



Legend of the Founding of the Iroquois League

As told by John Buck; translated by J. N. B. Hewitt

(An oral tradition based on events that likely occurred 1400s-1500s)

Most historians place the founding of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy, in the 1400s or 1500s, though some date it to the 1100s. The confederacy initially unified five indigenous nations living in what is now upstate New York; a sixth nation joined later, in the 1700s. The Haudenosaunee were a powerful military force during the colonial era. Longtime foes of the French, they also waged expansionist wars against indigenous peoples across the Great Lakes region and Ohio River valley, with the aim of monopolizing the lucrative trade in beaver furs.

Among the peoples who make up the Haudenosaunee, there exist different versions of an oral tradition telling how the confederacy was founded. The version excerpted here was dictated in 1888 by Onondaga leader John Buck (a.k.a. Skanawati) to white American ethnographer J. N. B. Hewitt. The gist of the tradition, across its different versions, is that in an era of constant lethal feuding, Dekanawida the Peacemaker persuaded the Haudenosaunee nations to form a multiracial representative government. He also taught them to cultivate peaceful relations through ritualized gift-giving and condolence for the bereaved, who otherwise would lash out in new violence. Dekanawida was assisted by a woman named Jikonhsaseh, who does not appear in the version of the tradition presented here; also by a man named Haiyohwatha (or Hiawatha), whose family had been killed by a sociopathic chief, Thadodaho. As he founded the confederacy, Dekanawida healed Thadodaho's mind and reconciled him to the community.

While this indigenous story is about peacemaking, it asserts mandates that would prove to be characteristic also of Western imperialism: to transform bloodthirsty, savage people into specimens of true humanity, and to create a beneficent universal new order by exporting one's political and cultural ideals to other peoples.

[“All the people feared the bloodthirsty Tha-do-da-ho”]

In the times of our forefathers, it came to pass that although the people unbanked many council fires, they utterly failed to transact any business. Tha-do-da-ho', the notorious and unscrupulous wizard and tyrant, brought all their plans to nought.

The chiefs of these people, sitting in secret session, chose at last a secluded spot for the purpose of holding a public council, but the wily Tha-do-da-ho', by means of his spies, who were everywhere, was soon informed of the time and place of the council; and divining that the purpose of the chiefs was to devise means of curbing his despotic power and unbridled passions, he resolved to be present at the council.

The place chosen for the council was on the shore of a lake. When the appointed time had come for the council, the great wizard and assassin hastened to be at the chosen place of meeting before all others. Having arrived there, he seated himself facing the lake; there he sat with bowed head, silent but forbidding. [...] Soon many boats, full of people, began to arrive [...] Whereupon Tha-do-da-ho' [...] stood and, in a loud voice, called [...], “Hasten, hurry yourselves, or you will all soon be destroyed. See, a wind is coming, and it may soon cause you all to drown.”

The people looked and saw the approaching hurricane, which was of unwonted fury. It destroyed all the people who had not landed. The chiefs felt that Tha-do-da-ho' had brought on this hurricane by his incantations [...A]ll the people [...] feared the bloodthirsty Tha-do-da-ho', whose vengeance, when provoked, knew no bounds and respected no ties of blood.

The daughter of Hai-yoⁿ-hwat-hă' went a short distance in the forest to gather fagots for her fire, when Tha-do-da-ho' [...] shouted, "Look ye up; some living thing is falling. What is it?" All eyes were now upturned, and they saw a beautiful creature flying down toward the place where the daughter of Hai-yoⁿ-hwat-hă' was gathering wood. [...A]ll the people were rushing forward to see the falling object; and in the tumult, the daughter of Hai-yoⁿ-hwat-hă', being great with child, was knocked down and [...] trodden to death, to the great sorrow of her father, Hai-yoⁿ-hwat-hă'. In his great grief, he exclaimed, "It has gone ill with us; all my children are now gone from me; they have been destroyed by Tha-do-da-ho', and he has spoiled all our plans. It now behooves me to go abroad among other people. [...]"

Then he entered the forest and, going directly south, crossed the Onondaga mountain. [...H]e finally came to a cabin [...], which he entered. The host said to him, "Hai-yoⁿ-hwat-hă', what has happened that you wander purposelessly in your greatness, for you are worthy of the highest homage?" Hai-yoⁿ-hwat-hă' replied, "Tha-do-da-ho' is mad. He is angry and rages. Thence I have come. My three children have perished. Tha-do-da-ho' destroyed them, and then I came away [...]" The host answered, "I will inform the chiefs concerning this; perhaps they may have something to say upon the matter."

