

The Americas: Native American Indians and Their Girls and Women-Part III

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Girls and Women of Native Americans

Girls

In various Native American cultures, for example Kaska Indians, for training purposes, the parent would say to a small girl "Make Tea" and the girl would try to reconstruct what her mother and elder sister often did, but what she herself had never done before.²

Towards menarche the Athabascan Indians paid much attention to the first menstruation of their girls with various taboos related to it. The Kutchin girls were made to live, for up to a year, in a special shelter constructed some distance from family camp. Here she wore a pointed hood, which made her look down towards the ground only. Other precaution for her own good included, a rattle of bones that was supposed to prevent her from hearing anything, a special stick to use if she wanted to scratch her head and a special cup that was not meant to touch her lips. Once menstruation started, only a short period of seclusion was required. In California and South America deer hoof rattles are associated with puberty rites (more recently replaced by met-

al cones of that shape). The rattles are tied to the adolescent girl's dress in Apache tribe. Among the Maidus and Karoks, the girl herself shakes them. Usually the older woman surround the girl and thump long hoof tipped poles on the ground, in some mountain tribes of California as well as in South America.²

Women

In Northern areas practices of pregnancy taboos and postnatal observances were instituted, which intended to serve the mothers benefit as well as to ensure the child's well-being.

Child Birth Practices

Birth took place in specially made birth huts, or according to early information, in the woods in some special places. One or more knowledgeable woman, a sister or a mother of the delivering woman helped in caring for her as well as her new born child. Babies were diapered with moss and carried on the back of the mother in ornamented leather bags or a cradle board.² It is just possible that replica of C. section took place as e.g. one of the carvings of Haida shows 2 bears per-

forming the procedure of slitting the abdomen and uterus of a 3rd pregnant bear.²

Midwives in e.g. Maya of Guatemala were highly respected women. The Maya believe that to be pregnant is to be “Yawa”, meaning ill. The midwives were obstetrical and at the same time religious specialists. They provided prenatal care and massage to the woman, attended deliveries and took charge of mother and child after birth. They were considered divine between spiritual and real world, performing rituals to keep their patients safe.^{2,3}

In Aztec civilization **midwife** usually attended a delivering woman, she not only lead prayers during the woman's labour to the **goddess of childbirth Tlazolteotl**, but also prepared a sedative drink made of herbs and grasses for the women in labour, and **a warm stone was laid on the pregnant woman's belly to ease her pain**. After the birth, the midwife made a series of battle cries, praising the mother who had fought through her labour to deliver the baby. **Preservation of umbilical cords was the tradition**. When a son reached adult hood, he would carry his cord to a distant battlefield and bury it, whereas a daughter buried her's next to the family's hearth.²

In later centuries in Zuni Indians, the birthing mother would lie on a soft bed, made of animal skins. Her mother and other elderly women of the family gathered to aid birth of her baby. More over she was encouraged to remain silent even during strong labour pains. Kneading her pregnant belly was another ritual. No medicines were

given during labour and the placenta was thrown in a steam to be washed.²¹

In more recent past, role of the husbands became pronounced, e.g. in the **Polar Eskimos**. They created holes lined by animal skin for their labouring wives, whom they comforted during labour. After the birth of the child the father would cut its cord with a knife and the mother would tie a knot in it. The placenta was wrapped and left for the animals to feast upon.²¹

Death of the mother as well as the child during or soon after labour was very common, hence a lot of superstition hovered around it.

Female goddesses of fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, were therefore quite a few, Chak Chel being the most important, but the women also liked to worship a beautiful female goddess of moon.²

Family, Marriage and Avoidance: The Arctic and Sub Arctic cultures had **family and kinship relations**, within the local bands comprised of **simple family of husband, wife and children** and at times adopted children for their emotional security and economic stability. On the other hand a man would occasionally have 2 wives marrying the widow of a dead brother; otherwise they were **mostly monogamous people**.^{2,22}

In Maya culture for example, it was not unusual for marriages to be arranged by the parents for their sons and daughters, who were still children.^{2,23}

Modes of obtaining a wife included bride's service rendered to the father of the bride or transfer of the sister of the groom to bride's family.²

Cross Cousin marriages were a norm, until impact of Christianity. Verbal and emotional "Avoidance", was gracefully exercised towards man's daughters, sisters and sister-in-laws i.e. these people were moral groups.²

Of course varied practices of these essential human functions occurred throughout the Americas.²⁴

Status and Role of Women in Various Native American Societies

The discussion concerns the time from the arrival of humans on the American continents with a focus on women's role in general and those of Maya, Aztec and Inca civilizations in particular.

