

On Solid Ground: How cultural narratives and women's roles in Haudenosaunee governance allowed for political stability following the 1687 abduction by the French

Saija Clement

In 1687, the Governor of New France, Jacques-René de Brisay DeNonville lured “fifty-one able bodied men, and a hundred and fifty women and children”¹ from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy under the false pretense of “bringing the most influential of the Iroquois to negotiate a settlement of our differences.”² then proceeded to kidnap them in the hopes of enslaving them and gaining access to their land.³ In spite of the loss of many of the Five Nations’ Grand Council, those remaining in charge of Confederacy, particularly the *gantowisas* and *Jigonsaseh*, (the clan mother of the confederacy) were able to maintain political stability and rapidly regroup following the abduction. The cultural norms and political structure that enabled the Five Nations to deliberate and strategize against the French in the wake of the abduction was rooted in the stories of the Haudenosaunee’s First and Second Epochs: The creation narrative of the Sky Epoch, and the politically potent unifying tale of the League Epoch, sowed the seeds in the early years of the League that would bear political fruits which historian Barbara Mann refers to as, “the duplicative mechanisms... that allowed the League government to function in the absence of one set of leaders.”⁴ Along with a range of other political tensions between the French, and the Haudenosaunee, Denonville’s failure to conceive of women’s role in the Five Nations’ sophisticated democratic governance structure eventually culminated in the French defeat at the Lachine Massacre.

It should come as no surprise that the fundamental beliefs which a people hold dear about their origins, spiritual and historical, often influence crucial elements of a society. Origin stories find their way into a culture’s gender roles, the demographic makeup of governing bodies, and

¹ Marquis De Nonville, *Narrative Of The Expedition of The Marquis De Nonville, Against The Senecas*, in 1687 (1687) De Nonville pp.174

² Ibid, p.172

³ Jean LeClerc, S.J. "Denonville et ses captifs iroquois." *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique du Nord*, Volume 14, numéro 4, Mars 1961: 6-7.

⁴ Mann, Barbara A. *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*. New York, Peter Lane Publishing Inc, 2000, p. 89

have an impact on what the explicit or implicit collective goals and values are. The confluence of all of these factors can also play some role in the responses to and outcomes of internal and external conflicts.

France found itself under the widespread influence of the Catholic church, whose religion revolves around one singular, all-powerful, male spiritual being to which all of life must bow and submit, lest they be judged and condemned to Hell.⁵ It follows, then, that deep-rooted cultural belief in concepts such as the absolute power of the monarchy and the supremacy of the Catholic Church underscored the religious tension between various sub-groups of Christianity. Due to these internal conflicts, transfers of power over France were often characterized by factions violently overthrowing one another, with the brutality involved often impacting the lower classes as well. The Most Catholic King, Louis XIV, reigned from 1643-1715. This period of French history marked the religious dominance of the Catholic Church, which culminated in the 1685 repeal of the Edict of Nantes. Established by Henry IV in 1598 to end religious wars, the repeal of this law left France's Protestant population vulnerable to religious persecution – specifically, because Louis XIV saw them as lower people, which "afforded the statutory basis for condemnations to the French galleys."⁶ The French belief in the supremacy of their religion also played a role in the attitudes of many people in the French colonies in North America towards Indigenous nations. While there were periods of peaceful negotiation and trade, it cannot be ignored that King Louis and DeNonville's beliefs about the Iroquois people and their vastly different spiritual framework played a not-insignificant role in the taking of the Iroquois who would be forced into galley slavery. In DeNonville's journal, he states, that "religion, [because of] the opposition of these enemies [the Iroquois], has made no progress for a long time, [which has] induced the King to send me orders to wage war on them."⁷ Louis' orders to DeNonville to advance upon the Five Nations were also a grab for territory, as "the Senecas' territory, a breadbasket and a formidable barrier to French incursions into Turtle Island (North America)."⁸ It is no wonder that a political system such as that

⁵ It is interesting to note that in contrast to the Catholic belief in eternal damnation, according to Barbara Mann in *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*, there were not found to be any pre-contact equivalent words for "...Heaven and Hell." And that "In 1633-1634, the Jesuit mission Le Jeune noted that the "Savages have not this word 'sin' in their language." (Mann, Barbara A. *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*. New York, Peter Lane Publishing Inc, 2000, p. 72)

