

WOMAN AS CENTRE AND SYMBOL IN THE EMERGENCE OF METIS COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

The author suggests that Metis life was characterized by matriorganization. Daughters were more likely than sons to remain in the West, marrying there and contributing to the rapid population growth of the Metis. She proposes that more detailed family histories could bring out important conclusions regarding the development of Metis society in the nineteenth century.

L'auteur de cette étude suggère que le matriarcat a été l'organisation de la société métisse, n'était probable que les garçons quitteraient leur communauté plus que les filles, celles-ci ayant tendance à rester dans l'ouest et à s'y marier, contribuant ainsi à la croissance rapide de cette population de race mixte. Selon l'auteur, une étude approfondie de l'histoire des familles métisses permettrait de décrire de façon plus précise l'expansion de cette société au cours du dix-neuvième siècle.

Biologically, *métissage* in North America can be described in a unitary way, as the meeting and mingling of Indian and white racial groups. Socially and culturally, it has had a complex history over many generations - one that continues into the present, as people of this dual descent decide which of their many ancestral roots they wish to tap in defining a contemporary identity. This history-in-process has always been multifaceted and has become more complicated with the passage of time, as much recent research is demonstrating (for samplings of work in this field, see, besides these proceedings, the papers in Peterson and Brown, forthcoming).

By early nineteenth century, biracial families in the fur trade context of northern North America numbered in the thousands. Their progeny were moving in varied cultural and ethnic directions - Indian, white, Metis. We still have much to learn about the dynamics of the diverse courses that they followed in their lives as individuals and as familial and community members. This paper suggests that women's studies provide one important perspective, among several, that is especially useful in tracing these processes. The study of women's roles, social, economic, and symbolic, in the critical years before the mid-nineteenth-century ascendancy of white settlers, missions, and rampant officialdom, requires further attention and will repay us in broadened insights and understanding of the human backgrounds, contexts, and consequences of *métissage*.

One initiative for this discussion comes from a recent paper by Charles A. Bishop and Shepard Krech, III, entitled "Matriorganization: the Basis of Aboriginal Subarctic Social Organization." Bishop and Krech argue that early postcontact subarctic Indian groups were typically matrilocal, i.e., a new husband took up residence, at least temporarily, with his wife's relations. They also call attention to evidence for early matrilineality among the Montagnais and Cree, as well as among some western Athapaskan groups (1980:35-36). During the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, disruptions of resource availabilities and subsistence patterns led to replacement of matriorganizational emphases by the modern "flexible and fluid bilocal-bilateral organization" documented by ethnographers of this century (1980:36). But if subarctic Indian societies were indeed characterized by matriorganization through their earlier histories and until ca. 1800 to 1900 (depending on location), it seems that we should inquire whether native women in emergent metis groups looked for and found ways to maintain this organizational bias in their own families and social lives. To what extent did women form the consistent nuclei of such groups? To what extent did biracial families later trace ancestry through women, or at least back to a female apical ancestor who represented in herself the meeting of races that founded a new lineage? Jacqueline Peterson has been concerned with such questions in the Great Lakes - Red River area (1981, 1982), and we might usefully ask them of data from many other localities. Some continuities with aboriginal matriorganization (on which we also need more data) may emerge from such questioning.

Another starting point for this discussion is the work of Sylvia Van Kirk (1980) on the socioeconomic role of women in the fur trade. It is clear that Indian women's traditional productive capacities, in preparing furs, netting

snowshoes, foraging, securing small game, etc., often came to be fully utilized and much valued in both the HBC and Montreal fur trades. In the post setting, Indian wives of traders often transmitted these skills to daughters of mixed descent. The maintaining, in this way, of women's traditional productivity was little respected or understood by the white women and other newcomers who began to penetrate the northwest from the 1820's on. But again it raises questions for metis history: did the persistence of such economic roles afford women a special place among the new peoples or help to maintain a sense of their continuity with the aboriginal past? The sources may fail us on this point. But any metis statements contrasting the productivity of these women and the practical value of their heritage with the relative frailty and oft-idolized economic uselessness of their "fairer sisterhood" would be very interesting evidence on this question.

A third incentive for writing this paper comes from pursuing the implications of what I have called the patrilocality that characterized some upper-level fur trade families in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries (Brown 1980:218). Numbers of company officers made more or less large and lasting commitments of resources and affection to their native families, although not required by law or church to honour their marriages "according to the custom of the country." By this period, however, these families tended to be large, ranging from six to a dozen or more surviving children (Brown, 1976). Officer fathers who maintained these bonds often did so selectively, choosing or being obliged financially to favour certain children to education and a "civilized" upbringing. A sampling of these fathers, consisting of Nor'Westers who had native children baptized in Montreal's St. Gabriel Street Presbyterian Church between 1796 to 1821 (Brown, 1982), indicates that sons were selected over daughters for such attentions by a margin of about two to one. The other side of this picture is that daughters of these families were more likely by a two-to-one margin to remain in the Indian country, marrying there and contributing to the very rapid growth of biracial population in the northwest at that time. As daughters of officers, they were unlikely to revert to the Indian communities of their maternal heritage. They often continued to bear European surnames that were well remembered and respected. They might marry relatively well in fur trade terms, as did the daughters of Patrick Small and William Connolly, or they might marry lower-ranked employees of French descent. Perhaps it seemed that their high-ranked fathers ultimately abandoned them, and perhaps they did. Yet if a father had been on the scene long enough to begin investing in certain of his sons, he probably conveyed to the daughters, too, a sense of their distinctiveness and non-Indianness.

