

Gender Roles among the Iroquois

By Katsithawi Ashley Thomas

Since around the 1800's women and men have been "doing gender," especially the Iroquoian people. Hundreds of years ago women and men had certain gender roles to follow. Men went out and hunted, they were the warriors and did more of the activities outdoors. Women on the other hand stayed at the longhouse (An Iroquoian home made of wood that had a fire pit and beds made out of wood. The longhouse held up to six families.) took care of the children, cooking, preparing the food, and making all the clothing for the family. Today, it is different; men and women try to share the responsibilities evenly among themselves although there are a lot of men and women who are very old fashioned, especially the older generation. The difference in the gender roles among the Iroquois in terms of power authority, agriculture and the children is that there is more equality nowadays.

Iroquoian woman had a great amount of authority and power in the community. Since the Iroquois are a matriarchal society, the women are the more dominant gender. "In the Iroquois community, women were the keepers of the culture. They were responsible for defining the political, social, spiritual, and economic norms of the tribe." (Iroquois Democracy.) Warner (1925) states, "In the Iroquoian political system, women possessed an unusual amount of power. All the male delegates to the ruling of councils of the Iroquois nation were designated by senior women in the clan or tribe." There are four different clans: bear, wolf, turtle and snipe. Women were the clan mothers in the longhouse, while men were the chiefs. Clan mothers' roles were to make sure everything was running smoothly in the community. They were to make sure that all the families in their clan had enough food and that the family was able to survive during the winter. "Clan mothers, the leaders of the clan, select the council members or chiefs, and have veto power over the men's decisions" (Carnegie museums.)

The clan mothers were also in charge of putting together all the festivals and ceremonies for the community. Some of these festivals were Corn-Planting festival, Strawberry festival, and Maple festival. These festivals were to celebrate corn, maple and strawberries and at the same time pray that there would be a good harvest for the years to come. There was also the false face ceremony "Various masks are carved by dancers and used in longhouse ceremonies in order to ward off spirits who cause sickness or to cure those people who are already afflicted,"(Warner.P.146) This is why the false face ceremonies are held each year.

Women also appointed men to be chiefs in the community. Chiefs took care of all the politics among the tribe and the confederacy. Men did the traveling to other communities to talk about land claims and other political issues, and also some issues concerning the white people. Men were also the warriors of the tribe; women were not allowed to fight for the community, they were told that they had to stay home and watch

over the reserve. Not all men went out and fought for the tribe; the medicine men, the elders and those men that were too weak to go out and fight were told to stay home. The people had great respect for those men that went out and fought for the welfare of the community. A man who gained great respect among the tribe became the war chief. Since the women had a lot of power, the family name was passed on through them instead of the father. After a couple got married, the man moved into the longhouse of the wife's family. Once they moved in their children became members of the wife's clan. If a couple decided that they no longer wanted to be married anymore and had a divorce, and then the children would automatically be in the mothers' full custody.

In today's day and age, women and men have different roles that involve the community. Women are still the clan mothers and still have some say on what goes on in the community. Although men overpower women when it comes to decision making, these days there are women who are chiefs and/or grand chiefs in the Iroquoian communities in Canada and the United States. In Akwesasne, New York, a community near Buffalo, their grand chief is a woman. The chiefs get voted into council by a community vote. The clans today are still passed down through the mother, for example: my mom belongs to the bear clan and my dad belongs to the snipe clan. Since the clans are passed down through the mother, then that would mean that I belong to the bear clan and would have to sit with the bear clan when I go into the longhouse for a ceremony or a social. In Kahnawake, a Mohawk reserve near Montreal, there are a few warriors still living, although no one will admit that they belong to the warrior society. "It is mainly the Mohawks of the Kahnawake reserve who have become the famous Iroquois high-steel workers of the 20th century." (Waldman p.141) The men travel great distances to go and work on bridges, tall building and many others in the Canada and the United States. The most important buildings to many Kahnawake men is the Empire state building and the World Trade centers. Gradually as the years go by women have started getting into ironworking. Today the family name is passed on through the father, and if a couple were to get divorced, depending on the situation they would be able to have joint custody of their children.

