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Building Native Women's Leadership through Community and Culture

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Abstract

Using the lenses of colonialism and gender, this article explores the evolving nature and perception of Native American women's leadership historically and in the present. Historically, women and men had different yet equally important leadership roles to play within the community. These roles were inextricably interdependent. Euro-American colonialism through conquest and religion brought concomitant gender ideologies that slowly tore at the fabric of indigenous communities and ultimately altered the nature of gender parity within community leadership. Today, Native American women are taking back a degree of the significant sociopolitical power they once exercised. Native women are rising to the top ranks of leadership in the nation as members of the US House of Representatives, in their states as executive officers and as state representatives in their state legislatures, as well as in their communities as tribal officials, education advocates, environmental activists, and as culturally empowered mothers, sisters, and daughters.

Keywords: Native American Women, Indigenous Women's Leadership, Indigenous Culture, Indigenous Community

Kızılderili Kadın Lider Kimliğinin Toplumsal ve Kültürel Oluşumu

Öz

Bu makale, sömürgecilik ve toplumsal cinsiyet kavramları üzerinden, geçmişte ve günümüzde Kızılderili kadınların liderlik algısını ve bu liderliğin değişen doğasını inceler. Kızılderili toplumunda, günümüze değin, kadın ve erkeklerin farklı ancak eşit derecede önemli liderlik rolleri olmuştur. Bu roller ayrılmaz şekilde birbirine bağımlıydı. Avrupa-Amerikalı sömürgeciliği; toprakların ele geçirilmesi, dini ideoloji ve bunların beraberinde gelen toplumsal cinsiyet ideolojileri aracılığıyla, yerli toplumların kültürel dokusunu yavaş yavaş bozmuş ve toplumsal liderlik konusundaki cinsiyet denkliğinin tam anlamıyla bir değişim geçirmesine yol açmıştır. Günümüzde Kızılderili kadınlar geçmişte sahip oldukları sosyo-politik gücü bir ölçüde geri almaktadır. Yerli kadınlar ABD Temsilciler Meclis üyeleri, kendi eyaletlerinde yürütme memurları, yasama meclislerinde eyalet temsilcileri, ve kendi toplumlarında kabile yetkilileri, eğitim savunucuları, çevre aktivistleri ve kültürel anlamda güç kazanan anneler, kız kardeşler ve kız evlatlar olarak ülkede liderlik anlamında üst kademelere yükselmektedirler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kızılderili kadınlar, yerli kadın liderliği, yerli kültür, yerli toplum

"Our voices and spirits must come together to reaffirm the bonds of community and renew the vitality of our future as Miami people."—Miami Women's Council, 2010

Introduction

Given the election of the first Native American women to the United States Congress, Representatives Sharice Davids (Kansas) and Deb Haaland (New Mexico) as well as that of Penny Flanagan as Lieutenant Governor (Minnesota) in 2018, it seems appropriate to engage in an exploration of female leadership within Native American

communities and consider the women's organizations Native women have created to build broad community and empower female leaders.[1] While such reclamations and expressions of female leadership exist throughout Indian Country, this article will primarily focus on an example from my tribal community—the *Myaamia*[2], the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma (Kiiloona Myaamiaki).[3]

Native American leadership historically has centered on interdependence, and shared vision and responsibility (Hill and Keogh Hoss 226). Women and men both participated in leadership, but in differing yet equitable ways. However, over time with the arrival of Europeans, Native American gender structures began to shift and resemble more closely that of European male-dominated structures. Shifting gender ideologies caused an alteration in how leadership roles played out in Native communities; causing women to lose the influence they once had (Allen 40-41). European males, at worst, were unwilling to accept the authority of Native women, or, at best, failed to recognize and therefore understand the important role Native women played in decision-making within their communities. Though European males would not have been privy to the inner workings of tribal communities and therefore would not have seen the alliance-building skills of *mitemhsaki* (women)[4] and the influence they wielded behind-the-scenes, it is highly doubtful that even if they were aware of these facts that they would have consented to negotiate with women on an equal level.

Indian Country, as we refer broadly to all of the spaces and places Native Americans occupy within the United States, elects more women to state legislatures than does the general population (Trahant).[5] Additionally, according to numbers from 2017, women accounted for 25% of seats on tribal councils and other tribal governing bodies (Trahant). These numbers reflect a resurgence of Native American women taking back a degree of the significant sociopolitical power exercised historically, but within the contemporary realm of politics. Fortunately, female leadership does not reside only in elected positions of power. There is a strong history of Native American grassroots activism, much of which either women have been a part of or have been led by indigenous women. So many contemporary female activists come to mind. To name only a few:

LaDonna Brave Bull Allard (Ihunktonwan Lakota from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe) –tribal historian, activist for cultural pres-

ervation, leader against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL); Founder of the Sacred Stone Camp.

