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THE STORY AND STRUCTURE OF THE IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY

CHRISTOPHER VECSEY

Introduction

Between 1400 and 1600¹ five Iroquoian nations—the Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Oneidas and Mohawks—established a Confederacy or League, a “state” built upon kinship loyalties and national alliances that reached its peak of military, economic, and diplomatic power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Confederacy functions today, but is weakened in relation to the United States and Canada, which are its neighbors and sometimes its adversaries.

The aim of this article is to examine the stories that describe the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy and to discern the pervasive messages communicated through their narrative structure. Numerous versions of these stories derive from sources that date from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present day, but a core consistency is readily identifiable and best represented by a manuscript recorded in 1899 (Gibson).

Behind the dozens of episodes that comprise the stories, and behind the many dimensions that various academic approaches can uncover in the stories, there exists a unity. The stories define and express the teleology of Iroquois *national* life: its grounding in human nature and human problems; its rules of ritual propriety; its incorporation of seemingly conflicting forces; its hope of transforming individuals and groups. These are stories—I should say, this is a story—of nation-formation, with its infrastructure, transcending loyalties, reciprocal duties, and principles for promoting human life according to divine models and accomplished through supernatural intervention and power. An analysis of such a story can help to illuminate the relationships among myth, religion, and national identity.²

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¹ Estimates vary widely regarding the founding date. See, e.g., Beauchamp (1926:36); Fenton (1949b:233, fn. 1); Hale (1883:19); Hewitt (1894:67); Paul Wallace (1948:399–400).

² I shall treat the issue of national or civil religion in a forthcoming comparative study

Since there is no original or perfect version of the story (Fenton, 1947:392), my method is to gather every version—including many fragments—in order to determine the normal form of the narrative and discriminate the central elements from the peripheral or idiosyncratic. The League legend “is known from fragments as early as the eighteenth century” (Fenton, 1975:134)—the Moravian missionary Pylaeus, who learned some Mohawk stories in 1743, but whose manuscripts disappeared and come down to us only through the reports of others (Beauchamp, 1921:7); Canassatego, a Seneca chief who gave a brief and vague account in 1763 (*ibid.*:8)—but the earliest identifiable account is from the Mohawk statesman–soldier, Joseph Brant, in 1801 (Boyce:288). Since then, around two dozen sources—some published, some still in manuscript form—have appeared (Tooker:440–441; cf. Weinman for a useful bibliography).³ Some are a page or two in length; others contain hundreds of episodes. Some are written by Iroquois with direct access to tribal records; others are filtered through non-Iroquois translators and editors. Some are unimpeachable in their authenticity; others are suspect (e.g., parts of Clark and Schoolcraft, 1847) or clearly bogus (Canfield). Some are original tellings; others are distillations, syntheses, and retellings of other versions in the corpus. Most are told by Iroquois from the three elder nations—the Mohawks, Onondagas, and Senecas—although there is one important version from a Tuscarora, David Cusick (in Beauchamp, 1892), a member of the Indian nation admitted as the sixth participant in the League in the eighteenth century.

The versions of some Iroquois storytellers can be scrutinized for ideological biases. For example, Seth Newhouse, an Onondaga of Six Nations Reserve, Ontario, a speaker of fluent Mohawk (his father was probably Mohawk), was deeply involved in the struggle between the Warriors Party and the Council of Life Chiefs on his reserve, and his texts (Newhouse, 1885, 1897; Parker, 1968) tend to represent his position in the debate. He was also a strong advocate of Iroquois political autonomy against Canadian intrusions. Thus, he wrote at the

of George Washington and the founders of the Iroquois Confederacy. In both cases one observes the incorporation of Christian images and motifs and other mythological traditions into the new myths of the emerging states.

³ The most prominent versions can be found in Akweks (1948; 1972); Beauchamp (1892; 1921; 1926); Boyce; Brant-Sero; Canfield; Clark; Converse; Dunlap; Elm; Fenton (1975); Gibson; Hale (1883); Henning; Henry; Hewitt (1892); Newhouse (1885; 1897); Norton; Parker (1968); Schoolcraft (1847); Scott; Snyderman (1961; 1982); and Paul Wallace (1946). A major, perhaps definitive, version of the story was narrated by John Gibson to Alexander Goldenweiser in 1912. Various translators have worked on it, including William N. Fenton, who completed the work in 1972 but has not yet published the finished product (1975:135–136).

outset of one story: “. . . we are now upholding our *Ancient Government* which was *Established* by the *Heavenly Messenger* ‘*De-ka-na-wi-dah*’ centuries before our friendly en[e]mies the Columbians (The Palefaces) came to this continent” (Newhouse, 1885:1, emphases his). In addition, he emphasized the leadership role played by Mohawks in the Confederacy’s founding, at the expense of the other Iroquois nations (Fenton, 1949a; Parker, 1968:39). Many examples in Iroquois history indicate how Mohawks and Onondagas in particular have often vied for prominence in the League, and the storytellers of these nations tend to validate their political claims against one another, as they have done for centuries (Jennings:105ff). Enough is known of the scholars who have collected, translated, edited, and sometimes altered the Iroquois texts that adjustments can be made for their biases. J.N.B. Hewitt, for instance, was not above “revising” some of his legends in his search for “a consistent historical background” to the founding of the League (1931:175). For their part, Goldenweiser, Parker (1918), and Fenton have all become embroiled in the debate about the possibility of aboriginal Iroquois constitutionality, and their disagreement has colored their work. All of these factors have been taken into consideration in evaluating the versions of the League legends.

This analysis of the Iroquois stories also takes into account the published interpretations of the texts. For the wealth of versions, there are only a few creative exegeses of the narrative. Some studies have indulged in honorifics for the Confederacy (e.g., Howard; Paul Wallace, 1948). Other scholars, such as Hewitt and Beauchamp, have made numerous and excellent observations about the stories without conducting a full fledged interpretation. Hertzberg performs a very useful service in relating the legend to the structure of Iroquois society and polity; Anthony Wallace (1958b) probes the story’s presentation of cultural change and revitalization. Other observers have made helpful remarks, but a systematic analysis of the full complement of versions is still lacking.