Some such daughters eventually lived out their lives among the white fur trade elite, although perhaps leaving children who joined metis groups. Others may be more immediately identified with *métissage* (sociocultural) in the northwest. Louise Frobisher, daughter of Joseph Frobisher, was by the time of the late nineteenth century halfbreed scrip commissions, the founder and perhaps matriarch of a numerous, three-generation descent group. As I suggested in discussing matriorganization, it would be interesting to investigate system-

atically how many metis families by the late nineteenth century looked back to an apical woman ancestor who, like Louise Frobisher, combined femaleness and a European father's surname. The obverse of patrilocality - white fathers pulling sons more than daughters into the orbits of their own lives and "civilization" might in the northwest be matrilocality, daughters remaining, more often than not, with their mothers in the Indian country, and having that familial tie as a continuing core of their lives. Nineteenth century HBC records can shed some light on comparative figures regarding daughters and sons, since district officers became required early in that century to enumerate their fur trade post populations. In the Ile à la Crosse district in 1823, besides numerous intact fur trade families, there were listed 15 daughters and 10 sons who had been left behind by retired, transferred, or deceased traders and were evidently with their mothers or with other families.¹ This sample by itself is too small to generalize from. But in combination with the St. Gabriel church records, and numerous other indications about the ratios of female to male offspring remaining in the orbit of the fur trade in the northwest, it is suggestive of a broader pattern.

One might carry this discussion a step farther, with respect particularly to residence patterns. Michael Asch has called attention to a pattern that he calls unilocality among the Slavey Indians: that is, a tendency for the siblings of one sex only (sisters or brothers) to remain with their parental groups upon marriage (1980:48). There may be use in looking for unilocal residence patterns in at least a proportion of fur trade and early metis families. We might watch for tendencies of two or more sisters to maintain "matrilocal" residence with their descendants in the Indian country, while their brothers gravitated to the father, and into the male-linked kin groups that characterized in particular the fur trade-oriented society of Montreal. Some such brothers, of course, eventually themselves returned to the fur trade country, as did Cuthbert Grant whom William McGillivray described in 1818 as "principal chief of the half-breed tribe" (Anonymous, 1819:142). In his case, a sister's residency and relations in the northwest no doubt provided a base for him to renew his contacts there after an extended absence, and the same may have been true for other native sons returning in this way.

The development and roles of semi-autonomous female-headed family units need further attention in looking at merle emergence. There are a few signs that by the early 1800's, native women with a background of ties to fur traders could be found living with their offspring, relatively independently, in the orbit of one or another of the posts. The journals of Nor'Wester George Nelson in the Lake Winnipeg area around 1810, for example, refer to at least two such instances. In this northern region where metis groups were just becoming visible as such, the offspring of such female-headed units would have contributed to metis emergence, being themselves neither Indian nor trading post residents.

A further line of inquiry relates to women's symbolic roles in the formulation of concepts of metis descent and identity, in contradistinction to the patrilineal European identities that were not readily available to this new people.

Parliamentary and court testimonies bearing on the Hudson's Bay/North West Company conflicts over Red River Settlement between 1812 and 1818 show that the issues of just who these people were and of their problematic legitimacy were discussed in public at that time. These officially published texts probably reflected broader currents of discussion among both whites and metis, as problems of metis identity and legal status began to draw general attention. Three such texts are of particular interest in their content and in their contrasts and similarities.

First, we have the pronouncements of the Non. William B. Coltman, commissioner hearing witnesses on the Red River troubles and testifying in court at York (Toronto) in October 1818. Being an outsider to the fur trade country, he took a simpler view of its natives than some. The halfbreeds, he said, were all "the progeny of Indian women, living with their mothers," although they varied "in character, information, and manners," some having been educated in Montreal or England. Overall, they ranged along a continuum: "they may be considered as filling every link, from the character of pure Indians to that of cultivated men" (Anonymous, 1819:177). As for those halfbreeds involved in the Seven Oaks massacre, they should be punished in accord with their place on this continuum. As example should be made of those Canadians and halfbreeds who had had a civilized education and religious instruction, whereas the crimes of those who had never been out of the Indian country were palliated by "their half savage state," and by their being accustomed to "the general system of revenge recognized among the Indians" (ibid: 193).

