Creating a Community: Religion and Trade Among the Kahnawake Mohawks in the 17th Century

by
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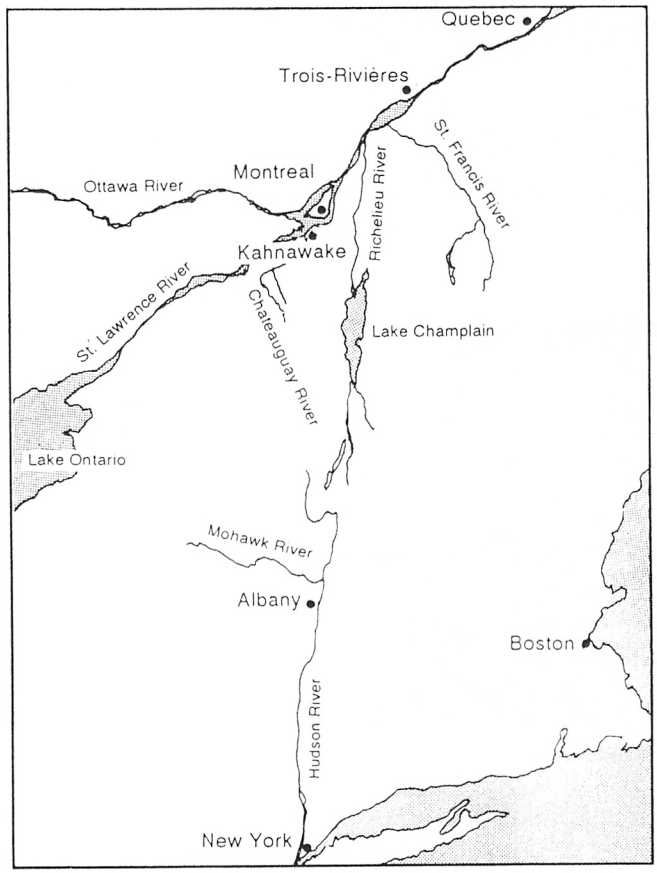
Historians recounting the establishment of a Kanienkehaka (Mohawk) settlement on the St. Lawrence River near Montreal at the end of the 17th century have always had to deal with the issue of religion's role in motivating that movement. The first students of the Kahnawakeró:non (Kahnawake Mohawks) were Jesuit scholars who tended to highlight religion, or the "conversion" to Catholicism,as the central motivating force. Recent works, influenced by Mohawk re-interpretation of history, have moved the opposite way and de-emphasized religion's importance in this formative period of Kahnawake's development.

As is usually the case, the best explanation of religion's role in driving the Kanienkehaka's re-settlement and the formation of Kahnawake as a community lies somewhere between the two. Religion was in fact one of two important reasons Mohawk people left their villages in the Mohawk Valley in present-day New York State to create a new Mohawk settlement in the northern part of Kanienke (Mohawk Territory). Along with opportunities to capitalize on the strategic location relative to Montréal and Albany, religious motivations brought the factional divisions within the community into bold relief, leading eventually to the formation of a distinct community.

Mohawk ancestors' spiritual life before Christianity centered on the reality of two worlds, between which man's existence shuttled in the form of temporal reality and dreams. Man was Onkwehonwe, and the spirits of the Sky World were Onkweshona. Although inhabiting different realms, both forms of existence were real. Religious practice was focused on communicating with the spirits to receive guidance and on travelling in various forms between the two worlds.

