

Reclaiming Tradition: American Indian Female Involvement in the Red Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s

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The Cheyenne people have been quoted as saying, “[N]o people is broken until the heart of its women is on the ground. Then they are broken. Then they will die.”¹ From the moment the first settlers arrived on the American continent until present day, the native tribes and peoples who inhabited that land have struggled for their very existence, both literally and culturally. Many lost, but many succeeded. Those who won and those who continue to wage their war have found a valuable weapon in what, until the advent of the women’s movement in the latter half of the twentieth century, would have appeared to the white invaders to be an unlikely source—their women. The women have refused to give up, have refused to let their hearts be thrown on the ground, and have refused to let their people die. Through the political turmoil and cultural rejuvenation that characterized the American Indian² society of the 1960s and 1970s, women not only participated in the background, but led the way, supporting their activism with roles and values retained from their heritage.

Upon contact with the indigenous peoples of the New World, European settlers, so accustomed to their “civilized” societies in which the male figure of the household held supreme power over the family *and* its dealings in the public sphere, applied their standards to the natives they encountered in America. The new inhabitants quickly learned enough of the natives’ ways to realize that the work of men and women were separate, that women not only tended to the children and other “domestic” concerns, but were responsible for the cultivation of crops in many tribes, while the men seemingly had few obligations beyond hunting and organizing tribal affairs. White

society stereotyped native women as the “workhorses” of the tribes. What the colonizers missed, however, was the immense power that females actually retained.

While it is true that masculine and feminine duties were seen distinct, they were *the* authority in their respective areas. As it has been stated,

Although males might have monopolized public roles and positions of authority, important decisions were also determined in the private sphere; there-fore, the reality of power was often very different from its public manifestation. Realizing the importance of private power is critical to understand-ing Indian cultural systems because—in general— Indian women exercised almost complete control over the home, the children, and the belongings inside the home.³

Women might not have held positions on the council (though in some tribes they did), and they might not have galloped off on a horse with a war party (though they sometimes did this, too), but they were the “decision-makers” in family affairs, indirect influences on the actions of the governing body.

The status of women in American Indian societies, in general, has undergone tremendous change over the past four centuries. Where they once had an important, if not public, voice in tribal affairs, where they were at one time regarded as equal, if not superior, to men, where they were held in high esteem for their ability to give life to the next generation, native American females were then silenced and subjugated to their male counterparts with the imposition of European customs and religion. Christianity, in all its forms, did much to damage women’s equality in American Indian society. Traditional

religions often put women in the forefront, as humans' creator; Christianity, rather, imposed "a patriarchal male god."⁴ When tribes were forced onto reservations and restricted from hunting, the male began to take over his counterpart's role as cultivator. The men quickly became the sole providers for their families, and, as contact with whites increased, slowly assumed women's positions as the major influence on family life. The conflict between Indian and white traditions resulted in "a breakdown of the complementary nature of male-female relations and a general increase in Indian male dominance and control over Indian women."⁵

It was not until the 1950s, over three hundred years since the clash between the two cultures began in North America, that women undertook the reclamation of the power they had traditionally possessed. As the United States government instituted policies aimed at the termination of native tribes—in effect, disassembling their independent governments and integrating their peoples into mainstream American society—the resolve of many indigenous peoples, men and women, to avoid such a fate strengthened. Their struggle became known as the Red Power movement, and during the 1970s gave birth to several organizations dedicated to the triumph of political and cultural survival.

The famous names and faces of the movement shared many ideals and dreams for their people. But more than their aspirations united them. Leonard Peltier, Dennis Banks, Russell Means, Clyde and Vernon Bellecourt, Leonard Crow Dog, Richard Oakes, Clyde Warrior, and Vine Deloria, Jr. were the leaders on whom the cameras were focused during the siege of Wounded Knee in 1973; articles and interviews centered around them during the occupation of Alcatraz Island four years earlier. And they were all men. As far as the traditionally ignorant American public was concerned, native women were what they had always been—"inferior to the noble male." As a result, the American populace largely overlooked female involvement in the Red Power movement. But they *were* there. They organized survival schools in Wounded Knee and Alcatraz, brandished homemade weapons at

the takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., were top officers in many of the early organizations, and died for their involvement.⁶

When a group of Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) employees, together with various tribal representatives, formed the first pan-Indian organization in 1944, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), Helen Peterson, a Sioux, was appointed executive director. In following years, two other women became national officers—Georgeann Robinson (Osage) as vice president, and Helen Mitchell (Quinalt) as secretary. In addition, females held three regional vice presidencies—Elsie Ricklefs of the Hoopa Valley Tribe, Agnes Savilla of the Mohave, and Alvina Grey Bear of the Standing Rock Sioux. Seventeen years after the emergence of NCAI, a group of ten college students, five of whom were women, created a second organization—the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC). Additionally, females controlled two of the three top officer positions; Shirley Witt (Mohawk) was appointed first vice president, and Joan Noble (Ute) was appointed second vice president.⁷

