

Jigonsaseh in Times of War and Peace

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On July 13, 1687, Jacques-René de Brisay de Denonville, Marquis de Denonville took a large French army to invade the Seneca Nation, a member of the Haudenosaunee Confederation. Much to Denonville's surprise, the Seneca were a mighty force, in a letter to he described them as such:

I cannot give you a truer idea of the war we have to wage with the Iroquois [Haudenosaunee] than by comparing them to a great number of wolves or other ferocious beasts, issuing out of a vast forest to ravage the neighboring settlements. The people gather to hunt them down; but nobody can find their lair, for they are always in motion. An abler man than I would be greatly at a loss to manage the affairs of this country.¹

This nation of mighty warriors was led by the Jigonsaseh, the Clan Mothers of the Senecas who at their behest wars were started or ended. Though not forbidden, women were not often warriors in Haudenosaunee culture and politics. This conflict was one of many that comprises the Beaver Wars (1609-1701). Based on his reputation as a soldier in France, Denonville was sent to Quebec in 1685 in an attempt to turn around New France's fortunes as they had been steadily losing territory and their alliance with the Wendat had been contracting since at least 1649.² Denonville sent troops to take the fort and trade operation at Hudson Bay, then turned his sights on the rapidly expanding territory of the Haudenosaunee attempting to lessen the influence of the British via the Haudenosaunee and to establish complete control of the St. Lawrence River.³ By 1689, the Haudenosaunee had dominated the fur trade in northern New York by procuring land via warfare and welcoming various other nations into their Confederacy. The expansion of the Haudenosaunee, and by association the British, starved their rivals the Wendat (Huron) and French fur traders of the goods they required for trade. To reconcile this issue the New France governor, Denonville, lured the Haudenosaunee into a pretend council to establish peace. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy reverses peaceful discourse and agreed to send 200 of their Chiefs to council with Denonville. Upon their arrival Denonville had the chiefs detained, shackled, and sent to France to serve as gally slaves.⁴ Through the lens of the Haudenosaunee this action was a transgression of the highest order and resulted in consequences that Denonville could not have anticipated. The Haudenosaunee retributions, in both 1687 and 1689, was led

¹ Parkman, *France and England*, 176.

² O'Callahan, *General Index*, 285-288.

³ Mann, *Iroquoian Women*, 147-150.

⁴ Graeber, *The Dawn of Everything*, 491.

by the Jigonsaseh. How can it be that the important role of the Jigonsaseh was left out of the popular narrative of these battles and time?

To understand how a Haudenosaunee woman could lead a military operation that ceases French encroachment begins with understanding the Haudenosaunee world view. Haudenosaunee separate their Confederations' history in to three epochs. The Sky epoch – creation, the League epoch – drafting of the Haudenosaunee Confederation and the Handsome Lake epoch – prophetic reintroduction of traditional practices. To fully understand how the Haudenosaunee are structured and why the Jigonsaseh is a central figure, we must look at their creation story. Sky Woman is the celestial woman who fell to earth with seeds clutched in her hands and her beloved daughter in her womb. As Sky Woman fell, animals of the earth caught her and gently placed her on a turtle back. An otter dove to the bottom of the sea and brought up earth for Sky Women to create more land and to plant her seeds: corn, beans, and squash, also known as the three sisters. Sky Woman bore the Fat-Faced Lynx and they happily lived on earth until Lynx was impregnated by North Wind. Lynx then gave birth to two boys: Sapling and Flint. Fat-faced Lynx died during childbirth when Flint, the second twin, was born creating hostility between Flint and his grandmother.⁵ The two twins are the dichotomy and polarity that makes life possible on Turtle Island, but one must be careful not to conflate that with being the sole creators of Turtle Island. Sapling and Flint are co-creators with Sky Woman and the Lynx. This creation story demonstrates that the first human-like being is a mother, a creator, and a protector of the world she created. The three seeds that Sky Woman brought with her are tended to by women thereby making it women who predominately take care of the clans. All of the names from the Haudenosaunee creation story become hereditary as we move forward. From the Great Law of Peace onward we experience Sky Woman, Lynx, Sapling and Flint through different Chiefs and Clan Mothers. Lastly, all hereditary names and titles flow through the mothers' line, only the Jigonsaseh had the power to veto resolutions made by the Grand Council and it is only women who can recognize and bestow or remove Chiefhood or Clan Motherhood upon an individual.⁶

The Great Law of Peace is another verity when understanding the Haudenosaunee political and power structure. To the Haudenosaunee, the separation of power is key to the success of a peaceful Confederation. In fact, rigorous efforts are made to maintain the separation of power by not addressing Chiefs by the name their Clan Mother gave them. The Chiefs are addressed via their nation or clan to ensure that popular personalities do not override the need of the Clans, Nations, or Confederation. At the local government level are the Clan Mothers who chose the Chiefs that best represent their people. The Clan Mother attends to all the needs and worries of her people and then brings the concerns of her people to the local Chief(s), with her council, for resolution. The Clan Chiefs meet in council with the other Chiefs of

⁵ Oneida Indian Nation, *The Haudenosaunee Creation Story*.