Suzan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne and Hodelgee Muscogee) – activist fighting racist representations of indigenous peoples, advocate for tribal sovereignty, poet, and policy advocate; President of Morningstar Institute.

Winona LaDuke (Anishinabe) –activist for sustainable development, renewable energy and food systems, and environmental justice, writer; Executive Director at Honor the Earth.

Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes) –journalist, scholar, and activist on issues relating to Indigenous nationalism, self-determination, and environmental justice.

Each of the aforementioned activists have their own areas of advocacy, but each of these areas support and advance goals that stem from traditional and contemporary concerns and priorities of Native peoples. Additionally, each of these women empower other women to stand up and reclaim their powerful role within Native communities and the nation.

These activists are examples of the most visible models of Native women leadership. Women's leadership/influence/activism, however, flourishes in many different ways and on many different levels. It is exercised in families and in tribal communities, and in local and national organizations led by women and organizations focused on women. Native American women, like many women of all communities, are the life givers, the healers, the original teachers, the matriarchs who preside over naming ceremonies, birth ceremonies, and death rituals for other women, as appropriate by custom. Native women serve their communities through meal preparation for elders, grassroots organizing for social, economic, and political community priorities, and myriad other ways big and small. This is leadership—servant leadership.

More and more organizations focusing on empowering Native women are established each year, organizations that seek to end domestic violence and sex trafficking, increase access to quality healthcare, to protect grandmother Earth, to revitalize culture, to improve education, and to protect tribal lands and sovereignty. These organizations seek to better serve our communities through servant leadership and the empowering of self and others to lead.

One such organization is Women Empowering Women for Indigenous Nations (WEWIN), an organization dedicated to strengthening and sustaining tribal cultures for the benefit of our children and to promote honest and dignified tribal leadership.[6] The founders of WEWIN include powerhouses within the Native community, including Wilma Mankiller (Former Chief of the Cherokee Nation), Susan Masten (Yurok, former president of NCAI), and Veronica Homer (Mohave, first female president of NCAI and former Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs). And, there are others involved in this organization who lead tribes as chiefs and as cultural preservation officers, lead social, economic, and political grassroots efforts for their people, and those who are leaders in business, law, and education. Whether leaders of our nation or leaders of our communities, these women have forged—and continue to forge—a path forward for Native peoples, yet their accomplishments rarely get the attention they deserve.

Why Women's Communities/Councils are Needed

Though national organizations like WEWIN are powerful connectors of Native women, women's communities, or councils, within a tribal community are an equally important network of relationships. Due to colonialism and forced removals from homelands, the traditional social structure of tribal communities was dismantled and in its place a new social model was installed, one that devalued the role of women. Women's councils are an important way in which tribal communities are reclaiming and nourishing the valuable role Native women play in our communities once again. One of the most powerful outcomes of these national women's organizations and of the local, tribally-based groups is the feeling of belonging.

Forced relocations, forced assimilation through education, and shifting federal Indian policy that swung between termination and constitution, tore apart Native communities and families. Boarding schools were particularly toxic to Native communities as these schools sought to erase and beat out indigenous cultures, languages and spirituality.[7] The legacy of this estrangement from families, the cultural violence, and the sometimes-physical violence endured by Natives is a sense of dislocation and loss. These experiences left some Natives to feel hollow. They knew they were Native, but removed from their

communities, they no longer had a firm point of reference for what that actually meant. For many, this hollowness remains and is due to a lack of cultural knowledge and the absence of a Native community in their lives. As Devon Mihesuah points out, even now some people are "Natives by race, they remain culturally unsatisfied" (94). Native social structures became imbalanced and therefore broken, causing many Natives to become partially or completely disconnected from their Native identities and cultures.

Cultural violence has affected Native communities on both macro- and micro- levels. At the macro-level, this cultural violence has torn at the very fabric of Indian communities. Through its shape-shifting policies, the federal government has tried to define for Indian peoples what an Indian community is and who should be allowed to be considered a part of that community. The government creates definitions of community for federal acknowledgement purposes (United States 9293).[8] With federal acknowledgement comes a whole host of benefits—education, health, other funding—due Indian peoples through treaties negotiated long ago but which are still legally binding (United States 9294).[9] The government has attempted to define "community" for Natives, often to the detriment of tribal communities and the Natives themselves, in three ways. First, the Office of Federal Acknowledgment, housed in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, has the power to evaluate whether or not tribes meet the legal definitions of what constitutes a tribe. Second, from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, the government attempted to disband tribes through tribal termination policies, thus establishing the criteria to determine which tribes were viable and valid and those that were not (Canby 27-30; Cramer 7-8, 20-26). Those tribes they considered not viable, were terminated. Many of the tribes that were terminated are currently seeking federal recognition, which is evaluated by the Office of Federal Acknowledgement, as mentioned above. Lastly, through the government's encouragement of establishing a blood quantum as a baseline indicator for membership into a federally recognized tribe, Indian tribes have been coerced into setting a course of communal extinction as intermarriage (and thus the "watering down" of "Indian bloodlines") is common (Sturm 89; Cramer 119).[10] Never mind the fact that blood quantum is a metaphorical construction to trace ancestry and for which there is no accurate measurement and therefore no accurate determination (Schmidt 1). The government's ability, or perhaps presumption, to define legally what

