THE TRADITIONAL ROLES OF NATIVE WOMEN IN CANADA AND THE IMPACT OF COLONIZATION

SOMER BRODRIBB,
Department of Sociogy in Education,
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,
252 Bloor St. West,
Toronto, Ontario,
Canada, M5S 1V6.

ABSTRACT/RESUME

Recent trends in feminist research indicate a growing interest in the impact of Native women on westward expansion and imperialism. The author suggests that while early European contacts affected the status of women negatively, the views of Native women were seldom recorded during these early contact periods. Recent studies have examined the status and changing roles of Native women from the viewpoints of contemporary Native women. The diversity of their opinions continues to be a part of the contemporary debate on the resilience and resourcefulness of Native women in the past.

Dans le domaine des recherches féministes actuelles, l'influence de la femme autochtone sur l'expansion impérialiste vers l'ouest semble intéresser de plus en plus les chercheurs. L'auteur fait observer que pendant la période des premiers contacts entre les Européens et les autochtones, le statut de la femme a connu une dégradation certaine, mais que pendant cette même période l'opinion des femmes autochtones était rarement notée. Dans certaines études récentes, le statut et le rôle changeant de la femme autochtone du passé ont été étudies en adoptant le point de vue de son homologue moderne. La variété de leurs opinions dans ce domaine constitue encore à l'heure actuelle un aspect important du débat sur la fermeté et l'ingéniosité de la femme autochtone du passé.

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Introduction

In approaching the study of the impact of colonization on the traditional roles and status of Native women in Canada, one is immediately struck by the scarcity of material available, and the diverse interpretations of it. Considerable controversy exists with regard to the position of Native women in pre-contact societies, the nature and effect of White influence, and the evolution of Native women's roles over time. Yet the possibility of reconstructing traditional Native social organizations is limited by two considerations: the rapid cultural and economic disruption of Native societies due to trade and colonization, and the patriarchal, ethnocentric biases of early observers. To understand Native women's changing roles, we must deconstruct the male-centred, Euro-Canadian interpretation of history, clearing the ground for a perspective that begins from the standpoint of Native women. In this paper, we will examine the writings of fur traders, explorers, missionaries, pioneer gentlewomen, contemporary Native women, anthropologists and historians in an attempt to identify current problems in historical research in this area.

Early Contacts

The first contacts between the Indians of Canada and Europeans occurred as early as the mid-fifteenth century on the Atlantic coast, presumably when codfishing ships used timbers and harbours for repairs. By the time of Carrier's arrival in 1534, the Indians of the area had been experiencing contact with Europeans for almost a century. The introduction of iron tools and the spread of disease meant that the impact of the European was felt before actual contact occurred. Thus, Native ways of life were influenced by the White man even before the fur traders and missionaries arrived to record them. The replacement of stone, bone and antler tools by ironware effected a revolution in the economic life of the Atlantic tribes, and disrupted the balance of power. Two palisaded farming settlements which Cartier sighted at Stadacona (Quebec City) and Hochelaga (Montreal) in 1535 were deserted by the time of Champlain's expedition in the early 1600's. Guns and new technological superiority may have enabled the nomadic, woodland Algonkians to overcome the Iroquoian agri-culturalists of the St. Lawrence valley who previously may have enjoyed the advantages of a stable food supply (Patterson, 1972:58).

Early accounts of the Huron tribes of Georgian Bay, and the closely related Tionantati and Neutrals of southwestern Ontario, put their numbers at between 60,000 and 80,000 persons (Kinietz, 1977:3). Disease, famine and fierce competition over trade routes had reduced the population to 24,000 by 1640, and after the Iroquois raids of 1648-51, they numbered 1,500. Thus, Native culture and society was in a state of distress and disintegration by the time it was first described.