The Iroquois have three genres of narrative: (1) fictional tales (e.g., of tricksters); (2) recent human adventures; and (3) stories of true events that took place long ago, and which are believed by the narrators (Fenton, 1962:285). The story of the Confederacy is part of the third category, which might be called a “myth.” There are three great myths of the Iroquois: (1) the Creation, in which a woman falls from the sky, lands on a newly formed earth, and her grandsons, Tarenyawagon (the good creator) and Tawiskaron (the contrary-minded) give shape to the present world; (2) the Founding of the League; and (3) the Good News revealed to Handsome Lake in 1800 and the years following. Although the last event took place less than

two centuries ago, the Iroquois consider it an ancient event because it established the third era of history, following the eras of the Creation and the League (Fenton, 1962:283).

It is said by some that the Iroquois regard the League legend as a “gospel” (Fenton, 1975:132) or a “Bible” (Paul Wallace, 1946:5). They treat it with reverence reserved for sacred texts that express ultimate and normative values. They think of its characters and events as having formed the present civil order with the authority and power of the “supernatural”—called *orenda*, a supramundane, qualitatively superior force that permeates and empowers all special being. They tell it in a highly metaphorical language with rhetorical, legal, and ritual phrases that are absent from ordinary Iroquois speech and unintelligible to most Iroquois (Hewitt, 1930:206). For these reasons, we can speak of it as a “myth,” a foundational, preternatural, ritualized, religious narrative.

We should note, however, that as long as a century ago Iroquois storytellers were demythologizing the text. Horatio Hale commented that the Canadian Iroquois he encountered “only smile with good-natured derision” when extraordinary events in the story were mentioned (1883:21). Seth Newhouse, it is said “. . . no longer believed in the mythology” of the League (Fenton, 1949a:156). In a more recent Mohawk text (Akweks, 1948:10–12), the narrator has rationalized the magical disappearance of lake water by asserting that a beaver dam must have given out and the water run dry. If the story serves as scripture to the Iroquois, at least a few of them interpret it figuratively, rationalistically, and perhaps with an emphasis on its philosophical principles. For many Iroquois the narrative is a “legend” about human heroes sanctioned by *orenda*, or a “story” expressing commendable ideas and values. Hence, I use the terms “myth,” “legend,” and “story” interchangeably in this study.

The Text

There is no one way to catalogue all the episodes, motifs, or mythemes that make up the legend of the League. To present the story fully but concisely, I have separated the narrative into twenty-two sections. In so doing, it has been necessary to reorganize the chronology of many versions to fit the prevailing model. No one version contains every episode, although Gibson’s 1899 manuscript comes the closest to completeness.

I. The Migration and Separation of the People

Tarenyawagon saved the five nations from Stonish Giants. He destroyed monsters and put the world in order, establishing princi-

ples for humans to follow, thus setting the stage for the later Constitution. He gave the five families the art of war, the right of expansion. He cleared waters of obstructions and pointed out good fishing. But a disagreement arose, and the five bands went their separate ways, with separate tongues. As they migrated, they established temporary, local leagues (Akweks, 1972:2–25; Beauchamp, 1892:10, 16; Brant-Sero:166; Clark:21–23; Hale, 1883:18; Hewitt, 1892:131; Howard:437; Henning:480; Henry:28; Norton:91, 98–99; Schoolcraft, 1847:272).

II. *The Birth and Growth of Deganawida*

In the ancient times of the ancestors, a mother and daughter lived alone among the Hurons near the Bay of Quinte. The daughter was a virgin, but became pregnant. When she would not confess to her mother of sexual relations, her mother became depressed at the shame and deception. But Tarenyawagon visited the mother in a dream and told her that the child, born of a virgin, would do the work of the divinities on earth. He was an incarnation of Tarenyawagon with a great mission. He was born, and the grandmother unsuccessfully tried to drown him three times, for fear of the calamity he would bring. He grew up honest, good, generous, beautiful, and peaceful. Animals loved him, but he was misunderstood and persecuted by his people. He grew very rapidly (Akweks, 1948:3, 5, 6; Dunlap:29; Fenton, 1975:136–137; Gibson:1–9; Henry:30–32; Newhouse, 1885:1, 169–172; Parker, 1968:14, 65, 66).

III. *The Journey to the Mohawks, the Situation, and the Mission Explained*

Deganawida left on his mission in a white (stone) canoe. He told his grandmother: If a tree runs blood, I have died; if not, I am successful. He crossed Lake Ontario and found hunters whose village had been destroyed. They told of intertribal warfare; of sorrow, destruction, starvation, and death; of feuding factions, lawlessness, warmongering, the slaughter of innocents, and cannibalism. The people had forgotten the Creator's ways. Deganawida told them, "The Great Creator from whom we all are descended sent me to establish the Great Peace among you. No longer shall you kill one another and nations shall cease warring upon each other" (Parker, 1968:15). He promised to protect against invasion and establish government (Akweks, 1948:3, 6–9; Beauchamp, 1892:16; Brant-Sero:166–167; Clark:24; Dunlap:29; Fenton, 1975:136–137; Gibson:10–24; Hale, 1883:18; Henry:28–29; Hewitt, 1917:436; Newhouse, 1885:173; Parker, 1968:15–17, 61–63, 67–69).

IV. *The Mother of Nations Accepts Deganawida's Message*

Deganawida visited a woman, Djigonsasa, the Mother of Nations, who fed warriors along the road. She fed him; they ate together, and he explained his message, telling her to cease supplying the war parties. He needed to explain to her the three double-faceted principles—Righteousness, Peace, Power—upon which his message was based, and the physical symbols of his message: the Extended House and the Great Law. She accepted his message, the first to do so, thus giving clan mothers priority (Brant-Sero:167–170; Fenton, 1975:137; Gibson:25–32; Hale, 1883:29; Parker, 1968:70–71).

V. *The Cannibal Converts*

In Gibson (34–60) the cannibal is Hiawatha. In Parker (1968:69–70) the cannibal is Tadadaho. Deganawida found an empty house. He climbed onto the roof to the smokehole. The owner returned, carrying a human corpse. He boiled the body in a kettle, and when it was ready he looked into the pot. He saw a man looking up “from the depths of the standing pot” (Gibson:37). At first he thought he was being tricked, then he said, “So then it is really I myself that is looking up from the depths of the pot. My personal appearance is most amazing. So, on the contrary, perhaps my manner of doing is not so beautiful, that thus it should continue to be my purpose to keep killing people and eating their flesh” (ibid.:39). He hoped that someone would tell him how “to compensate for the number of human beings whom I have made to suffer, in order that peace may prevail” (ibid.). Deganawida met him as he threw away the body, and they shared a meal of venison, which the Ruler has ordained as a food for humans. Its antlers shall be worn on the head, as a sign of authority. Together they buried the body, saying that from then on each person will be responsible “to care for the body of man” (ibid.:57). Deganawida explained his message, and the cannibal accepted it. He gave him the name of Hiawatha.

