

Restoring Hope: The Raising of Atotárho

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Last April, in the rain-drenched hills of the Onondaga Nation Territory, around 900 Haudenosaunee convened at their capital to bear witness to a rare ceremony that surrounds the official installation procedure of leadership within the Six Nation Iroquois Confederacy. Although this installation ceremony, which is called the condolence, is quite rare and a significant event on its own, this particular ceremony has seen the installation of the Atotárho title.

The Atotárho title, unlike the other titles that are selected by individual clans and nations, the Atotárho title belongs to the entire Confederacy and has particularly detailed and specific roles and responsibilities set apart from the other titleholders that sit on the Grand Council of the Haudenosaunee. Atotárho acts the Grand Council's Wellkeeper, or chairperson, who presents the issues before the other chiefs. It is also Atotárho's responsibility to arrange the details of holding a council and to see to the council's agenda.

The former identify of the newly installed Atotárho was known before the ceremony as Sid Hill who succeeded the late Leon Shenandoah who last occupied the title and passed away in 1996; leaving the Confederacy without a condoled Atotárho for 6 years. Hill, a former ironworker and lacrosse coach, was carefully trained and groomed for this position, and is committed to unify the Haudenosaunee.

The History of the Haudenosaunee Condolence:

The origin of the Atotárho title, as well as the condolence ceremony stems back to the birth of the original Five Nations Confederacy. Let us now journey back in time to understand the evolution of the Haudenosaunee.

Since the dawn of time, human beings have dealt with the mystery of death provoking various, and sometime conflicting, faiths surrounding the spiritual implications of death and the afterlife. What is universal around the globe is the human reaction to the death of loved ones. Regardless of race or religion, human beings have mourned the loss of loved ones and as a result feel an overwhelming sense of loss and sorrow. Sometimes, this emotional suffering will profoundly affect the thinking of the mourning; thus affecting this person's daily life and interaction with others.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands of years ago, the Haudenosaunee had devised a unique way of dealing with death and other factors that disturb the functions of ka'nikonhrí:io (a good mind). Kanonhsonni'kéha, the way of life of the Long House, is founded on interdependence and the concept of autonomous responsibility, which is primarily a result of the Iroquois traditional division of labor. Indeed, the winters of the Eastern Woodlands were harsh and the failure of a task could lead to starvation or worse. A consequence of individuals not fulfilling their designated responsibilities in the

interdependent social structure of the Haudenosaunee would eventually result in a collective breakdown.

In the time before Tekanawí:ta brought the Kaianere'kó:wa (the Great Law of Peace) to the Haudenosaunee, the Iroquois had recognized that those who are mourning affected this interdependent social structure by unconscious neglect. Moreover, it was said that this was a time of ruthless violence, which left many dead and just as many mourning. It is important to note that in that time, mourning periods lasted a full year. With so many dead and so many obscured by sorrow, the social structure of the Iroquois was breaking down due to the numbers of people who neglected their duties and responsibilities as a result of being crippled by the sorrow of mourning. The leadership could not find a solution to this dilemma until one day a young man presented to the people and leadership; a new social organization that would resolve the epidemic. This idea was clans.

The young man, thereafter named as Ro'nikonhrowá:nen (He has great ideas), proposed a system whereby families would take identification with an element of the natural living world. The people did this and after a series of events it eventually became so that two moieties (a collection of clans) were created and consequently separated by a river. One moiety consisted of the deer, bear, snipe and eel clans; while the other belong to the peoples of the wolf, beaver, turtle, and hawk clans.

With this separation of the moieties, a relationship status of cousinship was established between the two moieties. Therefore, in the event a person of a clan within a particular moiety passes on into the next sphere of life, the people of the opposite moiety would intervene and condole the mourning that now suffer his or her loss. This was the first instance where the Iroquois invented a social system that would remove the burden of sorrow and despair from those mourning by a process of condolence.

In time, the people strayed away and eventually forgot this unique concept and thus came the emergence of the five troubled nations. This was an era of violent reproach and blood feud and with so many people dead from campaigns of carnage and vengeance; the people left behind condolence and accumulated a heavy burden of despair. Tekanawí:ta, the Peacemaker, after bringing forth the good tidings of peace and power, revitalized and refined the concept and procedure of condolence.

During the formation of the league, Aionwà:tha of the Onondagas, lost his daughters due to the evil sorcery of Atotárho and in his grief Aionwà:tha exiled himself the land of the Onondagas. On his journey he came across a riverbed where he found shells of wampum. He then collected these shells and refined them so that they could be used as beads. Aionwà:tha made three strings of wampum, and as he gazed upon them he contemplated how someone in so much grief could be consoled; what words could be said to console his troubled spirit?

Aionwà:tha resolved that if he ever encountered anyone in grief, he would take these three strings of wampum and “put consoling words into them.” Eventually, Aionwà:tha

himself was condoled for the loss of his daughters by those who in time understood his desire to be condoled. With those three strings, the tears from Aionwà:tha's eyes were wiped away so that he may see clearly again, his ears were cleared so that he may hear clearly again; and the obstruction in his throat was taken away so that he may speak from his heart again. Hope was restored to Aionwà:tha.

Once the formation of the Great Peace was finalized, Tekanawí:ta refined and elaborated on the ancient teachings of condolence into a very concise and organized ceremony that best reflects the true righteousness and nature of the Haudenosaunee. The Kaianere'kó:wa now divides the nations of the Haudenosaunee into two moieties; the Mohawk, Onondaga, and Seneca nations would be called the Elder Brothers, while the Oneida and Cayuga nations would be known as the Younger Brothers.

