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XVII. *Extracts of some Letters, from Sir William Johnson Bart. to Arthur Lee, M. D. F. R. S. on the Customs, Manners, and Language of the Northern Indians of America.*

Read Jan. 28, 1773. **I**N all enquiries of this sort, we should distinguish between the more remote tribes, and those Indians, who, from their having been next to our settlements for several years, and relying solely on oral tradition for the support of their antient usages, have lost great part of them, and have blended some with our customs, so as to render it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to trace their customs to their origin.

The Indians did certainly live under more order and government formerly, than at present. This may seem odd, but it is true; for, their intercourse being with the lower class of our traders, they learn little from us but our vices; and their long wars, together with the immoderate use of spirituous liquors, have so reduced them, as to render that order, which was first instituted among them, unnecessary and impracticable.

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They do not at present use hieroglyphics; their figures being drawn, to the utmost of their skill, to represent the thing intended. For instance, when they go to war, they paint some trees with the figures of warriors, often the exact number of the party; and if they go by water, they delineate a canoe. When they gain a victory, they mark the handle of their tomahawks with human figures, to signify prisoners; and draw the bodies without heads, to express the scalps they have taken. The figures which they affix to deeds have led some to imagine, that they had alphabetical characters or cyphers. The fact is this. Every nation is divided into tribes, of which some have three, as the turtle, bear, and wolf; to which some add the snake, deer, &c. Each tribe forms a little community within the nation; and as the nation has its peculiar symbol, so has each tribe the particular badge from which it is denominated: and a Sachem of each tribe being a necessary party to a fair conveyance, such Sachem affixes the mark of his tribe thereto, like the public seal of a corporation. With respect to the deed of 1726, of which you sent me the signatures, the transaction was in some measure of a partial nature. All the nations of the confederacy did not subscribe it; and those chiefs who did, neglected to pay due regard to their proper symbols; but signed agreeably to fancy, of which I have seen other instances. The manner I have mentioned is the most authentic, and conformable to their original practice.

As to the information, which, you observe, I formerly transmitted to the Governor of New York,

York, concerning the belt and 15 bloody sticks sent by the Missifagees, the like is very common; and they use these sticks, as well to express the alliance of castles, as the number of individuals in a party. The sticks are generally about 6 inches in length, very slender, and painted red if the subject be war. Their belts are mostly black wampum, painted red when they denote war. They describe castles sometimes upon them, by square figures of white wampum; and in alliances, human figures holding a chain, which is their emblem of friendship, and each figure represents a nation. An axe is also sometimes described, and always imports war: the taking it up, being a declaration of war; and the burying it, a token of peace.

With respect to your questions concerning the chief magistrate, or Sachem, and how he acquires his authority, &c.; I am to acquaint you, that there is, in every nation, a Sachem, or chief; who appears to have some authority over the rest, and it is greatest amongst the most distant nations. But in most of those bordering on our settlements, his authority is scarcely discernible, he seldom assuming any power before his people. And indeed this humility is judged the best policy; for, wanting coercive power, their commands would perhaps occasion assassination, which sometimes happens.

The Sachems of each tribe are usually chosen in a public assembly of the chiefs and warriors, whenever a vacancy happens by death or otherwise; they are generally chosen for their sense

and bravery from among the oldest warriors, and approved of by all the tribe; on which they are saluted Sachems. There are, however, several exceptions; for some families have a kind of inheritance in the office, and are called to this station in their infancy.

The chief Sachem, by some called the King, is so either by inheritance or by a kind of tacit consent, the consequence of his superior abilities and influence. The duration of his authority depends much on his own wisdom, the number and consequence of his relations, and the strength of his particular tribe. But even in those cases where it descends, should the successor appear unequal to the task, some other Sachem is sure to possess himself of the power and the duties of the office. I should have observed, that military services are the chief recommendations to this rank. And it appears pretty clearly, that heretofore the chief of a nation had, in some small degree, the authority of a sovereign. This is now the fact among the most remote Indians. But as, since the introduction of fire arms, they no longer fight in close bodies, but every man is his own General; I am inclined to think this has contributed to lessen the power of a chief. This chief of a whole nation has the custody of the belts of wampum, &c. which are as records of public transactions: he prompts the speakers at all treaties, and proposes affairs of consequence. The chief Sachems form the grand council; and those of each tribe often deliberate apart on the affairs of their particular tribes. All their deliberations

are conducted with extraordinary regularity and decorum. They never interrupt him who is speaking; nor use harsh language, whatever may be their thoughts.

