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**No. 8. Iroquois Women, Then and Now**

**By MARTHA CHAMPION RANDLE**

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## IROQUOIS WOMEN, THEN AND NOW <sup>1</sup>

BY MARTHA CHAMPION RANDLE

In spite of the century-long discussion about an Iroquois "matriarchy," still another paper with Iroquois women as its theme has been undertaken. I will discuss briefly the role of Iroquois women as we can partially recreate it from the literature of the so-called "classical" League period and try to compare that picture with the present-day social life and role of women at Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. Accounting in a general way for the historical and acculturative factors which have been influential in the modern adjustment is naturally a difficult and perhaps questionable undertaking, but I have tentatively formulated some thoughts about it.

Generalizations as to present-day women are based on field work at Six Nations in 1947 <sup>2</sup> and 1950 <sup>3</sup> and could be documented to a certain extent by notes, test results, and observations, but I am well aware that such records were selectively collected and may be variously interpreted.

Such material does not lend itself to direct comparison: the earlier writers were generally more interested in the reconstruction of social life during the days of the best functioning of the League, rather than in direct observation of behavior; nor were they dealing with as mixed a population as now lives at Six Nations, and though often intuitively reaching valid psychological interpretations, such were not their conscious concern. However, I shall reexamine what is known about women's role in the past, then describe the varying impact of white culture on men and women, and lastly, generalize somewhat on the social life of the woman of the Six Nations today.

My conclusions are: that though not dominant in the so-called "matriarchal" sense, women of the League period, especially as described by Morgan, were secure in their role as women and participated in male-oriented culture patterns to a remarkable extent; that due to the

<sup>1</sup> Paper read at Fifth Conference on Iroquois Research, Allegany State Park, Red House, N. Y., October 6, 1950.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to a grant from the Viking Fund, New York, the author spent 5 months at the Six Nations Reserve in 1947.

<sup>3</sup> The writer wishes to express her gratitude to the Canadian Social Science Research Council, which financed field work on acculturation problems at Six Nations, summer of 1950.

patrilineal emphases of the White culture with which they have been so long in contact, cultural shock was more deeply and drastically felt by men who bore the brunt of the conflicts with the Whites and whose cultural accomplishments were destroyed by the Whites; that, finally, the present-day Iroquois woman has retained a great part of her ancient security and efficiency. My observations at Six Nations bulwark the thesis that Iroquois women today identify completely with their feminine role, do not seek "equality" with men, and, while participation in masculine-centered cultural pursuits is not as great as that of their neighboring sisters, feminine cultural activities are successfully and cooperatively undertaken and accomplished.

In the old days the extended household, matrilocal among the Mohawks,<sup>4</sup> gave the woman the utmost in security. There were no discontinuities in her upbringing. Desired as the one to carry on the clan and its prerogatives, and through her children, to keep up the strength of numbers of the clan, the girl was as fondly and permissively treated as the boy. Children were not punished; they participated in activities as soon as they were able, were not disciplined in any harsh physical fashion, nor weaned too young. Surrogate mothers were always available, and in the extended household there was no chance for isolation or neglect of the child. In the matrilocal household the relatives first to have contact with the girl would always be in closest relationship to her; she would not have to learn other clan affiliations or restrictions, nor other relationship terms. As she grew older, she would assist her mother in household tasks and in the care of younger siblings; work in the fields with the cooperative women's group; and learn the feminine crafts and techniques from her mother and maternal relatives. Sometime after adolescence her marriage would be arranged by her mother and the mother of a suitable man. Marriage would not change her residence, her name, or her place in the clan. The older women, especially the mothers of the spouses, were the ones responsible for the success of the marriage and would do their best to keep it going. But if their efforts failed, a broken marriage worked little hardship on the wife or young child. Another spouse might be brought into the maternal group, and the child's support was the concern of the maternal line, and his name and inheritance came from his mother's brother.

