

**Christian Themes Within the Mohawk Origin Story: An Exploration Through the Work  
of J.N.B. Hewitt**

By Quinlan Van Es, Rutgers University

It should come as no surprise that the famous Iroquois story of the Skywoman, and the world on the turtle's back has been whitewashed and edited by white historians. However, most readers are not familiar enough with the story itself and historical texts to be able to recognize the faults in the current telling of the story. During the 20th century, it became the goal of American ethnologists to find commonalities between different tellings of the same origin story, often reducing these stories to the barest plot points and ignoring complexities of the culture. One of the very few ethnologists who avoided being drawn into this trend was John Napoleon Brinton Hewitt, a native Tuscarora who eventually worked with the Bureau of American Ethnology. Hewitt's most famous and detailed work is his "Iroquoian Cosmology," published in two parts in 1903 and 1928, that included the same story told by native Onondaga, Seneca, and Mohawk speakers. I will be analyzing the last of these myths, that of the Mohawk people, as it is the most detailed of the accounts produced by Hewitt. Because of how he strayed from the accepted methodologies in ethnology at the time, Hewitt is genuinely the best and most reliable source to turn to when looking for minute details in Iroquoian culture. However, it is imperative to keep in mind the extensive history of the Mohawk people with missionaries and their complicated relationship with Christianity. As Hewitt's transcriptions value accuracy and detail more so than other ethnologists of his time, his accounts are the best to analyze in an attempt to find any evidence of Christian beliefs in Mohawk culture.

Hewitt was a native Tuscarora, born in 1858 and raised on the Tuscarora Indian Reservation in Niagara County, NY. However, Hewitt was only taught English by his parents, and it was not until he started public schooling at the age of eleven that he began to pick up Tuscarora. Tuscarora was the first of many native languages he would learn from other students at the school.<sup>1</sup> After his initial introduction to native languages, Hewitt became interested in the work of transcribing them in a form that was accurate, a challenging endeavor because of the complexities of languages that are designed to be spoken with no care to how they could be written. Hewitt learned his method of transcription from his mentor, the ethnologist Erminnie A. Smith, who first hired him in 1880 to assist her on her Tuscarora-English dictionary.<sup>2</sup> The Bureau of American Ethnology (hereafter referred to as the BAE or the Bureau) had commissioned the work. When Smith passed away in 1886, Hewitt was hired directly by the Bureau to finish the dictionary, thus starting the long career Hewitt would have at the BAE.<sup>3</sup>

However, there were issues in the basic foundation of the BAE that would make it a hostile environment for any Native American ethnologist. John Wesley Powell was the first director of the BAE, and he would remain in that position almost until Hewitt's first publication of the "Iroquoian Cosmology." One of the main reasons why Powell insisted the BAE focus on the languages of Native peoples rather than collecting artifacts, as other government-funded organizations in the past had done, was his belief that "all sound anthropologic investigation... must have a firm foundation in language." He added, "Custom, laws, government, institutions, mythologies, religions, even arts cannot be properly understood without a fundamental knowledge of the languages which express the ideas and thoughts embodied therein."<sup>4</sup> While he may have been correct about the importance of language, his underlying beliefs regarding

speakers of different languages were elitist. The BAE “was shaped by Powell’s enthusiasm for Lewis Henry Morgan’s theory of cultural evolution,” a theory that proposed three levels of linguistic development (savagery, barbarism, and civilization); Morgan’s theory also placed almost all Native languages in the category of savagery.<sup>5</sup> Any organization that espouses a definition of a people it serves as savage cannot possibly hope to remain truly open to them and view them as equals. Hewitt then was the first Native American scholar hired by the Bureau, and he remained the only one until Francis LaFlesche was hired in 1910, making LaFlesche the second and last Native American hired by the BAE.<sup>6</sup>

From the very beginning of his time at the Bureau, Hewitt was involved with disagreements and scholarly debates with various white ethnologists who were seriously misguided but given unwavering support by other theorists. Friedrich von Schlegel, a linguistic theorist of the early 19th century, had proposed that, because of the use of polysynthesis (or agglutination), specific languages were less developed than those without the trait. When the theory was confronted by other evidence to suggest that the same languages that contained these traits also had “greater morphological complexities” than many European languages, Daniel G. Brinton defended the theory by claiming the polysynthesis present in the languages contributed to holophrasis. Hewitt would disprove Brinton’s theories a year later with evidence from the Iroquoian language and other languages across the Americas.<sup>7</sup>

