Native American Women Essay, Research Paper

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On few subjects has there been such continual misconception as on the position of

women among Indians. Because she was active, always busy in the camp, often carried

heavy burdens, attended to the household duties, made the clothing and the home,

and prepared the family food, the woman has been depicted as the slave of her

husband, a patient beast of encumbrance whose labors were never done. The man, on

the other hand, was said to be an loaf, who all day long sat in the shade of the lodge

and smoked his pipe, while his overworked wives attended to his comfort. In actuality,

the woman was the man’s partner, who preformed her share of the obligations of life

and who employed an influence quite as important as his, and often more powerful.

Native Americans established primary relationships either through a clan system,

descent from a common ancestor, or through a friendship system, much like tribal

societies in other parts of the world. In the Choctaw nation, ” Moieties were subdivided

into several nontotemic, exogamous, matrilineal ‘kindred’ clans, called iksa.”

(Faiman-Silva, 1997, p.8) The Cheyenne tirbe also traced their ancestry through the

woman’s lineage. Moore (1996, p. 154) shows this when he says “Such marriages,

where the groomcomes to live in the bride’s band, are called ‘matrilocal’.” Leacock

(1971, p. 21) reveals that “…prevailing opinion is that hunting societies would be

patrilocal…. Matrilineality, it is assumed, followed the emergence of agriculture….”

Leacock (p. 21) then stated that she had found the Montagnais-Naskapi, a hunting

society, had been matrilocal until Europeans stepped in. “The Tanoan Pueblos kinship

system is bilateral. The household either is of the nuclear type or is extended to include

relatives of one or both parents….” (Dozier, 1971, p. 237)

The statuses and roles for men and women varied considerably among Native

Americans, depending on each tribe’s cultural orientations. In matrilineal and matrilocal

societies, women had considerable power because property, housing, land, and tools,

belonged to them. Because property usually passed from mother to daughter, and the

husband joined his wife’s family, he was more of a stranger and yielded authority to his

wife’s eldest brother. As a result, the husband was unlikely to become an authoritative,

domineering figure. Moreover, among such peoples as the Cherokee, Iroquois, and

Pueblo, a disgruntled wife, secure in her possessions, could simply divorce her husband

by tossing his belongings out of their residence.

Women’s role in tribal governance was often influential in matrilineal societies, as among

the Iroquois, in which the principal civil and religious offices were kept within maternal

lineages. The tribal matriarch or a group of tribal matrons nominated each delegate,

briefed him before each session, monitored his legislative record, and removed him from

office if his conduct displeased the women. Despite the feminine checks and balances,

the actual business of government was a masculine affair.

In the Northeastern Woodlands and on the Plains, where hunting and warfare demanded

strenuous activity away from home, the men often returned exhausted and required a

few days to recover. Wearied by both these arduous actions and the religious fasting

that usually accompanied them, the men relaxed in the village while the women went

about their many tasks. Seeing only female busyness in these native encampments,

White observers misinterpreted what they saw and wrote inaccurate stereotypical

portrayals of lazy braves and industrious squaws. Such was not the case.

In the Southeast and Southwest, men and women performed their daily labors with

observable equality because the men did not go out on grueling expeditions as did the

men in the Northeast and Plains. In California, the Great Basin, and Northwest Coast,

the sexual division of labor fell somewhere between these two variations.

Women had certain common tasks in each of the U.S. culture areas: cleaning and

maintaining the living quarters, tending to children, gathering edible plants, pounding

corn into eal, extracting oil from acorns and nuts, cooking, sewing, packing, and

unpacking. Certain crafts were also usually their responsibility: brewing dyes, making

pottery, and weaving such items as cloth, baskets, and mats. In the Southwest,

however, men sometimes made baskets and pottery, and even weaved cloth.

In regions where hunting provided the main food supply, the women were also

responsible for house building, processing carcasses of game, preparing hides or furs,

and whatever food gathering or farming that could be done. In the mostly agricultural

societies in the Eastern Woodlands, the women primarily worked in the fields and the

men built the frame houses and both shared duties for preparing hides or furs. Similarly,

in the fishing communities of the Northwest, the men built the plank houses and helped

with the processing of animal skins. In California and in the Great Basin, most aspects

of labor, except the defined female tasks of weaving and basket and pottery making,

were shared fairly evenly. In the Southwest, the men did most of the field work, house

building, weaving, cloth manufacturing, and animal skin processing.

Female prestige among the Iroquois grew greater after the Revolutionary War, and male

prestige ebbed due to continual losses and defeats and the inability to do much hunting

due to scarcity of game. By the nineteenth century, mothers played a greater role in

approving marriage partners for their children and more consistently got custody of

their children in a divorce, unlike the uncertainty of custody in earlier times.

Among many Southeast tribes the women were influential in tribal councils and in some

places they cast the deciding vote for war or peace. The Cherokee designated a female

as “Beloved Woman,” through whom they believed the Great Spirit spoke. Consequently,

her words were always heard but not necessarily heeded. However, she headed the

influential Woman’s Council, sat as a voting member of the Council of Chiefs, and

exercised considerable influence. She also unhesitantly used her absolute authority

over prisoners. When she died, a successor would be chosen.

The Cheyenne held women in particularly high regard. They played an influential role in

determining warfare and sometimes even fought alongside the men. Upon a war party’s

successful return, the women danced about while waving the scalps, exhibited their

men’s shields and weapons, and derived honors from their husbands’ deeds.

Property possession, inheritance, power, and influence rested on whether a tribe’s

structure was in matrilineal or patrilineal. Although a few universal female-designated

work tasks existed (cleaning, nurturing, edible plant gathering, food preparation,

cooking, packing, and unpacking), others varied by region, means of food production,

and social organization. Such variances in gender roles further exemplify the diversity

that existed among Native Americans.

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