VI. *The Prophets Prove Their Power*

Deganawida went among the Mohawks, preaching his message. He had to prove his power by sitting in a tree that was chopped down into a precipice. He emerged unharmed. In Gibson (74–82), Hiawatha exchanged places with him and was thought to be Deganawida. He married the favorite youngest daughter of the chief and became a chief himself. The chief accepted the message (Akweks, 1948:7–8; Gibson:74–105; Parker, 1968:15–16, 71–73).

VII. *Tadadaho the Wizard Prevents Peace*

A wizard was the chief of the Onondagas. He had snakes for hair, a snake for a penis, wrapping around his body. He had turtle claws the size of bear paws for hands and feet, seven crooks in his body, and a club in his fist. In youth he had been normal, the half-brother of Hiawatha, but now he was twisted in body and mind, hated but feared. He was a tyrant who blocked all attempts at peace by killing and spying on his fellows. Hiawatha tried to organize chiefs against him for peace by holding councils, but Tadadaho stifled every attempt. As Hiawatha's delegation approached him by canoe at his isolated nest, he drowned most of them with wind and waves. One version presents Tadadaho as a great chief without any evil (Schoolcraft, 1846:74–75). Another describes his hostility but asserts that he requested that his people transform him (Beauchamp, 1892:17). One says that he was associated with Tawiskaron (Henry:36) (Akweks, 1948:8–9; Beauchamp, 1892:17 and 1921:20; Clark:24; Converse:117; Dunlap:29; Gibson:65–73; Hale, 1883:20; Hewitt, 1892:132, 136 and 1920:538; Newhouse, 1885:3–4; Norton:100; Parker, 1968:17–18, 69).

VIII. *Hiawatha's Relatives Are Killed*

A. Osinoh the Witch Kills Hiawatha's Daughters.

A visionary learned that Hiawatha would be able to conquer Tadadaho if Hiawatha would leave Onondaga and join forces with Deganawida. Yet with his daughters still alive in Onondaga, Hiawatha would not leave. "With the daughters dead they knew the crushing sorrow would sever every tie that bound him to Onondaga. Then would he be free to leave and in thinking of the welfare of the people forget his own sorrow" (Parker, 1968:18). So they hired Osinoh the witch, who transformed into an owl and killed the daughters when they refused marriage. Despite attempts at revenge by his family, Hiawatha was shattered (Akweks, 1948:9–10; Beauchamp, 1926:31; Newhouse, 1885:4–5; Parker, 1968:18–19).

B. Tadadaho Kills Hiawatha's Relatives with a Great Plunging Bird.

As Hiawatha was planning for another council, his pregnant daughter (or other female relative) was gathering water or firewood. A great, beautiful bird (an eagle, vulture, or wampum bird) plunged down to earth where she was. A great crowd trampled her to death, in curiosity, fear, or greed for its feathers (Akweks, 1948:9; Beauchamp, 1926:31; Henning:477; Hewitt, 1892:132–135; Gibson:106–119; Newhouse, 1885:6; Norton:100; Parker, 1968:17–18, 74–76).

IX. *Hiawatha Mourns and Quits Onondaga*

No one comforted Hiawatha in his grief. His people had become so used to fighting that they were inured to each other's bereavement and to death itself. Therefore, Hiawatha left Onondaga; he "split the sky," i.e., went south, wandering (Akweks, 1948:10; Beauchamp, 1926:32; Hewitt, 1892:133; Newhouse, 1885:6; Norton:100; Parker, 1968:18–19, 114–115).

X. *Hiawatha Invents Wampum*

A. Hiawatha Uses Elderberry Twigs.

As Hiawatha wandered, he found elderberry rushes. He cut them into lengths and strung them into three pieces, saying, "This would I do if I found anyone burdened with grief even as I am. I would console them" (Parker, 1968:20) (Akweks, 1948:10; Parker, 1968:77).

B. Hiawatha Uses Shells.

Hiawatha came to a lake, or group of small lakes, where ducks were thick on the water. He startled them, and as they flew up, they carried all the water with them. Hiawatha gathered shells along the lake bottom and strung them into beads, making a speech about consoling and other uses of wampum (Akweks, 1948:10; Beauchamp, 1921:16 and 1926:31; Hale 1883:24; Henning:478; Hewitt, 1892:133; Gibson:264–268; Parker, 1968:20, 116; Snyderman, 1961:581). Or, he walked to the bottom of the lake and found the wampum beads among the weeds (Snyderman, 1982:323). Or, Hiawatha or Deganawida found shells on the paddle of a canoe, and planned to represent their plan pictorially through the beads (Converse:139–140, 187).

C. Hiawatha Uses Bird Quills.

Hiawatha strung eagle or wampum bird quills as he travelled (Beauchamp, 1892:64 and 1921:17).

XI. *Hiawatha Gives the Mohawks Lessons in Protocol*

Hiawatha travelled to a Mohawk town. He found a hut in a cornfield outside the village and sat there by a fire, making wampum. A female saw him and reported his presence to the chief, who sent messengers to invite him in. Hiawatha taught them the proper way to deliver messages with wampum. When he entered the village, they asked him why such a chief should be wandering. He said that he wandered because Tadadaho killed his family: "I don't care what shall become of me now" (Newhouse, 1885:7). The chief promised to place him at an honored seat at council and consult him; however, these promises were broken, so he continued to travel, searching for consolation (Akweks, 1948:11–12; Beauchamp, 1926:32; Con-

verse:188–189; Gibson:121–141; Henning:477–478; Hewitt, 1892:134; Norton:101; Parker, 1968:20–22, 76–79, 117).

XII. *Deganawida Consoles Hiawatha*

Hiawatha met Deganawida, who proceeded to console him using eight of the thirteen strings of wampum beads gathered by Hiawatha. Hiawatha's bereavement and depression were relieved, and now his mind was capable of judgment, so that he could help create law. Deganawida took the wampum, saying, "*This is the thing that will accomplish our undertakings*" (Newhouse, 1885:10). From then on, this is how mourners would be consoled (Akweks, 1948:12–13; Fenton, 1975:137; Hewitt, 1892:135; Parker, 1968:22–24).

