

PRE-CONTACT AND EARLY CONTACT PERIODS

In the pre-contact period the general cultural patterns of the Northern Iroquoian society were already discernible. Horticulture and collecting were combined with fishing and hunting, and it is entirely probable that the prominent sex division of labor, whereby women planted and collected while men fished and hunted, already existed. The units of residence were extended families, presumably matrilineal, who inhabited longhouses in villages of about a thousand souls.⁵ Although the individual villages were economically self-sufficient, they were probably united on a tribal level. Already there were tribal wars, giving the men an activity which was to become increasingly prominent after European contact in 1543. In particular, the desire for European trade goods and for control of the beaver trade, which flourished along the St. Lawrence River in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, caused the Mohawk to attack the Iroquoians and Algonquians living there and may have been the impetus for the formation of the League of the Iroquois.⁶ The French intervened just enough on the anti-Iroquois side to force the Mohawk to rely upon raids for trade goods, thus actively stimulating the pattern of warfare. It is also conjectured that the desire for the trade goods which finally reached the Hurons induced the Seneca to transform their warfare pattern from ceremonial to economic conflicts.⁷ As a result, isolated communities were further transformed into potential confederacies. Trigger also conjectures that the Mohawk ended their military raids against the Montagnais-Algonquin-French alliance in the St. Lawrence Valley not from a fear of their combined strength, but more from a desire to establish a beaver monopoly of their own, comparable to that of their northern enemies, at the fledgling Dutch trading post at Fort Orange.⁸ One can therefore surmise that the political acumen for which the Iroquois are celebrated was already in evidence at this time, approximately 1624 A.D.

The increasing demand for beaver pelts by Europeans and for guns by the Indians, as well as the shifting alliances by European powers with various tribes which the latter believed to be helpful to their aims, set off an exceedingly complicated chain of inter-tribal conflicts.⁹ For the Iroquois these conflicts meant an enhancement of the male warrior complex, but also a devastation of the male population. When one adds the ravages of smallpox and other epidemic diseases introduced into the Northeast, the consequence was a depopulation of such magnitude that social change could not but occur. Male leaders died or were absent on the warpath, forcing women into promi-