

Cultural Patrimony

Haudenosaunee National Cultural Treasures

Grand Council of Chiefs Haudenosaunee

On February 2, 1986 The Haudenosaunee Grand Council of Chiefs issued a Communique from the Onondaga Nation discussing the victimization of the Haudenosaunee and other Fourth World Nations by the contemporary disciplines of anthropology, ethnology and related fields, and institutions such as natural history museums and historical societies. We share with our readers the contents of the Haudenosaunee Communique as it was released.

The Haudenosaunee (also known as the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy), and, each member nation [Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora] separately and collectively claim all sacred objects, human remains, and traditional territory as our cultural patrimony, and our national cultural treasures.

The Chiefs, Clan Mothers, Faithkeepers, and members of our contemporary traditional medicine societies and the people who they serve are the rightful owners and authorities of our cultural patrimony and our national cultural treasures.

It is the obligation and trust responsibility of each succeeding generation of Chiefs, Clan Mothers, Faithkeepers and Medicine Societies of the Haudenosaunee to preserve our patrimony and national cultural treasures for the Seventh Generation to come.

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Desecration of Graves

The human remains and associated graves, sacred burial sites, and related objects from the graves of the Haudenosaunee are the responsibility of each generation of Chiefs, Clan Mothers, and Faithkeepers. Therefore, the disturbance, destruction, and theft of our patrimony is a violation of our human rights; and violation of our group rights; and a violation of the religious and spiritual welfare of our people.

Wampums

The continued possession of the sacred Haudenosaunee wampums by the State of New York Museum in Albany, the Museum of the American Indian in new York City, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and various other private museums, historical societies, and private collections of individuals are a violation of our human rights; a violation of our group rights; a violation of our religious freedom; and an infringement on our sovereignty.

These sacred wampum belts and strings are an inalienable and "imprescribable" heritage of our nations, individually and collectively, and of our people today.

Medicine Masks

The continued possession of medicine masks by national [United States], state, county and private museums, historical societies, and private collections is a violation of our human rights, our group rights, our religious freedoms, and a violation and deprivation of

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the spiritual needs of our medicine societies and the people they serve.

Arguments to the contrary by anthropologists, ethnologists, museum boards and directors, educational institutions, not withstanding, the undeniable fact is that we are a contemporary civilization and culture with a functioning governing body of Chiefs recognized by the governments of the United States and the state of New York.

Therefore, all other entities are secondary and must give way to the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee and our people as the ultimate and final title holder of our patrimony.

History

It is the opinion of the leaders of the Haudenosaunee that contemporary disciplines of anthropology, ethnology and related fields, and institutions such as natural history museums and historical societies have their roots in the western theory of **Manifest Destiny**. A racist theory that permeated social, educational, and military thought up to and including present time.

In the United States [of America], government support and use of anthropology gave the government a vehicle for rationalizing it's treatment of Indian Nations and people in a smokescreen of scholarly activity. John Wesley Powell's success in 1879, in convincing Congress that anthropology would be useful in getting Indians peacefully allocated to reservations made it possible for the [U.S.] Bureau of Ethnology to underwrite a large amount of research on topics somewhat tenuously to

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that end. (Hinsley, 1981 and Stocking, 1985:113)

Kathleen Gough pointed out that anthropology is the child of imperialism and ". . . it seems extraordinary then, that anthropology has no general theory dealing with imperialism". (Caulfield, 1974: 182) Anthropology and its related fields exist and are free to operate because of certain oppressive political conditions, "Anthropological fieldwork can function only when the field situation is guaranteed by superior power. Yet the anthropologist acts as if that power did not exist, despite the fact that his very mode of operation is predicated upon it." (Wolf, 1974: 459)

Anthropologists have played a leading role in advancing racist and oppressive theories of imperialism, as best stated by John Wesley Powell: ". . . savagery is not inchoate civilizations; it is a distinct status of society with it's own institutions, customs, philosophy and religion All these must necessarily be overthrown before new institutions, customs, philosophy and religion can be introduced." (Wolf, 1974:254)

It is also interesting to note that anthropology, and its related fields, does not assess the validity of contemporary Judeo-Christian religions, nor do they challenge or question the integrity of newly formed religious movements, such as Jerry Falwell's **Moral Majority** or Pat Roberts' **700 Club**. However, they feel they have the right to evaluate, denounce, interpret, and denigrate the leadership of the Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous Nations.

This pompous attitude is best displayed in the recent remarks of William Fenton during the Williamsburg Conference on the "Imperial Iroquois" in

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the Spring of 1985. Dr. Fenton's remarks were aimed at the current Tadatadaho of the Haudenosaunee, Chief Leon Shenandoah, when he said, "... it (the Council Fire) burns today in the minds of the traditionalists for whom the Grand Council has symbolic value which they project on the media. Some of its critics among the Seneca say the smoke now arises from Tadatadaho burning old tires on the reservation junkyard."

The remark is significant in the context of the forum in which it was presented, being a gathering of noted experts in their field who are expected to be dealing with the subject matter in a professional and dignified manner.

