WOMEN IN IROQUOIS SOCIETY

Seneca woman of Albany area chopping wood. Note the baby in the cradle on her back. Iroquois women did not stop their work in order to raise children.

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La société iroquoise traditionnelle est matrilinéaire, c'est à dire que l'on trace la parenté du côté de la mère. Les femmes iroquoises exerçaient autrefois beaucoup de pouvoir sur la vie économique, politique et sociale de leur tribu. Sous l'influence des colons européens et surtout lorsque les Indiens ont emménagé dans les réserves, le mode de vie européen à domination masculine a affaibli le pouvoir et la position des femmes iroquoises. Toutefois, même aujourd'hui il arrive qu'une "communauté" matriarcale traditionnelle co-existe dans la réserve aux côtés d'une forme de société plus nouvelle.

Unlike many North American societies, that of the Iroquois was based on a matrilineal organization, that is, kinship was traced through the female line. Thus women had an important role in both the social and political activities of Iroquois life. However, once the Iroquois were settled on reservations and subject to European laws, the influence of women declined. Nevertheless, the important role of Iroquois women has never been entirely annihilated.

All Indian tribes have a creation myth. The Iroquois creation myth is unique to North America because it attributes the creation of the world to a female rather than a male. Since the Iroquois were not a literate people and had to pass information along orally from one generation to the next, there were many variations of the creation myth. However, the general theme of the myth is always the same. The following is one version.

In the days before the Onondaga, the Oneida, the Senecas, the Cayuga, and the Mohawk were separate peoples, in the days even before people came to live upon the earth — there were other beings in other worlds.

One of these was the woman Awehai. Another was Awehai's husband. The third was a man that Awehai's husband thought she loved more than she loved him. Thinking this drove the husband into such a jealous frenzy that he uprooted the tree that was at the very centre of the world. And into the great chasm left by the uprooted tree, the husband threw the innocent woman to her death.

Falling, falling, through the great, dark hole, Awehai grasped at the life around her. Her fingers curled about seeds of vegetables and flowers. As she continued to fall through the great space, she gathered beavers, otters, and toads into her arms, clutching them to her breasts. Further and further she fell, as if there would never be an end — until the vast waters of another world spread out below her.

As her body grew closer to the water, creatures with broad, feathered wings flew to the place where she could land, making a soft feathery cushion. Gathered under and around her, they carried Awehai until she was safely atop the Great Turtle. The otters, beavers, and toads that she had carried with her scurried about, gathering the dirt that had been shaken from the roots of the great, uprooted tree. Pressing this dirt together, they formed it into an island — the one that we now know as Earth.

Once Earth was made, Awehai scattered the seeds from the plants, those she had gathered as she fell. Soon the Earth was covered with green sprouts of nourishing abundance. When Awehai saw this New World, she brought forth children to live upon it. So it happened that the Iroquois people came into being, children of the woman Awehai who had made the new land in the great waters, the woman whose heart had refused to surrender, the woman whose arms had reached out for life.

The creation myth is significant in that it establishes the philosophical basis for the role of women in Iroquois society. It symbolizes the fecundity of women, whose procreative powers and horticultural skills are closely associated with Awehai, the original force of creation.

So important were the creative abilities of women that they were celebrated in the ceremonial cycle. Almost all of the ceremonies were to give thanks for the fertility of the earth, especially for crops, which were women's main concern. The three main crops grown by the women were corn, beans, and squash,

Mohawk woman of Quebec outside her home displaying some of her household utensils and handicrafts.

which were referred to as the "Three Sisters," "Our Mothers," and "Our Supporters." These "Three Sisters" were most revered among the Iroquois, along with the female abilities of food provision and procreation.

Since the Iroquois followed a matrilineal system, a married couple either lived in or near the same longhouse as the wife's relatives. The wife held complete control over her household. She had property rights, both the right of personal ownership and the right to dispose of personal belongings. Therefore a woman could distribute fish and game caught by her husband and her own horticultural crops to family and friends with a free hand. The implements used for cultivating soil, for preparing food, for dressing skins, for making clothing and other household articles also belonged to the wife.

Most importantly, women "owned" the land, the crops, and the houses. The Iroquois did not practise a system of ownership whereby land could be bought and sold. Rather, the land was held collectively by all the women. Each woman used a piece of land which was recognized as hers. Yet should she abandon the land, any other woman was free to make use of it. The Great Law of Peace of the Iroquois Confederacy, formed in the fifteenth century, clearly stated who owned the land: "women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil." Because of this right of ownership women held the upper hand economically.