a "real" tribe is according to federal dictates, despite the historical role the government played in the disruption of Indian communities, is appalling because it undermines tribal sovereignty (Canby 72-104). Though tribal sovereignty has many nuances in its definition, at its essence, sovereignty simply means the inherent power or right to govern**.** It should not be up to the federal government to define community for Indian peoples as it takes away our legal right to sovereignty. An unexpected and unfortunate consequence is that too frequently Native Americans themselves will use the government's determination of tribal status to judge other tribal communities, thus deepening the insidious problematic nature of "official" tribal communities.

Belonging is most intimately practiced at the local level. The federal government's policies towards Native Americans shook the foundational structures that disrupted the traditional social relationships that define and ritualize belonging. While "official" tribal community is undeniably vital, albeit sometimes problematic, there exist other forms of community within tribes that are equally, if not more, significant. These communities exist at once within and outside of tribal delineation and often overlap with like groups in other tribes. A few examples of these communities are veterans, powwow dancers, and women. Veterans share their status and experience with other veterans from other tribal groups and even with non-Indians (Meadows 169, 385, 391). Powwow dancers share a rich culture unto themselves, separate from but related to their tribal affiliation (Ellis 6-10; Valaskakis 151-174). Native women share powerful bonds among other tribal women, but also have an affinity for others beyond their tribal boundaries. At once, these groups are created as a separate entity from their tribes, but also reside within their unique cultural experience. Veterans express their status and experience through their own specific cultural lens, which is displayed through ritualized behavior and regalia. Powwow dancers express their cultural affiliation through the cultural specificities of their regalia (emblems, types of ribbonwork, beadwork, colors, and the like). Native women's conception of themselves is intrinsically meshed with their tribal and/or cultural affiliation, which is also delineated through regalia.

Native peoples must define community on their own terms and must maintain some flexibility in these definitions as assimilation has increased differences in tribal communities, particularly in non-reservation Indian communities. Native American communities are a net-

work of relations, not a geographically-situated group of buildings and activities with accompanying shared attributes (Lobo 2).[11] If the network of relations is disrupted, so too is the nature of the community disrupted. This still holds true for Natives today as many no longer live in closely situated communities, they are dispersed throughout the US and world.

Members of the Miami Nation, and extending the generalization to all non-reservation Indians, are often more assimilated to the hegemonic culture and usually more geographically dispersed. The tie that binds, so to speak, is cultural affinity and sanguinity. The challenge in solidifying the reality of community—that almost tangible feeling of belonging—is the unfortunate reality of a lack of frequent face-to-face contact to reify those bonds of community. Many tribal members only see one another when they travel back to Miami, Oklahoma once a year to attend our annual tribal meeting and occasionally for cultural activities held by the tribe, like our tribal language camp for kids or our winter stomp dance. A more concerning reality is the fact that there is a new generation of Miami peoples, who have never been to our tribal headquarters in Miami nor have they ever been to our homelands in Indiana. "Community" is a state of being that is constantly challenged, continually fortified, and persistently reimagined in Native America. Groups like the Miami Women's Council were an outgrowth of this effort to fortify and re/create community. Part of the reason why the Myaamia women's community had been dormant for so long is because of assimilation and the accompanying devaluation of women found in the dominant (colonizing) culture. Our council was an attempt to survive, endure, and resist the harsh legacy of our colonized past.

On a more micro-level, this cultural violence has upset the balance between the genders in Indian communities. As previously mentioned, this gender imbalance is a result of the reality that indigenous populations were colonized politically and culturally and then forced to assimilate to the norms of the dominant culture. In this case, the dominant culture, the culture of the United States, which is a derivation from that of Western Europe, places greater value on men than women. Native Hawaiian Lurline Wailana McGregor agrees that, "In the past, men and women had very specific roles that complemented each other, assuring a functional and thriving community life. Although these roles are less rigid today, they are no longer balanced. Western cultures devalue women. So now we struggle for equity in the workplace and

recognition in our own communities" (Mankiller 8). After assembling a distinguished group of Native women for a dialogue on those issues most critically facing Indian Country today, Chief Wilma Mankiller recorded the consensus among them that regaining gender balance was vital for Native communities to thrive once again. Mankiller writes, "While the role of indigenous women in the family and community, now and in the past, differs from nation to nation, each of the women at this gathering stated unequivocally that there was a point in time when there was greater equity between men and women, and that balance between men and women must be restored if we are ever to have whole, healthy, communities again" (Mankiller 8). Denise K. Henning in her article "Yes, My Daughters, We are Cherokee Women" provides, perhaps, the best bit of advice on how to achieve these healthy communities. She writes, "we can't demand power until we own the innate power we have within" (Henning 197). The Miami Women's Council was, in part, an attempt to recreate that balance and to reestablish a "whole, healthy," Miami community once again by first reclaiming our power within.

