

Rattlesnake Tales

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Archaeological evidence from the Northeast and from selected Mississippian sites is presented and combined with ethnographic, historic and linguistic data to investigate the symbolic significance of the rattlesnake to northeastern Native groups. The authors argue that the rattlesnake is, chief and foremost, the pre-eminent shaman with a (gourd) medicine rattle attached to his tail. A strong and pervasive association of serpents, including rattlesnakes, with lightning and rainfall is argued to have resulted in a drought-related ceremonial expression among Ontario Iroquoians from circa A.D. 1200 -1450.

The Rattlesnake and Associates Personified

Few, if any of the other-than-human kinds of people that populate the mythical realities of the North American Indians are held in greater esteem than the rattlesnake man-being,¹ a grandfather, and the proto-typical shaman and warrior (Hamell 1979:Figures 17, 19-21; 1998:258, 264-266, 270-271; cf. Klauber 1972, II:1116-1219) (Figure 1). Real humans and the other-than-human kinds of people around them constitute a social world, a three-dimensional network of kinsmen, governed by the rule of reciprocity and with the intensity of the reciprocity correlated with the social, geographical, and sometimes mythical distance between them (Hamell 1987:77-78; 1992:453; 1998:258). What we would characterize as American Indian religion is best understood as a social contract between the human kinds of people and the other-than-human kinds of people to maintain the social order between them through ritual thought, words, behavior, and material culture.

The eastern massasauga rattlesnake (*Sistrurus catenatus catenatus*) and the much larger northern timber rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*) are native to the Northern Iroquoian homeland of the Lower Great Lakes region. The southern timber rattlesnake is commonly also known as the canebrake rattlesnake. While all rattlesnake man-beings are revered as grandfathers, as sorcerers with their medicine rattles, and as warriors with their deadly bite, since at least the later seventeenth century, the eastern diamondback

(*Crotalus admanteus*) rattlesnake man-being held a special fascination for the Northern Iroquoians (Figure 2).

This is unexpected because the historic range of the eastern diamondback rattlesnake did not extend northward into the homeland of the Northern Iroquoians. However, by the later seventeenth century, the historic range of the Northern Iroquoians and the Iroquois proper extended southward into the homeland of the eastern diamondback rattlesnake. By this time the Seneca and other Iroquois had also incorporated and assimilated into their identities individuals and families from throughout the Great Lakes region and southward into Virginia and the Carolinas. Presumably, firsthand knowledge and traditions of the flora and fauna of those regions were similarly incorporated and assimilated.

As early as 1656, the Iroquois were said to have been composed of more "foreigners," that is, non-Iroquois Indians, than "natives." Eleven different nations were noted among the Seneca at this date, and eight among the Onondaga (Hamell 1980: 96; Parker 1926:145-146; Thwaites 1896-1901:43:265). In 1721 pictographs of a "crocodile," more probably the American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*), and of "beefs," the American bison (*Bison bison*), as well as a great many other animals, were noted on the board walls of one the "Indian houses" built outside the gates of Albany for the use of the Indians when they came to trade (Colden 1918:128).

Incised linear motifs occasionally bearing repeating diamond motifs down their lengths



Figure 1. *Caddoan rattlesnake man-beings engraved on a circa A.D. 1250 marine shell cup from Spiro, Oklahoma. National Museum of the American Indian, 18/9083. (Phillips and Brown 1984: Plate 192).*

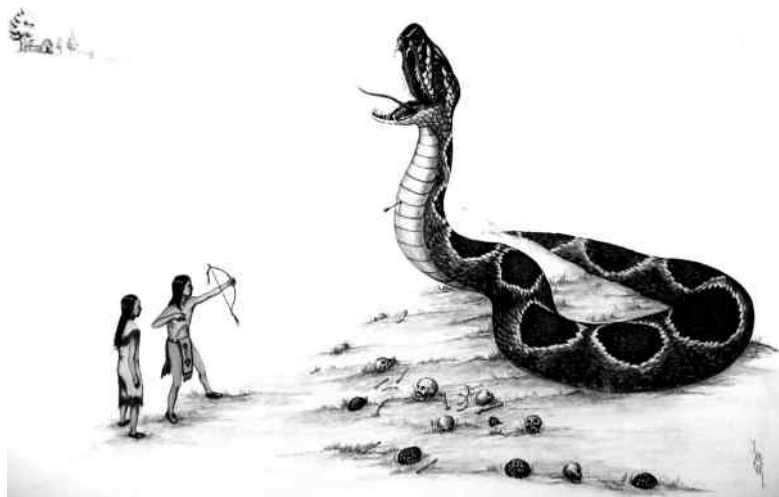


Figure 2. *The Story of Bare Hill. This painting depicts the slaying of the great serpent man-being that had devoured all of the first people, except a youth and his sister. The story is a variation of the Northern Iroquoians' origins tradition of the Feast of the Dead. Ernie Smith, Seneca Iroquois, 1937. Rochester Museum and Science Center, MR 949, Rochester, New York.*

appear on upper Iroquois bone combs of the later seventeenth century (Hamell 1979:Figure 6a and 6b). More convincing as inspired by the eastern diamondback rattlesnake are a pair of very early eighteenth century combs that feature great horned serpents bearing linked diamonds incised down their lengths (Hamell 1979: 17d). One of these also has a bifurcated tail, suggestive of the Birger Figurine's great serpent's bifurcated tail bearing bottle gourd blossoms and fruit (Figure 3).

The eastern diamondback rattlesnake's pattern of linked diamonds down its length found special resonance among the historic Iroquois and other Eastern Woodland Indians. This pattern found material expression in a wide range of media historically, such as quillwork and beadwork in the Northeast, including wampum belts composed of white and dark purple marine shell beads. Among the Seneca Iroquois of the lower Great Lakes region, sorcerers morphed into their great serpent man-being forms by putting on

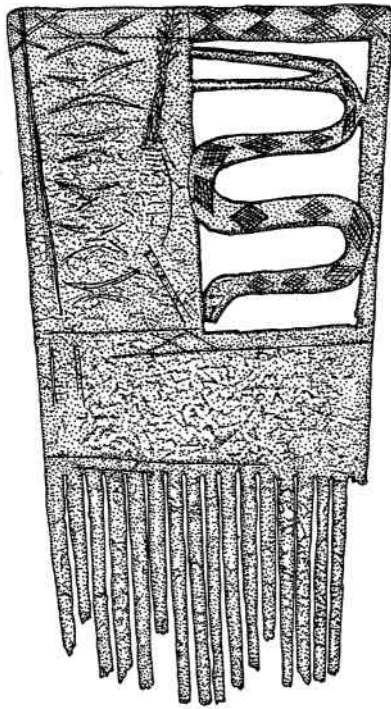


Figure 3. A circa A.D. 1700-1720 Iroquois antler comb decorated with a great serpent bearing an engraved linked diamond pattern down the back and having a bifurcated tail as does the great serpent of the Birger Figurine. Note also what may be a broken arrow on the comb's panel to the left.

quillwork-decorated buckskin jackets that bore linked white diamonds on a black strip down the midline of the jacket's back (Parker 1923:218, 220). A great serpent man-being might appear to a young woman as a handsome young man "with a wampum sash around his body and a fine headdress with black eagle plumes waving over it" (Curtin and Hewitt 1918:87). Northern Iroquoians further recognized the analogy between serpent skins and scales, and wampum belts and beads respectively (Cusick 1828:23; Parker 1919:3) (Figure 4).

