Culture in Crisis

Objectives:
• Describe the factors that caused cultural disruption for the Haudenosaunee in the 18th and 19th centuries.
• Draw parallels between the devastation of Native American societies with that of other groups in the United States, or in other countries.
• Describe the ways in which people preserve traditional world views while adapting to an ever-changing world.

There was a moment in Iroquois history when the biggest challenge was going to be physical survival. It is no longer like that. Like all peoples who have any diversity in their culture, the biggest challenge is surviving as a cultural group.

John Mohawk, Ph. D.
Seneca
Professor of American Studies
SUNY Buffalo

Prior to the 17th Century, the Haudenosaunee homelands extended from the Hudson River to the Finger Lakes Region in New York State. During the next 200 years, they would expand their “longhouse” and become one of the more formidable economic and political powers in eastern North America. There are many reasons for their strength. Foremost may have been their great military and diplomatic skills, but another major factor was (and still is) the Haudenosaunee’s great ability to adapt within a changing environment.

Prior to 1492, the major Indian trade network worked its way west, not east. And great cultures in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys far outnumbered the Haudenosaunee; that’s where Indian America was at its heart. The Haudenosaunee were on the eastern frontier of those larger cultures and they developed a society to cope with that larger set of cultures, plural. The Iroquois used their white roots of peace-- they used their Great Law-- as the way of bringing in peoples that they had been at war with. They used diplomats to follow the trends of what was going on in the territory. But once you came under the white roots of peace, you were allowed to carry out your own religion, your own language.

When the Europeans showed up, those cultures in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys had long since declined. But the Haudenosaunee still had the philosophical beliefs that enabled them to survive – and they used all the accumulated knowledge from previous centuries to deal with the Europeans. It had evolved into an entirely complex culture that the French, Dutch and the English found amazing to deal with.

Robert Venables, Ph.D.
Sr. Lecturer
American Indian Studies
Cornell University

The traditional explanation of the incredible expansion of the League beginning in the early 17th century is supposedly related to trade, particularly trade in iron age technology, and most especially, muskets. Remember, despite the great league of peace, this was a world at war. Survival depended on getting access to European iron age technology. In the next 20 years, the Confederacy of Nations armed themselves for an enormous war of expansion, the so-called Beaver Wars. As a result of that, the Iroquois found themselves masters of a territory extending north to the Ottawa River, South behind the barriers of the Appalachians, west to the Illinois River, and southwest to Tennessee.

Stephen Saunders Webb, Ph.D.
Maxwell School
Syracuse University
And in that sense, it’s a tragedy because it became like an arms race. In the 17th century, if you didn’t get fur-bearing animals to trade to the Europeans, you wouldn’t be able to buy the guns. If you couldn’t buy the guns, your enemies, both white and Indian, would destroy you. The Beaver trade changed the Haudenosaunee’s world view. As soon as they looked at the fur-bearing animals as part of a market economy, their religious beliefs were diminished – they had come to see animals and other beings much in the same way white were seeing them. The Haudenosaunee were always trying to keep things in balance— the roles of men and women, their political alliances, their environment— in balance. They began to think as the Europeans, that the environment was there for the taking.

We also can’t underestimate the impact of Jesuit, then Protestant missionaries who began to work amongst the Haudenosaunee. As they diminished in population because of the wars and because of the smallpox, the European population increased. And as that happened, the temptation on the part of Haudenosaunee young people was to look toward a missionary and say, well, our old system seems to be shaking, and we’re not succeeding as a people any longer. And some of the young people would be attracted to Christian missionary efforts. That’s a crisis that occurs to all human societies when they’ve been devastated with a terrible war or terrible epidemic. The major issue I believe that world Jewry faced after the Holocaust against them in the Second World War was, where was God? And that’s a question non-Jews can ponder too, where was God in all of this? American Indian people went through this when they were devastated by war and smallpox, when they saw treaties being broken.

Robert Venables, Ph.D.
Sr. Lecturer
American Indian Studies
Cornell University

Then, the beaver trade collapsed. Beaver hats went out of fashion in Europe and the most valuable product that the Haudenosaunee people had to offer Europeans was lost. And they only had one thing left to sell, and that was land. So there had been 250,000 colonists say in 1690; at the time of the American revolution there were 2 and a half million, but there’s still only an estimated 20,000 of the Haudenosaunee. They’re outnumbered, and these land-hungry, multiplying farmers are on their doorstep!

Stephen Saunders Webb, Ph.D.
Maxwell School
Syracuse University

Throughout the 18th Century, the Haudenosaunee endured more disasters. European diseases, with smallpox worst among them, continued to devastate their population, even more lives were lost to trade wars. Despite that, the Haudenosaunee would continue to apply new technologies and diplomatic strategies to maintain their strong political positions with the Dutch, French and English. The Senecas in particular, overcame this crisis by adopting members of conquered Native groups into their families and nations, as prescribed by the Great Law.

After the American Revolution, the Haudenosaunee were revitalized by the visions of a Seneca named Handsome Lake. According to oral tradition, he received a series of instructions that would enable the Haudenosaunee to further adapt to their changing world. Handsome Lake’s message was codified into social and moral behaviors collectively known as the Gaiwiio.
Handsome Lake’s vision was to strengthen our traditions, to make them a real part of our present. To continue to observe our ceremonies and way of life, to keep our language up, and at the same time, to abstain from alcohol. That was one of his principle messages, that alcohol was not intended for us, he called it the “mind changer,” that with alcohol, our people would do things they would never do under any other circumstances. Handsome Lake also acknowledged that some of our people may need to obtain an education, in order to deal with the white man. In order to function with his way of life as well.

