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Maggie E. McGoldrick Mrs
Algoma University College, 14mem5@queensu.ca

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“Not an Indian Tradition,”[1] Slavery, Sexual Perception and Prostitution Among the Great Lakes Iroquois: 1760-1860

Cover Page Footnote

[1]Anderson, Karen. “Exchange and Subordination: Montagnais-Naskapi and Huron Women, 1600- 1650.” *Signs*, Vol. 11. No.1 (Autumn, 1985): 48-62. [2]Grey Whaley, “Complete Liberty?: Gender, Sexuality, Race, and Social change on the Lower Columbia River,” *Ethnohistory*, vol.54, no. 4, (fall, 2007): 670.

“NOT AN INDIAN TRADITION”:
SLAVERY, SEXUAL PERCEPTION, AND PROSTITU-
TION AMONG THE GREAT LAKES IROQUOIS,
1760-1860

MAGGIE MCGOLDRICK

ABSTRACT

This study offers an analysis of the cultural intersection between European colonial fur-traders and the indigenous population of the Great Lakes Iroquois. McGoldrick argues that contrary to Eurocentric understanding of Iroquois customs, within the discussed time period, Iroquois women exhibited significant agency within their communities. McGoldrick explores the nuances of Iroquois customs, and focuses on the system of female ‘slave’ bartering. Ultimately, by contextualizing the cultural practices of the Iroquois, specifically their treatment of women, we can see that the bartering of women between tribes, or with Europeans, was a custom grounded in diplomacy and not exploitation.

When it comes to analyzing sexual encounters between First Nations women and fur-traders, or other European colonizers for that matter, since the late 1970's and early 1980's, there exists an evolving body of literature which demands new answers to important social questions about how race, class, and gender came to shape the lived experiences of those women involved. Historians such as Sylvia Van Kirk, Jennifer S. H. Brown and Sarah Carter have spent their careers marking out a place for First Nations women in the grand narrative of a colonial and fur trade history that had, for the most part, excluded them. Although we cannot undervalue the important historiographical contribution of the aforementioned historians, I argue that they succeeded in establishing broad categories of Native female activity which must be further explored if we intend to form a clear picture of the roles of Native women and how they evolved over time. More recently, historians have begun to break down the Native experience and objectively look at it on a case-by-case basis from one tribe to the next, nothing marked differences in social custom and behaviour. The role of Native women and their intimate relationships within their own culture, as well as with outsiders, was not an exempt category of analysis.

In 2007, historian Grey Whaley analysed the complex and evolving sexual status of Chinook women on the lower Columbia River. In particular, he used the practice of slavery and prostitution as an example of how high-ranking Chinook women were able to reshape their existing social patterns to accommodate a new market niche for sex by assigning the role of prostitute to low-ranking slave women.¹ It is with his research in mind that I begin my analysis. If slavery and prostitution took a firm hold on the west coast among Chinook women, what were conditions like for their sisters in the east? How likely was it that something similar was taking place in Native societies with a different sociopolitical organization? As we will see, the experience, and, in this case, the perception of a prevalent use of slavery and prostitution among Iroquois women, was quite different from that which took place in the Columbia River valley.

By utilizing this theoretical framework I intend to demonstrate that although there was an increased trade in war captives and slaves among the Iroquois during the time period, and they were indeed bartered with Europeans, this did not necessarily equate to a significant change in cultural custom or the social status of slaves within Iroquoian societies. To illustrate this point, I intend to specifically examine the role of female slaves. I will demonstrate that according to their own perceptions, their culturally significant roles as females, and the deeply embedded social customs around

¹ Grey Whaley, "Complete Liberty?: Gender, Sexuality, Race, and Social change on the Lower Columbia River," *Ethnohistory* 54, no. 4, (Fall, 2007): 670.

slavery, many of these women simply would not have seen their position as socially shameful or degrading or categorized their actions as prostitution. When we analyze the competing cultural viewpoints between the Iroquois and the European fur-traders, we see that the definition of prostitution and its negative stigma was entirely contingent upon the Eurocentric preconceptions held by the latter, and that there was little to no pre contact antecedent with which traditional Iroquois cultures could identify.² Furthermore, the long-standing practice of formally adopting slaves into Iroquoian society, especially with regard to women, was a fundamental deterrent from the sexual exploitation of them in the way traders believed was so prevalent.