Early accounts of the position of Indian women in their cultures were written by fur traders and missionaries, and tell us as much about the ideological perspectives of the authors as they do about the subject at hand. Christian mores

of the time emphasized the primacy of the male and the suppression of female sexuality. However, the records of these early Europeans are the only extant accounts of the Native way of life. It is the difficult task of feminist research to discover to what extent the White, male Christian perspective is operating, and to reconstruct the reality of the time. For example, in describing the political organization of the Hurons in 1656, Brebeuf indicates that women did not participate in general assemblies. However, this ceremony had clearly undergone change:

> Formerly, each one brought his fagot to put on the fire; this is now no longer the custom, the women of the Cabin take this responsibility; they make the fires, but do not warm themselves thereat, going outside to give place to Messieurs the Councilors (Thwaites, 1897:251-263).

Such tantalizing glimpses of earlier traditions suggest that the status of women was negatively affected quite early by the White man's presence.

The earliest account of the marriage ceremonies of the Huron was recorded by Champlain. He described female sexual liberty in these terms:

> Some girls spend their youth in this way, having had more than twenty husbands, and these twenty husbands are not the only ones who enjoy these creatures, however much married they be; for after nightfall the young women run about from one lodge to another, as do the young men for their part, who possess them wherever it seems good to them, yet without violence, leaving all to the wishes of the women . . . no disgrace or injury being incurred, such being the custom of the country (Langton and Ganong, 1929:137-140, cited in Kinietz, 1977:94).

The Recollect Sagard surmised that the "Lewdness of the women" (Kinietz, 1977:90) accounted for the small number of children in Huron families. A young Huron woman tried futilely to explain to the alarmed traveller, Lahontan, that "a young woman is master of her own body, and by her natural right and liberty is free to do what she pleases" (O'Meara, 1968:130). Early writers were convinced that matrilineal descent and inheritance were practised because a man could be sure that his sister's son was related to him by blood, whereas he was not certain about his wife's children (Kinietz, 1977:61).

The Europeans, of course, were not disinterested observers. Missionaries actively intervened to regulate Native social and conjugal customs. In 1642, for the first time in the history of the eastern Algonkians, a young girl was flogged for talking with her suitor against her Christianized parent's wishes (Bailey, 1969:103). In 1644, the Governor ordered corporal punishment for those who participated at a ceremonial dance of naked girls at Three Rivers (IBID: 100) and at Tadoussac in the 1650% Jesuits prevented the traditional night visits "with locks, doorbells and sentinels to protect the segregated girls"

(ibid:103). The Jesuit, Paul Le Jeune, sought to correct what he viewed as dangerous female ascendancy among the Montagnais-Naskapi:

> The women have great power here. A man may promise you something, and if he does not keep his promise, he thinks he is sufficiently excused when he tells you that his wife did not wish to do it. I told him then that he was not the master, and that in France women do not rule their husbands . .. (Thwaites, 1906: 93).

In contrast with the native freedom of contract which generally allowed for divorce at the request of either spouse, Christian marriage ceremonies sanctified irrevocable unions. The Jesuits vigorously enforced compliance, even to the extent of imprisoning women who left their husbands. Bailey observes that:

> Sometimes the women submitted, at others they preferred the degradation of imprisonment to the companionship of their former mates. On one occasion a woman was kept for twenty-four hours without fire or a blanket, and with scarcely any food. On another a woman who fled from her husband was threatened with being chained by the foot for four days and nights without food. There is no doubt that women occupied a more degraded position in the settlements of Christians than among the wandering pagans, where divorce was relatively easy. 'When they are at a distance of two or three hundred leagues in the woods, resort to the Pastor is a very onerous condition' (1969:104).

Thus. the medieval church doctrine of original sin, and its particular emphasis on female chastity and evil, had special implications for Native women.