In these societies, like everywhere else the women had important roles in domestic activities. They took care of their children, breast-fed them and prepared food for the family etc. However other roles of the women differed from region to region, some having a position in the market and others maintaining essential positions in religion and politics.^{2,22,25}

Women's role in General: Native American women traditionally belonged to a culture that gave them respect and power, autonomy and equality. Native societies in the past were not

based on a hierarchical system and there were few important divisions between men and women. The work of the two genders often differed but there was no value of one over the other. Native women of the past were respected and valued for their contribution to the survival of their families, which is alas deficient presently in our Pakistani societies! Their knowledge of plants, their ability to cure and to preserve food materials and their opinion in political matters etc were all valued. They gave birth to children, educated them, provided food for the family and maintain the abodes. Also, there were some matrilineal societies, such as the Iroquois. In such societies, women had important positions in the governmental and religious offices.²¹ Other common duties that women had were of gathering plants for food, pounding corn, cooking beans, squash, meats and sea food (in areas near coast lines), extracting oil from acorns and nuts, sewing and packing and unpacking camps. They were responsible for producing certain crafts such as brewing dyes, making pottery, and weaving items (including cloth for themselves, the family and textile) they also made baskets and mats.^{2,22,25}

In some areas, women were influential in tribal councils and cast the deciding vote for war or peace like the Cheyenne women. In the Cherokee society, women were considered equal to men, they could become "Be-

loved Women", who voiced and voted in General Council, lead the Woman's Council, prepared and served the ceremonial Black Drink and sometimes saved the life of a prisoner already condemned to execution.^{2,22}

Women's Role in Maya Civilization: In the contemporary Maya society of Zinacantan, Mexico, the women transformed the raw materials produced by men into objects of use and consumption in addition to the usual household chores. In fact the Maya society depended on deer meat for which it was the women's job to make sure that there was abundant supply of deer. Sometimes, these deer lived within the household, raised by women for men to kill. Most of the roles of women of ancient Maya society are inferred only from the **elaborate burial sites** containing steles, vases, and other burial accompaniments.^{22, 25} Furthermore the study of craft and fiber, from the city of Ceren, buried by volcanic ash in 600 C.E, shows that women's textile work was not only a mundane task that had specific household purposes, but had its position in the market. Women in the Maya society had a role in creating something valuable for the important people outside the home.^{22, 25}

Women in the Maya society played important part in religion. As girls, they were trained and taught how to maintain the religious shrines and were associated with ritual practices of religion. In addition, there is evidence

that some elite women took part in politics also.²²

Researchers working in Guatemala have discovered a 2 meter high limestone monument that depicts **a woman of authority in ancient Maya culture**. This portrait could **either be of a ruler or a mythical goddess**. It has been stated that, "The stele may date from the late 4th century AD, making it as much as 200 years older than previously discovered monuments depicting powerful Mayan women. There are **images of queens, who ruled singly** or with their husbands and sons, depicted on stelae later in Maya history beginning in the early 6th century AD. But this stele is completely unique in style, in that it shows a woman in a really early period in Maya history, a period when the city states were being founded and dynasties were being instituted".²⁶ It shows that **women played important roles in the phase when Maya states were established. Thus confirming that the Maya Society was Matriarchal and Matrilinear.**^{22,26}

Women's Role in Aztec Civilization: Amazingly enough the Aztec society became **patriarchal i.e. a male dominated society**. Thus, **women in this society were considered subordinates of men**. As a result, women had little chance to take part in government and religious activities. However, in daily life, people had clear division of roles between men and women. While men worked in the fields and fought in wars or took the job of

their fathers and became traders, women stayed at home and put their efforts in domestic duties like childbearing, weaving, and cooking. **Aztec girls** were taught at home the skills necessary for marriage, they began spinning at four and cooking at twelve. Aztec women also helped in weaving textiles (referred to later), some were also included in the work force, working as merchants, traders, scribes, courtesans, healers, and **mid-wives**.^{2,22,27}

They also helped the men (their husbands) in other fields, like handing over arrows to the former, as shows in Figure 9.



