

Native Women and the Fur Industry

BY KAAREN OLSEN

Before contact with European culture, the way of life for the Native People was based on hunting, fishing and gathering. In their society, relationships with one another were based on equality, and the divisions of labour were based on practical needs. Because women are reproducers as well as producers, their labour consisted mainly of work at the home. It was the men who procured the necessary items which were then turned into food, shelter or clothing. While the lines of division were not necessarily rigid, they became more so when their economic base was destroyed by the colonial powers who had other plans for the Native people.

When conditions forced them into the fur trade, other changes soon came. They came to rely more and more on Hudson's Bay's trade goods. Steel knives, axes, the rifle, all were wanted because they made work easier and speeded up production. Store cloth was easier to sew than leather and furs, and with some compensating, almost as good. Blankets took the place of rabbit robes. Flour, sugar, tea, tobacco became staple items.

As dependence on the fur trade was consolidated, trapping became an economic pursuit of major importance. Since larger game had long since been killed off, more time and effort was spent on going after the fur-bearing animals. In the fall, the families moved to their own trapping areas, set up camp, moving again when the seasons changed.

Because it was traditionally the men who had been the hunters, it was now the men who went off to trap. It followed as well that when they brought home their catch, it was the women who skinned and fleshed and stretched the skins to dry. Children grew up on this

activity and participated as their ability allowed. When enough furs were accumulated to warrant a trip to the trading post, the man would pack them up, along with enough provisions for a few days, and head for the nearest Hudson's Bay post. There, his skill as a trapper was tested by his ability to trade and return home with as much as he could haggle for.

Today, as Native families work their traplines, the women doing their traditional work are the silent partners. Her contribution to the family income is not immediately obvious. She is not the one who applies to get the trapper's licence or trapline, nor does she bring in the furs to be stamped and sold. She does not sit at the trappers' meetings or go to their conventions.

But she is the support system, the partner to the trapper. When he goes to the trapline, the family environment is maintained. The social tradition that the economic pursuit being a family endeavour is kept and the family ties are therefore strengthened. On the trapline, there are no drugs or alcohol problems because the day-to-day activity is directed towards immediate and future survival, and the whole family is involved. And there are no drugs or alcohol in the bush.



Because the Native woman is the home-maker, and in charge of the children if they are too young to go with their father as he checks and tends the traps, she is also to a great degree in charge of their education. As she goes about her work, she teaches them their role in production (a role that does not exist in town or back in their villages). She teaches them a respect for the animals as she skins and prepares the hides. She shows them what part of the animal the hunter

has to return to the earth when it is killed. She shows them where to leave the carcasses, what to do with the bones. The children are taught the rituals and ceremonies of thanking and showing respect to the land and animals.

For example, when she is skinning a beaver, the mother will show the children where one of the toe nails is missing from the animal's foot. She'll explain how the beaver uses this nail to groom itself, to distribute the oils it uses to waterproof its fur, and how the trapper will cut this nail off and return it to the water where the beaver was caught. In this way, the trapper pays his respect to the beaver who gave its life to him and at the same time thanks its spirit.

The children are also taught the taboos, actions that may anger or offend the spirits of the earth and the animals, and thus make the hunt unsuccessful until such time that the spirits are appeased. For example, the bones of the animals cannot ever be thrown into the fire. The knee bones of the muskrat, beaver, rabbit and other animals cannot be eaten. When the children are old enough to go with their father, they will know enough to put these teachings into practice.

The traditional teachings and values are thus passed onto the next generation. In a way of life where sometimes man and animals go hungry, where there are times of plenty, the children have to be taught to respect the land and animals. The children have to learn to take and use what is needed, to kill well and to make every effort to ensure that the gifts from the land and animals are not wasted.

Living on the trapline gives the woman opportunity to feed her family the traditional foods of her people. These foods have a much greater nutritional value than the food one buys from a grocery store. This is important in light of the quantity of junk foods consumed by those who live in the communities and towns. It is also very important when one considers the poisons, the food additives and preservatives that are in store-bought and commercially grown foods.

The woman on the trapline has also begun a new tradition. She utilizes the traditional materials and styles of her people to produce her own art and crafts, the leather and beadwork mitts, mukluks, moccasins, hats that are not only practical

for even a city dweller, but also very colourful and stylish. In this way, she is a producer as a craftsperson and contributes to the family income in her own way.

The restrictions, laws and regulations of outside society soon impose upon life on the trapline when the children become old enough for school. When that time comes, the family must remain in the village or in town the whole year round in order for the children to attain their formal education. The father usually goes back to trapping as he can, by himself or with another partner, usually someone in a similar situation. If the wife and children are in town, the trappers' costs multiply. Because the family is divided, he has two homes to maintain, usually by himself. Production is also lowered because the trapper makes more trips away from his trapline, to see his family and be assured of their welfare.

It seems that it will be up to the woman if change is to come about. Education has to accommodate the seasonal aspect of trapping. And trapping has to be considered as a vitally necessary part of the Native Peoples' lives, especially a part of the children's lives. Their experience on the trapline should take priority and be a major part of their education.

More and more Native women are abandoning their role as the silent partners. While their men are in the bush, it becomes their role to protect their interest



in the bush. Increasingly, they are taking on the government and industry, whose activities are threatening the viability of trapping. In some communities, while their men are out trapping, they are becoming a major force in organizing the Native trappers.

Internationally, there are attempts to wipe out entirely the fur industry, on the basis that animals too have rights. These pro-animal activists direct their messages to consumers of the modern western societies in Europe and North America. In the 1970s, they successfully challenged the seal industry. Successful, perhaps, but not honestly or wisely. By eliminating the consumer market for seal products, whole populations of Native peoples in the North were forced into communities, onto welfare lines. Where they had been living independently and productively, they are now grouped into communities where all sorts of social problems arise.

A point that the animal rights advocates ignore is the role that trappers play in keeping the animal populations healthy. The trapper plays a productive role in nature: man can be a responsible part of a balanced ecosystem. Trapping is a method of conservation, keeping the animals free from disease and over-population. Historically and traditionally, Native people have always understood their role in nature. The irony is that the animal rights activists are attacking a way of life of aboriginal people who retain a relationship with the natural world already lost to modern western societies. The aboriginal trapper protects life, the quality of life and its environment.

This is the Native woman's contribution to the fur industry — defending her people's way of life.

While Kaaren Olsen maintains a trapline in Tent Lake, Ontario, she continues to fight for Native aboriginal and hereditary rights and the rights "guaranteed" to us by Treaties. She is very active in the Native Trapper's Association in Red Lake.

Mary Wetrade fixing caribou hide, Rae Lakes, NWT (May 1985)