The so-called "disabilities" of women, that is, their inferiority in physical strength and their lesser mobility due to child-bearing and rearing, are usually points at issue when the position of women and

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<sup>4</sup> Matrilocality was the basis of the theory of the League, though habits of patrilocality and matrilocality were not well defined; Seneca tended to be patrilocal. See Morgan, (1901, vol. 1, p. 308) for composition of Longhouse groups, and Fenton's paper in this volume, pp. 3-12.

the division of labor between the sexes are discussed. The Mohawk matrilineal household minimized these disabilities; enough men were attached to the household as husbands or unmarried brothers to insure cooperation in the clearing of fields and erection of houses and palisades. Except in time of major war, enough men were present for the defense of the group. Women's chief occupation was horticulture, and work-time lost by the mother could be made up by the women's mutual aid group, and, since the fields were close to the village, a mother could start work fairly soon after parturition, taking the nursing child with her on his cradleboard. Older women frequently freed a young married woman from maternal duties so that she could accompany her husband on a hunting expedition. Older women were useful in the easier garden work and household tasks such as mat weaving, shaping of bark utensils, and beading of garments. Honored as heads of clans and household, the old age of women could be rewarding, surrounded by her offspring. The head of the household was not always the oldest woman of the line, but the one with most leadership and diplomacy. Consequently, there must have been an incentive toward developing these qualities and some conscious effort made to attain them.

Related to the "disabilities" of women is the sexual division of labor, male dominance generally being attributed to the differential in size and weight. Such dominance usually expresses itself in assigning to women the more time-consuming, monotonous jobs of life, while pursuits that take speed, strenuous spurts of energy and are often less time-consuming and more exciting are allotted to men. If culture is due in great part to Man-with-time-to-think-between-meals (Wheeler, 1950), no wonder that most cultural activities are man's creations. Though Iroquois women needed to put in long hours in garden and household work, the boresomeness was mitigated by the extended household and the mutual aid societies, for in household tasks the woman was in the company of other adults as well as children, and the sociability and gayety of the women's work-group in the fields eased that toil.

The literature stresses the "high position of women" in respect to their participation in dominantly male-oriented cultural activities, especially politics and religion. The political points are familiar and most of them can be traced to the symbolic extension of the Longhouse as the conceptual basis of the League. The extended family structure of the Longhouse, symbolized in the League, accounts for the function of the matrons to hold the chiefs' names in their clans and their consequent right to appoint and depose chiefs. Death feasts and mourning were the responsibility of the women. Women kept the White Wampum belts which signified the chiefly names. The ability of

the women to influence decisions of the council both directly through their speaker<sup>5</sup> and indirectly through the weight of public opinion is mentioned in the literature. Since unanimity was necessary for a decision to act, any proposal unpopular with the matrons could be hindered by their disapproval. Indirectly, too, it is stated that the women could hinder or actually prevent a war party which lacked their approval by not giving the supplies of dried corn and theoccasins which the warriors required. Village head-women are mentioned in myth, and though they may not actually have ruled villages, this concept reflects the power that women were thought to possess. The importance of clan matrons in deciding the fate of captives, whether they would be adopted to replace a lost clan member, or tortured as revenge for a death within the clan, is well known.

Religion was a shared activity, though I have called it male-oriented, for the men took the more active part in rituals, prayers, dancing, and singing, and figure as principals in most of the myths. However, there were as many women Keepers of the Faith as men, and these officials, appointed for life, had not only the care and preparation of the feast as their duties, but other responsibilities as well—conferring on the times of festivals, presenting the corn for examination for setting the date of the Green Corn ceremonial, etc. The women were more retiring than the men in making public confessions and it was only a rarely aggressive woman who participated in the dream interpretations. There were women's dances and women joined in the singing, but they requested men singers and drummers to lead the singing for them.

Women's activities, rather than men's, are celebrated in the ceremonial cycle. There are no festivals to celebrate hunting or war, though they probably existed in the past. All the ceremonies, with the exception of the Midwinter Ceremonial, are thanksgiving for the fertility of the earth, especially for the crops which are women's chief concern. The "Three Sisters," corn, beans, and squash, also called "Our Mothers" and "Our Supporters" are honored the most. Female virtues of food-providing and the natural fertility and bounty of nature are the qualities most respected and revered.

