



IROQUOIS

ORIGIN STORY

BIG HISTORY PROJECT



IROQUOIS

THE GREAT TURTLE

Compiled by Cynthia Stokes Brown

This story comes from the Iroquois people in North America. In the 1400s they formed a federation of five separate tribes in what is now New York State. The Iroquois did not use writing, so they told this story orally until settlers from Europe wrote it down.

The first people lived beyond the sky because there was no earth beneath. The chief's daughter became ill, and no cure could be found. A wise old man told them to dig up a tree and lay the girl beside the hole. People began to dig, but as they did the tree fell right through the hole, dragging the girl with it.

Below lay an endless sheet of water where two swans floated. As the swans looked up, they saw the sky break and a strange tree fall down into the water. Then they saw the girl fall after it. They swam to her and supported her, because she was too beautiful to allow her to drown. Then they swam to the Great Turtle, master of all the animals, who at once called a council.

When all the animals had arrived, the Great Turtle told them that the appearance of a woman from the sky was a sign of good fortune. Since the tree had earth on its roots, he asked them to find where it had sunk and bring up some of the earth to put on his back, to make an island for the woman to live on.

The swans led the animals to the place where the tree had fallen. First Otter, then Muskrat, and then Beaver dived. As each one came up from the great depths, he rolled over exhausted and died. Many other animals tried, but they experienced the same fate.

At last the old lady Toad volunteered. She was under so long that the others thought she had been lost. But at last she came to the surface and before dying managed to spit out a mouthful of dirt on the back of the Great Turtle.

It was magical earth and had the power of growth. As soon as it was as big as an island, the woman was set down on it. The two white swans circled it, while it continued to grow, until, at last, it became the world island as it is today, supported in the great waters on the back of the Turtle.



Sources

Cottie Burland, *North American Indian Mythology*,
Rev. ed. (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1985), 66.

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Illustration of the Iroquois Prayer of Thanksgiving
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Engraving of a tattooed Iroquois
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