

## **The Iroquois Creation Story[1]**

### ***A Tale of the Foundation of the Great Island, Now North America; the Two Infants Born, and the Creation of the Universe (rec. 1827)***

Among the ancients there were two worlds in existence. The lower world was in great darkness;—the possession of the great monster; but the upper world was inhabited by humankind; and there was a woman conceived [2] and would have the twin born. When her travail drew near, and her situation seemed to produce a great distress on her mind, and she was induced by some of her relations to lay herself on a mattress which was prepared, so as to gain refreshments to her wearied body; but while she was asleep the very place sunk down towards the dark world.[3]

The monsters[4] of the great water were alarmed at her appearance of descending to the lower world; in consequence all the species of the creatures were immediately collected into where it was expected she would fall. When the monsters were assembled, and they made consultation, one of them was appointed in haste to search the great deep, in order to procure some earth, if it could be obtained; accordingly the monster descends, which succeeds, and returns to the place. Another requisition was presented, who would be capable to secure the woman from the terrors of the great water, but none was able to comply except a large turtle came forward and made proposal to them to endure her lasting weight, which was accepted.

The woman was yet descending from a great distance. The turtle executes upon the spot, and a small quantity of earth was varnished on the back part of the turtle. The woman alights on the seat prepared, and she receives a satisfaction.[5] While holding her, the turtle increased every moment and became a considerable island of earth, and apparently covered with small bushes. The woman remained in a state of unlimited darkness, and she was overtaken by her travail to which she was subject.

While she was in the limits of distress one of the infants in her womb was moved by an evil opinion and he was determined to pass out under the side of the parent's arm, and the other infant in vain endeavored to prevent his design.[6] The woman was in a painful condition during the time of their disputes, and the infants entered the dark world by compulsion, and their parent expired in a few moments. They had the power of sustenance without a nurse, and remained in the dark regions.

After a time the turtle increased to a great Island and the infants were grown up, and one of them possessed with a gentle disposition, and named Enigorio, i.e. the good mind. The other youth possessed an insolence of character, and was named Enigonhahetgea, i.e. the bad mind.[7] The good mind was not contented to remain in a dark situation, and he was anxious to create a great light in the dark world; but the bad mind was desirous that the world should remain in a natural state.

The good mind determines to prosecute his designs, and therefore commences the world of creation. At first he took the parent's head, (the deceased) of which he created an orb, and established it in the centre of the firmament, and it became of a very superior nature to bestow light to the new world, (now the sun) and again he took the remnant of the body and formed another orb, which was inferior to the light (now moon). In the orb a cloud of legs appeared to prove it was the body of the good mind, (parent). The former was to give light to the day and the latter to the night; and he also created numerous spots of light, (now stars): these were to regulate the days, nights, seasons, years, etc.

Whenever the light extended to the dark world the monsters were displeased and immediately concealed themselves in the deep places, lest they should be discovered by some human beings. The good mind continued the works of creation, and he formed numerous creeks and rivers on the Great Island, and then created numerous species of animals of the smallest and the greatest, to inhabit the forests, and fishes of all kinds to inhabit the waters. When he had made the universe he was in doubt respecting some being to possess the Great Island; and he formed two images of the dust of the ground in his own likeness, female and male, and by his breathing into their nostrils he gave them the living souls, and named them Ea-gwe-howe, i.e., a real people[8]; and he gave the Great Island all the animals of game for their maintenance and he appointed thunder to water the earth by frequent rains, agreeable of the nature of the system; after this the Island became fruitful and vegetation afforded the animals subsistence.

The bad mind, while his brother was making the universe, went throughout the Island and made numerous high mountains and falls of water, and great steeps, and also creates various reptiles which would be injurious to humankind; but the good mind restored the Island to its former condition. The bad mind proceeded further in his motives and he made two images of clay in the form of humankind; but while he was giving them existence they became apes[9]; and when he had not the power to create humankind he was envious against his brother; and again he made two of clay. The good mind discovered his brother's contrivances, and aided in giving them living souls, (it is said these had the most knowledge of good and evil).

