

Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Peacemaking Protocol
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What are some of the peacemaking protocols of the Haudenosaunee people?

The Haudenosaunee utilize their founding constitution, Gayanesshagowa, to successfully implement their traditional peacemaking protocols. Among these protocols, the condolence ceremony assists adversaries in acknowledging each other's humanity, losses, and sacrifices during disputes, creating a safe space for productive discussions.

Brief Haudenosaunee History

The Haudenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois, is a confederacy of six tribal nations that came together through the efforts of Dekanawida,¹ also known as the Peacemaker.² The founding constitution of the Haudenosaunee is known as the Gayanesshagowa (gaya-ness-HA-gowa), or the Great Law of Peace.³ A full rendering of the Gayanesshagowa takes several days to convey, telling of “the ways in which the Peacemaker’s teachings emphasized the power of Reason, not force, to assure certain principles.”⁴ The Gayanesshagowa essentially “provides the Haudenosaunee people with instructions on how to treat others, directs them on how to maintain a democratic society, and expresses how Reason must prevail in order to preserve peace.”⁵ In Haudenosaunee stories, a boy was born into a world of continuous warring between tribes.⁶ His destiny was to address the issues of continuous warfare, and he became known as Dekanawida or the Peacemaker.⁷ Dekanawida travels among the people, “combing their hair” with the intention of “untangling old traumas that stand in the way of peace.”⁸ The peacemaking process runs on the people’s will and agreement to the government.⁹ Dekanawida established two houses of elder brothers (Mohawks, Onondagas, Senecas) and younger brothers (Cayugas, Oneidas, and later Tuskaroras).¹⁰

¹ Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, *Independence for Whom? Expansion and Conflict in the Northeast and Northwest*, The World of the Revolutionary American Republic: Land, Labor, and the Conflict for a Continent 119 (Andrew Shankman, ed. 2014).

² Interviews by Peace Talks Radio with Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, Onondaga Council of Chiefs of the Haudenosaunee, and American Studies Professor at the University of Buffalo, and John Mohawk, American Studies Professor at the University of Buffalo, diplomat for Seneca nation, farmer, and writer (Nov. 25, 2005).

³ *Id.*

⁴ National Museum of the American Indian, *Haudenosaunee Guide for Educators*, Smithsonian Institution 4 (2009).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ See John Mohawk, *The Warriors Who Turned to Peace*, YES! Magazine, Nov. 11, 2004.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Interview by Peace Talks Radio with Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, Onondaga Council of Chiefs of the Haudenosaunee, and American Studies Professor at the University of Buffalo (Nov. 25, 2005).

¹⁰ *Id.*

Under Dekanawida's leadership, the Haudenosaunee people created a protocol for bringing enemies together "under a temporary truce."¹¹ Dekanawida planted a white pine tree, known as the Great Tree of Peace, explaining that this tree had "four, white roots of truth that reach in the four, cardinal directions of the earth."¹² He explained further that "[t]hose people who had no place to go could follow the root back to its source and come under the shelter of the great law of peace."¹³ He instilled the idea of disarmament, uprooting the tree and commanding all to come forward and throw their weapons of war into the unearthed hole.¹⁴ Depictions of the Great Tree of Peace often include a war club, arrow, or hatchet underneath the tree;¹⁵ hence the well-known phrase for ending conflict: "burying the hatchet."¹⁶ The Peacemaker also gave Haudenosaunee women the responsibility to choose and oversee the leaders of the community, reserving the power to remove those unworthy of such leadership.¹⁷ The protocols and practices in the Gayanesshaqowa "were in place for generations prior to European arrival," allowing the Haudenosaunee Confederacy to establish "expansive, prosperous communities across today's state of New York."¹⁸ The Haudenosaunee negotiated with English colonists at least since the late seventeenth century using Gayanesshaqowa protocols and principles.¹⁹

Peacemaking Protocol

The goal of Haudenosaunee peacemaking protocol is to address each party's conditions for reaching a truce.²⁰ The initial goal is to stop the warfare.²¹ The Haudenosaunee believe that the truce itself does not ensure peace, although it symbolizes the start of peaceful negotiations as time goes on.²² The peacemaking protocol is mainly about the process as opposed to the outcome, because the Haudenosaunee assume that the process of maintaining peaceful relations will never end.²³ They accept that the process is ongoing, and instead of seeking closure, the larger purpose of a peacemaking meeting is to serve as a reminder of the continuing progress between affected parties.²⁴

The first step of the protocol begins with a condolence ceremony where the two warring parties "acknowledge each other's humanity and the losses and sacrifices that each had

¹¹ Mohawk, *supra* note 6.