Another ethnologist who was highly respected by the BAE was Franz Boas, the Columbia University professor considered to have founded the field of anthropology.<sup>8</sup> Boas attempted to discredit Hewitt with a paper in 1909, “Notes on the Iroquois Language.” It centered around how Boas’ “hearing and transcription of Mohawk” was “at least as good as if

not superior to that of Hewitt.”<sup>9</sup> However, comparisons between Hewitt and Boas’ transcriptions would suggest that Hewitt had “captured a more conservative version of Mohawk,” proven by some details in language that had been present in more archaic Mohawk that were no longer used in a more modern, day-to-day version of the language.<sup>10</sup>

Both of these altercations indicate a strong sense of superiority among white ethnologists, to the point that they would blindly support one another when faced with criticism even if their proof and work is inaccurate and quickly dismissed in later generations. The fact that Hewitt would be the only one to call the bluff of these ethnologists while others allowed these erroneous articles to be published would suggest that more importance was placed on a unified front than accurate work. Within a few decades, it would be increasingly difficult for ethnologists to find first-hand accounts of Native stories, and as ethnologists became more reliant on previously published work, the field still turned away from Hewitt in favor of white ethnologists.

After Hewitt’s death in 1937, there was no resistance to white ethnologists who sought to reduce the stories of Native people. The leading expert in the field of ethnology following Hewitt’s time was William N. Fenton, who became famous for his attempts to find commonalities between the different tribes’ tellings of the Skywoman origin. According to Fenton, the narrative could be reduced to between nine and twenty-three plot points that were shared between individual stories. However, this method erases all of the minute details of the culture that Hewitt sought to preserve in his detailed accounts.<sup>11</sup> While it might not be detrimental to a modern understanding of Native American cultures, if one historian follows this route in his studies, Fenton’s methodology caught on and became the basis for future research. Upon Fenton’s death in 2006, fellow ethnologist Thomas S. Abler published an article on the

great achievements and legacy of Fenton, stating, “Fenton’s publications over the past 70 years have done much to legitimize the ethnohistorical study of the Native people of North America within both anthropology and history. Indeed, Fenton continues to set a standard for all interested in the historic roots of contemporary cultures of Native North Americans.”<sup>12</sup>

To follow Fenton’s methods and ideas would be to completely disregard what Hewitt believed to be the true reason for individualistic disparities between tellings: the holders of tradition that passed these stories from generation to generation, sharing them at gatherings and events, told the myths so that they would benefit the particular audience they had.<sup>13</sup> While it was important to these Holders to keep their history and beliefs alive, it was essential to them that these myths play an actual role in the lives of their people and serve them; if not, what is the point of holding on to them? With each new telling of a familiar story, it is reshaped in a kind of revitalization: the story must serve the society that exists at the time of the telling, so both the people themselves and their culture are constantly coevolving.<sup>14</sup>

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I hope to show that one cannot simply determine to what extent the Mohawks have taken in Christian beliefs, at least to the point of evolving their own culture and stories to include them. In the late 1660s, the five nations launched peaceful relations with the first Christians to enter their lands, the Jesuits of New France.<sup>15</sup> However, these Jesuits would eventually spark lasting hesitation regarding Christianity by creating disunity among the Mohawks. After about a decade of coexisting with the Jesuits, “a large number of Mohawks... became sincere and exclusivist adherents to the new faith [Jesuit Catholicism].”<sup>16</sup> Starting in the mid-1670s, hundreds of Mohawks left the tribe in favor of living among Jesuits in a French community in Kahnawake,

Quebec, CA.<sup>17</sup> These divisions within the tribe had weakened its sense of community, so when Godfridius Dellius of the Albany Dutch Reformed Church arrived in the late 1680s, the Mohawks agreed to allow him to teach them about Protestantism in the hope that the tribe could reunify.<sup>18</sup>

Dellius worked with the Mohawks for over a decade, and in fact became very close to them. This connection would make it even more bitter for the people. In 1699, Dellius tricked a group of his followers into selling the Dutch their lands.<sup>19</sup> Because of this, constant distrust of all missionaries who followed Dellius would exist. The next group that came to the Mohawks was from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, or SPG. Thoroughgood Moore, Johannes Lydius, and Bernardus Freeman would preach to the Mohawks from 1700 to 1710, leaving upon Lydius' death.<sup>20</sup> The most significant issue with this group was how dogmatic Moore was, causing the Mohawks to think back to the Jesuit Catholic missionaries. They were replaced by William Andrews in 1712, who was regularly accused of "preach[ing] a Popish religion."<sup>21</sup> Andrews often faced "persistent, and sometimes physically violent, opposition" and was explicitly reminded that his followers would not sell their lands and that Andrews was not permitted to live in the villages.<sup>22</sup> In 1718, Andrews finally abandoned his mission, writing to his secretary, "Heathens they are, and Heathens they will still be."<sup>23</sup>