Among the most culturally significant of these analogies relates to the Todadahō wampum belt, or more properly a ceremonial "mat" because of its large size and great width. This is one of the three

"charter belts" or mats of the Iroquois Confederacy's founding. This wampum belt is named after the former snaky-haired, swamp-dwelling Onondaga cannibal-sorcerer-warrior, who was transformed at the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy, and who subsequently assumed the leading sachem title of the Confederacy, "Totadahō." This large wampum belt features a "chain" of white diamonds within a dark purple or "black" band running the length of the belt's midline (Clarke 1931:99, 118, Figure 35). In one early version of Todadahō's transformation, after the people drove away the snakes, a mass of wampum was collected and the chief was soon dressed in a large belt of wampum (Cusick 1848:22-23). In a more obscure and perhaps, more authoritative tradition of the Confederacy's founding, the belt or mat is identified with Todadahō's *pre*-transformation clothing. Following the straightening of the crooks in Todadahō's body and the combing of the snakes from his hair, the people removed the garment he was wearing that was "so offensive to mankind" (Fenton and Gibson 1941:83). Subsequently in the narrative, this garment is described as his "evil cloak" or his "shirt," in which the other founding federal sachems wrapped his weapons of murder and cast them into the watery void below the "tree of peace" which was temporarily uprooted for this purpose (Fenton and Gibson 1941:110-111, 158 n. 142).

Within the Iroquois Confederacy council, there was a special staff at hand to fling an unwelcomed wampum belt from the council fire. Like the "dragon of discord," such a belt was disdained (Parker 1916:31, 98). Similarly, an unwelcomed wampum belt, as the medium of discord, might be thrown to the ground and kicked about or left on the ground and denounced as "venomous and detestable" (O'Callaghan 1853:3:780; Sullivan et al. 1921-1965:2:795-796; 9:540). "Dragons of discord" were stereotypical roles into which serpents were often cast, literally and figuratively serving as agents disruptive of social communications.



Figure 4. The linked diamond pattern from a circa A.D. 1850 Seneca wampum belt. Lewis H. Morgan Collection, NYSM 37419, New York State Museum, Albany, NY.

Serpents are ambivalent beings in American Indian beliefs, as they are elsewhere. They are recognized “skin-shedders,” a concept perhaps related to their shape-shifting abilities, and a concept related to life renewal and resuscitation. Serpents occupy one pole of a continuum of long-tailed and long-bodied animal kinds of people closely identified with medicine; that is with potency that can be consecrated to socially-constructive or socially-destructive purposes, or as generally understood and translated to “good” or “evil” purposes. These animal man-beings range from serpents or snakes at one end of a continuum through salamanders, lizards, weasels, mink, fishers, martins, otters, and mountain lions at the other end (Hamell 1987:78; 1998:258, 264, 269). While the common water snake (*Nerodia sipedon*) is the natural prototype for the great water serpents, rattlesnakes are also frequently cast to play the roles of the great horned or antlered serpent man-beings, and fire dragon man-beings, who reside in springs and other deep and expansive bodies of water and to whom gifts are made to insure safe passage over their waters. These great serpents, like their kinsmen, the underwater panther man-beings, are often described or depicted as horned or antlered to denote their chiefly status, power, and authority. Horns and antlers are the symbolic equivalent of feather headdresses, and analogous to the auras, halos, and crowns of Western beings of imminent and radiant power and authority (Hamell 1979:Figures 10 and 16; 1987:78; 1998:285).

The Seneca Iroquois know the rattlesnake man-being by names that acknowledge his “black face”, the black “mask” around his eyes, and the rattle

that he carries (Curtin and Hewitt 1918:791 n.15, 802 n.195, 803 n.215) (Figure 5). Among the Northern Iroquoians and other Great Lakes Indians, a black face or black mask denotes and connotes individuals in ritual, asocial states-of-being; that is, individuals who are ritually set apart from the rest and not bound by normative behavior, such as mourning kinsmen and tricksters (Hamell 1987:75-76; 1992:456-457). Animal man-beings having a black face or a black mask around their eyes frequently find themselves typecast into asocial roles, such as the northern raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) man-being who often plays the role of “trickster” in animal stories from the region (Barbeau 1915:180-203; Parker 1923:312-313, 319-320; 1926:40-46, 47-58, 88-93). The rattlesnake man-being’s black mask and black face further links him conceptually with shamans and warriors, and with similarly-marked, other than-human-kinds of people, such as the peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) and the pileated woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*) (or the ivory-billed woodpecker [*Campephilus principalis*]) that appear in engraved shell work such as found at Spiro, Oklahoma. While the black face and black mask serve as their common denominator, these animal man-beings are further typecast into specific ritual roles based upon other culturally salient coloration, habits and habitats.

There is also a conceptual association and identification between rattlesnake man-beings and raccoon man-beings, who not only share black-masked faces, but also share “black and white” ringed tails, and homes in rocky places (Figure 6). In the eighteenth century, Wyandot Iroquoians

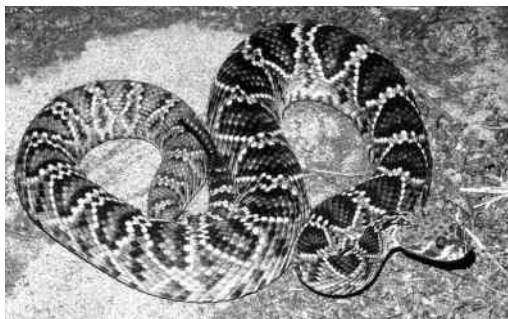


Figure 5. The eastern diamondback rattlesnake in spring. Photograph courtesy of Dr. Wolfgang Wuster, School of Biological Sciences, University of Wales, Bangor, Wales, U.K.



