

Clan Organization of The Winnebago.

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In the preparation of this paper I have been greatly ~~assisted~~ <sup>aided</sup> by the research <sup>of</sup> made in this field by the Bureau of American Ethnology whose agent, Paul Radin, visited the Winnebago reservation, and with the assistance of myself and others prepared a history of the general organization of the Winnebago Indians, and of their customs. The field he covered also embraced what I shall attempt to convey to you on the clan organization of the Winnebago. This paper can give no adequate idea of the subject it is written to cover, for the amount of material that could, ~~should~~ be obtained to cover fully the subject would probably fill a thousand pages such as I am about to write. I am constantly embarrassed in trying to select from this mass of material those features that would most interest you; for feeling as if I were a part of it myself, my interest is different from yours.

The Winnebago Indians are natives of Wisconsin, and about half of the tribe still remain there. So far as we know they were about the year 1639 on the eastern shore of Green Bay, first seen by white men <sup>some</sup> about twelve or fourteen miles north of the subsequent site of the city of Green Bay. The Winnebago believe that, according to their clan stories they originated there, at a place called Red Banks. This paper is based upon the stories of the different clans which I have heard and from personal interviews



with Winnebago having particular knowledge of the story of their clan, not upon knowledge of the clan organization of other tribes or ethnology. This tribe has two exogamic divisions, ---the upper and the lower clans. The upper clans are, Thunder-Being, commonly called Thunder Bird, the Hawk or War, Eagle, and Pigeon. The lower clans are Bear, Wolf, Water Spirit, Elk, Deer, Buffalo, Fish, and Snake.

The Winnebago do not claim descent from the animal after which the clan is named, but assert that their ancestors were transformed animals who met at Green Bay, Wisconsin, and there were transformed into human beings. Four animals of each species were present, and the older Winnebago can tell you from which of these four brothers they descended. Their attitude toward the clan animal is in no way different from that toward any other animal. They hunt and eat at any time of the year the animal which they regard as their personal manito. According to the clan stories various clans seem to have been inspired simultaneously with the knowledge of a great gathering to be held at the Red Banks mentioned. The clans then existing in the spirit world in the spiritual being of their clan animal began to counsel together about the great meeting of transformation, and each species sent four of their finest <sup>to</sup> <sup>individuals</sup> to this meeting, as has been mentioned. One old man who is of the Elk clan says: "In the beginning the Winnebago existed in the spirit world over towards the settling of the sun, where a place of existence or abode was established for them by Earth-Maker (the creator). There they existed from time unknown, until the creator spoke and said to them, "My children, you are to live on an earth that I have created and prepared for you. It is necessary that you should recognize one another there in some way. You should therefore select some animal, the animal you best



love, and after which your clan shall be named and recognized." So the Elk clan people considered seriously this matter and seeing that the Elk was not only a beautiful animal but clean and of good habits and temperament they decided to select the Elk as their clan animal."

From all of the reports on clan organization it is evident that a lodge was built, and a camp circle was formed where all had certain positions. This is shown from the fact that each clan has a particular brother or friend clan upon whom they call, especially in time of death, to assist in funeral rites. These friend clans speak of one another as sitting opposite each other in the original lodge. It is said that the Water Spirit clan came with the specific power to hold the position of chiefship in the tribe, but it so happens that when the original fire was about to be started the Water Spirit clan tried to get the fire but failed. Then the other clans had a trial at building this fire but the Thunder clansmen were the only ones who succeeded, and they therefore came in possession of the tribal chiefship, and have always held it until recent years. The United States government now recognize whomever it chooses as chief of the tribe, and the Indians often say that the choice always falls upon those to whom it can most easily dictate, and with little regard to fitness. The Water Spirit clan, however, did not lose its position of chiefship which they still maintained, and all their names have some syllable which implies chiefship.

The chief of the tribe was always selected from the Thunder clan, as has been said. He stood as the exponent of peace at all times. He could not lead a war-party, although according to some he could accompany such a party. If he heard of any one of his tribe about to lead a party on the war path, and if he thought the leader lacked in



war power and general ship, the chief would take his peace pipe and go to the leader and ask him to stay his war venture. If the war leader disregarded the counsel of the chief and went in spite of it, the chief would follow him to the first night's camp out, and there, if he placed his pipe immediately across the leader's path, the war leader would have to stop and return, for to go on would be sacrilege. The chief's lodge always stood in the center of the village, and it contained a sacred fireplace.