A Northwestern explorer, Samuel Hearne, journeyed to Coronation Gulf and the mouth of Coppermine River in the 1770's. His early account of Northern Indian society provides valuable insight into the role and status of women. Matonabbee, Hearne's Chipewyan guide, commented on the importance of women to travelling expeditions:

> Women, added he, were made for labour; one of them can carry, or haul. as much as two men can do. They also pitch our tents. make and mend our clothing, keep us warm at night; and, in fact, there is no such thing as travelling any considerable distance, or for any length of time, in this country, without their assistance. Women, said he again, though they do every thing, are maintained at a trifling expence; for us they always stand cook, the very licking of their fingers in scarce times, is sufficient for their subsistence (Hearne, 1968:55).

Hearne observed that women were purchased, taken by force or won in

wrestling matches, as it was recognized that the stronger men had a right to women. Abductions and gang rapes occurred through chance encounters of bands, or as a result of young men tracking and surprising other groups. The explorer noted that "the men have a wonderful facility in making the most stubborn comply . . . through fear . . . " (ibid:14). When one of Matonabbee's eight wives protested against his acquiring another, he "took it as such an affront that he fell on her with both hands and feet, and bruised her to such a degree, that after lingering some time she died" (ibid:15). Further research is required to determine whether such treatment of women was an intrinsic part of this society, or a result of economic distress and social breakdown.

The European Settlers

It is interesting to examine the attitudes of White women settlers regarding the Native women they met in the New Land. Some were sensitive and open-minded observers, others clearly were arrogant and prejudiced. Regrettably, Native women's views of these early contacts were not often recorded.

On an excursion to Lake Simcoe in 1822, Mrs. O'Brien had the opportunity to observe Chippewa women and noted:

> I wish I had anything to say about their native grace and beauty, but it must be confessed that there was little of either. The women's size compared with the men who are, when young, extremely slight. As they get older they are rather thick than otherwise, with very Chinese-looking faces (Miller, 1968:58).

There is some hint of curiosity and revulsion in her account of the Native women's involvement in war-making and her reference to their traditions of participating in war ceremonials by dancing with the scalps:

> Amongst the old women were some who would have looked in character had they been employed in some of the cruel practices which, according to their former habits, fell to their lot (ibid:59).

Anna Brownell Jamieson, who travelled through Southern Ontario in 1858, was sensitive to the status of Native women in their societies, but recognized that the varied accounts of travellers made it particularly difficult to discover their "true position" (1965:28). She observed with interest, however, the small size of Native families, the absence of rape in Indian warfare, and the Iroquois institution of hereditary chieftainship, "transmitted through the female, though passing over her (ibid:37).

Upon her arrival at York Factory in 1870, Letitia Hargrave wrote to her mother with a very telling passage:

> I only observed one or two 1/2 breeds, one was a woman . .. she had a baby with her and its unhappy legs wrapt up in a moss bag

> , . . I have not been near enough to inspect closely but I shall make Marg + fetch a child over without the mother that I may examine it . . . The women always come to the fort in pairs, the older 1st the younger behind her + they also look very dignified and demure... Squaws never move without their blanket common coarse often dirty affairs . . . The weest girls have them. One of the pigs comes to my window with red currants in the corner of hers which is black with dirt. Hargrave bought 2 lbs. of peppermint drops at Stromness and they laugh aloud when I give them some. They dont know a word of English or French. When I want flowers or berries I show them a specimen and give them a shove and off they go. It never happens that they fail (MacLeod, 1947:61-62).

Mrs. Hargrave was at pains to establish her social superiority, and continued to regard Native women with disdain.

It seems likely from accounts available that many White pioneer women felt the Indian wife's lot to be a hard one. Stories often circulated which featured an Archdeacon rescuing an Indian woman from maltreatment by her husband (Healy, 1967:152). In compiling a book for the Paris International Exhibition of 1900 on the life and work of women in Canada (Healy, 1975), the National Council of Women in Canada contacted various White pioneer women for information on their Native sisters. Most of the informants reported on the number of Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pagan and Treaty Indians, and discussed what headway civilization was making in converting the backward savages. Emily Cummings sympathized with the difficult work of the day schools and the poor attendance of the children, "owing to the indifference of the parents, few of whom realize the importance of education" (ibid:434). A Westerner, Henriette Forget, stated that the introduction of the reserve system in Canada in the 1870's was the beginning of the "squaws" uplifting contact with civilization. Formerly, "their lot was indeed hard. Polygamy was the general practice" (ibid:435). It seems there was even a prairie ditty that described the "red man's" choice of a wife, whose position was one of subservience. "Wives are chosen as we choose old plate/Not for their beauty but for their weight" (ibid:436). Satisfaction was taken in the fact that, with civilization, Indian women were dressing better for their weddings, and instead of the heavily burdened slaves of former times, the traveller to "the Canadian West sees bright-eyed, chubby, happy-looking damsels ' (ibid:436).

