

THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE WORD *SQUAW*

The following is a letter that linguist Ives Goddard had published in the mid April 1997 issue of *News from Indian Country* (p. 19A) on the origin and meaning of the word "squaw," which has been widely discussed in the media. The bracketed material has been added to this posted version.

Dear Editor:

Since the word squaw continues to be of interest and concern, and since my views have been misstated by one of your correspondents, I'd like to make available to your readers a few relevant facts about it.

First let me say that I have never "disputed the fact that the term is offensive" (as claimed by Muriel Charwood-Litzau in your mid December 1996 issue, citing a misleading Associated Press story). I have always tried to emphasize that *squaw* is now generally considered disparaging, as current dictionaries rightly indicate. Everyone would regard its use to refer to a Native American woman as demeaning (or colossally ignorant), though it should be noted that terms like *squaw bread* and *squaw dance* are still pretty widely used in Indian Country.

In its historical origin, however, the word *squaw* is perfectly innocent, as current dictionaries also correctly indicate: *squaw* comes from a language of the Algonquian family in which it meant "woman." The facts are as follows:

Many languages of the Algonquian family have related words for "woman" that can be reconstructed back to the Proto-Algonquian parent language as **ethkweewa* by using the techniques of comparative linguistics. (In writing words phonetically I'll omit accents and write double vowels for long vowels, as in current Ojibwe spelling; the * means the word is unattested.) Some of the words that are descended from this are Cree *iskweew*, Ojibwe *ikwe* (pronounced *ikkwee*, with *ee* about like the *a* of English *bad*), Meskwaki *ihkweewa*, Oklahoma Delaware *xkwee* (*x* like German *ch* or Spanish *jota*), Canadian Delaware *oxkweew*, and the word in the extinct Massachusetts language of eastern Massachusetts that is spelled *squa* and *ussqua*. (Note: The language name *Massachusetts* has no final *-s*). These are all the ordinary words for "woman" in these languages, except for Massachusetts *squa*, which has become specialized to "female, younger woman." [Even Cheyenne *he'e* (pronounced with mid-level tone) and Arapaho *hisei*, the words for 'woman', go back to the same source; in these languages original **kw* is regularly lost, and the medial consonant cluster shows up as a glottal stop (written with an apostrophe) in Cheyenne and as an *s* in Arapaho.]

Massachusetts *squa* appears in the Massachusetts Bible (printed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1663) in Mark 10:6, translating "female," and in the plural form *squaog* in 1 Timothy 5:2 and 5:14, translating "younger women." It is found in the writings of Massachusetts Indians, including a will written in the Massachusetts language by a native preacher from Martha's Vineyard who uses it to refer to his unmarried daughters. Massachusetts *squa* was an ancient and thoroughly decent word.

[The chroniclers of Plymouth colony (William Bradford and Edward Winslow) referred to “the squa sachim, or Massachusetts queen” in their entry for September 20, 1621. This reference, published in London in 1622, is the earliest attestation of the word in English.] In 1624 Edward Winslow, the governor of Plymouth colony, referred to "The *squa-sachim*, for so they call the sachim's wife" (*Good Newes from New England*, London, 1624). Ten years later William Wood of Lynn, Massachusetts, wrote: "If her husband come to seeke for his Squaw" (*New Englands Prospect*, London, 1634). These published examples show that the English settlers in eastern Massachusetts had learned the word *squa(w)* as "woman" from their Massachusett-speaking neighbors by [1621] and were using it as an English word by 1634. The expression *squa-sachim*, literally "woman chief," is actually in Pidgin Massachusett (the correct Massachusett for "chiefly woman" being *sonkusq*). This squares with the fact that the English would have learned *squa(w)* and other words via the pidginized form of Massachusett that the local Indians regularly spoke with them.

A competing claim has been made in recent years, despite the clear evidence that *squaw* comes from an Algonquian word for "woman," and in fact without discussing this evidence. This is the claim (often somewhat garbled) that *squaw* actually comes from the Mohawk word *ojiskwa'*, which we can politely translate 'vagina'. Mohawk was spoken some 200 miles from Plymouth in the Mohawk Valley by the principal enemies of the Massachusett Indians. It is, of course, a language of the Iroquoian family, which is completely distinct from the Algonquian family. Ms. Charwood-Litzau refers to (but misquotes) the earliest published reference to this idea that I know of, an anthology called *Literature of the American Indian* edited by Thomas E. Sanders and Walter W. Peek (Berkeley: Glencoe Press, 1973). There the origin is given as "probably a French corruption of the Iroquois word *otsiskwa* meaning 'female sexual parts'" (p. 184). The spelling used is the traditional system used by French Canadian missionaries, but the source of the information is not given. This claim has more recently become widely known because of the following statement made on the Oprah Winfrey television show in 1992 by Suzan Harjo: "The word *squaw*, for example, is an Algonquian [sic] Indian word meaning 'vagina,' and that'll give you an idea what the French and British fur-trappers were calling all Indian women, and I hope no one ever uses that term again." (From the program "Racism in 1992: Native Americans," as transcribed from a videotape by Jim Rementer at the request of a Delaware tribal member who knew from his knowledge of his own language that it was incorrect.)

It is as certain as any historical fact can be that the word *squaw* that the English settlers in Massachusetts used for "Indian woman" in the early 1600s was adopted by them from the word *squa* that their Massachusett-speaking neighbors used in their own language to mean "female, younger woman," and not from Mohawk *ojiskwa'* "vagina," which has the wrong shape, the wrong meaning, and was used by people with whom they then had no contact. The resemblance that might be perceived between *squaw* and the last syllable of the Mohawk word is coincidental. Such partial resemblances between words of different meanings in different languages are common and of no significance. I suppose someone might claim that the meanings of these words *are* similar, but to do that would be to adopt the viewpoint that those "fur-trappers" are being accused of.

I am passing along this information because I think that the correct historical facts should be available in any discussions of the word *squaw*. But the resolution of the controversy over its

use in particular cases must depend on other factors as well.