¹² Lyons, *supra* note 9.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Mt. Pleasant, *supra* note 1, at 119.

¹⁹ *See id.*

²⁰ Mohawk, *supra* note 6.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *See id.*

²³ *See id.*

²⁴ Interview by Peace Talks Radio with John Mohawk, American Studies Professor at the University of Buffalo, diplomat for Seneca nation, farmer, and writer (Nov. 25, 2005).

suffered.”²⁵ The parties meet in the middle of a forest, or on neutral ground,²⁶ and each side says words such as:

1. “We’ve been engaged in combat, and you’ve come out of the forest, and you’re covered in the bracken of the forest; we see that on your clothing.”²⁷
2. “So the first thing we do is we brush your clothing off, and clean off all the stuff that shows that you’ve been in war.”²⁸

The second step of the protocol starts with one side cleaning off the area that the other party will sit on.²⁹ One party passes strings of wampum (symbolic sacred shell beads) to the other party.³⁰ Each string of the wampum represents a “pre-set message.”³¹ The receiving party recognizes each message by repeating them back to the giving party.³² The messages can be words such as:

1. “With this wampum, I release the pressure in your chest. You’re feeling tight in your body from the struggle, so I release you from that.”³³
2. “With this one, I remove the tears from your eyes that you’ve been crying because of the people you lost in war.”³⁴
3. And with this one, I release your vocal cords. I release your voice so you can speak strongly.”³⁵

Timothy Pickering witnessed some of the Haudenosaunee diplomacy protocols during his time as federal commissioner for the confederacy in the early 1790s.³⁶ Seneca leaders including Honayewas and orator Sagoyewatha guided Pickering through the Gayanesshagowa condolence ceremony.³⁷ The condolence ceremony aims to “ease the grief of those who have lost kin, community members, or leaders,”³⁸ creating a clear space for productive negotiations. The ritual can take up to a full day and is as integral step preceding diplomatic interactions.³⁹ The opening of the ceremony has the hosts of the proceeding “acknowledge difficulties that may have been encountered on the journey,” where hosts “clear the ears, eyes, and throats of their guests.”⁴⁰

²⁵ Mohawk, *supra* note 6.

²⁶ Bruce E. Johansen, *The Native Peoples of North America: A History* 142 (2006).

²⁷ Mohawk, *supra* note 6.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ Mohawk, *supra* note 6.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ Mt. Pleasant, *supra* note 1, at 120.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 121.

Pickering also learned of the importance that wampum played in strengthening agreements, and the significance of oral recall.⁴¹ The wampum belts record the history of the peacemaking protocols, depicting in the shell designs “the process of ‘clearing obstructions from the path, polishing the covenant chain, building up the council fire and the procedures at the Wood’s Edge.’”⁴² The metaphors of the path, chain, and fire symbolize the Haudenosaunee view that any alliance is “naturally in a state of constant deterioration and in need of attention.”⁴³

During the mid-seventeenth century until the late nineteenth century, the Haudenosaunee successfully negotiated over a hundred treaties with English and later United States diplomats.⁴⁴ Initial meetings between parties were usually conducted on neutral grounds to determine the time, place, and agenda for the negotiations.⁴⁵ After participants approached the “council fire” at the designated meeting place, the condolence ceremony began “to remember those who had died on both sides since the last meeting.”⁴⁶

A designated party kindled the council fire at the beginning of negotiations and covered it at the end. A council was for a specific purpose (such as making of peace) and could not be changed once convened. Representatives from both sides spoke in a specified order. No important actions were taken until at least one night had elapsed since the matter’s introduction before the council. The passage of time was said to allow the various members of the council to attain unanimity – “one mind” – necessary for consensual solution of a problem.⁴⁷

During the ceremony, participants exchanged wampum belts or strings “when an important point was made or an agreement reached.”⁴⁸ When participants accepted a belt, this signified agreement with the issue.⁴⁹ When participants threw aside or rejected the wampum, this symbolized their disagreement.⁵⁰

Another metaphor that was used throughout many of the councils was that of the Covenant Chain, a symbol of alliance. If proceedings were going well and consensus was being reached on

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² 6 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada’s Residential Schools: Reconciliation*, The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2016).

