

The Iroquois League: Deganawidah and Hiawatha

The Iroquois League represents a radical departure from all previous models. It was the first confederation of equal nations, and did not rest on the idea of monarchy. The Five Nations' Confederacy traces its origin to the historical legend of the White Roots of Peace.

Some modern authors have claimed that the ideas put forth by the Iroquois served as a blueprint for the American Constitution. The proof brought forth is very eloquent, but not conclusive. It rests primarily on Benjamin's Franklin relationship with the Five Nations and his knowledge of their traditions. Although the Iroquois League was a key influence in the birth of the American federal system, it is obviously not the only one. The colonists also had a long tradition of compacts and constitutions hearkening back to Anglo-Saxon tradition. We need not invoke a link of causality between two such different societies as the Iroquois and the American. It is the Iroquois social construct—its spiritual underpinnings detectable in the legend—rather than its political structure, which lives and plunges its roots into the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. Therefore it is significant that Benjamin Franklin acknowledged that outlook, and that it later played such a prominent role in the formation of the American ideal.

One Legend, Many Versions

There are many versions of this historical legend. Besides Paul A. W. Wallace's *The White Roots of Peace*, other useful retellings of the legend are the following:

The Iroquois Book of Rites, Horatio Hale, 1969, AMS Press, New York.

Parker on the Iroquois, Arthur C. Parker, 1968, Syracuse University Press.

Wilderness Messiah: the Story of Hiawatha and the Iroquois, Thomas R. Henry, 1955, Bonanza Books, New York.

Hiawatha, Founder of the Iroquois Confederacy, Nancy Bonvillain.

The accuracy of the sources relating the events varies according to the kind of witnesses recording them and the time of these recordings. Some versions are obviously shorter renderings trimmed of any legendary character and made fit for a more modern, rational ear. The most noticeable variations lie in the identification of Hiawatha and Deganawidah in one single individual Hiawatha, and the deletion of the virgin birth. Of all the versions known, I will refer mainly to Paul Wallace's retelling, taken from three different sources at the turn of the nineteenth century. Wallace was a thorough interpreter of Iroquois culture and was completely immersed in their way of thinking. We will occasionally use other sources to amplify Wallace's version.

The Iroquois, as they were called by the French, occupied the northern portion of present-day New York State in a territory extending roughly between the Genesee and Hudson Rivers. The Confederacy comprised the five tribes of Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Oneidas, and Mohawks. The symbol of their legend, the tree of the white

roots, stands for *peace* in the larger sense of the word, a peace that in their language corresponds with Law; in other words, Sacred Law.

The events related in the Legend of the White Roots of Peace occurred between 1400 and 1500, most likely around 1450. However, some methods of dating place the founding of the league at an earlier stage, some two centuries before. (See sidebar)

The Legend of the White Roots of Peace

Deganawidah, the central hero of the history, was born among the Huron, a tribe on the north shore of Lake Ontario. He was a foreigner, not from the Five Nations. He was the son of a virgin and his name, meaning “Master of Things,” was revealed to his grandmother by an appearance of the Great Spirit. Deganawidah’s declared mission was to bring peace and spread what he called the “New Mind” among the nations. He wanted to turn his back on war and revenge, and bring about a new law. Although he was an exalted being, Deganawidah had a stutter.

When Deganawidah had grown to manhood, he set out toward the rising sun, riding in a white canoe made of stone, knowing that he would not return. He arrived on the southern shore of Lake Ontario in Iroquois territory, which at that time was ravaged by strife, and went from one settlement to another spreading the word of peace. After visiting these settlements, Deganawidah went to the house of a woman “who lived by the warrior’s path that passed between the east and west.” To the woman Deganawidah recited the message of peace, which he divided into three parts: *righteousness*, the desire to see justice embodied; *health*, meaning harmony of body and mind, and the foundation for peace; and *power*, based on law that has the backing of force, but a force that translates the desire of the “Holder of the Heavens.”

