

**Woods, Fire, Ship, Hatchet:  
The Iroquois Language of Symbols and Allegories**

Definitions

symbol: something that stands for something else

allegory: a story using symbolic figures and actions  
to express truths or morals

wampum: small tubular beads made from seashells strung in strings or woven into belts.

Wampum held an important symbolic role in Indian ceremonies and diplomacy, joining groups together and enforcing the words spoken in the meetings. It was exchanged at treaties and used by Indians and colonists.

Written accounts of Iroquois speeches and treaties with colonists are sprinkled with the language of symbols and allegories: familiar objects, features of daily life, or stories that represented more important relationships or ideas.

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the sections on Pennsylvania colonists and the Iroquois, from *Conrad Weiser Homestead, Pennsylvania Trail of History Guide*, (beginning with the last paragraph on page 11, through to page 13) to the students. Then, working in groups, students will read the following excerpts from several Indian speeches and treaties, and use the accompanying questions as guides for a discussion of these symbols and allegories.

A. Onondaga chief Canasatego, speaking at the Lancaster treaty in 1744:

*It is true that above one hundred years ago the Dutch came here in a ship and brought with them several goods such as awls, knives, hatchets, guns and many other particulars which they gave us, and when they had taught us how to use their things, and we saw what sort of people they were, we were so well pleased with them that we tied their ship to the bushes on the shore, and afterwards liking them still better the longer they stayed with us, and thinking the bushes too slender, we removed the rope and tied it to the trees, and as the trees were liable to be blown down by high winds, or to decay of themselves, we, from the affection we bore them, again removed the rope, and tied it to a strong and big rock. And not content with this, for its further security we removed the rope to the big mountain, and there we tied it very fast and rolled wampum about it, and to make it still more secure we stood upon the wampum and sat down upon it to defend it, to prevent any hurt coming to it.....*

*After this the English came into the country, and, as we were told, become one people with the Dutch. About two year after the arrival of the English, an English Governor came to Albany, and finding what great friendship subsisted between us and the Dutch, he approved it mightily, and desired to make as strong a league and to be upon as good terms with us as the Dutch were....and to become one people with us, and by his further care in looking what had passed between us he found that the rope which tied the ship to the great mountain was only fastened with wampum which was liable to break and rot, and to perish in the course of years. He therefore told us that he would give us a silver chain, which would be much stronger and last for ever. This we accepted and fastened the ship with it.....*

1. If you were the interpreter explaining this allegory to the colonial representatives attending the treaty, what would you say? What does the ship symbolize? the rope?
2. What is happening when the ship is first tied to a bush, then moved again and again?
3. The translator of the allegory explained that the big and strong rock represented the Oneida nation (people of the Standing Stone) What do you think the big mountain might represent? [ The six Indian nations in the Iroquois Confederation were the Mohawk, the Cayuga, the Seneca, the Onondaga and the Tuscarora. Leaders from each nation met at a central council at the Onondaga village.]

4. Based on your general knowledge of Indian-colonist relations after 1750 and the dramatic policy and attitude changes toward Indians, which took hold during the period of Westward Expansion in the 19th century, what do you think happened to the “silver chain?” How might Canasatego have described that change in allegorical form?

B. In 1743, a skirmish broke out between some Virginia settlers and an Iroquois war party passing through the region on their way to do battle against their enemies the Cawtawbas.. Several Indians and Virginians were killed in the skirmish, and the peace that had been carefully maintained between colonists and the Indian nations, through years of diplomacy and council fires, was now in danger. The skilled translators Conrad Weiser and Shickellamy were sent to Onondaga to repair any damage to this friendship and avoid an outbreak of war. Having Onondaga chief Canasatego speak for him, -- and using symbols familiar to the Indians --Weiser delivered this message on behalf of the Virginia governor:

*Brethren of the United Nations, the sun kept his beams from us and a dark cloud overshadow'd us when the late unhappy skirmish happened between my people and your warriors. My people are charged with having begun hostilities. I will not dispute with you about it. It is most certain that an evil spirit which governs in darkness has been the promoter of it, for brethren will never fall out without giving ear to such evil spirits. I and the old and wise people of my country highly disapproved the action. I therefore came here to your fire to fetch home the hatchet, from [a fear] that it might have been unadvisedly made use of by my people and I assure you by this belt of wampum that there shall be no more use made of it for the future, but it shall be buried.*

In response, the Speaker for the Iroquois delivered this speech:

*Brother Assaryquoa [the Indian name for Virginia] you have healed the wounds of the hearts of those families in mourning.....We thank you kindly for your so doing.....We thank your Brother Assaryquoa for removing your hatchet and for burying it under a heavy stone. Let this belt of wampum serve to remove our hatchet from you and not only bury it but we will fling it into the bottomless pit into the ocean. There shall be no more use made of it.*

1. In the two speeches, the speakers use a Native-American expression that has since become a widely used idiom. What does it mean to “bury the hatchet?”
2. Weiser describes an “evil spirit” that came over the Virginians, causing them to become violent. Why do you think he chose this way of explaining the violence?
3. What were the Indians really saying when they replied that they would not only bury the hatchet, but “fling it into the bottomless pit into the ocean?” (Do you think they expected the violence between the two peoples to end forever?)