The good mind now accomplishes the works of creation, notwithstanding the imaginations of the bad mind were continually evil; and he attempted to enclose all the animals of game in the earth, so as to deprive them from humankind; but the good mind released them from confinement, (the animals were dispersed, and traces of them were made on the rocks near the cave where it was closed).

The good mind experiences that his brother was at variance with the works of creation, and feels not disposed to favor any of his proceedings, but gives admonitions of his future state. Afterwards the good mind requested his brother to accompany him, as he was proposed to inspect the game, etc., but when a short distance from their *monina*[10] [sic] residence, the bad mind became so unmanly that he could not conduct his brother any more.[11]

The bad mind offered a challenge to his brother and resolved that who gains the victory would govern the universe; and appointed a day to meet the contest. The good mind was willing to submit to the offer, and he enters the reconciliation with his brother which he falsely mentions that by whipping with flags would destroy his temporal life[12]; and he earnestly solicits his brother also to notice the instrument of death, which he manifestly relates by the use of deer horns, beating his body he would expire. On the day appointed the engagement commenced, which lasted for two days: after pulling up the trees and mountains as the track of a terrible whirlwind, at last the good mind gained the victory by using the horns, as mentioned the instrument of death, which he succeeded in deceiving his brother and he crushed him in the earth; and the last words uttered from the bad mind were, that he would have equal power over the souls of humankind after death; and he sinks down to eternal doom, and became the Evil Spirit. After this tumult the good mind repaired to the battle ground, and then visited the people and retires from the earth.[13]

1 From *Sketches of the Ancient History of the Six Nations* (1827).

2 The woman who concives in most Iroquois accounts of the creation is the second generation of sky women to become pregnant without sexual activity. "Humankind" i.e. humans rather than

"monsters"—undefined creatures of a time before the world as we know it was established—although these humans have powers quite different from those humans usually possess.

3 Other versions have Sky Woman either being pushed out of the upper world or accidentally falling.

4 In other versions the monsters are a variety of familiar animals. Cusick's sense of them as monsters conveys the mysterious and dangerous state of affairs in the as-yet-unformed universe.

5 I.e., she lands safely, without harm.

6 Other versions of the story have Sky Woman give birth to a daughter, who again becomes supernaturally pregnant (perhaps by the spirit of the Turtle), and it is she who conceives the twins. The twins argue even in the womb, the Evil Twin deciding not to be born in the natural way but to burst through his mother's side, which leads to her death. The theme of rival twins is widespread in America.

7 More commonly, the Good Twin is called Tharonhiawagon (Sky-Grasper, Creator or Upholder of the Heavens) and the Evil Twin is named Tawiscaron (Evil-Minded, Flint, Ice, Patron of Winter, and other disasters). Cusick's Enigorio is a rough translation of the Tuscarora word for "good-minded" into Mohawk which his Enigonhahetgea is an equally rough translation into Seneca, Onondaga, or Cayuga of the Tuscarora word for "bad minded." Cusick has probably changed the Tuscarora words best known to him into these other Iroquois languages, because they were considered to be more prestigious than Tuscarora, the Tuscaroras only recently having joined the Iroquois Confederacy.

8 Humans. Ea-gwe-howe is a Tuscarora term used by speakers of all the languages of the Six Nations and, today, simply means Indian, or Indians.

9 Cusick may have seen an ape or a depiction of apes (there are no apes native to the New World) and decided to name them as the creatures made by the Evil Twin in contrast to the humans made by the Good Twin. John Buck and Chief John Gibson, in their later renditions of the Iroquois creation narrative also refer to apes at this point in the narrative.

10 Cusick perhaps means *nominal*, their named or designated residence.

11 I.e., the Evil Twin became so rude and obnoxious that the Good Twin could not lead ("conduct") his brother to the appointed place any longer.

12 The Good Twin tells his brother that he can be killed by being beaten with corn stalks, rushes, reeds, or cattails. Cusick calls this a deception; other accounts treat it as a confession of weakness. Below, the Evil Twin admits that he would die if beaten with the antlers of deer.

13 Other versions go on to say that the Good Twin teaches the people how to grow corn and how to keep from harm by means of prayer and ritual.