⁶ Paul W. Bamford, "The Procurement of Oarsmen for French Galleys, 1660-1748," *The American Historical Review* 65, no. 1 (1959): p.39

⁷ De Nonville, "Narrative of the Expedition The Marquis DeNonville, Against the Senecas, in 1667" 1867, p.1

⁸ Bruce E. Johansen and Barbara A. Mann, *Encyclopedia of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy)*

of France, particularly under Louis XIV, who embodied both absolute power and absolute devotion to the church, would see fit to run a campaign of elimination and brutality on the Five Nations – they were religiously inferior, and the King of France saw himself as entitled to the land on which they had built their home for centuries.

Since the dawn of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, formed in approximately 1142 AD⁹, the Five Nations managed to uphold a relatively political system characterized peaceful transitions of power, even in times of conflict. The role of women was one of the cornerstones of the Haudenosaunee political structure that allowed for a rapid rebuilding of their political stability following the 1687 abduction. The roots of gender parity in the Five Nations culture can be traced back to what is known as the Sky Epoch. This origin story tells of Sky Woman falling down to a flooded Earth, and being held upon the back of a turtle while several aquatic creatures search for earth to recreate land so that she can survive. One succeeds, finding a little bit of dirt, which is placed upon Turtle's back, thus becoming Turtle Island. Sky Woman is pregnant when she falls, and gives birth to her daughter, Lynx. The pair spend their days as a pair, roaming the Earth, exploring and creating the plants and animals of the lands. Lynx is eventually impregnated by the North Wind, but dies bearing twins: Flint and Sapling. These two then engaged in a competitive but ultimately collaborative process of creating more features of Earth, such as mountains and volcanoes. Because the twins were born to parents who were of the Earth (North Wind) and Sky (Lynx), we see not only an interplay between the sexes, but also between different qualities of the cosmos. When settlers came from Europe, their perception of this story was the Flint and Sapling were opposites. Sapling was seen as the "good" in the world, where as Flint is (inaccurately) considered to represent the "bad" in the world. Sapling created plants like strawberries, while Flint created the rambling rose: a beautiful plant, but with thorns that could hurt those who touched it.¹⁰ The European perception splits things into dichotomies, whereas in we can see that both of the realms of things created by Flint and Sapling simply "are." Just as Earth and Sky are two parts of the whole that makes creation, male and female are equal parts of humanity, tasked with sharing the work of maintaining the balance necessary for the health of the land and society. As Haudenosaunee scholar Barbara Mann puts it, the two bonded pairs of Sky Woman and Lynx, of

(Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2000), p.178

⁹ Mann, Barbara A., and Jerry L. Fields. "A Sign in the Sky: Dating the League of the Haudenosaunee." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* , 21(2) (University of California), 1997: 105.

¹⁰ Mann, Barbara A. *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*. New York, Peter Lane Publishing Inc, 2000, p. 32

Flint and Sapling, represent the duality and collaborative nature of the world.¹¹ This notion of twinship and collaboration manifested itself in Haudenosaunee society in a myriad ways, not least of which was a distribution of power amongst both men and women which would be inconceivable to most Europeans. Although governance roles differed for men and women, “Haudenosaunee women’s work included the formal direction of political and diplomatic decisions,”¹² and the roles played were at times interchangeable, considered equal. The term for the women who held these positions of authority was *gantowisas*, meaning “women acting in their official capacities.”¹³ Gantowisas were “female officials among the Iroquois who enjoyed sweeping political, economic, religious, and social powers that their European counterparts could only envy.”¹⁴ Some of the powers and responsibilities held by the gantowisas included:

“the right to confer or retract citizenship through adoption; call or end wars; appoint warriors and war chiefs; nominate all men to office; nominate all women to office; consider all matters in their own councils first; set the agenda of the league and the Wyandot Confederacy by deciding whether to send matters forward to the men’s councils; name children and officers (including direction of funerals); and impeach errant officials, male or female. Women also were the judges, mediators, and keepers of the peace. Economically, women owned all the land and the crops, as well as all the fruits of the men’s hunts and the town’s fishing. They owned the longhouses, all the household goods, the lineage names and titles to office, and all farming implements. In addition, the women oversaw all food and goods distribution, ensuring that the goods and services of life were equitably distributed to all. This included calling and managing the seasonal festivals.”¹⁵

Having both men and women in charge of various levels of decision-making speaks to the lessons derived from the Sky Epoch story. While there is a great more nuance regarding personal dynamics between the characters of Sky Epoch, an integral overarching theme is how women and men must share equally in the responsibility and power of creation.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 89

¹² Kane, Maeve. *Shirts Powdered Red: Haudenosaunee Gender, Trade, and Exchange Across Three Centuries*. Cornell University Press, 2023.

