

IROQUOIS CULTURE

LOCATION

Most of the Iroquois (or Haudenosaunee) now live in reserves in Canada, in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. There are still some smaller Iroquois communities, however, on their traditional lands in New York. There are also smaller communities in states like Wisconsin.

The areas that the Iroquois once lived in were once heavily wooded, with fertile ground for agriculture. Today, these areas have become more developed, but are still fairly remote.

HISTORY

The original territory of the Iroquois was located in what is now upstate New York, south of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. There is evidence that the ancestors of the Iroquois lived south of Lake Ontario 10,000 years ago. Iroquois longhouses have been found that date back to 1100. The growing of corn probably started around 1400 and the Iroquois population grew swiftly after that. Around 1600 five separate Iroquois tribes decided to band together in order to better protect themselves and to end the bloodshed between them. They entered into a peace treaty and created a Confederacy. These tribes were the Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and the Oneidas. The Tuscarora joined this nation around 1720. This treaty led to what is considered to be one of the world's first democracies.

Through warfare and conquest the Iroquois were able to expand their territory by 1680 to Kentucky and the Mississippi River. Other tribes were driven from their lands when the Iroquois increased their land. War captives were either enslaved or adopted as new Iroquois.

The Iroquois first came into contact with European civilization when the explorer Jacques Cartier ventured up the St. Lawrence river in 1535. The Europeans were looking for gold, spice and sugar, but didn't find any of these.

After the explorers left, colonialization and the introduction of western disease and guns gradually took their toll. For instance, the Dutch supplied the Mahican tribe with guns to fight the Iroquois. Nevertheless, Iroquois power was at its peak around 1700. After this many wars broke out between the Iroquois and their many enemies, including the French. British and Dutch settlement were also in full force and this made it difficult for the Iroquois to protect their land. The Iroquois started to lose power during this time. The total population of the Iroquois in the mid 1700's was around 15,000 people.

During the American Revolutionary War the Iroquois were divided. the Oneida and Tuscarora tribes sided with the Americans, while the others sided with the British. This had grave consequences for the Iroquois. The Iroquois were outnumbered and defeated by the US army. They surrendered in 1784 and then most were removed from their ancient lands and driven into the southern part of the Canadian province Ontario.

Since this time the Iroquois have lived primarily on reservations and have lived as second class citizens. Much of their culture and religion was lost. Many treaties were signed between the Iroquois and the Canadian and American governments. Most of these, however, were ignored by these two governments as they tried to settle and develop more land. In the 1970's the Iroquois won some major court battles that gave them the land back that was taken from them long ago.

Conflicts between Iroquois tribes, on the one hand, and the US and Canadian governments, on the other hand, continue through today. These conflicts tend to be about who owns what property and who has the rights to do what. In 1998, for instance, the Mohawk (who call themselves Kanien'kehaka, people of the flint) in Canada violently fought with the government in Quebec about their right to chop down wood and sell it on land they claim is legally theirs.

RELIGION

Iroquois religion is based on the myth of a woman who fell from the sky. Their myths and stories mix both violence and beauty. Many myths are full of supernatural aggression and there is much cruelty in these myths, such as cannibalism. Other myths deal with beautiful myths about the stars and other worlds.

Holy men and spirits have traditionally played an important role among the Iroquois, and influenced many rituals and decisions. For instance, peacemaking has always been an important religious and political ritual among the Iroquois. It was the Huron holyman known as "Peacemaker" who brought all the Iroquois nations into the Confederacy. At a time when there were many wars he received a vision from the Creator that there should be peace and cooperation among all Iroquois.

Along with visions, dreams played an important part in earlier Iroquois culture. The Iroquois turned to their dreams as a guide to their lives. It helped them make decisions about where and when to fish, to hunt, wage war, dance, who to marry, etc. The arrival of large groups of Dutch, French and British settlers in the 17th century led to the arrival of Christianity, and missionary campaigns led to the eventual conversion of many Iroquois. Most Iroquois are Christian today, though some are returning to their traditional beliefs again.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

The Iroquois were not a nomadic people. They built many villages with a number of longhouses. These longhouses were built out of evergreen trees and the bark from elm trees. About 20 families could live in one longhouse. Large fences with sharpened posts were built at the edge of the village. The elm bark was also used to make dishes, barrels and canoes. The Iroquois refer to themselves as the Haudenosaunee, or the People of the Longhouse.

The Iroquois were very skilled at agriculture. The land south of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River was ideal for farming. The main crop of the Iroquois was corn, but they also grew beans and squash. They hunted animals such as deer and even bears, and caught a variety of fish. Wild raspberries, grapes and other fruits and nuts were collected during the summer and autumn to add to their diet. The fur trade became an important means of income as the Europeans started to migrate to the Americas, especially the Dutch. Beaver fur was very popular among the Europeans. However, the desire for beaver fur among the Europeans (the Iroquois traded beaver for guns and iron tools) also led to the mass killing of beavers, as well as various wars and conflict with the Iroquois.

The Iroquois Nation was known for its democratic principles and its fair treatment of women at a time when women had few rights in the Western world. The form of government adopted by the United States seems to have been strongly influenced by the political system of the Iroquois. The six tribes had a common council and each tribe had one vote. They always tried to reach consensus. These communities were fond of having meetings where issues were discussed and people voted.

In fact, women's rights were more respected among the Iroquois than in the rest of the United States. For instance, the oldest woman of a clan (group of families with the same female ancestor) held the most power in the clan, and was responsible for the welfare of the clan. She would arrange marriages, select the male candidate for chief, watch his actions carefully and remove him if necessary. In 1893, Matilda Joselyn Gage, an American woman famous for fighting for women's rights, decided to become an Iroquois. She was arrested in the United States in the same year for voting in a school board election. As an Iroquois she had full voting rights.

Today, the Iroquois have taken advantage of several court decisions that have given them land back that was unjustly taken from them. The building of a resort and a casino in the state of New York has helped their economy a great deal.

CULTURE

Among the Iroquois the men were traditionally the hunters and warriors. They built houses and were the protectors of their community. The women cared for the children, farmed, gathered food, cooked, made clothing, but also owned and ran the houses. Therefore many women created artistic pieces of clothing and other objects. Beadwork with many bright colors and patterns, for instance, has been practiced for centuries by the Iroquois. Many women earned an important part of their family income in the past by selling tourists art made from beads.

Play is also common among the Iroquois. Mothers have traditionally made dolls for their children to stimulate their imagination. In general, playing games has always been an important pastime for the Iroquois. The game Ga-lahs, for instance, has now become lacrosse, a game that is played around the world.