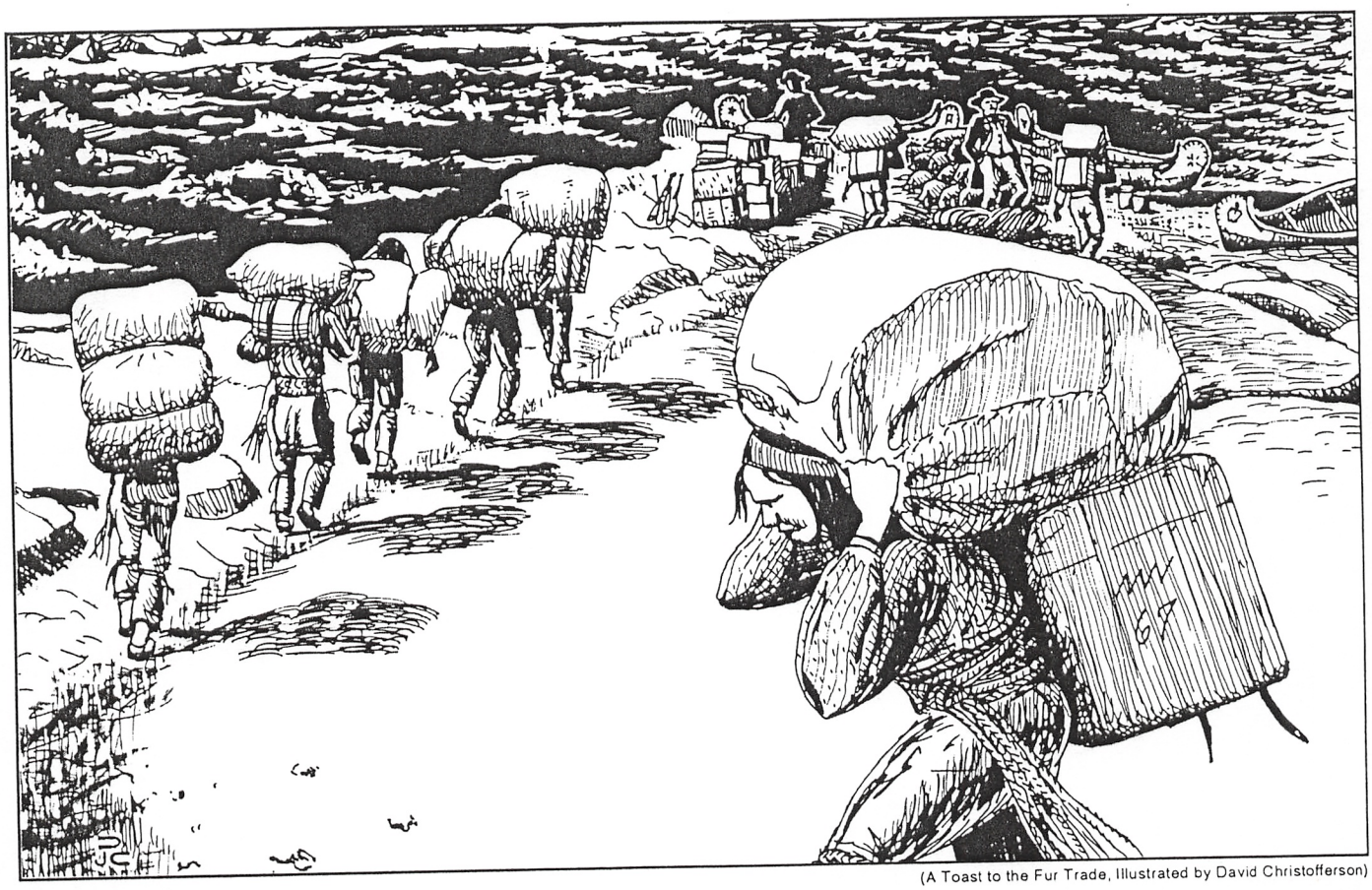
The Iroquois system of religious rituals contained two essential elements: specific rituals for giving thanks to the Creator through prayer; and non-specific means of communicating with the spirit world through dream interpretations. These non-specific religious practices included rituals such as sweat lodges as a ritual purification of body and soul, fasting with vision quests, trances, self-mutilation, and later, alcohol inebriation. All of these were seen by Kanienkehaka as means of gaining insight into the spirit world.