Figure 9. Showing an Aztec woman, supposedly a wife handing over an arrow to the man.

In the Aztec society the role of women included weaving and spinning cloth from cotton and wool. However, the women of the common people in this society had some opportunities regarding trade i.e. they could sell

what they made, in the market place to strangers, and gained some advantages as a result. They provided food, cloth, and other items for the market. It is said that some women in the Aztec society did hold places as official referees to resolve disputes that arose in the market place. Some other women were **skilled healers** and diviners. Documents from the Spanish accounts indicate that **the women healers were more highly skilled than contemporary Spanish doctors**.⁵ Other highly unusual roles were played by some Aztec women for example, that by a woman of the Aztec Empire in the 16th century who played an active and powerful role in the Spanish conquest of Mexico as an interpreter and an advisor. She facilitated communication between Cortes and various Native American leaders. With her encouraging negotiations over bloodshed, Marina saved thousands of lives.^{18,22}

Women in Aztec civilization had a certain degree of acknowledgement of work and enjoyed relative independence in matters such as paid work.²²

Marriage Practices in Aztec civilization are similar to those of other **Mesoamerican** civilizations such as the **Mayas**.^{2,28} They got married at a later age though, i.e. during their late teens and early twenties. Aztec marriages were initiated by the parents of the potential groom. After consulting with the extended kinship group, the parents would approach a professional matchmaker (*ah atanzah*), who would talk to the potential bride's

family. The latter would inform the matchmaker whether or not they accepted the proposal.^{2, 28}

The marriage celebration was a four-day event, and the wedding ceremony took place on the first day. The bride wore fine robes. Her kinswomen would decorate her arms and legs with red feathers, and paint her face with a paste containing small shimmering crystals. The ceremony took place at the house of the groom's parents. A fire was lit in the hearth and incense was burned as an offering to the gods. The groom's parents would give presents (robes and mantles) to the bride's parents. The ritual for finalizing the marriage involved the matchmaker tying the groom's cape to the bride's skirt, then the groom's mother would give the bride and groom each four mouthfuls of 'tamales'. Four days of feasting followed the ceremony.^{2,28}

Marriages among Aztec nobles were usually arranged for the purpose of political, military or economic alliances, such as Cosijoeza married Ahuizotl's daughter to seal the alliance between the Aztecs and the Zapotecs in 1496. Aztec kings reportedly had dozens of wives and many children. However, polygamy was only practiced among the nobles of Aztec civilization; while the majority of the population practiced monogamy.^{2,5,28}

Furthermore in Aztec civilization, women were involved in a number of other professions for example priest, doctor and sorcerer. Female predominance was seen in other professions like weaving and crafting. Though not equal to men they were regarded as true artisans with prestige and control over their own work as well as the

income it generated while such women belonged to the artisans' guilds.²⁸

The colourful designs of Aztec weavers are displayed in the images in Aztec codices. The dyes came from blue clays, yellow ochres, and red came from beetles as mentioned in part-I of this article. Purple was derived from the sea snail *Purpura patula*.^{9,28}

Women mainly worked inside the home, spinning and weaving thread from cotton. They used a handheld drop spindle, then wove cloth using a loom that they strapped to their backs and held in their laps like the Mayas. Women also spent hours grinding maize between stones to make flour. They were responsible for tending turkeys and dogs which were raised for meat. Extra cloth, vegetables or other items were taken by women to the nearest market to be sold or bartered for a needed item.^{2,4,22}

The Aztec women did have some recreation too, like a woman performing Aztec fire dance shown in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Showing a woman performing a recreational traditional Aztec Fire Dance.

