The League of the Iroquois

by Matthew Dennis



Letter to William Johnson, British commissioner of Northern Indian Affairs, 1761. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

No Native people affected the course of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American history more than the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, of present-day upstate New York. Historians have been attempting to explain how and why ever since, and central to their explanations is the remarkable political and diplomatic structure, the League of the Iroquois. The League has fascinated us for hundreds of years. In the seventeenth century, this Native confederacy united the Five Iroquois Nations—the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas—into something more than an alliance but something less than a single, monolithic polity. In the eighteenth century, the incorporation of the Tuscaroras made it the Six Nations of the Iroquois.

The Iroquois demanded attention. Their strategic geographic position, diplomatic savvy, military might, and astonishing resilience captivated white officials, settlers, and observers throughout the colonial period and beyond. To advance their goals, colonial authorities were forced to work with, against, or through the Iroquois League. Yet such engagement was often built not on genuine understanding of the Iroquois worldview, society, and politics, but on ethnocentric projections of white visions and desires. Into the present, such fantasies continue to enthrall us, and prevent us from understanding the Haudenosaunee and their history.

In the eighteenth century, English colonial authorities artfully imagined that the Iroquois held dominion over an exaggerated range of lands and peoples, and, by claiming the Iroquois as their client, they extended their own authority over those territories and Native communities, at least conceptually. Iroquois power was real, but an Iroquois European-style “empire” was not.

Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests that the Iroquois began to consolidate as a people in what is now central New York State about a thousand years ago. Their ethnic and cultural composition predates the formation of their famous League of Peace, and scholars are divided about the timing of its origin. Some date it to the fifteenth century, some earlier, and some argue that it was a late adaptive response to European colonialism in the early seventeenth century. But it seems clear that the spirit and purpose of the League is ancient, even if its precise framework, protocols, and offices are not.

In Iroquoia—the Five Nations’ homeland between the Mohawk and Genesee Rivers in central New York—the Haudenosaunee sought to construct a cultural landscape of peace, security, and prosperity. Intermarriage, interlocking kinship ties, and an elaborate clan organization wove together the various tribes and communities and undergirded political alliance and cooperation. Archaeologists have discerned these patterns in the ways that the first millennium ancestors of the historic Iroquois consolidated their villages over time, moved closer to one another, domesticated more space, and increased the dimensions of their longhouses.

For the Iroquois, these longhouses—traditional multifamily dwellings—symbolized and embodied their expanding world of peace, as the structures’ end-walls could be removed and more hearths added to accommodate new families who joined the Haudenosaunee through marriage, adoption, or amalgamation. As Horatio Hale, the late-nineteenth-century ethnologist and student of the Iroquois, explained, “Such was the figure by which the founders of the confederacy represented their political structure, a figure which was in itself a description and an invitation. It declared that the united nations were not distinct tribes, associated by a temporary league, but one great family, clustered for convenience about separate hearths in a common dwelling.”[6] Peace and security would expand as potentially hostile space was transformed into a place of domesticity. Hale likely overstated the extent of political integration. The Iroquois continued to value localism, and their communities retained considerable autonomy, but throughout the colonial period the People of the Longhouse, bound together by their League, often acted in coordinated fashion as they pursued common social, political, and economic objectives.

The Iroquois ideal of peace appears most clearly in the great chartering myth embodied in their epic of the Peacemaker. In some remote time, the Iroquois believe, their world was roiled by incessant violence and dangerous chaos. A great prophet emerged who ended the internecine bloodshed, unified the people, and provided a new moral order and charter of peace known as the Great Law. Through laws, rites, and everyday practices, the Iroquois institutionalized peace. The Peacemaker’s diplomacy ultimately won the support of each of the Five Nations, with his greatest triumph being the pacification of a powerful and maleficent Onondaga chief, Thadodaho. Subsequently, Thadodaho become the new League’s leading sachem—the “first among equals” that included some fifty confederacy chiefs—and Onondaga became the place of the central council fire. The successor “federal chiefs” embody the founders in name and position and are arrayed not merely by tribe but also on the basis of clans, which cut across Iroquois nations. This complicated social and political structure lent greater strength and unity to the League. Some scholars argue that unity and peace at home enabled Iroquois aggression abroad; others see the warfare that enveloped the Iroquois in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a more defensive response to the complicated geopolitics of a North America roiled by colonialism.