C. On numerous occasions, conferences or treaties between the colonial government and the Indians included references to fires and roads. In 1736, for example, a speaker for the Onondaga Council chiefs meeting in Philadelphia thanked the Pennsylvania government for the council fire kindled in their city. He presented a bundle of animal skins to “clear the road” of any trees that might have fallen between Philadelphia and the Iroquois country since their last meeting. [see Wallace, *Conrad Weiser, Friend of Colonist and Mohawk*, p. 69]

Some months later, Conrad Weiser used similar expressions when he delivered an invitation to the Six Nations to meet at a conference in Williamsburg as soon as possible, with the hope that the war between the Iroquois and the southern Indians-- a war which posed a great danger to the English colonies -- could be ended. As he approached the council village, Weiser sent word for the chiefs to “kindle their fire with all speed.” His journal describes what took place next:

*On the 11th the messengers came back early in the morning with the answer that their fire was kindled and a burning, that is, that some of the chiefs of every of the Six Nations was there and that I should be welcome to deliver to them what I had from their brethren of Philadelphia.....The next day in the morning....they were ready to hear me.*

*....[I explained] the desire of the Governor of Virginia to call or invite them to Williamsburg to a Treaty of Peace with the Southern Indians, the Cherokees and Catawbas.....Before night they sent to me to let me know that they were required to give me their answer.....Their answer was as follows:*

*“Brethren.....we must let you know that we cannot come to Williamsburg to a Treaty of Peace. There is no road to that place. We never travel through bushes to treaties of peace, it is too dangerous and we have no fire at Williamsburg, and if we should take a stump of fire to go there, we cannot get there without running the risk of our lives, for our brother Asaryquoh (the governor of Virginia) has made a fence or wall about his country and told us not to go over it.....We therefore give our Brother Asaryquoh an invitation....to come to Albany together with the chiefs of the southern Indians...where we have a fire burning under the shadow of some green bushes.....*

1. What does kindling a fire and getting it burning symbolize in these messages and conversations?
2. Does clearing a road of trees that may have fallen mean just that -- picking up fallen branches? Or do fallen trees and a clear road mean something else?
2. What do you think the Iroquois chiefs meant by responding that there was no road to Williamsburg? Was there literally no path to travel south --unlikely since their warriors had found a way south to do battle with the southern Indians -- or did they feel something else wasn't ready?
3. What did the Iroquois mean, that they had “no fire at Williamsburg”? Why would they preferred to meet in Albany? (and not Williamsburg or Onondaga?) Do you think they were looking for a neutral location, one where neither side had complete control? Can you think of any other famous peace treaty locations? Were they neutral locations?

D. The forest, or woods, has served as an important image or symbol among different peoples for centuries. It appears often in the speech of Native Americans in their dealings with European colonists. With much of the eastern part of the continent covered in dense forests, few travelers could avoid a journey through them. Travel between the Iroquois lands and colonial settlements and cities could therefore be a difficult trek. But “the woods” represented more than just a dense growth of trees to travel through; to the two sides negotiating treaties, it may have represented the difficulties of Indians and colonists working together for peace and friendship. Perhaps for this reason, the “wood’s edge ceremony” - a symbolic way to “cleanse” travelers - became a standard part of the beginning of any conference. The following are excerpts from eyewitness accounts of council meetings, and include these symbols.

*A string of wampum was given by Tocabontie in behalf of the Onondagas, to wipe off the sweat from their bodies; and God, who had protected them all against the evil spirits in the woods.....was praised.*

*Brethren, you came a great way to visit us, and many sorts of evils might have befallen you by the way which might have been hurtful to your eyes and your inward parts, for the woods are full of evil spirits.....*

*As you are messengers, and have come a great way through the woods, I brush the briars from your legs; I anoint the bottom of your feet; I wipe the dust out of your eyes and throat; I clear your bodies from the sweat and dust, and I heartily bid you welcome.*

1. What do you think the “evil spirits” in the woods might represent? (What could cause a problem at the start of a negotiation? Think about what kind of attitudes or mindsets would be harmful to a peace negotiation.)
2. Why was there attention given to clearing the eyes and throat during the wood’s edge ceremony? Does this mean that travelers were literally washed, or do clear eyes and throat symbolize something else? If so, what?
3. Think about some of the children’s stories and fairy tales you have learned growing up. What stories use the symbol of “the woods” to describe a wild, scary or dangerous place? Does the story end happily with someone rescued from the woods? What do you think the edge of the woods symbolizes in these stories?
4. Can you think of any expressions or word we use today that illustrate these same concepts of “the woods” or the wild? [see teacher notes]

## Teacher Notes

An interesting and helpful discussion of Indians' speech and use of symbolism may be found in the book *Into the American Woods - Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier*, by James H. Merrell. (W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., New York. 1999) The book is available in the Conrad Weiser Homestead museum shop, or through your local bookstore.

RE: "woods" symbolism  
[question #4, pg. 5, above]

words and idioms using idea of "woods" and wilderness :

bewildered

"out of the woods"

"babe in the woods"

Scholastic Books publishes a wonderful guide to idioms: *Scholastic Dictionary of Idioms*, by Marvin Terban (Scholastic: New York, 1996.) Have students look up these woods idioms in the book and explain their meaning and origin to the class.