Post Spanish invasion effects on Aztec Women

The Spanish conquest of Aztec territories decimated much of the indigenous population, through warfare and by bringing new diseases, such as smallpox, for which the Aztecs had no immunity.⁵

Aztec polygamous arrangements, with secondary wives and children, were not legally recognized by the Spanish, who considered such women and children illegitimate and disinherited them from claims on property. This also tore apart the political and economic fabric of Aztec culture, since noble marriages were made with political and territorial claims in mind.⁵

Working demands became harsh for women after the Spanish arrived and the **encomiendas** were created. Aztec communities had already lost many men to war and epidemics, and these encomiendas meant that more men worked outside of their villages for the encomenderos. **Traditional gender-based divisions of labour became irrelevant.** Women no longer had men to do plowing, and were left to do all the agricultural tasks alone, which included the planting and harvesting, as well as growing enough produce to meet the demands of the Spanish. Encomenderos and their Spanish retainers exploited Aztec women as weavers, often chaining them to looms, to meet demand for Aztec woven fabrics abroad. Over several generations, many young women left the rural areas to work as domestic servants or as market vendors in the cities.⁵

Spanish culture did not allow women to work autonomously outside the home, as Aztec women

had done before. Women were expected to make the raising of children their priority. Their independence as workers with paid occupations was ended by the Spanish, particularly in the textile work that had given Aztec women much esteem in their communities. When the Spanish eventually set up industrial textile mills, they had men working in the mills, not women.⁵

Women`s Role in Inca Civilization

In general the women's role in the Inca differed from that of European women at that time, in that European women existed only for the benefit of men. In the Inca society, women had very different roles from men, but these roles were considered as complementary to those of men and a necessary part of the society. In fact, **women played an essential role in the Inca society.**^{2,29} In addition to usual house hold duties the women wove cloth and worked in the fields.

Before the conquest, by the Spanish the household was an autonomous socio-economic unit, indicating that there was much freedom for the people, including women. One evidence in the analysis of this period, shows that **women consumed food in similar quality and quantity as men.** This can be interpreted as women having equal participation in community and domestic life. In addition, women in Inca civilization played a large role in religion, controlling the cults of goddesses. **But after the Spanish conquest, women`s social position became lower than that of men,** for the state began to exclude women from its rituals.^{5,22}

Inca women were not expected to work for government projects, or perform mit'a, which was a

requirement for every man in the society. However, this does not mean that women did not play a role in working of the government.²¹ In fact, women were to weave one piece of clothing every year to put in the government storehouses. Also, in some cases, they followed their husband on his mit'a, carried heavy burdens, and helped him in many other ways.

The women participated in the field work together with men, especially during sowing and harvesting seasons. When planting, men punched holes into which women scatters corn seeds, for these people believed that **women ensured successful crop**. And during the harvest, women carried bundles of stalks, cut by men, to be stacked to dry. Furthermore, women made flour through grounding corn and potatoes.^{4,22}

A unique concept was that, of the **chosen women**, in the Inca society, also called Acllacunas, in which women were identified as the Virgin of the Sun. They were trained for years and had important economic and cultural roles. The girls learned not only to weave skillfully the clothing worn by the nobles as well as the beautiful robes and elaborate hangings used on state occasions, they were also taught the preparation of special foods and 'chichi', a beverage used in religious ceremonials.^{5,22}

When the girls completed the training and reached about 16 years of age, they were divided in to classes based on their degree of beauty. The most beautiful and highly born became 'concubines' of the Inca Emperor. Some of the girls that suited the most, and reached the Inca ideal of perfection, were selected to be sacrificed in honor of the Sun, while some others were in-

terned for life in one of the convents where they acted as temple attendants and became mamaconas. Others became wives of nobles or military captains.

The social status of the Chosen women was great, and they enjoyed some advantages in the society. For instance, they did not perform hard labor in the fields, and enjoyed a steady supply of food and clothing, with whole estates dedicated to their needs. However, they were denied the support of their families as well as the opportunity to participate in daily social life. Those who were married could not select their spouse and those who did not marry lived secluded from the rest of society, in a state of perpetual chastity.^{2,22,29}

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Some words in English have Native American Origin

Kayak	from 'quayq' (Yupik word)
Igloo	from 'iglu' (Inuit word)
Moose	from 'mos' (Abenaki word)
Pecon	from 'pakani' (Illinois word)
Toboggan	from 'topaghan' (Micmac)

Source: www.igloo-books.com