The chiefs assume most authority in the field: but this must be done, even there, with great caution; as a head warrior thinks himself of most consequence in that place.

The Indians believe in, and are much afraid of, witchcraft: those suspected of it are therefore often punished with death. Several nations are equally severe on those guilty of theft, (a crime indeed uncommon among them): but in cases of murder, the relations are left to take what revenge they please. In general, they are unwilling to inflict capital punishments, as these defeat their grand political object, which is, to increase their numbers by all possible means.

On their hunts, as upon all other occasions, they are strict observers of *meum* and *tuum*, and this from principle, holding theft in contempt; so that they are rarely guilty of it, though tempted by articles of much value. Neither do the strong attempt to seize the prey of the weak; and I must do them the justice to say, that, unless heated by liquor or inflamed by revenge, their ideas of right and wrong, and their practices in consequence of them, would, if more known, do them much honor. It is true, that, having been often deceived by us in the purchase of lands, in trade, and other transactions, many of them begin now to act the same part. But this reflects most on those who set them the example.

As to your remark on their apparent repugnance to civilization, I must observe, that this is not owing to any viciousness of their nature, or want of capacity; as they have a strong genius for arts, and uncommon patience. I believe they are put to the English schools too late, and sent back too soon to their people, whose political maxim, Spartan-like, is to discountenance all pursuits but war, holding all other knowledge as unworthy the dignity of man, and tending to enervate and divert them from that warfare on which they conceive their liberty and happiness depend. These sentiments constantly instilled into the minds of youth, and illustrated by examples drawn from the contemptible state of the domesticated tribes, leave lasting impressions; and can hardly be defeated by an ordinary school education.

I wish my present leisure would allow me to give you as many specimens of their language as would shew, that (though not very wordy) it is extremely emphatical; and their style adorned with noble images, strong metaphors, and equal in allegory to many of the Eastern nations. The article is contained in the noun, by varying the termination; and the adjective is combined into one word. Thus of *Echin*, a man, and *Gowana*, great, is formed *Echingowana*, a great man. *Cabyunghaw* is a creek, *Caghyungba* a river, *Caghyunghaowana* a great river; *Caghyungbeo* a fine river. *Haga* the inhabitants of any place, and *Tierham* the morning; so, if they speak of Eastern people, they say *Tierhans-aga*, or people of the morning. *Eso* is expressive of a great quantity,

and *Esojee* is the superlative. The words *Goronta* and *Golota*, which you mention, are not of the six nations, but a Southern language. It is curious to observe, that they have various modes of speech and phrases peculiar to each age and sex, which they strictly observe. For instance, a man says, when he is hungry, *Cadagcariax*, which is expressive both of his want and of the animal food he requires to supply it; whilst a child says, in the same circumstances, *Cautfore*, that is, I require spoon-meat.

There is so remarkable a difference in the language of the six nations from all others, as affords ground for enquiring into their distinct origin. The nations North of the St. Lawrence, those West of the great lakes with the few who inhabit the sea-coasts of New England, and those again who live about the Ohio, notwithstanding the respective distances between them, speak a language radically the same, and can in general communicate their wants to one another; while the six nations, who live in the midst of them, are incapable of conveying a single idea to their neighbours, nor can they pronounce a word of their language with correctness. The letters *M* and *P*, which occur frequently in the other languages, are not in theirs; nor can they pronounce them but with the utmost difficulty. There is indeed some difference of dialect among the six nations themselves; but this is little more than what is found in all the European states.