A gentlewoman settler of the East believed there were two classes of Indian women: "civilized and partly civilized." The former live on Reserves, are much better off than before, "speak English fluently, are good cooks and excellent wives, . . . (keep) . . . their houses clean and tidy, and .... (dress) themselves and their children well." The latter are more likely to live in a nomadic state, are forced to work extremely hard, " are not brilliant successes as cooks," do not dress in the modern fashion, and exhibit "much laxity respecting marital obligations" (ibid:438).

E. Pauline Johnson, a poet and Iroquois woman, was also a contributor

to the book, and paints quite a different picture of the culture and position of Iroquois women. She refers to matrilineality and women's traditions of participation in the Great Council, countering the "widespread error, that Indian men look down on and belittle their women." At a time when other Canadian women were disenfranchised, Johnson pointedly observed that Iroquois women had votes and participated in government, but "not all civilized races honour their women as highly" (ibid:432).

Contemporary Native Views

Unfortunately, Native women have left no written accounts of their traditional status, and the impact of colonization on their lives. We can, however, examine status and changing roles in the myths, oral history, and material written from the viewpoint of contemporary Native women. In "The legend of Buffalo Lake," Eleanor May Brass of the Peepeekisis reserve in Saskatchewan, tells us a tale of how two beautiful sisters are drowned for their refusal to marry (1971:20). Desire for celibacy is seen as arrogance. Augusta, a Shuswap woman born in British Columbia's Cariboo country in 1888, repeats her grandmother's stories of how "they used to steal women then" (Speare, 1973:39). Roving bands of young braves from other tribes would forcibly abduct women as they were in the bush picking berries or dressing game. Mary Ann Lavallee, a Saskatchewan Cree, recalls that:

> Yesterday's Woman had to carry on. She was alive, young, and capable of love. Grandfather built her a shack and there she became a willing slave who managed to get things done and at the same time became one with scenery, for grandmother never had a voice in tribal or council affairs. She sewed, cooked; she hauled the water by hand; she drew the wood from the bush . . . (1970: 7).

Jean Goodwill, a Cree from the Little Pine reservation, agrees that in the past Indian women "remained in the background for traditionally social and cultural reasons. Other than the Mohawk women in eastern Canada, who followed the matriarchal system, women of other tribes did not sit on council nor did they have any say in the affairs of the tribe" (1974:2). Verna Patronella Johnston, born in Cape Croker in 1909, sees male chauvinism as fairly widespread and of long duration - not just characteristic of the Ojibwa men of her generation: "I think it is typical of Indian men all over . . . It really is an Indian institution . . . In our old tradition women had no value at all" (Vanderburgh, 1977:161).

Other native women maintain the *"Indian women always had a vote on council"* (Mazur-Teillet, 1979:13) and that *"No discrimination against women existed in Indian tradition"* (ibid:1). Those who hold this view claim that the Indian woman was an esteemed and essential part of her society until the imposition of Judeo/Christian beliefs regarding the nature of women. An Ontario native woman argues that "problems such as abortion, birth control, treaty

rights and parental roles were never encountered in traditional society" (ibid, 1975:5) and that Indian women, unlike their White counterparts, "have always taken equality and power for granted" (ibid, 1975:4).