¹³ Bruce E. Johansen and Barbara A. Mann, *Encyclopedia of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy)* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2000), p.105

¹⁴ Ibid., p.105

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 105-106

The sophistication and gender balance in the politics of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy was rooted not only in the Sky Epoch framework, but in that of the League Epoch. The League Epoch, which spells the end of the Sky Epoch, begins at the dawn of agriculture for the Five Nations, approximately 800 to 1000 C.E.¹⁶ This era begins in the midst of ongoing war among the peoples of the Five Nations, which necessitated a unifying political structure in which the Nations could participate to quell the fighting and establish what would come to be known as the Great Law of Peace.¹⁷ The tale of the founding of the Great Law of Peace concerns 4 main figures involved in bringing about the Great Law of Peace: Adodaroh, the Jigonsaseh, the Peacekeeper, and Ayonwantha. As the story goes, “a brutal civil war had split the Five Nations (at the time: the Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Mohawks, and Oneidas) into polarized factions.”¹⁸ This conflict arose as an army of cannibals raided and wrought terror upon the Cultivators. The cannibals (led by Adodaroh) can be seen as representing hunting, while the Cultivators are the metaphorical agrarians, whose means of procuring food presented a challenge to the old ways with their woman-centric workforce and economy¹⁹. Again, as we did in the Sky Epoch, we see two important roles set up as what we in the West would tend to perceive as opposites. In this time of conflict, it is said that Sapling reincarnated as a man, the Peacemaker, or Deganawida,²⁰ to quell the violence. His first step in the goal of securing peace among the peoples of the Nations was to approach Jigonsaseh. The leader of the Cultivators, Jigonsaseh was believed to be the reincarnation of Fat-Faced Lynx, who had also returned to bring peace. Peacemaker and Jigonsaseh negotiated politics, agreed upon a strategy, and agreed upon the Great Law that would be used to govern after peace was secured. It was promised that the place of women would be upheld by this Great Law. Jigonsaseh played a major role in carrying out the agreed-upon strategy by going to the Clan Mothers. One of the ancient responsibilities of the Clan Mothers was to “sit at the crossroads of war, and feed the passing war parties of any and all sides in return for their villages being left

¹⁶Mann, Barbara A. *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*. New York, Peter Lane Publishing Inc, 2000, p. 89

¹⁷ It is worth noting that, unlike the intracultural violence in France, fueled by economic and religious factors, war functioned differently for the Haudenosaunee. As Daniel K. Richter explains, war was a means of recuperating lost members of a population, or served a retaliatory purpose for broken agreements. For more information, see Daniel K. Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience," *The William And Mary Quarterly*, 40, no. 4 (October 1983): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1921807>.

¹⁸ Bruce E. Johansen and Barbara A. Mann, *Encyclopedia of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy)* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2000), p.3

¹⁹ Mann, Barbara A. *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*. New York, Peter Lane Publishing Inc, 2000, p. 36

²⁰ Peacemaker's true name is only to be used in ceremony, so he will be referred to henceforth as 'Peacemaker'

unharméd.”²¹ So, Jigonsaseh spread the message of peace throughout the Cultivators by requesting of the Clan Mothers that they pass the peaceful message on to the warriors. While Jigonsaseh took on this role, Peacemaker consulted with another cannibal - Adodaroh’s trusted speaker, Ayonwantha. He approached Ayonwantha, and persuaded him to agree to give up cannibalism in favour of hunting deer. Ayonwantha then became Peacemaker’s speaker to the cannibal factions involved in the war. The combined efforts of these three eventually convinced all of the Nations to agree to peace; they all banded together to confront Adodaroh, who was now outnumbered by all of those who wished for peace. Rather than confront him with violence, they employ a plan suggested by the Jigonsaseh: that they should offer Adodaroh the position of chairman in the new social order, as long as he agrees to peace. He accepts, and Ayonwantha combs the snakes from Adodaroh’s hair, metaphorically “untwisting” his thoughts. Thus, the councils are formed, and the Great Law of Peace was set in motion. ²²



Figure 1: "Peace Queen," Ernest Smith, 1936 – In this painting we see the artist’s depiction of Jigonsaseh (left) speaking the message of peace to different factions of warriors, directing them to put down their arms and enter the Longhouse and sort out their disputes.

