

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Woman Who Fell From the Sky

The five Iroquois-speaking nations were, from east to west, the Mohawk (on the Atlantic coast), the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga (in central New York), and the Seneca (in the Lake Erie area). The Iroquois earned lasting fame by creating a great political organization, called the League of the Iroquois or the Confederacy of the Five Nations, in 1452. In its time, the League was more democratic than any other form of government, and it existed for more than 300 years. In fact, the League was such an impressive political structure that it influenced the formulation of the United States Constitution.

The fathers of the Iroquois League were Hiawatha, an Onondaga chief, and Deganawida, a Huron, each of whom had been adopted by the Mohawk nation. Organizing the League took political talent. The Onondaga joined on the condition that they would chair the council. Deganawida persuaded the fifth nation, the Seneca, to join by telling them to watch the sun when their corn became knee-high. They joined when, following his advice, they witnessed a total solar eclipse. The League enlarged to six nations in 1722, when the Tuscarora, an Iroquois nation that was then living in North Carolina, was admitted.

The Iroquois League was designed to facilitate equality, peace, and prosperity among its member nations. It was only concerned with the issue of war. The members decided that war could not occur without a unanimous vote, and that all the member nations would fight together on the same side. This agreement was a particularly great accomplishment, since the major way to achieve honor, fame, and glory was through war.

The League was run by fifty sachems or clan leaders, who had been nominated by women of noble rank in their nation and had been approved by their own nation's council. Each nation had proportional representation in the council. A second group of representatives—leaders who were called Pine Trees—could speak but not vote.

The Iroquois lived in stockaded villages that were organized according to matrilineal lines. All property was inherited through the mother. The women owned the houses in which they lived, taking their husbands in to live with them as visitors. The

male head of the family was the brother of the oldest sister. Sisters and daughters lived in the same longhouse, which was large enough to house eight to ten families.

The women also owned the land and farmed their family's fields. They grew corn, squash, and beans. The Iroquois called the three crops the Three Sisters, believing that the crops were guarded by three spirit sisters.

In 1614, the Dutch navigated the Hudson River and built Fort Orange where Albany, New York, is located. The Iroquois traded beaver furs for Dutch guns and became wealthy and powerful. However, by the mid-1600s, they had exhausted the local beaver supply. In order to acquire the furs they needed to continue their trade, the Iroquois moved west and, in 1648, conquered the Huron, who also spoke the Iroquois language.

The Revolutionary War destroyed the Iroquois League by dividing the nations. The Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga peoples supported the British, while the Oneida and Tuscarora peoples supported the Americans. Consequently, in January 1777, the League's great council fire was extinguished in a formal ceremony. In the years after the war, many of the Iroquois were given the land near Brantford, Ontario, that is known as the Six Nations Reserve. Today, more than 7,000 Iroquois live in that area. In the United States, most of the Oneida moved to Wisconsin in 1832, and most of the Seneca moved to Oklahoma.

The Iroquois council fire was rekindled in the 1960s. As of 1971, the six nations were located on six reservations and had formed a modern republic. Many Iroquois continue to live within the Iroquois tradition, adhering to the values of their people and participating in longhouse ceremonies under the leadership of one of their chiefs.

The Huron, who call themselves the Wendat, were originally a confederation of four nations, numbering between 45,000 and 60,000 people when the Europeans first encountered them. The Huron lived in Ontario in large villages of from 4,000 to 6,000 people until the Iroquois destroyed most of them in 1648. The Huron took the side of the British in the Revolutionary War. Since 1867, many of them have lived in Oklahoma.

APPEAL AND VALUE

The special relationship between a divine grandparent and grandchild and the adventures of twin brothers are both common themes in mythology. When one twin is good and the other is evil, the twins can be viewed as representing the capability of any one human being to be both kind and cruel.

The Iroquois creation myth is remarkably similar from one Iroquois-speaking nation to another. One of the oldest versions was recorded by David Cusick, a Tuscarora Iroquois historian, whose *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations* was first published in 1827. The oldest Huron version was related in 1874 by a seventy-five-year-old Huron sub-chief who had heard it as a child from those who had been alive in the mid-eighteenth century. It appears as part of Horatio Hale's "Huron Folklore," published in 1888. J. N. B. Hewitt, an important mythographer of Tuscarora descent, specialized in the Iroquois creation myth and collected detailed Mohawk, Seneca, and Onondaga versions for the Bureau of American Ethnology.