Figure 6. The northern raccoon in winter. Photograph courtesy of the Department of Natural Resources, Springfield, Illinois. Bob Gress, photographer.

and possibly Ottawa Algonquians regarded raccoon man-beings and rattlesnake man-beings as morphs of but one species. Setting their wooden traps at the mouths of openings into the rocks on an island at the west end of Lake Erie, the Indians found their traps filled with large and fat raccoons every winter and with large rattlesnakes each spring (Smith 1907:82-83). The Seneca Iroquois tradition of “an anthropomorphic tribe of rattlesnakes” tells of a young hunter who, in winter, tracked a raccoon to the mouth of a cavern along a high rocky riverbank. Leaving his bow and arrows, and walking stick outside, the hunter entered the cavern and found himself in another country where black raspberries were ripening. Following a well-beaten path, the young man came to a lodge where he was invited in by a very aged couple, whose heads were white and partially bald, and who called him “grandson.” The young hunter subsequently learned that his hosts were elderly rattlesnake man-beings, in the corner of whose lodge lay curled up on a mat, the very raccoon he had followed into the cave the day before. Upon returning home the chiefs called a council at which the young hunter could tell the people his strange story of the rattlesnake people who “assumed at will human form and attributes and lived under human institutions” (Curtin and Hewitt 1918:543). Within the context of one community variation of the Iroquois shamanistic animal medicine society, known as the Little Water

Medicine, the raccoon is regarded as a “witch,” that is, as having “supernatural power” (Fenton 2002:189).

Similar shared elongated forms, ventral striped patterns, and habits of co-denning, probably underlay the Menominee Algonquian belief that chipmunks (*Tamias* sp.) transform into garter snakes (*Thamnophis* sp.) and vice versa (Speck and Witthoft 1947:348). Among the Iroquois, chipmunks were thought to have descended from snakes (Hewitt 1890:389). Similar concepts probably underlay the role of the “ground squirrel,” with the eastern chipmunk (*Tamias striatus*) intended, as an “uki” (Barbeau 1915:137-141). An “uki”, and its cognate among the Seneca, is a powerful entity whose potency is thought harmful and dangerous to human welfare, and thus generally identified with “witchcraft”.

Seneca and Northern Iroquoian traditions, although distant in both time and space, suggest plausible explanations for the seemingly anomalous associations between rattlesnakes and raccoons, sometimes horned or antlered, and sometimes bearing motifs identified with serpents, as depicted in the shell work from Spiro, Oklahoma, and identified with Caddoan language speakers (Phillips and Brown 1978:133, 136 Figure 195, 142 Figure 306, 154, Plates 104-105; Phillips and Brown 1984: Plates 136-137, 139, 224, 237, 252, 254) (Figure 7a-c). One of the earliest images of a probable feather and incised-decorated gourd rattle is also found



Figure 7. Caddoan cutout and engraved raccoon man-beings and motifs on circa A.D. 1250 marine shell gorgets from Spiro, Oklahoma. United States National Museum, 448808 (a); James Durham collection, Sp-507 (b); National Museum of the American Indian, 1819086 (c). After Phillips and Brown (1984:Plates 235, 136, and 139). Illustrations courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

on one of these marine shell gorgets that also features raccoon motifs (cf. Phillips and Brown 1984: Plate 137, at the upper right).

Bottle Gourd Rattles

Bottle gourds (*Lagenaria siceraria*) are among the earliest domesticated plants in the New World with an archeologically documented presence 10,000 years ago. By 8,000 years ago they were widespread in the Americas (Erikson et al. 2005). A bottle gourd has been archeologically recovered from the Windover site in Florida and dated to 7,290 B.P., making it the earliest documented record for the species north of Mexico (Doran et al. 1990). Recently, the long-standing debate as to whether the bottle gourd, which originated in Africa, was introduced directly in the Americas from Africa, or indirectly from Asia has been resolved through genetic research. Bottle gourds had originally been introduced to the New World from Asia, but more recently re-introduced from Africa following European Contact (Erikson et al. 2005).

Bottle gourds have been grown throughout the Americas for their functional uses as containers when dried and for their spiritual uses as the “medicine rattle” of shamans. A survey of the antiquity of the bottle gourd medicine rattle and its distribution in the Americas remains to be made. Gourd rattles are highly unlikely to be preserved archeologically unless under very dry or very wet conditions. However, an otherwise inexplicable cluster of small pebbles—small white stones or quartzite pebbles—may be the only archaeological evidence for the former presence of a gourd rattle or rattle made from some other perishable material, such as bark, wood or skin.

Frank G. Speck presented a survey of gourd uses among the Indians of the southeastern United States, including the bottle gourd’s use as medicine rattles (Speck 1941). The watercolours of John White document their presence and use in dancing and singing among the coastal Carolina Algonquian Indians in 1585 (Hulton 1984:66 Plate 36, 69 Plate 39, 70 Plate 40, 179). The [bottle] gourd’s use as a medicine rattle is ubiquitous and well documented in the ethnographic and

historic literature. The great regard in which the gourd rattle was universally held is no where better exemplified than its role in identifying Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions as “medicine men,” with the power of life and death, as they journeyed across southern Texas and northern and western Mexico in the years 1534 through 1536 (Kreiger 2002:185-234). The gourd rattles carried by them served as virtual “passports,” a symbolic function analogous to that played by the calumet, and the wampum belt, in central and eastern North America respectively during the following two centuries.

Rattlesnake Rattles

The rattlesnake man-being is the pre-eminent shaman with his gourd medicine rattle at his tail. The Seneca Iroquois story of the origin of the “rattlesnake tribe,” tells of warriors who danced themselves into a delirium and at the signal of their rattles, turned upon their warrior kinsmen and killed them (Parker 1908:110-112). As punishment, they were transformed into “snake people:” the warriors’ rattles dropped to their feet and melded to them, and from thenceforth, as rattlesnakes, they would always shake their rattles before striking. This story was said by some Seneca to be an allusion to the Cherokee Iroquoians. Among the latter, terms for “rattle” and for “ground rattlesnake” are identical, and Cherokee bottle gourd [medicine] rattles sometimes have rattlesnake rattles attached as tassels (Speck 1941:77 Figure 73, 85; Speck and Broom 1951:21-22, Figure 1, left) (Figure 8). A similar tradition of the transformation of dancers, whose leader carries a rattle, into rattlesnakes is found among the Passamaquoddy Algonquians (Fewkes 1890:261, Speck 1923:279).