To understand how Iroquoian models of slavery differed from that of their European counterparts, it is important to mete out an accurate description of both practices and to understand the lens through which both sides would have viewed the exchange. Firstly, for the most part, European conceptions of slavery, or “slavery proper,” were related to economics and hegemonic power systems.³ In a basic sense, European models of slavery were interlaced with ideas of expansionism and capitalism, and a slave’s worth was directly connected to their ability to sustain labour and production. The possession of a large amount of slaves by a designated master, and his ability to use them to amass profit in the form of surplus goods, directly translated into an acquisition of wealth, status, and power on behalf of the owner.⁴ Although the abolitionist movement appears to have taken hold in Britain and certain areas of North America during the time period, it was apparent that the colonial environment and fragmented political nature of the emerging white society permitted the sway of custom over law in many instances. For example, in 1793, when Frederic Alexandre, the French Duke of Rochefoucauld, traveled through upper New York, he was quick to note that:

The state is not one of those which appear to have the most liberal ideas as to slavery. It is therefore natural, that the laws, which in every country follow more or less the public opinion, should also in this recourse be rather illiberal. Slavery is not abolished here by an express law. The first article of the New-Hampshire declaration of rights pronounces that all men are born equal, and independent, but private interest has suggested an interpretation of that article

² Ibid., 672.

³ Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America*, (London:Harvard University Press, 2010) 6.

⁴ Catherine Cameron, “Captives in Pre History as Agents of Social Change,” in *Invisible Citizens: Captives and Their Consequences*, ed. Catherine M. Cameron. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), 6.

which restricts its benefits. Slaves are valued according to their age and sex, from as low as forty dollars up to one hundred and twenty.⁵

Flowing from Alexandre's observations, we can see that not only was the exchange of slaves still customary in North America, but that the sex of the slaves exchanged was also very important. Essentially, young male slaves were preferred to female since their physical strength was an asset to farm labour.⁶ This viewpoint had significant ramifications for women in particular. As we know, conceptions of patriarchy usually cornered women into a position of weakness, and this made them less valuable as contributors to the production economy. As a result, when it came to European ideals, they were often reduced to a position of subjugation entirely defined by their ability to provide sexual favours for money or goods.⁷ Although there were variations of these rules depending on context, in a general sense, we can discern that European men had a very narrow definition of what slavery was. Indeed, "slavery proper" was that of the chattel model, and they viewed it as distinct and separate from other forms of bonded labour, such as, indentured servitude or sharecropping.⁸

For indigenous societies modes of slavery were viewed as not only economically and socially different from that of the European traders they encountered, but the process of capturing and maintaining slaves served an entirely different purpose. By the early 18th century, disease and constant warfare among various Native tribes in the Great Lakes region had reduced the population of the Iroquois significantly.⁹ With this in mind, the most common reason that the Iroquois engaged in warfare and "slaving" expeditions was in an attempt to bolster their fledgling populations.¹⁰ The Iroquois lived in large agrarian villages and needed satisfactory numbers of people to survive. As a result, the Iroquois were hard-pressed to capture and incorporate other nations into their tribes. Even though many European traders assumed that the purpose of slaving was tied to the economics of farming and having enough labour to produce acceptable crop turnover, the Iroquois did not have a concept of material gain for its own sake. Furthermore, once a person was captured, they became part of a systematic cultural process which was a far departure from the experience of those

⁵ Alexandre Frederic Francois, Duke de Rochefoucauld, *Travels Through the United States of North America, the Country of the Iroquois, and Upper Canada in the years 1795, 1796, and 1797: With An Authentic Account of Lower Canada*. (London: Phillips, 1799), 191.

⁶ Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*, 10.

⁷ Cameron, "Captives in Pre History as Agents of Social Change," 15.

⁸ Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*, 12.

