

A Caution: The Place of Indigenous Womanhood as a Political Strategy

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Abstract

In their ongoing struggle for socio-economic and health justice, many Indigenous women today employ gendered concepts of pre-colonial Indigenous womanhood as a political strategy. Matriarchy, women's wisdom, respect for women and women's exercise of power are central to these concepts. Contemporary Indigenous women assert themselves specifically as Indigenous women, adopting their own cultural frameworks rather than a Western human rights lens. This privileging of tradition demonstrates the resilience of Indigenous identities and women's commitment to these identities. It also recognises how Indigenous values contrast to predatory capitalism and the harm it inflicts.

Yet, this strategy has inherent pitfalls rooted in assumptions about pre-colonial Indigenous womanhood. For instance, matrilineality does not necessarily translate into matriarchy. In addition, pre-colonial Indigenous women's duties were ascribed, possibly limiting their agency, and there was a potentially restrictive and reductive emphasis on women's biological roles. Twenty-five years ago, Emma LaRocque advised Indigenous women to question the privileging of tradition and if this privileging is liberating or not.

So that Indigenous women's agency and political power are truly advanced, this chapter urges careful thought about these current strategies. A useful lens should consider whether and which concepts, practices and ascribed roles limit or promote Indigenous women, limit Indigenous women's expectations and/or reproduce the colonial gender binary. This chapter encourages careful consideration of the context of predatory capitalism and male privilege. While many Indigenous women and their representative organisations do use such lenses, wider adoption is advised.

Introduction

This chapter explores gendered concepts of pre-colonial Indigenous women and their use as a political strategy among contemporary Indigenous women in Canada. In so doing, they eschew the Western human rights framework in favour of Indigenous cultural perspectives;

this stance reflects the resilience of Indigenous identities and women's commitment to these identities. Indigenous women and their organisations frequently refer to women's roles in the era before European contact to advance their positions today, asserting that Indigenous societies were matriarchal, with power accruing to women. Discourse and scholarship reflect the widespread belief that Indigenous women were respected because they were women and especially because of their role as life-givers and, later, as grandmothers who were sources of wisdom to be handed down to the following generations.

Indigenous women and their organisations are aware of current health disparities and their limited formal political power at all levels, and they formally (and informally) advocate for improved status. The political strategy of choosing to promote assumed gendered pre-European contact roles may be effective in some contexts. It carries with it, however, some pitfalls that may hamper Indigenous women. This chapter offers a caution, reflecting the admonition of Cree-Métis scholar Emma LaRocque (1996) to be 'circumspect in our recall of our tradition' (p. 14). The use of gendered traditions and expressions of culture as a political strategy must be adopted only after an appropriate lens has been applied.

This chapter proceeds with a basic introduction to the Indigenous peoples of Canada and then turns to the status of Indigenous women today. A discussion of Indigenous gender concepts and practices follows. The chapter then focuses on the changes wrought in Indigenous societies after the arrival of Europeans to what is now Canada and how Indigenous women challenge the effects of the traumatic transformations that resulted. Finally, the chapter turns to the potential pitfalls of the gender- and culture-based strategies adopted by Indigenous women and concludes with a caution intended to support the specific political goals of Indigenous women.

Much of the relevant literature and discourse has assumed and addressed two genders, male and female, although lately there have been increased attempts to understand the pre-European contact lives and roles of two-spirited Indigenous people and people of what might be considered other genders. According to Blackfeet-Métis scholar Rosalyn LaPier (2020), the gender binary is 'definitely a European or American-imposed idea about gender' that has been shaped by the influence of Christianity and Christian culture, although recovery is ongoing. Dorais (2020) wrote of a third Inuit gender, in addition to male and female, to which many shamans belonged (p. 80). For reasons of space and to focus on women specifically, this issue is not covered here. Finally, this chapter has limitations in that it makes general

conclusions about diverse populations and histories. These conclusions are, however, based on textual and discourse analysis as well as many years of participation observation, but readers should know that these conclusions cannot be applied to all Indigenous people in Canada. The purpose of this work is not to provide a broad description and characterisation but rather to analyse a political strategy commonly adopted by Indigenous women in this country. The author engages in this analysis as a status Indian of Mi'Kmaq and Irish heritage who shares with many in Canada the goal of the political advancement of Indigenous women.

