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Surviving Colonization:  
Native American Women and Their Lives  

Izumi Ishii

Native American women have suffered a long history of scholarly neglect. Academicians have not, until recently, paid much attention to the roles and status of women or gender relations in Indian society. Stressing the devastating impact of colonization on the lives of women, some have advocated “declension” narratives; others, modifying or refuting this Marxist model, have begun to explore a more complex world of Native women. With the idea of complementarity and reciprocity increasingly replacing declension models, the scholarship on Native women has steadily deepened our understanding of Native American society.

Feminist anthropology of the 1970s rested on a “separate spheres” theory of gender. This theory was first pointed out by Ruth Landes’s ethnographic study, *The Ojibwa Woman* (1938), and later theorized by Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere’s cross-cultural work, *Women, Culture, and Society* (1974). Their studies demonstrated that separate spheres for men and women led to the universal subordination of women. As historian Nancy Shoemaker put it, Eleanor Leacock was “the foremost critic of Landes and

Doshisha Society for the Study of Language and Culture,  
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Rosaldo.” Regarding feminist anthropology of the 1970s as full of “ethnocentric and male-centered bias,” LeacocK, together with Mona Etienne, constructed her compelling counter-argument in Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives (1980). Applying Marxist theory to Native American societies, Leacock argued that “the separate spheres for men and women . . . were historical developments fed by the rise of capitalism.” Leacock’s pre-colonized Native society embraced the ideology of male-female complementarity, but colonization entirely replaced this egalitarian principle with the hierarchical organization of the dominant society. As she observed, Native women had enjoyed autonomous, influential status in society, but European powers favored male roles as hunters and warriors. They incorporated men into their empires and economies and made women economically dependent on and eventually subordinate to men.

Alan M. Klein’s “The Political-Economy of Gender: A 19th Century Plains Indian Case Study” (1983) documented “declension” among the Plains Indians. Focusing on relationships between men and women and those between individual and collective economic values, Klein traced the impact of the horse and hide trade on Plains Indian society between 1750 and 1880. He argued that Indian women lost political and economic position over a century. Whereas the collective nature of hunting and distribution characterized eighteenth-century egalitarian Plains society, the buffalo hide trade and the introduction of horses changed the basis of Indian communities in the nineteenth century. Many Indian men acquired horses by raiding, and the horse and a different chase method altered the nature of hunting from a collective operation to an individual, male-dominated enterprise. Sexual division of labor became more rigid, and women were increasingly confined to communal processing and domestic production while men became much freer to pursue individual wealth. Women became a proletariat, a working class, as a consequence of economic transformation.
Karen Anderson used the “declension model” to analyze missions among the Hurons and the Montagnais in seventeenth-century New France. In *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (1991), Anderson argued that within thirty years, the Jesuits successfully transformed gender relations in the Native societies. Bringing their cultural baggage with them, the Jesuit missionaries were appalled at the status and power Native women were enjoying. They thought that the women were wild, unruly, and awfully lewd because they never seemed to obey male authorities nor hide their sexuality. Thus, the Jesuits attempted to undermine the social institutions that permitted such situations and to reorganize Indian society by putting women in their proper place—one of subjugation. While the crises in Indian society caused by European-induced epidemic disease, war, and famine contributed to the spread of Christianity, Native converts gradually accepted the Christian conceptualization of women as the source of evil in their communities. Traditionally, Huron society had provided ways of expressing aggression such as warfare and torture, dreaming and acting out dreams, and temporary insane behavior, but when these Native ways of easing social tension proved to be unworkable, women became the objects of male aggression. By imposing patriarchal ideas on them, the Jesuits successfully deprived Huron and Montagnais women of autonomy and independence and subjugated them.

Carol Devens also studied the effects of missionization on Native society and women in *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900* (1992). Believing that missionaries, “a vital part of colonization,” performed “the ideological counterpart to economic and political manipulation and exploitation,” Devens presented three patterns of Native responses to Protestant missionizing efforts and the subsequent evolution of gender relations among the Ojibwa, Cree, and Montagnais-Naskapi of the Great Lakes. According to Devens, Native
societies initially united in resistance to the Christian message and often expelled missionaries. As economic and political interaction with Europeans increased, however, many communities grudgingly accepted these missionaries. Missions, as well as economics, favored men to women, and so “communities divided along gender lines into factions.”

