Using a Legend as a Primary Source

**What is it?** A legend that describes the beginnings of the Iroquois Confederacy.

**Who wrote it?** Unknown.

**Why?** To explain the importance of peace in the development of a nation.

Many Iroquois speakers lived south of Lake Ontario in what is now the United States. They comprised five nations: the Cayuga, Onedia, Onondaga, Seneca, and the Mohawk. As these nations competed for farm land and other resources, they found themselves in a state of almost perpetual warfare.

In the late fifteen or early sixteenth century, the Iroquois nations stopped fighting with each other and made an alliance known as the “Confederacy of the Five Nations.” What follows is an adaptation of a legend of how the confederacy came into being. You might be interested to learn that a legend is not the same thing as a myth. A myth explains something about the world. A legend usually describes the challenges and adventures of a heroic person. Think about this difference when you are reading this adaptation.

In the time when war was the normal state of things, a young Huron woman who lived apart from her mother became pregnant, although she was still a virgin. Her mother dreamed that the child was destined to do great things. When the child, a boy, was born, he was named Dekanawida, and he was truly gifted. As he grew into a young man, he showed a natural gift as a persuasive speaker, but his own people treated him with doubt and jealousy. He therefore decided to depart and eventually came to the country of the five Iroquois nations.

He travelled amongst the Iroquois hunters, giving them a message of peace, and urging them to take this message back to their chiefs. The Peacemaker, as he was called, stopped for a time among the Onondagas and gazed through the smoke hole of the house of Aiyonwahitah. Aiyonwahitah was a cannibal, but he was soon persuaded from this way of life by the Peacemaker, and he accepted his message of peace. Dekanawida charged him with the task of converting Thadodaho, a particularly unpleasant shaman with snakes in his hair. Leaving Aiyonwahitah to convert Thadodaho by combing the snakes from his hair, Dekanawida left to spread his message of peace among the Mohawks.

Unfortunately, Aiyonwahitah fell in his mission. Thadodaho killed each of Aiyonwahitah’s three daughters in turn. In great grief, Aiyonwahitah left his village and went eastward into Mohawk country. Wandering aimlessly, he happened upon Dekanawida, who cured Aiyonwahitah of his grief by urging the Iroquois to choose an Address for the first time. Together they sang the Peace Hymn, the Hai Hai.

Together, Dekanawida and Aiyonwahitah taught the ritual to the Mohawks, and accepted adoption into the Mohawk nation. They then turned westward, accompanied by the Mohawk chiefs, and quickly established peace.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**
1. The legend of the Peacemaker bears a resemblance to a story that is important to European culture. What is that story? How is it similar to this legend? How is it different?
2. Identify other regions of the world where war is “the normal state of things.” Are these regions close to peace?

**SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT**

Iroquois societies were both matrilineal and matrilocal, terms you learned on page 187. Women held the fields in which crops were grown, and they were responsible for ensuring that the crops were well-tended and harvested.

When a couple married, they went to live with the bride’s family. All Iroquois groups had a fairly complex system of government. At the local level, each extended family or clan had two leaders. One, the “civil chief,” directed the normal activities of the clan. The “military chief” was in charge of settling conflicts with other groups. Both chiefs were chosen by the women elders of the clan, who also had the authority to remove a chief if he proved to be a poor leader.

Several towns usually cooperated in an area. On a regular basis, councils would be held to discuss matters concerning the entire group, and each town would send representatives to this council.

The nations of the Iroquois cooperated as much as possible. Matters concerning the entire nation would be discussed at a confederacy council, and each tribe would send representatives to this council. At all levels, decisions were made democratically, and the opinion of the majority was followed.