["It is our duty to endeavor to reconstruct his mind"]

Then De-ka-na-wi-dă, for it was he who lived there, requested Hai-yoⁿ-hwat-hă' to remain with him; and he laid the matter, as he had promised, before the council [...] After discussing the matter for a time, the chiefs finally decided to wait upon Tha-do-da-ho'. Replying, De-ka-na-wi-dă said, "If so, then produce your wampum strings"; but they had none. To remedy this, they began stringing common shells on threads of skin [...] De-ka-na-wi-dă said, "Hai-yoⁿ-hwat-hă', what [...] matter can you add to what we have?" Hai-yoⁿ-hwat-hă', taking up his pouch of wampum strings, said, "This that I hold in my hand is what I will contribute." [...] Out of the pouch, thirteen wampum strings [...] were taken out, and they placed them on a horizontal pole or rod. They gazed upon the array of wampum strings and were very greatly pleased, exclaiming, "We will use these in our work. They will be of great benefit to us." [...]

De-ka-na-wi-dă then said, [...] "Who will go to seek the smoke of Tha-do-da-ho'?" [...] Then two men said, "We are willing to go." [...]

That night, the two spies started on their journey, and when they reached the end of the clearing surrounding the council house, they transformed themselves into crows and flew [...] After a long search, they found a smoke rising like a huge pillar to the very sky. [...T]hey assumed again their human form, and entered the longhouse whence issued the smoke. [...] The two spies looked, and they were struck speechless and motionless by seeing a thing—a shape—that was not human but rather supernatural and deformed. For the hair of Tha-do-da-ho' was composed of writhing, hissing serpents; his hands were like unto the claws of a turtle, and his feet like unto

bear's claws in size, and were awry like those of a tortoise; and his body was cinctured with many folds of his *membrum virile*—truly a misshapen monster.

The two spies quickly left the place [...] and very soon reached their home, for they flew in the form of crows. Upon their arrival, De-ka-na-wi-dǎ asked, "Did you two find the smoke?" They answered, "We found the smoke. The thing we saw was horrifying. Tha-do-da-ho' is not human; he is daimonic and supernatural."

De-ka-na-wi-dǎ, replying, said, "We must go to the place where Tha-do-da-ho' abides. It is our duty to endeavor to reconstruct his mind, so that he shall again have the mind of a human being. We will wean him from his ungovernable temper of mind, and we will cast it deep in the ground away from him. If we can accomplish this great work, we shall be fortunate, and we shall reap fruitful benefits from it. [...] It is necessary that we [...] shall work together [...] When we have reached our destination, the habitation of Tha-do-da-ho', we shall make a fire for him at the wood's edge. We will speak to him, and we shall hail him by congratulatory words. We will also tell him that we have a matter in which he is concerned, but this latter shall come to pass in the Principal Place."

[*"They changed Tha-do-da-ho' into a natural man"*]

[...T]hey took up their journey. [...] Finally they arrived at the edge of the forest, where ends the cleared land [...] Hai-yoⁿ-hwat'-hǎ' said to his companions, "We are now at our journey's end," and immediately they halted. Whereupon De-ka-na-wi-dǎ said, "Let us now send someone to notify them of our arrival." This was done. The messenger notified the resident councilors of their arrival, saying, "They [...] have kindled their fire at the edge of the woods, and there we will meet [...]"

The resident chiefs went to the place where the fire had been kindled, and there they met the visiting chiefs. Then [came] the preliminary business, called *o-hěñ'-toñ' ka-ĩq-hwa-teq'-kwĩ oñ-tat-noñ'-heñ'*, "the preliminary part in which mutual greetings are had." [...T]he newcomers began to sing the Six Songs. Tha-do-da-ho' heard the singing, and immediately a radical change came over his mind, for he was gladdened—transfigured—by the singing. [...]

When these salutations were ended, they said, "Let us go to the Principal Place. The war chief will take them by the arm to conduct them thither." Arriving there, De-ka-na-wi-dǎ arose and said, "My pitiable brother Hai-yoⁿ-hwat'-hǎ' [...] came to my house. Moreover, he brought with him a matter of importance which he related to me. Does Tha-do-da-ho' dwell in this place?" The inmates of the place whispered precatively, "*Tcĩ, tcĩ, tcĩ, tcĩ,*" to silence him, and only one of them dared to point him out with his finger. The visitors looked and were horrified. They saw Tha-do-da-ho'; he looked to be anything but human [...] Undaunted, De-ka-na-wi-dǎ said, "We are now here. We came seeking Tha-do-da-ho'. Now, chiefs, unwrap again your matters." Obedient to this command, they took the wampum strings out of the pouch one by one, thirteen in number [...], and they placed them in order on a horizontal rod. [...]

Then Tha-do-da-ho' spoke and said, "It gave me great pleasure to hear the singing of the Six Songs." Again arising, De-ka-na-wi-dǎ continued, "We have come here seeking a certain person;

we seek Tha-do-da-ho'. The mind that belongs to his body is not now that of a human being." Then, taking his station near Tha-do-da-ho', the speaker continued, "Now, we will reconstruct and straighten out thy mind. *Hai-i, hai-i, hai-i, hai-i, hai-i, hai-i, hai-i, a-ke-wi'-yo e-koñ-he-wa''-tha'* [my-beautiful-thing, (it-is)-a-besom]." Having repeated this song thrice, the speaker delivered a string of wampum and said, "This song hereafter shall belong to you alone. It is called, 'I-use-it-to-beautify-the-earth.'"