The Myaamia: Past and Present

The sovereign Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, based in Miami, Oklahoma in the northeastern corner of the state, has a population of approximately 4,400. Our citizens live in all 50 states as well as outside the boundaries of the United States. Our tribe's contemporary population is concentrated in northeastern Oklahoma, eastern Kansas, and northern Indiana. This contemporary tribal geography reflects our historical experiences of a series of forced removals from our historic homelands in the Great Lakes region – to a reservation in what would become the state of Kansas, and then from Kansas to Indian Territory, which later became the state of Oklahoma. We refer to ourselves in our language as Myaamiaki, the "Downstream People."[12]

In October of 1846, after decades of resistance to removal by the United States federal government and its army, the bulk of Myaamiaki boarded several canal boats and left our sacred homeland in Indiana. Each mile that separated our ancestors from our homeland, dismantled our culture bit by bit. Upon arrival to the Miami reservation in Kansas, the federal government employed policies to eradicate Miami culture

and to force assimilation. One way the United States federal government forced the Miami to assimilate was through boarding school education. One of the many casualties of this forced assimilation and earlier efforts that began with the very first encounters Myaamiaki had with Europeans and then Euro-Americans was traditional gender ideologies, particularly in relation to leadership roles within our tribal communities.

Myaamia Leadership

Historically, every leadership position with the Miami Tribe was dualistic and so had a male and a female counterpart. The typical Myaamia village had a gender-appropriate leader representing each gender, and each gender was responsible for different aspects of community health and wellbeing (Ironstrack 7). Every *akima* (civil leader-male) worked together with an *akimaahkwia* (civil leader-female) (Trowbridge 14-15). Men's activities focused outside of the village on activities like hunting, trading, negotiation, and war (Ironstrack 7). Women's activites focused on internal matters like construction and maintenance of the *wiikiaama* (lodges) as well as food production and preparation (Ironstrack 7). *Myaamiihkwia* controlled the family home and possibly the entire village space, including farm fields and garden plots. Control over land and domestic belongings allowed *myaamiihkwia* significant authority and power within the community. The men hunted, but could not demand food supplies. If they were given these items, it was because the women allowed for it. Women also owned the *wikiami* (lodging). If a woman decided to divorce her husband, she placed his things (usually moccasins, blanket, and pipe) outside the door of the *wikiami*. The divorce was thus finalized. She usually kept the children (Trowbridge 44)**.**

Traditional and contemporary Myaamia leadership positions are servant-oriented and not positioned as authoritative. The authority rests within the community, which served/s as the traditional decision makers. As tribal members, we enact our responsibility to the community by informed participation in the decision-making process. Our leaders then dispense and implement the results of that decision-making (Ironstrack 2). The focus of Myaamia leadership is on group responsibility, which stands in stark contrast to the individual-rights-based culture of America (Ironstrack 2). Servant leadership and traditional

social structures in which that brand of leadership existed is challenging to maintain within the governing structures imposed upon Native governments by the federal government, which more closely resemble modern United States governing structures than traditional Native governing structures.

An important philosophical concept that informs the core of Myaamia conceptions of leadership is the balance between *mitemhsaki* (women) and *aleniaki* (men). Prior to European arrival, *myaamiihkwia* controlled the lodges, agriculture, and food preparation, which gave them considerable influence within the community. Men could not proceed with negotiations without the support of the women in the village, both in terms of agreement and in the material supports necessary to cement relationships with negotiating parties (Ironstrack14). *Myaamiihkwia*, like other Native women, also played a crucial role in building alliances with the French and the British through intermarriage, which built in no small part the extensive fur trade networks (Wright 528). The efficaciousness of a leader, whether male or female, rested on their ability to build and maintain relationships and alliances.