Economically, the maintenance of the household was a joint undertaking, but the women had the chief responsibility in the care of the fields and the raising of the staple foods. Men and women cooperated in the clearing of new fields, after that the women's group took over. Men's hunting added an important relish to the diet. A good meat-provider was considered the best husband. But hunting was more a prestige and recreation point, than a necessity. Village sites were

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Dr. W. N. Fenton for calling attention to this delegation of power by women.

changed when the fields near them were exhausted—every 15 or 20 years with this type of horticulture—rather than when the district had been hunted out. Conflicts with pioneers occurred more often over the decimation of the game animals, due to the clearing and planting of large numbers of acres, rather than over the scarcity of arable land. But in this case one must remember that it was the Iroquois men with their developed war patterns who came in contact with the pioneers.

Women, then, were secure in their matrilineal clans and participated to a marked degree in the political and religious life of the village. Yet Morgan says,

Intercourse between the sexes was restrained by circumstances and by inclination. Indian habits and modes of life divided the people socially into two great classes, male and female. The male sought the conversation and society of the male, and they went forth together for amusement, or for the severer duties of life. In the same manner, the female sought the companionship of her own sex. Between the sexes there was but little sociality, as this term is understood in polished society. Such a thing as formal visiting was entirely unknown. When the unmarried of opposite sexes were casually brought together there was little or no conversation between them. No attempt by the unmarried to please or gratify each other by acts of personal attention were ever made. At the season of councils and religious festivals, there was more of actual intercourse and sociality, than at any other time; but this was confined to the dance, and was, in itself, limited. [Some courtship techniques were employed; if we examine the folk tales we find that boys often threw small wooden chips at the girls whose attention they wanted to attract, and girls often dressed up in their best finery and went to dances to meet the boys of their choice, Morgan continues.] A solution of this singular problem is, in part, to be found in the absence of equality in the sexes. The Indian regarded woman as the inferior, the dependent, and the servant of man, and from nurture and habit, she actually considered herself to be so. This absence of equality in position, in addition to the force of custom, furnishes a satisfactory explanation of many of the peculiarities characteristic of Indian society. [Morgan, 1901, pp. 314 ff.]

From a feminist point of view, Mrs. Converse writes of the same situation,

Labor and burdens may have been the condition of the Indian woman. She may seem to have been a creature only and not a companion of the red man, yet by comparison with the restrictions, to characterize it by no stronger term, obtaining among *civilized* people, the Iroquois woman had a superior position and superior rights. [Converse, 1908, p. 138.]

Nonequality is interpreted by Morgan as inferiority, by Mrs. Converse as superiority (in comparison with the position of white *women*, of course.) There is a subjective element in the problem of inferiority, and it seems to me, that the *different* must be made to *feel inferior* before *difference* can be interpreted as *inferiority*. Behind the feminist movement as well as behind most male chauvinism is the concept that the difference between the sexes is always to be interpreted as

inferiority, and the further hypothesis that inferiority can be removed only with the extinction of the difference, which is called equality. Iroquois men and women had separate and different culture patterns, different values and different life goals, and although contact between the Iroquois and the Whites has been both long and penetrating, these differences between men and women remain to the present day.

It is impossible adequately to summarize the effects and forces of a long period of acculturation in a few paragraphs: the many conflicts, the gradually increasing impact, more and more contact, and intermarriage. Today the people of Six Nations participate to a large extent in the surrounding Ontario culture, some individuals participating so completely that their identification with the Indian group seems nothing more than a sentimental gesture. The participation of others is partial, particularly the people who belong to the Handsome Lake cult which is a potent force for the retention of Iroquoian languages and customs.

Not much is known of the early days of the groups which went to Canada at the termination of the American Revolution and formed the nucleus of the present Six Nations people. The earliest treaties were signed by Matrons as well as by chiefs, later agreements only men signed. Early land holdings were in women's names in many cases, but later, and up until the beginning of the 20th century, the patrilineal emphasis of the Whites in Ontario brought it about that land was always registered in men's names. English and Americans were accustomed to dealing with men, chiefs and warriors, and no doubt any dealings with Iroquois women were minimized and gradually eliminated.

The Six Nations Reserve was constituted with approximately its present acreage in 1847. Whites who had settled in that area were given land outside, and the various bands of Indians who lived in the vicinity were allotted land in 200-acre tracts on the Reserve. The population at that time was about 2,000 and has tripled in the subsequent century.