"The Iroquois were an agricultural people and it was the women who owned the land and tended the crops." (Iroquois Democracy) Women have always planted, cultivated, harvested, and processed the crops; it was a privilege because women have a connection to the earth. The reason that the women have a connection to the earth was because of the Iroquois creation story. The creation story says that a woman fell from the sky and landed on moth earth. This woman was called Sky Woman. While living on earth this woman had two children, these children were not conceived by a male, they were conceived by the earth. That is why the Iroquois woman has such closeness to the earth. "Dualism was applied to labor with each gender taking a clearly defined role that complemented the work of the other. Women did all the work involving the field while men did all the work involving the forest including the manufacture of anything involving wood. The Iroquois men were responsible for hunting, trading, and fighting, while women took care of farming, food gathering, and housekeeping. (Reference.com) Men built the longhouses so that their family and clan would be able to live and survive throughout the years. They also built the sweat lodges, which are similar to saunas,

which were made out of branches from the trees and also animal hide. Sweat lodges were used for ceremonies or the people used them for a sort of healing. If they had troubles in their home, they would go into the sweat lodge with one or two of the same gender, to talk about how they were feeling and maybe resolve some of the problems or situations that they were having. Although men were the main gender to be working with wood, women would also go out into the forest and cut down and carry the wood back to the village so that they may have some sort of heat during the cold winters and also that they were able to cook the food that the men would catch. They would go out and cut the wood while their men were out to war or when they were gone for weeks at a time hunting and fishing for food. The only way families in the village would survive, it would be by growing their own food, fishing and hunting. Some of the main harvest that the village would produce and would have for the winter time would be corn, beans, and squash. In Iroquoian culture these three foods are what they call The Three Sisters. They call them the Three Sisters because they were the three main foods that the Iroquois would produce. The other foods that the Iroquois would survive on was moose, deer, rabbit, and of course the many different fish that they would catch.

Today the Iroquois people still eat corn, beans, and squash, although these three are eaten mainly only in the ceremonies and on special occasions. They also eat many of the processed food that we find in today's grocery stores. Iroquois men still go out hunting, when they can. They go hunting mostly in Northern Canada, especially in Northern Quebec and Ontario. However today, the men are told that they need a permit for hunting and fishing so that they could kill the animals and bring home wild meat. "Farming has now been largely abandoned by the Iroquois, although the annual cycle of festivals and ceremonies associated with planting, harvesting, and other traditional economic activities persist." (O'Leary,p.165)

"Iroquois boys began developing military skills when young, practicing with knives, war clubs, and bows and arrows." (Waldman, p.105) When these boys became teenagers, they were ready to have their first raids against other natives or white people. By doing these raids they would gain respect among the community. Boys knew at a very young age that they were to grow up and become a warrior; they knew that it was their destiny. Men favored boys more than girls. Men always brought their young boys with them hunting, fishing, or any of the other daily things that they did each day. The only place the boys knew that they weren't allowed to go to was with their fathers when they went to war or did the raids. Young girls on the other hand knew that they were not allowed to become a warrior because they were girls. Mothers taught their girls at a very young age to cook, clean, and how to tend to the gardens. They taught their children all about the culture and the traditions of the Iroquois people. When a girl turned eighteen, her mother and grandmother would try to set her up with one of the other young boys in another clan. They set them up to be married, so that the couple could start having a family. When it came to disciplining the children, if a child was doing something mischievously outside a neighbor's home, then that neighbor had the permission to do whatever felt necessary to punish the children, even if it meant hitting the child.

Today some children were brought up knowing the culture and traditions of the Iroquois; others were brought up with Christian beliefs. The children that were brought up with traditional values don't drink, smoke or do drugs. They don't do these things because in the ways of the Iroquois, if you were brought up through the longhouse, then you shouldn't do these things. Today if your neighbor's child was doing some kind of mischief outside, then the neighbor is not allowed to hit the child like it used to be in the olden days. Today if you hit a child, even if you are a relative, the child might decide to go to social services and say that you are abusing him or her.

Gender roles among the Iroquoian people have changed a great deal from hundreds of years ago to today. They have changed through how women had a great deal of power and authority back then to how nowadays men have most of the power. Gender roles have also changed by the way parents treat their children, and in the way that men and women shared the responsibilities with the way men went hunting and the way women always stayed home and did all the work that dealt with living in the community. Gender roles have helped the community change a great deal from years ago to today.

Katsisahawi Thomas is proud of who she is, a Mohawk woman. She enjoys being in the longhouse and learning the language, which she learns from her To:ta (Grandmother.)