Though Devens focused on the effect, rather than the cause of gender-based factionalism, she agreed with Klein that when the fur trade drew Native men into complex economic and political relationships with Europeans, it eliminated women from participating as producers in their own right and eventually undermined the reciprocal nature of gender relations in Native society. The end result was that while many men embraced Christianity which ideologically sanctioned the economic and social subordination of women, women rarely accepted this new faith and, instead, became conservators of Native culture.

But was the impact of colonization on the lives of the Native women as devastating as these declension narratives suggest? Two complementary studies of Western Canada fur trade society, published in 1980, pointed to more creativity on the part of Native women in adapting to European colonization. Examining the position of Indian, mixed-blood, and European women in the Western Canada fur trade, Sylvia Van Kirk described how these Native women created a unique, racially mixed society with Euro-Canadian fur traders in “Many Tender Ties”: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870.

Defining the trade as a mutually beneficial system for Europeans and Natives, she portrayed the Indian women’s active roles in providing their husbands with access to Native trade networks, as well as survival skills, and in cementing trade ties. When marriage bonds with Indian women lost much of their economic significance at the end of the eighteenth century, their mixed-blood daughters replaced them as partners of Euro-Canadian traders. The offspring of Native women, however, enjoyed less autonomy than their
Native mothers. In the nineteenth century, the arrival of missionaries and the coming of British ladies who considered themselves superior to the country wives threatened their status. Sensing that their “legitimate place—that of wife and mother” was taken by these inferior Native wives, these English ladies developed racial prejudice toward the Native people. Yet for more than a century, Native women, as “active agents,” had played important parts in Western Canada fur trade country.

Jennifer S. H. Brown’s *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (1980) sought to examine the “interracial encounters” between Euro-Canadian traders and Native women and to reveal their significance and consequences. Dispelling the often-held belief in the creation of single fur trade society, Brown argued that different organizational structures, cultural backgrounds of the personnel, and patterns of interaction with Indians of the London-based Hudson’s Bay Company and the Montreal-based North West Company led to two distinctive patterns of “marriage ‘according to the custom of the country.’” The relationships between Hudson’s Bay traders and their Native partners “exhibit[ed] greater permanence and more signs of mutual affection and loyalty,” but the “greater independence and mobility” of the North Westers made their alliances with Native women “a casual-exploitative type.”

After the consolidation of these two companies in 1821, many traders adopted the North West Company tradition of country marriages. Brown concurred with Van Kirk that the arrival of British ladies disrupted relationships between company men and métis women and contributed to the rise of more intense racism in the fur trade society. Both Van Kirk’s and Brown’s Native women underwent the eventual decline of their status, but they, by playing crucial parts in the fur trade society, showed a greater degree of vitality in and adaptability to new environments.

Unlike Alan M. Klein, Marla N. Powers did not find declension in Plains Indian society. Relying on twenty-seven years of field work on the Pine...
Ridge Reservation, Powers sought to examine Oglala women’s roles and their relationships with men in *Oglala Women: Myth, Ritual, and Reality* (1986). Throughout her book, Powers’s narrative conveyed the importance of the idea of complementarity between Oglala women and men: “[W]omen are neither inferior nor superior to men, merely different.” Attempting to dispel the conventional notion of male dominance in the Plains Indian society, Powers argued that “Oglala women purposely perpetuate this myth by making males and outsiders believe that men are in charge.” In the section on “Activist Women,” moreover, she stated that “[o]ne essential way Oglala women, . . . differ from activist women in mainstream America is that Oglala women are supportive of their men.” On the Pine Ridge Reservation, as well as in the traditional Oglala society, therefore, complementarity worked as the ideal behavioral mode. Another important thesis was that Oglala women survived the economic pressures of the transitional period to reservation life more easily than their male counterparts because their roles required less adjustment. Whereas men could no longer hunt buffalo, women retained their roles as caretakers of the home and children in the nineteenth century. Well into the twentieth century, these female responsibilities continued to be highly regarded in the society. Thus, Powers concluded that Oglala women did not suffer from a decline of their status as much as previous scholars such as Klein often claimed. Furthermore, these women, by exercising the ethic of complementarity, helped elevate the position of Oglala men.

