

Iroquoian Medicine Women and the Earth Around them in New York State

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The Iroquois Nation has a long history and valued reputation regarding their reverence for the environment; from traditions passed down orally for years to a 1999 study by the Seneca Nation in an effort to save their land. The medicine women of the Iroquois in New York state have a connection to the environment that is unique from other tribal members. Their domestic role as food preparers accompanied by their role as medicine women connects them to the environment around them. Using and analyzing primary narratives by outside observers and geographical studies, this examination takes a look into the lesser-studied aspects of the connection between Iroquoian medicine women and their environment.

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In the eighteenth century, many European settlers in the northeastern United States viewed Native American women as *significantly* inferior to their male counterparts, even suggesting the comparison of these women to slaves. Ethnologist Lewis H. Morgan studied the nations that made up the Iroquois tribe in the 1840s and wrote “the Indian regarded women as the inferior, the dependent, and the servant of man, and from nurture and habit, she actually considered herself to be so.”¹ Native Americans were perceived as enslaving and oppressing their women which helped to craft the narrative of their savage lifestyle and inferiority to the customs of Anglo-Saxon settlers. While traveling around the United States in the mid-1800s observing the customs of various tribes, George Catlin wrote of the Mandans that women “are always held to a rank that is inferior to that of the men...they stand rather in the light of menials and slaves.”² Despite their observations, the jobs many women did were not as severe as they were often painted to be by observing men. While captured by Iroquois in the late 1750s, Mary Jemison observed the women’s work as “probably not harder than that of white women.”³ Some scholars say Iroquois women, particularly after the seventeenth century, faced similar limitations as western women, primarily the struggle of being cast out of the public sphere unless their roles as mothers or wives allowed it, though they had a significance politically western women did not.⁴ Not only were Iroquois women highly regarded in their community, but many rose to obtain positions of power, popularly, the role of medicine woman. The Iroquois medicine

¹ Lewis H. Morgan, *League of the Ho-De-No-Sau-Nee or Iroquois* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1922), 315.

² George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians Vol. I* (London: Tossell and Myers, 1841) 118.

³ James Everett Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison: The White Woman of the Genessee* (New York: The American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, 1918) 47.

⁴ Nancy Shoemaker, “The Rise or Fall of Iroquois Women,” *Journal of Women's History* 2, no. 3 (1991): 40.

woman, however, has not been studied in the context of her environment, especially the natural environment of the Iroquoia homeland.

The Iroquois inhabited much of modern-day New York and portions of surrounding states as well as Canada, stretching from the Hudson River to Lake Erie. The landscape was heavily forested with a variety of lakes and bodies of water upon which settlements were concentrated.⁵ Each tribe had slightly different topography, for example, the Mohawks were often surrounded by coniferous trees, while the Oneida were chiefly surrounded by beech, birch, and maple trees.⁶ They often set fires to farming areas in the early spring and occasionally in the fall to promote quicker rejuvenation of the grass and increased forest productivity and diversity. This also allowed new areas for animals to graze as well as higher levels of visibility for hunters in these areas.⁷ Due to these slash and burn farming methods, villages were moved and cycled through, often every twelve to twenty-five years once the farm area and resources were exhausted. This allowed time to replenish its resources before being used again.⁸

The Iroquois often used vertical lines, similar to longitude lines, to divide boundaries between the tribes making up the Iroquois nation.⁹ Each tribe in the League of the Iroquois had distinct areas and boundaries, never mixing their settlements though they often would settle across lakes and rivers from each other, with each body of water having a set boundary. They lived in harmony and communicated often despite their very precise settlement arrangements. These arrangements made the League possible while allowing each tribe to keep individuality

⁵ Morgan, *League of the Ho-De-No-Sau-Nee*, 36.

⁶ William Fenton, "Contacts Between Iroquois Herbalism and Colonial Medicine," in *An Iroquois Source Book Volume 3: Medicine Society Rituals*, ed. Elisabeth Tooker (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1986), 504.

⁷ William E Engelbrecht, *Iroquoia: The Development of a Native World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005) 9.

⁸ Michael K Foster, Jack Campisi, Marianne Mithun, *Extending the Rafter: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies* (Albany: State of New York Press, 1984) 115.

⁹ Morgan, *League of the Ho-De-No-Sau-Nee*, 39.

and autonomy.¹⁰ Because they maintained their individuality, the medicines used by each tribe differed slightly along with healing rituals sacred to each one.