⁹ Jose Branado, *Your Fyre Shall Burn No More* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

enslaved by Europeans, especially in regard to women.¹¹

Firstly, the Iroquois identified a marked difference between captivity and slavery. Just because a person was captured during a “slave” raid did not automatically mean this was their determined fate.¹² Pierre Radisson, a French trader who was captured in 1770 and lived among the Iroquois for three years, knew the rules of circumstance well, and was further instructed by an elder about the process when he was told, “Nephew, you must know that all slaves, men as women, are first brought before a council and we alone can only dispose of them.”¹³ These councils, which usually included women, would decide what was to be done with those in captivity. Generally, males and warriors were executed on site, but if death was not to be the immediate option, the next step was carried out. If it was decided that a captive was to remain among the Iroquois, the process of “social death,” by which they were brutally tortured and stripped of all of their previous personal identity, was enacted. By removing status and clan ties, the captive was effectively rendered kinless and recreated in the image of an empty soul from which the new host society could mould them into a new citizen—including a new name and identity.¹⁴ In other cases, captives were offered as compensation to a family who had lost a loved one in battle.¹⁵ Although during this time period captives were essentially in a position of servitude to their host families, such a position like this was seen as transitory probationary period for their host family to decide whether they were a good candidate for formal adoption. Essentially, captives were somewhat in limbo, in between a position of slavery and the relationship building that their new physical presence was to facilitate.¹⁶ After a time, if a captive proved to be worthy of formal adoption, the process was completed.

Based on what we know about the need of the Iroquois to recoup their fleeting population, it should come as no surprise that this latter tradition, that of capture and formal adoption, was the desired outcome of slaving raids, and that it had tremendous implications for women. In almost every case, female captives were preferred to males and they were almost always offered formal adoption with complete social recognition in their host families and communities.¹⁷ Mary Jemison, a white woman from Virginia, was captured by the Seneca tribe at the age of seven and lived among them as a full member of their society for over 43 years. She recounted her life’s

¹¹. Ibid.

¹². Cameron, “Captives in Pre History as Agents of Social Change,” 1.

¹³. Pierre Esprit Radisson, *Radissons Voyages*, ed. John Wilson (Boston: Prince Society, 1885), 121.

¹⁴. Peter Peregrine, “Social Death and Resurrection in the Western Great Lakes,” in *Invisible Citizens: Captives and Their Consequences*, ed. Catherine M. Cameron (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), 226.

¹⁵. Ibid.

¹⁶. Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*, 20.

¹⁷. Cameron, “Captives in Pre History as Agents of Social Change,” 9.

narrative in 1824, and said of her experience with her adoptive sisters:

I was adopted in place of their dead brother, and I was very fortunate in falling into their hands. They were kind, good natured women, who were tender and gentle toward me... with them was my home; my family was there, and I had many friends in them to which I was warmly attached.¹⁸

Noting this, we can see that not only was it customary for women to be treated with respect by the Iroquois, even as captives or slaves, but that women were desired over men as adoptive members of their communities. Further evidence is provided by Alexander Henry who, when encountering an Iroquoian slave woman up at Cumberland house among the Osinipole people, was informed that in the custom of her people, “the men of her country never suffer[ed] themselves to be taken, but always die[d] in the field rather than fall into captivity,” since they likely knew nothing good awaited them, and that “the women and children [were] made slaves, but never put to death nor tormented.”¹⁹ Although there has been some controversy as to whether or not slave members of Iroquois society were ever truly accepted as full members of their communities, another reflection from Henry is useful. While travelling through the lower Lake Huron Region, he had a discussion with the leader of an Iroquoian group he had wintered with about a slave in their company. When Henry told the leader what the slave’s obligation to him should be, he replied:

I adopted him as my brother. From that moment he became one of my family, so that no change of circumstance could break the cord which fastened us together. He is my brother, and because I am your relation he is therefore your relation too, and how, being your relation, can he be your slave?²⁰

While in this instance Henry’s actual relationship to the leader is unclear, what is clear is the leader’s belief that slaves could, and should be seen as family. Although this example makes reference to a male slave, one can suppose that the situation was likely the same for women, and also, as we will see, that their role was even more significant. Ultimately, the Iroquoian conceptualization of slavery was considerably different from that of the European fur-trader.