Chichicois or some similar variation in pronunciation was the common name for the gourd rattle throughout the Eastern Woodlands, and occasionally for rattles of different construction. The term is onomatopoeic in origin, reproducing the sound of the shaken rattle itself, *chi-chi-cois*, *chi-chi-cois* (Hamell 1984) (Figure 9). The French were the first to record the term in the Northeast early in the seventeenth century. In 1634, the

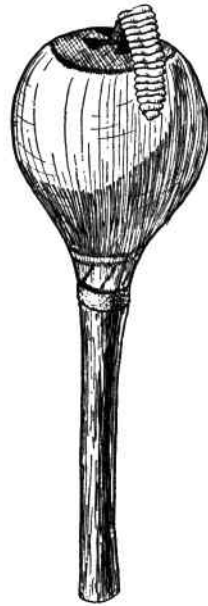


Figure 8. Cherokee bottle gourd rattle with rattlesnake rattle tassel (Speck and Broom 1951:Figure 1 left). Illustration courtesy of the University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma.

Jesuit Father Paul Le Jeune observed that Montagnais Algonquian shamans utilized a tambourine drum which they called *chichigouan*, in which they placed some little pebbles to make more noise (Thwaites 1896-1901:6:185). An apparent “cognate” Montagnais term, *Khichikouai*, was the name for “certain Genii of light, or Genii of the air,” and was derived from the word, *khichikou*, which means “light” or “the air” (Thwaites 1896-1901:6:161). Montagnais “jugglers” consulted these spirits who “are acquainted with future events.” One of these spirits, was reported to be “as large as a fist;” “his body was stone, and rather long;” judged to be “cone-shaped, large at one end, and gradually becoming smaller towards the other;” and in “this stone body there is flesh and blood” (Thwaites 1896-1901:6:169-171). Despite the lack of feet and wings, these spirits could move and fly about.

Quartz crystals and “white stones,” that is, white quartzite pebbles, were used, if not preferred for use, in rattles, including gourd rattles,



Figure 9. Algonquian shamans and medicine men, circa A.D. 1700. Note the feather-decorated gourd rattle at left. Drawing made by the Jesuit missionary Father Louis Nicholas based upon his missionary experience in New France, circa A.D. 1664-1675 (Nicholas 1974:Figure 39). Illustration courtesy of the Thomas H. Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

across North America and beyond (Hodge 1907-1910:2:355). The Warao of Amazonia placed small quartz crystals or white quartzite pebbles in their (tree) gourd rattles, the sounds of which, when shaken, summon the shaman's ancestral "familiar spirits," and his "family" (Wilbert 1974:90-91). When shaken vigorously, the quartz crystals within the Warao's "calabash of the ruffled feathers" shaved off and ignited pieces of the gourd's interior which could be seen through the holes purposefully carved in the shell of the rattle for that purpose (Wilbert 1974:92). The pebbles used within the medicine gourd rattles of the Pawnee Caddoans symbolized the spirits of dead priests (Dorsey 1904:5, 329 n. 6 and n.7); Menominee Algonquian medicine men use a thin and flat rattle consisting of a hoop covered on both sides with woodchuck skin that is obviously related in form and construction to the Montagnais Algonquians' *chichigouan*; Menominee medicine men "call the spirits and they get inside the *cicigwan* rattle and make the sound" (Densmore 1932:100). Shawnee Algonquians place about 20 small quartz crystals in their gourd rattles, and use the same in all their hand rattles (Voegelin 1942:465).

While first recorded among Algonquian speakers in the Northeast early in the seventeenth century, variations of this onomatopoeic term for rattle, *chi-chi-cois*, can be found across North America (Hamell 1984:2-3, 5 n.1-3). The widespread distribution of this name for "rattle," principally of the [bottle] gourd type, has been argued to be the result of its dispersion by the French, who with their Algonquian-speaking guides and translators, carried the term with them as they traveled into the Great Lakes region and down the Mississippi Valley during the seventeenth and well into the eighteenth century, and to its subsequent borrowing into local native languages (Crawford 1978:64-67 and 117-118n; Friederici 1926:26; 1947:171-172).

However, it is just as likely that this onomatopoeic term for "rattle" was already ancient and had been independently adopted in widely scattered populations across North America. Compare the Nahuatl term for Xipe's rattle-stick, *chicauaztli* (*chicahuaztli*) a staff with a gourd

filled with pebbles or seeds (possibly corn) attached at its upper end (Neumann 1976:247; von Winning 1959:86). The possible onomatopoeic origins of its name and for the human femur rasp used at the funerals of Aztec warriors, *omichicauaztli* (*omichicahuaztli*), have been overlooked with their accepted etymologies attributed to the word, *chicahua*, whose meaning is given as "that by means of which something is made strong or powerful." This etymology probably derived from a long-term association between the concepts of curing, rattles, and the onomatopoeic sound of the medicine gourd rattle in particular. Incidentally, the Iroquois formerly used a set of wooden rasping sticks at funerals, which were then either broken and burned, or buried with the deceased. This instrument is said to be one of the "old-timers" and to represent human bones (Conklin and Sturtevant 1953:286).

Moreover, the same sound symbolism appears in Algonquian, Siouan, and Iroquoian names for "rattle" (of various forms, including the gourd rattle) and for "rattlesnake" (Hamell 1984:2-3, 5-6). In Abenaki Algonquian, *sizikwa* is the name for both "rattle" and "rattlesnake" (Day 1981:165; personal communication 1985 and 1988); in Chippewyan and Menominee Algonquian, *cicigwan* (*shishikwe*) is the name for both the medicine rattle and for rattlesnake (Densmore 1932:11, 100; Kurath 1953:275 n.21); in Shawnee Algonquian *si?siikwa*, *si?siikwana*, and *sisikwia* are the names for the speckled gourd, gourd rattle, and "rattlesnake," respectively (Voegelin 1939:315, 317); in Catawba Siouan *se` se` here* and *tci` tci` here* are names for "rattle" (Speck 1939:53); and in Seneca the rattlesnake is known as *sigwaon* (Curtin and Hewitt 1918:93, 791 n.14 and 15). Its given Seneca etymology derives it from the nominal root for "fork," as in "forked tongue" (Chafe 1967:56 lexical item 683). This is probably a folk etymology and the term is perhaps a loan word from neighboring Algonquian speakers.