Despite observations of individuals such as Morgan, the Iroquois were traditionally very progressive in regard to women, though they never had a legitimate matriarchy in place. Women had ownership over land and houses all of which were passed down matrilineally as were titles.¹¹ Even though women were never able to hold the position of chief (called sachem), they selected each successor and evaluated their progress.¹² The power was still in the hands of the men, but women had control over how power was often used. During council meetings, women had a man appointed to speak on their behalf; once the meetings closed, women became involved and diligent activists making their position clear to council members.¹³ In the early 1700s, Pierre de Charlevoix, after observing the governmental organization of the Iroquois, wrote "women have the chief authority amongst all the nations of the Huron language...all is done in their name, and the chiefs are no more than their lieutenants."¹⁴ When Henry Dearborn came in contact with the Senecas in 1838, he concluded the Seneca women must stay with their husbands out of true love because she is "more useful and important to the husband than he is to her" as opposed to the opposite situation common in western societies.¹⁵ He also noted that because of the matrilineally organization and female ownership of property and many belongings, "she can obtain her own means of support better than he can."¹⁶ At the time, women had great influence over men and

¹⁰ Morgan, *League of the Ho-De-No-Sau-Nee*, 41-42.

¹¹ Carolyn Niethammer, *Daughters of the Earth the Lives and Legends of American Indian Women* (New York: Collier Books, 1977) 139.

¹² Niethammer, *Daughters of the Earth*, 140.

¹³ Shoemaker, "The Rise or Fall," 40.

¹⁴ William M. Beauchamp, "Iroquois Women," *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 13, no. 49 (1900): 86.

¹⁵ Frank H. Severance, *Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society* (Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society, 1904): 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

because women tended to the fields, their contribution and work were much more consistent and reliable than men's, who had to rely on availability of animals through hunting and fur trading with the French.¹⁷

In-depth studies of Native Americans have only become prevalent in the late twentieth century; studies of Native American women came even later. Most sources older than 1900 are accounts from anthropologists and numerous captivity narratives. Even these do not focus on women but primarily on men and are often extremely biased, as Native Americans were seen as savages and heathens.¹⁸ These sources also hold tight to the stereotype of Native Americans as unchanging and rigid; when in reality, they changed and adapted in the same ways Europeans did. In some aspects, like the role of women, natives were more progressive than many European settlers. The works available focusing on women primarily show how their political and economic roles within each tribe differed from that of western women, like the narrative of Mary Jemison, with many ignoring roles such as medicine women and other positions of authority.¹⁹ Native American women are most often painted as princesses or merely homemakers when in reality they were much more.²⁰ Information about the environment and native women's connection to it regarding any aspect apart from farming is rare, as native agriculture was a massive topic of curiosity.

The French were the first to look at women as more than simply mothers and wives but as true members of the tribe who served a vital purpose.²¹ There are several works discussing

¹⁷ Shoemaker, "The Rise or Fall" 44.

¹⁸ George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition*, 118.

¹⁹ James Everett Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison*.

²⁰ Lyle Koehler, "Native Women of the Americas: A Bibliography," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 6, no. 3 (1981): 73.

²¹ *Ibid.*

women in positions of authority and some narratives mention their roles as medicine women; however, they do not mention how they used their environment in this work, rather discussing legends and stories. For example, Lucian Carr speaks a lot on the political role of women without mentioning their crucial role as medicine women.²² With many scholars ignoring the full picture of the use of the environment by Native American women, this provides ample opportunity for new research to find links and connections between medicine women and their use of the environment and landscape that so obviously had to have existed to make their work as effective medicine women possible. Medicine women, while being of great interest to many, receive little recognition in scholarly works and are often brushed over as an interesting phenomenon, not investigated for the dynamic inner workings and complex role they take. In fact, due to the matrilineal structure of the Iroquois tribes, women were in a unique position to assert their dominance in both the political and domestic spheres. Because of this, they were able to connect with the environment around them through the preparation of food as well as healing in ways the men were not afforded.

