

Haudenosaunee Iroquois Religion and Politics

Summary: The Iroquois nations in the regions of New York, Pennsylvania, and southeastern Canada refer to themselves collectively as the Haudenosaunee, "the people of the Longhouse." In this peace-making government, political positions and relationships are governed by ceremonial interactions and a body of oral literature. Today, in many cases, these traditional governing processes are forced to account for U.S. Indian governing policy and administration.

Among the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, nations in upstate New York, Pennsylvania, Ontario, and Quebec, the work of political decision-making is at its very core also religious. Central to their religious traditions are the relations established among the six distinct nations of Mohawks, Oneidas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Senecas, and Tuscaroras, ceremonially expressed in the "Great Law of Peace," a body of oral literature received from a prophet called the Peacemaker or Deganawida, who is said to have lived in the 14th century. Deganawida was a council chief who wanted to end warfare and factionalism among the Iroquois peoples. The Great Law of Peace envisioned not only the cessation of hostilities, but the presence of justice and harmony. For centuries, skilled orators have recited the Great Law of Peace using beaded wampum belts as aids for memory.

The men who make up the chiefs of the Haudenosaunee Grand Council today are chosen by clan mothers, and serve at the continuing pleasure of these elder women, who scrutinize every move. Gatherings are held in the longhouse, a building of central importance to Haudenosaunee identity, where ceremonial procedures and relationships are observed. Almost all longhouse meetings open with a Thanksgiving Address, a traditional prayer-speech that re-establishes the people's relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds, and frames everything that follows in that context. Debate, for example, proceeds according to a decorum established over the centuries to foster the development of consensus on divisive issues. One party's representative speaks, followed by a representative of the opposing party, who first repeats what was heard on the other side and then issues a response. This process continues until agreement is reached. While the procedure takes more time than might seem expedient according to conventional Western decision-making processes, the spiritual grounding of Haudenosaunee consensus-making is key to the outcome: restoring the body politic to right relationship with the natural forces of harmony and power, establishing peace and single-mindedness.

This longhouse tradition of peace-making government is so central to their identity that the Iroquois nations refer to themselves collectively as the Haudenosaunee, “the people of the Longhouse.” In this tradition, political positions and relationships are governed by ceremonial interactions. Indeed, one might say that authentic worship brings into being a peaceful society.

With the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, the United States began again to recognize distinct tribal governments. The constitutions drafted for the tribes were modeled loosely on American representative democracy, though typically without rigorous attention to the separation of powers and independent judiciary. But these constitutions generally were not designed to reflect existing Native traditions of governance and decision-making; in fact, they often served to displace traditional structures of governance. Today, the effective self-governance of Native communities like those of the Haudenosaunee has become a matter of balancing indigenous legal and political traditions with the demands of U.S. Indian policy and administration.