The protocols of the League mirrored and modeled practices in everyday Iroquois social and political life. When one of its members died, for example, the fifty League chiefs divided themselves into two sides (according to a division among clans), with the bereaved group receiving condolence from the other, which conducted mourning and burial rites and raised up a new chief. Grief could cause rash action that might imperil peace, and such condolence and requickening ceremonies—for common people as well as chiefs—restored calm and returned reason, locally and throughout Iroquoia.

Iroquois Constitution - Council Organization

The Organization of the Council

5. The Council of the Mohawk shall be divided into three parties as follows: Tekarihoken, Ayonhwhathah and Shadekariwade are the first party; Sharenhowaneh, Deyoenhegwenh and Oghrenghrehgowah are the second party, and Dehennakrineh, Aghstawenserenthah and Shoskoharowaneh are the third party. The third party is to listen only to the discussion of the first and second parties and if an error is made or the proceeding is irregular they are to call attention to it, and when the case is right and properly decided by the two parties they shall confirm the decision of the two parties and refer the case to the Seneca Lords for their decision. When the Seneca Lords have decided in accord with the Mohawk Lords, the case or question shall be referred to the Cayuga and Oneida Lords on the opposite side of the house.

6. I, Dekanawidah, appoint the Mohawk Lords the heads and the leaders of the Five Nations Confederacy. The Mohawk Lords are the foundation of the Great Peace and it shall, therefore, be against the Great Binding Law to pass measures in the Confederate Council after the Mohawk Lords have protested against them. No council of the Confederate Lords shall be legal unless all the Mohawk Lords are present.

9. All the business of the Five Nations Confederate Council shall be conducted by the two combined bodies of Confederate Lords. First the question shall be passed upon by the Mohawk and Seneca Lords, then it shall be discussed and passed by the Oneida and Cayuga Lords. Their decisions shall then be referred to the Onondaga Lords, (Fire Keepers) for final judgement. The same process shall obtain when a question is brought before the council by an individual or a War Chief.

10. In all cases the procedure must be as follows: when the Mohawk and Seneca Lords have unanimously agreed upon a question, they shall report their decision to the Cayuga and Oneida Lords who shall deliberate upon the question and report a unanimous decision to the Mohawk Lords. The Mohawk Lords will then report the standing of the case to the Firekeepers, who shall render a decision as they see fit in case of a disagreement by the two bodies, or confirm the decisions of the two bodies if they are identical. The Fire Keepers shall then report their decision to the Mohawk Lords who shall announce it to the open council.

11. If through any misunderstanding or obstinacy on the part of the Fire Keepers, they render a decision at variance with that of the Two Sides, the Two Sides shall reconsider the matter and if their decisions are jointly the same as before they shall report to the Fire Keepers who are then compelled to confirm their joint decision.

12. When a case comes before the Onondaga Lords (Fire Keepers) for discussion and decision, Adodarho shall introduce the matter to his comrade Lords who shall then discuss it in their two bodies. Every Onondaga Lord except Hononwiretonh shall deliberate and he shall listen only. When a unanimous decision shall have been reached by the two bodies of Fire Keepers, Adodarho shall notify Hononwiretonh of the fact when he shall confirm it. He shall refuse to confirm a decision if it is not unanimously agreed upon by both sides of the Fire Keepers.

15. No individual or foreign nation interested in a case, question or proposition shall have any voice in the Confederate Council except to answer a question put to him or them by the speaker for the Lords.

16. If the conditions which shall arise at any future time call for an addition to or change of this law, the case shall be carefully considered and if a new beam seems necessary or beneficial, the proposed change shall be voted upon and if adopted it shall be called, "Added to the Rafters".