Females hardly limited their involvement to "safe" office work, however. The occupation of Alcatraz Island by Indians of All Tribes (largely a student organization) furthered their commitment to the Red Power movement.⁸ Madonna Gilbert ran a survival school for nine months, as entire families became involved and their children needed to continue their education⁹; Stella Leach, "a registered Indian nurse," helped to operate a medical support unit; Grace Thorpe was in charge of public relations, until "she bumped heads with the island council and left."¹⁰ LaNada Boyer became an outspoken advocate of American Indian rights; she organized a press conference, interviewed with the Leftist journal *Ramparts*¹¹, and visited with actress Jane Fonda, who consequently arranged an appearance on the "Dick Cavett Show" for Boyer. When the siege ended in the arrival of federal marshals on 11 June 1971, all fifteen people on the island were arrested, of whom four were women and five were children.

Women again raised their voices when, in 1973, a particularly odious leader of the Oglala Sioux, Richard "Dicky" Wilson, was brought up

on charges by three members of the tribal council and then managed to postpone his impeachment hearings. Nearly three hundred demonstrators protested in front of the BIA building in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, almost all of whom were women and children. United States marshals, called in to protect the area, taunted the group

with a boast that revived memories of braggart officers like Custer: "Us seventy-five marshals could whip you three hundred Indians very easily." It got the women mad and they marched up to the marshals. "They wouldn't lay a hand on us," said one of the women. "But if they tried...we were willing to fight."¹²

It would eventually come down to that. In February of 1973, hardly a month after the demonstration, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) seized the small town of Wounded Knee. Women were not only there, they put their lives in danger for the principles and demands set forth during the conflict. They were arrested as they left the area, often detained for weeks without the allowance of a phone call or opportunity for legal counsel. They took up rifles during firefights between those holding the hamlet and the federal law enforcement (and later the military) brought in to "liberate" it. Mary Brave Bird arrived to support AIM's action when she was only seventeen, and nine months pregnant. Her son Pedro was born during an exchange of gunfire, with both their lives in danger. Brave Bird left Wounded Knee while the occupation was still in full force, and was jailed on several charges, though she had been given assurance on entering "the Knee" that she was allowed free entry and exit. Authorities later released her without major incident.¹³

The most publicized case of female involvement in the American Indian Movement ended more tragically than that of Mary Brave Bird and her son. Anna Mae Aquash, a Micmac Indian born and raised in Nova Scotia, relocated to the United States and became embroiled in the American Indian struggle. She, too, was an occupant of Wounded Knee, and it is widely believed that the FBI suspected she had seen the murder of two of its agents while there. Three years later, in February of 1976, she was found

dead on the Pine Ridge reservation. What happened following her discovery has led her friends and relatives to believe the federal government or someone connected to it, was behind her murder:

After an examination of her remains, a BIA-hired pathologist announced that she had died of natural causes—probably exposure. Later, her body was exhumed, and independent pathologist discovered in her head a .32-caliber bullet, which had been fired from a gun placed at the back of her neck, execution style. When the BIA's pathologist was questioned, he retorted, "A little bullet isn't hard to overlook."¹⁴

Anna Mae's murderer was never found, although the FBI recently reopened the case in light of new evidence.

Given the extent of American Indian female activism during the 1960s and 1970s, a case could be made that they were heavily influenced by the women's rights movement during that time, that they took cues from the white women who were raising their voices to protest sexual inequality in society. That assumption would be misguided. American women in the feminist movement demanded their individual rights as females, not their collective rights as an ethnic group. They asserted themselves to break free of traditional society, they did not struggle to return to it as American Indian women did. Their main enemy was sexism, not racism. And theirs was not a question of survival. In the words of Paula Gunn Allen, American Indian activist and author: "American Indian women struggle on every front for the survival of our children, our people, our self-respect, or value systems, and our way of life."¹⁵ Additionally, the majority culture that the feminist movement challenged so directly would not be destroyed if women lost their battle; even if they won, most of its aspects would still be retained. Indigenous women fought to save their traditions, to reclaim their ancestral land, and to assert their identities as *Indians*, not women:

Many [American Indian] women express strong opposition to those who would alter our life supports, steal our tribal lands, colonize our cultures and cultural expressions, and revise our very identities. We must strive to maintain tribal status; we

must make certain that the tribes continue to be legally recognized entities, sovereign nations within the larger United States, and we must wage this struggle in many ways.... We are doing all that we can as mothers and grandmothers; as family members and tribal members; as professionals, workers, artists, shamans, leaders, chiefs, speakers, writers, and organizers, we daily demonstrate that we have no intention of disappearing, of being silent, or of quietly acquiescing in our extinction.¹⁶

American Indian women in their traditional roles were the guardians of the culture; they were responsible for passing on customs and beliefs to their children. Though their participation in armed conflict certainly was not typical of their ancestors, they were fulfilling their duty. They were, through their participation, both voicing their anger at the corruption of their ancient ways of life and demanding a return to them. Author Nancy Shoemaker arrives at the same conclusion: "...[N]ative women actively, creatively, and often successfully resisted marginality....[T]hey sought alternatives and created a new understanding of their roles by merging traditional beliefs with cultural innovation."¹⁷ That "cultural innovation" in the Red Power movement was to utilize methods of protest that white men would understand—violence and political action—in order to keep their traditions alive.