Traditional definitions of Iroquoia vary greatly due to ever changing boundaries with other nations, though many consider their borders to be Lake Champlain in Vermont on the East to Lake Erie on the West, roughly 200 miles across, reaching up into southern Ontario and south through Pennsylvania.²³ This examination, will focus primarily on the Iroquois inhabiting upstate New York and the surrounding environment. The main villages of the Iroquois were located about twenty to forty miles apart and would move once the farming land was exhausted.²⁴

²² Lucian Carr, *The Social and Political Position of Women among the Huron-Iroquois Tribes*, Salem: Salem Press, 1884.

²³ William M. Beauchamp, *Aboriginal Occupation of New York* (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1900) 11; Engelbrecht, *Iroquoia* 3.

²⁴ Engelbrecht, *Iroquoia*, 3.

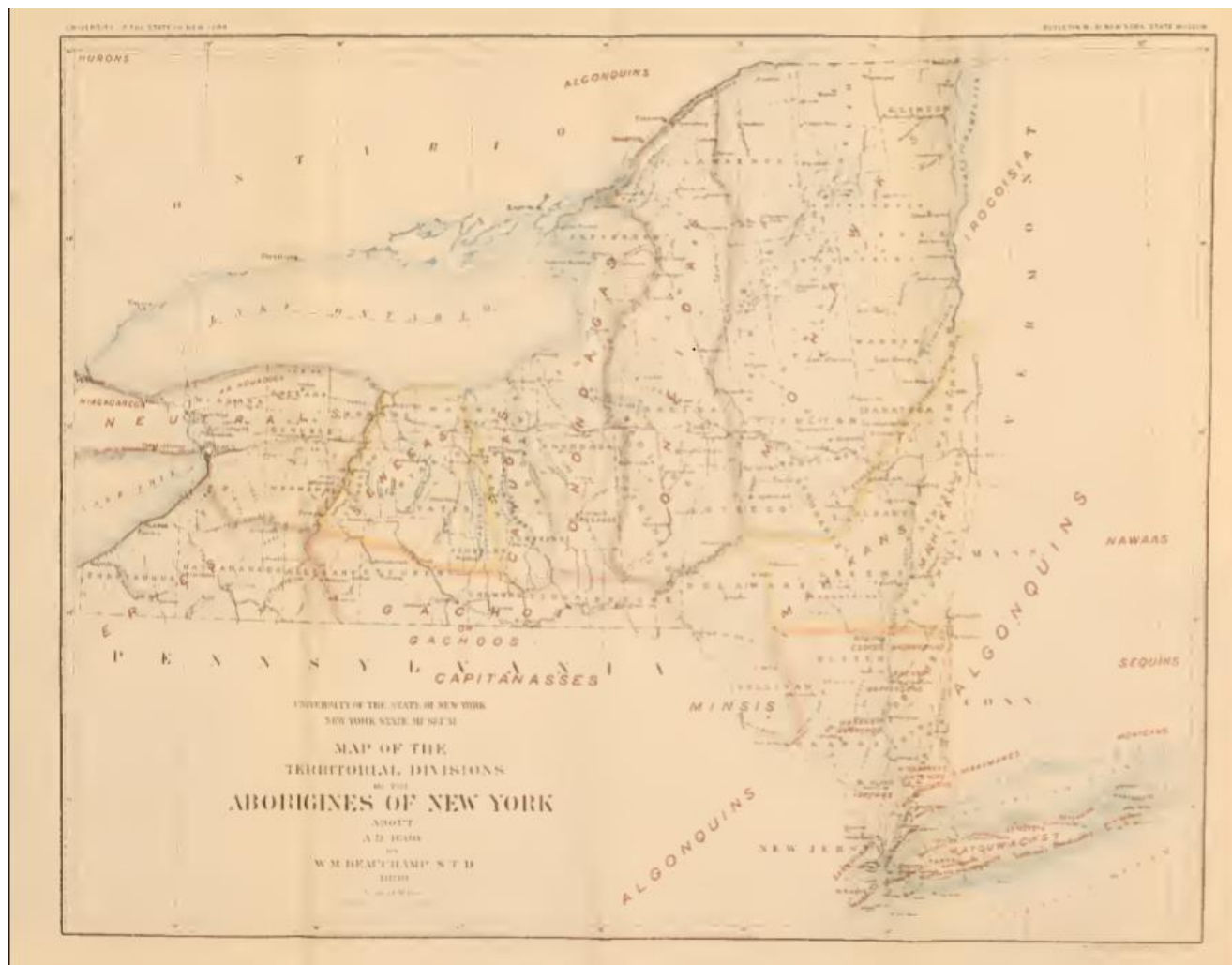
Another theory behind this is that soil wasn't the limiting factor influencing the time a community could remain in one spot; the exhaustion of natural resources was much more likely. Women occasionally had to walk great distances to obtain dry wood and their farming techniques would not have led to the depletion of the soil.²⁵ However, moving was a common practice where they would allow several months for a transition period so as not to disturb any major activities within the village. French Jesuit missionary Joseph-François Lafitau observed this practice in the early 1700s, writing that they "sort and arrange so that their old fields can serve them until the new ones are in condition to provide for their subsistence; in this way they can abandon the former without suffering."²⁶ Occasionally, some of the older members of the tribe would stay behind to live out the rest of their days in the old village location.²⁷ Villages were roughly five to ten miles apart, ideally surrounded by two to five miles specifically their own for agricultural use.²⁸ As shown in Figure I below, each tribe within the confederacy had fairly distinguished boundaries while still remaining a unified nation; with the help of waterways, especially Lake Ontario, communication was fairly easily as they could more conveniently travel and meet between tribes.

