wars would be conducted, even at the level of calling for the avenging of deaths within the clan.

***A Note on Longhouse Religion***

So, as we can see, the Confederacy was bound up in the kinship system and the gender system. It was also bound up in the religion.

The sacred lifeway of the Haudenosaunee includes an annual commemoration which includes a recitation of the Thanksgiving Address, thanking the various parts of creation in a sacred manner. There can be Thanksgiving Addresses in many other contexts as well.

Here a Haudenosaunee elder discusses this address in a much better way than I or your textbook could:

[Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address (Links to an external site.)](https://youtu.be/swJs2cGNwIU)[](https://youtu.be/swJs2cGNwIU)

This annual commemoration also includes a recitation of the Great Law of Peace upon which their Confederacy was founded, which, in its sacredness, ritual-ness, and origins in a sacred narrative, is itself both a religious and political narrative.

By the way, as we will discuss next slide, the lifeway has adapted over time in response to colonialism and the revelations of Handsome Lake, while maintaining a core as well.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, the kinship, gender, political (Council/Sachem), and religious systems were intimately interwoven with each other in the societies of the Haudenosaunee, in a trenchant example of Champagne's idea of **non-differentiated**society.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzQI3PFKrG8>