This is not to say that American Indian females did not experience the sexism that the mainstream movement struggled against. It existed on the reservations and it flourished in Red Power organizations. It was present during the Alcatraz takeover and throughout the existence of the American Indian Movement. But this sexism was learned from the chauvinistic culture of European white men; "[t]hey have learned the white man's ways of talking down to women and regarding their position as inferior." In the context of traditional society, the status of American Indian women at the advent of the Red Power movement did not make sense. They have, however, continually insisted that survival of the tribes and preservation of their culture are of primary concern, rather than focus their attention solely on changing their position.

Madonna Gilbert, co-director of We Will Remember Survival School near the Pine Ridge Reservation, agrees: "In [white] culture you have lots of problems with men. Maybe we do too, but we don't have time to worry about sexism. We worry about survival."

A few scholars have pushed to distinguish American Indian feminism from the mainstream women's movement, to set boundaries between actions aimed to help tribes in general and actions aimed to elevate the status of indigenous women. However, few, if any, divisions can be made between the two. Women held much more power in their traditional societies than they did at the time the pan-Indian organizations were launched. By involving themselves in efforts to return to a culture long disregarded and protect the rights of their people women began to reclaim their status.

Buffy Sainte-Marie, a North American Indian singer, once said, "Our women are the cement of our culture. Our women are our warriors."¹⁸ The actions of Mary Brave Bird, the words of Paula Gunn Allen, and the sacrifice of Anna Mae Aquash are evidence enough for her claim. If the Cheyenne are correct, their people survive because of them—because they risked their lives and loved ones to perpetuate tradition, and, through it, to restore their power.

Whether American Indian sexism exists, it is not the issue for these women. Of utmost importance is the continuation of an ancient way of life. The activism they engaged in during the 1960s and 1970s, the struggle they became embroiled in, was a way for these women, as the guardians of their culture, to continue and return to roles long abandoned, but not forgotten.

End Notes

¹ Paula Gunn Allen, "Stealing the Thunder," in *The Sacred Hoop* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 267.

² An overwhelming majority of native writers, speakers, and activists use the term 'American Indian' to identify indigenous peoples in general, rather than the often-used 'Native American.' They argue, perhaps rightly so, that every person born on the American continent is a native, and therefore the American Indians are not seen as a separate ethnic group. Furthermore, it is commonly held that 'Indian' is a corruption of the Spanish term *en Dios*, or "in God," which elevates their self-perception to one of a holy people.

³ Theresa D. LaFramboise, Anneliese M. Heyle, and Emily J. Ozer, "Changing and Diverse Roles of Women in American Indian Cultures," *Sex Roles* 22, nos. 7/8 (1990): 461.

⁴ Beatrice Medicine, "Indian Women: Tribal Identity as Status Quo," in *Woman's Nature: Rationalizations of Inequality*, Athene Series, ed. Marian Lowe and Ruth Hubbard (New York: Permagon Press, 1983), 69.

⁵ LaFramboise, Heyle, and Ozer, "Changing and Diverse Roles," 461.

⁶ Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (New York: Friendship Press, 1945), 39-40; quoted in Beatrice Medicine, "Indian Women: Tribal Identity as Status Quo," in *Woman's Nature: Rationalizations of Inequality*, Athene Series, ed. Marian Lowe and Ruth Hubbard (New York: Permagon Press, 1983), 69.

⁷ Stan Steiner, "The Changing Woman," in *The New Indians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 223.

⁸ The island of Alcatraz was seized to protest its sale to a public utility company; under a nineteenth-century treaty, any land relinquished by the federal government was to be turned over to native peoples.

⁹ Survival schools were initiated in Minneapolis-St. Paul, when the American Indian Movement began. They are institutions for Indian children who dislike or who cannot perform in public schools. In addition to regular lessons, the students are taught traditional Indian culture.

¹⁰ LaNada Boyer, "Reflections of Alcatraz," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 18, no. 4 (1994), 81.

¹¹ The title of the article was "Better Red than Dead," referring to a desire to preserve American Indian culture. It was later used by the U.S. government as support for their claim that the Red Power organizations were supported by the Soviet government, and AIM's main priority was to spread communism to America.

¹² Alvin M. Josephy, "The Sioux Will Rise Again," in *Now That the Buffalo's Gone: A Study of Today's American Indians* (New York: Knopf and Random House, 1982), 246.

¹³ Mary Brave Bird and Richard Erdoes, "Backtracking," in *Ohitika Woman* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), passim.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁵ Paula Gunn Allen, "Angry Women are Building: Issues and Struggles Facing American Indian Women Today," in *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 190.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁷ Nancy Shoemaker, "Introduction," in *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, comp. and ed. Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Routledge, 1995), 20.

¹⁸ Buffy Sainte-Marie quoted in Susan Braudy in "We Will Remember," p. 78.

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