

## **Iroquois False Face Masks: Living Representation of Spirits**

I am Wolf Clan, Seneca Nation of Indians, Iroquois Confederacy. My father grew up on the Cattaraugus Reservation in Western New York, where my grandmother still lives. He told me about how my great-grandfather carved medicine masks from live trees. My father died when I was thirteen (after years of suffering from chronic alcoholism). As a child, I wondered naively why the mask's healing powers did not cure my father.

### The Image.

In the false face legend, Great Ruler shonkwaia,tison (Fenton) encountered a stranger known as "Grandfather" (Keene). The stranger said:

'I believe I am the creator of this land, and I am walking around now admiring what I have done.' Surprised, shonkwaia,tison said, 'No, you are wrong. It was I who created this land.' They bickered back and forth ...until finally shonkwaia,tison said, 'Fine then, let us have a test to see who actually did create this land. ... 'See that mountain? . . . We will use our power to move it. The one who moves it the farthest must have the most power, and must therefore also be the creator of this land' (Fenton).

The stranger was powerful, but he was only able to shake the mountain; he wasn't able to move it. Great Ruler moved the mountain to demonstrate his strength, admonishing Grandfather not to look. When Grandfather disobeyed him, the mountain struck him, leaving his face broken and disfigured (Keene; Iroquois Masks). Great Ruler knew Grandfather's broken face would scare children, so Grandfather was exiled to the forests (Keene). Grandfather learned medicine from the Great Ruler and became a powerful healer known as "Old Broken Nose."

Masks representing Grandfather's smashed face are used to invoke spirits during healing rituals. The false face masks are "alive;" the breathing "faces" carry a spirit's presence (Keene). Because the mask is alive, it is "fed" cornmeal and given tobacco as a gift for healing illnesses (Iroquois Masks). "Old Broken Nose" must be carved in a particular way, according to Iroquois tradition: an Iroquois walks through the woods until he is moved by a spirit. The spirit inspires the design and the resulting mask represents the spirit itself. The masks are carved directly on a live basswood tree and are removed when completed. Masks are painted red if begun in the morning or black if begun in the afternoon. The mask design features deep-set eyes and a bent, crooked nose. Horse tail is used for the mask hair. (Fenton; Iroquois Masks).

### Use of the Image in Rituals.

The false face mask is more than an artful representation of an important Iroquois legend. Traditional Iroquois object to the word "mask," because the image is not a thing but instead a living representation of spirits. It is an embodiment of important healing therapies central to Iroquois beliefs (Thomas). The masks are used to invoke spirits and are worn in healing rituals held during the spring and fall, or upon request at an individual's home. False Face Society members, wearing masks, go through houses in the community, driving away sickness, disease and evil spirits. The False Face members shake turtle shell rattles. The ritual continues with dancing and serving corn mush to the participants (Thomas; Iroquois Masks).

Because the masks are a powerful and provocative art form, many have been sold to private collectors, tourists and museums (Jimerson Obituary; False Face Controversy). Many Iroquois consider it sacrilegious to sell, publicly display or mimic sacred false face masks (Iroquois Masks). The Iroquois Confederacy campaigns to regain possession of masks that remain with private collectors or museums, including the National Museum of the American Indian. Onondaga Chief Tadadaho issued policies which prohibit the sale, exhibition or representation in pictures of the masks to the public. The policies also

condemn the general distribution of information regarding the medicine societies, and deny non-Indians the right to examine, interpret, or present the beliefs of the secret societies (False Face Controversy).

### My Experiences with the Image.

My great-grandfather was a carpenter by trade. He began making medicine masks in the 1930s, at the request of the Works Progress Administration for its Indian Arts and Crafts Section. The Rochester Museum of Science directed his work (Jimerson Obituary; Thomas). At the time of his death in 1961, there were only a few Seneca who preserved the ancient craft of mask-making originated by the Iroquois Confederacy Secret Society of False Faces (Jimerson Obituary). In 1961, many of his masks were in museums and schools throughout the country; others were held by private collectors (Jimerson Obituary).

My great-aunt has one of his false face masks displayed in her living room. The mask seemed scary to me when I was a small child. I am no longer fearful of it. It was carved from a live basswood by my great-grandfather (Jimerson Obituary). The mask has provoked a family controversy. My aunt displays it in a glass box for safekeeping. Some family members find it improper to keep the mask under glass because it is not allowed to "breathe" properly. Other family members believe it should not be displayed openly (Thomas). As I was researching this essay, my uncle told me he plans to distribute my great-grandfather's masks: a red mask to his children and a black mask to me and to my brother. I am humbled and honored.

### False Face Masks Convey the Important Story of the Iroquois People.

Apart from the family controversy about whether my aunt's mask should remain "under glass," I am conflicted about admonitions from Iroquois elders prohibiting or severely limiting public access to study the living false faces. When we share the story of our powerful traditions and interpretive art forms, we build bridges with other cultures toward understanding and acceptance. As Dr. King reminds us, "the arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice" (Elders). I see the arc of history bending toward tolerance, when I compare my experiences to my parents' lives. I attend school among many races, religions, cultures, languages and sexual preferences. Diversity is celebrated; I feel empowered to be biracial, not shunned. My parents remind me the "good old days" were not that good.

My generation is cynical of politics, but we are also more informed and tolerant. I am informed about world affairs and politics because I have access to many viewpoints, through a wide variety of media channels. Because I am informed, I can challenge a hateful remark or ludicrous observation. The great strides in transparent information and technology bring our world closer, as we share more, communicate ideas more freely and understand our interdependence. As we are more informed, we are more tolerant. As we are more tolerant, we are more peaceful.

We can respect our Iroquois community by limiting the display of live face masks. We can discourage mask sales, photographs and forgeries which profane Iroquois beliefs. But, we should not limit the study, discussion or interpretation of powerful Iroquois legends and creative works. The study of the medicine masks convey strongly held Iroquois beliefs. The important contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy to larger society can only be appreciated through the transparent study of its culture, in all its forms.

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