

Tracing the White Roots of Peace

A commentary by Teyowisonte (Thomas Deer)

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Among the Haudenosaunee community, there is much confusion and debate that surround the various interpretations of the Kaianere'kó:wa; the Great Law of Peace. This contention remains as an obstacle for our people to make true progress in returning to our traditional government and way of life. As a student of Kanonhsonni'kéha, I decided to track down and research the various written accounts of the Kaianere'kó:wa and then try to decipher the most authentic. I thought that perhaps this journey would shed light on some hidden truth. The following are my findings have collected over some time.

The first written version of the Kaianere'kó:wa was drafted by Seth Teiotekano Newhouse in 1885, a resident of the Grand River Territory who was of both Mohawk and Onondaga descent. Newhouse's handwritten manuscript entitled, the *Dekanahwideh Government for the Iroquois Confederacy* (later renamed by Parker as the *Great Binding Law, Gayanashagowa*), was organized according to numbered sections which included a substantial portion devoted to the Condolence Ceremony as it figured predominantly in the Kaianere'kó:wa. This author has the understanding that the reason Newhouse's version was recorded in this manner was to prove to the Dominion of Canada that the Haudenosaunee had an organized constitution and were well equipped and able to govern themselves; thus having ammunition to resist Canada's plan to dissolve the traditional council and replace them with an elected council under the authority of the newly established Indian Act.

While his intentions were commended by most, official support or sanctioning of Newhouse's manuscript remains debatable. There is some record that asserts that in either 1897 or 1898, the manuscript was endorsed by both the warriors and women's councils in Grand River, but twice rejected by their Grand Council of Chiefs. Contrarily, according to a publication by the late Chief Jacob Thomas (*The Constitution of the Confederacy by the Peacemaker*, Sandpiper Press 1989), which bears a replicated certification of approval from the "Chiefs of the Iroquois Confederacy" for the Seth Newhouse manuscript, was supposedly sanctioned in 1897. Adding to the debate is Newhouse's "pro-Mohawk" sections that give Mohawk chiefs special rights above the other chiefs; prompting insinuations of an ethnocentric bias regarding Newhouse's paternal affiliation (Mohawk).

Despite this confusion, it is less disputable that around 1900, the same Grand Council apparently felt as though Newhouse's version was somewhat inaccurate, incomplete, and subjective to the personal agenda of Newhouse, leading towards a resolution to compose a Committee of Chiefs to examine and compile an official confederate version of the Kaianere'kó:wa and substitute Newhouse's. The Committee of Chiefs compiled a written document entitled, *the Code of Dekanahwideh*, which unlike Newhouse's, was written in the form of story rather than in organized point form. In 1900, this version of the Kaianere'kó:wa became the officially endorsed version by the traditional council of the Six Nations at Grand River.

Later on in 1916, ethnologist Arthur C. Parker, grandnephew of the famous Seneca Ely Parker, published a bulletin for the New York State Museum entitled, *the Constitution of the Five Nations*.

This ethnological bulletin compiled these two previous versions with Parker primarily editing the two texts. Parker's work is the most popular of analyses regarding the two previous versions of the Haudenosaunee constitution, although it must be mentioned that Parker, after having Newhouse's manuscript edited by Albert Cusick (an Onondaga/Tuscarora), totally reorganized and codified Newhouse's manuscript somewhat corrupting its value as an authentic rendition of Haudenosaunee oral tradition.

Apparently dissatisfied with both Newhouse's and the Chiefs' renditions, Chief John A. Gibson (who sat on the Committee of Chiefs when preparing their 1900 version) went ahead to dictate a more extensive version to Professor Alexander Goldenweiser in 1912. This version, which was dictated in the Onondaga language, was very similar to that of Committee of Chiefs, but much more detailed. This 525-page manuscript remained largely untranslated until the 1980's and finally published into English in 1992, and is felt by many to reflect the true integrity of Haudenosaunee oral tradition.

It would appear that the Newhouse version, as well as its subordinates, reflect a practical and efficient essence to the concept of Kaianere'kó:wa, whereas the Committee of Chiefs version as well as Gibson's, reflects a mystical wisdom that exists in the other side of this spectrum; that when pieced together produces a balanced and thorough doctrine that is Kaianere'kó:wa.

Many other versions and interpretations sprung from primarily Parker's revised Newhouse publication, such as Roy Buck, Karoniaktajeh, and the *Red Book* from Akwesasne Notes; with each emitting their own style in their interpretation. Words and terminologies were replaced and some technical aspects were adjusted, but they all managed to remain similar to Parker's revision. It is this author's opinion that three-quarters of the Newhouse manuscript, and indeed Parker's revision of Newhouse, is material that has been in time "added to the rafters"; possibly by-laws that were resolved by the chiefs in Grand River applied only to that community.

It must be stressed that all versions have some merit as they contain an array of scattered information integral to tracing the White Roots of Peace to its source. Learning Kanonhsonni'keha is much like putting together a huge puzzle. Puzzles have various pieces that each have a place in the big picture, the obstacle is recognizing each individual piece and where they fit together in relation to the other pieces; likewise is our pursuit of knowledge. Using deductive reasoning, we are able to compile the similar aspects contained among the various interpretations and extract those part that are harmonious. From there one is equipped with the pieces of the puzzle to finally begin the process of piecing together the big picture.

As for my conclusion, I ultimately found that there is no version that is the most authentic or concise, as written versions of the Kaianere'kó:wa are suitable for those beginning to form a basic understanding of the laws and principles of the Haudenosaunee; but what the books can never provide is the living spirit that is only contained in the oral tradition. Indeed, the entire Haudenosaunee community should compile a universally written rendition, but never should it replace the legal integrity of the oral tradition. After all, it's not the Bible.

Ever onward towards the good tidings of peace & power!