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THE SACRED HOOP

RECOVERING THE FEMININE IN AMERICAN INDIAN TRADITIONS

“A LANDMARK BOOK WHICH MAY PROVE AS IMPORTANT TO AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN AS SIMONE DE BEAUVIOR’S THE SECOND SEX HAS BEEN FOR WESTERN NON-TRIBAL WOMEN.”—NEW DIRECTIONS FOR WOMEN

WITH A NEW PREFACE
When Women Throw Down Bundles: Strong Women Make Strong Nations

Not until recently have American Indian women chosen to define themselves politically as Indian women—a category that retains American Indian women’s basic racial and cultural identity but distinguishes women as a separate political force in a tribal, racial, and cultural context—but only recently has this political insistence been necessary. In other times, in other circumstances more congenial to womanhood and more cognizant of the proper place of Woman as creatrix and shaper of existence in the tribe and on the earth, everyone knew that women played a separate and significant role in tribal reality.

This self-redefinition among Indian women who intend that their former stature be restored has resulted from several political factors. The status of tribal women has seriously declined over the centuries of white dominance, as they have been all but voiceless in tribal decision-making bodies since reconstitution of the tribes through colonial fiat and U.S. law. But over the last thirty years women’s sense of ourselves as a group with a stake in the distribution of power on the reservations, in jobs, and within the intertribal urban Indian communities has grown.

As writer Stan Steiner observes in The New Indians, the breakdown of women’s status in tribal communities as a result of colonization led to their migration in large numbers into the cities, where they regained the self-sufficiency and positions of influence they had held in earlier centuries. He writes, “In the cities the power of women has been recognized by the extra-tribal communities. Election of tribal women to the leadership of these urban Indian centers has been a phenomenon in modern Indian life.”

Since the 1960s when Steiner wrote, the number of women in tribal leadership has grown immensely. Women function as council members and tribal chairs for at least one-fourth of the federally recognized tribes. In February 1981, the Albuquerque Journal reported that sixty-seven American Indian tribes had women heads of state. In large measure, the urbanization of large numbers of American Indians has resulted in their reclaiming their traditions (though it was meant to work the other way when in the 1950s the Eisenhower administration developed “Relocation” and “Termination” policies for Indians).

The coming of the white man created chaos in all the old systems, which were for the most part superbly healthy, simultaneously cooperative and autonomous, peace-centered, and ritual-oriented. The success of their systems depended on complementary institutions and organized relationships among all sectors of their world. The significance of each part was seen as necessary to the balanced and harmonious functioning of the whole, and both private and public aspects of life were viewed as valuable and necessary components of society. The private (“inside”) was shared by all, though certain rites and knowledge were shared only by clan members or by initiates into ritual societies, some of which were gender-specific and some of which were open to members of both sexes. Most were male-dominated or female-dominated with helping roles assigned to members of the opposite gender. One category of inside societies was exclusive to “berdaches”—males only—and “berdaches”*—female only. All categories of ritual societies function in present-day American Indian communities, though the exclusively male societies are best recorded in ethnographic literature.

The “outside” was characterized by various social institutions, all of which had bearing on the external welfare of the group. Hunting, Loading...
gathering, building, ditch cleaning, horticulture, seasonal and permanent moves, intertribal relationships, law and policy decisions affecting the whole, crafts, and childrearing are some of the areas governed by outside institutions. These were most directly affected by white government policies; the inside institutions were most directly affected by Christianization. Destruction of the institutions rested on the overthrow or subversion of the gynocratic nature of the tribal system, as documents and offhand comments by white interveners attest.

Consider, for example, John Adair’s remark about the Cherokee, as reported by Carolyn Foreman: “The Cherokee had been for a considerable while under petticoat government and they were just emerging, like all of the Iroquoian Indians from the matriarchal period.” Adair’s idea of “petticoat government” included the power of the Women’s Council of the Cherokee. The head of the Council was the Beloved Woman of the Nation, “whose voice was considered that of the Great Spirit, speaking through her.” The Iroquoian peoples, including the Cherokee, had another custom that bespoke the existence of their “petticoat government,” their gynocracy. They set the penalty for killing a woman of the tribe at double that for killing a man. This regulation was in force at least among the Susquehanna, the Hurons, and the Iroquois; but given the high regard in which the tribes held women and given that in killing a woman one killed the children she might have borne, I imagine the practice of doubling the penalty was widespread.

