

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Iroquois Religion and Women in Historical Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The term "Iroquois" is broadly used to refer to a group of sixteen historically identifiable Native American peoples having cognate languages. Some of these peoples are now extinct, some have lost knowledge of their aboriginal language, and others still speak modern Iroquoian languages. Among these languages it has been determined that Cherokee is the most divergent, and it is estimated that the differentiation of Cherokee from the others dates from approximately 3500 to 4000 years ago.¹ Thus the Northern Iroquoian languages are more closely related to each other than they are to Cherokee, which represents the southern branch. In this article I shall confine the discussion to the Northern Iroquois, and more particularly yet, to the best known of the Iroquoian speakers, namely the members of the famous League of the Iroquois: the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. These tribes, that once lived across most of the breadth of upper New York State, were joined in 1722 or 1723 by the Tuscarora, another Iroquoian-speaking people, and were thereafter known as the Six Nations.