The onomatopoeic and reduplicative name—*chi-chi-cois*—for the gourd, squash, and "pumpkin" rattle in North America suggests the possibility that the Old World scientific family

name for gourds, *cu-cur-bi-tae*, has similar origins. The name derives from the Classical Latin word for “gourd,” *cucurbita*. At present no etymology for this term is available and the origins of this name has so far escaped plausible explanation. (cf. Norrman and Haarberg 1980:141). Perhaps it too, originated in the sound symbolism of a shaken dried gourd [and its interior seeds] and the possible subsequent function of the same, as further modified into a rattle proper. In response to inquiries about the etymology of the term *cucurbita*, a recognized *cucurbitae* specialist and a Classical Latin authority knew of none (H.S. Paris, personal communication 2006

and W. Wyatt, personal communication 2006). However, both scholars are agreeable to a probable onomatopoeic origin, with the latter further suggesting that the original reduplicative form was “*cur-cur-bita*.”

No other object from North America visually exemplifies the rattlesnake man-being’s conceptual identification and association with the bottle gourd and bottle gourd rattle better than the Middle Mississippian bauxite Birger Figurine from Illinois, which dates to the Stirling phase Cahokia culture, about A.D. 1000-1250 (Figure 10). The figure represents a woman kneeling on the back of a coiled great serpent, whose head



Figure 10. The Birger Figurine from the circa A.D. 1000-1250 Middle Mississippian BBB Motor site, on the outskirts of Cahokia in Illinois. Back (a) and side (b) views, and detail of the great serpent’s face (c). Courtesy of the Illinois Transportation Archaeological Research Program, University of Illinois.

exhibits feline characteristics and whose tail bifurcates, ending with probable bottle gourds (Emerson 1982:5-8 Figures 4a and 4b; Penny 1985:157-158 Plate 113, 212; Prentice 1986; Reilly 2004:134 Figures 17a,b, 263). To date, interpretations of the figurine's meaning have focused upon the identity of the woman depicted and not upon the great serpent as the grandfather or grandmother rattlesnake man-being. Obviously, the great serpent, from whose bifurcated tail grows gourd blossoms and bottle gourds, is a visual pun for the great rattlesnake man-being—male, or more likely here, female in gender (Figure 10a-b). The Birger Figurine's great serpent's feline facial characteristics (Figure 10c) are indicative of its kinship with the "piasa" and with the "fire-dragon" and underwater panther man-beings—"flying lions", alter egos of the Meteor and Comet man-beings of the historic Huron-Wyandot and Seneca Iroquoians (Hamell 1979:Figures 18a-f; 1998).

This identity between rattlesnakes and bottle gourds is further exemplified in Caddoan bottle gourd-shaped ceramic vessels, dating to about A.D.

1200-1500 and featuring engraved serpentine motifs, and sometimes explicit images of the (timber/canebrake) rattlesnake itself (cf. Brown 1985:110-111 Plate 76, 209; Halfmoon 2004:248, Figure 3, 266; Walters 2006:27-33, Figures 19-29) (Figure 11). These ceramic vessels undoubtedly reproduce in form, function, and perhaps in decoration, bottle gourds used as containers, just as other ceramic vessels reproduced other members of the curcurbit family. An early eighteenth century gourd rattle from the Carolinas in the British Museum resonates with the forms and decorations of earlier gourd-shaped Mississippian ceramic vessels (King 1999:82, Figure 82) (Figure 12). The Seneca Iroquois story concerning the origin of the "rattlesnake tribe mentioned earlier describes the transformation of male dancers carrying [bottle] gourd rattles into rattlesnakes, as does a similar Passamaquoddy Algonquian tradition. A Cherokee Iroquoian bottle gourd rattle (Figure



Figure 11. A circa A.D. 1200-1500 Caddoan ceramic bottle decorated with rattlesnakes. James and Elaine Kinker Collection, Hermann, Missouri (Halfmoon 2004:248, Figure 3). Reproduced with the permission of the owners, and John Bigelow Taylor, photographer, Highland Falls, New York.



Figure 12. Engraved decorated bottle gourd rattle, from the Carolinas, dating before A.D. 1730. Sir Hans Sloane Collection, (King 1999:82, Figure 82). Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London, U.K.

8) features a rattlesnake rattle tied to its distal end as a tassel, confirming their association and identity (Speck 1941:77, Figures. 73 and 85; Speck and Broom 1951:21-22, Figure 1).

In Seneca traditions of the origins of the Little Waters Medicine—a war medicine bundle to treat wounds and other trauma—the animal man-beings of the sky and of the earth all contributed to the resuscitation of their friend, the good hunter, who was scalped and left for dead by the enemy, usually identified as the Cherokee (Fenton 2002:23-43). The “birds sang and the rattlesnakes rattled; all—the ‘bird and animal sorcerers’—present made music, every one in his own way” (Curtin and Hewitt 1918:274-275). Among the Seneca, the use of the large gourd rattle is restricted to this ancient shamanistic curing society, also known as the Society of Mystic Animals (Conklin and Sturtevant 1953:272, Figure 3d, 287-288; Fenton 2002:116 Figure 8, 130 Figure 12, 134-135 Figures 17-18, 137 Figure 20, 139 Figures 21-22; Parker 1908:149-183 Figure 9; Parker 1909:165-167). These rattles are usually made of the bottle gourd. However, “squash” and “pumpkin” rattles are also sometimes described. Incidentally, in the origins tradition of

the Menominee Algonquian medicine rite or Mitawin, the gourd rattle was the gift of the rattlesnake (Skinner 1920:171; 1925:300).

Rattlesnakes as Northeastern Reptiles

There are only two rattlesnake species native to the Northeast—the massasauga and the timber rattler (Logier 1958:56-61). The former (*Sistrurus c. catenatus*) are relatively small, rarely exceeding 75 cm in length; while the latter (*Crotalus b. horridus*) can reach lengths of over 180 cm (Figure 13). Both display colour phases varying from black to a ground colour of grey or brown with darker blotches or V-shaped crossbands, in the case of timber rattlers. These two species formerly ranged as far north as the southern edge of the Canadian Shield in Ontario (Fox 2003:2-4); but, the timber rattler was extirpated from the province in the mid-twentieth century. However, they are widely distributed to the south, in the United States.

Klauber (1972:1221) has identified the account of Pedro de Cieza de Leon concerning Peru, published in 1554, as the earliest description of a rattlesnake (presumably, *Crotalus durissus* [Rubio 1998:14]). The first references to rattlers in the



Figure 13. Timber rattlesnakes (*Crotalus horridus horridus*). Photograph copyright and courtesy of John Cancalosi/naturepl.com.

