



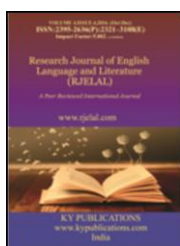
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## BOUND IN SPIRIT: AN EXPLICATION OF THE MOHAWK LEGEND OF MAN-NATURE KINSHIP IN MAURICE KENNY'S "THEY TELL ME I AM LOST"

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### ABSTRACT

One of the most pestering questions and debates of the Millennial Generation is centered on the sustainability of natural resources and the increasing inhospitality of the earth. Ever since the advent of the mechanistic view especially during the era of Industrial Revolution, Nature has been regarded as a dispensable entity that ought to be subdued and exploited. It is only when mindless environmental destruction recoiled on human existence that we began speaking of holistic and harmonious co-existence, deep ecology and sustainable development. However, most primitive communities propagated the selfsame ideology centuries ago through their mythology, legends and lifestyle. The Native American tribe of the Mohawks, who belonged to the Iroquois Confederacy believed in the paternity of all universal elements. In their spiritual projection of life on earth, every being is united to form an eternal cosmic family – Earth is Mother, Thunder is Grandfather, Moon is Grandmother and the Sun is Big Brother. Consequently, the Native American identity is as magnificent and eloquent as Nature itself. This paper analyzes Maurice Kenny's poem "They Tell Me I Am Lost" which is a reassertion and explication of this profound philosophy and a retort to the ignorant majority illusion that the aborigines are a lost people bereft of purpose and relevance.

**Keywords:** Native American, Mohawk, Nature, spirituality, mythology, aborigines.

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### Introduction

Mark Twain once remarked: "The very ink with which all history is written is merely fluid prejudice." Living in the very interesting times of counter narratives, revisionism and paradigm shifts, long-standing assumptions regarding people and nations have undergone revolutionary modifications. Individual and collective histories that shaped world views and attitudes are now seen for what they are – not mere recordings of facts and reality, but rather the victor's version of the reality they deemed to construct. The European master narrative of history has been rejected as a sham that

generated false representations and pejorative stereotypes of "Others" to cover up their violations and suppress variant subcultures. But the resurgence of the literature of the marginalized has brought to light a rich canon of thought including myths, legends, spirituality and philosophy from the colonized indigenous cultures. Among these ethnic, post-colonial revivals, the one that deserves special admiration is the oeuvre of the Native American writers who offered remarkable insights into the life and attitudes of the aboriginal populace of the land.

America has a teeming and diverse community of indigenous tribes who arrived during

the Pre-Columbian era and are therefore, the first settlers of the country. Thousands of years before the arrival of the European colonizers, these communities thrived in forests and along shorelines, amidst the abundance of resources and gradually developed a complex ritualistic life comprising language, law, customs and spirituality, all based on their kinship with the land. But the arrival of the British and other European settlers brought in its wake widespread devastation and deprivation through confiscation of land and resources, large scale hunting and fishing and diseases like smallpox to which the native tribes were not immune. Eventually this gave way to social exclusion, ghettoization and sabotage of aboriginal cultures. The attempt of the Native American tribes to arise phoenix-like from the ashes of near-extinction has been pioneered by writers from among the ethnicities whose works offer an inside and intimate view of their existence and challenge the white man's derision. Among the many crusaders who strived to restore lost dignity and relevance to the indigenous cultures, the Mohawk writer Maurice Kenny has carved a niche of his own. He is a leading figure in the Renaissance of Native American poetry since the 1970s.