XIII. *Scouts Travel to Tadadaho*

Deganawida sent scouts, sometimes as crows, sometimes as bear and deer, to find Tadadaho's column of smoke. They passed through Oneida and found Tadadaho, whom they described in horrible detail when they returned (Akweks, 1948:15–16; Converse:189; Hewitt, 1892:136; Newhouse, 1885:13–17; Parker, 1968:26–27).

XIV. *Deganawida and Hiawatha Join Oneidas, Cayugas, and Senecas to Mohawks*

Interspersed with visits to Tadadaho, the two prophets brought their message to the other Iroquois nations, and each in turn accepted the message, including the two chiefs of the Senecas. Each nation took its name from Deganawida. Now the two had the power of unity behind their words and could approach Tadadaho in order to transform him (Akweks, 1948:14–15; Boyce:288–289; Gibson:142–217; Hale, 1883:29; Newhouse, 1885:76–130, 175–176; Norton:103–105; Parker, 1968:25–26, 85, 96–97).

XV. *The Nations March to Tadadaho, Singing the Peace Hymn*

Led by Deganawida, the nations marched in procession to Tadadaho, singing the Peace Hymn, which Deganawida taught and which could "soothe the angry feelings" (Norton:103) of Tadadaho, reconstructing his mind "so that he may again have the mind of a human being" (Hewitt, 1892:135). If the song was sung without error, it could straighten and transform Tadadaho. The song thanked the League, Peace, the Ancestors, the Warriors, the Women, the Kindred; it was a song to be sung for all time, especially at Condolences. All the while, Tadadaho's voice could be heard, shouting: It has not yet occurred, or when will it occur? (Akweks, 1948:13; Beauchamp,

1921:20–21; Hertzberg:105; Hewitt, 1892:135, 137–140; Newhouse, 1885:28–52; Norton:103; Parker, 1968:27–28, 79–91).

XVI. *Deganawida and Hiawatha Transform Tadadaho*

The procession reached Onondaga and performed ceremonies at the edge of the woods, while Tadadaho continued in his impatience. They met him and explained their message to him. He agreed to their plan after they promised to make him the firekeeper, the main chief, with Onondaga as capital and with veto power in his hands. Then they combed the snakes from his hair; they placated him; they gave him new clothes and shoes; they sang the song to him; they reduced his penis or made it harmless; they rubbed him with wampum; and after some false tries, he “became perfect. Harmless. Peac[e]able. And calm minded man. . . and his evil spirit left him completely” (Newhouse 1885:64–65) (Boyce:288–289; Converse:118; Dunlap:3; Hale, 1883:27–29; Gibson:244–252; Hewitt, 1892:140; Norton: 104–105; Parker, 1968:27–28, 80–91).

XVII. *Deganawida and Hiawatha Establish Iroquois Unity and Law*

After curing Tadadaho, the two were able to establish national “peace and tranquility” (Hewitt, 1892:140). They created one people, united, “one great family” (Converse:189), “brothers again” (Akweks, 1972:29), with “filial love” (Boyce:289), “a vast sisterhood of all the tribes of men” (Hewitt, 1915:322). They created unanimity among the chiefs, and “If any one of these nations was attacked, the injury was felt by all of the Five Nations” (Akweks, 1972:29). They created a permanent confederate government with local autonomy, a constitution, civic order, law, means of perpetuation, and unchanging customs, with each item of law represented by wampum. Such was the commonwealth, the Great Law. Underlying the entire structure were three principles, each with a double application: health and peace; righteousness and justice; authority and spiritual power (Akweks, 1948:26–27; Fenton, 1975:136–138; Gibson:253; Hale, 1883:21–22; Henry:32–33; Newhouse, 1885:9, 17, 65; Parker, 1968:29).

XVIII. *Deganawida and Hiawatha Establish League Chiefs and Council Polity*

In order to ensure the future generations’ lives, they established permanent chieftaincies. The chiefs were protectors and guides for the people, and should never consider themselves before others. They should be patient, long-suffering, thick-skinned, generous, and

fearless in pursuing justice. The founders made a roll call of the fifty League chiefs, naming them by nation and clan. There were rules for installing chiefs, protocol at council, relations with the clan mothers and the warriors, and dire warnings should the chiefs fail in their duties (Akweks, 1948:18, 21–25; Gibson:218–243, 307–311, 322–341, 344, 350–357; Hale, 1883:30–31; Hewitt, 1892:140–144; Newhouse, 1885:9, 17–28). After providing the chiefs with deer antlers as symbols of authority, a seagull wing to sweep away dirt from the council fire, and an emergency pole to flick crawling creatures (i.e., propositions that might undermine the League) into the fire, Deganawida said, “So now we have finished that which in future days to pass shall be the protection of our grandchildren” (Gibson:300) (Akweks, 1948:14, 25–26; Gibson:266–300; Newhouse, 1885:9, 21, 176; Parker, 1968: 24, 91–92).

XIX. *The Confederacy Takes Symbolic Images*

Deganawida established symbolic representations of the League: the Longhouse, with five fireplaces but one family; wampum belts picturing five nations, Onondaga being a great tree or heart at its center, or five brothers holding hands; the Great Pine Tree, high to the sky so all can see it, broad so all can find protection beneath its branches; the Eagle atop the tree, keeping watch for enemies; the Four White Roots of the tree, stretching out to other nations to lead them in; the weapons buried beneath the tree, where an underground stream carries them out of sight; a common meal of beaver tail, with no sharp utensils in the common dish; five arrows, tied together into a bundle to make them strong; the council fire and pillar of smoke that touches the sky; the antlers of office; five corn stalks coming from one stalk, built upon four roots. All of these symbolize the unity and power of the League (Akweks, 1948:5, 18 and 1972:29, 31; Beauchamp, 1921:19; Dunlap:30; Fenton, 1960:3–7 and 1975:141–143; Gibson:301–306, 312–321; Hewitt, 1892:140–144 and 1915:323–325; Newhouse, 1885:24–25; Parker 1968:30, 44–49, 100–102, 116; Paul Wallace, 1946:7–8).

