The Quest for the Historical Tekanawi·ta': Oral Tradition and the Founding of the Iroquois League

Jonathan Bernier

The University of Western Ontario
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In North America, "tribal historians and religious leaders frequently rely on oral tradition as literal records of ancient history" (Echo-Hawk 2000:268). Alternatively, "most academically trained scholars respond with skeptical rejection of verbal literature as a vehicle for transmitting useful information over long time spans" (Echo-Hawk 2000:268). Although I do not believe that we should uncritically accept oral literatures as literal representations of the past, I do believe that an a priori rejection of such literatures as potential sources of historical data is equally unwarranted. We must evaluate the sources and overall reliability of any historical data with which we work; this is necessary whether the historical data is transmitted in writing or orally. One such myth that must be considered in this fashion is the so-called "Tekánawí·ta' Myth". This tradition purports to record the founding of the Iroquois League and today is part of the larger "Iroquois League Tradition" (see Gibson 1992: xix-lx, for a discussion of this); this larger tradition discusses the philosophy behind the League and includes rules governing its operation. In this paper, I will consider the formation of the League of the Iroquois; specifically, I will ask to what extent we can rely upon the "Tekánawí·ta' Myth" to provide biographical details about Tekánawí·ta's life and his role in the formation of the League.

The Iroquois are not one but rather five nations which were located just south of Lake Ontario in what is now upstate New York at the time of European contact; from east to west, they were the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk (Engelbrecht 1985; Snow 1994; Tooker 1978). They all were part of a language family called Northern Iroquoian; they were not the only members of this family, with the Erie, Huron-Petun, Neutral, St. Lawrence Iroquoians, Susquehannock, Tuscarora, Wenro and also being classified as Northern Iroquoian (Lounsbury 1978). There were also the Southern Iroquoians, represented by the various dialects of Cherokee; these dialects are mutually intelligible to one another and linguistically related yet quite distinct from the Northern Iroquoians (Lounsbury 1978). At some point, the Seneca, the Cayuga, the Onondaga, the Oneida and the Mohawk came together to form the League of the Iroquois (Engelbrecht 1985; Snow 1994; Tooker 1978). According to tradition, the League was formed by Tekánawí·ta' and his colleague, Hayehwátha' (i.e.

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1 Tekánawí·ta' is a figure in the League Tradition who is often referred to as the Peacemaker in English. There are a number of variant spellings for Tekánawí·ta': Dekanahwidah (Parker, 1968), Dekanawidah (Parker, 1968), Tekanawitagh (Klinek and Talman, 1970) or Tekanawí·ta' (Gibson, 1992). The same is true for Hayehwátha' (often called Hiawatha) and Thatotá ho'. Here, I have chosen the spellings found in Gibson (1992). Of note, this is the only full-length Iroquoian language version of the Iroquoian League Tradition in print.

2 For more information on the various groups, see also Boyce 1978; Trigger (ed.) 1978:296-544; Trigger 1985, 1987

3 For more information on the Cherokee, see also Anderson 1991; Mooney 1891, 1900; Schroedl 1995.
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The Iroquois are not one but rather five nations which were located just south of Lake Ontario in what is now upstate New York at the time of European contact; from east to west, they were the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk (Engelbrecht 1985; Snow 1994; Tooker 1978). They all were part of a language family called Northern Iroquoian; they were not the only members of this family, with the Erie, Huron-Petun, Neutral, St. Lawrence Iroquoians, Susquehannock, Tuscarora, Wenro and also being classified as Northern Iroquoian (Lounsbury 1978). There were also the Southern Iroquoians, represented by the various dialects of Cherokee; these dialects are mutually intelligible to one another and linguistically related yet quite distinct from the Northern Iroquoians (Lounsbury 1978).