G. Peter Jemison
Faithkeeper
Cattaraugus Reservation
Seneca Nation

The Gaiwiio remains at the core of modern Haudenosaunee life as leaders struggle to maintain traditions amidst mainstream societies. Six Nations members are active in court cases involving land claims and in international groups dedicated to indigenous rights. Yet the most difficult challenge they continue to face is their daily struggle to maintain traditional Haudenosaunee balance in every aspect of their lives.

The biggest problem I see for myself is how do I take advantage of my education? Both my traditionally-inspired education and my text book education and put that together with my practical experience of how to get things done in the world. And work at preserving the things that we believe are important, and at the same time, to negotiate a future. We can’t all run off into the woods and do that old Indian thing because the outside world intrudes on us all the time.

So I see my role, and for people like myself, is to learn the most we can about the enemy, whatever the enemy is, so that it no longer manipulates us. That we can be the defenders for that thing which we believe, that we hold precious, but now we have to defend ourselves through powerful words, through other ways of thinking. But the problem is that other ways of thinking and these powerful words are very seductive. They keep pulling at you all the time, because along with those, comes a style of living, a way of life and a way of thinking that sometimes rubs up against what we really want to be. All of a sudden you’re being wined and dined in this other community with the power brokers, and they expect you to wear a suit and tie, marry a non-Indian, live in the suburbs, whatever, there is an expectation that they bring to you. And some of our people have said, okay, I’m going to do that for the sake of our people. But in the end, you get further and further away.

Richard Hill Sr.
Tuscarora
Haudenosaunee Standing Committee on NAGPRA

Given that it’s inescapable that Indians will be surrounded and immersed by a culture that is really global. It’s not just the United Sates, American culture, Anglo culture-- you go anywhere in the world and that culture is right in front of you. Are they going to be able to maintain themselves as a specific group? Now just about every group that can claim some identity, I don’t care if you’re Ukrainian or Italian, Chinese, whatever – every group in America faces that crisis. But most of those groups have some place where their culture still thrives, and Indians don’t. If they don’t maintain their culture, it’s gone.
There are Indian reservation up here (New York) where not one single Indian knows one single word of their language. There are groups up here where no one can tell you anything about their religion, their relationship to nature. If they had it before, they don’t know it. Their memory has been completely erased and none of us are happy with what’s left. None of us. This is a culture that has informed the world over and over again. It was at times, I think the most enlightened human experience in the world. I don’t think we have begun to scratch the surface of what we need to think about how to follow that first vision of peace. And to lose something like that is to lose some incredible value to humanity. I say that so white society may get the idea that maybe they shouldn’t do any more harm to it. But the responsibility to carry forward is on the shoulders of the Indians. They have to sustain it – they have to look in the mirror and see something valuable about being that.

John Mohawk, Ph. D.
Seneca
Professor of American Studies
SUNY Buffalo

Our way of life is not preserved by a museum. Our culture will not be preserved by a museum. Our language, our way of life and our culture will be maintained by us, will be preserved by us. It’s an awesome responsibility even to consider, and we do the best we can at this point and time to take the responsibilities.

The very first thing we do is keep our young people interested – to show them who we are and involve them in our way of life. Teaching them from the very beginning what our traditions are, involving them in those traditions, having them help maintain those traditions. That makes them belong, and feel as if they belong. We hold elder gatherings her to transmit traditional knowledge to young people, and we do it in a very disciplined way. We take away the TV, the snacks, all the things that people think they have to have around them. We get up at dawn every day and we begin the instruction. And the question they have for us when they leave is, “Can I come back? I don’t want to leave. Can’t I stay longer?” It’s tough to compete with all those things in that world out there, but we must prepare our young to be able to function in that world.

G. Peter Jemison
Faithkeeper
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DISCUSSION

**Middle School Level**

- **CAUSES**
  Discuss how your life has changed because of some new technology, like computers.
- **Interview people older than you to see how technology and communities have changed over the past 50 years. Ask them what they have done to adapt to these changes. Do they feel these changes are good or not?**

**High School -- Advanced Levels**

- **PARALLELS**
  Robert Venables draws a parallel between the devastation of Native American societies with that of Holocaust Jewry. Do you see parallels with the devastation of other cultures in the twentieth century? Are there parallels with the experience of other indigenous groups around the world? Explore resources in your library and on the Web.

- **PRESERVATION OF CULTURE**
  Describe the ways in which people preserve traditional world views while adapting to an ever-changing world. What are some of the ways in which the Haudenosaunee retain their traditions? What else can be done to ensure its preservation?
ON-LINE RESOURCES

American Indian Legal Resources
   http://www.law.ou.edu/indian/ailegal.html

Ganondagan State Historic Site (NY)
   http://www.ggw.org/freenet/g/gan-shs/

Haudenosaunee
   http://sixnations.buffnet.net/

Haudenosaunee: People Building a Longhouse
   http://www.sixnations.org

Iroquois Museum:
   http://www.iroquoismuseum.org/