Iroquois Creation Story (Traditional-Ancient)

The original homeland of the Iroquois was in upstate New York between the Adirondack Mountains and Niagara Falls. Through conquest and migration, the Iroquois gained control of most of the northeastern United States and eastern Canada. At its maximum in 1680, their empire extended west from the north shore of Chesapeake Bay through Kentucky to the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. The following is an excerpt of the tribe’s creation story.

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 mankind; and there was a woman conceived who would have the twins born. When her travail drew near and her situation seemed to produce a great distress on her mind, she was induced by some of her relations to lay herself on a mattress which was prepared so as to gain refreshments for her wearied body. While she was asleep the very place sunk down towards the dark world.

The monsters 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 they made consultation, and 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, 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? None was able to comply until a great turtle came forward and proposed to endure her lasting weight. 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.

While holding her, the turtle increased every moment and became a considerable island of earth, and apparently covered with great bushes. The woman remained in a state of unlimited darkness, and she was overtaken by her travail. 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. The woman was in a painful condition during 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 a gentle disposition and was named Eni-gorio, or “the good mind.” The other youth possessed an insolence of character and was named Enigon-ha-het-gea, or “the bad mind.” The good mind was not content 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 took the parent’s head, of which he created an orb and established it in the center 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, the moon.

Whenever the light extended to the dark world the monsters were displeased and immediately concealed themselves in the deep places. 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.