To answer the woman’s question of which form this message would take in the world, Deganawidah foretold what would later be known as the Longhouse, “the house of many fires,” symbol of a confederacy of equals. The woman embraced the message, and Deganawidah gave her the name *Jigonhsasee*, meaning the “New Face that embodies the New Mind,” and told her that she would be remembered as “Mother of Nations.”

Upon leaving the woman, Deganawidah proceeded toward the sunrise, knowing that he would have to meet with “the man who eats humans” in Onondaga territory. Arriving at the man’s hut, Deganawidah climbed on the roof and stood waiting with his head next to the smoke hole. The man returned home with a corpse and set the kettle over the fire. On the surface of the water, he saw Deganawidah’s face, and he believed it to be his own reflection. Detecting in it a strength and wisdom that he had never imagined before, he started questioning his cannibalistic habits. This change of mind brought him sorrow at the realization of the evil he had committed. Thus moved, he pondered what needed to be done in order to compensate for the pain he had caused. At that moment, Deganawidah entered the hut, appearing to the man. The latter related his experience, and Deganawidah offered him the means of redressing his wrongs by explaining to him the “Good News of Peace and Power.” From then on, the cannibal would have the name *Hiawatha* (which means “he who combs”). At the same time, he was given the task and challenge of enlisting the wizard Atotarho to their cause.

Atotarho, whose name means “entangled,” was versed in the arts of magic. He had “a twisted body and a twisted mind, and his hair was a mass of tangled snakes.” He struck terror in his enemies and held great power. His cry “*Hwe-do-ne-e-e-e-eh*,” meaning “When shall this be?” was said to be “the mocking cry of the doubter who killed men by destroying their faith.” He could strike his enemies even at great distances. Before setting Hiawatha on his new task, Deganawidah visited the wizard and announced to him the coming of the Good News of Peace and Power, without managing to sway his mind. Still proceeding toward the sunrise, he arrived among the last Iroquois tribe, the Mohawks. They were favorably inclined toward the message, but wanted to receive a sign by testing the messenger.

They asked the foreigner to climb a tree next to the lower falls of the Mohawk River. They felled the tree over the river, and Deganawidah survived into the next day, unscathed. This was the sign they desired, and the Mohawks accepted the prophet’s message. They were the first nation to accept the New Mind.

Following his Master, Hiawatha arrived in Onondaga territory. There he spread the new message without managing to loosen Atotarho’s grip over his people’s minds. Three times he called a council, and after each one of them, one of his daughters fell ill and died, victim of the powers of Atotarho. Finally, the Onondagas arranged to have a game of lacrosse performed to lift Hiawatha’s spirits. During the game, a mysterious bird came down from heaven. The crowd pursuing the bird caused the death of Hiawatha’s wife, who was trampled in the onrush. Unable to contain his grief, Hiawatha wandered away toward the east. He reached one of the Tully Lakes; there the ducks lifted the water to give him a dry passage. On the bottom of the lake he found shells that he strung together with three ropes. Those he set on a horizontal pole supported by two vertical ones. Holding each string in turn, Hiawatha recited words of comfort, which he pledged to repeat to anyone who mourns over a loss. This is the origin of the so-called Ritual of Condolence. In vain he waited for anyone to console him. After a few weeks of mourning, he arrived at the village by the lower falls of the Mohawk River. There he reconnected with Deganawidah. The Master relieved Hiawatha of his grief by repeating the very same Ritual of Condolence.

