Jordan Paper

THE FORGOTTEN

AMERINDIAN WOMEN AND RELIGION

Quand on fait des recherches sur les religions américaines autochtones, on a l'impression, dit l'auteure, qu'elles étaient dominées par les hommes et établies pour eux. Les moines, les missionnaires protestants, les voyageurs, les informateurs, et les chercheurs ne furent pas sensibles à la place de la femme dans la culture.

Dans l'Amérique du Nord aborigène, hommes et femmes avaient des cultures, des sociétés religieuses et, en partie, des mythes et des rituels séparés et complémentaires. Les femmes étaient "shamans". Le rôle religieux des femmes dans les cultures matrilinéaires a dû être important: et pourtant rien n'a été consigné; le chercheur doit alors assumer la tâche de reconstruction.

L'auteur se concentre sur les grand-mères oubliées en explorant les cultures pré-contact, les types de transformation résultant du contact, et la situation actuelle. Il conclut que aussi longtemps que le message est adressé aux grands-pères ou à un créateur mâle, il y a négation de la spiritualité féminine et, par là même, impossibilité de se réaliser totalement.

Introduction

If one were to attend a contemporary Native American ceremonial circle, one might observe a male elder assisted by other males preparing a sacred pipe or burning sacred herbs while praying to the Great Spirit, or the Creator, or the Grandfathers, addressing all in masculine terms. Meanwhile, women would be participating passively or preparing a feast. Reading the ethnological literature, one would find similar paradigms. The apparent conclusion would be that Native American religions are similar to those of the European invaders - male dominated and male oriented.

The early historical sources of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were written primarily by Catholic missionary monks, who were by training, ideology, and lifestyle programmed to be oblivious to the female component of human culture. Later historical materials are usually from Protestant missionaries or male travellers imbued with patriarchal Old Testament concepts. The early ethnological data of the late nineteenth century concerning religion was collected by males using Native male translators who were Christian converts or was written by Native male Christian catechists, lay readers, or deacons. Ethnologists of the first half of the twentieth century were either males or females trained by males and imbued with their teachers' values. With few exceptions (such as Ruth Landes), female ethnologists interviewed male informants. Asked Western questions, informants frequently gave responses they assumed were desired, preferred, or valued by their interviewers.

As in many cultures throughout the world, men and women in aboriginal North America had separate and complementary cultures. There were women's as well as men's religious societies. Women had, in part, their own myths and rituals. In rituals that involved the entire community, women often had the predominant role, although, to the Western observer, not necessarily the most obvious one. A number of women were important shamans. Of course, in matrilineal and matrilocal cultures, as many Amerindian cultures were, the role of women in religion was proportional to their roles in other aspects of society. But virtually none of these ways have been recorded. Only in the last decade or so have women in the western part of North America begun to be heard, and, aside from the Iroquois, we can but surmise the female aspect of the destroyed cultures of the eastern part.

Furthermore, it must be understood that there were many different cultures in North America; indeed, there are more distinct language families in the Americas than in Eurasia. No scholar is even partially familiar with the multiplicity of cultures once or even still present in North America. And all of these cultures, as any other, continually changed over time. Hence not only are the following reconstructions hypothetical, but, by being generalized, they are to that degree spurious. In the following essay, I will focus on the issue of the forgotten Grandmothers by exploring selected precontact cultures, discussing types of transformations due to both direct and indirect contact, and reflecting on the contemporary situation.

Aboriginal Amerindian Religions

Unlike those in Western religions, myth and ritual in Amerindian religions are often not intimately related. Myths in Native American religions are imparted during winter evenings and not usually expressed as part of ritual. To the Native Americans, rituals are the primary mode of religious expression. Hence basic ideology must be extracted from ritual behaviour. There were few ritual commonalities shared among precontact (in the sense of contact-induced) North Amerindian cultures — the two major ones being the sweat lodge, with circum-polar distribution, and the sacred pipe (not found in the far north or northwest until after contact). The mode of offering the pipe has remarkable similarities in this large area of utilization. The pipe is basically a vessel for offering sacred herbs (tobacco and other substances) to spiritual powers and at the same time is a channel for communion between the smoker and these spirits. As well, it is a means of

GRANDMOTHERS:

IN COLONIZED NORTH AMERICA*

communion among the members of the community. The smoke that is inhaled by the smoker is then blown to the spirits and links one to the other in an intimate bond; furthermore, the long-stemmed pipe (*calumet*) is often passed around the ceremonial circle and shared among all the participants.