XX. *The League Declares Its Sovereignty*

After setting up its internal structure, the League regarded foreign policy. It created laws of adoption, emigration, and laws regarding the rights of foreign nations. The League shall be a place of refuge for other nations, and delegations were sent out to Cherokees, Ojibways, and other Indians. Foreign aggressors would be given warnings, then war would be fought. The League reserved the right to battle any “obstinate opposing nation that has refused to accept the Great

Peace” (Parker, 1968:52) (Akweks, 1972:32; Fenton, 1949a:150–151; Hale, 1883:32–33; Parker, 1968:49–55).

XXI. *The Condolence Maintains the Confederacy*

The final effective symbol of the League was the Condolence ceremony, a re-enactment of the rite performed by Deganawida for Hiawatha and repeated by them both for the cleansing of Tadadaho. The clearminded will speak kind words of consolation to mourners. One moiety will console another, when someone—especially a chief—has died. The Condolence will stop the mourner from incessant, destructive grief, and will reaffirm life and “mental equipoise” (Hewitt, 1927:238–239). The living become “reconciled” (Parker, 1968:58) with death and with one another. The thirteen wampum strings of Requickening will help maintain the stability and mental health of the League’s officials and of the League itself (Fenton, 1975:138; Gibson:345–348, 365–367; Hewitt, 1927:238–239; Newhouse, 1885:11–13; Parker, 1968:36–60).

XXII. *Deganawida Departs*

Having completed his business, Deganawida left, promising to come again in time of crisis. In some versions (Clark:30; Henning:480) it is Hiawatha who went in his canoe up to the heavens after the League was formed. Deganawida either buried himself or simply disappeared, determining that his name not be included on the chiefs’ roll; indeed, his name should not be used except at Condolence or when talking of the Good Tidings he brought. For this reason he is often referred to simply as “the Peacemaker” (Howard:435) (Hale, 1883:31; Gibson:360–364; Newhouse, 1885:130; Parker, 1968:105).

Analysis

Who were these heroes who created the Iroquois Confederacy? The three main characters, Deganawida, Hiawatha, and Tadadaho, exhibit some fixed characteristics that suggest connections to historical persons: Deganawida the healer, Hiawatha the mourner, Tadadaho the wizard chief who is cured. Nevertheless, the processes of folkloric storytelling have produced some interchangeable roles—both Hiawatha and Tadadaho are portrayed as the cannibal who is converted—and some twinning—Deganawida and Hiawatha are described as identical twins in some versions; Hiawatha and Tadadaho are presented as half-brothers in other sources. Among the Onondagas, Hiawatha plays the prominent role; the Mohawks favor Deganawida (Tooker:440–441). It appears that local stories about

separate persons combined as the nations combined into the Confederacy (Beauchamp, 1892:62). If we look at early sources, for example, Colden's 1727 and 1747 history of the Iroquois (ix–xxi), there is no mention of the three. Lewis Henry Morgan, as late as 1851, states (3–8) that there is no history of the League's origin, although he later refers to Deganawida as "the founder of the confederacy" and Hiawatha as "his speaker" (101, fn. 1). It is only in the nineteenth century that one encounters any of the three names: 1801 for Deganawida (Boyce), and 1816 for the three in the combination of roles familiar to the League legend (Norton). Beauchamp commented (1892:137) regarding Hiawatha: "It is rather odd that what is now the most famous of Iroquois names was almost unknown but little over half a century ago." Hewitt noted (1920:537–539) that Hiawatha is really two different persons in Iroquois myth: the converted cannibal and the mourner. The fourth prominent personage, the Peace Woman Djigonsasa, was little known in traditional Iroquois mythology (Hewitt, 1917:437). She may represent an ancient chieftainness of the Neutrals (Hewitt, 1927:239), although her name is passed down among the Iroquois as a title. In the legend she plays the roles both of the Peace Woman and Deganawida's mother (Hewitt, 1931:175–178).

The story's importance seems to be other than in the identification of the main characters. On the contrary, the legend does not concern itself with these characters' biographical data, but rather with their roles in founding the League. We note that there is no biographical record of Hiawatha after the League is founded; rather, he is merely a function of the Confederacy's formation. As Hale says, "The records of the Iroquois are historical, and not biographical" (1883:34). The story delineates the lives of its heroes, but against a background of egalitarian ideals and decisions by councils who act according to ritual rules of propriety.

The story establishes patterns of activity to regulate and inspire contemporary Iroquois behavior. The manuscript left by Seth Newhouse (1885) contains editorial changes—the changing of verb tenses, the addition and deletion of words—that show he was penning not only a description of what Deganawida did to convert Tadadaho, but a prescription for present Condolence ceremony. He even writes: "Note. The above part of the ceremony is always to be performed accordingly, afterwards when '*De-ka-na-wi-dah*' completely Established the confederacy" (62). When the Peacemaker speaks in Newhouse's text, he addresses "you" the listener, telling "you" what to do and how to live "your" life. There is then a clear connection between the myth and Iroquois ritual life. It is especially evident in the Condolence (the Peace Hymn, the Ritual at the Edge of the Woods, the Requickening) but is also apparent in the protocol of

political diplomacy and alliance. We see, for instance, Hiawatha's insistence on ritual decorum, typical of Iroquois concern for form (Fenton, 1962:297–298). He refuses to enter a village or attend a conference because he has not been invited properly or officially. We can find matching examples from Iroquois history. For example, in 1664 the Mohawks insisted upon French propriety in sending invitations, before the Iroquois would attend a diplomatic meeting (Jennings:131). The League legend prescribes ritual as a proper and effective mode of behavior.

One of the effective uses of ritual in the story is its ability to transform individuals and societies. Implied in this view is the Iroquois notion that every being is double-faceted, and even in the worst of creatures there exists a worthiness that can reveal itself. Paul Wallace (1948:393) is perceptive in seeing the central importance of episode V, the cannibal's conversion upon viewing Deganawida's (and his own) reflection in the kettle. The wretch sees what he thinks is his own face, but it is a face of "beauty," "wisdom," and "strength." Thus, he sees "the possibilities of human nature, and of his own nature. . ." (Paul Wallace 1948:393). The story reveals a basic trust in human nature to heal itself, and to heal itself through ritual. As we shall see, the League legend—the League itself—is grounded in a view of human nature as salvagable, in part through ritual, propriety, and moral principles.