⁶ Gibson, *Concerning the League*, 419.

their nation, this is the state level of government. Then the Grand Chiefs, again chosen by the Clan Mothers or the Jigonsaseh, that represent the entire nation, which is made up of many Clans, attend the Grand Council in Onondaga. The Grand Council being the federal level of government. At the Grand Council, and all levels of Haudenosaunee government, complete consensus must be reached for a resolution to be made. This is done by the Mohawks and Senecas coming to a consensus on an issue, they then present their resolution across the council fire to the Oneida and Cayuga (and later the Tuscarora) once they too have reached consensus. When the four nations have reached consensus together, they present the resolution to the Onondaga, the Fire Keepers, whom either agree or amend the resolution. If at any time, there is not complete consensus the process begins again. The Jigonsaseh also attend the Grand Council, though they are not seated around the fire with the Chiefs, they are there to act as advisors and advocate for their Clans' and Nations' unique needs. Using this extremely sophisticated system of governance, the Haudenosaunee have been living as a popular sovereignty since 1142 AD.⁷

Matrilineal descent is something that is very foreign to most Europeans, including Denonville – a French noble, however, from the east coast to the west coast of North America matrilineal lines dominated as the political and inheritance structure. In the political structure of the Haudenosaunee,

The gantowisas [Jigonsaseh] enjoyed sweeping political powers, which ranged from the administrative and legislative to the judicial. The gantowisas ran the local clan councils. They held all the lineage wampum, nomination belts, and titles. They ran funerals. They retained exclusive rights over naming i.e., the creation of new citizens and the installation of public officials. They nominated all the male sachems as well as Clan Mothers to office and retained the power to impeach wrongdoers. They appointed warriors, declared war, negotiated peace, and mediated disputes.⁸

This type of power associated with an indigenous woman was unthinkable to most European settlers. Women were to be sold as slaves, to be made wives, and to birth children. Other than Queen Elizabeth I there was no precedent for Denonville or other settlers to assume women could hold positions of power. Jigonsaseh as a real woman and as a reincarnation upholds all Haudenosaunee values. When Denonville decided to take all the Chiefs of the Haudenosaunee Confederation into slavery Jigonsaseh was forced into the role of military leadership. To a European mind, this may seem illogical but given what we know of the Haudenosaunee, their origin story, and the Great Law, the Jigonsaseh is the only logical person to hold a majority power while the nations grieve and begin to bestow horns upon new Chiefs.

If the Jigonsaseh has power comparable to ancient Rome's Tribune of the Plebs,⁹ we could assume that, like many sacred things, the Haudenosaunee were not forthcoming with her importance to their foreign

⁷ Mann and Fields, Barbara, "*A Sign in the Sky*," 118.

⁸ Mann, *Iroquoian Women*, 116-117.

enemies. It would be strategically unwise to disclose of their most precious power source. The interpolation suffered by the Haudenosaunee creation story is evidence enough that the Europeans could not fathom the complexities and nuances of the Haudenosaunee tradition,

First, westerners downsized Sky Woman's beloved Lynx, removing her from the public eye and demoting her to namelessness, as befitted the sequestered daughters of the West. Indeed, her name may never have been divulged to missionaries in the first place: powerful names are not bandied about lightly to outsiders, and certainly not for their curiosity value. Thus the names of some of the most notable figures in Haudenosaunee history were deliberately kept from Europeans. For instance, in 1892 William Beauchamp marveled that the name of Hiawatha, by then "the most famous of Iroquois names," had been "almost unknown but little over half a century ago," by which he meant "famous" and "unknown" to Europeans, of course. It had been only forty-one years earlier, in 1851, that Lewis Henry Morgan had recorded the name of Deganawida, the Peacemaker, himself. And in 1917 Hewitt was incredibly asserting that Jigonsaseh, a cofounder of the League and direct descendant of Sky Woman, was "little known" in "traditional" Haudenosaunee mythology! On the contrary: the fact that the Lynx's name was not uttered before Europeans for four hundred years was a measure of her importance in Haudenosaunee tradition.⁹

The role of the Jigonsaseh is encoded into the Great Law as follows:

Now come hither, you who are our mother, you too are a Great Chief...Thereupon Tekanawita' (the Peacemaker) said, "Now we are done, we having conferred antlers on all of the Five Nations. This is what I will now ordain, this is how these matters shall continue on: these are to be the principal ones, the women controlling the title name, because it is by means of all their suffering that people are born here on earth; and it is they who raise them. Moreover, their blood, this is what we have, we the people, for these are our mothers, the women, and this is why families follow according to their blood lines. Moreover, now, indeed, we finished conferring antlers on each of the nations and each of the families of the clans...Moreover, this is what is going to be the rule for all of the clans and several nations: From now on the women will confer antlers on the men. Indeed, the women, our mothers, this is with whom we are cooperating. So that is how it shall be done in our several nations, this kind of matter, among our ongoing families and our grandchildren and those are in earth still unborn.

