

NATIVE CALIFORNIA WOMEN AS CULTURAL MEDIATORS

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ABSTRACT

Thirty-four of the 38 Native Californians at Fort Ross in 1821 were women. Until the recruitment of the local indigenous population for agriculture, they essentially made up one component of the triad of cultures interacting at this Russian colony. As the wives of the Native Alaskans and as the sisters and daughters of the Pomo and Coast Miwok, their role as cultural mediators was critical. Theoretical and methodological approaches in ethnohistory and archaeology are explored to develop a model of culture change within this contact experience and evaluate its applicability to prehistoric contexts.

INTRODUCTION

"There is an important Indian woman in virtually every major encounter between Europeans and Indians in the New World" (Kidwell 1992:97). Indian women acted as wives, mistresses, translators, guides, counselors, intermediaries, and the mothers of "mixed bloods." "Theirs was the more sustained and enduring contact with new cultural ways..." (Kidwell 1992:97). Based on the Kuskov census of 1821, thirty-four of the 38 Native Californians at Fort Ross at that time were women. They made up 63% of the adult female population (Istomin 1992:10-11). Of these 34, 13 were "Bodegan" (Coast Miwok), 19 were "from the vicinity of Ross" (Kashaya), and 2 were "from the Slavianka River" (South Pomo or Kashaya) (Istomin 1992). Most of the Indian women were married to the Kodiak or Chugach, while a relatively small number lived with Russian and Creole men.

The goal of this paper is to show how ethnohistoric accounts can be used to develop hypotheses on the role of women in a particular

historical context and how these hypotheses might be tested in the archaeological record. The ethnohistory will be critically evaluated and then used within the framework of a modified version of the direct historical approach currently being applied at Fort Ross (Lightfoot n.d.). Ideas for testing the hypotheses developed from these ethnohistoric accounts will then be briefly mentioned. Finding women in the archaeological record will require the full spectrum of archaeological inquiry: from the specifics of a moment in history to more general assumptions about life as human beings.

CURRENT ETHNOHISTORICAL THEORY

The impact of Europeans on the indigenous people of California, from the early Spanish and English explorers, to the anthropologists of the early twentieth century ethnographic period, is currently a major issue in anthropological and ethnohistoric theory. We are all aware that the records and the recorders were biased. And it is

doubtful that today anthropologists and archaeologists are any less biased in their aspiration to do what seems right or appropriate for their time. Yet, the acknowledgement of these biases coupled with a critical evaluation of the ethnohistorical accounts as well as the use of multiple lines of evidence should allow us to benefit from this valuable resource.

Fort Ross

After some preliminary research into the role of women in North American contact experiences (especially the fur trade), several suppositions or hypotheses are apparent. For instance, intermarriage and the resulting kinship and affinities appear to facilitate acculturation. Social organization (and changes in social organization) has important implications for production and division of labor. And conservatism and risk seem to influence the types of activities performed by men and women. But the most important issue to be addressed here is that women were not merely passive participants but exerted varying degrees of choice in their actions.

No single ethnographic fact has been more firmly entrenched than the sexual division of labor. Men hunted and participated in warfare. Women made baskets, pots, mortars, and mats, pounded grains, made bread, planted, and carried burdens (Grumet 1980).

Back at Fort Ross. Lutke remarks that "Women do all the work" (Lutke 1989:278). The Pomo woman not only hauls children, but also "all the heavy burdens" (Wrangell (1839) 1974:4). The basket, the woman's acknowledged object of handiwork, was used for gathering, processing, cooking, storage of grain, and later for trade. "Their food consists only of acorns and rozhinitza, and in the summer whatever the sea provides" (Lutke 1989:257). The importance of grain and acorns made such an impression on Wrangell (1974:4) that he credited the "vegetarian diet" as well as the mild climate with having molded the temperament of these Indians into an easygoing one.