The Indigenous Peoples of Canada

Canada is home to three Indigenous peoples with constitutional rights: First Nations, formerly known as Indians; Inuit, the people of the Circumpolar North, who also live in Greenland and Alaska; and Métis, the people descended from European fur traders and First Nations women (Belanger, 2018). First Nations are the largest group, living in some 600 communities, designated as reserves, across the country as well as in urban centres (Statistics Canada, 2018). First Nations belong to many linguistic and cultural groups, including Cree, Dene, Mi'Kmaq, Anishnaabe, Haida and Blackfoot. In 2016, there were 977,230 First Nations people in Canada, including 'status' and 'non-status' Indians (the terms used in Canadian law; Statistics Canada, 2018). Status Indians are registered in Ottawa's Indian Register, and their bands and reserves are regulated by the colonially imposed *Indian Act*. This is not the case for non-status Indians. There are over 500,000 Métis concentrated in the prairie provinces (Statistics Canada, 2018); Alberta is the only province in which Métis have land bases, called settlements (Belanger, 2018). The Inuit are a much smaller group at 65,000, with most living in Inuit *Nunangat*, the four official Inuit regions (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami [ITK], 2018, p. 8). In total, Indigenous people make up almost 5% of the total Canadian population. There are over 70 Indigenous languages spoken in Canada, although many are now spoken as a second language after English or French, and speakers are more likely to be older people, causing some concern for language health and survival (Statistics Canada, 2019). Only 1000 people can speak Michif, the Métis tongue, one of many endangered Indigenous languages in Canada.

First Nations, Inuit and Métis have endured numerous multi-generational losses since Europeans arrived. These losses include the loss of land, language, family life and the ability to parenthood, movement and governance structures. Additionally, the decimation of crucial natural resources such as bison (or buffalo) and economies; sedentarisation and resettlement;

punitive legislation such as the banning of the potlatch, the sundance and other ceremonies; the introduction of deadly foreign diseases; and myriad other negative changes have been externally imposed. These losses have added up to a deficit of collective agency for Indigenous people, which has resulted both in suffering and resilience (Hanrahan & Wills, 2015). The Indigenous people of Canada have this history in common with their counterparts globally, thus comprising the Fourth World of people colonised within their own homelands (Manuel & Posluns, 2019).

Indigenous resurgence began in Canada in the late 1960s. Besides rights-based litigation, Indigenous resistance has led to the establishment of First Nations, Inuit and Métis political organisations, such as the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), the ITK and the Métis National Council (MNC). National women's organisations, such as the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) and Pauktuutit: Inuit Women of Canada, are less influential than the AFN, ITK and MNC, which have generally been dominated by male leadership.

The Status of Contemporary Indigenous Women

In Canada today, Indigenous women suffer from both racism and sexism. As Jobin (2016) explained, 'Judged as inferior both by race and by gender, Indigenous women are doubly vulnerable to the assimilationist policies of a patriarchal state' (p. 42). In horror, Razack (2016) described the disappearance of Indigenous women in Canada as 'commonplace' (p. i). Indigenous women and girls are 4.5 times more likely to become victims of murder than other women (Saramo, 2016, p. 204). After longstanding resistance from the conservative government, the federal liberal government responded to grassroots activism and initiated a national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women. Most notable in this advocacy was the Sisters in Spirit campaign of the NWAC and a report by Amnesty International. In 2019, the inquiry concluded that the thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous women, with cases going back over several decades, were victims of a 'Canadian genocide' (Barrera, 2019).