However, it is still not easy to say whether or not the Mohawks took to the teachings of these Protestant missionaries. Dellius, for example, had 200 proselytes and had baptized over 130 Mohawks. Andrews had 38 that attended communion and a total of about 100 that were baptized.<sup>24</sup> Even though Dellius had betrayed them, Andrews noted the Mohawk were still praying and singing just as Dellius had taught them, and when SPG missionaries returned over a

decade after Andrews left, they found that nearly everyone was baptized.<sup>25</sup> If the Mohawks had been so grievously offended by the many missionaries that had come to them, why then did they stick so firmly to these beliefs, even when left unattended?

The reason lies in the Native American beliefs about spiritual power. The goal of any group of Native Americans is to gain as much spiritual power as possible, and the easiest way to do so is to align themselves with different spiritual leaders.<sup>26</sup> These leaders are seen as direct conduits of power to whatever spirit they serve, whether it be a native spirit or the Christian God. Furthermore, baptisms, prayers for the sick, and other rituals were all seen as ways of “mobilizing spiritual power,” so they could be done with or without that conduit.<sup>27</sup> When the Jesuits had taken so many of the members of the Mohawks, it had done irreparable damage to the spiritual power of the tribe as a whole, so allying themselves with spiritual conduits of a different sort, no matter how untrustworthy they might be, could aid them in making their tribe whole again. However, the question remains: did the Christian influence on the Mohawk people go any deeper than basic rituals to call forth spiritual powers?

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Since there now exists a foundation for this question and others about Christian influences within the Mohawk origin story, we can now address the story itself. It starts by detailing a world above our own in which “man-beings” dwell; among them were a brother and a sister, both “down-fended,” a term which meant that they were secluded from all but their guardians while they went through adolescence because of a “powerful orenda, or magic power,” that they possessed.<sup>28</sup> The audience is immediately presented with the family that will be the main focus of the story, a family that is much spiritually stronger than others. In another article





published shortly before “Iroquoian Cosmology,” but after his research for it was completed, Hewitt further elaborates on what this orenda is. Hewitt describes it as a “mystic potency” and says that no other words in the English language, including magic, come close to describing it.<sup>29</sup> It is clear from this article that orenda is something that exists within all things in the world, but very few people (like shamans) have any control over it. To possess a considerable amount is extremely rare and required individual teaching, hence the need for down-fending.

The origin story continues following the members of this bloodline, down to the great-grandchildren of the original brother and sister. The story starts when the sister becomes pregnant and will not tell who the father of her child is. Since she is secluded from everyone but her family, it is believed that this is an example of virgin birth (it is later explained that her brother is the father of her child).<sup>30</sup> It is to be understood, however, that even if this was an example of virgin birth, the theme is present throughout many Native American myths, including those of the Iroquois, and often occurs after one eats the seed of a fruit or practices other ceremonies (as will later be seen in this same story). The child of the brother and sister is a girl, and she grows up speaking to her dead father’s body, which has been preserved on a pedestal in their home. Eventually, he sends her on a quest to be married and describes to her the various trials she must face to get there.<sup>31</sup>

Many aspects of her story going forward reflect aspects of the life of Jesus Christ, specifically different trials that he underwent. On her journey to find the home of her husband, the daughter is tempted by men who call out to her. She must remain steadfast; to help these men would be to abandon her journey.<sup>32</sup> This aspect of her mission mirrors that of Jesus in the Judaeen Desert when Satan tempts him to abandon his fasting as God commanded. It is only by

proving that one can resist temptation that one can show that they are worthy. The daughter reaches the man she must ask to marry (whom White, previously cited as the author of “Rousing a Curiosity in Hewitt’s Iroquois Cosmologies,” refers to as the Guardian of the Tree, a name I hereafter will also be using) and the Guardian also gives her a series of trials. She is spattered with boiling food, which the Guardian causes to be licked off by two dogs, and “their two tongues were so sharp that it was just as if one should draw a hot rod along her naked body.”<sup>33</sup> The physical pain she suffers here can be connected to an event from the Passion of the Christ, the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Both stories require the hardening of an individual in the face of great pain and anguish, so that they may continue with further hardships. The next trial the daughter undergoes is a trial of burden, an obvious parallel to Christ carrying the cross.<sup>34</sup> It is only after these trials that the Guardian agrees to marry the daughter.

