

Ramapo mountain people essay



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Native Americans are nowadays a very bright and diverse group, which includes different backgrounds, based upon Indian tribes. The Ramapo Mountain People are amongst the proudest and most courageous highlanders, whose cultural heritage is nowadays a focus of folklorists' and anthropologists' attention. The present paper is intended to discuss the history and characteristics of this small society. The Ramapo Mountain People, the Jackson Whites, or the Ramapo Lenape Nation are a population of about 5, 000 individuals, who live around the Ramapo Mountains in southern New York and northern New Jersey (Cohen, 1974).

Today, their tribal office is situated in Mahwah, New Jersey, on Stag Hill Road, and the current chief of the community is Dwaine Perry. " Until the 1970s, the tribe was frequently referred to as the " Jackson Whites", which, according to the legend, was shorthand for " Jacks and Whites". Folk belief was that they were descendants of runaway and freed slaves (" Jacks" in slang) and whites (including Dutch settlers and Hessian soldiers) who had supported the English during the American Revolution and were forced to flee to the mountains after the end of the war" (Kaufman, 1957, p. 09).

Nevertheless, this name and the corresponding legend are denied by the ethnic group. Contemporary historian David Cohen (Cohen, 1974) suggests that the notion of " Jacks and Whites" has nothing in common with reality and is merely a legend, or even a tale, which might have been invented by a group, which intended to discredit the true heritage of the Ramapo Lenape Nation and introduce a humiliating stereotype.

In fact, the members of the Ramapo Mountain Community allege that they originate from the Munsee and the Lenape peoples, but African, Caucasian, Dutch and Tuscarora ancestries also contributed to their overall background (Kaufman, 1957; Cohen, 1974). Furthermore, the Ramapo People state their 'kinship' with aboriginal American tribes, living in the west and north; their native language, as the Ramapough hold, was Munsee, but the community very soon began to use English and Jersey Dutch (Cohen, 1980; Kaufman, 1957).

The real background and genealogy of the Ramapo Mountain People is nowadays a disputable and controversial issue, as there is an array of versions and hypotheses. Herbert Kraft, a noble historian, states his archaeological research suggests that the Ramapo Lenape Nation originated from Munsee community, which migrated to the remote Ramapo Mountains in attempt to find a new shelter and segregate from Dutch and English colonizers towards the end of the seventeenth century (Cohen, 1980).

On the other hand, there exists a gap in records and chronicles between 1790 and 1830, so the actual relationships between the Ramapo People and the Hackensack Valley settlers are vague. Furthermore, Kraft recognizes his inability to establish an interrelation between Indians tribes of the exploration period and the contemporary Ramapo Lenape People, as the difference is tremendous, especially in appearances, lifestyles, cultural traditions and languages (Cohen, 1980). "Evan Pritchard, a professor of Native American history, wrote: "The Pamapough, or 'mountaineer Munsee', on the other hand, never disappeared.

Their people still occupy the southwest portion of the point of that projectile which is Rockland County, on all sides of Ramapo Mountain. Ramapough means 'slanting rock'...the main Ramapough Lenape villages in New York were Johnsontwon, Furmanville and Sherwoodville" (Cohen, 1974, p. 316). Furthermore, Pritchard states that the tribe had strongholds in Hillburn, Ringwood and Stagg Hill; and although depicted as foreigners like Dutch, Gypsies or Tuscarora, they are the most 'canonical' non-foreigners in the regions around New York and New Jersey (Cohen, 1974).

Historian Roger Joslyn states that the Ramapo Mountain People derived from the aboriginal Lenape tribes. The scholar scrutinized their genealogy since 1700 and found merely the confirmation of non-foreign background of the Jackson Whites (Cohen, 1980). J. Shapard, the former executive of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office, supports this view and thus rejects the versions about non-white background of the Ramapo Mountain People (Cohen, 1980). David Cohen, who has been cooperating with the NJ Historical Commission challenges the aforementioned versions about Native American tribal ancestry of the Ramapo Mountain People.