The deerskin trade in the southeast also revealed vital roles Native women performed. In “Guardians of Tradition and Handmaidens to Change: Women’s Roles in Creek Economic and Social Life during the Eighteenth Century” (1990), Kathryn E. Holland Braund illustrated the ways in which the deerskin trade affected eighteenth-century Creek society. The traditional Creek community exercised a rigid sexual division of labor and a matrilineal kinship system. Men hunted while
women farmed. When the deerskin trade with Europeans transformed Creek men into commercial hunters, however, Creek women accompanied their husbands and performed miscellaneous duties during their winter hunt. Thus, unlike Klein’s Plains Indian society, “commercial hunting became a joint venture for Creek men and women.” In order to obtain European goods such as metal tools and fabrics, Indian women also sold their crops and engaged in horse theft and even in liaisons. Though some women married European traders, they did not allow their husbands to disturb the basic institutions of the tribe and, instead, attempted to maintain traditional family values including matrilineality within their mixed households. Creek women’s determination and influence protected tradition and resisted drastic change in eighteenth-century Creek society. Thus, Braund aptly called Creek women “guardians of tradition and handmaidens to change.”

She further explored this theme in her monograph, *Deerskins & Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815* (1993). As she pointed out, English traders entered into exchange networks which already existed in Indian country, but they soon became the Creeks’ major trading partners. For the Creeks, “the maintenance of a steady trading relationship with a European power [became] essential to their survival as a people.” Yet economic dependence and individual debt, along with the ready supplies of rum, began to threaten the autonomy of the tribe. What was worse, the rise of the new consumerism increasingly eroded the tribal ethic of respect for elders among young Creek men. By processing deerskins, making pottery, and tilling villages together in their communities, however, women continued to observe the traditional corporate values and a matrilineal clan system and maintained the strong tie between generations. The women “helped offset the ill effects of the trade and white contact on Creek men and bolstered traditional social institutions.”

In “The Rise or Fall of Iroquois Women” (1991), Nancy Shoemaker explicitly attacked the Marxist model of declension. She examined how
Seneca women’s political rights, economic roles, and individual freedoms changed after colonization. According to Shoemaker, Seneca women traditionally influenced the politics of the tribe as “diligent lobbyists” and as clan mothers who chose and deposed chiefs. Federal authority, together with missionaries, attempted to transform the Seneca society into the one similar to their own, but tribal leaders protected women’s political rights “as part of the larger effort for community survival.” Though Seneca women had less economic opportunities than did their male counterparts, the men were never “the sole breadwinners of the nuclear family model,” and women always contributed to the family economy. Because the Senecas continued to adhere to a matrilineal kinship system, women, as determinants of tribal membership, assumed great influence on tribal matters. Shoemaker’s Seneca women did not become increasingly subordinate to Seneca men. As she compellingly argued, the declension model was too simplistic to explain culture change in the Seneca Nation.

Shoemaker’s challenge to the declension model culminated in the publication of Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women in 1995. In this collection of essays, each contributor illustrated the ways in which the Indian women, as producers, continued to exercise their economic power and sought greater opportunities even after the arrival of the Europeans. As these authors convincingly argued, Native women’s economic roles and the practice of the separate spheres in Indian societies ultimately contributed to the reinforcement of “strength and identity” of Native women. Shoemaker’s own contribution to this anthology provided a good example. Shoemaker’s analysis of seventeenth-century New France revealed a group of Iroquois women at a praying town called Kahnawake embracing Christianity. Unlike Karen Anderson’s Jesuits who transformed gender relations in Indian community, Shoemaker’s Native women “transformed Christianity into an Iroquois religion.” Indeed, “Kateri Tekakwitha’s Tortuous Path to Sainthood”
demonstrated Indian women’s adaptability to a set of new ideas from Europe. What these Indian converts embraced was “a syncretic religion,” which was comprehensible from both Iroquois and Jesuits’ perspectives. As Shoemaker compellingly argued, those Iroquois who subscribed to Christian ethics “did so for reasons that made sense within an Iroquois cultural framework.”