Northeast are to be found in the early seventeenth century observations of Samuel de Champlain and John Smith (Klauber 1972:1227). It is not until the Jesuits establish missions among the Five Nations Iroquois that a description of a rattlesnake is found in the 1657 Relation of Paul Le Jeune (Thwaites 1896-1901:43:153-155). In discussing some salt springs near Lake Ganentaa (Onondaga), Le Jeune takes note of these snakes which can kill, but which are also used medicinally, for toothache and fever, and are simply eaten in the same manner as eels. Slightly later in the seventeenth century, Brehant de Galinee writes of the Burlington Bay vicinity, at the west end of Lake Ontario, that "[t]here are a great many of them at this place, as thick as one's arm, six or seven feet long, entirely black. The rattle that they carry at the end of the tail, and shake very rapidly, makes a noise like that which a number of melon or squash seeds would make if shut up in a box" (Coyne 1903:41). These can only be timber rattlers, given their size, and Galinee further observes that three large rattlesnakes encountered (face to face?) by la Salle while exploring the Niagara Escarpment may have been the cause of his subsequent "fever". Another brief eighteenth century Jesuit reference reports numerous rattlesnakes around Lake George in the Adirondacks (Thwaites 1896-1901:70:141).

A search of the Ontario archaeo-faunal literature, including several hundred unpublished reports held by the Howard Savage Faunal Lab at the University of Toronto, produced only four potential rattlesnake bone identifications, three of which seemed certain to be *Viperidae* family. One was identified to *Crotalidae* genus (Bernhardt 1986:14, 30) and another as *Crotalus horridus* or timber rattler (Fram 1984:23). All four sites are fifteenth to sixteenth century Neutral Iroquoian villages situated in a relatively limited geographic area adjacent to the Niagara escarpment, a noted rattlesnake habitat (Fox 2003a:2-3). The identified timber rattlesnake remains derive from House 1 at the Ivan Elliot village site (Fitzgerald 1990); however, there is nothing in its context to suggest any ritual significance to the remains. Elsewhere, Dr. Elizabeth Reitz (personal communication 2006) notes that *Viperidae* remains are "not common but they are present at many sites" in the Southeast,

such as Etowah; however, no contextual information is available at this time.

Rattlesnake-Native Relations

While there are sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish observations concerning the place of rattlesnakes in mesoamerican and southwestern Native ritual (Klauber 1972:1226), it is not until the eighteenth century that we find a reference to Native religious beliefs in the Northeast. When Alexander Henry attempted to kill a rattlesnake on the north shore of Georgian Bay in 1764, he was prevented by the Chippewa with whom he was traveling, who "surrounded it, all addressing it by turns, and all calling it their grandfather;... they filled their pipes; and now each blew the smoke toward the snake, who, it appeared to me, really received it with pleasure." (Bain 1901:166-167). It is clear that this rattlesnake personified the "Horned Serpent" of lore, as the Chippewa were forced to sacrifice two dogs, some tobacco (and almost Alexander Henry, himself) to "the god-rattlesnake" in the midst of a storm on Georgian Bay the following day; which storm was assumed to have been precipitated by Henry's "insult" to the snake. Among the Chippewa or Ojibwa, rattlesnake skins were used as Eighth Degree medicine bags by the Midéwiwin Society. Blessing (1977:82) reports that the Ojibway of Minnesota used "small brass trade bells or thimbles fastened to the tail in imitation of rattlesnake rattles" (although, also note the use of gourd rattles, above). The Eighth Degree was the highest level of attainment for a Midé priest and Blessing notes that "[t]hough eighth degree snakeskins were obtained in old accumulations, no eighth degree members were recorded. Aged informants knew the names of a very few persons holding this degree. They had heard of them in their youth but none knew any personally." (Blessing 1977:110). These Midé priests appear to have attained a level of spiritual power, similar to that of so-called rattlesnake shamans elsewhere in North America.

In a list of snake-related ethnographic specimens held by the Smithsonian National Museum

of the American Indian we find snake skin medicine bags from the Menominee, Potawatomi, Ojibwa and Seminole, and medicine belts/sashes from the Ojibwa and Iowa. Many of these items could be of rattlesnake skin; however, this is not indicated in the catalogue. Actual rattlesnake rattles are included as a Cherokee ball player hair fetish and as part of an Osage plume decoration. Finally, a Cherokee war dance mask carved from wood displays a coiled rattlesnake on its forehead (Figure 14).

Laurence Klauber, in his exhaustive three-volume review of rattlesnakes, provides extensive ethnographic data concerning Native beliefs and activities relating to these snakes from throughout North and Central America. Attitudes of “mingled fear and reverence” were widespread and the uses to which rattlesnakes were put were numerous; however, some basic themes are ubiquitous, including the associations with both the Upper (lightning, thunder and rainfall) and Lower Worlds. Among Mississippian groups, this appears to have been symbolized by the winged rattlesnake as represented on the “public” Hemphill-style pottery from the Moundville site (Steponaitis and Knight 2004:170-172 Figure 6a, 179) and by “serpent and feline piasas” on stone or shell gorgets (Steponaitis and Knight 2004:179 Figure 21, 180). The former may well have had a rainfall connotation to the farmer class, whose crops supported the elite of Moundville (but see also Lankford [2004:213-214] regarding its celestial connection). The serpent/feline piasa motif has been argued to have had a limited distribution and use in Moundville society; being considered to be part of the “restricted” sphere of Moundville art” (Steponaitis and Knight 2004:179) utilized by the elite class, whose responsibilities appear to have been centred around mortuary matters in the “necropolis” that was Moundville in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Steponaitis and Knight 2004:180). The Seneca reflect the intertwined Upper and Lower world aspects of the rattlesnake/Great Serpent in stories such as “The Great Serpent and the Young Wife” (Parker 1923:223-227) as the target of lightning, and “A Seneca Legend of Hi-Nun and Niagara” (Smith



Figure 14. Cherokee war dance mask. Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

1883:9) as a subterranean agent of death. A lightning-rainfall association is expressed clearly in lore by Algonquian-speaking groups, such as the Chippewa/Ojibwa, Micmac, and Kickapoo (Fox 2004:289-292). The Lenape held a “powerful ‘rain medicine’” which was shiny and appeared to be mica, and they believed that it was “necessary only to expose a few of the ‘scales’ on a rock beside some stream to make the black thunder-clouds rise and refresh the thirsty corn-fields with rain” (Harrington 1913:225-226). Among Great Lakes Native groups, the Horned Serpent was associated consistently with lightning in the context of its eternal conflict with the Thunderers. There is little doubt that the Mississippian horned/antlered serpents were rattlesnakes (Burnett 1945:Plate 32), an identification mirrored in later times by Seneca peoples (Jesse Cornplanter’s “The Horned Serpent” in Parker [1923:218]) (Figure 15). The importance of horned serpents to the Iroquoian peoples of southwestern Ontario has been proposed by one author in connection with black shale pebble pendants, which represented serpent scales (Fox 2004:295-299).