As early as 1673, Father Marquette observed among the Illinois that the pipe was ceremoniously offered to the four directions as well as above and below. Early eighteenth-century reports provide identical descriptions (the order varies) among the Teton Sioux, the Omaha, the Natchez (Alabama) and, slightly later, the Pueblo (New Mexico). The Four Directions or Four Winds summarize the natural and seasonal powers; above represents the masculine celestial powers, especially the sun; below represents the feminine earth powers, called variously Grandmother and Mother. In other words, North Amerindian aboriginal religions conceived of a basic equality between feminine and masculine spiritual powers. Indeed, the symbolism of the pipe itself maintains this notion. The calumet is stored in two parts; only during ceremonies are the stem and bowl joined. The stem is considered male and the bowl female, and only when the stem enters the bowl and the two form a single unit is the pipe considered spiritually potent.

Among the earliest Native cultures studied by Europeans was that of the Hurons, the northernmost Iroquoian culture. The Jesuits established a mission among them in the mid-seventeenth century and sent voluminous "Relations" back to France. Although the writings described a number of ceremonies, including hunting and fishing rituals performed by men, planting and harvesting rituals are conspicuous by their absence. Since later northern Iroquoian cultures have such rituals, modern ethnologists have interpreted this data as indicating that Huron culture was new to horticulture. This explanation is not convincing, given that the Hurons lived in semi-permanent palisaded towns with multifamily fixed dwellings surrounded by arable fields, which produced the bulk of food resources. There is a simpler explanation. Iroquoian cultures are matrilineal and matrilocal. Males hunted, fished, and engaged in ritual raiding; the women farmed and "owned" the arable land as well as the longhouses (and chose the male leaders from within the matrilineal clans). Most likely the elder women officiated at the planting and harvesting ceremonies, and the Jesuits were oblivious to them as they were to most aspects of female cultures. Certainly, Iroquoian myths give priority to both women and horticulture. In one central myth, the earth was formed when a pregnant woman fell from the sky-world to the primeval sea and was lowered gently by birds to the back of a swimming turtle. A dollop of mud was brought up from the bottom by an aquatic animal and expanded on the back of the turtle to make a land for her to live on. Thus Turtle Island (North America) was created. The woman (or her daughter) died in giving birth to the good and evil twins. From the breasts of her corpse grew the corn that nourishes and sustains us. (The above is a synopsis of a beautiful and richly detailed myth.)

Among Northwest Coast aboriginal cultures, men and women had separate religious societies and distinctly different creation myths. Only recently recorded, the women's-society creation myth had the male fabricated from the original woman in a manner not very complimentary to men. Among Plains buffalo-oriented cultures, there were women's societies with their own myths and rituals, but only a minute amount of data has to date been recorded. The major ceremonial complex was (and is) the "Sun Dance," a fertility-renewal ritual, which among the Cheyenne, for example, must be sponsored by a woman. Her most significant ritual act during the ceremonies takes place in private. Among the Oglala Lakota (Sioux), the most sacred object is the White Buffalo Calf Pipe bundle which, according to the most important Lakota myth, was given to them by White Bufalo Woman. (The buffalo is symbolically both female, as provider of the necessities of life, and male, as ferocious bull.) Among the Kiowas, the ten sacred bundles (the foci of all major situals) were called Grandmothers.

Little is known of the hunting-gathering Algonkian-speaking cultures prior to the fur trade. It is clear that fasting for a vision was practised to a considerable extent, beginning in childhood. The available literature focusses on males. Ignored is the probability that all females fasted. The onset of puberty determined the initial major girl's fast. Contrary to many studies, a woman was not considered polluted during her menstrual period. On the contrary, she was considered extremely potent spiritually and, in that sense, hazardous to the spiritual power objects of males, as well as other persons and herself if her feminine power interacted with masculine power. Ensconced during that time in a separate dwelling, she communed with the feminine powers, the Moon and the Earth, to receive visions. From these visions she learned to control her powers and was inspired with new ceremonies, songs, and design motifs that gave spiritual power to the things she made. Women as well as men functioned as shamans. This pattern is also found across the continent in Northwest Coast cultures.