As the scholar alleges, his investigations and analytical work "established that their ancestors included free black landowners in New York City and mulattoes with some Dutch ancestry who were among the first pioneers to settle in the Hackensack River Valley of New Jersey" (Cohen, 1980, p. 19). Furthermore, "gaps in the genealogical records and the fact that the federal censuses for 1790-1830 are missing prevent establishing the relationship between these colored families in the mountains, and the earlier colored families of the Hackensack River Valley" (Cohen, 1980, p. 9).

In fact, the local government of New Jersey banned free non-whites from owning any land, so the question of ancestry and exact history is resolved only partially. The scholar also states that the lack of information about the history and the genealogy of the Ramapo Mountain People is associated with the unwillingness of the Dutch Reformed Churches to record interracial marriages. Nevertheless, Cohen's arguments were not accepted by the United States Department of Justice, which declared the Lenape Mountain Nation as Indians (Lenik, 1999).

Edward Lenik, who heads the Sheffield Archaeological Consultants and has produced a number of articles about the Ramapo Mountain tribes and the book "Indians in the Ramapos" states that archaeological excavations reveal very clear and understandable facts about the presence of Indian communities in the Highland Physiographic Providence-Ramapos in the eighteenth century, moreover, historical chronicles, which began to emerge in large numbers in the 19th century, suggest that the Ramapo Indians never left their territory and have stayed in the Highlands until the present day (Lenik, 1999).

The author, however, finds it very difficult to find out all tribes, whose ancestry contributed to the Ramapo Mountain background, but the only scientific fact the scholar can present is comparatively low mixture of races in the Ramapo People, as they traditionally have been leading a secluded mode of life (Lenik, 1999).

B. Lossing, a folklorist and historian of the 19th century, describes not actually the origins of the Lenape Mountain Nation, but also the people's

customs and tribal symbols: “ Along the sinuous Ramapo Creek, before the war of the Revolution broke out and while the ancient tribe of the Ramapoughs yet chased the deer on the rugged hills which skirt the valley, iron-forges were established, and the hammer-peal of spreading civilization echoed from the neighboring crags” (Lenik, 1999, p. 97). As one can understand, the tribe is depicted as “ ancient”, moreover, - as exceptionally Indian group rather than a mixture of Dutch and black populations.

C. Weslager, the former head of the Eastern States Archaeological Federation, suggests that in the nineteenth century, the Indian tribes were situated in the northern areas like Passaic, Warren, Sussex and Morris, and most of these tribes originated from the Munsee and Delaware Indians, and partially -from the Tuscarora groups.

The majority of those who descended from the Tuscarora, moved to New York state and assimilated with the Six Nation Iroquois, whereas a number of Munsies and Delawares migrated to the area around New Jersey (Lenik, 1999). The most complicated aspect of the Ramapo Mountain People’s history is their oral tradition, which is nowadays available only in fragments (Lenik, 1999). Due to the fact that the community has lived in the remote area, which was for a long time detached from ‘ civilization’, the oral history is among the major sources of information.

It confirms the fact that the Munsee and Delaware escaped Dutch and English settlements and migrated to the Ramapo Highland. Furthermore, “ the Lenape didn’t believe anyone could own the land or water. They believed that would be like someone owning the air. You could only own what you can

hold in your hand and even that was for sharing. They believed the Creator put the land and water here for the survival of all people. They also believed the plants, animals and rocks gave their life so that people could survive” (Lenik, 1999, p. 269).

Nevertheless, they deliberately settled the mountains in order to ensure no-one would dispute their ownership of the land. In general, the Ramapo Mountain People are one of the most peaceful ethnic groups and obediently accepted all post-Civil War transformations, including the construction of railroads and the following industrialization. As one can understand, contemporary academic circles haven't still come to consensus concerning the history of Ramapo Mountain People, but most evidence suggests that they are rather Native Americans that the descendants of Dutch settlers and formerly enslaved blacks.