As Saramo (2016) wrote, 'Colonialism and patriarchy have attempted to marginalise Indigenous womanhood and have allowed racialised and gendered violence to flourish' (p. 216). This attempt, propelled by the tools of residential schooling, forced sterilisations, the Sixties Scoop (during which large numbers of Indigenous children were taken into care

or adopted out of their communities) and other assimilationist policies, has achieved its goals. As Native American scholar Inés Hernández-Avila asserted about violence against Indigenous women in her country, 'It is because of Native American women's sex that she is hunted down and slaughtered, in fact, singled out, because she has the potential through childbirth to assure the continuation of the people' (quoted in Women's Earth Alliance & Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2018, p. 207).

It is amid this environment of danger that Indigenous women live, work and strive for recognition and equality. They are keenly aware of the force of ongoing colonialism and invested heavily in the inquiry. Yet, the Trudeau government announced that the police were not bound by the recommendations of the inquiry. While Indigenous women's lives are snuffed out, the neoliberal colonial state allows and even enables its armed police forces to carry on with impunity. Thus, police officers are assigned in droves to Indigenous protests and blockades in the name of land protection while cases of missing and murdered women are ignored.

This occurs despite police forces being deemed culpable in sexual violence against Indigenous women in at least one report based on six weeks of fact finding (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The grandmother of missing First Nations teenager Fonessa Bruyere was told by police, 'Oh, she's just a prostitute, she's probably just on a binge, she'll come home', according to Crystal Bruyere, Fonessa's cousin (quoted in 'Families of Missing', 2015). In this and other cases, police and the state in whose interests they act dismiss Indigenous women as commodified sexual beings, disposable and unworthy of attention. The selling of Indigenous female bodies is associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and is intrinsically traumatising and a violation of basic human rights (Farley et al., 2005). It is part of the horrific legacy of colonialism (Farley et al., 2005).

The fate of missing and murdered Indigenous women represents the extreme end of gendered racism in Canada. Indicators elsewhere on the scale include poor population health and lower life expectancy. Much research illustrates the colonisation of Indigenous women's health. In one breast cancer study, researchers found that survival was more than three times poorer for First Nations women diagnosed at stage 1 than for non-First Nations women (Sheppard et al., 2011). The risk of death after a breast cancer diagnosis was about five times higher among First Nations women with a comorbidity other than diabetes, and was more than five times greater for those with diabetes than for those without a comorbidity (Sheppard et al.,

2011). This means that having a pre-existing comorbidity was the most important factor in explaining the survival disparity among First Nations women with breast cancer (Sheppard et al., 2011). The authors concluded that there is a need to improve the general health status of First Nation women (Sheppard et al., 2011), as their current health status places them at a disadvantage. In 2011, life expectancy was 77.7 years for First Nations women, 82.3 years for Métis women and 76.1 years for Inuit women compared to 87.3 for non-Indigenous women (Tjepkema et al., 2019).

Indigenous women in Canada are under-represented in institutions such as hospital boards, academia and provincial and federal legislatures. This extends to colonial Indigenous structures; there has never been a female chief of the AFN, the national political organisation for the First Nations. Although Canada was founded in 1867, the first Indigenous woman member of parliament was not elected until 1988, when Ethel Blondin-Andrew, a Dene from the Northwest Territories, was elected (Gallant, 2020). Meanwhile, the first Indigenous male member of parliament, Pierre Delorme, a Métis, was elected in 1872 (Barkwell, 2015, pp. 49–50). Of course, there have been and are many Indigenous women in Canada who have overcome the structural oppressions of colonialism; former Chief Roberta Jamieson of the Six Nations of the Grand River, writers Eden Robinson and Tracey Lindberg and scholars like Marie Battiste come immediately to mind. Yet, although she was referring to others, Kathleen Barry might have been speaking of Indigenous women when she wrote, ‘There are no institutions, no politics, no government, where my sex and I have not been dominated, subdued, and robbed of our potential and talents as we are excluded from patriarchal privilege’ (quoted in Griffin, 2015, p. 53).