The position of women in Eskimo culture is a controversial issue for present day Inuit women. Jeela Alilkatuktuk of Broughton Island, Northwest Territories, contends that the White man's different sexual attitudes and technological superiority have decreased the importance and status of the Inuit woman:

> In the old days, the man and the woman were equally necessary to each other and to the family: the man hunted and without him, the woman would starve; the woman sewed and without her the man would freeze . . . The oldest and most respected persons were the old women. There were no formal councils and women had equal influence over camp matters (1974:10).

Masak of Baillie Island, N.W.T., differs in her account of the esteem in which Inuit women were held:

> Boys were much preferred over girls. Boys became hunters and provided food for the family. They were also trappers. There was not much a girl could do. She was of little value until she married and brought home a hunter and trapper (French. 1976:4).

Such divergences of opinion on the status of autochthonous women in their cultures are part of the contemporary historical debate over women's status in hunting/gathering societies, and the implications of the sexual division of labour.

Contemporary Historical Views

Many ethnocentric and adrocentric histories perpetuate stereotypes of Indian women as fierce princesses or hump-backed drudges. Some 'historical' accounts are little more than crass sensationalism: "The hair raising deeds of . . (Indian women) . lead one to believe that the female of the red-skinned species was Deadlier than the Male" (Ewers, 1965:10). The following is another example of this genre: "Forgotten are the names of many other courageous and determined red-skinned Amazons who were not content to keep the tepee fires burning while their men marched off to war" (ibid:13). Other historians are somewhat more subtle, suggesting that we have Indian women "to thank for . . the domestication of plants and probably . . . a broad range of domestic equipment . . . We have the men to thank for our heritage of hunting, warfare, religion and politics" (Price, 1979:46).

Some accounts of westward expansion manage to achieve a strange mixture of sexism and jingoism. Daughters of the Country (O'Meara. 1968) particularly stands out in this regard. According to O'Meara. the major impulse behind westward expansion was the search for those strange exotic creatures, the "tawney belles of Canada" who could be seduced with a few "bauables and

gewgaws" (ibid:15). He refers to some "ancient law of racial contact which (with some sacrifice of euphony to propriety) has been expressed thus: When two strange races meet, first they fight then they interbreed" (ibid:16). Thus, imperialism is blamed on the "dusky maidens" who lured men west: "all white men on the borders must have felt the spell of that mysterious allure. And reacted to it as adventurous men always have" (ibid:21). The explorers were not disappointed by the "sultry daughters of the country" who"unclothed... were not even dissimilar in color from the women of the White cities and settlementS' (ibid:43).

O'Meara's introduction abounds in sexist, racist stereotypes and serves as a clear warning about the quality of his book:

> We shall observe the Indian woman as the victim of raw lust and brutal force. We shall view her as slave, concubine, prostitute, a 'hospitality gift' or simply a loan for the night to a passing stranger. But we shall meet her, too, as the loved and respected wife of a distinguished, even great, White man. For she has appeared on the stage of her obscure and little-noted history in all these roles (ibid:23).

Fortunately, Daughters of the Country no longer stands alone as the only work available on Native women and the coming of the European. Sylvia Van Kirk's Many Tender Ties (1980) provides valuable information on the role of Native and mixed blood women in the fur trade in Canada's Northwest, from 1670 - 1870. The author examines the evolving pattern of marriage alliances between the men of the fur trade and their Indian, mixed blood, and later White wives, in her reconstruction of the social history of fur trade society. Van Kirk suggests that Native women actively encouraged the spread of the fur trade, by contracting marriages with fur traders and acting as guides and interpreters, since it was in their interest to secure the iron technology which considerably alleviated their domestic chores. Native women used their position as "Women in between" (ibid:75) two groups of men to enhance both their social and material positions. Procuring a Native wife was very much in the White trader's interest, since his survival often depended on her traditional skills such as trapping or food gathering, while her knowledge of Native customs and languages was crucial in mediating trading disputes. Native families were also eager to cement trading alliances with the marriage of a daughter to a fur trader.