In Iroquois cosmology the salvagable human exists in the context of opposing dualities. The world is created by brothers who oppose one another in every activity, in their very being. In the League legend these forces of opposition are prevalent and significant (Chodowiec in Fenton, 1975:139), particularly in the struggle between Hiawatha and Tadadaho, the supposed half-brothers who carry out the cosmic drama of Tarenyawagon and Tawiskaron (Henry:36).

But if siblings fight one another in Iroquois folklore, twins are lucky and creative (Fenton, 1962:297–298). Hiawatha and Deganawida are a case in point. These two are like right and left hands, both necessary for a successful life activity, both necessary for the mission to be accomplished (Hertzberg:92).

The apparent oppositions in Iroquois worldview do not oppose one another endlessly. Although there is dual-antagonism in the folklore, there is also the common motif of incorporation of one's adversary. For example, in the Creation story, Tarenyawagon defeats his foe, Twisted Face, who then becomes a helpful curer through the society of Faces. In the League legend the cannibal is first incorporated into Deganawida's mission, and then Tadadaho is incorporated into the League. Thus, even the most wicked enemy can be part of the forces of good; indeed, he may even want to convert, as Tadadaho

impatiently does. He wants to be cured, co-opted by promises of chieftaincy in the League, and incorporated into the new political order (Hertzberg:92).

In this we see the more complex nature of Iroquois dualism, even between good and evil. Opposing forces are also complementary forces throughout the Iroquois cosmology (Müller), and reciprocity of design and responsibility abounds in Iroquois culture. Men and women, younger and older brothers, the forest and the clearing, hunting and farming: these examples only begin to suggest the wealth of reciprocal principles that fill Iroquois life (Hertzberg:12–19). In the legend of the Confederacy we see actors working together, each with his own role, serving one another and serving a larger purpose of establishing the moiety structure of the universe in human institutions. We see the recognition of the victim as the other part of oneself; we see the adversary as the potential ally; we see the reciprocal responsibility in consoling the bereaved. In short, we see complementary, reciprocal dualisms as the metaphysical foundations for the founding of the Iroquois League.

The League legend begins with the metaphysical groundwork of a salvagable human nature within the context of complementary dualisms, and it ends with a Confederacy based on this foundation. The story describes the process by which kinship villages with their local systems of mutuality are able to combine into a kinship state with larger and more complex systems of mutuality. The story is, after all, one of state formation: the transcendence of village kinship loyalties; the creation of leadership beyond the local, lineage chiefs; the setting up of a central place of authority, a capital; the extension of the kinship longhouse to the larger kinship state. Compromise is essential to such a process (Fenton, 1975:138), and the legend describes compromise and incorporation as viable political modes. Indeed, the very reciprocal arrangements that make up village life become the methods of state formation and the working principles of the state thus established. Not only kinship terminology, but the spirit of kinship, fills the story and the structure of the Confederacy. It makes the Iroquois state different from modern national systems, with regimentation of rights and duties through institutional, legal structures (Venables; cf. Hewitt, 1920:529). The Iroquois expect humans to help one another as part of a kinship system. People even have the responsibility to provide one another the desires of their dreams (Wallace 1958a). The Iroquois regard humans as perfectible; thus, the story recounts the attempt to maximize human potential for mutual benefit through state formation.

In order for the Iroquois to help one another, there must be an infrastructure that promotes connectedness. In this regard, we can see

the significance of Hiawatha (or Tarenyawagon) as the clearer of streams (Hale, 1883:34), who allows canoe traffic among the nations. Similarly, we note the symbolic importance of the Mother of Nations, who stops feeding warriors along the warrior road and transforms that byway into the Iroquois trail of unity. We also observe that Tadadaho is called “he who obstructs the road.” It is necessary for the heroes of the story to clear all paths of obstructions along the great Iroquois trail. This trail helped hold the League together; it stretched like a belt from the Hudson River to Niagara Falls and was the means of communication over 300 miles of territory (Hertzberg:30–31).

Even more important to the infrastructure of communication is wampum. Just as Hiawatha helps clear the streams of obstructions and Tadadaho stops obstructing the path, Hiawatha’s wampum clears the way for the Confederacy to occur (Hertzberg:92–93). Wampum belts are the chains that bind nations of the League in alliance. They establish a means to send messages and record agreements, to make peace among the villages (Snyderman, 1982:321–325). In the seventeenth century, Iroquois symbolized their peace agreements by wrapping themselves in wampum; the action is reminiscent of Hiawatha, who wrapped wampum strings around his head while on his journey to the Mohawks. A Mohawk in Albany in 1688 made such a gesture with wampum, recalling that such was the expression of alliance established “when the first covenant was made. . .” (Snyderman, 1954:477).

Wampum is more than a means of communication or of exacting etiquette in invitations and diplomatic exchanges. It is a device that symbolically assures the truth of one’s communication, a compulsive method of exacting truth from people’s words. The Iroquois vow by wampum as one might swear on the Bible in our culture. Furthermore, using wampum provides one’s words with their effectiveness, their power to cure. Wampum has metaphysical and supernatural properties that “could be used to restore to the body the powers necessary for clear thinking—only then would tempers be unruffled so that man could focus his attention on good, peaceful, and calm thoughts. Wampum thus became a medicine—a sedative to be administered to the contentious and injured; a healing agent which would enable the sick and wronged to forget injuries” (Snyderman, 1954:475). When Hiawatha creates wampum, he creates the means by which he can be consoled, Tadadaho can be healed, blood feuds can be cooled, and mourning can be alleviated.

Wampum is also the means by which the principles and agreements of the League can be recalled and passed down to future generations. Before alphabetic writing among the Iroquois, wampum had the potential of creating a kind of constitutionality in Iroquois

polity. Today, for those who can read them, the wampum belts can serve as reminders of Iroquois foundations. Wampum is a means of making and maintaining the Iroquois peace through a codification of Iroquois law.⁴ It is part of the infrastructure of the Confederacy.

The story of the Confederacy is one of peaceful purpose and peaceful means. Although it would be sanguine to conclude, as others have done, that the League is some sort of “primitive forerunner of the United Nations to promote peace” (Snyderman, 1979:34), the section (XX) on foreign policy shows that warfare and imperial design are not foreign to the League’s purposes. The cannibalism so condemned in the myth was practiced by the Iroquois against their enemies in elaborate and cruel ceremonies. The League thus provides a system to regulate feuds and revenge as well as to provide for a common defense. Warfare against others is explicitly allowed for just cause. However, “The dominant motive for the establishment of the League of the Five Iroquois Tribes was the impelling necessity to stop the shedding of human blood by violence through the making and ratifying of a universal peace by all the known tribes of men, to safeguard human life and health and welfare” (Hewitt, 1920:541). The League comes about not through warfare but through comforting, curing, moral regeneration, converting, and compromising. The peaceful intentions of the peacemakers are matched by their peaceful methods of creating an Iroquois state.