While it seems easy enough to make these connections across the two stories, it is far from conclusive proof that they are at all related. These are just minor themes of temptation, suffering, and physical burdens that exist in both stories, but could easily exist in any story without the influence of Christianity. There are not enough details within each trial to make any conclusive association between the two belief systems.

This is where what may be called the introduction to the myth ends. The story shifts to the events that lead the daughter to be cast out of their divine world down to ours (making her the Skywoman of legend). It starts with the Guardian falling ill, something that had only happened once before (in the case of the Skywoman’s father), and the people of the Guardian’s tribe trying whatever they can to heal him.<sup>35</sup> The Guardian recommends that the people uproot a tree in front of his home and lay him down beside the hole that looks down upon our world.

While he lays there, his pain is relieved, and he asks his wife to sit beside him on the edge. She does so, and when the Guardian asks her to bend forward and look in the hole, he pushes her into it.<sup>36</sup>

Immediately, I made the connection to a literal fall from grace, or perhaps even the death of Christ. This seems to be a common misconception according to White; he states that this is one of many examples within the stories recorded by Hewitt of aspects of Native American culture and tradition that could only be understood by someone from within the communities. While it is difficult for a non-Native American to understand these because of the constant erasure of cultural details within published recordings from white ethnologists, it is possible for a Native historian to piece together small details. For example, White says of the Guardian's state of mind:

While it may not be abundantly clear to a reader of Hewitt's works why she is being ejected from Skyworld, the reader might have had difficulty trying to decipher that the Guardian of Tree's mind had become unhealthy due to jealousy. The only way to restore his mind to "goodness" was to fulfill his dream that had been guessed earlier in the Skyworld sequence--I believe this to be the basis of dream-guessing ceremonies among the Haudenosaunee. Juxtapose this to the audience members among the Haudenosaunee communities, who hearing the narrative would have recognized those very frameworks of a healthy and unhealthy mind being demonstrated so clearly by the Guardian of the Tree.<sup>37</sup>

This analysis, which seems so obvious to a native scholar, completely eludes many white ethnologists. This only further proves that the way ethnologists like Fenton have written native myths and histories has not only eliminated aspects of their culture, but has also prevented future generations of ethnologists from learning about further aspects.

White also says the same is true for the twin dynamic, which is presented later in the origin stories. One brother, Tawĩskaro<sup>n?</sup> (or Flint), purposefully kills his mother in childbirth

and continuously lies to and deceives their grandmother (the Skywoman), while the other, Wă‘tă’ Oteroñtoñni’’ă‘ (or Maple Sapling), is blamed for the death of their mother and must eventually kill his brother.<sup>38</sup> Similar to the “unhealthy mind” of the Guardian, the twins do not represent “good-minded and evil-minded twins of creation.” White explains, “Each of these notions is steeped in a Western theological construct that does not adequately or correctly represent those meanings in a Haudenosaunee culture.”<sup>39</sup> Even aspects that seem to be connected to Christianity, like the twins and the fall, are deeply connected to Iroquoian culture and have just been mislabeled this entire time.

I did skip from the Skywoman to her grandchildren, however, leaving out a generation with a trait worth addressing. The daughter of the Skywoman, mother of Flint and Maple Sapling, did have an entirely virgin pregnancy. It seems that when a man “laid one of his arrows beside her body” and left it there the whole night, she was made pregnant with the twins.<sup>40</sup> As previously mentioned, however, the virgin birth is a common theme across Haudenosaunee culture that this can be dismissed as just another cultural belief.

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It seems obvious, considering all the details mentioned above, that there exists no real connection to Christianity within the origin story. However, I cannot claim this conclusively as there always exists the possibility that details like the virgin birth or the trials of the Skywoman were reinforced by Christian teaching. Because of the way white ethnologists regarded the myths of Native Americans, it is possible that no truth may ever be found and that the chance to learn while the Iroquois people flourished was lost. It is now, as historians such as White believe, only possible to gain any semblance of knowledge about these people and their beliefs

through turning to those who respected the culture and preserved it as Hewitt did. While ethnology and anthropology are both sciences, to approach them in the same objective manner than one would approach other sciences, in the way Fenton and his colleagues approached them, is faulty. It is true that one must keep their own beliefs out of their work, not allowing them to shape the field as Powell did, but to disregard the fact that these are the lives of people we are studying does so much irreversible damage to these people.

## Endnotes

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editors, as well as Dr. Camilla Townsend and Christina Monaco for their comments and guidance regarding research and earlier drafts of this article.

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