



Oneida Cultural Heritage Department

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Iroquois Traditional Ceremonies

INTRODUCTION OPENING AND CLOSING

With each of the ceremonies of the traditional annual cycle, as well as all social and/or political gatherings, the first thing that is always done, before all else, is what is called the “Opening” – the acknowledgment, honoring, and thanksgiving of all of creation. Likewise, at the end of the day, the process is repeated. This is known as the “Closing”. This is a constant reminder of the relationship that all creation has with each other and that we humans, are just one strand in the delicate web of life.

THE CEREMONIES

The following is a list of the regular, seasonal Longhouse ceremonies with a brief narrative of each.

Tshateko’shélha (Midwinter)

The Midwinter ceremony is celebrated five days after our new year moon (January). This is a time of renewing our responsibilities for the coming year.

The first day, there are three Great Feather Dances that are done. The first one is in honor of all of the title holders: Lotiyanéshu (the chiefs), Kutiyanéshu (the clanmothers), and Kayé Niyolwáke Lonatlihutú (the faithkeepers). The second is in honor of Kaytohwakekú all of the people who hold no title from the youngest newborn to the eldest. The last one is in honor of Shukwaya’tísu, our Creator.

The second day is atwakhlawáli, “Stirring the Ashes”. The ashes from the wood stoves are used to symbolize our Mother Earth. Wooden paddles are used to turn the ashes over and replenish our Mother Earth so that she can renew herself.

The third day starts out with Kayu’kwáthu, the Tobacco Burning Thanksgiving Ceremony. Oyu’kwa’uwé, the real tobacco, is collected from all of the people. Through the burning of the tobacco, an acknowledgment, a thanksgiving, and an encouragement are conveyed to all of creation for the renewal and continuation of their responsibilities.

After the tobacco burning, the Hatuwá the men’s songs, are sung. This a time when our real names are uplifted (put through to the Creator for recognition). Faithkeepers can also be “put up” during this time, and the Friendship Medicine Society can also be renewed. Oncho’lú, the Water Drum Dance, is then done and everyone dances. A speaker is chosen to give thanks to all things on earth.

The significance of the drum is that it is round, representing everything in creation and the connection between everything on earth, including the human family. The beating of the drum and the people dancing in a circle, constantly moving in a circle, symbolizes the ongoing cycle of life. Sa’yes, the wild blackberry is mixed with water and made into a drink which is used as a medicine at this time.

The fourth day is Kayatowaná, the Peach Stone Game. Lotiskle’wáke, the Bear Clan, and Latinyátha, the Turtle Clan, play against Latikwáho, the Wolf Clan. Things that

are highly looked upon to bet are wampum, traditional clothing, lacrosse sticks, or turtle rattles. Things not to bet are anything that is solid red in color, which represents anger, anything black, which represents death, or anything is shiny, which represents greed.

After the Peach Stone Game is done, Ohstowa'kówa, the Great Feather Dance, is done as a thanksgiving. Following this dance, Kunukwehné, the Old Women's Dance, and Osahéta Aotiláná the Bean Dance are performed.

Lastly, hatúwi, the False Face Medicine Society, and Shatsitsísha, the Cornhusk Masks Medicine Society, come in to remind the people of their day of renewing themselves.

The fifth day is set aside as a renewal for these and other medicine societies.

Wáhta? Kayu?kwaátho (Maple Tree Tobacco Burning)

This ceremony is held at the end of February or first part of March, after the first thunder which wakes up the trees. It all depends on the weather. When the warm winds once again begin to circulate, a day is set aside to give thanks.

A tobacco burning is done to honor the maple tree. Each camp in the community will have their own tobacco burning. A small fire is built near a maple tree. The words in the tobacco burning asks all of creation for a safe time while the people are in the woods working, thus calling on the Creator to assure that no great harm comes to those harvesting the sap. All of creation is acknowledged. Then the people can go out and set up their sugar camps.

Otsyi?khé'ta Twanchelatú (Maple Tree Thanksgiving – Closing)

Once the camps are all done harvesting the sap, and everything is cleaned up, a day is picked by the faithkeepers to give thanks for what the people have been able to harvest. At this time, the sap is used as medicine for everyone to drink and give thanks. Two Great

Feather Dances are done as a way to honor the maple tree and for creation's cooperation during the harvesting of the sap.