²⁵ Engelbrecht, *Iroquoia*, 102-103.

²⁶ Eric E Jones, "Using Viewshed Analysis to Explore Settlement Choice: A Case Study of the Onondaga Iroquois." *American Antiquity* 71, no. 3 (2006): 525; Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, ed. William N. Fenton, and Elizabeth L. Moore (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1977) 70.

²⁷ Engelbrecht, *Iroquoia*, 102.

²⁸ Engelbrecht, *Iroquoia*, 126.



A map of the Iroquois nation in New York by William Beauchamp, 1900. Note the distinct organization by tribe and lack of intermingling due to precise vertical boundaries. SOURCE: William Beauchamp, *Aboriginal Occupation of New York*, 1900.

The vertical boundaries demonstrate the Iroquois's expert organization; this helped avoid messy lines and quell boundary disputes that could arise. Although only New York is shown, the boundaries of the Iroquois nation extend far past the boundaries of the state in every direction. Many villages were on hillsides where they still had usable soil, though not as rich as at the bottom. Thus, they had a vantage point and effective defensive position. Many villages often

tried to settle near swamps or wetlands because of the plethora of floral resources available. Although many factors went into choosing a location, it can be inferred that the most important were defensibility, soil quality, and climatic conditions.²⁹ The soil quality played possibly the largest part as they often gave up the better defensive position at the top of hills, for better soil on hillsides.

In the area of the Iroquois Confederacy are the Adirondack Mountains which has the highest elevation in the state of New York, Mount Marcy at 5,467 feet.³⁰ The mountains are composed of granite rock and due to this take on a conical form as opposed to a precise outline. They are covered with forests, primarily birch, beech, maple, and ash trees with deposits of hemlock, spruce, fir and white pine at higher elevations and cedar, hemlock and hackmatack in the lowlands.³¹ Due to the consistently cold climate at the top of the mountains, European settlers wanted to eliminate many of the forests in hopes the soil would be warmed by the sun.³² The mountainous area is also full of streams, springs, and lakes making it an ideal area for settlement, especially in the warmer lowlands.³³

Iroquoia is also home to plains breaking up the dense forests. The plains are made up of primarily sandy soils such as loamy fine sand, Saugatuck sand, Covert loamy sand, Napoleon peat, and Palms muck with Windsor loamy fine sand making up over half of the composition in some areas. This was excellent for growing maize, beans, and squash, the principle crops of the

²⁹ Jones, "Using Viewshed Analysis" 526.

³⁰ George Hayes, "Remarks on the Geology and Topography of Western New York" *American Journal of Science and Arts* 35, no. 1 (1839) 91.

³¹ Sidney Grey, "The Adirondacks," *The Aldine* 9, no. 1 (1878): 18.

³² Philip G Terrie, "The New York Natural History Survey in the Adirondack Wilderness, 1836-1840." *Journal of the Early Republic* 3, no. 2 (1983): 185-200.

³³ Grey, "The Adirondacks," 19.

