A Study of
French Canadian Kinship

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1. Introduction

Anthropologists and comparative sociologists have often been struck by the differences which exist between systems of kinship in “modern” or “civilized” societies and those found in societies which we call “primitive”. The most striking contrast concerns the position of the individual family which in modern societies has often been taken to be the only significant socio-economic grouping based on kinship, whereas in primitive societies it is usually integrated with wider groupings of kinsfolk such as lineage, clan, or extended family. And in regard to modern societies a contrast has often been drawn between kinship in rural and in urban communities. It has been widely held that the modern phenomena of urbanization, migration and industrialization must necessarily weaken or destroy bonds of kinship beyond those existing within the individual family.

Firth (1956) and his collaborators were the first to demonstrate that extended kinship bonds can be extremely important even in such a highly urbanized society as London, and their work has opened up wide opportunities for investigations in which the techniques of social anthropology (which is so largely concerned with kinship) can be of use to the sociologist in the study of modern societies.

One most promising field for such investigations is French Canada, where historic events have set the stage for the testing of many hypotheses concerning the role of kinship in modern societies.

The region of the St. Lawrence River was first exploited by France during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the primary basis of this exploitation being the fur trade. In 1606 Samuel de Champlain founded the city of Quebec, and agricultural settlements, largely self-sufficient, began to grow

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along both banks of the lower St. Lawrence, though the fur trade continued to flourish and spread westward as the fur-bearing animals were progressively exterminated. The habitants of the St. Lawrence agricultural settlements lived in small parishes in which the parish priest played an important part as religious and secular leader – the whole of New France was solidly Catholic, as are the communities of French Canadians today.

This was the situation which the English met after Wolfe captured Quebec in 1759. The subsequent social and political conflicts between the two major ethnic groups in Canada (Wade 1950; Lower 1946) are beyond the scope of this paper, but the memories of them are relevant to French Canadian attitudes today. These are marked by a consciousness that they were the first Europeans in Canada; that they were conquered by the English and subsequently betrayed by France by the cession of Canada in 1763; that they must protect their language and their Catholicism against the predominantly Protestant English majority; and that their way of life, especially in regard to kinship, is superior to that of the English.

The settlements of the St. Lawrence habitants remained very much as they were until the middle of the nineteenth century, when the growing pressure of population on a limited area of fertile land produced extensive migration to industrial towns in New England and in Quebec itself (Faucher and Lamontagne 1953). After 1870, with the opening up of Western Canada, a new trend in migration developed: French Canadians from both Quebec and New England established communities in Manitoba (Howard 1952; Morton 1957) one of which forms the subject of the study reported here.

Kinship had, and still has, certain important organising functions among the rural communities of Quebec (Gérin 1898 and 1937; Miner 1939; Rioux 1954). When sociologists became aware of the trends of migration, urbanization and industrialization mentioned above, they tended to assume that either these trends would produce atrophy of French Canadian cultural elements (including kinship) or that adherence to these “archaic” elements would militate against the successful adjustment of French Canadians to modern conditions. In this they were supported by leading French Canadian churchmen who had always held up the simple, closely knit, village community, in which material advantage was regarded as secondary to spiritual values, as the ideal of French Canadian life. They feared that departure from this ideal would mean the collapse of French Canadian values, including those connected with kinship.

Such predictions have not been confirmed by Garigue’s studies of kinship in the city of Montreal and in the mining town of Schefferville (1958: 63–76; 88–102) where French Canadian kinship usages, far from becoming atrophied, have assumed new functions which have helped the communities concerned in the social and economic adjustments which they have been forced to make. It is therefore interesting further to test the hypothesis of the correlation of “progress” with degeneration of kinship in a comparatively new Canadian community of a different type. This I attempted to do during a period of ten