At this point Deganawidah and Hiawatha set out to complete their task by concretely envisioning the form that they wanted to give to their message of peace. One after another, the tribes accepted their message. The final obstacle was Atotarho. The two decided that Deganawidah would sing to him the Song of Peace, while Hiawatha would explain the Words of the Law. They set forth in a canoe across a lake to meet Atotarho. The wizard, using his last magic powers, sent winds and waves against the canoe, but to no avail. Deganawidah and Hiawatha thus brought their message to a skeptical but more receptive Atotarho. To accomplish the great reconciliation he had in mind, Deganawidah invested Atotarho with the highest authority over the Five Nations. In the presence of the Five Nations he told Atotarho: “Behold! Here is Power. These are the Five Nations. Their strength is greater than your strength. But their voice shall be your voice when thou speak in council, and all men shall hear you.” Then Atotarho’s mind was made straight, and Hiawatha combed the snakes out of his hair (hence the meaning of Hiawatha’s name). Deganawidah laid his hands on the wizard’s body and removed the seven crooks.

Then he placed antlers on Atotarho's and the other chiefs' heads, as a symbol of their new authority.

The implications of this legend, and the historical events that ensued, are a rich mine of truth and inspiration. In the language of the legend, the "New Mind" must bring about a New Form. New ideas shape a new reality in the social world.

The Message and the Form

In most versions of the legend, Hiawatha and Deganawidah formed a duality. Occasionally they merged into the single individuality of Hiawatha. The dynamic of the legend revolves around the two of them and Atotarho.

Deganawidah's biography is by far the most extraordinary of the three, since he was conceived by a virgin. In some versions of the legend, the messenger also prophesied that Deganawidah would indirectly bring the downfall of his people, the Hurons. The Grandmother tried to kill him by throwing him in the freezing waters, and twice again in unspecified ways.⁽²⁾

In Deganawidah we see a prophet who came to introduce new spiritual principles. That he was a highly evolved individual is also indicated by the fact that he rode in a white canoe made of stone. In the version of the legend quoted above, once his mission was accomplished, Deganawidah rowed in his canoe toward the setting sun, never to be seen again. In the version given by Horatio Hale it is said that Deganawidah was the only name that was not used down through the line of heredity, in contrast to the names of all the other chiefs who were present at the foundation of the League. This is because none can do what he did.⁽³⁾

Like Deganawidah, Atotarho shared a mixture of human and superhuman attributes. His cry was "the mocking cry of the doubter who killed men by destroying their faith." The translation of the cry means "When will this be?" This impatient attitude is typical of a being who wants events to emerge before their time. The physical appearance of Atotarho (his crooked body, his head covered with snakes) is the expression of the fact that he was a black magician.

Hiawatha stood between these two extremes. His flaw, cannibalism, was a major trespass inherited as a cultural habit. It was a practice tied to war and religious beliefs. Cannibalism stood at the center of the encounter between Hiawatha and Deganawidah. Because Hiawatha was in touch with his true humanity, he was able to overcome his cannibalistic habit. The prophet allowed him to recognize his shortcomings and realize his full human potential. This brought about the recognition of the pain caused to others, and the desire to redeem himself, made possible by Deganawidah's message.

Soon after, Hiawatha took on the task of helping his people. The length of the process of grief is emphasized by the establishment of the Ritual of Condolence, the burdensome journey to the Mohawk nation, and the earnest desire to bring consolation to others. Only Deganawidah knew the depth of Hiawatha's sorrow. He could reach to the spiritual source, which offered Hiawatha peace, and allowed for perception of the truth that suffering had obscured.

The dynamic of development moving between the two founders shows significant nuances that could escape a superficial examination. Hiawatha was as much a pupil of Deganawidah as he was a collaborator. Although the prophet carried the vision, he was also impaired by his stuttering. He needed someone else with oratorical skills; that was

Hiawatha's role. Although Deganawidah guided and inspired, it was Hiawatha who carried out the burden of the central confrontation with Atotarho. Hiawatha could not make use of supernatural powers as Deganawidah did in the instance of the test of the fallen tree. Still, it was Hiawatha who established the Ritual of Condolence, and who combed Atotarho's hair. The prophet Deganawidah had to find a willing companion before he could realize his mission. With the achievement of the League, Deganawidah's task came to an end. Hiawatha still had a political task to carry out.