

HIAWATHA AND THE PEACEMAKER (Excerpt from Hidden America)

In most versions of the legend of the White roots of Peace, Hiawatha and Deganawidah (Peacemaker) form a duality. Occasionally they merge 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 is conceived by a virgin. In some versions of the legend the messenger also prophesies that Deganawidah will indirectly bring the downfall of his people, the Hurons. His Grandmother tries to kill him by throwing him in freezing water and twice again in unspecified manners.

In Deganawidah we see an initiate who tries to introduce new spiritual principles. That he is an initiate or an exceptional person is also indicated by the fact that he rides in a white canoe made of stone. In the version of the legend quoted above, once his mission is accomplished, Deganawidah rows in his canoe towards the setting sun, never to be seen again. In the version given by Horatio Hale it is also said that Deganawidah is the only name that cannot be used down through the line of heredity, contrary to that of all the other chiefs present at the foundation of the League. This is because none can do what he has done.

Like Deganawidah, Atotarho (alternatively spelled: Thadodaho) shares a mixture of human and superhuman attributes. His cry is "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 to bring forth events before their time. The physical appearance of Atotarho—his crooked body, his head covered with snakes—is the expression of the fact that he is a black magician.

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

Soon after this encounter, Hiawatha takes 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 knows the depth of Hiawatha's sorrow. He can reach to the spiritual source which offers him peace and allows for perception of the truth that suffering has obscured.

The dynamic of development played by the two founders shows significant nuances that might escape first sight. Hiawatha is as much a pupil of Deganawidah as he is a collaborator. While the prophet carries the vision he is also impaired by his stuttering. He needs someone else with oratorical skills; that is Hiawatha's role. Although Deganawidah guides and inspires, it is Hiawatha who carries out the burden of the central confrontation with Atotarho. He cannot make use of supernatural powers as Deganawidah does in the instance of the test of the fallen tree. Still, it is Hiawatha who establishes the Ritual of Condolence and who combs Atotarho's hair. The prophet has to

find a willing companion before he can realize his mission. With the achievement of the League Deganawidah's task comes to an end. Hiawatha still has a political task to carry out.

The legend has still other implications on the social level. The Ritual of Condolence has a central place in Iroquois society not immediately noticeable from the legend. Previous to the advent of the League the strife between the tribes was perpetuated by cycles of war and revenge, cannibalism and black magic. The cornerstone of Iroquois Society is the recognition of the need for the process of grief and consolation to replace the cycle of violence and revenge. The Ritual of Condolence makes possible the harmonization of the aims of the community by allowing individuals to overcome their grief and align their goals with those of others. Grief is seen as a veil covering the senses and the heart. The Ritual of Condolence lifts these veils and makes explicit the second principle expressed by Deganawidah: health as harmony between spirit and body.

More important still is the outcome of the legend in the form of government that arises within the Iroquois community. The New Word is the message of justice, health and power. The Iroquois know that a Word is nothing without a Form. They have embodied the Word in the Form of the Longhouse, symbolizing the union of many fires, which represents the idea of confederacy. For the first time nations stand as equals, no more as vassals. Authority is defined by complex organizational levels built to ensure that no individual, or single nation, can at any time impose their will upon the community. Political and religious powers are also clearly differentiated. It is in fact a system of checks and balances, obliging the representatives of power to seek broad consensus in all their decisions. More detail about this form of government can be found in the fine analysis of Bruce Johansen.

The Iroquois achievement is significant. It prepared a favorable ground in that part of the American continent where the American federal government would be born. We will now see how the Templar influence finally reached North America in a transformed way three centuries later.