

Excerpt from "Dating the Iroquois Confederacy," Bruce E. Johansen

"Mann also offers another example of what she believes to be the European-centered and male-centered nature of existing history. Most accounts of the Iroquois League's origins stress the roles played by Deganawidah, who is called "The Peacemaker" in oral discourse among traditional Iroquois, and Aionwantha (or Hiawatha), who joined him in a quest to quell the blood feud and establish peace. Mann believes that documentary history largely ignores the role of a third person, a woman, Jingosaseh, who insisted on gender balance in the Iroquois constitution. Mann's argument is outlined in another paper, "The Beloved Daughters of Jingosaseh."

Under Haudenosaunee law, clan mothers choose candidates (who are male) as chiefs. The women also maintain ownership of the land and homes, and exercise a veto power over any council action that may result in war. The influence of Iroquois women surprised and inspired nineteenth-century feminists such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, according to research by modern feminist Sally Roesch Wagner.

While a high degree of gender equity existed in Iroquois law, sex roles often were (and remain) very carefully defined, right down to the version of history passed down by people of either sex. Men, the vast majority of anthropological informants, tended to play up the role of Deganawidah and Aionwantha, which was written into history. Women who would have described the role of Jingosaseh were usually not consulted. Mann points out that Jingosaseh, originally the name of an historical individual, subsequently a title, as a leader of clan mothers. The historic figure Tadadaho, originally Deganawidah's and Aionwantha's main antagonist, became the title of the League's speaker. Occasionally in Iroquois history, a title also may become a personal name -- Handsome Lake (a reference to Lake Ontario) was the title to one of the 50 seats on the Iroquois Grand Council before it was the name of the nineteenth-century Iroquois prophet. According to Mann, "it is only after the Peacemaker agrees to her terms that she throws her considerable political weight behind him . . . She was, in short, invaluable as an ally, invincible as a foe. To succeed, the Peacemaker needed her."

"Jingosaseh is recalled by the Keepers as a co-founder of the League, alongside of Deganawidah and Hiawatha," writes Mann. "Her name has been obliterated from the white record because her story was a woman's story and nineteenth-century male ethnographers simply failed to ask women, whose story hers was, about the history of the League."

The story of how Jingosaseh joined with Deganawidah and Hiawatha is one part of an indigenous American epic that has been compared to the Greeks' Homer, the Mayans' Popul Vu, and the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The Great Law of Peace is still being discovered by scholars; as recently as 1992, Syracuse University Press published the most complete available translation of the Iroquois Great Law. Once every five years, the Cayuga Jake Thomas recites the entire epic at the Confederacy's central council fire in Onondaga, New York, a few miles south of Syracuse. The recitation usually takes him three or four eight-hour days, during which he speaks until his voice cracks. According to the calculations of Mann and Fields, the Iroquois' central council fire has burned at Onondaga for more than 900 years.

Mann and Fields conclude: "The only eclipse that meets all requisite conditions -- an afternoon occurrence over Onondaga that darkened the sky -- is the eclipse of 1142. The duration of darkness would have been a dramatic three-and-a-half-minute interval, long enough to wait for the sun; long enough to impress everyone with Deganawidah's power to call forth a sign in the sky."

Akwesasne Notes New Series, Fall -- October/November/December -- 1995, Volume 1 #3 & 4, pp. 62-63.