The lodge was a sanctuary for all wrongdoers. No one could be killed there, and a prisoner of war escaping to it had to be spared. The Thunder clan chief always acted as intercessor between wrongdoers and their avengers. Even in so extreme a case as the murder of a clansman, the chief would always attempt a reconciliation by which the life of the offender might be spared. On the other hand it is said the Hawk or War clan also maintained a lodge in the village known as the war lodge, and a prisoner of war taking refuge in it was immediately put to death. The Hawk lodge was the general meeting place for the warriors of the entire tribe. The Bear clan at its origin had disciplinary power, and would therefore maintain a sacred lodge in a village. The lodge would be known as the soldier's lodge and its members as soldiers.

The functions of this clan consisted in the regulation of the hunt, general disciplinary rights, and the duty of carrying into effect the orders of the Thunder clan chief. At a tribal hunt their power was seen in its most characteristic development. Whoever disregarded the rules laid down by them, such as shooting too early or cutting up the captured animal out of turn, could be deprived of his bow and arrows; these would be restored to him only if he acquiesced in his



punishment. But should he repeat the offence, bow and arrows would be broken.

The general disciplinary powers were those of patrolling the village and preventing disorder. The leader of the clan carried an emblem symbolical of his power. The Bear clansmen always carried this emblem of authority whenever they patrolled the village or were on duty. They would make their rounds singing and at their approach all noise would immediately cease. They executed all capital punishments. If the Thunder clan chief failed in his intercessions for a criminal the latter was handed over to the Bear lodge for punishment.

The Elk clan, it is said, acted as usher at the original meeting and was preordained to act in that capacity through life; but this is rather vague. The Buffalo clan is said to have originated with the mission of a herald, and this, in its full meaning, has also become obscure. The few who give this information say that the Buffalo lodge should always be placed near the lodge of the chief, where it reports every morning to learn his desires and hear his announcements. The supposition that all the clans came possessing some mission, but that time, war, and contact with civilization, have made it difficult to obtain full information as to its exact nature is probably correct. All accounts do not agree, and some of the clans are now extinct, or have been discontinued.

The marriage relation was regulated by strict rules and customs, which in olden times were never violated. An upper-clansman must marry a woman of the lower clan and vice versa. A member of an upper clan may select his wife from any of the lower clans. Those Winnebago who cared to give an explanation of their exogamy declared



that the members of the clans of each class were closely related and should not therefore intermarry, and these regulations were prescribed for the purpose of producing a stronger race, the relationship between upper and lower clansmen not being so close. Descent is patrilineal, and a man's name generally comes from his father's clan or carries some syllable denoting his father's clan name. Formerly the name was always that of the father's clan, but this system has been largely abandoned. Certain irregularities have crept into this tribal custom; thus, many individuals bear names belonging to the mother's clan. Whenever a person bore a name of a clan not his father's he had a paternal ancestor who was either a white man or an Indian of another tribe. Such individuals had of course no Winnebago clan name, and consequently a name was taken from the wife's clan. This custom thus begun seems to have become a precedent, and many names were thereafter taken from the maternal clan. Notwithstanding this innovation descent is still reckoned in the paternal line.

Other customs of interest are, that a married man always lives with his wife's parents the first few years after marriage; he must never address his mother-in-law and must act as servant to his father-in-law as long as he lives with him.

The relation of a man to his maternal uncle is peculiar; he may take liberties with him which he is expressly prohibited from taking with his paternal uncle and aunt or his maternal aunt. Yet, in spite of this larger freedom, there is particularly close relationship between them. The nephew must always act as servant to the uncle; on the warpath he is, after a fashion, an esquire; and should the uncle while <sup>warrior</sup> leader, be slain or captured, the nephew



should then suffer himself to be slain.