The Iroquois story is currently one of the best chronicles of the overthrow of the gynocracy. Material about the status of women in North American groups such as the Montagnais-Naskapi, Keres, Navajo, Crow, Hopi, Pomo, Turok, Kiowa, and Natchez and in South American groups such as the Bari and Mapuche, to name just a few, is lacking. Any original documentation that exists is buried under the flood of readily available, published material written from the colonizer’s patriarchal perspective, almost all of which is based on the white man’s belief in universal male dominance. Male dominance may have characterized a number of tribes, but it was by no means as universal (or even as preponderant) as colonialist propaganda has led us to believe.

The Seneca prophet Handsome Lake did not appreciate “petticoat government” any more than did John Adair. When his code became the standard for Iroquoian practice in the early nineteenth century, power shifted from the hands of the “meddling old women,” as he characterized them, to men. Under the old laws, the Iroquois were a mother-centered, mother-right people whose political organization was based on the central authority of the Matrons, the Mothers of the Longhouses (clans). Handsome Lake advocated that young women cleave to their husbands rather than to their mothers and abandon the clan-mother-controlled longhouse in favor of a patriarchal, nuclear family arrangement. Until Handsome Lake’s time, the sachems were chosen from certain families by the Matrons of their clans and were subject to impeachment by the Matrons should they prove inadequate or derelict in carrying out their duties as envisioned by the Matrons and set forth in the Law of the Great Peace of the Iroquois Confederacy. By provision in the Law, the women were to be considered the progenitors of the nation, owning the land and the soil.

At the end of the Revolutionary War, the Americans declared the Iroquois living on the American side of the United States–Canadian border defeated. Pressed from all sides, their fields burned and salted, their daily life disrupted, and the traditional power of the Matrons under assault from the missionaries who flocked to Iroquois country to “civilize” them, the recently powerful Iroquois became a subject, captive people. Into this chaos stepped Handsome Lake who, with the help of devoted followers and the exigencies of social disruption in the aftermath of the war, encouraged the shift from woman-centered society to patriarchal society. While that shift was never complete, it was sufficient. Under the Code of Handsome Lake, which was the tribal version of the white man’s way, the Longhouse declined in importance, and eventually Iroquois women were firmly under the thumb of Christian patriarchy.

The Iroquois were not the only Nation to fall under patriarchalization. No tribe escaped that fate, though some western groups retained their gynecentric egalitarianism until well into the latter half of the twentieth century. Among the hundreds of tribes forced into patriarchal modes, the experiences of the Montagnais-Naskapi, the Mid-Atlantic Coastal Algonkians, and the Bari of Colombia, among others, round out the hemisphere-wide picture.

Among the Narragansett of the area now identified as Rhode Island was a woman chief, one of the six sachems of that tribe. Her name was Magnus, and when the Narraganssets were invaded by Major Talcot and defeated in battle, the Sunksquaw Magnus was
executed along with ninety others. Her fate was a result of her position; in contrast, the wife and child of the sachem known as King Philip among the English colonizers were simply sold into slavery in the West Indies.]

This sunsquaw, or queen (hereditary female head of state), was one of scores in the Mid-Atlantic region. One researcher, Robert Grumet, identifies a number of women chiefs who held office during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Grumet begins his account by detailing the nonauthoritarian character of the Mid-Atlantic Coastal Algonkians and describes their political system, which included inheritance of rank by the eldest child through the maternal line. He concludes with the observation that important historians ignore documented information concerning the high-status position of women in the leadership structure of the Coastal Algonkians:

Both Heckewelder (1876) and Zeisberger (1910) failed to mention women in their lengthy descriptions of Delawaran leadership during the westward exile. Eight out of the eleven sources listed in Kinetz (1946) noted that women could not be chiefs. The remaining three citations made no mention of women leaders. These same sources stated that “women had no voice in council and were only admitted at certain times.” Roger Williams translated the Narragansett term saunks as “the Queen, or Sachims Wife,” with the plural “Queenes” translating out as sauncksquuaog (1866). He nowhere indicated that these sauncksquuaog were anything more than wives.

The ethnographic record has indicated otherwise. Even a cursory scanning of the widely available primary documentation clearly shows the considerable role played by Coastal Algonkian women throughout the historic contact period. Many sources state that women were able to inherit chiefly office. Others note that women sachems were often the sisters of wives of male leaders who succeeded them upon their decease. This does not mean that every “sunksquaw’s” husband or brother was a leader. Many women sachems were married to men who made no pretension to leadership.9