The shock of culture contact must have been more deeply experienced by the Iroquois men than by the women. The man's association with his maternal family was disrupted by the Whites' insistence on farming separate holdings. The extended household with its nonmarriage-group security was gone, and the man was isolated in his nuclear family where he had not the tradition of permanence and security. A noncongenial, isolating occupation, and a historically feminine task, that is, farming, was imposed by necessity. The man became more dependent upon his wife and children for help in farming and for emotional satisfactions.

War, the truly masculine prestige-earning activity, was gone. Politically, the hereditary council continued its functions until 1924,



and made many interesting adjustments to the changing situation (Noon, 1949; Fenton, 1949). That the Six Nations were Allies, not subjects, of the British was maintained as a point of honor, but the realists among the Indians must have been sore at heart at the actual condition of dependence and poverty of their people, facing an ever-rising and unstemmable tide of White influence.

Women had less contact with the Whites; their lives had been and continued to be more family-centered. Not as much effort was put into getting girls to school, teaching them English or other white ways. Although the extended household, clan, and moiety affiliations gradually lost their hold, women were still concerned with their habitual occupations of housework and child rearing and gardening. The daughter was still close to her mother and sisters and women's cooperative mutual aid societies continued. Of course, the smaller, more closely knit family group resulted in more dependence of the wife upon the husband, but here that effect seems offset by the increased insecurity of the man.

Competition with Whites was felt more keenly by the man, for the Whites considered the Indian male completely dominant and the one to be dealt with in intercultural conflicts. Domination by the Whites was more keenly experienced by the man for it was his cultural accomplishments which, first threatened, were rendered ineffective, and finally abolished—war, hunting, political domination of others, political independence, and, at last in 1924, political forms.

Women, during their entire life span, were never strongly tempted into individualistic activities. It is true they could practice medicine and join medicine societies, either in a society with men, or in an all-women's group. In regard to witchcraft, folk tales often represent the mother-in-law as a strong malevolent witch, but these are certainly men's fantasies. Wizards are more prevalent than witches. The typical wizard is the evil male character of unbridled power and pride who will not be governed by group values and expresses his power over other men. The typical witch is lacking in femininity; de-sexed, she plays a man's role in attempting to coerce, intimidate, and harm her victims. It is interesting that though stories of female witches were told of the past, today the only evil magic feared is that of two old men who are accused of working bad magic against young women who have refused them.

Generally, the pressures of acculturation were more strongly and sooner felt by the men than by the women, and these external pressures were more disruptive to men's values than to the women's activities.

What light does this material cast upon an inquiry into the role and social function of women at Six Nations today? Certainly the 6,000 people at Six Nations are not homogeneous in heredity, in political or

religious affiliation, or economic status; and general statements about such a mixed group may become meaningless if qualified sufficiently.

As to population, one drastic effect of the patrilineally oriented governmental regime has been to exclude women from the tribal roles if they married non-Six Nations Indian men; and to include on the roster women who married into the group, whether White or Indian from other groups. As we know, too, that adoption was practiced from ancient times, and that white captives and enemy Indians were often taken in marriage by Iroquois, the composition of the group is now far from all-Iroquois. At present, White women who have married into the group take as seriously their affiliation with the Six Nations as many of their Indian spouses and neighbors. This cultural compromise of these White women is integrated into the community and is influential in group as well as particular family patterns. On the other hand, since girls who marry out are lost to the group, the cultural orientation of ambitiously seeking a White man in marriage and accommodating to White ways off the Reserve is an attitude lost to the community. The Six Nations girl who marries a White man and lives in the White community brings up her children as Whites, and the Indian heredity in that case is merged with the general American genetic pool.

To discriminate and describe the various segments of the population is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>6</sup> It probably is necessary to state that there are about 1,500 Longhouse people, about 2,000 Christians of various denominations, chiefly Anglican and Baptist, and that the remainder, whether they have a Longhouse or a Christian background, adopt the prevalent White attitude of scepticism and nonattendance at Church services, but identify themselves with either the Longhouse or the Christian tradition and usually seek ceremonial sanctions for marriage or funeral services.