This tale ultimately brings us to looking specifically at the role of *Jigonsaseh*. Though Jigonsaseh is one person in the League Epoch tale, the role Jigonsaseh plays in bringing about

²¹ Mann, Barbara A. *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*. New York, Peter Lane Publishing Inc, 2000, p. 37

²² Ibid., p.39

peace among nations results in a specific political role being named after her. Thus, many women have historically occupied the role of *Jigonsaseh*:

“Jigonsaseh was the position title of the Head Clan Mother of the Haudenosaunee League. Her many titles include “The Mother of Nations,” “The Peace Queen,” “The Great Woman,” “The Fire Woman,” and “The Maize Maiden.” ...[Jigonsaseh's] traditional obligations included feeding all visitors, including war parties, regardless of their national loyalties, and discovering their business in Iroquoia. All visitors were safe within the precincts of Gaustauyea, her home town; her longhouse was a place of absolute sanctuary. She was charged with making and keeping the peace among individuals, clans, and nations, using mediation and negotiation. In circumstances when the use of force became unavoidable, she had the right to raise and command armies.”²³

A functioning political body such as that of the Haudenosaunee requires a wide range of input from local councils, federal councils, and many decision-making figures. The fact that many Nations and figures within the League Epoch narrative had to commit to upholding peace demonstrates a deep cultural respect for the idea of collaboration across various experiential differences such sex or National faction. These values can be seen as contributing to what ultimately became the collaborative and deliberative structure of the local councils and the federal Grand Council:

“The order of deliberation in the councils was this: The Clan Mothers’ councils considered all matters first, determining whether and when to forward them to the men’s Grand Council. The men could only consider matters sent to them by the women. Once a matter was forwarded to the men, they deliberated it according to their own judgment. Their consensus conclusion was not binding on clans or nations, however. Each nation might, through its clan councils, reconsider or reject the consensus of the Grand Council. Thus the clan councils performed judicial review of the matters coming out of the Grand Council.”²⁴

²³ Bruce E. Johansen and Barbara A. Mann, *Encyclopedia of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy)* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2000), pp.176-178

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125

Neither Grand council nor local council exerts power over the other, as neither man nor woman is subservient to the other. The gender balance and the political system relied upon “the precept of... **“Consensus,** not coercion.”²⁵ The goal of political order was to strive for a natural order of reciprocation, trust, and autonomy. Unfortunately, although relations between French traders and the many Nations of Turtle Island had existed in relative peace at points throughout history, the mounting threat of King Louis XIV and DeNonville’s goals of land conquest and dominance over the region pushed the Jigonsaseh and the Nations to a point where reciprocity became untenable. By violating the trust of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy by lying about their desire to engage in peaceful negotiations as a means to take captives, no recourse was left for the Jigonaseh but to declare war upon the settlements of New France.

Although the capturing of Haudenosaunee people for galley slaves, conducted under false pretense of peace negotiations, was a massive transgression against the Haudenosaunee Confederation, this act was only one in a myriad of violent actions the French had taken against the Haudenosaunee. As well as taking hostages, in the same year, “2,400 French soldiers under the command of the Marquis de Denonville descended on the town [of Ganondagan, where the Great Law of Peace was debated for ratification by the Senecas during the Green Corn time of 1142 C.E.] and burned it to the ground”²⁶. An attack upon the sustenance staple of corn was also carried out in 1687: “A French minot, according to Lewis Henry Morgan, equals roughly three bushels, so the 400,000 minots of corn that Denonville’s forces destroyed in 1687 equalled roughly 1.2 million bushels. While Denonville’s estimate may have been inflated to please his superiors, even half that amount would have been a very large cache of corn.”²⁷ The orders to enact such violations upon the trust, food source, and people of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy led to a full-scale rebellion against French forces. Tying back into how the beliefs of both players in this particular moment in history perceived the situation “ DeNonville and Louis XIV believed they were dealing with only “savages who have no experience as to regular war.”²⁸ This could not have been further from the truth. Though the warfare tactic of “paralyzing an army by taking its’ whole top leadership prisoner...typically worked well against the armies of imperial hierarchies,”²⁹ it was unsuccessful