Indigenous Gender Concepts and Practices

In opposition to the current patriarchal environment, many First Nations communities in Canada claim a matriarchal past in which women were honoured and respected, especially for their role as life givers. Many First Nations societies assert an egalitarian aspect (Cull, 2006). Grandmothers were sources of wisdom, which they passed from one generation to the next. Indigenous women had influence in community decision making, notably in the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) tradition, where they had formal roles as clan mothers who appointed male leaders. Women of the Haudenosaunee, whose land base extends from present-day Ontario and Quebec into New York, are thought to have influenced the early

suffragettes of the United States (Wagner, 2011). The First Nations of Northwest British Columbia reckoned kinship affiliation through the matrilineal (Frost, 2019); thus, female lineage played a central role in identity. Métis women were the keepers of Anishinaabe and Cree knowledge systems, thus preserving the Indigenous ways of their people and engaging in active resistance against the domination of French patriarchal paradigms (Payment, 1996, p. 24). As with First Nations, Métis grandmothers were deemed essential cultural transmitters (Iseke-Barnes, 2009). Métis social organisation has been described as matriorganisation (Brown, 1983). Yet, it is difficult to determine where each pre-European-contact Indigenous society fits on a spectrum of patriarchy to matriarchy, but it is likely that there was such a spectrum.

Even within pre-colonial Indigenous societies, there would have been complexity regarding gender. Roles and responsibilities among Inuit, the Indigenous people of the circumpolar north, were ‘distinctly gendered’ pre-contact (Dorais, 2020, p. 81). These gendered roles and responsibilities were complementary and interfaced with each other (Billson & Mancini, 2007). Broadly, men hunted and engaged in whaling while women reared children, prepared food and made clothing. Women were more familiar with plants while men had a more intimate knowledge of animals (Dorais, 2020, p. 81). The home, the camp or iglu, was largely a female domain, while men’s sphere was larger, extending to the land and sea.

These work and knowledge patterns are reflected in the memoirs of Indigenous Labradorians Paulus Maggo (1999) and Elizabeth Goudie (1973), who were taught ancient, gendered skills from their parents and grandparents. However, Inuit were pragmatic out of necessity; they lived in small mobile groups to better access relatively scarce natural resources dispersed across a large area. To survive in the arctic and subarctic environment, every individual, no matter what gender they held, had to be adaptable and skilled at most tasks (Billson & Mancini, 2007). Goudie (1973), for instance, described how she hunted birds when her husband was away on his trapline, gone seasonally for months at a time.

Lévesque et al. (2016) provided a glimpse into First Nations gender practices. They used four dimensions or organising principles to study women’s and men’s knowledge and skills among the Naskapi of Quebec: differentiation, complementarity, transfer and integration. There was a ‘fairly clear division of tasks’ based on gender (Lévesque et al., 2016, p. 69). Like other Indigenous societies, women engaged mainly in childcare and food preparation while men were hunters. Childhood learning was gendered because adult roles were so differentiated.

However, like Inuit, Naskapi women had to know how to hunt to prevent hunger and starvation while men were away in pursuit of caribou: ‘In this system, although individuals clearly belong to a female or male world, the boundaries between these worlds are continually adjusted to allow for the socio-ecological alliances essential to group survival’ (Lévesque et al., 2016, p. 72). Thus, pre-European-contact gender roles were diverse and complex and reflected the needs dictated by the geophysical environment and local economy. It may be tempting to simplify these roles based on contemporary contexts. In addition, care should be exercised when making conclusions about what political power women accrued based on their gender-based roles and responsibilities.