In order for peaceful nationalism to occur, the myth states, it is necessary to see the other, the outsider, as one sees oneself. The cannibal looks into the pot and sees himself in the depths. He sees himself as the victim in the pot as well as the beautiful human paradigm. The cannibal must see his victim as a person reflected in himself. It is also necessary for the Mohawk to see the Onondaga as an extension of his own kinship group. Thus, it is significant that Deganawida is born outside the nations that make up the eventual League. He is born among the Hurons and therefore is an outsider to

⁴ Debate exists over the possible aboriginality of Iroquois concepts and practices of constitutionality. Hertzberg distinguishes between the Confederacy Myth and the Constitution (85), and both Fenton and Hewitt decry Newhouse’s emphasis on the Iroquois constitution; they claim that such a notion is anachronistic to the founding of the League. Fenton speaks of the nineteenth-century Iroquois tendency to “idealize” the early League (1978:266). Given Fenton’s hostility to Iroquois assertions of sovereignty and rights to wampum belts (1971), one might suspect ideological reasons for his denial of Iroquois constitutionality. The Iroquois are probably influenced by U.S. and Canadian written laws, as these laws are possibly influenced by Iroquois concepts (Johansen). However, in the extant texts about the League’s founding, texts written or told by Iroquois representatives, there is the consistent expression of constitutional concepts. These stories do conceive a constitution as part of the League, and whether or not they are accurate historically, they are the stories we are studying.

League structure. Yet he creates the League, and the members that make up the League welcome him in. Even more, among his own people he is a “social cripple” (Chodowiec in Fenton, 1975:140), an outcast without father and without acceptance. As an outsider, with no firm ties of kinship, he has all the potential in his nature to create a nation that transcends (and yet builds upon) tribal kin loyalties. As Hewitt states regarding Deganawida, “Tradition ascribes his lineage to no tribe, lest his personality be limited thereby” (1920:537). Paradoxically, other traditions suggest that Deganawida’s father did exist and took three successive wives among the Mohawks, one from each of the three Mohawk clans. Therefore, Deganawida was related to every person in the Mohawk nation, and, through clan ties, to everyone in the League (Hale, 1883:24).

In *Hiawatha* we can see a similar pattern. His family is destroyed, and only because he is without family can he join Deganawida’s mission to create a greater family of all Iroquois people. The pathos of his daughters’ deaths and his subsequent mourning (and consolation) is balanced by the boon the deaths bring to the League’s founding. He must be set free of kinship in order for the Confederacy to exist. Both heroes are liminal culture-brokers, going back and forth among the tribes, because they are tribeless (Henry:33–34).

The two heroes are travellers who cover the entirety of the Confederacy territory, naming locations, meeting with chiefs, creating clans and methods of communication. They are paradigmatic outsiders who move from one nation to another; they are the links in the chain of the League. In their travels, touching base with all the local bases of Iroquois village life, they find adoption among the Mohawks. Adoption thus is crucial to the Confederacy and to the story. Historically, Iroquois clans and nations adopted outsiders—defeated enemies, displaced persons, and others—in order to fill the ranks of the League. Ironically, adoption became both a means of maintaining Iroquois membership in times of war losses, and a motive for war as clan mothers demanded more sons and nephews (Snyderman, 1979:6–7). In the story adoption is a means by which the League produces trans-tribal affiliations. In some cases *Hiawatha* marries his way into tribal networks; in other cases the tribes adopt him and Deganawida, thus denying the categorical otherness of the perpetual outsider in the story.

The transformation of the outsider into the peacemaker and chief is matched by the three parallel transformations, boundary-crossings, that are the heart of the legend. First, the cannibal—whether it is *Hiawatha* or *Tadadaho* does not matter—is transformed into the messenger of peace and power. The figure moves from the most depraved form of human activity to the work of nation-building, from

chaotic immorality to the moral project of making political order. Second, the transformation of Hiawatha from grieving wanderer to powerful lawgiver and chief is a replication of the first. In both cases Deganawida cures a sick person—sick from killing too much, sick from too much killing, sick as aggressor, sick as victim—and transforms him into an upholder of moral order. Third, the straightening of Tadadaho's mind and body repeats once again the pattern of curing and transformation in order to create an orderly state. The message of peace is repeated in these episodes and underscores the point that the Iroquois Confederacy exists in order to stop wanton killing and the mourning that produces a desire for revenge and more killing.

The myth replicates its message through these transformations. The person of Hiawatha (as cannibal and as mourner) is cured twice, but it is essentially the same cure for the same disease: the disease of killing. The person of Tadadaho is cured twice (as cannibal and as monster) for the same reason. In order to stop the cycle of killing and mourning, and revenge and killing, Deganawida must cure those caught in the cycle. He must cure the cannibal from his monstrously excessive disregard for human life, and he must cure the mourner of his disastrously excessive attachment to his lost family members. The cannibal undervalues, the mourner overvalues, human life, and Deganawida must cure them both. To the cannibal he says, stop killing and form a social order. To the mourner he says, stop mourning and form a social order. The structure of the Confederacy is revealed in these transformational cures. The League exists to stop killing and to comfort the bereaved.

Consolation and peacemaking are the bases for the League (Hewitt, 1892:131–132). Hiawatha's wild melancholy at his daughters' death needs to be relieved. He overmourns; therefore, he must, and the Iroquois must, learn to accept death. The ritual of Condolence, taught by Deganawida, helps the Iroquois face death, and the League is a mechanism, and extension of the Condolence ceremony. The Feast of the Dead, witnessed in the early seventeenth century and still practiced among the Iroquois (Fenton and Kurath) is perpetuated through a political organization, the Confederacy, that sees as its duty the comforting of mourners in the face of death. It is significant, then, that the procession of chiefs approaches Tadadaho singing songs of consolation, as if he were a mourner just as Hiawatha was. Those songs remember the dead, console the living, and cure society of its killing ills. It is in the best interest of Iroquois society to soothe the mind of mourners like Hiawatha and straighten the mind of killers like Tadadaho so they may think straight and well and act intelligently.