²⁵ Ibid., p.123

²⁶ Ibid., p.,105

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 66-67

²⁸ Mann, Barbara A. *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*. New York, Peter Lane Publishing Inc, 2000, p. 147

²⁹ Ibid. p.148

in weakening the Haudenosaunee. Of all the hostages taken, DeNonville left Jigonsaseh untouched. Although deliberation as to what measures must be taken against DeNonville and his forces took many moons, it speaks to the solidity of the Haudenosaunee political structure that the abduction failed to weaken the collaborative power of the multi-level and horizontally organized democracy. Failing to take Jigonsaseh ultimately led to the defeat of DeNonville's forces at La Chine:

“for, in accordance with custom, she had not left Gaustauyea, [Jigonsaseh's fortress] but had only sent her speaker to the distant council. This Jigonsaseh rose to the occasion, rallying the remaining chiefs and Clan Mothers, appointing war chiefs, and assembling an army (including women warriors), which she personally led against Denonville. She proved to be a brilliant tactician. The deciding battle occurred at Ganondagan (called La Chine in French documents), near modern-day Victor, New York. There the Jigonsaseh conclusively routed Denonville. By the end of 1687, the Jigonsaseh not only had driven Denonville out of Seneca territory, inflicting on him the most ignominious defeat of his life in the process, but had chased his army all the way back to the gates of Montreal, to the consternation of the French. In June 1688, Denonville had sued for peace and capitulated to the Jigonsaseh's demands that he dismantle the French fort at Niagara, which was done on September 15, 1688 by order of Denonville himself.”³⁰

It would have been unthinkable to a French militiaman such as DeNonville that a woman could wield the power to raise an army.

By overlooking the complexity of the Haudenosaunee political structure, the Marquis DeNonville opened himself and French forces up to defeat by the Haudenosaunee military forces. Being that it was inconceivable for women to hold political and military agency in the eyes of a society rooted in a masculine-centric creation story, *Jigonsaseh*, with the might of the people of those who trusted her, were able to secure a military victory over DeNonville at LaChine. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy's long-standing stories about the world, and the value of women's participation in the political process, paved the way for a powerful leader to occupy the role of

³⁰ Bruce E. Johansen and Barbara A. Mann, *Encyclopedia of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy)* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2000), pp. 178-179

Jigonsaseh and carry out retribution for the wrongs committed against them by King Louis XIV and DeNonville.

Bibliography

- Bamford, Paul W. "The Procurement of Oarsmen for French Galleys, 1660-1748." *The American Historical Review* 65, no. 1 (1959), 31. doi:10.2307/1846600.
- De Nonville, Marquis. *Narrative Of The Expedition of The Marquis De Nonville, Against The Senecas, in 1687*. 1687.
- Translated by Orasmus Marshall
- Eccles, W. J. "Frontenac'S Military Policies, 1689–1698 a Reassessment." *Canadian Historical Review* 37, no. 3 (1956), 201-224. doi:10.3138/chr-037-03-01.
- Henneton, Lauric, and Louis Roper. *Fear and the Shaping of Early American Societies*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.
- Johansen, Bruce E., and Barbara A. Mann. *Encyclopedia of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy)*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2000.
- Kane, Maeve. *Shirts Powdered Red: Haudenosaunee Gender, Trade, and Exchange Across Three Centuries*. Cornell University Press, 2023.
- LeClerc, Jean S. *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique du Nord* 14, no. 4 (March 1961), 6-7.
- Mann, Barabara A. *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2000.
- Mann, Barabara A., and Jerry L. Fields. "A Sign in the Sky: Dating the League of the Haudenosaunee." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 21 (2), 1997.
- Richter, Daniel K. "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience." *The William And Mary Quarterly*, 40, no. 4 (October 1983), 528-559. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1921807>.
- Smith, Ernest. "Peace Queen." *Rochester Museum & Science Center*. 1936.
- <https://rmsc.org/exhibits/online/lhm/IAPpaintings.htm>.