So when the Russians chose to establish a colony on the coast of northern California how did these "easygoing" Indians respond? Choice is not one-sided. Because we do not have their words documented does not mean they merely "responded" or responded passively. The indigenous people had a part in the agenda for change. In historic contact contexts indigenous peoples altered production strategies to their own perceived interests. They engaged in procurement, processing, and use/consumption activities that were embedded in the procurement sphere of the European market. Indian involvement in the fur trade was a microcosm of the larger world-system network based on extensive division of labor and containing a multiplicity of cultures (Kardulias 1990:26-29). And, just as part of the agenda for change was an Indian one, so too would the female agenda be one of conscious choice.

Istomin (1992:4) points out that:

Russian colonization was characterized by the absence or rare presence of Russian women...Under such conditions, marriage or relations with Indian women and their presence in the Russian settlement were prerequisites for a normal life in the colony (for the men anyway).

But women often benefit from intermarriage by "marrying up" and effectively raising the rank of their descendants. Kinship can be a decisive marker or maker of value. The production of kinship is legitimated in each generation through the transmission of inalienable possessions, be they land rights, material objects, or mythic knowledge (Weiner 1992:11).

As easily as they may have joined the Native Alaskan men, it was also common for women to leave. According to Khlebnikov:

All the Aleuts have Indian women, but these relationships are unstable...An Indian woman may live for a number of years with an Aleut and have children, but then, acting on a whim, will drop everything and run off to the mountains...[Khlebnikov (1800-1837) 1990:194]

There were also many cases of divorce. In two cases the Indian women "were released to go to their place". In another seven cases the husbands left for Sitka leaving the women behind. After a husband's death the women were "allowed" to go to their homeland (Istomin 1992:7).

At first it may seem surprising that the Indian women would agree to leave the Native Alaskan men who were well known for their hunting skills (Khlebnikov 1990:54) and who, at least according to ethnohistoric accounts, were much more industrious than the native Californian men. Were women leaving these resourceful men "on a whim" or for reasons influenced by access to resources?

In the 1990 translation of Khlebnikov's travel notes, Schmidt makes an interesting point:

When the Aleut hunting party was sent to the Port of San Francisco the second time, the men all asked me not to keep them for the hunt once the agreement had expired, because the last time they had been separated from their families, their wives and children had received no assistance and had gone hungry; therefore, they begged me to help them this time to feed their families. Notwithstanding the shortage of supplies at Ross, I tried to supply them with food as much as possible, but several of the women nevertheless ran away out of hunger, and the others endured terrible privation. [Khlebnikov 1990:131]

Khlebnikov himself realized that the Aleuts must be provided company *laftaks* (sea lion hides) to construct *baidarkas* even if there are no sea otters to hunt, because "the Aleuts need to eat fish, which they cannot hunt without *baidarkas*. The company must enable them to feed themselves" (1990:195). So even though they were skilled hunters and employed by the company, resources were very limited.

Eleven years after this observation, Wrangell described the food allocation paid Russian, Creole, and Aleut workers.

Those receiving salary are given 1 pud (36.133 pounds) of flour per month and 1 funt (.90282

pounds) of meat (including bones) per day...there is no way whatever for them to live and to feed a family with one salary and one ration of flour and meat. [Gibson 1969:211]

It must be stressed here that even though agriculture and animal husbandry were being practiced here, the purpose was to export the products of these endeavors to other Russian settlements. Livestock was not to be wasted on the men (and in turn their families)! (Khlebnikov 1990:192).

As skilled and industrious as the Native Alaskan men were, life with them may not have been an improvement and it would have required action to reduce risk to the women and children. If the inhabitants could not rely on rations supplied or bought from the company store, then other potential resources would be necessary. The women might choose to resort to traditional subsistence.

In addition, becoming part of a fur trade colony may have meant adjusting to a different social organization. Changes in social organization can lead to intensification and to increases in both productivity and production (Bender 1985; Lourandos 1985; Ames 1985). This might be characterized by an increase in net labor and resources devoted to productive activity and diversification of the combinations of labor and resources to produce a greater yield (Kaiser and Voytek 1983:387).