Wahsásé (Thunder Dance)

This ceremony has to do with celebrating the return of Yothihsótha (Our Grandfathers) Latihsakayutéhse? (the thunderers), who bring the rains to replenish the water life. They come out of the direction from where the sun sets.

During the time in our Creation Story, when the twins were struggling, the thunderers came to drive many of the animals that the left handed twin had created into the earth. That's what the lightening is still doing, suppressing these ferocious, powerful animals that are all over the earth.

It's been told that if the Thunderer were to cease, these animals would emerge and cause a lot of suffering. So, whenever we hear them, we are to make an offering to them of Oyu?kwa?u·wé (the real tobacco) so that they will continue with their responsibilities.

There was also a time long ago that one of the thunder beings married a human being and they had boy child. Today, this boy is an old man and that's the reason we refer to the thunderers as our grandfathers. The child is half human and half thunder being. He is related to us an all of the thunderers.

The dance that's done at this ceremony is called the War Dance. It's a dance done just by the men.

Atela?khúsla? (Community Death Feast)

This ceremony has to do with our ancestors that have passed on. All of the Oneida Community is to prepare a dish to share. Generally, old time food is encouraged (corn mush, venison, squash, wild rice, berries, etc.) It is important not to use salt in the food because it is of this world and not theirs.

A small portion of the food that everybody brings is placed on a dish. Someone is appointed to place this food in an isolated area just before sunrise as an offering to those spirits that have gone on.

This feast takes place twice a year, once in the spring (after the Harvest Ceremony). An evening is chosen by the Okhíwe Society for the people to gather. Everyone is encouraged to bring the real tobacco for a tobacco burning.

When the food is passed out, the people are to do so in a clockwise direction. In our culture, this is the direction in which the spirit world goes.

This is the only ceremony that we have where we go in this direction.

Twanuhsohaléhte? (Medicine Masks Community Cleansing)

This ceremony takes place each Spring and Fall. Its purpose is to cleanse the community of any bad influence. The Hatúwi, (commonly called the “False Face”) and Katsihsa (Corn Husk mask) Medicine Society people go around to each house in the community that requests a cleansing or doctoring of their homes. It is important that any women who are “on their moon” or are pregnant not be present.

The Hatúwi and Katsihsa go through the home, cleansing it of any evil influence. Once they’re done, everyone in that household dances with the Hatúwi. The snapping turtle rattle is used to keep a beat for the songs that are sung. Then the Katsisha will dance. They have a faster beat to their dance and the people do not dance with them.

Once the dancing is done, tobacco is given that will be burned at the Kanúhses (Longhouse), that evening. All of the people that belong to these medicine societies are to bring the foods for their medicine. The Hatúwi masks are fed the corn much and what’s left over gets passed out to the people. The Katsihsa people bring their bread to distribute to the Corn Husk people and then to the people.

Shukwahtsiha tlayethinuhwelatú (Sun Dance Thanksgiving)

The Sun Dance Ceremony is a thanksgiving to Shukwahtsha (he is our elder

brother), Kwatekékha (daytime), and Whentale? (light giver). In our language we refer to him as Loskálhakehta’kó (He is the almighty provider, peace keeper, and protector). This ceremony is done in the Spring (early May).

The sun has an intimate relationship with the earth and through this honoring; we encourage that relationship to continue. The sun is the one that warms up our mother earth so that we can plant. He is the one who provides us with light so that we can see. He also sees what all is going on as or mother the earth goes about her journey.

The old ones say that he works for Shukwaya’tísu (He who molded, shaped, created how our bodies are, our Creator) and at the end of each day he reports to him what we are doing. Our Creator then knows what all we have done, so when we ask something of him (pray), he knows whether we are sincere or not. The sun is the role model for all of the male side of life. The men are to provide and be protectors of the children, women and old ones. This ceremony is done early in the morning.

Thuwi’sáhs (Moon Dance)

The Moon Dance Ceremony is a thanksgiving honoring of Yukhihsótha (our grandmother), Kwa’ahsute’kékha? (night time), and Whentale? light giver). We are reminded of the many important responsibilities that the moon has and ask her to continue to fulfill them.