Iroquois known as the Three Sisters.³⁴ These plains were home to primarily deciduous-coniferous forests, especially in areas where the composition of soil was less sandy. With annual precipitation averaging about 44 inches, the density of the forests made for humid conditions close to the ground where moisture was trapped by tree canopies.³⁵ In observations of the rock strata of Upstate New York, it is found that it is rich with red sandstone as well as limestone accompanied by various shales. This has led some to believe the areas that are now valleys were once underwater and current mountains were once islands.³⁶ Other common canopy species include sugar maple, American beech, yellow birch, red spruce, and balsam fir with understory shrubs including primarily hobblebush and striped maple.³⁷ Balsam fir was especially favored for use in medicines; most often, the pitch was used as a salve for sores and wounds.³⁸ Sugar maple was standardly used not only in medicines but in food. Its bark was dried and made into a bread while the sap was commonly used to treat sore eyes.³⁹ Many plants and trees were used in both cooking and healing, supporting the idea that women would have special knowledge and domain over both.

The practice of medicine was a traditional way for Iroquois women to gain power and prestige within their tribe. Women could join medicine societies within their tribe devoted to driving away disease and evil spirits through traditional rituals involving dance. The medicine societies were responsible for curing simple diseases as well as nose bleeds, toothaches, and

³⁴ Frank E. Kurczewski, "Historic and Prehistoric Changes in the Rome, New York Pine Barrens." *Northeastern Naturalist* 6, no. 4 (1999): 329; Jones, "Using Viewshed Analysis" 526.

³⁵ Kurczewski, "Historic and Prehistoric Changes" 331.

³⁶ Hayes, "Remarks on the Geology and Topography," 86.

³⁷ Susy Svatek Ziegler, "A Comparison of Structural Characteristics between Old-Growth and Postfire Second-Growth Hemlock-Hardwood Forests in Adirondack Park, New York, U.S.A." *Global Ecology and Biogeography* 9, no. 5 (2000): 373.

³⁸ Daniel E. Moerman, *Geraniums for the Iroquois: A Field Guide to American Indian Medicinal Plants* (Algonac, Michigan: Reference Publications Inc, 1981) 22.

³⁹ Frederick W. Waugh, *Iroquis Foods and Food Preparation* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1916) 119, 142.

inflammation.⁴⁰ Through a different selection process, women could also rise to the position of medicine woman. Women could not, however, rise to this position until after menopause, as menstruating was seen as unclean. This led to it being a very highly revered position, commanding significant respect from other tribal members and those outside the community, as medicine women occasionally catered to white settlers. John Heckewelder, in the 1880s, describes how many wives of white missionaries in Pennsylvania would come to the Iroquois in search of relief during menstruation, and of his own experience with remedies writes, “I firmly believe that there is no wound, unless it should be absolutely mortal...which an Indian surgeon (I mean the best of them) will not succeed in healing.”⁴¹ These women were revered as nearly equal to their male counterparts and often were the only ones permitted to treat other females.

The Iroquois were known for their use of the environment around them as tools in their remedies; they often used barks and roots in everything from topical ointments to medicines.⁴² They would keep a wide assortment of medicine on hand at all times and when the seasons changed, would stock up for the coming year. Due to their location in a forested region, medicine women had a wide array of resources, namely barks, they used for various remedies.⁴³ They had knowledge regarding the healing properties of their environment and would often take trips to areas around them to find the best ingredients for healing remedies.⁴⁴ These trips were often to visit nearby tribes to obtain ingredients unavailable to them and to expand their knowledge. While women were not the only ones with the knowledge of these remedies, they

⁴⁰ Morgan, *League of the Ho-De-No-Sau-Nee*, 160.

⁴¹ John G.E. Heckewelder, *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1881) 229.

⁴² Heckewelder, *History, Manners, and Customs*, 228.

⁴³ Morgan, *League of the Ho-dé-no-sau-nee*, 36.

⁴⁴ Heckewelder, *History, Manners, and Customs*, 229.

were often more familiar with the uses of various plants and herbs making them a very in-demand commodity.⁴⁵

Medicine societies were a substantial part of the Iroquois belief system regarding healing. Both men and women could be members of the societies. The original and most popular society being the false face society.⁴⁶ An Onondaga related its origin story to Harold Blau who wrote about it in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1966. It begins with the Evil-One traveling the earth and infecting it with his power. He challenged the Creator to see who could make a mountain move as a way to prove his power. While the Evil-One could not make the mountain move, the Creator moved it so close to the Evil-One that he scraped his face on the surface when he turned to it. As he hit his face on a rocky ledge, it became distorted. Upon his victory, the Creator determined that his face would be permanently distorted as a consequence of doubting him; his speech was also limited to cries of “hooo hooo hooo.” Additionally, the Creator made the Evil-One promise to help the Iroquois cure disease. He agreed upon the conditions that they burn tobacco to honor him, address him as “grandfather,” and as a show of honor, wear masks resembling his likeness as they performed rituals. The masks are often made with twisted faces showing the consequence of the mountain scraping against his face.⁴⁷ As shown in Figure II below, the false face mask is twisted and distorted to match the appearance of the Evil-One after he hit the ledge.