In the days before Iroquois contact with Europeans there was a fairly even balance in the amount of food provided by the two sexes — women supplied grains, vegetables, and fruits and men brought in meat and fish. However, during and antecedent to early contact with the Europeans, the women's responsibility for solving the subsistence problem of the group greatly increased. When it became possible to exchange beaver pelts for firearms, the men spent much less time at food-producing activities and took to trading. Furthermore, after 1640 the Five Nations launched a series of wars against the Huron and other tribes allied with the French in order to gain control of the fur trade along the St. Lawrence River. This led to a further decline in the production of food by Iroquois males. As historian John Noon explains, "with war parties almost continually in the field, little time could be spared for hunting. Increased cultivation by the women had to compensate for the loss of game as well as assisting in providing war parties." With this added responsibility came an even higher status for women since they held further control over the economic organization.

Wherever woman is an essential factor in tribal economy, as among the semi-agricultural Iroquois, her status tends to be high. The high status of women is explained by Eileen Jenness in *The Indian Tribes in Canada:*

> If women among the Iroquois enjoyed more privileges and possessed greater freedom than the women of other tribes, this was due . . . to the important place that agriculture held in their economic life, and the distribution of labour . . . which left the entire cultivation of fields and the acquisition of the greater part of the food supply to the women.

The role of women was not confined to raising children and providing food. Rather, women played an important part in the political organization of the Six Nations. Since clan descent was matrilineal, chieftainships were owned and controlled by matrons of certain families and the appointment of a sachem (chief) was determined by that matron in meetings with other clan women. Within the family unit primogeniture did not function with any degree of strictness. It was, however, the custom to assign to a child a lifelong series of names which, when combined with the hereditary titles assigned to that family, determined that child's ultimate status and political function within the Iroquois Confederacy. The most respected names, those that applied to the forty-nine chiefs of the league, were thus predetermined by matrilineal succession. The son of a chief could not succeed his father because he was of his mother's clan, which was necessarily different from that of his father's. Consequently he would not be of the family to which the father's chieftainship belonged. This law was also entrenched within the Iroquois Confederacy. It stated that "the lineal descent of the peoples of the Five Nations shall run in the female line. . . . Men and women shall follow the status of their mothers."

It was also the responsibility of the women to ensure that new sachems conducted themselves satisfactorily. If a new sachem behaved improperly, the matron would warn him three times, giving him a chance to improve. If after three warnings the sachem did not change his ways, the matron would ask the council to depose him. Because of her position, it was necessary for the matron always to conduct herself with great decorum so that if she had to admonish an erring sachem her warnings were respected.

Therefore, while women could not be chiefs, their functions in connection with the election and deposition of chiefs made them a most important factor in Iroquois politics. Moreover, women often addressed councils; their opinion was asked and heeded. When tribal or village decisions had to be made, both men and women attended a meeting. Though the chiefs normally did the public speaking, women at times stepped in and, by their authority as owners of the land and their concern for the future of their children, took an actual part in telling sachems what they should do. During such times women often chose an official male speaker to acknowledge their claims in the council meeting.

Iroquois men obviously appreciated and respected the opinions of their women, for as the French author Chateaubriand explained, "the Iroquois thought that they should not deprive themselves of the aid of a sex whose discriminating and ingenious mind is fertile in resources."

Women also played an important role in another highly significant area of Iroquois life, that of warfare. When the time came for men to go on the warpath, it was the women who prepared them. They collected provisions, weapons, and clothing

for the warriors and carried these items for the men during the first day of the journey or waited with these articles outside the village. After the warriors changed their ceremonial war garb for clothing more suitable for travelling and fighting, the women returned to the village carrying the ceremonial paraphernalia.

Women held the power to both instigate and restrain war parties. The Jesuit missionary Lafitau explained how this power worked.

> The matron, who has principle authority in the household, can force children to go to war if it seems best to her, or keep them at home if they have undertaken a war displeasing to her. When, then, this matron judges it time to raise up the tree again, or to lay again on the mat someone of her family whom death has taken away from her, she addresses herself to some one of those who have their sire at her house and who she believes is most capable of executing her commission. She speaks to him by a wampum belt, explaining her intention of engaging him to form a war party. This is soon done.

For the women war had one major purpose: to produce captives who would replace deceased family members. Because of the high mortality rate sustained by various member tribes of the league in the series of wars against other Indian tribes around them, many women were left without husbands, children without fathers, and councils without councillors. In order to fill these gaps male captives could be taken as husbands for these young widows or as sons by some matron. Replacement of such individuals was a primary concern of the family and so came under the direction of the matron. Adoption of females was also frequent because the tribes required women who were capable of childbearing.

Adoption is generally acknowledged to be the social practice that particularly characterized Iroquois society. On a practical level, the adoption of persons into the family and the natural increase in population meant that the labour force would never become depleted. Thus each independent family would be economically secure. Furthermore, adoption meant that the Iroquois were able not only to survive but to become a dominant military force. Often as many as half of the Iroquois warriors had become members of tribes through adoption. As the proportion of these warriors in a tribe grew, the power of women also tended to increase.

The power and position of Iroquois women were gradually eroded during the nineteenth century. The traditional diplomatic and military roles of Iroquois men were sharply limited by circumstances of reservation life. Simultaneously, the matriarchal character of certain of their economic, kinship, and political institutions was drastically diminished.