Transformation

As with any viable religion, Amerindian ones were continually changing over time and mutually influencing one another. The spread of the pipe throughout most of North America is an example, in part, of precontact pan-Indian development. However, contact with European cultures led to rapid and profound changes. One obvious effect of contact was the massive decimation of Native populations due primarily to introduced diseases such as smallpox and measles, but due also to extermination, such as the Puritan massacre of the Pequots in 1636.

Another important change was that of the economy. The fur trade — beaver pelts for metal tools and utensils, firearms, food, and alcohol — led to major cultural disruptions. Previously, hunting provided food; now animals that had not been the primary food source were overhunted and trapped. This led to concepts of family territories, warfare between cultures to monopolize the trade, migration involving armed conflict to follow the disappearing beaver, and dependence on Western trade goods.

It is difficult to speculate on the effects of this economic shift on women in hunting-and-gathering cultures, but one can assume that their importance in subsistence was considerably lessened. Flour, sugar, and tea perhaps replaced the necessity for the plants gathered by the women. Western cloth replaced the need for finely tanned skins for clothes. Brass pots and buckets replaced the need for birchbark containers. With decreased reliance on those skills in which women specialized, we might assume their lessened importance in the social fabric.

Only at the end of the eighteenth century did many of the renowned Plains cultures shift from a mixed economy based on earthen lodges in arable river valleys to a year-long nomadic following of the buffalo made possible with the horse. Women cultivators who had been the economic mainstay in these usually matrilineal cultures became economically dependent on male hunters when the buffalo became the sole basis of the economy. It is only after this economic shift (or when trade for furs became economically important) that we have occasional reports of wives being gambled away by husbands or stolen by rival warrior societies within a band.

It is in the period of the fur trade and its aftermath — alcoholism and destitution — that we find institutionalization of Native religious practices. Although the subject is controversial (e.g., the Ojibwa Midewiwin predates at least direct-contact influence), certainly the reforms of Handsome Lake among the Iroquois in the early nineteenth century cannot be historically doubted. Institutionalization in the postcontact period was a means of revitalizing Native religions, as well as a means for coping with fixed habitations often based on trading centres or due to forced migrations. It was also a means of combatting the religion of the economically and militarily dominating Euro-American cultures. However, institutionalization, given the cultural milieu, meant partially adopting aspects of Christianity. Handsome Lake's reforms included shifting Iroquoian ritual and myth from a matrilineal focus to a patriarchal one: a male "Creator" Diety was introduced and rituals were led entirely by men.

It is with the forced relocation of Native peoples onto reservations that we find the most disruptive cultural changes. Reserves were put under the control of Christian missionaries, who could call upon the military to enforce their decisions. The governments refused to recognize matrilineality and enforced a patrilineal and patriarchal social structure. This, together with the imposition of Victorian morality — most reserves were formed in the second half of the nineteenth century — changed social and sexual equality among the sexes to male domination and female subservience. Victorian prudery meant a double sexual standard enforced by law. Simultaneously, the disappearance of the male role of hunter and warrior placed the entire double burden of providing subsistence and maintaining children on women.

Malnourished, utterly demoralized, forbidden the support of traditional religions, Native people frequently turned to alcohol and suicide. Previously understood as the mainstay of society, male and female shamans were denounced by Christian priests and ministers as being in league with the devil and were ostracized. In eastern and central parts of North America, outside of the Iroquois Longhouse Religion, traditional Native spirituality became feared among Native people as evil sorcery. It is in this climate that we find a major change in Native religious conceptions.

Even with the earliest tenuous contact with Europeans, there was an attempt by Native Americans to understand Western religious concepts and their own concepts in Western terms. By the eighteenth century, in Algonkian-speaking cultures, Native religious leaders had accommodated to the European assumption of monotheistic superiority by adding the prefix *k'ce* (great) to *manito* (spiritual powers and sacred objects, of which there are many). *K'ce-manito* slowly evolved into a male, creator, high god and became the missionary translation for God. A "Genesis" type of creation tales was tacked onto the beginning of traditional migration legends and culture-hero myth chains, a male Creator taking precedence over the aboriginal Grandmother Earth. (In the Longhouse Religion of Handsome Lake, the supreme, male "Creator" replaced the earlier "Sky," which was co-equal with "Earth," the source of life; contemporaneously, the Shawnee female creator, Our

Grandmother, was reconceived as male.) The "Genesis" type of narratives included the creation of woman from man, reversing the aboriginal concept as well as natural logic. However, ritual remained unchanged and, although the pipe offering to the above may be addressed as *k'ce-manito*, the offering to Earth continued.

