

The iroquois indians and their tribal issues



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The Iroquois are one of the largest ethnic groups of Native Americans significant for their culture, history, territory of their distribution and traditions. This group of Indians were among the first to encounter European settlers - the French and the British - and has had close, but often controversial, relationships with them ever since. They name themselves the Haudenosaunee, which means "the People of the Long House," their abodes became incorporated into their original name as a distinctive feature of the tribal community, and as an essential element of their culture (Tehanetorens 5). A longhouse is a symbol of a large extended family uniting several generations living under the same roof and sharing all basic necessities. Iroquois is a name given by their enemies - the Algonquians labelled them Iroquo ("rattlesnake") and the French Gallicized it into the Iroquois, which became their generally accepted name. However, they may be called in many different ways - Five Nations, Six Nations (since 1722), Canton Indians, Confederate Indians, Nadowa, Matchenawtowaig etc ("Iroquois History").

North East is considered their original territory where they have lived since their arrival, this terrain includes the "lands bordering the lower Great Lakes - Huron, Erie, and Ontario - and the St. Lawrence River, in what are now parts of Ontario and Quebec in Canada, upstate New York, and adjacent Pennsylvania" (Fenton 3).

The Iroquois people came to what is now the United States and Canada long before the Europeans did. It is problematic to define the precise date of their appearance on these lands due to the fact that they did not have written language, or the systems of recording the events like the Aztecs, Mayas, or Incas of Central and South America. The archeological digs reveal that the

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longhouses trace their history back to ca. 1100 A. D. The maize began cultivated by the Iroquois in the period between years 1300 and 1400. On the boundary between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as the researchers say, this people started the practice ritual cannibalism after the significant growth of population and increasing warfare tension between the tribes (“ Iroquois History”).

The famous Iroquois League was established in sixteenth century according to the majority of the scholars, although there still exists a suggestion that the confederacy might have emerged as long ago as the tenth century A. D., but most of the researchers do not support the above mentioned view. The League was originally formed by five tribes that had been so far engaged in continuous warfare against each other. The tribes were the following – the Cayuga, the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, and the Seneca (Five Nations), in 1722 they were joined by the Tuscarora and became known ever since as Six Nations, the latter, however, did not have the right to vote.

The next important historic event was the Beaver Wars that lasted for some 70 years and had a considerable impact on the further history of the relationships between the Five Nations and their Indian and European neighbors. It was the confrontation between the Mohawk, on one side, and the Algonquian and Montagnais, on the other, caused by the desire to gain the monopoly on the fur trade. That warfare stopped in 1701 after concluding a truce with France and their allies. In the Seven Years War, the Iroquois supported Britain against the French and the Algonquians.

The American Revolution provoked a bitter division within the Six Nations League, and had a far reaching consequences both for those who took the side of the revolutionaries and the side of Great Britain. The majority of the tribes adhered to the British military forces, so the Cayugas, the Seneca, the Onondagas, and the Mohawks were fighting under the British flag. The Oneida and Tuscarora joined the American revolutionaries. After the war, many of the British allies moved to Canada and were given land for their service, the Cayuga and the Seneca, however, remained on their native terrain, while the Oneida were not appropriately rewarded for their contribution to the Independence War (“ Iroquois History”).

Since 1790s there began a slow but steady recovery of the Haudenosaunee, the tribes started to enjoy a calmer life with less turmoil and confrontation. During nineteenth and twentieth centuries they were being deprived of their land by the white settlers, e. g. many of the Mohawk and Seneca lost their land in New York, the land was also changing its proprietors in other states – Ohio, Kentucky, Delaware etc. Nowadays there are about 70, 000 of Iroquois residing in the United States and Canada and occupying eight reservations and twenty settlements in New York, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Ontario and Quebec.