On the reservations the division of labour between men and women was seriously altered. On the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario, co-operative patterns were implemented within the family for chores and between families for barn construction and harvesting. Within the nuclear family a division of labour now existed by which all members participated in maintaining the farm. Men performed the bulk of the farm duties while women and children assisted. The agricultural role of women was by this time reduced to milking cows, feeding chickens, and maintaining their own small and private vegetable gardens.

The nuclear family became both the residential and economic unit. No longer was a rule of residence held up as ideal. Rather, a newly married couple now usually lived wherever there was available land and a house. Since ownership of land was by this time on an individual basis, in cases where neither partner had any landholdings or neither was willing to live with in-laws, the European idea of the precedence of the husband prevailed. In other words, the wife was expected to settle at the discretion of the husband.

Eventually many families became patrilineal with respect to both name and inheritance. Iroquois men took an English name or an English translation of an Iroquois name as a surname and transmitted this name, along with inheritance rights to real estate, to their children.

This transition from matrilineal to patrilineal inheritance was legally defined in Canada by the 1869 act entitled "An Act For The Gradual Enfranchisement Of Indians." Section six of this act concerns Indian women who marry non-Indians or Indians from other bands. In defining the status of an Indian woman who marries a non-Indian, the act reads as follows: "Provided always that any Indian woman marrying any other than an Indian shall cease to be an Indian within the meaning of this Act, nor shall the children of such a marriage be considered as Indian." If a woman married an Indian from another tribe or band, the woman and her children "belong to their father's tribe only." The act also for the first time took away land rights from Indian women who married "out."

It is clear from this act that Indian women were to be subject to their husbands, as were European women; by law, any children were to be the husband's alone. Because of this attitude it was inconceivable that an Indian woman would be able to own and transmit property and rights to her children.

European cultural values, which served as a model for the development of early laws relating to Indians, were based primarily on the needs of an agricultural society. Notions of private rights in land inherited through the male were a necessary part of this system. According to European thinking the wife and her property belonged to the husband. Therefore a married Indian woman was seen as an adjunct to her husband — whether he was Indian or non-Indian.

Although matrons had played a role in dealings with Europeans during early contact and even signed some of the earliest treaties along with the chiefs, it gradually became clear that the English and Americans wished only to deal with men and to eliminate any dealings with women. In the negotiations between Iroquois men and non-Indian men, the inter-

vening presence of female mediators was unexpected and unwelcome by the non-Indians. The women also inhibited the exercise of full control by Iroquois men who were observing the independent action of non-Indian men in a male-oriented society.

Furthermore, women gradually lost their power within the political structure of Iroquois society. Matrilineally inherited chieftain statuses were changed, under the direction of non-Indian men, to elective positions.

After the settlement of some Mohawks on a reservation on the Bay of Quinte (an inlet of Lake Ontario), the British, rather than the Mohawks, announced that the head of the village was to be Captain John Deserondyou, who was regarded by the British as an officer of the Indian Department and who could only be deposed by the King of England. This situation shows that the political leadership of the village was now based upon British authority rather than upon the traditional pattern of the Iroquois, in which matrons chose and deposed sachems. This attack on women's control was forced upon the Allegany Senecas of the United States in 1848 and upon the Mohawks at Six Nations Reserve in 1924.

Despite all these impositions upon the Iroquois to change, some have not done so. On most reservations two separate "communities" have emerged, each with its own heterogeneous social and cultural patterns. One derived from Christian/European ethics and the other from longhouse ethics. On the one hand, members of the Christian element accept acculturation and, although they identify as Indian, have become in behaviour and belief indistinguishable from non-Indians. On the other hand, members of the longhouse continue to speak the Iroquois language, retain the matrilineal descent system, and support the confederacy. Their chiefs are still chosen, advised, and deposed by clan matrons. Women are still considered to be the guardians of their children and their homes. It is they who continue to maintain the social order. According to Judy Swamp, wife of the Mohawk chief Jake Swamp:

> We've always had rights. We've always had an equal voice in the council. And we have our own Women's Council. The Women's Council is consulted if things need to be organized or if just too many problems arise concerning our young or the children. That has always been the way, within the clan, when any type of problem develops — it is up to the clan to straighten them out.

Iroquois society was drastically transformed by reservation life. Men and women were forced to abide by the rules of a male-oriented society. The European cultural standards of the importance of private property, inheritance through the male, and a male-dominated form of government were not customary to the Iroquois. It was inevitable that under such a system the powerful role of Iroquois women would gradually decline and eventually be altered.

Yet the role of women has not been totally eliminated. Traditional or longhouse Iroquois have not completely accepted Canadian and American values and laws but rather have retained much of their own culture. Thus, although an Iroquoian child inherits the surname of his father, he may at the same time inherit the title of sachem through his mother. Furthermore, it is evident by the resurgence of interest in traditional culture by many present-day Iroquois that the role of women will continue to be of significance.