Born to a Mohawk/Irish father and Seneca/English mother in Watertown, New York, Maurice Frank Kenny generated "an oeuvre of work that represents a generation and captures Indigenous existence like no other writer" (Kelsey 1). The strong influence of Iroquois culture and the interactions with his Kanien'keha (Mohawk) elders prompted him to turn to his roots and retell stories of Native American life from a fresh perspective. Inspired by his mentor and tutor Louise Bogan, he began to find his voice and vision as a poet by drawing on the world he was best acquainted with. Kenny speaks of her counsel in the introduction to *On Second Thought* (1995) thus:

Cull from the past; cull from experience; do not ignore history or art; utilize what has passed before your eyes and heart and spirit. Know who you are, where you hail from, and have some idea of where you are plotting to go, your destination as a living

human being. Carry no shame for your culture, your past, or yourself. (Maus 2)

Bogan along with other literary artists like Werner Beyer, Roy Marz and Douglas Angus as well as the landscape of his ancestral home Akwesasne, shaped his poetic sensibilities. His work "celebrates berries, bears, and bloodroot, all images of the Adirondacks and the Mohawk way of life" and "painfully examines the losses incumbent on the Iroquois, from the slash-and-burn campaign of Sullivan and Clinton to the current contamination of the water at Akwesasne ..." (Kelsey 1). Kenny has also tapped the abundance of Mohawk legends and myths in his poems establishing the cultural heritage and profound philosophy that underlines aboriginal existence.

"They Tell Me I Am Lost" collected in the exhaustive omnibus *Braided Lives: An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing* (1991) is a challenge thrown at the white American population and a statement of the versatility and wholesomeness of the Native American identity. The disparaging and fallacious notions regarding Amerindians prevalent among the European majority led them to censure the former's apparently inadequate and anarchic lifestyle. They were demeaned as blood-thirsty, borderline dwellers who led a lost, purposeless existence.

Since the first Europeans made landfall in North America, native peoples have suffered under a weltering array of stereotypes, misconceptions and caricatures. Whether portrayed as "noble savages," "ignoble savages," "teary-eyed environmentalists" or, most recently, simply as "casino-rich," native peoples find their efforts to be treated with a measure of respect and integrity undermined by images that flatten complex tribal, historical and personal experience into one-dimensional representations that tell us more about the depictees than about the depicted. (Meland)

Kenny's poem is a counter to this typecast and indulges in a meditative explication of the selfhood of the tribesmen and their intimate kinship with the expanse of Nature and the universe. Narrated in the

voice of a proud Mohawk hunter-gatherer-farmer, he asserts that far from being lost, his life is more grounded and worthwhile than that of the urbanized, philistine majority. He makes the criticism sound ironical by turning it back at the slanderer.

Dedicated to the Cheyenne poet Lance Henson, the poem is written in a highly subjective strain employing an abundance of natural/seasonal imagery and unfolds like a meditative chant in the midst of the forest. Kenny discards the hackneyed stylistic norms of capitalization, punctuation, rhyme and meter, and emulates the tradition and rhythm of the Shamanic ritual song. Consequently, a unique coalescence of Man and Nature permeates the poem serving as an integral aspect of the definition of the Native American's selfhood:

my feet are elms, roots in the earth  
my heart is the hawk  
my thought the arrow that rides  
the wind across the valley  
my spirit eats with eagles on the mountain  
crag and clashes with the thunder  
the grass is breath of my flesh  
and the deer is the bone of my child (Kenny  
1-5)

Invoking the topography, flora and fauna of the aboriginal landscape, the speaker explores the power of the "I/my" which is infinitely flexible and offers enormous potential for self-expression. Nature, which is endowed with mystique attributes in the Mohawk lore, augments and enriches the tribesman's identity to the extent that one subsumes the other. In a manuscript compiled by the Onondaga-Seneca Chief John Arthur Gibson and the Tuscarora ethnologist JNB Hewitt in 1899, the late John Mohawk-Satsisowah of the Seneca Nation explains the "Iroquois Creation Story" and writes:

Our story holds that we have much that we should be happy about, and evidence of this great good fortune is the manifestation of the gifts of nature. But even these gifts of nature are part of a grander scheme. These are ultimately the gifts of the beings of the Sky World, those who conceived of and created that which we experience as nature. We are now able to see evidence of

this great good fortune which positions us in a special relationship to that which is called nature. We are now urged to do more than give gratitude. We, as human beings are urged to join in the sacred act. (Mohawk xiv)

Kenny extolls and celebrates this sentiment and philosophy of Mohawk existence in the poem as the speaker asserts the magnificence and opulence of Nature which he claims is transfused into his being. The flesh and Nature come together in eternal bondage and thus, he imbibes the spirit of the elm tree that rises high up but stays rooted to the Earth mother. His heart is infused with pride over his ancestry symbolized by the hawk while the eagle represents the gallantry of the tribe that clashes with the elements for daily food and subsistence.

