

# Origins of the Longhouse Religion

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The Longhouse religion began in 1799 as an episode of religious enthusiasm among the several hundred Seneca Indians living on and near the Allegany Reservation in southwestern New York State. It was based on the revelations of the prophet Handsome Lake. Before the prophet's death in 1815 his gospel had spread to several other Iroquois reserves in the United States and Canada (see Deardorff 1951; Wallace 1969). By at least 1850, and perhaps as early as the mid-1820s, his message had been codified and a religious organization formed to promulgate it as a religion. The "church," and the system of religious belief and ritual associated with it, have survived among the Iroquois into the latter half of the twentieth century as a non-Christian alternative to the several Protestant and Catholic denominations that have established themselves on the reservations and as a forum for the continued assertion of the integrity of an Iroquois ethnic identity.

The circumstances that led to the founding of this religion and account for its particular character go back into the middle of the eighteenth century. Before the ending of the French and Indian War (Seven Years' War) in 1763, the Iroquois tribes had enjoyed two generations of relative peace and tranquillity. During this time, their political institutions, their material comforts, and their self-esteem were constantly augmented by the advantages accruing from their strategic location between the centers of British and French colonial power. They were able to play off these two imperial contenders against each other, maintaining a balance of power by threatening each side that if they were dissatisfied, they would join the other. Iroquois neutrality, and the threat of its abandonment, thus became a lever by which Iroquois diplomats at the endless round of treaties were able to extort courteous treatment, promises of territorial integrity, large quantities of "presents" (which included guns, powder, lead, traps, cloth, kettles, knives, axes, awls, food and drink, and body ornaments), and favorable credit for Indian fur-trade hunters. They were also able to use their alliance with the imperial powers as an argument to induce Indian tribes on their periphery to come under the shelter of their own confederacy; and this, too, the Europeans paid the Iroquois to do, for it simplified their own Indian diplomacy to have to deal only with the Iroquois.

The Iroquois thus between about 1701 and 1763 did not suffer directly from imperial domination. Rather, they profited temporarily. During this period many of their villages grew to be substantial towns, containing two-story log houses with stairs, paneled doors, and glass-paned windows; defended by cannon and by warriors wielding not muskets but rifles; and surrounded by vast and well-kept orchards and cornfields. Iroquois hunters could range in relative safety throughout the Ohio Valley and along the Great Lakes in search of peltries. Iroquois diplomats were received with respect at the capitals of a half-dozen colonies and provinces.

The traditional religious system also was well calculated to provide both cognitive assurance and emotional support. An annual round of communal ceremonies, basically expressing thanks to the pantheon, was performed on the occasion of various significant events in the seasonal food cycle (see particularly Fenton 1936; Tooker 1970a; Chafe 1961). Another system of rituals, directed at the individual rather than the group, sought to anticipate or cure disease by the satisfaction of dream wishes and by the ministrations of the "secret" medicine societies like the Society of Faces (Fenton 1941a). Shamans diagnosed the sources of illness, whether from the neglect of dream wishes, or from the malevolence of witchcraft (Wallace 1969). The rituals of mourning—and particularly the Condolence ceremony performed whenever a confederate chief died—sought to assuage the disabling effects of grief and to preclude the blood feud, born of the deep-seated resentments and witchcraft suspicions of bereavement (Fenton 1946). In general, these therapeutic rituals tended to elicit the acting out, or conscious fantasizing, of repressed desires of a passive or dependent nature, but in such a cautious fashion and in such ritually insulated circumstances as to disturb only minimally the smooth and harmonious course of ordinary social life.

## Iroquois Catastrophe, 1763-1797

The equilibrium of this cultural system was destroyed by a series of military, political, and economic disasters that befell the Iroquois after 1763. With the victory of the British in the war with France, the Iroquois found themselves outflanked, no longer able to play off the British and the French against each other, and surrounded by a circle of British forts. Their abortive effort