This separation of the genders was not rigid and there was some crossover, but it was not common. One ancestor of mine, for example, was one such crossover example. Her name was Takumwah (1720-1790).[13] She was the sister of the great Miami chiefs Mihšikinakwa (1752-1812) and Pacanne (1737-1816) and mother of future chief Jean Baptist Richardville, but more importantly, she was a trader in her own right and acted as an *akimaahkwia* in public, a realm that was typically considered male. One historical account recounts a council meeting, a typically male space, where Takumwah spoke on behalf of her son (Sleeper-Smith, *Indigenous Prosperity* 296). The eighteenth century was one of political turmoil and frequent warfare. This age of instability allowed women increasing agency. In addition to the skewed sex ratios that often accompany recurrent warfare, women's work of providing the necessary food and supplies needed to feed war parties became more important. Women also kept the usually male-dominated fur trade alive while the men were fighting (Sleeper-Smith, "Women, Kin, and Catholicism" 430). Miami women were left to tend to many of the activities traditionally undertaken by men, which left many of the British and later American leaders uneasy.

This "intense male anxiety" Euro-American authority figures

felt over Native female agency and gender divisions that did not mirror their own ideological framework of gender, with male superiority at the apex, caused some groups to specifically and assertively address the issue directly with Native communities (Wilson 41). For example, in 1802-1803, the Society of Friends sought to persuade our principal chief Little Turtle to institute individual farming techniques in Miami villages and sent farming implements as well as a Baltimore farmer named Philip Dennis to demonstrate how to use these implements. While there, Dennis and his companions were aghast to see men doing what they deemed "women's work" and vice versa. The Society of Friends then emphatically urged the Miami to engage in a "more proper" division of labor between men and women (Ellicott and Hopkins). The report concludes that both the implementation of individual farming and the adoption of "proper" gender divisions would be a gradual process.

Despite how well Miami gender ideologies and the concomitant divisions of labor and authority worked for our people, eventually through dislocation and assimilation this balance dissipated, as it did for other Native communities (Sleeper-Smith, *Indigenous Prosperity* 310). So, too did women's own participation in the evolution of their traditional subsistence economy, one in which Native women played an important role, to a much more dependent role in the market economy cause gender roles to evolve (Wright 526). The onset of the nineteenth century and the renewed fervor for proselytizing the "unenlightened peoples" and "heathens" of the world including indigenous peoples in North America, eventually solidified gender ideologies among Native communities that closely resembled those of dominant culture (Devins 45). While some Native men found the missionaries' religious teachings as useful in successfully dealing with the dominant culture (ideally, to the benefit of Indian peoples), many Native women rejected these teachings as they saw in them a threat to their status and influence within their traditional socio-political structures. It is likely that gender conflicts that ensued in Native communities was due to this gendered divergence in the acceptance of these religious teachings (Devins 44). Ultimately, however, *mitemhsaki*, slowly sank into roles that precluded them from having much (at least publicly) influence over matters other than in the domestic sphere.

The Year of Myaamia Women

The Miami Nation of Oklahoma declared the year 2010 to be *Kweehsitawankwiki myaamiihkwiaki*: The Year of Myaamia Women. One reason for this declaration was the reconstitution of the Miami Women's Council after there had been no female-specific community like that for over 100 years. An old tradition was resurfacing via modern day technology, giving voice to tribal women. The women of the Miami Nation of Oklahoma resurrected their traditional women's council, but unfortunately it would not last. The women's council thrived for almost five years but sadly it came to an end. Though the council itself ceased meeting, the aspirations of cultural revitalization lived on through the relationships that had been built, ribbonwork workshops, and other cultural events.

With a mission of Miami cultural preservation, revitalization, and education, the Miami Women's Council sought to gather Miami women together, build connections among them, and create with them the tools to reestablish women's cultural position within the larger Miami community. We wanted to establish again a sense of community and enhance leadership within the women's community, again allowing Miami women's voice to rise.

As mentioned above, a challenge to reclaiming the power within is a willingness on the part of the women to recognize that they indeed have power. Part of this challenge relates to a feeling by many dispossessed Native women that they are not a "legitimate Indian" and that they simply do not belong. Many Native women face this deep wound that refuses to heal or heals only as they regain a connection to their culture and their homelands. Native women do have power, but external factors limit their ability to see their own power within. For some, their non-native religion has taken them away from their cultural power. Others may have married a non-indigenous person who is not interested in Native culture, and so the ribbonwork that binds these Native women to their traditional ways of being and knowing are made threadbare (Mihesuah 95). Traditional ways of being and knowing are the basis for Native cultural power. Women's Councils, like the Miami Women's Council, provide a framework and a support network in reclaiming this power. A Miami Women's Council member from Oklahoma City, who has made an effort to attend all of our Women's Council meetings and deeply loves our Tribe, but is married to a non-Miami,

wrote, "I appreciate everyone involved in getting this going. I think it's a wonderful idea. The only thing—it's hard when I am the only one in my family that's interested in all of this, so, it's good to have a support group like you all" (Prescott, Survey). Some women in our council have retained ties to our tribe, attended tribal functions, powwows and other cultural events, and even have supportive families, but for some reason feel something is lacking and they want to strengthen and deepen their connection to our culture. These women believed at the time that the way to strengthen their connection to our culture was through a women's group. At the base of what we were building with the Women's Council is the belief that we need to have a community that reaffirms our identities as indigenous—*Myaamiihkwia* (Miami women).