The traditional tribal dance is initiated with the beating of the drum, the rhythm of the Mohawk life, accompanied by the ritualistic chant. The drum-beat stanza proceeds as the toes dance in sync with the tempo of the music and "in the light of the eyes of the old turtle" (Kenny 6). Connected with longevity and wisdom, the turtle forms a significant aspect of Iroquois beliefs. The creation myth details how the pregnant Sky Woman fell down from the heavens and was caught by the birds and brought to the animals. The mud collected from beneath the primal sea was spread on the carapace of the Big Turtle which eventually grew into the land of North America. Stepping onto this land, the Sky Woman created the Sun, Moon and the stars and gave birth to twins – Sapling and Flint – both of which are integral to Mohawk life ("Mohawk Legends"). The turtle embodies the invincibility and omnipotence of the spirit which is unlocked as the dance proceeds and the Shamanic chant intensifies, leading the dancer into a trance whence he enters the spiritual plane. As his *Orenda* is unleashed, he converses with the cosmic soul, performs divination and prophecy, and is endowed with the power of healing. *Orenda*, in Iroquois spirituality, refers to the mystic, supernatural potency of all beings and "it appears that primitive man interpreted the activities of nature to be the ceaseless struggle of one *orenda* against another, uttered and directed by the beings or bodies of his environment" (Hewitt 40).

In the article entitled "Rainbows, Thunder Beings and the Origins of Humans", Doug Georg-Kanentiio touches upon the implication of dance in Iroquois rituals as illustrated by John Mohawk:

Mohawk points out that the most sacred of Iroquois rituals, the sacred acts, come directly from the Sky World, as do plants such as tobacco, strawberries, corn and beans. When the people sing and dance they do so in acknowledgement of their celestial origins and to create, in part, the Sky World on earth. Legends, which not only tell compelling stories but give vivid descriptions of the Sky World and the beginning of human life as a gift from the inhabitants of that realm, are as sacred and vital as all other ceremonial acts... We come to know nature and our place within the interlocking cycles of life through story, music, dance and ritual.

What is achieved consequently by the speaker/dancer is a grand unification with Nature whereby time and identities melt, man absorbs the universe, and the past present and future turn seamless. A sense of paternity binds him with the wind, muskrat, seed and tadpole, even journeying back into the past to connect with his ancestor, the Great Sire, who grandfathered the Mohawk lineage and his many descendants begotten in the "frost of March and the summer noon of brown August" (Kenny 11). The Shaman then pays obeisance to the mother who bore him, to his life blood and to his future progenies, his soul expanding to traverse time zones and generations. Unlike the white Americans who decimate natural landscapes in the urge for sophistication and industry, the Native American revels in the grandeur of the corn fields, the perennial river, and the magical herbs:

my chant is the field that turns with the sun  
and feeds the mice  
and the bear red berries and honey  
my chant is the river  
that quenches the thirst of the sun  
my chant is the woman who bore me  
and my blood and my flesh of tomorrow  
my chant is the herb that heals  
and the moon that moves the tides

and the wind that cleans the earth  
of old bones singing in the morning dust  
(Kenny 12 – 15)

The abundance of Nature that sustains existence, the seasonal cycle that balances life cycles, the purging winds that resuscitate the Earth are all tied together in universal fraternity as the Shaman pays homage to even the axe that fells the birch for cultivation. But the Mohawks and other tribes indulge in controlled clearing of forest space to make room for limited farming of daily essentials.