Figure 15. *The horned serpent.* (Parker 1923:218) Drawing by Jesse Cornplanter, courtesy of the New York State Library.

An Ontario Tail

Some 25 years ago a carved and polished antler tine artifact of curious form was recovered from the bottom of an abandoned storage pit during the first days of a rescue excavation on the thirteenth century Iroquoian Calvert site in southwestern Ontario (Fox 1982) (Figure 16). Measuring a mere 29 mm in length, the piece displays a gently curved lateral profile (Figure 17) and was identified as an antler ornament in a subsequent doctoral dissertation (Timmins 1997:147). The only analogous form to the Calvert artifact known to the authors is a rattlesnake rattle, as depicted on Mississippian engraved images a century or so later, and as represented by a similarly formed wooden pendant from the famous Spiro site, identified by Burnett (1945:43) as “a pendant, carved to represent a snake rattle and drilled for suspension”.

No such antler forms are known from other Early Ontario Iroquoian contexts; however, the Calvert site was also unique in producing an assemblage of artifacts associated with Carolina parakeet cranial elements, which have been argued cogently to represent components of a shamanic pipe, indicative of religious activities on the site (von Gernet and Timmins 1987). The only comparable Ontario Iroquoian artifact forms are certain “decorated bone awls” or “annular constriction” hair pins, from fourteenth to early fifteenth century village sites (Williamson et al. 2003:Plate 13f, g; Williamson and Veilleux this volume; Wintemberg 1928:Plate

20, Figure 22; 1948:Plate 14, Figure 32) (Figure 18). None of these display a needle point form, as might be expected if they were used as tattooing instruments, similar to the documented use of rattlesnake fangs as scarifiers among groups such as the Cherokee (Klauber 1972:1199). This is unfortunate from that particular symbolic standpoint; however, if they were indeed hair pins, we do have a parallel in Iroquoian symbolism with the story of Atotarho (Hale 1883:26) or Adodarhoh, whose “long tangled locks were adorned by writhing serpents.” (Parker 1916:17).

Less species-specific serpents are, of course, well represented in northeastern mobile art (Fox 2003:Figure 15.12; Sempowski and Saunders 2001:187 Figure 3; Smith 1923:Plate 78, Figure 1;) (Figure 19) and rock art (Rajnovich 1994:107-110; Vastokas and Vastokas 1973:Figure 33) (Figure 20). However, there are relatively few clear depictions of rattlesnakes, beyond the famous Mississippian stone disc representation and engraved piasas on shell (Phillips and Brown 1978:Figures 199, 204 and 260), shell rattlesnake gorgets (Muller 1966), the spectacular Hopewell carving of the piasa progenitor (Figure 21) and the mica cut-out horned serpent recovered from the Turner group of earthworks in Ohio (Brose 1985:Plate 43; Willoughby 1922:Figures 31 and 32). By far the earliest and most spectacular rattlesnake remains on record in the Northeast derive from a 2,800 year old medicine bag from the Middlesex complex Boucher



Figure 16. The Calvert site community pattern (Fox 1982:Figure 1).

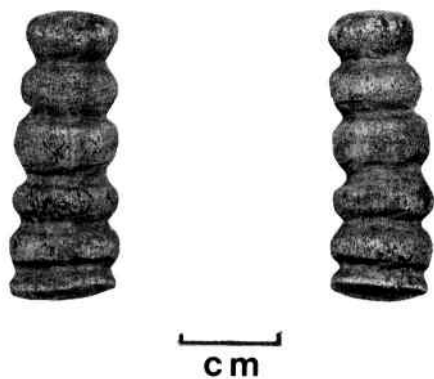


Figure 17. Two views of the carved antler rattlesnake tail effigy from the Calvert site (Affig-1, Feature 3).

site in Vermont; where a hide bag associated with a middle aged male was found to contain the partial remains of a duck, a variety of mammals, a black rat snake and a substantial portion of a timber rattlesnake (Heckenberger et al. 1990:130). Other than noting the probable ritual function of

the container, no further discussion was allotted to this intriguing article, but in light of the preceding considerations, it suggests that a strong association between serpents and rattlesnakes and ritual activities existed among Native peoples throughout Eastern North America for at least 3,000 years.

Feature 3 on the Calvert site, which produced the rattlesnake rattle effigy, relates to the thirteenth century early phase of village occupation (Timmins 1997:Table 5.5 and Figure 8.2)—a time when Ontario Iroquoian reliance on corn agriculture was rapidly reaching a crescendo (Pfeiffer and Williamson 2003:342). The secondary author has suggested that contemporary populations to the southeast, on the Norfolk sand plain, moved from that region to farm heavier soils by the end of the fourteenth century (Fox 1972:190). Sand soils tend to diminish in fertility rapidly, and are extremely well drained and hence, prone to drought. Calvert too is situated on sandy soil with



Figure 18. Bone hair pins from the Grandview site. Photograph courtesy of Archaeological Services Inc.

“low natural fertility, and low moisture-holding capacity.” (Timmins 1997:48). The reconstructed site occupation history indicates that the early phase village experienced a reduction in size and population, before ending as a hunting camp (Timmins 1997:211-213).

Recent climate histories have identified a continental Medieval Climate Anomaly (MCA), involving extended drought episodes over the period A.D. 1000 to 1450 (Herweijer et al. 2007;

Seager et al. 2006). While southwestern Ontario appears to have been peripheral to this phenomenon (Herweijer et al. 2005:Figure 7), droughty soils could easily have exacerbated its limited impact, similar to events during the recent drought period from 1931-1940. The most severe MCA drought episode has been dated by tree ring chronology to A.D. 1240-1265, the occupation period when the Calvert antler effigy was in use (and discarded) (Timmins 1997:Figure 5.8); but, the episode of greatest impact to southwestern Ontario may have been from A.D. 1360 to 1382 (Herweijer et al. 2005:Figure 2). This raises the possibility that Native farm communities were experiencing crop failures to the extent that (rattle) snake related ritual, connected with a call for rainfall, was required. Perhaps, the antler rattle effigy was a fetish or was appended to a rattlesnake skin medicine bag, similar to those described later for the Midéwiwin Society.