Similarly to the process established among the clans, the Kaianere'kó:wa teaches us that in the event a leader of a nation of a particular moiety (either of the Elder Brothers or Younger Brothers) passes on into the next sphere of life, the leadership of the opposite moiety would intervene and condole the mourning that now suffer his or her loss.

The Origin of the Atotárho Title:

During the Peacemaker's mission, he and Aionwà:tha met in great friendship and proceeded to unify the five troubled nations as well as compiled the original laws of the Great Peace. Through the Kaianere'kó:wa, the condolence ceremony became a rite of the Haudenosaunee designed to elevate the leadership and restore hope to the people, however before the Great Peace was finalized, one man stood in the way of the Tekanawí:ta's mission; the sorcerer Atotárho.

It must be known that at this time, the Onondaga people were under the tyranny and watchful eye of an evil sorcerer named Atotárho, who was said to be a hideous looking monster who lived off the flesh of men. Atotárho's body was distorted by seven crooks and is said to have had living serpents slithering in his hair. He lived in solitude on the other side of Lake Onondaga where his camp, made of bulrush, was virtually impenetrable. Although he was somewhat distant from the main village, he still managed to control Onondaga through his clairvoyance and sorcery.

At the beginning of his mission, Tekanawí:ta actually met the evil wizard in passing. Tekanawí:ta climbed to the roof of Atotárho's lodge to bear witness to the cannibal's meal of human flesh. As Atotárho began to boil the meat he mistakenly noticed Tekanawí:ta's reflection in the pot for his own. This had a profound effect on Atotárho and led him to believe in his capacity for good. Atotárho then dumped the pot of water and flesh and declared his contempt for the life he had led. Tekanawí:ta then approached Atotárho and assured him the good tidings of peace and power would soon arrive in his country. Tekanawí:ta then departed leaving Atotárho anxious and impatient for what the Peacemaker had promised.

After years of effort Tekanawí:ta began to forge a union of the nations and once most of the people most of the put their faith into the good tidings of peace and power, the

remaining business to finalize the confederation was the pacification of Atotárho. Led by Tekanawí:ta and Aionwà:tha along with selected leadership from the Five Nations converged on Atotárho's camp with the purpose to pacify evil sorcerer. As Atotárho was mesmerized by the sensation of peace and love brought by the delegates, Aionwà:tha began to comb the snakes from his hair. The removal of these serpents symbolized the pacification of Atotárho.

Once Atotárho was pacified, Tekanawí:ta bestowed deer antlers, the symbol of chieftainship, upon his head. According to Tekanawí:ta's design Atotárho was to become the first of 50 statesmen that would make up the Grand Council of the Haudenosaunee. Tekanawí:ta knew that power Atotárho once wielded for the purposes of evil, would be as equally strong once converted for the purposes of good. This made Atotárho a stern and strong foundation of the Iroquois Confederacy; qualities certainly considered when grooming an individual for this position.

The New Atotárho and its role in the future of the Haudenosaunee:

The chilled spring rain did not deter the hundreds of Haudenosaunee who traveled many miles to witness this historic event. The ceremony began "at the woods edge" where the condolers met the mourning. There, the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen was offered to open this ceremony. Like the original condolence of Aionwà:tha, the first three strings of condolence were then used to first wipe the tears away from the mourning so that they could see clearly again, then followed the ears that were cleaned so that they may hear with objectivity, and finally the obstruction of sorrow was removed from the throat of the mourning. From there, the mourning are then led by the condolers to the Long House where the remainder of the eight hour ceremony takes place.

During this eight hours, that could be described as meditative, this author had plenty of time to contemplate the positive effects that a new Atotárho could have on the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The raising of this title provides the Haudenosaunee with a new hope for different reasons. Firstly, of course, the occupation of the Atotárho title is certainly needed to provide directional role for the Grand Council of the Haudenosaunee. Mr. Hill has declared that it is his intention to restore the strength of unity among the Haudenosaunee. Certainly, this declaration is nothing less than ambitious and only time will tell if his actions will harmonize with his good words. In the meantime, it is the responsibility of Haudenosaunee citizens to help and support his efforts in order to maintain his moral and motivation.

Another reason for people to view the raising of this title as a positive and encouraging event was the dominant presence of young people who were instrumental in the passing of the ceremony. The roll accepted by these young people included speeches that were spoken in the respective language of their nation. These young people also sang the ancient songs of condolence including a magnificent performance by a young Cayuga man who recited the entire Hai Hai song. Seeing the potential of the next generation of Haudenosaunee was extremely encouraging. Perhaps our young people here in Kahnawake could feed off of this wellspring of knowledge and education and participate in some kind of exchange with young people from the other nations.

Near the close of the ceremony, a Kastó:wa with deer antlers, the symbol of chieftainship, was bestowed upon the new Atotárho. Shortly after when the ceremony closed, came the time when the new Atotárho begins to “rub antlers” with the other chiefs, which means that he basically begins to socialize and become familiarized with his colleagues in the Grand Council. When this happened, and the new Atotárho exited the Long House, the rain miraculously stopped, the clouds subsided, and a rainbow emerged above the Long House. Perhaps I am being far too metaphorical, but at this time I felt that perhaps this event could similarly subside our dark clouds so that better days could prevail. With that comforting thought, I then realized we must be on the right path and that our potential for greatness is still alive. Rest assured, hope shall be restored.

Ever onward towards the good tidings of peace and power!