Winnebago names are derived from the clan animals and their characteristics. For example, a Bear clansman may be named White Bear, and a Thunder clansman might be called "Strikes-the-Tree" after a characteristic of lightning. Every clan has certain objects some materialistic and other invisible and immaterialistic, which are considered as belonging especially to it. If a member of one clan asks for any one of these specific objects belonging to another, he never obtains it, but receives instead the most valuable present that the clan addressed can give. However, it is considered so immodest to make such a request, that no self-respecting Indian would be likely to do so: for example, to ask a member of the Thunder clan for a brand from his fireplace or to sit on the fire-logs in his house, to admire or criticize anything in the lodge of a Bear clansmen or sit in <sup>his</sup> doorway, or to ask water of a Wolf or Water Spirit clan. Should one sit in the doorway of a member of the Bear clan he would not be told to get out but the clansman would spread a robe or something good to sit upon and politely ask the visitor to be seated there, and it is always well to accept such hospitality.

While the clans have numerous customs there are no customs or beliefs distinctive of the upper and lower clansmen. In addition to those mentioned, there are characteristic ceremonies at birth, at the naming of a child, at death, and at a burial and funeral wake of a clan member. In early days, where the tribe was concerned in any question touching land or other earthly affairs, the Bear clan would be consulted before any thing definite was done. Likewise the Thunder clan would be consulted in regard to



aerial things, from trees up; and the Water Spirit clan in regard to things of the water.

In this paper I can only touch briefly on the most important features of clan organization. To fully explain the clan organization would require many volumes, and I will conclude with a description of some few of the tribal customs. In olden times the Winnebago always lived in villages. I presume this was for social intercourse as well as for protection, and counsel. It is said that there was a custom of counselling children incessantly; but it has nearly dropped into disuse. The children would be called in as the dusk began; for it was believed that all bad things went about in darkness, having reference principally to the dangers of falling into temptation, possibly also to wild animals. So when the young people including children, were all in and the family circle around the fire place was full, the old grandfather (as it is usually the oldest member of the lodge who speaks) would begin to counsel them. He would tell them how they should conduct themselves through life--that they must learn to hold their tongues, that they should fast and strive to obtain some blessing from the Great Spirit, to enable them to protect their people in time of trouble, or that they might be blessed with power for good, to be brave and learn the way of the forest, and to be good hunters. And he would tell the young girls how to order their lives for happiness, of the sacred marriage state, and of the responsibilities of bearing children. When young persons asked for special stories, the old man would have them fast a day <sup>first,</sup> ~~for it,~~ or perhaps require them <sup>to</sup> get an especially good fire-log and place it in the fire. This was done of course to impress the young mind.



Fasting was encouraged at all times. It is said that oftentimes the old man would offer a young boy food and a piece of charcoal at the same time. Should the boy reach out and take the food, the old man would punish him and blacken his face with the charcoal and send him out. The object of this was to create a lowly spirit in the boy, as they believed the Great Spirit would not bless any one in a proud state of mind. The face is always blackened with wood charcoal when fasting. It often happens that many would be out fasting at the same time, and it was customary for all to sing a song or a chant of praise, or pray to the spirits. This always occurs about dusk. Fasting is always done in seclusion; so on a quiet evening, when all in the village is still, a cry from the hills of a loved one who perhaps has been fasting in the distance for several days, and whose ordeal has been so severe as to reduce his strength, may be heard, in a weak and pitiful voice. The cry of one seeking a blessing in supplication to the spirits, might start another in a distant part of the hills, and so on until many are wailing together. And in the lodge when the parents and younger brothers and sisters at home heard the voice of sons and brothers calling weakly in the distance, the family circle would be greatly moved and the mother, the first to show her emotion, would allow a silent tear to roll down her cheek, and then the sisters; and finally, unable to restrain themselves, mother and sisters would burst out weeping in their monotone characteristic of Indian women. The father would bow his head in pity for his son, for he knew all the struggles and sorrows that must be endured in seeking a great blessing. It is said that very frequently the whole village would be aroused by the cry to the Great Spirit.

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A quite similar practice occurs among the negroes in the Black Belt of the South has come under the my personal observation. It is said that, "Nighttime for ant supplicants that they are 'gone' looking!"  
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