⁴⁵ Niehammer, *Daughters of the Earth*, 147.

⁴⁶ Joseph Keppler, “Comments on Certain Iroquois Masks,” in *An Iroquois Source Book Volume 3: Medicine Society Rituals* ed. Elisabeth Tooker (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1986), 21.

⁴⁷ Harold Blau. “Function and the False Faces: A Classification of Onondaga Masked Rituals and Themes.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 79, no. 314 (1966): 566; Keppler, “Certain Iroquois Masks,” 16.



A drawing of a false face mask by Lewis Morgan 1922. Note the distorted expression and tongue hanging out. SOURCE: Lewis H. Morgan, *League of the Ho-De-No-Sau-Nee or Iroquois*, 1922.

Each of the false face masks would have differed with a unique individuality, though they would all still maintain the same general features. The scraping of the Evil-One's face grows out of Iroquoian experience with the Adirondacks and the mountainous land to which they were

accustomed. The origin story of the false face society shows the spiritual connection to their land and environment and how landmarks like the Adirondacks play into not only the physical healing work, but the significance behind it.

The leaders of these medicine societies were called Honunastesta and were women responsible for the regalia used as a method of communication with its members.⁴⁸ Many women served in the capacity of healers; their relation to spirituality clears up many of the reasons why. The earth was looked upon as The Mother and her primary crops: squash, maize, and beans, called the Three Sisters.⁴⁹ Folktales and beliefs like these put women in the position of provider and in large part, bringer of food. Women were even seen as bearers of venison and played a large part in the preparation of the meat; additionally, they were responsible for making clay cooking pots.⁵⁰ Women were given complete domain over the preparation of food, relating to the preparation of medicine through the use of natural resources. Women were also responsible for the spiritual training of children and were central to all spiritual endeavors, working as the mediators between the spirit world and maintaining funerals and facilitating sweat lodges.⁵¹

The original folk tale detailing medicine in Iroquois society speaks of the allocation of healing to the Bear Clan. The Bear Clan was a moiety, grouping of clans, of the Mohawk and Onieda tribes and the largest of their three clans, in addition to the Turtle and Wolf Clans. Clans were used to connect the League and its members together, binding them as brothers; those in different clans were considered cousins.⁵² In the tale, the women of the Bear Clan were given

⁴⁸ Keppler "Certain Iroquois Masks," 23.

⁴⁹ Engelbrecht, *Iroquoia*, 22.

⁵⁰ Engelbrecht, *Iroquoia*, 10.

⁵¹ Mann, *Iroquoian Women*, 294.

⁵² Elisabeth Tooker, "Northern Iroquoian Sociopolitical Organization," *American Anthropologist, New Series* 72, no. 1 (1970): 93.

knowledge and healing powers when a sick man entered their village covered in sores, nearly unable to move. Although many were so frightened and sickened by his appearance that they would not help him, finally he came across the Bear Clan. The Clan Mother pitied and took him in, assuring him she would do everything she could to help. He began instructing her in what roots and plants to get to make the medicine he would need to cure his ailment. Out of gratitude for her kindness and generosity, he taught her about his secret medicines, sharing recipes and the significance surrounding ingredients. As soon as she would cure each disease, another would appear in its place and she would, in turn, learn to heal each one. Eventually she knew how to cure every disease that ailed humanity until he came down with tuberculosis, for which he had no cure. Before his death, he revealed to the Clan Mother that he was a Sky Messenger sent to help prepare the Iroquois for their future and warn them of a pale-faced diseased people and the destruction they would bring. As his final act, he blessed the Clan Mother and gifted her entire line with the art of healing along with an evergreen tree, "I place in the midst of your clan...a majestic pine tree...as the top reaches above all other trees so will your clan...your clan will multiply above all others and be the ruler of the nation."⁵³ With that, the women of the Bear Clan were officially blessed with the ability to heal and knowledge of recipes passed down through generations. Medicinal plants were said to have been brought down by the Sky Mother, again giving women domain over various medicines.⁵⁴

Although the exact origin of the legend cannot be pinpointed, it is central to the spiritual healing aspect of the Iroquois and stands to believe it is a product of oral history from years ago.