Perhaps the most important feature of the pre-Christian Kanienkehaka's belief system was the absence of a theological doctrine, or prescribed set of beliefs. Unlike the Europeans, the ancestors of today's Mohawks were free of strict rules and dogma



dictating to them what they could and could not believe about their god. James Smith, an 18th century English captive, studiously observed the pre-Christian beliefs prevalent among the group of Kahnawakeró:non he was living with:

> Those of them who reject the Roman-Catholic religion, hold that there is one great first cause, whom they call Owaneeyo, that rules and governs the universe...but they differ widely in what is pleasing or displeasing to this great being. Some hold that following [the] nature of their own propensities is the way to happiness, and cannot be displeasing to the deity...Others reject this opinion altogether, and say that following their own



(A Toast to the Fur Trade, Illustrated by David Christofferson)

> propensities in this manner, is neither the means to happiness nor the way to please the deity.

Aside from illustrating the high level of philosophical debate engaged by Kanienkehaka, this passage demonstrates that the non-Christian Iroquois belief system was absolutely democratic in terms of interpreting the nature of God and man's obligations to the Creator. This left the Kahnawakeró:non free to consider new ideas about the nature of man, the Creator, and the proper expression of belief and respect for the relationship.

The type of Christian message first introduced by adopted Huron converts, and later reinforced by Jesuit missionaries, was a Catholicism designed to allow a synthesis of these native beliefs and the message of Christ as the savior of man. There were three central aspects of the native system: thanksgiving prayer; spirit world communication; and an absence of theological doctrine. The newcomers' Christian message was accepted in so far as it did not contradict these essential elements. With some compromise on both the part of the Kanienkehaka and the Jesuit missionary, they were able to create a unique form of Catholicism which would satisfy the Kanienkehaka's intense spiritual appetite and the Jesuits' overpowering drive to gain at least nominal converts to their religion.

The Jesuits who preached among the Kanienkehaka were guided by a Catholic doctrine developed earlier by St. Thomas Aquinas and known as "probalism." This allowed them to bend the rules on issues of Catholic faith and work toward their goal of furthering the absorption of Christianity among the Indians without necessarily disrupting those native institutions which were compatible with a liberal interpretation of Catholic doctrine. A historian who has studied the cultural conflict between French and Indian societies during this period concludes:

> With due deference to Governor de Frontenac, whose policy aimed at converting the Indians into French Catholics, the missionaries...simply sought to develop a Christian Indian civilization...Instead of rejecting the entire social fabric, they hoped to improve on local customs and approximate a Christian ideal of sanctified conduct.

For the new Christians' part, most of the Jesuits teachings were wholly integrated into the pre-existing belief system. The teachings did not clash with their religious beliefs, and the black-robed missionaries were viewed, not as threats, but as new and powerful shamans possessing great powers in a very traditional sense. Theologians who have studied the intellectual process of Rotinohshonni "conversions" have similarly concluded:

> The fundamental effect of missionary influence upon the Iroquois was to enlarge the sphere of religious sanction behind behavior...the introduction of Christianity...affected but superficially the religious influences already operating in or upon [their] institutions.

The integration of Rotinohshonni and Christian beliefs in ritual and ceremony was accomplished by a skillful and imaginative fusing the two traditions. For example, the Christian Kanienkehaka would come to merge the Corpus Christi procession and tree-planting ceremonies in their Saonteneratonniate, or "planting of the trees" ritual. The feast of St. Jean the Baptist was marked by a Teksienhoiaks, or "firing into the fire," ritual in which weapons were discharched into a ceremonial fire built at the base of a flagpole. The Jesuits ministering to the Kahnawakeró:non even received a special dispensation from the Pope allowing them to say mass in Mohawk, demonstrating that the importance of the religious movement happening at Kahnawake was not only in the minds of the Kahnawakeró:non themselves.