Colonial Changes

Matriarchal tendencies, where they existed, have been largely lost through colonialism and predatory capitalism, which privileges the white, wealthy and male. In this, they parallel the loss of Indigenous medicinal practices; the reserve system, for instance, confined First Nations to small geographical spaces where they could not access the plants necessary for medicine. Matriarchal aspects of Indigenous cultures, like most aspects of gender, are mainly absent from the historical record; when they appear, they are frequently misunderstood. Some of the early historical accounts come from the Society of Jesus priests, the Jesuits, who lived and preached among Indigenous people from the Mi’Kmaq of Nova Scotia to the Blackfeet of Montana. Father Joseph Francois Lafitau, whose encounters with Indigenous people dated from 1711 to 1717, was one of few who noted gender complexity, although he did not understand it as such:

If there were women with manly courage who prided themselves upon the profession of warrior, which seems to become men alone, there were also men cowardly enough to live as women... they believe they are honoured by debasing themselves to all of women’s occupations; they never marry. (quoted in Cannon, 1998, p. 3).

Other Jesuits interpreted women’s (and men’s) behaviour in a similarly negative manner, viewing it as deviant, improper and to be eradicated (Cannon, 1998). Most aspects of Indigenous lives were invisible to missionaries and explorers; as LaPier (2020) put it, Indigenous lands were ‘places of men’ to the authors of historical accounts. Because European societies were patriarchal, colonisers assumed that Indigenous societies were patriarchal.

The tools of colonialism, chiefly Christian missionary activity and residential schooling, are widely to blame for the erosion of matriarchal traditions in Indigenous communities (Jobin, 2016; LaPier, 2020; Minor, 1992 Turpel-LaFond, 1998). Europeans saw women through a patriarchal lens, developing, at different times, negative images of Indigenous women as ‘drudges’ (LaPier, 2020), ‘Indian princesses’ and ‘easy squaws’ (Acoose, 2016). Colonial elements institutionalised their ideas and harmed Indigenous women through legislation like the *Indian Act*.

Under this legislation, First Nations women lost their status, and the limited benefits that status brings, if they married a man without Indian status; the reverse was not true. Without status, First Nations women had to move away from their reserves, and they could not pass their status onto their children. This changed in 1985 after Sandra Lovelace Nicholas, a Wolastoqiyik woman from New Brunswick, took her case to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which ruled against Canada (Boyer, 2009). Despite Lovelace Nicholas’ victory, formal power at the reserve or community level is still derived from the *Indian Act*, and it accrues mainly to male leadership.

Indigenous Women Challenge Colonialism and Its Effects

Indigenous women are politically active as Indigenous women. In 2017, the Women of the Métis Nation (WMN; Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak in French), an arm of the MNC, declared, ‘We recognize the central role that Métis women play in raising Métis families and value the experiential education and wisdom that results from undertaking this role’ (p. 2). The WMN’s political goals include improved housing, better access to health services, improvements in the socio-economic gaps between Métis men and women and education programmes that better meet women’s needs, referring to the gender and cultural biases in existing national programmes and services initiatives such as the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (WMN, 2017, p. 3). Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada have advanced gender-based implementation and accountability mechanisms so that, in the words of Meeka Otway, Inuit women are empowered to ‘set our priorities, and work with government partners to reach our shared goals’ (quoted in Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat, 2017, p. 1). The NWAC (n.d.) mandate is ‘to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well-being of First Nations, Métis and Inuit women’. Besides its work on missing and murdered Indigenous women, the NWAC

engages in research and advocacy on a wide range of issues such as forced sterilisation and COVID-19 among incarcerated Indigenous women, often privileging the most marginalised Indigenous women in Canada. In this focus, Indigenous women's organisations defy the colonial capitalist state and make it clear the threat Indigenous people pose to this state.

The Problems of Harkening Back

Reliance on pre-colonial women's roles and responsibilities may be a useful political strategy to empower and motivate Indigenous women. Recognising this, this author suggests caution based on the inherent challenges of this strategy in the current context. LaRoque (1996) said, 'We must ask ourselves whether and to what extent tradition is liberating to us as women' (p. 14). Indigenous people should (and some do) filter what are deemed to be traditions through a lens which privileges the status of contemporary Indigenous women and advances the political position of Indigenous women at all levels of decision making. As LaRoque said, it is important to raise expectations beyond being honoured and respected. Next, this chapter identifies some of the pitfalls associated with the often central place of concepts of pre-colonial Indigenous women and matriarchy in discourse and activism.