⁴³ *See id.*

⁴⁴ Johansen, *supra* note 26, at 141.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 142.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ Johansen, *supra* note 26, at 142.

major issues, the chain (which was often characterized as made of silver) was being “polished” or “shined.” If agreement was not being reached, the chain was said to be “rusting.”⁵¹

Attendants during negotiations were generally allowed to finish their statements free from interruption.⁵² This practice was honored regardless of “carefully planned schedules,” so that everyone (both warriors and leaders) had the opportunity to voice their opinions.⁵³

Hosts of the negotiation proceedings were expected to provide tobacco for the common pipe, along with refreshments.⁵⁴ Parties exchanged gifts and held feasts during the meetings, which could last from several days to as long as a month.⁵⁵ The main peacemaking proceedings were also “accompanied by several smaller ones during which delegates with common interests met to discuss problems that concerned them.”⁵⁶ Typically, documented records of the proceedings only accounted for discussions during the main meetings, “leaving out the many important side conferences, which, in diplomatic language of the time, were often said to have been held ‘in the bushes.’”⁵⁷

The Haudenosaunee presented the Gayanesshagowa to European colonists, and as early as 1645 Jesuit missionaries at Three Rivers produced the first written records of some of the critical protocols.⁵⁸ Soon realizing that European visitors did not intend to be incorporated into Haudenosaunee society, diplomats established an “alternative relationship” known as Guswenta.⁵⁹ Explained by Haudenosaunee traditionalists, “Guswenta conveys the understanding that peace and friendship can be maintained in a colonial context when both parties embrace policies of noninterference in the other’s government, religion, or way of life.”⁶⁰ Guswenta principles directed Haudenosaunee relations with foreigners throughout the colonial period and Revolutionary War.⁶¹

Peacemaking Principles

Undoubtedly, one of the principles in Gayanesshagowa protocols is peace⁶² or disarmament, signified by the parties burying their weapons beneath the Great Tree of Peace.⁶³

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ Johansen, *supra* note 26, at 142.

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ Mt. Pleasant, *supra* note 1, at 120.

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² Lyons, *supra* note 9.

This practice is entirely symbolic since each party could either buy or make more weapons.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the burying of the weapons represents that the parties agree to no longer using their weapons against each other.⁶⁵ The burying of weapons also signifies that talking through negotiations is superior to violence.⁶⁶ Another principle is “equity, justice for the people,”⁶⁷ and another is unity,⁶⁸ summarized by the statement, “[w]e are now going to put our minds together to create peace.”⁶⁹ Other principles include righteousness and health.⁷⁰

The overarching purpose of all these principles is to peacefully cooperate in order to create an appropriate outcome that benefits all sides.⁷¹ The principles focus on building a better world for future generations,⁷² known as the “politics of abundance.”⁷³ The politics of abundance means “to always be respectful of the natural world and to have ceremonies” to ensure a healthy world for future generations.⁷⁴ This idea contrasts with “politics of scarcity,” referencing political action taken only in response to the scarcity of resources.⁷⁵ For tackling the war on terror, Haudenosaunee Great Law advocates for progressive pragmatism, barring idealism and vilification from negotiations to reach desirable outcomes agreed upon by all.⁷⁶

In conclusion, the Haudenosaunee continue to utilize their founding constitution, Gayanesshagowa, to successfully implement their traditional peacemaking protocols. Integral to these protocols, the condolence ceremony serves to ease the pain of grieving community members and establish a clear space for productive peacemaking. The principles and practices of this deep-rooted, nonviolent confederacy could be further utilized by other native peoples to facilitate peaceful negotiations and healing.

⁶³ See Mohawk, *supra* note 6.

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ Lyons, *supra* note 9.

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ Mohawk, *supra* note 6.

⁷⁰ National Museum of the American Indian, *supra* note 4, at 4.

⁷¹ See Mohawk, *supra* note 6.

⁷² See *id.*

⁷³ See Lyons, *supra* note 9.

⁷⁴ See *id.*

⁷⁵ See *id.*

⁷⁶ Mohawk, *supra* note 6.