Politically, the chief line of cleavage is between the defenders and supporters of the old Hereditary Council and those who participate in the elections of the present Elective Council. The numbers of the supporters of the old chiefs have recently been augmented by the addition of a number of disaffected Mohawks, the so-called Mohawk Workers. But the Mohawks have never participated in the Longhouse religion, and since the present-day Hereditary Council is committed to and supported by Longhouse people, the affiliation of the Mohawks is not dependable. In politics as well as religion, there is a large group who think it unimportant what council is in power. Perhaps one-third of the population, though they may or may not vote for the Elective Council, have the prevailing attitude that, "Reserve politics don't matter." These people are not malcontents, and

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<sup>6</sup> An account of the factions and divisions of the Six Nations people of today is in preparation.

usually realistically condemn the perpetuation of the Hereditary Council as "child's play" or "make-believe." Not all of the Longhouse people support the Hereditary Council, which continues to have meetings, appoint chiefs, pass resolutions, though aware that it has no power to enforce its decisions. Probably one-half of the Longhouse people are active in support of the old Chiefs' Council, and with the addition of the disaffected Mohawks, their strength may be about two thousand.

As to residence and occupation, there is a stable base of nonshifting residence of fairly successful farmers, but the population is generally more shifting than a White-Ontario rural community. Employment is not difficult to find in the adjacent towns of Hagersville, Caledonia, Brantford, and Hamilton. With good roads, and fair cars and bus service, the people can live on the Reserve and commute to work. The result is a rural, nonfarming group. In addition, tobacco and fruit picking offer seasonal employment to families, who usually move to the fields during the season, and return home every 10 days or so to care for their garden plots. Such families save some money from their summer's work, and the man of the family may work at day labor or jobs of short duration during the remainder of the year to add to the family income. There are families who retain their membership in Six Nations, though they live more or less permanently in other places, Buffalo, Brantford, Hamilton, or other cities, and return home on visits, to have babies at the hospital, for vacations, or because of illness, or temporary lack of employment. Such families often move back to the Reserve to retire and farm a little in their old age.

Returning to the subject of women, maternal descent is, of course, not important except to the Longhouse people, where the mother still confers membership and position through her clan. However, the situation as to affiliation has become quite confused, and at present there is a certain leniency and freedom to choose either the mother's or the father's Longhouse affiliation. Very few people outside of the Longhouse know their clan or moiety affiliation. They are aware of their tribal mixtures. (Marriages, once chiefly within the tribe, are now in many cases across tribal lines.)

Perhaps a woman's life is not as free of discontinuities as it once was. However, a strong ego-structure is built up in the girl, and the women are efficient and active individuals in the great majority of cases. The child is wanted and cherished as much as ever, girls as much as boys. Only one mother out of many expressed to me a wish for a boy—and she had already a family of five girls! Seldom is a baby born outside of the hospital; the care and rest is appreciated by the mothers, and child care is studied and followed, though some mothers are not much concerned with hygiene and cleanliness. Gen-

erally, babies are handled and fondled more than among us; grandparents, friends, and relatives, fathers too, take more care of the infant than we are accustomed to see. Often a maternal grandmother frees a young mother for outside work.

Discipline of both sexes is at a minimum in infancy, no fixed feeding schedules or harsh disciplines for motor control are imposed. Little girls are often given tasks by their mothers at an early age, jobs that look too difficult to our eyes. However, from my observation, these tasks were never resented nor insisted upon and no punishment was imposed for failure, but praise was lavishly given for success.

The only temper tantrums observed were due to sibling rivalry. The displaced older child showed all the symptoms of a typical temper tantrum, but the mother ignored the manifestations so completely that the frustration must have been eventually interpreted by the child as imposed by fate rather than by the mother. Boys are rarely assigned tasks by their mothers, though grandmothers are more apt to give them jobs. At an age somewhat older than the girls, boys begin to help their fathers, if their fathers farm. If the father works away from home, the boy of preschool age has complete freedom and runs about a lot with nothing to do. Not many toys or tools are provided for children, and boys often seem aimless and bored, even though they have company. Mothers tend to keep their daughters occupied with household chores or care of younger siblings. At school the same contrast continues; girls seem not to have enough time, boys have time on their hands. Girls develop better work habits and do their homework; boys tend to neglect it for baseball or lacrosse.

In school, the picture is much as it is with us. Girls are more amenable to discipline and usually do assigned tasks more cheerfully and more neatly. In the upper grades of grammar school, the boys often catch up and outdistance the girls in intellectual and imaginative learning, though they continue to be less neat and disciplined. More girls than boys continue their education in high school. Girls are apt to have a specific career in mind, such as marriage, teaching, nursing, stenography. Boys often have ambitions which are vague or impossible of execution.