By fasting, walking in ice and snow barefoot, and whipping the comrades and being whipped by them, Tekakwitha, together with two other young women, engaged in self-mortification and dedicated herself to virginity. Catholic female saints were believed to conduct fasting and penitential self-abuse when they needed to acquire spiritual and physical power, but these practices, the very “sources of individual empowerment,” also resonated with Iroquois traditions. In the end, the Jesuits’ attempt to implant the idea of patriarchy in Iroquois society failed. Indian women selectively internalized Christian teachings and rituals.

Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman, with the new attention to autonomy and complementarity, engaged in an anthropological attempt to understand gender in Native American societies. With each contributor seeking to unveil the “silence” which had long “surround[ed] the lives of Native North American women,” Women and Power in Native North America (1995) provided a new framework for understanding gender relations and women’s roles among Native people. Women and Power, reflecting Leacock and Etienne’s assertion about women’s high status before colonization, developed more systematic accounts of complex gender relations among Native people than previous anthropological studies. The essays in this volume showed how each different culture defined women’s power and status. Not only the political realm, but also family structures and kinship systems, the sexual division of labor and women’s economic roles, and mythology and religious beliefs of Native people all made women’s empowerment possible. Carefully avoiding discussion of the relative power of genders, the contributors created a
Native world of autonomy, complementarity, and egalitarianism.

With the new attention to autonomy and complementarity, therefore, *Women and Power* enhances further intellectual discourse between anthropologists and historians about gender issues in Native American societies. The shift in the historiography on Native women from the Marxist declension model to a complex understanding of gender and culture change is reflected in the works done by historian Theda Perdue. In “Southern Indians and the Cult of True Womanhood” (1985), Perdue illustrated how the American notion of the cult of domesticity undermined the status of Cherokee women, who had had an important place politically, economically, socially, and culturally within their community. Embracing Anglo-American ideals, a Cherokee elite came to expect women to be sexually pure, submissive to men, and concerned primarily with spiritual and domestic matters. They eventually excluded the women from politics and economic activities outside the home. Though many elite women learned to be “true women” in mission schools, the majority of Cherokee women retained their traditional ways of life. Yet, as Perdue stated, the impact of the cult of true womanhood on Cherokee women was substantial because of the power of the Cherokee elite, who embraced these ideas, along with other aspects of American civilization.

As “Cherokee Women and the Trail of Tears” (1989) demonstrated, the Cherokee planter elite, by depriving women of their economic and political roles, excluded them completely from the public arena in the Nation. During the removal crisis of the 1830s, therefore, the voices of the women were no longer heard in the Cherokee government. In face of federal authority and forced removal, Cherokee men in the 1830s recognized the vulnerability of their own position, but well before they did, Cherokee women had found that they lost much power and influence in their community.

In her *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1830*
(1998), however, Perdue modified the idea of declension and elaborated her stance on Cherokee women before removal. She demonstrated that “[t]he impetus for any shift in gender relationships among the Cherokee, . . . grew out of the need to meet the challenges of European contact, not out of a battle of the sexes.” Just like Braund’s Creek society, the ideas of individual acquisitiveness, hierarchy, and commercialism increasingly induced Cherokee men into a new, aggressive world with Europeans, while women were left, as “conservators,” to preserve communal values in Cherokee society. Perdue believed, however, that internal gender relations remained complementary because this duality and the importance of “a feminine ethic” eventually “prevailed, even in the male National Council” and were most clearly reflected in the Cherokee legal code concerning communal land title. Portraying cultural persistence and change as well as vitality in the lives of Cherokee women, therefore, Perdue finally found the significant roles of women in Cherokee resistance during the removal crisis of the 1830s. Their association with the land and their opposition to selling it reinforced the Cherokee concept of and commitment to communal landholding, and Cherokee women quietly challenged male authority in the Nation. The women could not convince a small number of “self-interest[ed]” Cherokee elite in the end, and their people suffered from removal, but “a distinct Cherokee women’s culture survived removal, rebuilding, civil war, reconstruction, allotment, and Oklahoma statehood.”