There is a cycle that she follows and the women have this same cycle. Within that cycle, there is a phase where they cleanse themselves. This is looked upon as a very sacred time for them.

Yukhihsótha (our grandmother) also controls all of the plant life’s growing cycles. Throughout the growing season, different plants renew themselves. We use the moon as a guide, when to plant crops that bare fruit above the ground (following the new moon) or when to plant root crops (following the full moon).

She is the one that controls the tides.
We look to her as to when to have ceremonies.

She renews herself thirteen times within one of our calendar year. She is the role model for the female side of life. This ceremony is done in the evening and the women are responsible to see that this ceremony is done.

Twánáhyá? (Seed Dance)

The Seed Dance Ceremony is an honoring of all plant life. It is done prior to anybody planting. Kayátowaná (The Peach Stone Game) is played and seeds are used to bet. The men play against the women. Fifty beans are used as counters. After the game is over, Ohstowa?kówa (the Great Feather Dance) is done to commemorate the purpose of this ceremony. Kunukwehnéha (the ways of the woman) and Osahéta? Aotiláná (the Bean Dance) are then done.

Twahyahnekíha (Strawberry Thanksgiving)

This ceremony has to do with giving thanks, honoring and acknowledging the wild strawberry as well as all other berries. Ka'niyohutésha (the wild strawberry) is the first fruit to ripen.

In our Creation Story, it says that this berry originally came from the Creators world. This day is set aside to make a strawberry to be used as a medicine. Prior to drinking it we are to give thanks to our Creator for all the things he has given to us.

A boy is chosen to pass it out to the men and a girl for the women. During this ceremony Tekni Ohstowa?kówa (Two Great Feather Dances) are done, one before we drink the medicine and one after.

Oyhóhtsch (Green Bean Ceremony)

This ceremony is to honor the beans. As Iroquois people, our ancestors grew dozens of different types of beans. It was an important part of their diet. The ceremony is generally done around the first part of August.

Ohstowa?kówa (The Great Feather Dance), Kunukwehnéha Osahéta and Aotiláná (Bean Dance) are done. Various kinds of bean dishes and soups are brought for the feast

Onástase? (Green Corn Ceremony)

This ceremony has to do with celebrating the fact that the corn has once again provided us with its life sustaining spirit. When the Onásté? (white corn) is at the "sweet corn" stage of growth (late August), a day is set aside to honor the corn. Soup is made from this corn and the various beans and squash are added. Three dances are done, Ohstowa?kówa (the Great Feather), Kunukwehnéha, and Osahéta Aotiláná (Bean Dance).

Twakhwaló·loks (Harvest Thanksgiving)

The Harvest Thanksgiving ceremony lasts for three days, assuming that Kayátowaná (the Peach Stone Game) lasts only one day.

The first day there are áhsá nikanúnyake Ohstow?kówa (Three Great Feather Dances). The first one is for Ionatlihtú (all of the title holders), the second is for katyóhkwa (the people), and the third is for Shukwaya?tsu (the Creator).

On the second day, Kayu?kwáthu (the Tobacco Thanksgiving Ceremony) is the first thing done. Then the Hatúwa Ceremony is opened. This is when our Ukwehuwé names are put through. The Friendship Medicine Society Ceremony can be done, and Faithkeepers can be raised up (appointed) at this time, also.

Then Oancholú (the Water Drum Dance) is done. A speaker is chosen to give the Thanksgiving during the dance for all of the cycles of life. Sayes (the wild blackberry) is used as a medicine during this dance.

On the third day Kayátowaná (the Peach Stone Game) is played with Lotiskle·wáke (the Bear Clan) and Lotinyátha (the Turtle Clan) against Lotikwáho (the Wolf Clan). Things deemed appropriate to bet are wampum, turtle rattles, lacrosse sticks, or traditional clothing.

A runner is chosen from each side of the house to go around early in the morning to collect what the people will be using to bet. The items collected from the Bear and Turtle Clans are matched up with items of equal value that are collected from the Wolf Clan. Whatever side

of the house wins, they get back what they bet and what was matched up with it.

Then Ohstowa'kówa (the Great Feather Dance), Kunukwehné (the Old Women's Dance) and Osahéta (the Bean Dance) are sung.