There are some very early marriages, but generally the age of marriage follows the trend among the neighboring Whites—depression and hard times retard marriage, war brings a crop of early marriages—a tendency which has continued from the end of the war to the present.

Since children are loved for their own sakes and puritanical ideas are only accepted on the surface, if at all, there is not the pressure against the unmarried mother that we are familiar with in our society. Having a child does not shame the parents of the unmarried mother, except in the case of the most acculturated and Christian families of the community. Later marriage is always possible, either to the

child's father, or, more generally, to some other man. Little social censure is passed along to the illegitimate child, who is often cared for by its maternal grandmother in the same fashion as legitimate children.

Of course, there are exceptions, but the role of the father, especially in relation to the daughter, is a kindly and playful one, without much pressure or control. There is a much closer bond built up between father and son, especially if they cooperate in farm work.

Many girls face a major conflict when they decide to work or go to school outside the Reserve. Most families have some relatives in nearby cities, and girls often want to try life with them, nourishing the hope of marriage to a White, if their emotions are not already involved with a boy on the Reserve. Frequently, such ambitions are realized; the girl lives with relatives or friends in Buffalo, works a year or two, marries there, and returns only for visits to her parents, or in hard times. Some girls never feel at ease away from the Reserve, and after an interlude of working away from home come back to stay and marry on the Reserve.

Of course, the less ambitious girl may never be interested in leaving the Reserve. Even the contacts with outsiders in high schools in the nearby towns may cause the more introverted girl to recoil and wish to stay at home although her studies may be going satisfactorily. Especially in homes where Iroquois languages are still spoken, and where economic conditions are hard so that the girl may feel at a disadvantage as to her clothes and equipment, such introversion may occur and ambition to compete with Whites be stifled. Economic pressure in such cases usually keeps the girl busy, however. She may go out to work with other women as day labor on farms which pick up workers daily on the Reserve, she may find housework jobs on the Reserve, and if her parents pick tobacco or fruit, she will accompany them and, in any case, earn her own money.

Adult women enter into many cooperative enterprises and group activities; Women's Institutes flourish, mutual aid societies still carry on; associations of women tangential to churches thrive. The casual observer would remark that the women's exhibits at the annual agricultural fair are equal to those of their White neighbors, whereas the men's exhibits generally are not as good. Schools taught by women tend to have better morale and discipline.

Usually having supported herself before marriage, the Iroquois girl makes a thrifty and self-reliant wife. Her property is her own. Her attachment to her husband is generally not as much based on companionship as in our marriages. Her decisions in regard to her children are usually final. Examining Thematic Apperception Tests<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Unmodified TAT was used because of the acculturation situation.

of Six Nations women and comparing them with White women's tests, we find the chief difference is a more complete identification of the Iroquois women with the feminine role. This means that an Iroquois woman never sees herself as a Hero, always as a Heroine. Masculine accomplishment is not her ambition, and in her daydreams and fantasies she sees herself succeeding in typically feminine pursuits—nursing or teaching, a mother or wife on whom children and husband rely and depend, influential and beloved, a *grande dame* around whom offspring congregate. This truly feminine identification shows that she does not envy men nor seek equality. These tests also show a rich fantasy and inner life, a strong ego-structure, and little conflict with individuals; life's battles appear chiefly as conflicts with the external, real situation, rather than attempts at freedom from domination or influence of individuals.

The Iroquois woman of today is resolute and self-reliant. Because of her identification with the feminine role, her relationship to her sons differs from our mother-son relationship. She herself does not have masculine ideals and consequently does not adequately encourage and spur onward her sons, who, unless they have a particularly interested and affectionate father, lack ambition. TAT tests show that adolescent boys do not always identify with masculine ideals, and this might be attributed to their mother's lack of them.

To sum up: The family-centered life of the Iroquois woman in the old days made for a secure woman who entered into masculine activities in a subsidiary but important fashion. The acculturative process was less destructive of the woman's pattern, and consequently the woman of today is more secure in her feminine role and more successful in accomplishments along the lines set by White patterns, than her masculine counterpart.

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