At some point, the Seneca, the Cayuga, the Onondaga, the Oneida and the Mohawk came together to form the League of the Iroquois (Engelbrecht 1985; Snow 1994; Tooker 1978). According to tradition, the League was formed by Tekanawi•ta’ and his colleague, Hayehwátha’ (i.e. 1Tekanawí wa’ is a figure in the League Tradition who is often referred to as the Peacemaker in English. There are a number of variant spellings for Tekanawí wa’: Dekanahwideh (Parker, 1968), Dekanawida (Parker, 1968), Tekanawitagh (Klinck and Talman, 1970) or Tekanawí wa’ (Gibson, 1992). The same is true for Hayehwá-tha’ (often called Huwatha) and Thatota ho’. Here, I have chosen the spellings found in Gibson (1992). Of note, this is the only full-length Iroquoian language version of the Iroquoian League Tradition in print.

Footnotes:
1 Tekanawí wa’ is a figure in the League Tradition who is often referred to as the Peacemaker in English. There are a number of variant spellings for Tekanawí wa’: Dekanahwideh (Parker, 1968), Dekanawida (Parker, 1968), Tekanawitagh (Klinck and Talman, 1970) or Tekanawí wa’ (Gibson, 1992). The same is true for Hayehwá-tha’ (often called Huwatha) and Thatota ho’. Here, I have chosen the spellings found in Gibson (1992). Of note, this is the only full-length Iroquoian language version of the Iroquoian League Tradition in print.
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or, less likely, in 1451. Most attempts to date
the formation of the League make use of oral
traditions from one source or another; however,
the historical reliability of these traditions
suffers from the same limitations that I will
discuss below.

All surviving versions of the Iroquois
League Tradition are the product of oral
tradition rather than oral history. Echo-Hawk
(2000:270) defines oral literature as any
literature which is transmitted verbally and he
further distinguishes between oral history and
oral traditions. Oral history consists of “verbal
memoirs of first-hand observers” while oral
traditions are “verbal memoirs that first-hand
observers have passed along to others” (Echo-
Hawk, 2000:270). Oral history is created when
individuals tell their own stories; oral history is
transformed into oral tradition when individuals
begin to tell the stories of others. However,
what degree of factual accuracy can we expect
from individuals who are composing and
producing their own oral history? Loftus and
Ketcham (1991:77) assert that “…facts don’t
come into our memory and passively reside
there untouched and unsathed by future
events… [Memory is] a constructive and
creative process…After a week, memory is less
accurate than after a day”; consequently, even
within one’s own lifetime, one will edit one’s
own oral history. Further, what degree of factual
accuracy can we expect will be
maintained when oral history is transformed
into an oral tradition via transmission from one
individual to another? These questions speak to
the ability of oral literature to accurately
transmit information over time.

In seeking to address these questions,
both Echo-Hawk (2000) and Mason (2000) cite
Vansina’s (1985:19-20) example of three
versions of a conflict between groups of Hopi
and Navaho sometime between 1853 and 1856.
Two versions were recorded in 1892. At least
one of these accounts was provided by an
eyewitness; it is quite possible that both were
(Vansina 1985:19-20). The first was short and
generalized; the second was longer and more
detailed (Vansina 1985:19-20); nonetheless,
despite the difference in details, both are
primarily concerned with narrating a sequence of
events (Vansina 1985:20). The third was
recorded in 1936 and displays significant
variation; indeed, a “lot of invention took place in
the years between the history and the tradition”
(Mason 2000:251). The story is framed in terms
of traditional Hopi mythology (Eggan 1967:47-
51; Vansina 1985:20); this was not the case in the
1892 versions (Vansina 1985:20). There was, in
this case, Following Echo-Hawk (2000)’s
distinction between oral history and oral tradition
we can identify the two 1892 accounts as oral
history and the 1936 version as oral tradition. In
this case, then, there is an unknown amount of
variation between the actual events and the
recording of the oral history; even though the
stories are similar to each other, we must
recognize that these are not independent accounts
as the individuals who gave them lived in
adjoining villages (1967:37). Additionally, there
is a measurable and significant amount of
variation between these records and that of the
oral tradition.

