

THE LEAGUE OF THE IROQUOIS

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Origins

THE origins of the Iroquois are shrouded in the mists of pre-history. There is no certainty or even agreement of probability as to how the Indians of America came to inhabit the North American continent. It is not even known where the Iroquois lived in North America before they began to establish domination over the area from the Hudson River to Lake Erie and from the St. Lawrence River to the Susquehanna Valley.

To the primitive Iroquois the problem of their origin was solved by the "Creation Myth," which told of a sky-world of gods who resembled the Iroquois. As the story goes, one of the young ladies was pregnant and kept her husband busy collecting the strange assortment of foods pregnant women are supposed to crave. In the middle of the sky-world grew a great elm tree especially sacred and not to be mutilated. Naturally, the woman wanted to eat of the roots of this tree. Her husband knew it was wrong, but to quiet her he dug some roots of the sacred tree for her. In so doing, he inadvertently broke through the crust of the sky-world. The woman, being curious, looked through the hole. Whether she then slipped and fell or her husband pushed her is a moot question. At any rate, fall she did — to the water far below — still clutching the roots of the sacred elm. The birds stretched their wings to support her on the way down, and a great sea turtle surfaced to give a dry resting place. Fish dove to the bottom of the ocean floor for soil in which she could plant the life-giving roots. The woman started walking in a circle around the planted roots, moving in the same direction the sun moves. All Indian dances still move in this same direction. At the proper time the woman was delivered of a daughter, who in turn grew up and gave birth to twin sons, fathered in all probability by the West Wind. The birth of the twins killed their

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mother since one was so obstinate as to insist on being born through his mother's left armpit. The twins continued to be exact opposites — the one obstinate and deceitful, the other honest and upright. When they buried their mother, from her grave grew the Three Sisters — corn, beans, and squash. Having equal creative powers, the twins made all the other living plants and animals, known even to this day. The deceitful twin created the poisonous plants and the creatures of prey. The upright twin created the beneficial plants and gentle animals in greater proliferation. The upright twin created men of clay and baked them in a fire. Those baked too little were white; those baked too much were Negro; those done just right were Indian. The twins fought continually, engaging in duels, games of chance, and soul-searching in an effort to determine the supremacy of one over the other. In the soul-searching the inner consciousness of the upright twin lied, while the inner consciousness of the deceitful twin told the truth. Thus, the upright twin succeeded in killing his brother and throwing him over the edge of the earth. The deceitful twin did not really die and became ruler of the world of darkness. The grandmother, who had favored the deceitful twin, became enraged at the remaining twin who killed her, throwing her head into the sky to become Grandmother Moon.

If parts of the preceding myth sound familiar, rest assured the Iroquois were in firm possession of it long before they had any contact with other beliefs. Even more amazing is the fact that it was a story evolved logically by the Indian mind as opposed to the revelatory nature of other stories of creation. Along with the creation myth, the Iroquois have another great myth — the "Confederacy Myth." This is the myth establishing the Iroquois Confederacy, their Great Law, and Great Peace. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's long narrative poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*, introduces every schoolchild to the great hero of the Confederacy. For many years great chiefs of the Iroquois continued to inherit the name of Hiawatha.

In these two myths all of Iroquoian culture has its roots, explanations, and reason for existence.

Economy and Technology

The Iroquoian technology and economy are so closely related as to be one. The Iroquois lived in, on, and of the forest. Their tools were made from the forest to be used on the forest. They had a mixed economy of hunting and farming until the white man's coming forced them into a trading economy that ultimately led to their subordination.

They had no money. The men did the hunting, and the women did the farming. Some were specially trained for political, religious, and social roles. Individuals performed complete tasks in the manufacturing of articles for personal and social rewards.

The village consisted of a group of longhouses and several smaller buildings of bark construction surrounded by a high stockade fence located on the high ground of the banks of a stream, river, or lake. They had no knowledge of well drilling. The abundance of surface water in their domain obviated the necessity for learning or devising well-drilling methods. Having no idea of soil preservation, crop rotation, or generalized fertilization, it was necessary for them to move the entire village every twenty years. Also, in twenty years the game would be hunted out of the area. They grew corn, beans, squash, and tobacco, and fished as well as hunted. When it was time to move a village, the men went ahead and cleared a spot for the village and fields by alternately burning and chipping with stone axes at trees until all was in readiness for the rest of the populace to follow.

They built canoes of bark, lightweight enough to be carried overland from one waterway to another by one or two men. They used the waterways without altering them. This was typical of their general life. They were orderly and unhurried, using space and the stars for orientation.

Corn was the mainstay of their economy and technology. In addition to eating it fresh, dried, and ground into a flour in hundreds of recipes, they used the cobs for fuel and the husks for the manufacture of mats, baskets, sieves, and masks. Medicine tubes were made from the stalks, and the green leaves were used for bandages. They buried their surplus corn in bark-lined pits — dried, it would keep for one year, and charred, it would keep longer. White people copied many of the Iroquois agricultural methods, most visibly the odd-shaped corn-crib for drying corn.