The Confederacy of the tribes consists of the six mentioned sub-nations and is headed by the Grand Council represented by fifty chiefs. The tribes are not evenly presented in the Council, the biggest number of seats is occupied by the Onondaga – fourteen chiefs; the Cayuga – ten chiefs; the Oneida and Mohawk – nine sachems each; the Seneca – eight chiefs and the Tuscarora are not participating in the work of the council. Each leader, in turn, was

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chosen by a woman, the mother of the clan, the latter were heads of separate subdivisions of the tribes. Interestingly, the League members were also divided into “elder brothers,” or “uncles,” (the Seneca, the Onondaga, and the Mohawk) and younger brothers, or nephews (the Cayuga, the Oneida, and the Tuscarora) (“Iroquois History”).

Each of the tribes is subdivided into several clans - from three to 8 ones. The Mohawk, and the Oneida incorporated 3 clans, each of them consisted of the Wolf, the Bear, and the Turtle. The Cayuga had five clans - the Wolf, the Bear, the Turtle, the Snipe, and the Heron; the Tuscarora included seven clans - the Wolf, the Bear, the Snipe, the Turtle, the Eel, the Beaver, and the Deer. The Seneca has eight clans - the Wolf, the Bear, the Turtle, the Snipe, the Hawk, the Heron, the Deer, and the Beaver; the Onondaga consists of eight constituents as well, with a slight difference - it has the Eel but does not have the Heron.

The main occupation of the Haudenosaunee was hunting and agriculture, when they encountered the European colonists. Besides the maize, they were growing the squash and the beans. As for fishing, they consumed trout, perch, salmon and others. Gathering was also one of the sources of their nutrition, but it was the prerogative of women and children. Later, they were integrated into the international trade, the fur trade for example was one of their priorities and was one of the causes of the war between them and the Algonquians.

After receiving reservations, their activities did not radically change, hunting, fishing and gathering continued to be intertwined with their everyday

occupations. In the twentieth century, some of the Iroquois communities introduced tourist gambling, and after some argument with the representatives of the local government they retained their right to keep casinos for the tourists.

Culturally, the Haudenosaunee are one of the most significant groups of the North American Indians. The principles of their political alliance, the relationships between the Grand Council and the tribe leaders proved to be effective throughout all their history and remained even until nowadays. Many historians argue that the Framers were significantly influenced by the Iroquois ideas and principles of social and political organizations including the system of balances and checks, supreme law and others (“ Iroquois History”). Even if it is not so, the peculiarities of the Haudenosaunee’s organization allowed them to survive in a hostile and dangerous environment defeating, or at least successfully standing up to, the invaders and trespassers. The number of the Iroquois warriors was virtually always smaller than their enemies, which was never a reason for them to be defeated.

The Five (Six) Nations Indians have been also characterized for their religiousness, they worshipped God with his manifestations in many natural phenomena. They always expressed gratitude to the Supreme Power for their food, harvest and crops, for successful hunting, gathering, and fishing. The Haudenosaunee held six annual festivals devoted to their agricultural activities, these holidays were the days when each individual and the whole community were praising their Celestial Defenders and Protectors for all the good the tribes had been enjoying so far. There was also a belief in evil spirits causing diseases, natural disasters and other mishaps, and the

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Iroquois people were searching and implementing the methods of countering the negative influence of those dark forces. For instance, there was a False Face society, the main function of which was to scare and daunt the evil ghosts with the help of the wooden masks.

The religious genius of the Haudenosaunee is also illustrated by their famous prophet Handsome Lake, of the Seneca origin. He appeared at the time when the Iroquois were enduring the hardest and most difficult period of their history. In 1799, he had a vision which turned out to be a starting point of his religious activity, and it greatly influenced the subsequent destiny of his own tribe and the whole Confederacy of the Six Nations. What he preached he called a Good Message, and it became a core of the Longhouse religion that was firmly based on the traditional values of the Iroquois but offered a new interpretation of the conventional ideas applicable to the new circumstances where the Indians had to live. The teaching of the Handsome Lake incorporated universal values and principles of tolerance and respect to the humans and nature. In the Code of Handsome Lake there were such articles as abstinence from alcohol, from evil witchcraft, from onohwet (or love medicine), he encouraged creating families, bearing children for the nation to survive. He did not oppose the white people's style of living and even encouraged some of the Indians to study in the white Americans' schools and colleges. His teaching and activities were recognized by Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the US (" Handsome Lake").