During the fur trade in North America the skinning and dressing of pelts was primarily a female activity (Kardulias 1990). The increased burden of preparing provisions for the hunt and tanning fur pelts put new demands upon female labor and increased the economic importance of women in fur trade colonies (Lewis 1942). Lutke comments that at Fort Ross:

Some of the promyshlenniks and Aleuts have married the Indian women. Our interpreter, whose wife is one of these people, told us that she has learned this language very quickly and well, and that she had also learned Aleut handicrafts such as sewing the whale gut kamleika (waterproof outer garment) and other things. [Lutke 1989:278]

In contact experiences female activities or traditions are suggested by many to have persisted longer and to have been more conservative. The apparent conservatism of women in fur trade colonies can be exemplified by the Seneca. Their actions were selective and part of a rational strategy to maintain control of local production which provided the base for a society dependent on complementary economic sex roles (Rothenberg 1980). Female conservatism may sometimes stem from the realization that the avoidance of risk will affect the well-being of her kin to a greater degree than that of males.

Acknowledged, there is plenty of bias in the record concerning the "value" of activities as observed by European men, but that should not keep us from reevaluating and recognizing patterns in the types of activities. Attributing traditional female activities to women becomes a problem when they are assessed by male standards within a male paradigm. It is not necessary to label women as passive or subordinate or conservative but rather as choosing strategies very different than those of men. We should not discredit the "separate spheres" of male and female activity when we find them because it is politically correct to do so. Consequently, if we can hypothesize that women will tend to do certain types of activities we can then proceed to discern the context in which these activities took place.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS

Testing these ideas in the archaeological record will be a challenge. For concepts such as choice, or even intermarriage, we may have to rely on the ethnohistoric accounts as well as the direct historical approach. But the "Direct historical approach advances the study of culture change by comparing and contrasting different lines of evidence in a diachronic framework" (Lightfoot n.d.:12). By not relying on single sources of evidence we may be in a better position to evaluate what may have really been going on. For example, we need to shift our unit of analysis from the focus on artifacts to the spatial context of

archaeological remains (Lightfoot n.d.). I also see the value of economic models for determining social organization and division of labor.

Spatial Patterning

Archaeological spatial contexts (both inter- and intra-site) can be used to infer changes in economic, political, social and ideological organization and their implications for production. Increased complexity, specialization, and exchange networks could cause changes in social structure potentially observable in the archaeological record.

As well as looking at intra-site variability at Native Alaskan Village Site (NAVS), we are continuing our archaeological investigations of broader regions to examine change in Kashaya Pomo culture during prehistoric, protohistoric, and historic times.

Economic Models

When the Native Californian women lived with the Native Alaskan men they were not only introduced to new technologies but also to new resources. The emphasis shifted from terrestrial resources to marine and domestic. If we can make assumptions about the types of activities women performed we can then use economic models to measure relative risk, accessibility, reliability, and energy requirements in order to compare the utilization of these resources and estimate degree of culture change.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been suggested that the Pomo and Coast Miwok women worked hard assuming laborious activities within the framework of a mobile, seasonal subsistence round. These tasks, along with basically full-time child care, would have required risk-minimizing, labor-intensive activities such as acorn processing, mollusc collecting, plant gathering, and basket making for harvesting, hauling, and storage. Some suggest that storage and extractive strategies that result in increased

levels of production at the expense of greater time, energy, or material were not preferred, but rather necessary. While on one hand life may have seemed arduous, there remained a certain degree of autonomy for the Pomo woman. Her own and her children's survival ultimately depended on her resourcefulness.

On the other hand, the potential of access to greater resources associated with the Native Alaskan men may have never been realized. These ethnohistoric accounts point out that it was a constant battle to keep the Fort Ross personnel fed and that the Native Alaskans were poorly paid. European food supplies were limited, and if a debt to the company was accrued you could anticipate working even harder and longer. So, not only would the Alaskan's wife be dependent on either the Russians or her husband's hunting skills for food, she would also be limited in her own ability to practice traditional lifeways having access only to nearby resources (such as shellfish) unless, of course, she left and went back home to her family.

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