Another large part of the Iroquois economy and technology was built around their hunting methods. The deer provided food and clothing and inspired the invention of many of the tools necessary for the conversion of a live, free animal to the Indians' use. The braves would go out in a hunting party of several days journey, carrying with them dried cakes of corn mixed with maple syrup. They would dry and cure the meat and hides at the site of the slaying and would pack them in bark barrels for transport home. The method used was so efficient one man could carry a dozen deer. Back home, the cured venison was

stored in deerskin-lined pits. There has never been a better way of tanning skins devised than the Iroquois method. They first removed, with a wooden blade or stone scraper, the hair and skin grain with the hide stretched over a cylindrical beam. The skin was next soaked in water in which a cake made of animal brains and moss had been boiled. Afterwards the skin was smoked. Skins tanned in this way are not ruined by getting wet.

Stone was used to make gouges shaped like a convex chisel, mortars for grinding corn, tomahawks, and war clubs. The Indian arrowhead was of flint and mounted on a slim wooden shaft with twisted feathers at the other end. The ingenious twist to the feathers caused the arrow to revolve in flight, thereby gaining greater speed and force of penetration.

Two other inventions of the Indian were the snowshoe, on which he was able to gain great speed — enough to overtake a bear — and an airgun made from a tube of alderwood — with which he shot birds. Much of the Iroquois technology was lost through disuse after contact with the whites. With the coming of the white man, the copper-colored man spent more time fighting and hunting for furs to trade with the white man in exchange for cloth material, metal pots and utensils, and guns and ammunition.

Social Organization

The greatness of a social culture must in the long run be judged by the effectiveness of its government. As long as the Iroquois remained a closed society, their government was the greatest ever known in terms of the ultimate in individual freedom. Montesquieu said, "Inequality between governors and governed or between governors leads to disorder," and there was no disorder in the Confederacy. It is only natural that this be so, for the Iroquois mind was careful, kind, patient, quiet, and orderly. Recognizing the dual nature of man, the Iroquois were gentle in peace and barbarous in war. Even the women tortured prisoners brought home by the men. Those prisoners who survived the torture were adopted into the family as if born into it. Prisoners were never exchanged.

The Confederacy originally consisted of five Indian nations: the Mohawks (Keepers of the Eastern Gate), the Cayugas, the Onondagas (Keepers of the Central Fire), the Oneida, and the Seneca (Keepers of the Western Gate). In the early eighteenth century, the Tuscaroras, situated along the southern borders of the Con-

federacy, joined it as the sixth nation. The Tuscaroras had been driven out of the Carolinas by the white men and were called the Shirted-Ones. Certain words in their language indicated they had lived in the vicinity of Montreal before their migration to the Carolinas. Each nation had eight tribes or clans: Wolf, Deer, Bear, Beaver, Heron, Turtle, Snipe, and Hawk. The clans were all brothers and thus could never war against each other. The Iroquois must always marry outside his own clan. Descent was matrilineal. This way there could be no argument as the mother was always known no matter who might be the father. The line was also assured, as warriors could be killed in battle.

The Confederacy was ruled by sachems who formed a hereditary oligarchy — hereditary insofar as each tribe owned a certain number of positions, but elective among the male members of each tribe by their women. It might be supposed this practice would inspire the men to be nice to the women. Each nation could have any number of elected chiefs for local rule. The Confederacy had two hereditary war chiefs, but any brave who could inspire others to follow him on a warpath was a spontaneous and temporary war chief.

When the Great Council met at the council fire of the Onondagas, all had a chance to voice an opinion. They divided themselves into groups of four. Each group would decide upon one opinion and send a spokesman to be part of a new group of four to form again one opinion. When all the elected chiefs could speak with one voice, their sachems were told of their opinions. The sachems then repeated the process until the chief sachem could speak for the Confederacy with one voice. The Confederacy abolished cannibalism and looked for world peace. Each Iroquois belonged to a fireside family, a longhouse family, a clan, a phratry or moiety, a nation and the Confederacy.

A longhouse was constructed of bark and without a ridgepole. It would accommodate approximately fifty people and had a center aisle with five family fires in depressions in the earth of the center aisle. The roof had five holes for smoke to escape. On each side of the center aisle were elevated compartments in which each family slept and kept their belongings. Each longhouse was dominated by the eldest woman and inhabited by her blood relations. The clan contained several longhouse families. A phratry would be groupings of clans. Since the eight clans of the Iroquois sorted themselves into two groups called big and little brothers, their groups were called moieties within each nation of the Confederacy. This system was conservative, although the possi-

bility of expansion was limitless, and it did allow for progress. Had the white man in such vast numbers not appeared for several hundred more years, it is entirely possible the Iroquois would have had a coast to coast Confederacy, for in addition to individual freedom there was an essential, logical identity with the accompanying security.