Kweehsitawankwiki Myaamiihkwiaki

Women have always been the bearers and keepers of culture and of community. The Miami Nation's resolution proclaiming the year 2010 as *Kweehsitawankwiki myaamiihkwiaki*: The Year of Myaamia Women affirms the role of women as culture bearers and signals a rebirth of the Miami people:

> WHEREAS, Miami leadership acknowledges that our unique cultural identity as a Sovereign Nation must be supported, protected, embraced and perpetuated at all costs to ensure our continuity as a community, a people and a Nation, and; WHEREAS, the Miami Nation, as a people, does acknowledge and embrace the vital roles of myaamiihkwiaki, Miami women, in our community and more importantly in our very homes, in the rearing of kiniicaanhsenaanaki, our Miami children, and thus the ultimate perpetuation of our unique language, traditions and culture…. ("Miami Tribe of Oklahoma," Resolution 2010)

In our tribal newspaper *Aatotankiki Myaamiaki* (which translates to "what the Myaamiaki are talking about"), the historic event was posited as a time of "newness, emergence, beginning" and was set to correlate with a new decade according to our culture's lunar calendar. The reason for this correlation was because "[s]uch…themes…are directly related to the status and role of the females/women who make up the foundation of the ribbonwork that is our community" (*Aatotankiki Myaamiaki* 4). Women are vital to our traditional community,

both historically and in the present. It is generally the woman who passes on the culture to her children.

Numerous Miami Women's Council members have stated that our children and the passing on of our knowledge and traditions to our children are of primary concern to them and served as an impetus for them to join the Council.[14] It is the woman that will save a culture because in many ways, she IS the culture.[15] But, as Wilma Mankiller points out, tradition and culture are always evolving. "Indigenous women are not responsible for continuing time-honored traditions," Mankiller writes, "they are also creators and interpreters of indigenous culture in the early twenty-first century, a time when advanced technology draws the entire world closer together and there are many attempts to homogenize world cultures" (Mankiller 4). Organizations like the American Indian centers established throughout the urban centers of the United States, tribal organizations themselves, as well as councils like the Miami Women's Council are all resisting this homogenizing tide and ensuring the survival of Indian cultures.

Rebirth of a Tradition

The idea to resurrect the Miami Women's Council was born collectively between several tribal women elders, including my mother, over twenty years ago when we participated in the establishment of our tribal language program. We discovered that such a council had been incubating in the minds of many Miami women for years. As one Women's Council member from Ft. Wayne, Indiana wrote, "A Women's Council sounds exciting and long overdue. A lot of Miami people are experiencing a call back to the basics/simplicity of our ancestors. There is an urgency about this call: survive" (Prescott, Survey).

The Fruit

We held our very first Women's Council meeting at the Ethel Miller Moore Center (also known as the old tribal longhouse) in 2009 during the weekend of our annual Tribal Council Meeting. The organizers (including myself, my mother—Piitilahnoohkwa (Rain Woman), and one other tribal elder) were all uncertain as to how many

women would show up. I optimistically estimated that approximately 10-15 women would attend. I was flabbergasted when over forty Miami women arrived! We spent the first part of our two-hour meeting going around a circle and introducing ourselves and our family affiliation to the group and sharing a little about what brought us to the meeting. Many of the stories shared similarities. Miami women were looking for community. We were all looking for another strand that binds us to what makes us Myaamia. At this meeting, we discussed what identity and culture means to us and how we might work to preserve it and share cultural knowledge among us all.

Our Values

The cultural education employed in the Women's Council was to be an organic education, coming from within Miami tradition and from Miami ways of knowing. Guided by our Miami elder women and strengthened by intergenerational bonds, we sought to meaningfully incorporate our history and culture into our everyday lives. We wanted to create a vehicle for knowledge transmission, to develop knowledge of our culture and history and to foster community among and between the generations. In this endeavor, we worked from a position of building consensus and minimizing hierarchies within our group, and respecting all Myaamia women's perspectives in the group, as we each brought something valuable and unique to our council community.

Bringing Our Community Together

What brings a community together? Opportunities to connect and share. The Miami Women's Council established these guiding objectives to achieve community:

- To offer cultural education opportunities through special workshops, webinars, events, speakers, and discussion via our Google Group, Miami Women's Gathering, and social media.

- To create a support structure through which Miami women could educate one another about what it means to be Miami and together amass a collective cultural wisdom.