Although life as a trader's wife offered greater material advantages, Native women had to conform to "the trader's patriarchal views on the ordering of home and family" (ibid:7). Drawn into a patriarchal, European marital structure, Indian women became increasingly dependent on their male protectors. If a White trader deserted, died, or "turned off" (ibid:50) his Native wife, she would be welcomed back to her tribe or previous husband. Her mixed blood grandauqhter, isolated from her Native kin as a result of her White father's concern for her respectability, was much more vulnerable to the increasing racism of Victorian society.

By uncovering the essential role of Indian women in the social, cultural and economic life of fur trade society, Van Kirk has dealt a final blow to the myth that the fur trade was an exclusively male concern. The author takes the "active agents" rather than "passive victims" approach to women's history, stressing women's resiliency and resourcefulness in responding to changing conditions. However, Van Kirk does not lose sight of the fact that "despite her important contributions and influence in certain areas, the Indian woman in fur trade society was at the mercy of a social structure devised primarily to meet the needs of European males" (ibid:88).

Contemporary Anthropological Views

The anthropological debate over the position of women in tribal and egalitarian societies has been productive and highly controversial. Three significant positions have emerged in recent literature. The "complementary but equal" position, held by Matthiasson and Briggs, describes egalitarian societies where women enjoy prestige and authority equal to that of men. Matthiasson argues that "women are valued for themselves and the contributions they make to society. In these societies, women are neither inferior nor superior to men, merely different" (1974:xviii).

In her study of the Uktu and Qipi Eskimo families, Jean L. Briggs stresses the interdependence of male and female roles: "a man cannot hunt until his parka is finished, nor can he move his family to spring camp until his wife has finished making the tent" (1974:274). Although Uktu men make decisions about hunting and travelling that affect the community, and direct women's daily activities while the reverse is not the case, Briggs argues that women appreciate the strains placed on men's strength and endurances by the harsh environment. Furthermore, decision-making is valued differently in a society which stresses consensus and restraint. After living with one Uktu family for almost two years, she wrote:

> Too late I realized the dignity inherent in the Uktu pattern of authority, in which the woman is obedient to the man. I envied Allaq the extreme satisfaction of knowing that she was appreciated because she did well and docilely what Innutiaq told her to do (1972:293).

It seems, however, that Briggs does not look too deeply into the implications of formal distance between men and women. She notes that "an Uktu man explained that each sex feels freer to talk and laugh when it is alone: men feel that way about women and women (his wife agreed) feel that way about men" (1974:276). Such sharp divisions may exist because "Eskimos very easily interpret as potentially sexual any friendly exchange between adults of the opposite sex" (ibid:279). For Briggs, the fact that women are highly valued almost exclusively as mothers in both Inuit and White societies, is indicative only of "the emotional importance of women in both societies" (ibid:283).

Her article, "Eskimo Women: Makers of Men" concludes:

> I see no conscious, institutionalized conflict between men and women and also - as societies go - relatively little unconscious potential for tension that is specifically directed by one sex toward the other (ibid:300).

Indeed, this harmonious relationship exists because of "the clear division between male and female roles" (ibid:273).

Lamphere points out that the "complementary but equal" position ignores the issue of public decision making and influence, and focuses entirely on the complementarity of male and female activities and women's roles in the household. She suggests that

> The category of 'complementary society' is no more than a label for societies where anthropologists, on closer examination, find that women do and say more than we naively might have expected. A different interpretation of the evidence could lead one to argue that women are subordinate... (1977:616).

In fact, Friedl, a social anthropologist writing of Inuit culture, points to male domination and sexual aggression, which she sees as resulting from women's disadvantaged role in the production of subsistence (Quinn, 1977:202).