¹⁸ James E. Seaver, *The Life of Mary Jemison: De-He-Wa-Mis* (New York: C.M. Saxton, 1824), 69.

¹⁹ Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures in the Years 1760- 1776* (Chicago R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1913), 266.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

Even though fur traders may have viewed slavery among the Iroquois as a degraded position, traditional Iroquoian custom has shown us that this was not the case.

In 1831, when Hudson's Bay Company trader George Nelson traveled into the Great Lakes Region, he was quick to notice the acceptance and pervasiveness of a trade in slave women and sex, and how many male leaders repeatedly "made use of strong arguments to convince him of the goodness of the ladies in question."²¹ By his account, and that of many other traders, it appeared that enslaved Native women were being prostituted by their masters, and that this practice was not only common, but had long been in place. Based on what we have discussed about European conceptions of slavery, and how it pertains to women, we can understand why Nelson may have made this observation. After all, a woman's body and its use to satiate the sexual appetites of men who were starved of female affection seemed like a sure thing, and an excellent commodity of which one could make use of. However, when we include what we know about Iroquoian slavery practices, we can see that this assumption has little to do with the indigenous reality. In fact, if we examine the roles and sexual behavior of Iroquoian women which, via the adoption process, included female slaves as well, we can see that it was unlikely that their status as "slaves," made them vulnerable to exploitation as prostitutes.

It is important to understand the roles of Iroquoian women in a general sense. For these women, their shared part in a society which was largely egalitarian was central to their identity, and their personal autonomy was highly prized. Although men and women had separate roles dictated by their gender, these duties were viewed as complimentary, and neither gender was valued more over the other.²² Furthermore, the Iroquois were a matrilineal and matrilineal society. As a result, after marriage, the husband would go to live with his wife, her extended family, and all of her female kin. Any title to land, property, or status was passed down to the children through the mother, and women were highly respected as they held the community together.²³ Elder Iroquois women were often clan mothers, and, as the senior members of their families, they arranged every social activity, from marriages to maturation ceremonies, and participated in the election of chiefs. All farming activity was organized and carried out by the women in the community, and tasks were delegated by senior women to those younger than them.²⁴

²¹ Carolyn, Podruchny. *The Making of the Voyageur World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 262.

²² Elizabeth Tooker, "Northern Iroquoian Sociopolitical Organization," *American Anthropologist* 72, no.1 (February, 1970): 99.

²³ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Although not all women in Iroquois society held positions of authority, this did not necessarily mean that elder clan matrons or more senior women were valued more than their younger counterparts. Essentially, Iroquois women would be what they made of themselves, and they could ascend the social ranks of their society freely.²⁵ All of this is important to consider, because their own understanding of their roles and value as females, even as slaves, was not the same as that held by the fur traders they encountered. From a European perspective, the social mobility and independent status enjoyed by Iroquoian women was something with which they would not be able to identify with, and, with this in mind, we can start to see how their actions were often misconstrued.

When it came to sexual relationships, contrary to the belief of many traders, the Iroquois were monogamous after marriage. This being said, monogamy in an Iroquoian sense meant marital monogamy; that is, an individual was officially married to only one man or one woman. As such, it did not mean that they abstained from sexual encounters with other people.²⁶ This is not to say that Iroquoian women were indifferent to their sexual commitment to their partners, but rather that sexual engagement was often calculated and had culturally significant implications. Most fundamental to the maintenance of healthy societal relationships was the principle of reciprocity, the notion that members were socially inclined and pressured to share anything they had amongst themselves—including women and sex. Refusal to engage in reciprocal exchange, whether it was for material goods, emotional council, or a night of intimacy, was seen as shameful.²⁷ When we read all of the above insight into trader encounters, a completely different picture of Iroquoian women emerges. For example, consider these anecdotes by Alexander Henry:

The women appear to be held in slavery, and stand in awe of their husbands, many of whom have six or seven wives. At our establishment they are a nuisance in offering their women, and they too [the women] often feel offended if their services are not accepted²⁸

And he later wrote:

They themselves, and should their husbands permit for them, were forward in seeking a loose intercourse with the Europeans. The former appeared vain of solicitation, and, if having first obtained

²⁵ Judith K. Brown, "Economic Organization and the Position of Women Among the Iroquois," *Ethnohistory* 17 (Summer, 1970): 153.