Games and Leisure: Lacrosse

Modern day lacrosse descends from and resembles games played by various [Native American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_peoples_of_the_Americas) communities. These include games called *dehuntshigwa'es* in [Onondaga](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Onondaga_language) ("men hit a rounded object"), *da-nah-wah'uwsdi* in [Eastern Cherokee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cherokee_language) ("little war"), *Tewaarathon* in [Mohawk language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohawk_language) ("little brother of war"), *baaga`adowe* in [Ojibwe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ojibwe_language) ("bump hips")[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_lacrosse#cite_note-2) and *kabucha* in [Choctaw](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choctaw_language).[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_lacrosse#cite_note-Chahta_Anumpa-3)

Lacrosse is one of the oldest [team sports](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Team_sport) in North America. There is evidence that a version of lacrosse originated in what is now America as early as the 17th century.[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_lacrosse#cite_note-4)[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_lacrosse#cite_note-5) Native American lacrosse was played throughout modern Canada, but was most popular around the [Great Lakes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Lakes), [Mid-Atlantic seaboard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mid-Atlantic_states), and [American South](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_South).

Traditional lacrosse games were sometimes major events that could last several days. As many as 100 to 1,000 men from opposing villages or tribes would participate. The games were played in open plains located between the two villages, and the goals could range from 500 yards (460 m) to six miles apart.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_lacrosse#cite_note-STX-6)

Rules for these games were decided on the day before. Generally there was no out-of-bounds, and the ball could not be touched with the hands. The goals would be selected as large rocks or trees; in later years wooden posts were used. Playing time was often from sun up until sun down.

There are traditionally three areas of scoring on the stickball pole. There is a mark, about chest high on the pole, and when scored above, awards one point. Contact below that point is not scored. The top half of the pole, well above arms reach, is worth two points when hit. The very top of the pole, usually embellished with a large figure of a fish, is worth three points. In recreational games, scoring is loosely kept, most times by the audience or a few players. Games typically reach around twenty points before concluding.[*[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*]

The game began with the [ball](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lacrosse_ball) being tossed into the air and the two sides rushing to catch it. Because of the large number of players involved, these games generally tended to involve a huge mob of players swarming the ball and slowly moving across the field. Passing the ball was thought of as a trick, and it was seen as cowardly to dodge an opponent.[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_lacrosse#cite_note-7)

The medicine men acted as coaches, and the women of the tribe were usually limited to serving refreshments to the players.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_lacrosse#cite_note-8) (There was also a [women's version](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_lacrosse) of lacrosse called amtahcha, which used much shorter sticks with larger heads.

 Artwork:

The artwork of the Iroquois is a huge part of the culture. Iroquois art like many forms of art tends to represent the beliefs of its creators and the heritage of the creators people. Each piece of art carries with it the history and in many cases the legend in which their lives and beliefs are based.

    For example  Iroquois art pieces  such as the faceless  doll, which is the origin of the cornhusk doll which was very popular amongst children of the European settlers. "The faceless doll carried the legend of one of the three sisters of the Iroquois, Corn, Beans, and Squash. The corn spirit had a doll made from her husks by the creator and she eventually became so concerned with her vanity that the creator took her reflection to teach her a lesson. The lesson behind this is that appearance isn't everything!"

   More commonly the Iroquois have their art implemented  on clothing and accessories. Possibly their best known “art” is  the usage of beads. Beads are doughnut-like rings that are connected through threads usually made out of animal tendons. Beads are carved out of wood, bones, rocks and jewelries. The Iroquois also enjoyed making clothes. Their clothes are very vibrant in colours.

    The Iroquois tribes were also known for their mask carving. Iroquois masks are considered a sacred form of art that outsiders, even today are still not permitted to view many of them.  The more demanding porcupine quilwork is more freely displayed by the Iroquois in their many forms of head wear, dresses etc. The Iroquois Indians also crafted  wampum out of white and purple shell beads. Wampum beads were sometimes traded as a kind of currency, but they were more culturally important as an art material. The designs and symbols on Iroquois wampum belts often told a story or represented a person's family.

    Thus in conclusion we can see that much of the artwork created by the Iroquois were symbolic. From an artistic standpoint the Iroquois  were very creative and resourceful people who were able to create beautiful works of art from the earth around them. Hence making the Iroquois a unique first nations tribe.

 