The first sunsquaw Grumet mentions was noted in John Smith’s journal as “Queene of Appamatuck.” She was present during the council that decided on his death—a decision that Pocahontas, daughter of one of the sachems, overturned.10 The Wampanoag Confederacy’s loss of control over the Chesapeake Bay area did not cause an end to the rule of sunsquaws or of the empress: George Fox, founder of the Quaker religion, recorded that “the old Empress [of Accomack] . . . sat in council” when he was visiting in March 1673.11 In 1705, Robert Beverley mentioned two towns governed by queens: Pungoteque and Nanduye. Pungoteque, he said, was a small Nation, even though governed by a Queen, and he listed Nanduye as “a seat of the Empress.” He seemed impressed. For while Nanduye was a small settlement of “not above 20 families,” the old Empress had “all the Nations of this shore under tribute.”12

From before 1620 until her death in 1617, a squaw-sachem known as the “Massachusetts Queen” by the Virginia colonizers governed the Massachusetts Confederacy.13 It was her fortune to preside over the Confederacy’s destruction as the people were decimated by disease, war, and colonial manipulations. Magnus, the Narragansett sunsquaw whose name was recorded by whites, is mentioned above. Others include the Pocasset sunsquaw Weetamoo, who was King Philip’s ally and “served as war chief commanding over 300 warriors” during his war with the British.14 Queen Weetamoo was given the white woman Mary Rowlandson, who wrote descriptions of the sunsquaw in her captivity narrative.

Awashonks, another queen in the Mid-Atlantic region, was squaw-sachem of the Sakonnet, a tribe allied with the Wampanoag Confederacy. She reigned in the latter part of the seventeenth century. After fighting for a time against the British during King Philip’s War, she was forced to surrender. Because she then convinced her warriors to fight with the British, she was able to save them from enslavement in the West Indies.15

The last sunsquaw Grumet mentions was named Mamanuchqua. An Esopus and one of the five sachems of the Esopus Confederacy, Mamanuchqua is said to be only one name that she used. The others include Mamareoktwe, Mamaroch, and Mampacrocht,16 unless they were the names of other Esopus sunsquaws who used the same or a similar mark beside the written designation. Grumet wisely comments on the presence of women chiefs and the lack of notice of them in secondary documents—that is, in books about the region during those centuries.

Ethnohistorians have traditionally assigned male gender to native figures in the documentary record unless otherwise identified. They have also tended to not identify native individuals as leaders unless so identified in the specific source. This policy, while prop-
erly cautious, has fostered the notion that all native persons mentioned in the documentation were both male and commoners unless otherwise identified. This practice has successfully masked the identities of a substantial number of Coastal Algonkian leaders of both sexes. 

And that's not all it successfully achieves. It falsifies the record of people who are not able to set it straight; it reinforces patriarchal socialization among all Americans, who are thus led to believe that there have never been any alternative structures; it gives Anglo-Europeans the idea that Indian societies were beneath the level of organization of western nations, justifying colonization by presumption of lower stature; it masks the genocide attendant on the falsification of evidence, as it masks the gynocidal motive behind the genocide. Political actions coupled with economic and physical disaster in the forms of land theft and infection of native populations caused the Mid-Atlantic Algonkians to be overwhelmed by white invaders.

Politics played an even greater role in the destruction of the Cherokee gynocracy, of a region that included parts of Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina. Cherokee women had the power to decide the fate of captives, decisions that were made by vote of the Women's Council and relayed to the district at large by the War Woman or Pretty Woman. The decisions had to be made by female clan heads because a captive who was to live would be adopted into one of the families whose affairs were directed by the clan-mothers. The clan-mothers also had the right to wage war, and as Henry Timberlake wrote, the stories about Amazon warriors were not so farfetched considering how many Indian women were famous warriors and powerful voices in the councils.

The war women carried the title Beloved Women, and their power was so great "that they can, by the wave of a swan's wing, deliver a wretch condemned by the council, and already tied to the stake," Lieutenant Timberlake reports. A mixed-blood Cherokee man who was born in the early nineteenth century reported knowing an old woman named Da'nawa-gasta, or Sharp War, which meant a fierce warrior.

The Women's Council, as distinguished from the District, village, or Confederacy councils, was powerful in a number of political and socio-spiritual ways, and may have had the deciding voice on what males would serve on the Councils, as its northern sisters had. Certainly the Women's Council was influential in tribal decisions, and its spokeswomen served as War Women and as Peace Women, presumably holding those offices in the towns designated red towns and white towns, respectively. Their other powers included the right to speak in men's Council, the right to inclusion in public policy decisions, the right to choose whom and whether to marry, the right to bear arms, and the right to choose their extramarital occupations.

During the longtime colonization of the Cherokee along the Atlantic seaboard, the British worked hard to lessen the power of women in Cherokee affairs. They took Cherokee men to England and educated them in English ways. These men returned to Cherokee country and exerted great influence on behalf of the British in the region. By the time the Removal Act was under consideration by Congress in the early 1800s, many of these British-educated men and men with little Cherokee blood wielded considerable power over the Nation's policies.