> We attempted to do that by sharing our stories in the Google group and in our council meetings. We shared knowledge about our traditions of storytelling—when we tell stories and what those stories are about.
>
> • To establish an annual Women's Gathering through which Miami women gather to learn and to share. At our very first annual gathering, an elder in the women's council shared with the rest of the group how to make cornhusk dolls. There were many heart-felt tears at our council meetings. There was a palpable sense that we were building something important and vitally necessary. We all felt closer than we had before. (Myaamia Women's Council Mission Statement)

Who?

It was important to us to keep the group as inclusive as possible. In our mission statement, we wrote that the Miami Women's Council was open to all Miami women, including mothers of Miami children and Miami spouses. We recognize that modern families do not always follow the prescriptive guidelines laid out by normative society and we recognize that our traditional kinship structure did not follow these dictates. As such, neither did our council membership. We consciously decided to use the term "spouse" as it allows for a more inclusive definition of partnership.

Successes and Challenges

Of utmost importance was creating a communal and cultural link between Miami women across the nation—that was one of our greatest challenges. Due to removal and the dissipation of our land base, Miami peoples dispersed throughout the nation. This fact created challenges to our efforts. How does one resurrect a traditional gathering when council members live thousands of miles away from one another? One must turn to modern day technologies, like the Internet. We recognized the vital necessity of integrating and utilizing the newest technologies that would help us bridge these vast distances. We

used social media platforms such as Facebook, as well as Gmail, and Google groups. We wanted to explore the possibility of using podcasts, as well, but time ran out before this happened. Of course, we preferred the old-fashioned face-to-face experience, which we did get to have during annual meetings.

Despite these challenges, the Google group steadily gained members and had a consistent flurry of posts about topics ranging from recipes, to wild ginger and milkweed, to mortuary customs, to history, to storytelling, local powwows and culture. Sometimes, the women used the space to share the joys and hardships of life. Through this virtual world, we truly created relationships based upon mutual interest and a caring that is so real that it belies the medium in which it was created.

There were many challenges that we faced with this endeavor of reestablishing a women's community through the Women's Council. As there were more elders than young women interested in participating in the Women's Council, a very large challenge was a lack of computer literacy. Further, many elders had no computer, computer access, or Internet access. To address this issue, council organizers were working to overcome this challenge by working on grants to obtain money to pay for mass mailings and for transportation to face-to-face council meetings.

A second challenge was that many of the women did not feel comfortable in their skins as *myaamiihkwia*—Miami women. Our Miami Women's Council Google group grew slowly but steadily. Our women were reluctant to participate in discussions, but seemed to enjoy and learn from the posts made by a few women who regularly posted. Many of our group members were not tech savvy and so did not feel comfortable posting due to this. The larger reason, however, is what I alluded to previously. Some members were having difficulty "owning" their experience as Miami women. They felt they had nothing to offer. What I often heard was: "I am not Miami, but my grandmother was." I reminded them that if their grandmother was Miami then so are they. Some felt that their culture is something of the past, even though they yearn for a resurrection of it—they still felt detached. As a result, we targeted that issue and tried to make the women more comfortable with the idea that they have something valuable to share as Miami women. Devon Mihesuah calls this "rediscovering Indianess" (95). I call this rediscovering their Miami-ness.

A third challenge, related to the last, is that there was a reluctance of anyone to step into a leadership position. Group members were reluctant, too, to make their presence in the group publicly known. Instead, they watch from the sidelines. Experience teaches us that our tribal members tend to 'observe' sometimes for years, before they actually become involved. They step from the shadows into the soft light. Perhaps they were waiting to build confidence in their identities. When women finally do get the comfort level or courage to participate in the group, they tend to share their feelings of deep appreciation at feeling connected in some way with each other. "God bless you for trying to keep all generations of our history," wrote a Women's Council member from St. Petersburg, Florida (Prescott, Survey). Many women said they were excited to be a part of the group and to learn a little about their history. They wanted to connect. Many of the women spoke of this experience in an emotional—and even spiritual way. One Council member from Oregon wrote that she wanted to attend Women's Council because to her "it would be a pilgrimage (Prescott, Survey). These women, most of whom would never call themselves activists—were in reality revolutionaries. They were acting out against centuries of oppression and neglect. They were acting to build a better society built on their values rather than those imposed upon them. Every Google post. Every corn husk doll. Every Miami family recipe swapped. Every ribbon that is worked. Every Myaamia word that is learned. Every traditional story told is a revolutionary act of activism—whether or not they choose to use the label.