In addition to its unwillingness to face the issues of economic and political decision-making power, this "complementary but equal" approach is marred by its reaction against what it calls "these days of acute sensitivity to male dominance" (Briggs, 1974:284). With charges of ethnocentricity, Matthiasson strikes out against those "strident" feminists who "in their attempts to attack the enemy 'man', emphasize the myth that women are universally oppressed" (1974:xv). We are told that these feminists would do well to remember that "it is women who bear the sons and have major roles in their upbringing" and consequently, women "are at fault in creating their own 'oppression' " (ibid). Briggs also lashes out against the women's movement:

> Western women, as we know, increasingly resent the clear division of labour and of authority that was traditional in Western society and their domestic, private, dependent role vis-a-vis men. Some, for complicated reasons, even resent the fact that they are sexually attractive to men (1974:284).

Quite clearly, such statements about women in Western or Native societies are not informed by a feminist analysis of women's subordination. In particular, this approach assumes that where women's labour is crucial to male survival, conflict and female oppression cannot exist. Yet the record of human slavery suggests that one can be useful, but not free. This uncritical acceptance, and even endorsement, of female docility and male dominance indicates an inability

to tackle crucial issues of power and control in social and economic relationships.

A second position agrees with the complementary nature of sex roles in tribal societies, yet stresses the impact of European trade and civilization on native collective economies and egalitarian sex roles. Leacock and Nash (1977), Sacks (1974), and Etienne and Leacock (1980), do not see the sexual division of labour as problematic. As in communal economies, production was production for use. Work was communal and thus decision making was consensual. "Both sexes were social producers and equal members of the group" (Lamphere, 1977: 616).

In her study of the hunting/gathering Montagnais and Naskapi tribes of Quebec and Labrador, Leacock describes how the fur trade

> disrupted the collective economy and put ownership of trap-lines, furbearing animals, and the commodities for which fur was exchanged in the hands of individual men . .. (Quinn, 1977:202).

This study is criticized by Lamphere, who suggests that the dynamics of decision making by consensus, and the relationship of control and production of resources to participation in decision making, require further examination.

Leacock's later work, "Montagnais Women and the Jesuit Program for Colonization" (1980b), illustrates her thesis that "the origins of both socio-economic and sexual hierarchy are inextricably bound" (1980a:8). She describes the process by which the Jesuits, seeking to restructure Native society along hierarchal, patriarchal lines, attacked female autonomy and communal decision-making. The Jesuits correctly saw Native acceptance of White ideology as essential in reordering relations of production and facilitating colonial domination.

Leacock rejects a large portion of the anthropological record as ethnocentric and ahistorical. Emphasis on the male public/aggressive and female private/submissive dichotomy, projects onto egalitarian societies the role structures of our own culture - low status for women. By denying the complementarity of the sexual division of labour, and the respected position of women in communal economies, the "upshot of an ahistorical perspective is to see giving birth and suckling as in and of themselves furnishing the basis for past subordination" (1979:254). Leacock singles out Woman, Culture and Society, edited by Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974), for its "ahistorical orientation" and its "psycho-biological explanations for an assumed universal male dominance" (ibid).

This third position, best articulated in the work of Rosaldo and Chodorow, and other contributors to Woman, Culture & Society, argues that women's reproductive role accounts for universal female subordination, and is the source of the division between the public and private realms. A critical approach to the sexual division of labour and women's mothering role, is an important contribution to an anthropology of women, Gayle Rubin's original work, "The Traffic in Women" (1975), also analyzes the sex/gender system and examines kinship and marriage alliances in an attempt to integrate economic, political and

ideological explanations of women's oppression. Unlike the "complementary but equal" positions, this latter questions political power associated with control over resource production and distribution, and is more critical of the social relations of reproduction. Clearly, the origin and universality of female sub-ordination is a subject of continuing debate in anthropological and theoretical literature, and reflects disagreements over the relative importance of, and relationship between, class and gender hierarchy.