That anthropologists have, and do, become involved in the internal political affairs of Indigenous Nations and their people is exemplified by the activities of William Fenton who campaigned for the overthrow of the traditional government of the Tonawanda Senecas in 1936.

Laurence Hauptman chronicles these events in his book The Iroquois and the New Deal.

John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, directed W.K. Harrison, the Indian Agent in New York, and William Fenton, the Indian Service community worker based at Tonawanda, to hold public meetings on the [Wheeler-Howard] Act, and to deliver copies and information door to door. (page 65)

Fenton supported the Act because he feared that the educational and economic support would be lost if the IRA [Indian Reorganization Act, U.S. Congress,

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1934] was rejected. (page 68)

In December 1934, Commissioner Collier, in a speech in Pittsburgh, stressed the need to work closer with anthropologists. The Commissioner had borrowed this idea from the British Empire's use of social scientists. Moreover, his plan was to use them where missionary influence had previously been strongest.

In 1935, Collier appointed William Duncan Strong of the Bureau of American Ethnology to head the newly created Applied Anthropology Staff of the B.I.A. Through the efforts of Strong William Fenton was appointed as community worker in the Indian Service at Tonawanda receiving \$2,000 per year subsidized use of his car and \$3.50 per diem per day for travelling expenses. (page 107)

The project was faced with an uphill battle. A major problem involved the by-passing of the chief's council at Tonawanda, a deliberate move to [get] the project rolling as fast as possible to secure W.P.A. funding without being held up by intertribal factional political activity. More over because the need for a group to take the lead and be a responsible sponsoring body or "holding agency" under the laws of the state, traditional Iroquois beliefs about themselves as an independent sovereignty would have emerged to block the council's support for the center. (page 130)

The combination of the Depression years (1930's), Indians out of work and available W.P.A. monies created a fertile ground for exploitation and economic control over the Senecas and other nations of the

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Haudenosaunee.

It was in this milieu of circumstances that Arthur Parker realized his dream project to build a collection of Iroquois art and cultural objects that would equal the collection of Lewis Henry Morgan, which had been destroyed by fire in 1911.

Despite the objections of traditional leaders and people to the "secularized" carving of medicine masks, Parker successfully co-opted people into a massive carving project that was the beginning of the commercialization of sacred masks. The ability to de-spiritualize the sacred is an art that seems to be peculiar to Western sciences and civilization. It has been noted by some Westerners, such as Levi-Strauss:

To study men, we treated them as objects; but to study men as objects — from the privileged position of the imperialistic observer — was but to deal with them as they were already dealt with in the world of economic and political coercion. As the laborer was treated as a source of impersonal labor power, so we too, treated men as sources of tradition, abstracted from their evident human predicament.

Individual Indigenous people have been the victims of all of these designs to overthrow, eradicate, or in the least make subordinate, the ways of life they were born to. These persons then become local imitations of the racist and oppressive originators of this whole pattern of dominance.

The curious pattern that now occurs is the development of *Indian* anthropologists who aspire to the credentials of that discipline, and, become spokespersons

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for Indian Nations, people and cultures. One such person is George Abrams, Director of the Seneca Iroquois National Museum in Salamanca, New York.

During a workshop entitled: "Care and Interpretation of Native American Collections" at the Buffalo Museum of Science in April 1983, Mr. Abrams made two remarks: That he was addressing the "faithful", that is the *museumologists* assembled who perceived as an informed audience concerning Indians; and, that his opinion "were not popular among other Native Americans".

It is important to examine the person more closely in this case because his opinions are regarded as definitive statements on the cultural patrimony of the Haudenosaunee throughout the non-Indian world.

In November 1979, the *Courier Express* ran a story headlined: **Museum Head Approves Display**, datelined Salamanca, New York. Mr. Abrams was interviewed concerning a display of Haudenosaunee medicine masks at the Buffalo Museum of Science. In the article Mr. Abrams promotes the line of there being a difference between "ceremonial" and "commercial" medicine masks. The article states:

(Dr.) Abrams . . . find "nothing objectionable" with the display . . . The types of masks being displayed he said, are ceremonial masks, but are masks produced for commercial purposes only . . . Officials of the Buffalo Museum of Science consulted with (Dr.) Abrams concerning the policy of the Salamanca Museum, before permitting the current display to be opened to public, (Dr.) Abrams confirmed.

In reprinting this article we have placed parenthesis around the word "Dr." because there is much to question about the authenticity of this title.

George Abrams actively promotes the policy of displaying medicine masks and the sale of medicine masks. The public is entitled to know where he acquires his authority for such activity. He says that the policy is a decision of the Advisory Board of the Seneca Iroquois National Museum and that they have permission from the Longhouse people to do this.

The Haudenosaunee Chiefs have discussed this matter with the Longhouse leaders in Cattaraugus and Allegany and they are all of one mind in their opposition to this exploitation.