Throughout all their history, the Iroquois faced a great many of problems and difficulties hazardous for their lives and existence. The main issue for the Haudenosaunee was survival among the hostile tribes and environment.

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Many of their neighbors made attempts to conquer their land and property, to kill their men, women, and children. Another highly important point of their attention was food, in search of which they were changing the places of their residence.

Initially, the Iroquois lived “toward the setting sun in the west” on the territories where the Mississippi flows, but later for some reason “[t]hey headed toward the rising sun” (Tehanetorens 5). These migrations were caused primarily by the search of food, a more fertile land, the lakes, rivers and forests inhabited by the plants and animal used for nutrition.

Among the closest and most dangerous enemies of the Haudenosaunee were the Adirondack Indians, a more numerous tribe engaged in primarily hunting whereas the Iroquois were “more or less farmers” (Tehanetorens 7). The former were good warriors and were dominating over the Five Nations for some period of time, the later were paying tribute - fur, meat and skins (ibid. 8).

The other tribal group the Haudenosaunee had to stand up to were the Algonquian Indians, the Mohican Confederacy, the Pocumtuc, the Montagnais and others. The years before the arrival of the European settlers could be hardly characterized and described adequately for the reason of written evidences' absence. The archeological digs may shed some light on the pre-Columbian times, but all the specificity of the intertribal confrontations could be hardly restored. Since the arrival of the Dutch, French and British the history of the Iroquois started being more or less recorded.

After the arrival of the Europeans, new trade links were established on the American continent. The old connections were either destroyed or modified, and an important role was played by the Haudenosaunee. When the newcomers appeared, the demand for the fur increased considerably, and the tribes and tribal confederacies began their harsh competition for the control over the trade, and the territories related to it. They were competing with the Algonquians for the commerce with the Dutch merchants, which also resulted in several wars between the tribes. As the Iroquois controlled the area between the Dutch forts and the Great Lakes, they were gaining their profit from the established trade relationships.

The military conflicts with the French posed the problem of the supplies with the firearms, for the primitive weapon of the Five Nations could not be compared to that of the French. The problem was solved with the help of Dutch settlers who agreed to sell them the guns. The Iroquois were quite quick in acquiring the skills of firearm handling and usage, which helped them to survive in the severe conflicts and confrontation.

The Independence War was also a difficult ordeal for the League as they separated by the both parties of the conflict - the British and the American Patriots. After the Independence was reached, many of the tribes began being deprived of their land and confined in reservations. That process lasted until the first half of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, many of the Six Nations Indians integrated into the white American society and reached high positions in the social strata. Eli Parker was working in Grant administration and participated in working out the text

and conditions of General Lee's surrender. Catherine Tekahitha, or the Lily of the Mohawk, was beatified by the Roman Catholic Church, writer Pauline Johnson, Kaniehtiio Horn - the actress, Jace Martin, and many others made their valuable input into the culture of the United States.

The modern commercial activities of the Iroquois are tightly attached and closely integrated into the US and Canada economical systems, there can be still paid attention to the reservation economies. The Seneca and the Oneida are run casinos and bingos, they also enjoy the right to sell cigarettes and gasoline tax free on the territories of their reservations. The Mohawks are famous steeplejacks as they do not fear great height, so they are engaged in the constructions of the skyscrapers and highway bridges.

Summing up, it is necessary to point to the fact that the modern Iroquois, on the one hand, are tightly connected to the modern society and play a significant role in it - in business, culture, sports, science etc. - on the other hand, they still preserve their cultural distinction in following their tradition and remembering their cultural and spiritual legacy. The political, economic, and cultural experience of the Haudenosaunee is a highly valuable element for all the humans despite their cultural or ethnic origin.