It was now evident that the mind of Tha-do-da-ho' had experienced a change. De-ka-na-wi-dã, however, continued, "There is yet another thing which it is our purpose to make straight and natural, and that is thy body.[...]" Then, passing his hand over Tha-do-da-ho's feet, they instantly assumed the natural form of human feet, and he delivered another string of wampum. Continuing, De-ka-na-wi-dã said, "[...] We will now restore the shape of thy hands [...]," and delivered another string of wampum. Still speaking, De-ka-na-wi-dã said, "It was not intended that men should have snakes in lieu of hair," and brushing them from his head and casting them away, he added, "Thy head shall now be like that of a human being"; he then delivered another wampum string. "One other thing remains," said De-ka-na-wi-dã; "it was not intended that this should be thus." And then, unwinding from the body of Tha-do-da-ho' the many fathoms of the *membrum virile*, with which he was girdled many times, and measuring with the eye its natural length, De-ka-na-wi-dã cut away the excessive length, saying, "This shall be so long," and held in his hand a wampum string as he spoke, and then delivered it [...]

Thus they made and changed Tha-do-da-ho' into a natural man. When they had accomplished this great work, they exclaimed, "We have now redeemed Tha-do-da-ho'. Everything will now prosper in a natural and peaceful manner. [...]"

["We are bound to carry this Law to all the nations"]

De-ka-na-wi-dã and Hai-yoⁿ-hwat-hã' then added, "We must now work [...] on that which is the guarantee of our welfare and which is of the greatest moment and importance. Are there not nights when there is danger that one may kill another, to our mischief? It is this matter which we must set right, so that the nations of Natural Man* may dwell in peace and tranquility, undisturbed by the shedding of blood. In the first place, the chiefs must be patient, longsuffering, and courageous in the cause of right and equity. This applies to the chief and the war-chiefs who shall fill these offices. All this must be done for the sole object of peace and quietness.

"We are bound also to carry this Law around and show it to all the nations (and we will name it the Great Law—the Great Law of Equity), for all, all the nations, without exception, hate us of the Extended House. [...B]attleaxes are crossed, and men are slaughtering one another; [but] now we have put this evil from the earth. We have cast it deep down into the earth. Into one bundle have we gathered the causes of war and have cast this bundle away. [...] All the nations will look upon the Law, and all Natural Mankind will like and desire it. Never again shall we be in fear. All the nations of Natural Mankind will then dwell in peace and tranquility, for [...] we have formed ourselves—the nations—into one round and compact body. We have also taken one

* The term "Natural Man" is the literal translation of the present Iroquois name of "Indian"—Oñ-kwe-hoñ-we. [Footnote from the source publication]

another by the hands and arms. We have put our minds in one place. [...W]e must have but one head, one tongue, and but one blood in our bodies. [...]

“A council fire in behalf of this Law shall be kindled for all nations. Such a fire shall be lighted for the Tcerokis, and one as well for the Thās-tā-he-tcī [...], so that the purpose of having all Natural Men receive this Law may be executed. We shall also kindle such a fire for the Seven Nations living toward the sunrising, so that they can work in behalf of this Law and, in their turn, light such fires among the nations living still farther toward the east than they do.” De-ka-na-wi-dā then ceased speaking.

The Seven Nations did light such fires for the nations living still farther toward the sunrising. All received the Great Law, and worked together for the good and welfare of all Natural Men. Then men went toward the south, visiting the Tcerokis in behalf of this Law, and a council fire of this Law was lighted for them. These men then went toward the west, where they kindled similar fires for the Tyo-non-ta-te'-ka' (Tionontates) and the Thās-tā-he-tcī (Wyandots). All these nations received this Law—this fire of the council fire of the Extended House (of the Iroquois).

Then they said, “We have completed our task. Nevermore will anyone hear it said, ‘There lie the bodies of persons who have been assassinated.’ That is the matter which we have accomplished, which is to work in the Law to secure to all the nations peace and prosperity; to secure to all Men of Nature, for all time, the benefits of living in peace [...].”

Source: J. N. B. Hewitt, “Legend of the Founding of the Iroquois League,” *American Anthropologist* 5, no. 2 (April 1892): 131-148, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044041795055>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Italicized section headings added by Duffy. The sentence beginning “We will wean him from his ungovernable temper of mind...” relocated from a point later in the source publication for the sake of a more condensed text. Paragraph breaks adjusted and additional sentence breaks inserted for readability. Grammatical infelicities corrected. Punctuation emended in line with modern conventions. Quotation marks or italics used for certain ceremonial terms or phrases in the source publication, but to unclear purpose, have been omitted in this edited text. An interlinear English translation in the source has been integrated into the running text, enclosed in square brackets. Onondaga names inconsistently rendered in the source publication have been emended here to match the rendering most frequently used in the source.

These edited excerpts from Hewitt’s article are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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