In the ensuing struggle women endured rape and murder, but they had no voice in the future direction of the Cherokee Nation. The Cherokee were by this time highly stratified, though they had been much less so before this period, and many were Christianized. The male leadership bought and sold not only black men and women but also men and women of neighboring tribes, the women of the leadership class retreated to Bible classes, sewing circles, and petticoats that rivaled those worn by their white sisters. Many of these upper-strata Cherokee women married white ministers and other opportunists, as the men of their class married white women, often the daughters of white ministers. The traditional strata of Cherokee society became rigid and modeled on Christian white social organization of upper, middle, and impoverished classes usually composed of very traditional clans.

In an effort to stave off removal, the Cherokee in the early 1800s, under the leadership of men such as Elias Boudinot, Major Ridge, and John Ross (later Principal Chief of the Cherokee in Oklahoma Territory), and others, drafted a constitution that disenfranchised women and blacks. Modeled after the Constitution of the United States, whose favor they were attempting to curry, and in conjunction with Christian sympathizers to the Cherokee cause, the new Cherokee constitution relegated women to the position of chattel. No longer possessing a voice in the Nation's business, women became pawns in the struggle between white and Cherokee for possession of Cherokee lands.
The Cherokee, like their northern cousins, were entirely represented by men in the white courts, in the U.S. Congress, and in gatherings where lobbying of white officials was carried on. The great organ of Cherokee resistance, the Cherokee Phoenix, was staffed by men. The last Beloved Woman, Nancy Ward, resigned her office in 1817 sending her cane and her vote on important questions to the Cherokee Council, and “thus renounced her high office of Beloved Woman, in favor of written constitutional law.”

In spite of their frantic attempts to prevent their removal to Indian Territory by aping the white man in patriarchal particulars, the Cherokee were removed, as were the other tribes of the region and those living north and west of them, whom the Cherokee thought of as “uncivilized.” Politics does make strange bedfellows, as the degynocraticization of the Cherokee Nation shows. Boudinot and Ridge were condemned as traitors by the newly reconstituted Cherokee government in Indian Territory and were executed (assassinated, some say). The Cherokee got out from under the petticoats in time to be buried under the weight of class hierarchies, male dominance, war, and loss of their homeland.

While the cases cited above might be explained as a general conquest over male Indian systems that happened to have some powerful women functioning within them rather than as a deliberate attempt to wipe out female leadership, the case of the Montagnais women clarifies an otherwise obscure issue. The Montagnais-Naskapi of the St. Lawrence Valley was contacted early in the fifteenth century by fur traders and explorers and fell under the sway of Jesuit missionizing in the mid-sixteenth century. The Jesuits, under the leadership of Fr. Paul Le Jeune (whose name, appropriately, means The Little or The Young One), determined to convert the Montagnais to Christianity, resocialize them, and transform them into peasant-serfs as were the Indians' counterparts in France centuries earlier.

To accomplish this task, the good fathers had to loosen the hold of Montagnais women on tribal policies and to convince both men and women that a woman’s proper place was under the authority of her husband and that a man’s proper place was under the authority of the priests. The system of vassalage with which the Frenchmen were most familiar required this arrangement.

In pursuit of this end, the priests had to undermine the status of the women, who, according to one of Le Jeune’s reports, had “great power . . . 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 him to do it.” Further, the Jesuit noted the equable relations between husbands and wives among the Montagnais. He commented that “men leave the arrangement of the household to the women, without interfering with them; they cut and decide to give away as they please without making the husband angry. I have never seen my host ask a giddy young woman that he had with him what became of the provisions, although they were disappearing very fast.”

Undaunted, Paul Le Jeune composed a plan whereby this state of affairs could be put aright. His plan had four parts, which, he was certain, would turn the Montagnais into proper, civilized people. He figured that the first requirement was the establishment of permanent settlements and the placement of officially constituted authority in the hands of one person. “Alas!” he mourned. “If someone could stop the wanderings of the Savages, and give authority to one of them to rule the others, we would see them converted and civilized in a short time.”

More ominously, he believed that the institution of punishment was essential in Montagnais social relations. How could they understand tyranny and respect it unless they wielded it upon each other and experienced it at each other’s hands? He was most distressed that the “Savages,” as he termed them, thought physical abuse a terrible crime. He commented on this “savage” aberration in a number of his reports, emphasizing his position that its cure rested only in the abdication or seduction of the children into attendance at Jesuit-run schools located a good distance from their homes. “The Savages prevent their [children’s] instruction; they will not tolerate the chastisement of their children, whatever they may do, they permit only a simple reprimand,” he complains.