Given the timing of the Medieval “megadroughts,” the concurrent distribution of horned serpent scale effigy pendants on Norfolk sand plain farming settlements may be no random coincidence. Furthermore, it is during this same period that a distinctive architectural feature is evident, usually associated with longhouse dwellings. These are semi-subterranean sweat lodges, which first appear in the late thirteenth century, continue in use for over two centuries and then disappear from the archaeological record by the sixteenth century (MacDonald 1988:24). It has been proposed that these features were the site of socially integrative ceremonies (MacDonald and Williamson 2001:71), some instigated by stresses resulting from

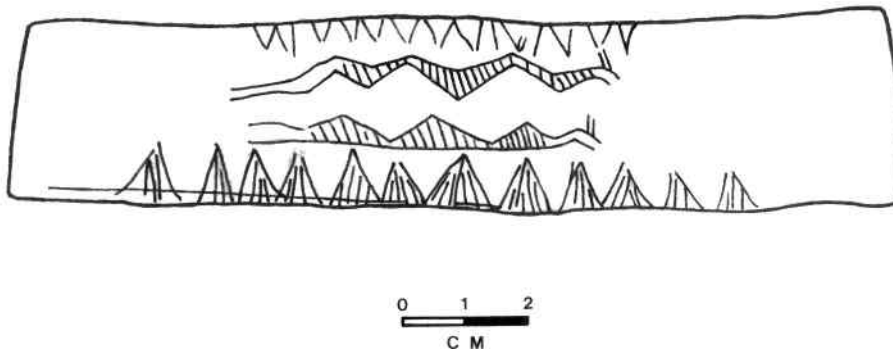


Figure 19. Brass bracelet incised with horned serpents from the Odawa Hunter's Point site (Fox 2003:Figure 15.12).

the agricultural revolution and associated changes in Iroquoian society (Kapches 1995:90); however, they also may have witnessed ritual associated with stressed crops. Articles recovered from the floors of sweat lodges are not common, but among those are some suggestive of ritual; including, a complete deer calvarium, a bear cranium, an owl wing and, of more interest to the drought thesis, six of the rare “annular constriction” or rattlesnake rattle motif hair pins (Williamson et al. 2003:13 and Williamson and Veilleux this volume.:Table 5). The demise of these structures coincides with the onset of the so-called “Little Ice Age” c. AD 1450, a period of wetter climate. The distribution of the serpent scale pendants terminates likewise at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Taken together, the evidence is suggestive of a period of intensified serpent related ritual from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, practiced by southern Ontario Iroquoian farming communities who were being stressed by the extended droughts of the Medieval Climate Anomaly.

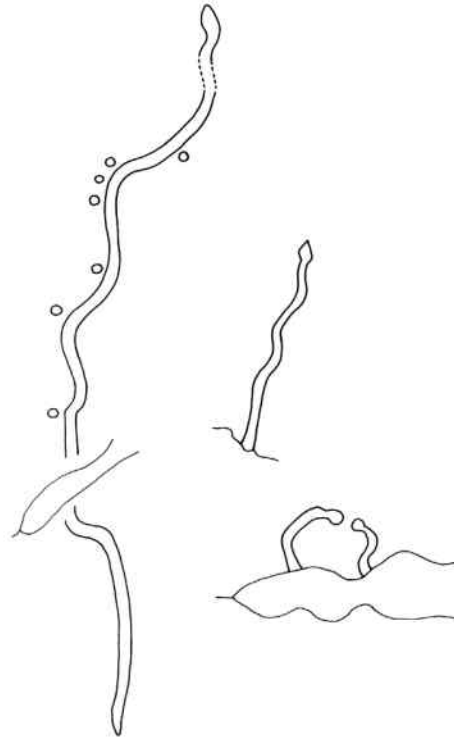


Figure 20. Serpent images from the Peterborough Petroglyphs site (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973:Figure 32). Image courtesy of J. Vastokas.



Figure 21. Carved cannell coal “piasa” from the Hopewellian Turner Mounds in Ohio. Photograph copyright and courtesy of 2007 Harvard University, Peabody Museum Photo 82-35-10/29685T131.

Conclusions

The archaeological, ethnological, linguistic, and historical data assembled here suggest an ancient and widespread conceptual association and identity between bottle gourds, bottle gourd medicine rattles, and the rattlesnake man-being as the ancient and proto-typical shaman and warrior. While all rattlesnake species partake of this association and identity, including the timber rattlesnake of the Eastern Woodlands, the preeminent species is the eastern diamondback rattlesnake, the largest venomous snake in North America. Even the Iroquois, living in the lower Great Lakes region, well to the north of the homeland of the eastern diamondback rattlesnake, came to know him and to elevate him to the chief of the rattlesnake and other serpent kinds of people, and the preeminent sorcerer and warrior. Another aspect of the serpent—its association with lightning and rainfall—has been argued to apply to Iroquoian farming communities situated in southwestern and, perhaps, south central Ontario. A distinctive constellation of artifacts and longhouse features appears to represent serpent/rattlesnake-related ritual, associated with attempts to mitigate the agricultural impact of the Medieval megadroughts.

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provided advice concerning the etymology of the word “cucurbita”.

Note

¹ The term “man-being” in this discussion follows the usage of the Tuscarora ethnologist and linguist, John N.B. Hewitt in his translations of Northern Iroquoian oral traditions (cf. Curtin and Hewitt 1918). “Man-being” is used to denote real humans and the other-than-human kinds of people that comprise the social world of North American Indians. The other-than-human kinds of “man-beings” habitually take the forms of the different kinds of what we know as plants, animals, and “natural phenomena,” such as flint, ice, wind, lightning, the sun, the moon, the meteor, and the comet. These living, sentient beings can at will take human form, either male or female, in their reciprocal, kinship-based interactions with humankind.

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Histoires de serpent à sonnettes

Des preuves archéologiques du nord-est et de certains sites mississippiens sont présentées. En combinant ces preuves avec des données ethnographiques, historiques et linguistiques, on tente d'examiner la signification symbolique du serpent à sonnettes chez les peuples autochtones du nord-est. Les auteurs argumentent que le serpent à sonnettes est, tout d'abord, le chaman prééminent avec un hochet du guérisseur (courage) attaché à sa queue. On soutient qu'une association forte et envahissante entre le serpent, y compris le serpent à sonnettes, et la foudre et la pluie, est le résultat d'une expression cérémonielle relié à la sécheresse chez les Iroquoiens de l'Ontario entre 1200 et 1450 apr. J.-C.

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