

The Spiritual World of the Lenape or Delaware Indians

It was about the year 1690 when a young Lenape named Keposch died. He had angered a powerful old chief, who bewitched him and caused a long sickness to come on him which finally caused his death. Keposch was laid out for burial, and four days passed as his family and friends assembled. Then, on the fourth day, he moved his hand, and removed the covering from his face. When revived he told the story of visiting a white-robed man in the sky, who told him, "You shall not die, but live, and be called after my name, Tammekappei." And he did live until 1756, when he died at age 84. This is one of the earliest written accounts recorded by Moravian missionaries of a Lenape visiting a Manëtu (a lesser spirit). 1

Although the Lenape have a number of Manëtuwak (lesser spirits), Kishelëmukong (Our Creator) is the greatest Manëtu of all, since He is the source of life and events. It is to Him that all prayers are addressed. He sits in the twelfth layer of the Heavenly realm. There are twelve layers to pass through before one reaches His kingdom upon death.

The first layer is the residence of the Pethakhuweyok (the Thunder Beings). These are large birds with human heads – some are very old, and some very young. A sharp cracking thunder is said to be the younger ones, while the low rumbling thunder is the old ones. There is a story about a powerful Lenape man who visited and ate with the Pethakhuweyok. He said they made a rich soup from old, dry bones. After he visited these Thunderers for a while, he returned to the earth by jumping from a low hanging cloud. [You can hear the full story here: <https://www.talk-lenape.org/stories?id=62>.]

Another powerful Manëtu among the Lenape is the Ohtas (the Doll Being). Not all Lenape families owned the dolls, but those who did must dance them, that is, have a dance for them once a year. If there is some good reason why the dance cannot be held, then the family must 'feed' the doll. It is said by the old people that if this is not done something bad will befall the owners and their relatives. 2

The Lenape people also believe that there are Manëtuwak at the four cardinal directions, and these are called Muxumsa Luwanan'tu (Grandfather of the North; Muxumsa Wehenchiopang (Grandfather of the East); Muxumsa Ehëliwsikakw (Grandfather of the West); and Uma Shawnaxawësh (Grandmother the South).

There are many other Manëtuwak in our belief. There is Wehixamukes, a man about 3 feet high and dressed all in leather who lives in wooded areas. He is very lithe, and can give the one who sees him strength and stamina.

There is a Mëxaxkuk, a huge reddish snake who lived in the ocean. He was killed and his parts divided among various tribes. It is said that the Lenape portion is now in the Museum of American Indian.

The Mësingw is another Manëtu. He is a keeper of the game animals, and was seen riding around on the backs of deer.

There are the Manëtutëtak, the little people. They are about a foot tall and have the power to grant great stamina or to cure without medicines; but they can also injure people who do wrong. My mother saw and heard these little people.

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about 1981

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1. This historical information was discovered as part of his research by Pennsylvania State Historian William Hunter.
2. Lucy Parks Blalock, a tribal elder, told of a time when her older sister Ruth was selected to eat for the Doll and Lucy sat there with her.