To move away from the governmental structure and deal a bit more with the social life, marriage practices are a good jumping-off point. Marriages were arranged by the mothers without the knowledge of the prospective bride and groom. In primitive times warriors of twenty-five were married to women of forty while warriors of sixty were married to girls of twenty. Gradually this changed until the couples were nearer the same age — around twenty. The bride took cakes to her prospective mother-in-law to prove she would be a good hostess, for the Iroquois were a very hospitable people, and the first thing a woman must do is feed the stranger at her fire as well as her own family members. The mother of the groom gave venison to the bride's mother to prove that her son was a great provider. With that exchange of gifts, the couple was considered married. The groom then moved into the longhouse of the bride, and their children belonged to her clan. The mothers-in-law always settled any disputes to arise between the couple. Primitive divorce was censured and then became too frequent. Property rights remained separate to both during marriage. The land was owned by the Iroquois nation, and the right to use specific land was inheritable through the women. This law is in effect to this day. There was no social mixing of the sexes as women were considered to be inferior — although one cannot help wondering in what way. Crimes could be paid for and forgotten. Theft was unknown, and the Iroquois had a great love for truth.

Religion and Symbolism

Many of the social customs of the Iroquois are closely allied with their religious and symbolic culture. As noted earlier, the creation myth was not based on revelation. Rather, the Iroquois used inductive reasoning, based on nature, to arrive at the Great Spirit and also an Evil Spirit with lesser spirits as aides to the Great Spirit. They had a belief in a hell, a purgatory, and a heaven. Witchcraft, murder, and infanticide were unforgivable sins. They held public confession of sins as an aid to shape the future conduct of individuals. They showed respect for their dead and provided them with the accoutrements for the long journey to heaven. The dead needed nothing when they

reached heaven, as it was an ideal place. The rituals for the dead helped the people to share their burden of grief. Interestingly enough, George Washington is the only white man in the Indian heaven.

The Iroquois had six festivals of thanksgiving and invocation with speeches, songs, dances, music, feasts, games, and dream guessing. These festivals were the Maple as thanks for sweet water, Planting to bless the seed, Strawberry as thanks for the first fruit, Green Corn as thanks for the ripening of vegetables, Harvest as thanks for the crop, and New Years as a great jubilee when a white dog was sacrificed. At all festivals they smoked tobacco tempered with sumac leaves. The rising smoke carried their messages to the Great Spirit. By dream guessing, individuals set themselves right with the world around them — a face-saving action that would work only within a closed society. An individual went from fire to fire until someone guessed his dream or someone said something that would satisfy him.

In 1800, the institution of a new religion — really an enlargement of the old — was preached by Handsome Lake, a Seneca sachem of the Turtle Tribe and half-brother to Cornplanter. Handsome Lake claimed to have had a divine revelation and primarily preached temperance, love for one another, attendance at religious instructions, permission to eat domestic meat, observance of feast days and old laws, and he included a graphic description of heaven and hell. The only actual changes he accomplished were the eating of domestic meat and a reduction of the period of mourning from one year to ten days. How much of the rejection of Handsome Lake's theology was due to the logical mind of the Indian and how much to their enjoyment of alcohol is a debatable point. At any rate, Handsome Lake was not a hero at home — although the meetings conducted by him and his later disciples were great occasions for socializing.

The Iroquois language was not written until the nineteenth century. Much meaning was given to the inflection placed on each syllable. With no labials this was not easy. Try talking without touching your lips together. Primitive languages have few words and therefore rely on the complex construction of declensions and conjugations to say the same thing for which English has many words. Many present-day place names are a beautiful legacy from the Iroquois — names like Chautauqua, Ohio, Niagara Falls, Schenectady, Oswego, Tioga, Allegheny, and many others.

Symbolic of the Iroquois culture were their animal and object decorations; endless fables; dances; concerts with flutes, rattles, and

drums ; and games. Nothing was done without a reason, and to every act there was a reason — even medicine. To partake in curing others, an Iroquois had to have himself recovered from a grave illness. He would then be required to make a mask of the creature he had seen while ill. The privilege of joining the False-Face Society was extended to him, and he became a practicing medicine man with all power to cure.

An Iroquois's name contained the thinking part of his soul and was his until his death, unless he turned it back into the name pool and got another. Names were given by the women. The primitive Iroquois had no last names. Some of their names required religious or political responsibilities.

Present and Future

What now of the Iroquois? Their way of life has altered drastically. The longhouse is gone — more than just the structure. The Iroquois still hold part of their original lands as a reservation. The land is held in common with the title vested in the people who have no right to transfer the title to each other or to non-Indians. The Iroquois have continually intermarried with whites since the white man first came. They rent their land to white farmers. Some work in the white world but live on the reservation — most notably as high-structural steel workers as well as in many other occupations. Some have left the reservation entirely, although they still own land there. The independent Indian thinker can see how enormous a crutch the reservation is ; for if an Indian cannot make a living away from the reservation, he can always go back to it. To do away with the reservation and divide the land among the remaining Iroquois might be the answer. There is essentially no difference between reservation care and welfare care when both are viewed as crutches stifling private initiative. The Iroquois have come a long way since they were first provided with the opportunity for a general education in 1846.

The manifest destiny for which the Iroquois Confederacy stood can only be achieved by participation in the control of that destiny — as taxpayers and voters.