As in the above case of the Hopi oral
history and tradition, there are several extant,
written, versions of the Iroquois League
Tradition. These provide insight into the
tradition’s content at different periods in its
development. Three versions to be considered in
this paper date from the 1910s and two date from
100 years earlier. As the more recent are better
known, we shall consider these first. In 1911
Duncan Campbell Scott (1911) published the so-
called ‘Chiefs’ Version; this was a document
originally prepared by a group of Six Nations
Iroquois chiefs around 1900. The next year,
1912, saw the Seneca chief John A. Arthur
transcribing an Onondaga text to anthropologist
A.A. Goldenweiser; it was not, however,
published until 1992 (Gibson 1992). Often called
the Gibson-Goldenweiser Version, this version
has become the only, complete, Iroquoian
language version of the League Tradition ever to
appear in print (Gibson 1992: xi-xv). Four years
later, 1916, Parker published his Constitution of
the Iroquois, later republished in Parker (1968).

These documents, of course, cannot be
seen as independent sources. Indeed, John Arthur
Gibson, a Seneca chief, was a key figure in the
formation of the Chief’s League Tradition
(Gibson 1992). Therefore, one would expect a
significant correspondence between his version
and the Chiefs’ Version. Parker made use of
the Chief’s version, along with the editorial services
of Albert Cusick and earlier manuscripts prepared
by Seth Newhouse (Gibson 1992; Parker 1968:12-13). To the best of my knowledge, none of the earlier Newhouse manuscripts have been published.

Although they vary, these texts seem to agree on several major points about Tekanawita’s life. I will briefly summarize those points I believe to be most relevant to this discussion. First, in each text, a woman and her daughter reside together. The daughter was a virgin yet conceived a child (Gibson 1992:3; Parker 1968:14; Scott 1911:198). Her mother does not believe the daughter when she claims to have had sexual relations with any men (Gibson 1992:4; Parker 1968:14; Scott 1911:198). The woman mistreats her daughter (Gibson 1992:6; Parker 1968:14; Scott 1911:198) and only stops after miraculous signs convince her that the child is blessed (Gibson 1992:7; Parker 1968:14; Scott 1911:205). Once born this child, Tekanawita, grows rapidly and becomes exceptionally strong and healthy (Gibson 1992:7; Parker 1968:14; Scott 1911:198).

When he reaches manhood, Tekanawita leaves his home and journeys to the land of the Five Nations Iroquois to preach the message of the Great Peace (Gibson 1968:15; Parker 1968:15; Scott 1911:199). The accounts differ in the order and circumstances of the events but all agree upon the introduction of two other key characters, Hayehwatha and Thadotâ ho (Gibson 1968:101; Parker 1968:23; Scott 1911:205). In each account, Hayehwatha is an Iroquois chief whose daughters (or granddaughters) die within the narrative (Gibson 1968:133-8; Parker 1968:18-19; Scott 1911:205-6). Hayehwatha is grief-stricken and searches out Tekanawita (Gibson 1968:139; Parker 1968:23-24; Scott, 1911:207). Hayehwatha is Tekanawita’s first ‘convert’ and works with him to bring the Iroquois nations together into a confederacy (Gibson, 1968; Parker, 1968; Scott, 1911). The construction of the League requires that the five nations agree to join and that the Great (but evil) Sorcerer, Thadotâ ho, also agrees to join (Gibson, 1992; Parker, 1968; Scott, 1911). The rest of the narrative is focused upon curing this cannibalistic sorcerer of his evil and insanity. At the end, he becomes the head of the League (Gibson, 1992:232-4; Parker 1968:90-91; Scott 1911:218-9). Tekanawita then gives a set of rules to govern the operating of the League (Gibson 1992; Parker 1968; Scott 1911).

For purposes of this discussion, I have identified five key biographical details of Tekanawita’s life as given by the Gibson (1992), Parker (1968) and Scott (1911) traditions. First, Tekanawita is born outside of Iroquoia; he is an outsider both geographically and socially. Second, his birth is miraculous; like Jesus or the Buddha, he is conceived in some sort of supernatural fashion. Third, the stories begin with his birth and move promptly to his mission to spread the Great Peace; he is the primary actor who sets the crucial events in motion. Fourth, he is responsible for curing Thadotâ ho. Fifth, he provides rules for the governance of the League.