It has been pointed out that George Abrams is a Christian and, therefore, cannot speak for the Longhouse People or the medicine societies. So he derives no authority from the institutions and leadership of the traditional Seneca people.

It is also important to note that Mr. Abrams has not fulfilled the requirements for his doctoral degree in anthropology, and is therefore misrepresenting himself as a doctor of anthropology. This becomes important when such misrepresented credentials are the criteria for appointments to prestigious boards such as the Heye Foundation.

The divergent opinions of Christianized or secularized Iroquois are irrelevant. However, when the opinion of such a person is coupled with the responsibility of sacred masks and policy regarding

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Haudenosaunee patrimony then we must be clear in our position that this person is violating our religious freedoms and is a full party to the exploitation of our culture.

Such an Indian person also becomes, knowingly or unknowingly, an ally to all those who seek to perpetuate cultural genocide by insisting on denying us and other Indigenous nations our national cultural heritage and patrimony.

No other document draws the battle lines more clearly than the letter from the so-called Committee on Anthropological research in Museums of the American Rockefeller Association to then Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Dated February 23, 1970 and issued in Norman, Oklahoma. The letter is signed by Dr. William c. Sturtevant, Smithsonian Institution, Dr. Donald Collier, Field Museum of Natural History, Dr. Phillip Dark, University of Southern Illinois, Dr. William Fenton, State University of New York, Mr. Earnest Stanley Dodge, Director, Peabody Museum.

In two paragraphs these men set forth the racist, irrational, and demagogic arguments that characterize the conflict:

As scholars whose researches depend on the great ethnographic collections of now largely vanished primitive peoples of the world we urge the preservation of such mementos of culture in museums. We deplore the principle of returning such treasures to the acculturated descendants of their original owners lest a precedent be established that would require logically returning Ibo carvings to Nigeria, Asmat art to New Guinea, and the works

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of Florentine painters to Italy.

That the wampum collection of New York has now an appreciated value of one quarter of a million dollars is a further footnote on inflation. Nevertheless, state property should not be legislated away lightly in the illusion of religiosity or as capital in the civil rights movement to an unidentified portion of the aboriginal inhabitants who may not fairly represent the 10,000 descendants of the Iroquois Confederacy now living in New York, or an equal number in Canada. [Emphasis added] (U.S. Information Agency)

This letter is significant for several reasons: 1. That it is signed by the top anthropological authorities of the times, and 2. That it encompasses most of the processes and terminology used against Indigenous Nations and people in contemporary times for the purposes of maintaining custody and control of our national treasures.

Ethics seems to be the last consideration in the letter to governor Rockefeller. By this letter the signers violate every canon set forth by the American Anthropological Association in their Principles of Professional Responsibility, in particular:

In research, an anthropologist's paramount responsibility is to those he studies. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first. The anthropologist must do everything in his power to protect their physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and privacy. [Emphasis added]

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There remains one last important point in this letter, and that is the reference to the monetary value of the sacred wampum belts. This leads certainly of utmost interest nationally and internationally because of the clandestine trade in sacred treasures of other Nations and their cultural patrimony.

Recently, New York Attorney General Robert Abrams brought criminal charges against the internationally recognized auction house of Sotheby Parke-Benet as dealers in stolen goods.

These charges were brought on behalf of the Jewish people and the loss of their national cultural treasures by an individual who did not have title to these treasures, and therefore, could not convey title in the sale. Attorney General Abrams charged Sotheby's with prior knowledge of this questionable title and insisted on auctioning the goods.

This case is of extreme importance to the matters here, because for the first time the moral question and moral responsibility of the State of New York in such matters was addressed. This reflects directly upon our case, and cases of all Indigenous Nations and peoples who are the victims of such trades, sales, and exchanges nationally and internationally.

We are gaining support from many quarters nationally and internationally such as the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its sixteenth session in Paris, France on November 14, 1970. This Convention has been accepted and codified by the United States of America with

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President Ronald Reagan signing the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act (Public Law 97-446) on January 12, 1983.

The legal issues of repatriation revolve around the status of title. Law favors title, title is absolute ownership against the world. The national cultural treasures of the Haudenosaunee are the property of today's generation of people and the governing body of Chiefs who represent them. Possession does not run against the sovereign without his consent. Therefore, title remains with the Haudenosaunee.

The only other resort to title of the Haudenosaunee patrimony and national cultural treasures is to destroy our nations as we stand today. Furthermore, this power resides outside of the authority of anthropologists, ethnologists, museums public and private, and their related fields.

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(ED. The Haudenosaunee is one of the few nations in the world that has maintained a passport system which is recognized by many contemporary states and virtually all other nations. Located in north central North America, the Haudenosaunee has maintained the oldest federal system of government in the Western Hemisphere. And they have maintained a government consisting of Executive, Legislative and Judiciary branches longer than any government in the Western Hemisphere. The United States of America government was largely influence in its organization by the Haudenosaunee.)

CWIS ADDRESS CHANGE

Center for World Indigenous Studies

P.O. Box 82038

Kenmore, Washington 98028

U.S.A.