So now we, together, will place antlers on him, indeed these lying here, the deer antlers.¹⁰

Any European familiar with the Haudenosaunee must have been cognizant of her importance yet, reading many of Denonville's correspondences between himself, King Louis XIV and other French and English

⁹ Mann, "The Lynx in Time," 426-427.

¹⁰ Gibson, *Concerning the League*, 237, 418-420.

legislators, the Jigonsaseh is nowhere to be found.¹¹ Evidently, the absence of the Jigonsaseh from the context of this history was intentional. The Clan Mothers were the life force of the Confederacy that held against invading Europeans for hundreds of years, yet the powerful European men of this period paid her no heed.

The decision to ignore the capacity of the Jigonsaseh severely disadvantaged the governor of New France when on August 5th, 1689, the Jigonsaseh, along with British allies, marched over 1500 warriors to Lachine destroying the town and taking many prisoners. In 1689 Denonville was recalled to France and was replaced by Louis de Buade de Frontenac. Frontenac had originally planned to

Use sham negotiations to neutralize the Five Nations during his planned invasion of New York, but the suffering that the Iroquois attacks had inflicted the previous summer [Lachine] had leant a touch of sincerity to the ploy. Frontenac had brought with him to America thirteen of the Iroquois seized at Cataraqui in 1687- the only survivors of the French galleys- whom he had intended to restore to their peoples. This was a significant offer indeed in light of the importance the Five Nations had attached to the kidnappings in their stated motives for war.¹²

The Lachine massacre, which is being referenced above, was led by the Jigonsaseh. Her military leadership pushed the French back towards Lower Canada and started the cascade of events that led to the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701. After many years of war with the French and French allies, it was the Jigonsaseh's militia that ultimately ceased violence with the French.

The Jigonsaseh of the Denonville era was not the last, and it is probable that she was not the first, to engage in and lead warfare. Molly Brant or Tekonwatonti, is the best documented Jigonsaseh. Tekonwatonti was the granddaughter of Chief Hendrick, older sister of Joseph Brant and wife of Sir William Johnson the Superintendent of Indian Affairs.¹³ Although Tekonwatonti's older brother, Joseph is much more thoroughly documented, as Jigonsaseh Tekonwatonti was the driving force for keeping the Haudenosaunee warriors engaged and loyal to the British during the pre-Revolutionary War and Revolutionary War years.¹⁴ Joseph, being of the preferred sex, having exceptional literacy and "whiteness" gave him every advantage when climbing the chain of British command, however, the power to influence his people lay firmly with his sister. Daniel Claus, who worked closely with Tekonwatonti and was tasked with making sure Haudenosaunee warriors had the supplies and adequate clothing for battle, wrote in a letter: "One word from her [Tekonwatonti] goes father with them [Haudenosaunee] than a thousand from

¹¹ O'Callahan, *General Index*, 280-286.

¹² Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 170.

¹³ Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution*, 30.

¹⁴ Graymont, 158-159.

any white man without exception who in general must purchase their interest at a high rate.”¹⁵ The role of Tekonwatonti influence as Jigonsaseh during the American Revolution cannot be overstated. Again, it took hundreds of years for Tekonwatonti’s story to gain the attention of historians. It is reasonable to conclude that the history of Tekonwatonti and all Jigonsaseh before her were a product of the way Europeans regarded women and who was keeping the written history at that time.

Mohawk poet and historian Maurice Kenny spent many years recovering and writing about Tekonwatonti.¹⁶ His poem Molly perfectly encapsulates what Tekonwatonti and all other Jigonsaseh were willing to do and hold for their beloved nations:

*Behind me,
the warriors,
young and fearless,
handsome in their war paint,
proud in stance,
strong in limb and mind,
spirit at ease as their
moccasined feet
pad the earth they follow
to protect and preserve.
I, too, am proud to lead
to lead these young men
to battle, victory--perhaps death.
In death their blood
will scar my hands forever;
The tears and keening of their women--
mothers, wives, daughters--
will ring always in my ears.
The loss will be too great to bear.¹⁷*

The unearthing of the roll of Jigonsaseh and the recognition of her omission changes the lens in which we view the centuries predating the founding of Canada and the United States of America. The Haudenosaunee

¹⁵ Graymont, 159.

¹⁶ Barron, “Maurice Kenny’s Tekawantonti,” 31.

¹⁷ Malo, *A Thousand Islands Life*

had an exhaustive role in the British maintaining power on Turtle Island for as long as they have. Knowing that the most powerful ally for the British in North America from the 15th to 18th century was run by women leaves us with more questions than answers. Who were the other Jigonsaseh? What roles did they play in the forming of North American countries? And how do we recover their stories?

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