Indigenous women's organisations understand how Indigenous women live with, face and oppose the intersectionality that creates multiple forms of discrimination; in other words, Indigenous women know they are 'twice othered' (Acland, 1998, p. 4). This is especially true for Indigenous women of colour. It is unclear if male-dominated organisations and activist groups share these understandings. Indigenous women are celebrated in the rhetoric of Indigenous organisations and in discourse; for instance, an AFN (2014) document reads, 'Empowering First Nation women to embrace their traditional significant role in their communities is an invaluable investment lasting for generations to come' (p. 2).

This is a common statement in Indigenous discourse. The intended message may – or may not – be more complicated than it seems, depending on the source, but it is often received as being about women's roles as life givers and mothers. The National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH, 2012) understands that mothering is a practice of love and caring that extends beyond the biological and bodies, as do some scholars (Cull, 2006; Gosselin, 2006), but this is not necessarily a widely held perspective.

Too often Indigenous (and other) people receive proclamations about Indigenous womanhood as motherhood in the colonial (biological) sense because of the dominance of the English language, the interruptions to Indigenous culture and patriarchal colonial notions of motherhood rooted in biology. The hefty emphasis on Indigenous women's roles as life-givers and the sacredness attached to this function is a prevailing theme in contemporary Indigenous communities and organisations and on social media. There is insufficient harkening to what the NCCIH and some scholars see as an older, broader Indigenous sense of motherhood, extending beyond biology to nurturing. This can reduce Indigenous women's roles to biology and bring essentialism into concepts and arguments. This is problematic since not all Indigenous women are life givers or give birth; some eschew this role while others cannot conceive or bring pregnancies to term. Scholars must ask what effect the focus on women's place as life givers is having on some Indigenous women.

Many Indigenous women advance their contemporary rights based on a matriarchal past, which may be assumed, and on women's 'traditional' roles and responsibilities, which may be misunderstood. It is worthwhile to remember that matrilineality does not necessarily translate into matriarchy. Often women's duties were ascribed, and today ascription is often seen solely in positive terms. The title of Anishnaabe writer Jackie Traverse's (2018) colouring book *IKWE: Honouring Women, Life Givers, and Water Protectors* sums this up. Today, advocacy roles are often conferred on women because they are women. In some eastern Canadian First Nations, women are charged with the guardianship of water, which is vital for life. In certain times and places, this is an onerous task. Many First Nations reserves in Canada live with long-term water insecurity and ongoing boil water advisories due to inadequate and/or inappropriate water infrastructure, such as the absence of piped water (Hanrahan, 2017). In addition, some Indigenous communities live with continuing environmental injustice, such as water contaminated with mercury at Grassy Narrows, Ontario due to mining (Ilyniak, 2014). Currently, the population health on Blackfoot reserves in Alberta is threatened by the repeal of progressive coal legislation and proposed coal mining in the local watershed. Protecting water in such circumstances is bound to cause cognitive and emotional dissonance for women who may be powerless to change or even challenge such plans. Yet, gendered expectations about women and water survive in many Indigenous communities, and many women have internalised them.

Ascribed responsibilities can be onerous for those on whom they fall, especially if there is a mismatch between personal inclinations and assigned duties. In the case of water,

the political and economic context, dominated by capitalism and its commodification of land and water, presents additional challenges. This adds to the stress experienced by Indigenous women. A related problem is that women generally lack the resources to mount the campaigns and actions that are needed to combat the pernicious effects of colonialism and ongoing damage due to capitalism. Activism is expensive, and even national Indigenous organisations struggle to target all the issues facing Indigenous people.