What he had in mind was more along the lines of torture, imprisonment, battering, neglect, and psychological torment—the educational methods to which Indian children in government and mission schools would be subjected for some time after Conquest was accomplished. Doubtless these methods were required, or few would have traded the Montagnais way for the European one. Thus his third goal was subsumed under the “education” of the young.

Last, Le Jeune wished to implement a new social system whereby the Montagnais would live within the European family structure with its twin patriarchal institutions of male authority and female fidelity. These would be enforced by the simple expediency of forbidding divorce. He informed the men that in France women do not rule their
husbands, information that had been conveyed by various means, including Jesuit education, to other tribes such as the Iroquois and the Cherokee.

Le Jeune had his work cut out for him: working with people who did not punish children, encouraged women in independence and decision making, and had a horror of authority imposed from without—who, in Le Jeune's words could not "endure in the least those who seem desirous of assuming superiority over the others, and place all virtue in a certain gentleness or apathy,"26 who

... imagine that they ought by right of birth, to enjoy the liberty of wild ass colts, rendering no homage to anyone whomsoever, except when they like. They have reproached me a hundred times because we fear our Captains, while they laugh at and make sport of theirs. All the authority of their chief is in his tongue's end, for he is powerful insofar as he is eloquent; and even if he kills himself talking and haranguing, he will not be obeyed unless he pleases the Savages.27

The wily Le Jeune did not succeed entirely in transforming these gentle and humorous people into bastard Europeans, but he did succeed in some measure. While the ease of relationships between men and women remains and while the Montagnais retain their love of gentleness and nurturing, they are rather more male-centered than not.28 Positions of formal power such as political leadership, shamanhood, and matrilocality, which placed the economic dependence of a woman with children in the hands of her mother's family, had shifted. Shamans were male, leaders were male, and matrilocality had become patrilocality. This is not so strange given the economics of the situation and the fact that over the years the Montagnais became entirely Catholicized.

With the rate of assimilation increasing and with the national political and economic situation of Indians in Canada, which is different in details but identical in intent and disastrous effect to that of Indians in the United States, the Montagnais will likely be fully patriarchal before the turn of the next century.

As this brief survey indicates, the shift from gynecentric-egalitarian and ritual-based systems to phallocentric, hierarchical systems is not accomplished in only one dimension. As Le Jeune understood, the assault on the system of woman power requires the replacing of a peaceful, nonpunitive, nonauthoritarian social system wherein women wield power by making social life easy and gentle with one based on child terrorization, male dominance, and submission of women to male authority.

Montagnais men who would not subscribe to the Jesuit program (and there were many) were not given authority backed up by the patriarchy's churchly or political institutions. Under patriarchy men are given power only if they use it in ways that are congruent with the authoritarian, punitive model. The records attest, in contrast, that gynecentric systems distribute power evenly among men, women, and berdaches as well as among all age groups. Economic distribution follows a similar pattern; reciprocal exchange of goods and services among individuals and between groups is ensured because women are in charge at all points along the distribution network.

Effecting the social transformation from egalitarian, gynecentric systems to hierarchical, patriarchal systems requires meeting four objectives. The first is accomplished when the primacy of female as creator is displaced and replaced by male-gendered creators (generally generic, as the Great Spirit concept overtakes the multiplicitous tribal designation of deity). This objective has largely been met across North America. The Hopi goddess Spider Woman has become the masculine Maseo or Tawa, referred to in the masculine, and the Zuñi goddess is on her way to malehood. Changing Woman of the Navajo has contenders for her position, while the Keres Thought Woman trembles on the brink of displacement by her sister-goddess-cum-god Utset. Among the Cherokee, the goddess of the river foam is easily replaced by Thunder in many tales, and the Iroquois divinity Sky Woman now gets her ideas and powers from her dead father or her monstrous grandson.

The second objective is achieved when tribal governing institutions and the philosophies that are their foundation are destroyed, as they were among the Iroquois and the Cherokee, to mention just two. The conqueror has demanded that the tribes that wish federal recognition and protection institute "democracy," in which powerful officials are elected by majority vote. Until recently, these powerful officials were inevitably male and were elected mainly by nontraditionals, the traditionals being until recently unwilling to participate in a form of governance imposed on them by right of conquest. Democracy by coercion is hardly democracy, in any language, and to some Indians recognizing that fact, the threat of extinction is preferable to the ignominy of enslavement in their own land.

The third objective is accomplished when the people are pushed