Fur trader witness Pierre Pambrun, in contrast, gave emphasis to metis distinctiveness and to the metis consciousness thereof, although raising the spectre of their illegitimacy. "The Bois-brules," he said, "are the bastard children either of French or English fathers, by Indian women;... some of them I know have been sent to Lower Canada, and received their education at Montreal and Quebec. I do not think they consider themselves as white man, or that they are so considered by white men, nor do they consider themselves as only on a footing with the Indians" (ibid., 112).

Significantly, William McGillivray, North West Company partner and leader, and himself the father of a half-Cree family, went the farthest of the three in his analysis both of metis identity and of the legitimacy question. Writing to Coltman on 14 March 1818, he observed that many of these halfbreeds were more or less linked to the North West Company "from the ties of consanguinity and interest . . . yet they one and all look upon themselves as members of an independent tribe of natives, entitled to a property in the soil, to a flag of their own, and to protection from the British Government." He went on to enlarge upon the "independent tribe" concept, after spelling out his view of the legitimacy question:

It is absurd to consider them legally in any other light than as Indians; the British law admits of no filiation of illegitimate children but that of the mother; and as these persons cannot in law claim any advantage by paternal right, it follows, that they

ought not to be subjected to any disadvantages which might be supposed to arise from the fortuitous circumstances of their parentage...

That the half-breeds under the denominations of bois brules and metifs have formed a separate and distinct tribe of Indians for a considerable time back, has been proved to you by various depositions (ibid:]40).

McGillivray, then, was unequivocal about metis identity and separateness. But his legitimacy argument is also very interesting. The denial of paternal filiation meant, under British law, the affirmation of maternal right. McGillivray did not specify what this might entail. But in British legal practice, the maternal filiation of illegitimates would have comprised the right to use the mother's surname and to inherit from her as a blood relative. We might surmise that, by extension, McGillivray had in mind upholding metis rights to Indian tribal status and to land and other inheritances, through such maternal filiation. Although he did not spell it out, he urged the point indirectly: "[the fortuitous circumstances of their parentage" should not subject them "to any disadvantages."

Of course, as a Nor'Wester, McGillivray spoke with an element of self-interest; the new nation was politically useful to his company. Yet he also spoke truth: metis identity and solidarity were indeed taking form. And his argument on legitimacy was expressed in accord with commonly held Canadian and North West Company views regarding marriages "according to the custom of the country" as unions without legal standing (for amplification of this point, see Brown 1980:90-96); he simply extended that argument logically in the direction of explicitly asserting mother right or maternal filiation as a positive claim.

Although McGillivray's statement is the most detailed, he, Coltman, and Pambrun were all in accord in coiling attention to the maternal element as formative in metis emergence. One could respond that they were simply saying the obvious; we all have mothers. But the reiteration of this theme in these writings suggests its centrality in early thinking about the metis.

It is also of interest that Louis Riel, who would not have known the texts cited above, returned to this theme in his own thought, focussing on the symbolism of motherhood in at least two different ways. There was first his well-known recommendation that the metis attend to their maternal as well as their paternal descent: "It is true that our Indian origin is humble, but it is indeed just that we honour our mothers as well as our fathers" (Tremaudan 1982:200). In a second and different vein was his statement to the court during his 1885 trial, on his homeland as mother: "The North.West is also my mother, it is my mother country . . . and I am sure that my mother country wall not kill me . . . because a mother is always a mother, and even if I have my faults if she can see I am true she will be full of love for me" (Morton 1974:312).

The data and examples gathered here are of varied origins and substance.

But it seemed useful in this forum to present some preliminary ideas and evidence about possible avenues for thought and research on the numerous topics relating to women in metis history. A full range of subjects concerning the social, economic, cultural, and symbolic roles of women are available for investigation, and can be pursued in the context of a variety of social science and humanistic disciplines.

I would like to conclude by suggesting one specific research strategy that could serve to make our knowledge of women in metis communities more precise. It would help to refine available data on this topic in generational terms. We often tend to collapse fairly broad timespans and to telescope generations in looking at developments over a century or more, when it would be useful to distinguish these phases of familial and domestic cycles more clearly as the microcosms from which metis communities grew. The alliances of white traders and Indian women in fur trade post contexts were qualitatively different from second-generation alliances involving the first women of biracial descent, and second-generation from third-generation ones. More detailed family histories with time depths of three, four, and five generations, could bring out important and subtle comparisons and paths of change, as the experiences of these native families accumulated, and as persons outside them in turn responded and reacted to them, helping to confer on them a new ethnicity. More broadly, such studies would also contribute to better knowledge of metis demographic profiles. The rapid expansion of metis families between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries is a major phenomenon whose implications, social, economic, and political, remain to be fully worked out. Its analysis, along with that of many other issues in metis history, must begin with the family—the dynamics of relationships between women and men, parents and children, and their close kin and contemporaries. It is all too easy to learn more about the men than the women; but new kinds of systematic study can redress the balance, contributing richer perspectives not only on individuals and families, but on metis social history in its broadest sense.

NOTES

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