Indigenous women in Canada worry about water quality. The danger is that, because of their status as Indigenous women, their efforts might be restricted to water ceremonies. Water ceremonies are undoubtedly meaningful experiences, instilling the value of water in all life. Yet, there is an irony here in that such ceremonies might be shaped by protocols which women may or may not have been part of developing. Ceremonies like these might effectively play a part in underlying political action if ties between ceremony and politics were more obvious and resourced.

There is significant pressure on Indigenous women to preserve Indigenous culture with an emphasis on performative and material culture as well as the ceremonial. This is particularly true of grandmothers. Indigenous women are widely seen as culture bearers and knowledge holders, and it is assumed that Indigenous women know songs and ceremonial practices, have medicinal knowledge and can offer teachings. These things are all learned, however. Thus, this perspective must consider that there has been massive interruption to Indigenous culture and hence to the socialisation of children and cultural transmission, the residential school system being the most pernicious of these interruptions. Accordingly, there may be gaps in knowledge for which no one should feel shame, although some Indigenous women do. Discourse does not always recognise the breadth and depth of the interruptions to Indigenous cultures that have occurred across several centuries, nor does it sufficiently acknowledge the socio-economic and health difficulties with which many Indigenous women live and their relative power and lack of resources.

This leads to the notion of authenticity, another concept that hampers Indigenous women. Jean O'Brien (2010), a White Earth Ojibwe, wrote that the Indigenous cannot be modern. Instead, Indigenous people are relegated to the past, the time before Europeans arrived, the period before history. If they eat pizza or wear blue jeans, borrowing Cruikshank's (1998, p. 68) example, they are judged as inauthentic. In the so-called New World, Indigenous culture does not have permission to change, unlike cultures derived from Europe and despite the massive

changes resulting from contact, all externally imposed. In addition to the Indigenous losses already cited, the 20th and 21st centuries saw rapid technological developments which have affected every part of the globe, including Canada's Indigenous people. It is ludicrous to expect Indigenous people to live the same way they lived before the European invasion, yet that remains an expectation (O'Brien, 2010). It is, of course, an expectation which Indigenous people cannot live up to, which renders them vulnerable to accusations of inauthenticity. The inference derived by some is that Indigenous people are extinct; they are certainly not 'real' Indigenous people. This makes claims to Indigenous land or benefits and even identity invalid. In the case of Indigenous women, this pressure, stated and unstated, adds to the emotional workload of maintaining or developing an identity that fits prevailing ideas about pre-colonial Indigenous womanhood. Both men and women, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, impose these unwritten rules, which may be as simple as mandatory skirt-wearing while drumming or as complex as knowing the intricacies of the medicine wheel. Depending on where these ideas come from, they may or may not be accurate; beliefs may conflict with each other. The tall order of conforming to certain images can be experienced as a burden for contemporary Indigenous women. Further, accusations of inauthenticity are used to dismiss Indigenous women's political aspirations.

Conclusion: Taking a Stand as Indigenous Women

Indigenous women have used the pre-colonial past to advance their rights and promote respect for their responsibilities and positions, including their gendered position, in contemporary communities and at the national and international levels. It is significant that they do not look to the Western human rights framework, instead choosing to build on their own cultural roots. There may be confusion about these roots, and there may be influences from imposed notions of Indigenous womanhood. Yet, as conceived by Indigenous women, their roles and responsibilities prior to European contact delivered them some agency, influence and even power. For these reasons, Indigenous women make assertions specifically as Indigenous women. In so doing, they recognise how precious and good their values are and how much they stand in contrast to damaging predatory capitalism.

To bolster Indigenous women's political power and their agency to make meaningful decisions, the author recommends some careful thought about current strategies, specifically the use of a lens that privileges the advancement of this power and agency. Do concepts, practices

and ascribed roles limit or promote Indigenous women? Do they limit Indigenous women's expectations? Do they reproduce the gender binary derived from colonialism? Is there any danger of essentialism? Which concepts, practices and ascribed roles are possible and useful in the contemporary context of predatory capitalism and male privilege? Many Indigenous women and their representative organisations do use such lenses, but there is a need for these tools to be more widely adopted.

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