⁵³ Elias Johnson, *Legends, Traditions and Laws, of the Iroquois, or Six Nations, and History of the Tuscarora Indians* (Lockport, NY: Union Printing and Publishing Co, 1881) 59-60; Barbara Alice Mann, *Iroquoian Women* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2000) 343-344.

⁵⁴ Seneca Nation. "Cultural Plants." in *US 219 Between Springville to Salamanca, Improvements from NY 39 to NY 17: Environmental Impact Statement*, Vol. 4 (New York: Department of Transportation, 2003): 3.

In the coming hundreds of years, the practice of medicine expanded and healing was not just reserved to the Bear Clan; it expanded through the tribes, with the knowledge of the land as they explored various flora. It is thought that through their history and interactions with various European colonists, the Iroquois may have, in total, experimented with all the flora in the region, however, some theorize that no one person could have mastered all of the flora throughout the Iroquois nation.⁵⁵ It was much more probable that they would have known all the flora within their tribal boundaries, even through trade there is a chance not all flora found in the eastern Seneca region would have been known by the Mohawks. With different collections of flora in each tribe's region, it would have been very difficult for an individual to know each one by heart.

The differing landscapes changed how various flora were treated, "if the beech tree was the most numerous upland tree of the Iroquois country, the maple was more important in economy and religion" but each organism had a role and was vital.⁵⁶ When Iroquois herbalists collected plants, the plants were viewed as part of the Earth's population as opposed to merely plants. They were sent by the Creator to help the Iroquois and a prayer was often said before plants were gathered.⁵⁷ Iroquoian medicine can be broken into two parts, the scientific and the mystical; more specifically, between tangible remedies and the spiritual or religious aspect of healing.⁵⁸ The preparation of the plants medicinally was given great reverence and there were specific ways to prepare them for different desired effects. For instance, when using bark, if trying to make a purgative, gatherers had to scrape downward; conversely, they scraped upward

⁵⁵ William Fenton, "Medicinal Plant Lore of the Iroquois: Chauncey Johnny John and James Crow Instruct He-lost-a-Bet in the Use of Native Plants," in *An Iroquois Source Book Volume 3: Medicine Society Rituals*, ed. Elisabeth Tooker (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1986), 233.

⁵⁶ Fenton, "Iroquois Herbalism" 504.

⁵⁷ Fenton, "Medicinal Plant Lore" 235.

⁵⁸ William Fenton, "Some Medical Beliefs and Practices of the Contemporary Iroquois Longhouses of the Six Nations Reserve," *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 41, no. 5 (1951) 153.

for an emetic. There was also a correlation between the color and outward appearance of the plants and what they were used for, similar to the humors. Yellow rooted plants were often used to treat jaundice while bloodroot was used most often to treat external wounds.⁵⁹

Some remedies were so effective they greatly surprised settlers with their efficacy. Dutch writers noted “Indians know how to cure very dangerous wounds, sores, and bruises in a most wonderful manner with herbs and roots and leaves which grow in their country and are known to them.”⁶⁰ The Iroquois would contribute to European medicines though were not always willing teachers. Their primary contributions were sassafras, maidenhair, and ginseng, with each later making huge strides in medicine. Sassafras was arguably the most popular and was often used as a tonic to treat fevers, while maidenhair was used to treat women’s disorders such as labor pains.⁶¹ Ginseng is used commonly today as a “catch-all” herb; it is popular in both the United States and China. The Iroquois would use it to treat a wide variety of ailments from vomiting to sores, as well as to strengthen other medicines.⁶² They would also add ingredients and recipes taught to them by the Europeans that would later become commonplace, while remaining true to their traditions and their spiritual beliefs.

Plants and trees were given high reverence evidenced by their appearance in the Iroquois Thanksgiving Address which specifically references them.⁶³ They were used in a variety of ways as remedies often ingested, again connecting women’s responsibilities of preparing food to that of preparing medicine. Both of these roles had developed from the mountain environment and

⁵⁹ Fenton, “Medicinal Plant Lore” 236.

