



ONEIDA CULTURAL HERITAGE DEPARTMENT

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Edge of the Woods

The concept of “guest” is very important in Iroquois culture. It is felt that visitors of guests, particularly strangers or visitors of an official nature should be announced and welcomed into the community. In general, they should be treated as important personages.

In the ancient days of the Iroquois, there was certain protocol that was followed with regard to visitors to village settlements. More often than not, delegations walked for many days to deliver messages of condolences to surrounding villages. During that time, an elaborate set of traditional customs and attitudes concerning the proper treatment of guests not only afforded hospitality but assured safe conduct as well. In order to escape suspicion of wrong doing or threat to the community, guests were expected to follow certain behaviors to allow them to be invited into the community.

Once invited, the people in the community would make the visitors as comfortable as possible in their homes and also provide them with nourishment.

In the days of our ancestors it was customary that when visitors were nearing another nation’s village, they would set up camp outside of the village or at the edge of the forest near the village and make a fire to signal their presence. In those days, if a person or group did

not do this first, they faced the possibility of being taken prisoner. However, if the people of the village would see the smoke rising into the sky over the tree tops, the leader of their village would be notified and he would then send runners throughout the village to let the people know that there were visitors approaching. The people would then gather for a meeting. At that meeting two men would be designated to greet the visitors and to escort them into the village.

As the runners arrived at the encampment of the visitors, they would not immediately go into the encampment. Instead, they first observed from a safe distance, how many were in the party and what kinds of weapons they might have. After observing this and when they determined that it was safe, then they would proceed.

As the runners got to the encampment, they asked the visitors where they were from and what their purpose in coming was. The visitors would then announce from what nation they came and their reason for seeking assistance from the confederacy.

After that initial meeting they were then escorted into the village. Usually the meetings were conducted either in the middle of the village or at the back end. As they entered the meeting place, the visitors were made as

comfortable as possible, and then either the leader or another person designated would do the speaking.

First, a greeting was given to all community members present and then to the visitors. The leader would announce to the gathering that there were people who had come and that they were strangers to the community so they were being brought into the community and a comfortable place had been made for them. The following words were then spoken to, symbolically, offer comfort to the weary traveler:

“We now take this softest of deerskins, white in color and wipe away the dust that may have accumulated your eye’s upon your travel here. So that you may be able to see all that the Creator has provided for us here on the earth, and that you may be able to see clearly the generations ahead of us.”

“Secondly, we now take this white feather from the eagle, the softest down of white feathers and we brush away from your ear’s all the dust that may have accumulated your ear’s upon your travel here. So that you may be able to hear the words that our people convey to you and that you are able to understand clearly when you are asked to make a decision based upon what you are able to understand of the issue presented.”

“Now we take water that has been drawn from one of the clear, clean springs of the earth. We give you a drink of the water so that it can take away the parchiness from your throat so that you will be able to speak freely and to take in the nourishment of food that is provided for you. Perhaps you also may have a message that you want to convey to our people, so now we give you this water to drink to clear your throat.”

“Now we stand you up and brush away all of the things that may have accumulated upon you from your travel. We start from your head, all throughout your body, right down to your feet. At this time we say to you that we now welcome you into our territory and that you may stay as long as you like.”

“We ask that you be mindful of the ways of our village and if you cannot obey these rules then we have no other resources but to tell you that you must move on from our village. Leave as soon as you hear this message for we will not be able to aid you after this. Just be aware that you will no longer be under the protection of our laws.”

“Now at this time, we will all go around and greet you and shake your hand and welcome you to our village. When the handshake is done, you will be given the chance to speak and tell us your message. After we have had time to take in your message and consider your purpose, we will let you know how we feel about the message that you carry. When we are satisfied with your message and purpose, we will then release you of your duties. As we said before, you may stay as long as you like but do not stray from our rules.”

Visitors are guests of the community, guests of the people, and therefore must follow the ways of the people in that community. If that visitor chooses to participate in activities that misrepresent his purpose in coming, he may be called back into counsel with the leaders and asked to leave.

The Edge of the Woods or Handshake ceremony, although almost lost has been revived in recent years and is still practiced in the Oneida community today.