For the Lakota, as a second example, we have documentary evidence for a shift in the early reserve period, the late nineteenth century, in the meaning of the term *wakan-tanka*. It was originally an amorphous term, varying according to individual interpretations, for all the mysteries or spiritual powers. Under the tutelage of Sword, who became an Episcopal deacon, *wakan-tanka* came instead to be understood as the "Great Spirit," synonymous with the masculine Christian God. Black Elk, a major spiritual leader among the Lakota and a Catholic catechist, added the appelation "Father" to prayers addressed to *wakan-tanka*.

These terminological changes caused a shift in Native ideology. As Jesus was understood as the agent of the Father, so the Sun became the "eyes" of the distant *k'che-manito*, watching over the behaviour of the people. Sun as Grandfather/Father and Earth as Grandmother/Mother maintained their equality, but as *k'che-manito* was "over" the Sun, so "He" must be superior to the Earth. And as the "Great Spirit" is also the "Creator," the female component of the original complex came to be considered created by the male aspect, who also incorporates the common unitive aspect of all the powers. Of all the aspects of Christian influence, it is probably the excision of the female from the aboriginal concept of creation that enabled a single patriarchal god to emerge.

Contemporary Situation

Viable responses to the reserve situation took advantage of the new cultural context. Enforced residential schooling in English meant a means of communication between speakers of different languages, as also the postal service and railroads allowed easy communication over long distances. The Native American Church, based on rituals utilizing the Meso-American peyote, has been a successful and widespread pan-Indian movement. Adopting Protestant institutional structure and terminology, the religion gained legal status through incorporation in a number of American states (it is still illegal in Canada). The degree of Christianization (use of the Bible and primary prayers to Jesus) varies from one group to another, but leaders are normally male, although women participate fully. One development that has influenced other contemporary Native religious revivals is the closing of the all-night ritual with a woman's bringing into the meeting a bowl of water from which all the participants drink after ritual blessings. The Morning Water Woman represents the Mother Earth; the water, her life-giving fluid. But throughout the night, prayers are addressed to the Grandfathers, the Great Spirit, the Creator, Jesus, or God the Father.

In the late 1960s, following the example of the Black Power movement, young Natives realized the time had come for militant protest against oppression. The most pan-Indian group is AIM (American Indian Movement), although it is Lakota-warrior oriented. It is composed of youths seeking their roots and a revival of Native religion. Ironically, although there is much talk of "Mother Earth," stereotypically Western attitudes toward women remain. Women complain that their role in AIM is limited to secretarial and kitchen work.

The last decade has witnessed revitalization of a number of Native traditions in which there has been some influence from the feminist movement and increasing awareness of the traditional role of women in religion and culture. The Iroquois lifestyle is being revived at Akwasasne. The Midewiwin tradition has begun to be revived among some Ojibwa, where women pipeholders are beginning to be accorded recognition. (It was during participation in these ceremonies that I began to experience the feminine component of spirituality.) Women are dancing and being pierced in the Lakota Sun Dance. In the traditionally matrilineal Northwest Coast cultures, women are at the centre of the revived rituals. A few women healers are being accepted in several cultures. But the numbers involved in all of the above are proportionally small. Furthermore, there is still ideological confusion. So long as the voice is directed primarily to the Grandfathers or a male Creator and silent to the Grandmother(s), there is a denial of the feminine aspect of spirituality, which when combined with the masculine leads to creation and wholeness.

FURTHER READING

Nancy O. Lurie, ed. *Mountain Wolf Woman*. Ann arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961.

Nan F. Salerno and Rosamond M. Vanderburgh. *Shaman's Daughter*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980.

Beverly Hungry Wolf. *The Ways of My Grandmothers*. New York: William Morrow, 1980.

Anne Cameron. *Daughters of Copper Woman*. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1981.

Álvaro Estrada. *Maria Sabina, Her Life and Chants*, trans. by Henry Munn. Santa Barbara: Ross-Erickson, 1981.

Jordon Paper, from mid-Atlantic America and educated at the Universities of Chicago and Wisconsin, after teaching at Indiana State University, came to York University in 1972 as a specialist in East Asian and Native American cultures and religions.

**Some of the topics covered in this essay are treated in a more complete, technical and fully documented format in Jordon Paper, "The Post-contact Origin of an American Indian high God: The Suppression of Feminine Spirituality," American Indian Quarterly (Winter, 1984).*