As mentioned above, these may be the best known versions of the Iroquois League Tradition. However, they are not the only or even the earliest ones. Indeed, they are relatively late redactions. About a century before these three versions were produced in the 1910s, Joseph Brant (Boyce 1973) and John Norton (Klink and Talman 1970) provided accounts of the formation of the League. They are significantly different from the Gibson (1992), Parker (1968) and Scott (1911) versions. Boyce (1973:288) observes that Brant’s account lacks any magical or symbolic language; he further suggests that Brant’s account, therefore, has a greater historical credibility (Boyce 1973:288). However, the absence of magical or symbolic language does not necessarily mean that this version contains more accurate historical data. The lack of magical symbolic language may have more to do with the format of the account: The other accounts were written with an intention to either entertain others or to preserve tradition whereas Brant’s account was given as a response to a questionnaire (Boyce 1973).

Brant’s and Norton’s accounts present a very different understanding of Tekanawita then that presented by the Gibson, Parker or Scott versions. First, in both accounts, Tekanawita is born within Iroquoia. He is described as a respected Mohawk chief (Boyce 1973:288; Klink and Talman 1970:102); unlike the Peacemaker of the later versions, we see here a man who is fully integrated into Iroquois society. Correspondingly, there is no mention in either Brant or Norton of his birth: hence, there is no suggestion that he did not have a father. In Gibson (1992), Parker (1968), and Scott (1911) his origins are moved both outside the realms of Iroquois society and he is conceived in an atypical fashion; he is extrasocietal and extrahuman. Further, as in the Gibson, Parker and Scott accounts, in the Brant account (Boyce 1973:288)
Tekanawíta' is the primary actor in the formation of the League; from the beginning of the account, he is actively seeking to unite the tribes in some sort of confederacy. In Norton (Klinck and Talman 1970:102), however, he does not appear until the middle of the story. Hayehwatha', seeking aid in dealing with Thatotá ho's anger, travels to a Mohawk village whereupon he meets Tekanawíta'. As in the later accounts, both Brant and Norton portray Tekanawíta' as instrumental in the "conversion" and restoration of Thatotá ho (Boyce 1973:288-9; Klinck and Talman 1970:102-104); Brant (Boyce 1973:288-9) portrays Thatotá ho as an obstinate Onondaga chief rather than as an evil sorcerer. Finally, contrary to the 20th century accounts, neither account suggests that Tekanawíta' provided any sort of rules for governing the League.

There is significant variation between the conceptions of Tekanawíta' put forward by Brant (Boyce 1973) and Norton (Klinck and Talman 1970) in the 19th century and Gibson (1992), Parker (1968) and Scott (1911) in the 20th. It would be tempting to suggest that the early versions are more accurate. However, we cannot do that. Unfortunately, they, too, are far removed from the events they purport to record. The oral tradition appears to have changed in the 19th century; as in the case described by Eggan (1967) and Vansina (1985), we cannot determine how much variation occurred between the initial events and the first recording of the tradition. Given the paucity of data, we simply cannot chart the development of the tradition as it moved through the time. We must recognize that we cannot verify the factual veracity of these traditions.

This recognition is not to say that these traditions are without meaning or that they are untrue. Indeed, I believe that they are very true. They convey social and cultural meaning. That is perhaps more important than any factual data they may or may not provide. The really important questions are questions that I have not addressed in this paper. Those are questions which locate these traditions within contemporary Iroquois culture. Why did the League Tradition undergo change in the 19th century? What were the discursive reasons for these changes? What do these traditions mean to Iroquois peoples today? These questions transcend epistemology and move toward a more existential realm. That realm is a discourse more of the heart rather than one of the mind. In the end, that discourse far more important; unlike attempts to determine "what actually happened", this discourse is the one that can make, unmake or remake the world.

Works Cited