Trade was another important factor in the formation of Kahnawake as a distinct community. In all of their relations with European imperial powers during the colonial period, Kahnawakeró:non ancestors consistently staked-out a position of autonomy based mainly on their advantageous location vis-a-vis and ties with the Iroquois Confederacy. Along with Catholicism, trade constituted the other initial magnet attracting Mohawk migration to the St. Lawrence Valley. Even more than Christianity, for which zealousness diminished over time, their role in the Montréal-Albany trade link came to characterize the Kahnawakeró:non. By the turn of 18th century, the Kahnawakeró:non's actions and thought were oriented to guaranteeing their political status and role as vital links in this trade relationship.

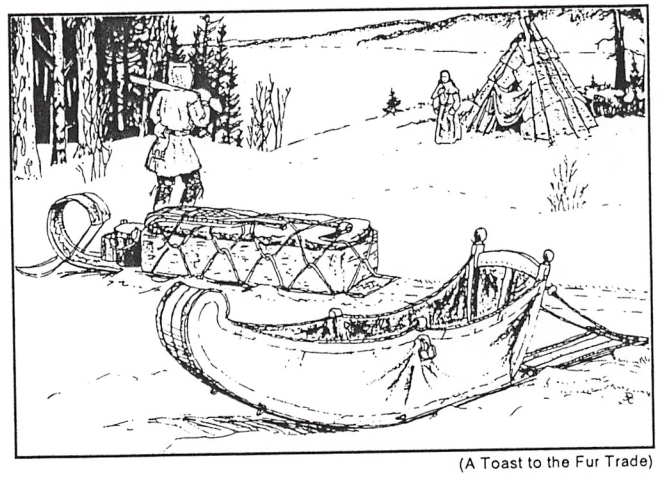
In almost every instance where Kahnawakeró:non were parties to negotiations or treaties, the discussion of trade and the Mohawks' role in it was central. In one example from 1735, Massachusetts' Governor Jonathan Belcher attempted to guarantee Kahnawake's neutrality with this statement to the four Chiefs representing the village:

> ...if there should happen a war between King George and the French King...I shall have a good opinion of your fidelity...there is no question but your justice and faith, as well as your interest, will hold you to peace with us. You will always be honestly dealt with by Capt. Kellogg at the Truck House, where you may have such things as you need, at a cheaper rate than any others can or will let you have them.

The most thorough study from the European perspective of the illicit trade in New York during this period boldly concludes that the primary reason Kanienkehaka lived in Kahnawake revolved solely around their role in the trade:

> To a great extent the livelihood of the [Kahnawakeró:non] depended on the money that many of them earned as porters in the illegal trade. Without this incentive most members of the tribe would have returned to their homelands in New York...

Even discounting this speculative conclusion on the Kahnawakeró:non commitment to their new home, the Montréal-Albany trade was in fact a huge business for all those involved. French-Canadian traders in Montréal could make high profits selling their furs to Albany merchants during the winter when the St. Lawrence River was frozen and the Hudson River remained an open waterway to Europe. The huge disparity in efficiency of transportation and in quality between English and French manufactured goods -- mainly woolens -- allowed Albany merchants to sell their goods in Montréal at half the French price and still make twice the French profit. The only problem was that this entire enterprise was illegal under both French and British law. Even when the two empires were not at war, imperial policy forbade free trade between the two colonies. But with the vital participation of the Mohawk, local merchants in both Montréal and Albany nonetheless managed to conduct £12,000 in trade (1720).



(A Toast to the Fur Trade)

Kahnawakeró:non would either bring goods directly from Montréal to Albany, or circumvent colonial forces during times of heightened enforcement by bringing goods from Montréal to Fort Oswego on Lake Ontario, then through their former Mohawk Valley villages into Albany. This role merged perfectly with the Mohawks' political position as an autonomous community. Recognition of their

special status by both colonial governments was key if the Mohawks were to fulfil their role in this enterprise. Mohawk gained that special status among Indians and Europeans by a constant assertion of independence and persistent reminders to all parties of their strategic value as an ally. This special status was recognized as an "understanding" between those involved:

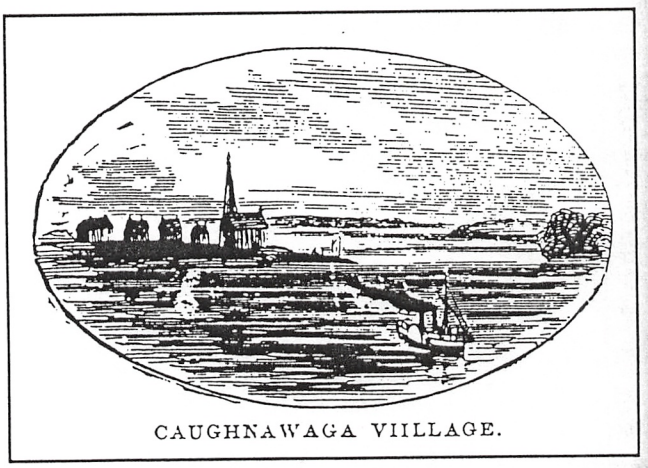
> [The Mohawk] presence at the head of the Mahican Channel created a very special situation on that vital artery of transportation. Conscious of kinship, [Valley] Mohawk and Caughnawaga rarely and reluctantly fought each other even when their patrons warred most bitterly...trade could be carried securely along the Montreal-Albany axis because of the understandings between the dominant Indians at its ends.

The impression given by this statement is that the Indians were not merely beasts of burden, but in fact defined a crucial role for themselves as sponsors and agents of trade. Kahnawake Mohawks had the power to influence colonial policy as a result of this role; this fact is illustrated in the French Governor's appeasement of their anger at an attempt by individual French entrepreneurs to siphon profits by establishing a trading house of their own among the Jesuits serving the Mohawk community. This was the first of two times in which the Mohawk community used its political leverage with the French authorities to guarantee the special trade status.

At the turn of the 18th century, Kahnawakeró:non were successfully operating their end of the enterprise at near maximum capacity. One non-Mohawk Rotinohshonni commented on the trade route that "there is an open road from this place to Canada as of late, yea, a beaten path knee deep." An Albany merchant, Robert Sanders, employed so many porters that he even had three sub-contracting Mohawk agents. A French woman named Marie Anne Desaulnier and her sister came to reside with the Jesuits at Kahnawake in 1720. Within a short time the sisters had established a trading house for Montréal merchants which contracted Mohawks to porter goods to Albany. By the mid-1720's, the sisters dominated the profits formerly earned by Mohawks. When the French military commander complained of the illicit operation to the Governor and threatened to reinforce the garrison stationed at the mission to stop it, the Mohawks joined in protest of the Desaulnier-Jesuit enterprise by threatening to withdraw their military allegiance and return to New York. The Kahnawake Mohawks were successful in gaining a secret license from the Governor to carry on the trade, and forced the sisters' eviction from their village.

From the beginning, colonial governments had realized the inter-dependent relationship they shared with Kahnawakeró:non. This economic relationship in turn reinforced the political status of the Mohawk. During Queen Anne's War, New York and Canada secretly negotiated the 1701 Schuyler-Calliéres Agreement, which guaranteed the Kahnawakeró:non free passage into New York. The special relationship and the Mohawks' attachment to their specific interests in and around Albany was further demonstrated by the fact that New York was unable to obtain peace for the New England colonies further to the east. During King George's War, the citizens of Albany complained about French-allied Kahnawakeró:non openly trading in Albany, and warred with other colonies. Again the colonial government passed secret measures allowing the Mohawks to travel freely.

Modern Kahnawakeró:non are the beneficiaries of their ancestors' efforts to create the special relationship with the colonial governments. Later treaties such as the Jay Treaty at the conclusion of the War of Independence cemented the role as a people with links and responsibilities on both sides of the line drawn by the Europeans to separate their peoples, as well as on both sides of the cultural divide which separates the Mohawk peoples. This is a legacy we strive hard to guard and expand in the contemporary era.



The Village of Caughnawaga as depicted in Hunter's Panoramic Guide from Niagara to Quebec, 1857.