Reflection

Though the Miami Women's Council started with and engendered so much hope for community where women could safely explore what it meant to them to be Miami, it ended. The reasons for its ending are multivalent and complex. Although its ending still evokes some longing and sadness within me and many others, many of the objectives of the group lived on through other avenues like our tribal ribbonworking, language, and history workshops. Native women tend to take leadership when they feel a sense of belonging, a cause for which to fight. In these successive years, the Miami Nation has experienced a significant cultural revitalization, which has increased opportunity to experience belonging. Our language program and the development of

the Myaamia Center (a tribally-driven research and educational partnership with Miami University) serve as shining examples of the survival and endurance of the Miami people. We have seen the Miami Nation establish our very own inter-tribal powwow that brings in some of the most talented head man and head lady powwow dancers in the nation. It also gives us the chance to show off our own Miami dancers decked out in regalia adorned with traditional Miami ribbon work and our customary styles. Our Winter Stomp dance provides more than just a good excuse to stomp in time with the shell shakers and friends and tribal members from across the US, it also provides a venue for Miami artists to showcase and sell their work. This is us practicing our culture.

Conclusion

As the National Congress of American Indians points out, "Each Native woman's journey is a revealing story of strength, courage, and wisdom. For generations, our grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and daughters have played a major role in maintaining our culture, protecting our families, and supporting our governments. Their guidance sustains and equips future generations with the knowledge, support, and resources necessary to achieve success in their personal and professional lives." It is critical that Native women have a seat at the table of influence and politics. It is even more critical that Native communities reconstitute the equitable gender ideologies that created a socio-economic structure that enabled influence and participation by both men and women. Young Native women need to know about the female leaders who came before them and serve as an example of servant leadership for us all. Most importantly, women need to stand together to support, nurture, and protect other women. To lift them up and, in return, to be lifted. It is time to decolonize Native gender ideology. Aho.

Notes

[1] Sharice Davids is an enrolled member of Wisconsin's Ho-Chunk Nation Tribe and is not only the first Native American to represent Kansas in Congress, but is also the first out lesbian to serve in that role. Deb Haaland is an enrolled member of the Laguna Pueblo Tribe. Currently, there are only two male Native American members of Congress, Representatives Tom Cole (Oklahoma) and Markwayne Mullin (Oklahoma), both Republicans. There are no Native Americans currently serving in the United States Senate. Peggy Flanagan is an enrolled member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe and is the second Native American woman elected to statewide executive office in the United States. Denise Juneau, Mandan Hidatsa Arikara, was the first; she was elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction in Montana in 2016.

[2] For help with pronunciation, please refer to the *Myaami Dictionary* (*Myaamiaatawaakani)* online at https://www.myaamiadictionary.org/dictionary2015/index.php.

[3] The Miami Tribe of Oklahoma is a federally recognized Indian tribe now headquartered in northeastern Oklahoma, but whose traditional homelands were in the Great Lakes region.

[4] *Mitemhsaki* is the Myaamia word for women. Though mitemhsaki refers to all kinds of women, I will use this word to specifically refer to Native women and will use it interchangeably with "Native women" and "Native American women."

[5] According to *Indian Country Today's* editor Mark Trahant, 47% of those elected to state legislatures in the 2018 election were women, this is up from 40% in 2016.

[6] Women Empowering Women for Indigenous Nations. Mission Statement. https://www.wewin04.org/about-wewin. Accessed 7 August 2020.

[7] For more on the effect of education on Native Americans, please see Prescott "Neepwaaminki," Adams, and Lomawaima.

[8] According to the Office of Federal Acknowledgement, Bureau of Indian Affairs: *"Community* means any group of people which can demonstrate that consistent interactions and significant social rela-

tionships exist within its membership and that its members are differentiated from and identified as distinct from nonmembers. *Community* must be understood in the context of the history, geography, culture and social organization of the group."

[9] The acknowledgment process is the administrative process of the Department of the Interior, by which petitioning groups that meet the criteria are "acknowledged" as Indian tribes and their members become eligible to receive services provided to members of federally recognized Indian tribes.

[10] As Cramer points out, the federal government has also used blood quantum to allow or disallow Natives access to community resources. Cramer writes, for example, that the Burke Act empowered Dawes commissions to set blood-quantum standards for individual Natives seeking land allotments. Blood quantum is a highly politicized and highly charged issue in some Native communities today. In fact, some Natives consider the blood-quantum standards set by the federal government as another form of genocide.

[11] Lobo writes, "The application of this standard definition of community to urban American Indian communities by researchers, and including the U.S. Census Bureau, distorts reality and limits an understanding of many aspects of community dynamics…."

[12] For more information on the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, please see the Tribe's official website: www.miamination.com.

[13] For more on Takumwah and the fascinating trial between her and her ex-husband, please see Marrero.

[14] The passing on of tradition and knowledge to our children was a very common response in the original survey sent out to the women of all Miami households.

[15] This is an interesting counterpoint to the essentialist assertion that makes women emblematic of nature.

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