Challenging the prevailing ideas about the fur trade, intermarriage, and Christianity in Indian societies, historian Susan Sleeper-Smith argued that these factors did not undermine women’s status in the western Great Lakes region but instead they made Native women’s empowerment possible. In *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (2001), Sleeper-Smith reconsidered the roles of extensive kin networks in Native societies and concluded that “[w]omen, kinship, and Catholicism shaped the dynamics of the exchange process and
minimized the intrusion of market forces.” French fur traders recognized that successful trade required Native kin and allies, and they eagerly sought to “marry socially prominent Indian women, particularly those with extensive kin networks.” Those Native women who married fur traders incorporated their French husbands into their communities, and they enhanced their status and that of their households by participating in the trade as intermediaries. By converting to Catholicism and serving as godmothers, moreover, these Indian women cultivated fictive relationship with other French traders and further strengthened kin linkages. Catholic kin networks, by the middle of the eighteenth century, became integral to the western Great Lakes fur trade, and kinship and Catholicism helped reinforce Native women’s authority in the region.

In the past few decades, the study of Native American women has undergone change and expansion. The concepts of egalitarianism and complementarity help us understand the complexity of the Indian historical past. Though scholars have only recently shifted their focus to gender relations in Native American society, gender is, indeed, a real key to resolving riddles of culture change and persistence in the Native world. Further intellectual discussion among academicians, as well as more active interaction with contemporary Native American women, will deepen our understanding of Indian culture and history.

Notes

I would like to thank Theda Perdue for her guidance, encouragement, and criticisms.


8 Ibid., 3.

9 Ibid., 4.


11 Ibid., 202.

12 Ibid., 8.


14 Ibid., 51.

15 Ibid., 131.


17 Ibid., 6.

18 Ibid., 7.

19 Ibid., 149.


21 Ibid., 244.


23 Ibid., xiii.

24 Ibid., 132.

25 Shoemaker, “The Rise or Fall of Iroquois Women,” *Journal of Women’s History* 2
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26 Ibid., 40.
27 Ibid., 41.
28 Ibid., 47.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 65.
37 Ibid., 64.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 154, 155.
40 Ibid., 194-95.
41 Susan Sleeper-Smith, Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 5-6. See also Sleeper-Smith, “Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade,” Ethnohistory 47 (2000): 423-52. In this article, Sleeper-Smith examined extensively the lives of four Native women who were Catholic converts and married French fur traders.
42 Susan Sleeper-Smith, Indian Women and French Men, 19.
植民地化の時代を生き抜いて：
ネイティブ・アメリカンの女性と彼女たちが歩んだ道

石井泉美

本稿は、ネイティブ・アメリカンの女性をインディアン研究者がどのように捉えてきたのかについての変遷をたどったものである。以前から文化人類学者たちにより指摘されてきたように、ヨーロッパ人到来以前のインディアン社会においては、男は狩り、女は畑を耕すことで自らのアイデンティティを確立し、男女が共に支えあい、相互に補いあいながら日々の生活を営んできた。しかし、「デクレーション・モデル（ディスコーディネート・モデル）」を唱える研究者たちは、この男女間の「相互補完性（ディスパッファリー・モデル）」の伝統は、ヨーロッパ人との接触、それに続く植民地化の中で崩れ去り、ヨーロッパ社会同様、インディアン女性はインディアン男性に従属することを強化され、ヨーロッパ人によりインディアン男性が重用される一方でインディアン女性の地位は一様に低下したのだと論じた。しかしながら、現在では、より多くのインディアン研究者たちがインディアン＝白人関係史をこのように単純化して捉えることの危険性に気づき、ネイティブ・アメリカンの女性のなかに順応性や柔軟性を認め、その結果、主体性をもった様々なインディアン女性像が浮かび上がっている。