The existence of a matriarchy among the Iroquois is a question of continuing interest, with various theoretical perspectives in evidence. Father Lafitau of The Society of Jesus recorded that the Iroquois form of government was a gynocracy. Women were the principal authorities elected, and deposed male representatives. "Women choose and sometimes are the chiefs themselves" (Mathur, 1975:31). According to Goldenweiser, there was a sexual division of labour, work was communal, and property was controlled by the women. He notes that:

> While women could not be chiefs and had no vote in tribal or federal councils, their functions in connection with the election and deposition of chiefs constituted them a most important factor in Iroquois society. Moreover, prominent women often addressed councils, some were noted for their eloquence, and, in all cases, the opinion of women was asked and heeded (1915: 377).

Cruikshank interprets the data to mean that the Iroquois system was not a matriarchate, but "a male oligarchy with special powers vested in one woman who is family head" (1969:17). Stressing the strong matrilineality of the Iroquois nations, Vicki Camerino takes issue with those who view women as being secondary in importance. Camerino argues that the eldest woman, the tribal matriarch, chose a male sachem to represent her decisions in the Great Council as she herself was indispensable to the settlement. The male sachem was totally accountable to the matriarch, and was replaced by her in the case of disobedience. "Women were the most honoured, most respected and most powerful people in the society" (1978:8), and thus had complete control over such decisions as which captives would be adopted into the nation. Judith Brown argues that it was neither the matrilineal kinship system, nor women's considerable contribution to the production of subsistence, but women's control of the organization of the tribal economy which accounts for Iroquois women enjoying "perhaps more authority than women have ever enjoyed anywhere at any time" (1975:243).

Conclusion

We have seen how various authors - explorers, missionaries, pioneer gentle-women, contemporary Native women, anthropologists and historians - viewed the status of Native women in the past, and suggested deficiencies in those

approaches. It is evident that the study of the evolution of Native women's roles over time requires research that will take as a starting point the experience of Indian women within their cultures. In so doing, it is not necessary to deny inequalities where they existed, although this is a strange approach indeed when a "sense of grievance" (Pierson and Prentice, 1981:1) is what characterizes women's history. Perhaps the unique emphasis on women's competence in fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers suggests a lingering acceptance of the myth of the helplessness and natural passivity of women (see for example, Briggs, 1972, 1974). Surely it is possible to write positively and sensitively of the lives of women, their struggles and hopes, from a feminist perspective which recognizes, and seeks to expose, injustice.

Reacting against what was seen as an overly negative perception of the universal subordination of women, much of recent women's history has attempted to describe women as "active agents" rather than "passive victims". Van Kirk's Many Tender Ties is situated in that current of feminist research which seeks to portray women as shrewd pragmatic agents who adapt selectively to the pressures of colonization in order to maximize gains. It is in these terms that Van Kirk emphasizes the role of Native women in actively demanding and promoting the new iron technology brought by the White trader. Certainly, it has been necessary to challenge the stereotypic view of women as passive victims by stressing that a recognition of the ability of the colonized to respond resourcefully to their situation, must be part of our understanding of the dynamics of colonial exploitation. However, it is important to remain aware of the full range of economic and ideological forces which limit and constrain women's lives, for female power and reality cannot be separated from the broader social context. As Mona Etienne points out:

> The recognition that women took advantage of available opportunities, eventually trading on their own sexuality, should not be interpreted as a denial of the brutal exploitation, both sexual and economic, that they were subjected to by the colonizer... Nor should the opportunism of women - often at the expense of their compatriots . . . both women and men - be given more dignity than the opportunism off men. The rejection of the 'passive victims' approach to colonized women is, however, necessary in order to recognize what can properly be termed resistance, that is, forms of action that aimed at defending collective interests and represented a struggle against oppression rather than accomodation to it (1980:21).

Some feminist scholars are moving cautiously, some more exuberantly, towards an analysis of colonial exploitation which emphasizes the ability of women to act forcefully within that framework. Yet this growing challenge to "male-stream" historical interpretation must move beyond the applause for individual women who maximize their opportunities towards a more tightly woven theoretical framework which will encompass the dynamics of colonial

exploitation and the various responses of Indian women, both as women and as Indians.

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