⁶⁰ Fenton, “Iroquois Herbalism” 511.

⁶¹ Fenton, “Iroquois Herbalism” 515.

⁶² Moerman, *Geraniums for the Iroquois*, 85.

⁶³ “Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address,” Mohawk, translated by John Stokes and Kanawahienton (Six Nations Indian Museum and Tracking Project, 1993). http://nmai.si.edu/environment/pdf/01_02_Thanksgiving_Address.pdf, November 4, 2017.

the resources available to them. In the 1530s, French explorer Jacques Cartier's men had their scurvy cured by a tea made from the bark and leaves of a balsam fir or northern white-cedar, known as the tree of life. It was widely used to cure most disease.⁶⁴ The Iroquois had to harvest the plants with the utmost respect or risk the plants making themselves invisible. They took great care to maintain their careful balance with their environment.⁶⁵

This examination on the use of the environment by Iroquoian medicine women has revealed a previously unexplored connection between their role as food preparers and women in society and their connection to the environment as medicine women. The careful balance between practical and spiritual reverence given to the environment is shown by the Iroquois today. Their Thanksgiving Address, still recited by Iroquois leaders, gives respect and shows thanks to the plants: "plants grow, working many wonders. They sustain many life forms."⁶⁶ As well as specifically food plants and medicine herbs: "they are always waiting and ready to heal us. We are happy there are still among us those special few who remember how to use these plants for healing."⁶⁷ Even today, women play a vital role as healers and are gaining more attention as research on Native American women has gathered a following and more scholars, like Elizabeth Tooker and Barbara Alice Mann, explore the intricate aspects of their lives as leaders in their community. The power of the matrilineal line has fallen out of favor in most places except the Longhouse people where the matriarch is still the one that identifies membership in each clan.⁶⁸ There are those that want to be medicine women though western

⁶⁴ Jacques Cartier, Henry Percival Biggar, and Ramsay Cook. *The Voyages of Jacques Cartier*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, 80.

⁶⁵ Engelbrecht, *Iroquoia*, 21.

⁶⁶ Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Martha C. Randle, "Iroquois Women, Then and Now," in *Symposium on Local Diversity in Iroquois Culture*, *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 149, ed. William N. Fenton (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1951): 177.

medicine has gained a foothold making this role more of a symbolic and spiritual role than in the past. More recently, there has been a renewed fervor to revive the art of using medicinal plants for healing.⁶⁹ Beginning in the mid-1900s, more and more natives began moving off Reserves and while they still retain membership in the tribe, they live permanently in larger cities.⁷⁰ Even though there have been inevitable changes to the culture of the Iroquois, the spirituality and significance behind medicine women have remained the same.

The Iroquois have always maintained their respect for their environment. In a 1999 appeal to the New York Department of Transportation, the Seneca rallied against the construction of a new highway through sacred land. The highway was proposed, but could not be fully funded without express permission from the Seneca people. As a reply to this request, they compiled data and information about the land the highway would destroy and presented a study of the various flora and their significance to the tribe. This highway would endanger an abundance of plant life that would be forced out due to the construction of highways; the exhaust and chemicals from cars render medicinal plants unusable, and often eliminate them altogether.⁷¹ To complete the highway, the New York Department of Transportation has to receive express permission from the Seneca Nation allowing them to build the highway across the Allegany Territory. United States Representative Tom Reed has been communicating with the Seneca Nation saying they have “been an active participant in the conversations. Their administration has indicated to us a willingness to get involved.”⁷² The medicine women of the Iroquois cannot be effective without access to the plants and herbs necessary for healing, the Seneca write in their plea “In the name of progress interstate highways traced over ancient well traveled

⁶⁹ Seneca Nation, "Cultural Plants" 5.

⁷⁰ Randle "Iroquois Women" 177.

⁷¹ Seneca Nation, "Cultural Plants" 5.

⁷² Rick Miller, "Reed seeks faster Route 219 studies," The Salamanca Press, June 14, 2017.

moccasin paths...As natural habitat is destroyed plants and animals are forced to relocate.”⁷³

This is a huge issue facing Iroquoian women today both as preparers of food and as medicine women. Based on their reverence for the environment and the renewed interest in the position of medicine women, it is shown that though the land is ever changing, Iroquoian women remain resolute and strong in their domestic domain.

⁷³ Seneca Nation, "Cultural Plants" 4.

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