Primarily animistic, the Mohawk religious beliefs are inextricably bound with creatures, elements, weather and even human words and actions all of which are considered distinctly spiritual and alive. Hence, the dancer gratefully chants "a blessing to the trout, beaver and a blessing to the young pheasant" (Kenny 18). Fishing is a significant source of food for the tribe and hence the welfare of aquatic life is integral to their survival. Mohawk association with European countries, principally effected through trade, is dependent on the availability of beaver fur that was much in demand in these countries. The Mohawk tribe had the earliest regular fur trading contacts with Europeans including the Dutch, Swedish, French and British (Alchin). When winter strikes, access to food and warmth becomes challenging and the hunting of the pheasant provides not only meat but also fat which can be used as fuel.

The spirit of the poem, especially the first half, emulates the essence of the thanksgiving prayer that initiates all the Mohawk rituals and ceremonies, particularly marriage. Considered sacrosanct and eternal, marital vows and oration are an expression of gratitude to the entire universe and its elements for nurturing life and enriching it. Various essentials of Mohawk mythology find reference in the prayer:

On behalf of the people, greetings, love and thanksgiving is given to our Mother Earth, then to the waters of the world; the fish life; to the food (corn, beans and squash) and all the garden food; to the berries and their leader, the strawberry; to the trees that make up the forests of the world; to the animals, big and small and their leader,

the deer; to the medicine in the mountains, the fields, the rivers' edge and in the forests that heal our sicknesses; to the grasses of the world that provide food for the animal life; to the birds who greet our eldest brother the sun with beautiful songs to bring satisfaction and enjoyment; to us, the human beings; to the Eagle, who is the leader of all bird life, we greet and thank you for your gifts; to the four winds who bring the warmth and coolness, the changing of the four seasons for the people; to our Grandfather, the Thunder, for renewing the lakes, the rivers and quenching our thirst.

We, the human relatives, give you our greetings and thanks to our eldest brother the sun for the light and the warmth, for all that grows and our children to live; to our Grandmother, the moon, for the birth of our children; to the Stars for the deposit of the morning dew and their great beauty; to the four Sacred Sky Dweller beings who protect and guide us, as the Creator instructed them; to the ultimate, our Creator, who provided all that is necessary for our life; to our Creator that only asked that we be grateful. ("Mohawk Marriage")

However, the tribesmen are well aware that this unison with the cosmic world comes with a warning: such life is not permanent and hence, he should put up with the wrath of Nature that may at times seem pitiless and cruel. The Shamanic dancer therefore chants in awe at the "quaking of the earth angry and bold" (Kenny 23) that often tears loved ones apart yet maintains the renewal of the earth and the cycle of life-and-death.

In the final section of the poem, Kenny reverts to the vapid stereotypes of Native Americans rampant among settler communities as well as the plight of the aborigines who attempted to assimilate into the latter. But nevertheless, he is not perturbed nor does it discount his self-worth:

though there are eyes that do not see me  
and ears that do not hear my drum  
or hands that do not feel my wind  
and tongues which do not taste my blood

I am the shadow on the field  
the rain on the rock  
the snow on the limb  
the footprint on the water  
the vetch on the grave  
I am the sweat on the boy  
the smile on the woman  
the paint on the man (Kenny 25 – 27)

Although ostracized by the expanding, dominating mainstream creed, he proudly treads his world as the walking, breathing shadow of Nature and is hence, never lost or perplexed. Having embraced the totality of the world he dwells in, both in its tender and callous ways, he is empowered to accept his own virtues and vices and lead a wholesome life. This holistic philosophy which is the corner stone of Mohawk life is reaffirmed as the poem concludes: "I am the sun and the moon the light and the dark/ I am the shadow on the field/ I am the string, the bow and the arrow" (Kenny 36).

Timeless and epiphanic, "They Tell Me I am Lost" reveals how the rudiments of sustainable development and deep ecology were practiced by the aborigines many centuries prior to its currency in the modern world. It is therefore just to presume that this earliest, apparently 'uncivilized' lot is more prudent and enlightened than the technocratic elite generation.

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