Condolence ceremonies became part of peace negotiations for the

Iroquois. It was understood that there might be a grievance between other nations and the League, and before talking with them, the Iroquois delegates must soothe and comfort them. Alliance came to mean condolence, and thus the revenge warfare (“mourning war”) that plagued the Iroquois and its neighbors could come to an end, as it did by 1800 (Richter: 529, 536, 551). In the League legend, Condolence is portrayed as a device for creating and maintaining the state. It stops the cycle of mourning wars, and it maintains the state when a chief dies and needs to be replaced (Hewitt; 1920:524; 1944:66). For the Iroquois, then, the Law is something that exists because there is death. Hertzberg (93) states that the legend faces death and law, but a causal relationship exists between the two. The Iroquois need law to prevent unnecessary deaths, to control mourning at times of death, and to provide for continuity when chiefs die and need to be replaced. If myths are ways of facing death, as they often are, the League legend states that individual deaths are mitigated by the eternality of the Confederacy and its Law. Significantly, Deganawida summarizes what he has created: the Dead Feast, or Condolence, and the Great Law (Gibson:361). They are his perpetual gifts to the Iroquois.

It is not surprising that the Iroquois conceive their Law as an extension of eternal principles that reflect the will and intervention of the divine. As Hewitt says, Deganawida “knew and sought to do the will of the Master of Life [Tarenawagon]” (1920:536). This deity put the world in order and established the principles by which humans live. But when famine, warfare, cannibalism all undermined the human order, there was a need for a practical plan, a restatement of the principles of good will. This was brought by Deganawida (Henry:28–29). We should see the League and its legend as particular manifestations of Iroquois religious principles, which the Iroquois say are grounded in natural law and ultimately in divine law.

The six principles that Deganawida explains to the Mother of Nations in episode IV reveal the Iroquois conception of divine law and its application in the League, as well as in each individual human:

1. *Ne Skenno*. (A) This means health, soundness, and normal functional condition, when used to describe a human person. It is what is achieved after the transformations of Hiawatha and Tadadaho. It is sanity of mind. (B) It is also peace, tranquility, between individuals, between groups like men and women, and between nations, when describing the body politic. It is what the League promotes. Disease, illness, obsession, and possession through witchcraft are the antitheses of the first meaning. War, strife, and contention are the antitheses of the second. Deganawida finds these negative conditions

when he first visits the Iroquois, and his mission is to produce *Ne Skenno* among the people.

2. *Ne Gaiihwiyo*. (A) This is a kind of gospel, a wholesome doctrine to persons, good to be heard, that denotes ethics, values, and righteousness in conduct, thought, and attitude. It is righteousness not only in action but also in advocating it in other people. Deganawida acts well and he also encourages others to act well. He is his own message, the peaceful promoter of peace, the orderly promoter of order. He embodies *Ne Gaiihwiyo*. (B) In addition, it denotes justice and right, as formulated in custom, manners, religion, ritual, and tradition. It points to equity or justice, rights and obligations in society; it is the mutuality epitomized by Deganawida when he takes it upon himself and the chiefs to cure Tadadahö of his monstrosities.

3. *Ne Gashedenza*. (A) This is the force, authority, or power of a people, the physical strength contained in civil chiefs or military power. It is necessary for defense of a nation. (B) It is also the underlying supernatural power, the *orenda*, of a people's institutions. It is the spiritual power that underlies physical power. The League depends on this power because all human life, the Iroquois say, depends on divine help as well as divine guidance (For these concepts, see Hewitt's notes on Iroquois law, in Gibson; also see Hewitt, 1915:322; Henry:32–33. For *orenda*, see Hewitt, 1902:38–40; 1927:239).

As we might expect, the story of the Iroquois Confederacy is also a story about the intervention of the divine in human life. Tarenyawagon, the sender of dreams, communicates his will to Deganawida's grandmother and mother about the hero's mission, which is also a divine mission. In Iroquois culture dreams compel fulfillment because they are messages from the supernatural world (Fenton, 1962:298; Snyderman, 1961:576; Wallace, 1958a; Wolf:34–41). The story of the League portrays the fulfillment of Tarenyawagon's desires.

In addition, the legend manifests supernatural power (*orenda*) through the heroes. These men, thought by some Iroquois to be embodiments or incarnations of Tarenyawagon, are at the least messengers from the divine, and the institutions they create possess the power that derives from the supernatural (Fenton, 1962:298). Perhaps only some Iroquois "thought their deities visited them in human form" (Beauchamp, 1892:139); all traditional Iroquois regard their Confederacy as a direct reflection of divine law and the result of divine intervention.

For this reason, Deganawida instructed his chiefs, present and future, to give thanks to the Creator, "the source and ruler of your lives" (Newhouse, 1885:22). Thus, when the Confederacy's council

meets every year at Onondaga, there are prayers to the Creator similar to those given at other, more purely religious, rituals and festivals (Hertzberg:102). The wampum created by Hiawatha is regarded by Iroquois as a medium of “communion with the Great Spirit” (Snyderman, 1982:323), and the Great Tree of the League, like the column of smoke that symbolically rises from Onondaga, reaches from earth to the heavens. The Great Tree pierces the sky, from which Tarenyawagon’s grandmother fell at the beginning of earthly time, and continues to furnish symbolic rapport between the Iroquois and the world above, the supernatural.

The Iroquois Confederacy does not constitute the whole of Iroquois religious life. Its meetings do not constitute the whole of religious rituals. Its story is but a part of the whole corpus of Iroquois religious narrative. One scholar states: “The founders of the League of the Iroquois did not aim to establish a religion, but rather a system of government” (Hewitt, 1937:84). Nevertheless, “Behind the machinery of the League lay a religious motive. . .” (Paul Wallace, 1948:391), and transcending the League is the supernatural world that created and continues to sanction both the story and structure of the Iroquois Confederacy.⁵

⁵ David Everett, Case Library, Colgate University; Beth Carroll, American Philosophical Society Library; and Kathleen T. Baxter, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, provided me with sources for this study. The Colgate University Faculty Research Council aided my work with a grant of money in 1984, and Robert W. Venables and an anonymous JAAR reader made valuable suggestions to help me revise an earlier draft of this paper. I am grateful for these contributions.

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