²⁶ Tooker, "Northern Iroquoian Sociopolitical Organization," 91.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 526.

the consent of their husbands, afterward communicated to them [the traders] their success. The men were the first to speak on behalf of their wives, and were even in the practice of carrying them to Hudson Bay, a journey of many hundred miles, on no other errand.²⁹

Initially, this does appear to be a corrupt trade in Native women; however, if we apply our knowledge of the Iroquois here, a different scenario can be put forth. In the first instance, it is likely that all of the women mentioned, even if some were slaves, would not have “belonged” to the man in question. In fact, they may even have been the family members of his wife, of whom there would have been only one. Further, it is also likely that they were simply trying to form new trade relationships and extend their kinship networks, since developing ties to traders was eventually understood to be good economic strategy. The offense of the women at the trader’s refusal seems to suggest that this was more likely the case.

In the second instance, we can surmise that the women were not seeking permission from their husbands to engage in an indecent relationship with the traders, but were having a discussion as to whether it would be of any benefit to them. The fact that the women appeared to desire these encounters on their own behalf lends weight to this interpretation. As for the husbands speaking on behalf of their wives, it is possible that they were simply engaging in business on a level which the European traders would have expected, that is, male governed transactions. Most significantly, the fact that these men were willing to take their wives all the way to Hudson Bay, does not suggest a propensity to exploit their wives, but rather, lends weight to their desire to make solid alliances with the most prominent traders. Practicality begs the question: why would they make such a long journey, and risk their own lives and that of the women, to exploit them at Hudson Bay, when it was clear that even if they stayed put they would continue to encounter other traders to bargain with? It was Samuel Hearne, who also traveled throughout the region, seemed to comprehend this custom perfectly when he wrote:

It may be strange that while I am extolling the virtue of the Indian women, I should acknowledge that it is very common custom among the men of this country to exchange a nights lodging with each other’s wives, and that this is so far from being considered an act which is criminal, that it is esteemed as one of the strongest ties of friendship between two families.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., 314.

³⁰ Samuel Hearne, *Journey from Fort Prince Wales, in Hudson’s Bay, to the Northern Ocean For the Discovery of Copper Mines and a North West Passage, Performed Between the Years 1769 and 1772* (Philadelphia: Joseph and James Cruickshank, 1802), 160.

In the process of negotiating these alliances, women were not enslaved or oppressed, but central figures in the exchange, and acted with purpose, caution, and good intention. When Mary Jemison came of age, her adoptive sisters decided that she should be married to a man of high rank, who would equal her worth, and strengthen the bonds of her family with members of their trade network. At the age of 17 she states she was:

Married by my sisters to a Delaware Chief by the name of Sheninjee according to Indian custom. Spending my day with him at first seemed irreconcilable to my feelings, but his good nature, generosity, tenderness, and friendship toward me soon gained my affection, and strange as it may seem, I loved him.³¹

By any account, this does not appear to be the narrative of exploitation that traders such as Alexander Henry and others put forth. It is exactly the opposite. It is also interesting to note, that after 43 years of living among the Iroquois, and having been offered her freedom on several occasions, Mary Jemison never wanted to leave and not once recalled an instance of indecency enacted toward her, and she remained a part of her adoptive community until she died at the age of 82.³²

On the whole, when it comes to the notion of slavery and prostitution for Iroquoian women in the Great Lakes region, a dissection of the conflicting cultural viewpoints of both the Iroquois and the fur traders they encountered shows us that, from an Iroquoian perspective, the inferences documented by the traders could not have been further from the truth. We have seen how European understandings of slavery, its purpose, and its implications for women simply did not fit with the indigenous customs of the Iroquois. Furthermore, we have seen how the process of adopting slaves into their host societies was the preferred outcome for slaves, and a fundamental deterrent to a position of social degradation. In demarcating these cultural practices, we can also clearly see how the culturally significant roles of Iroquois women, adopted slaves or not, meant that they had autonomous control over their lives in regard to their social position, community status, and sexual behavior. While it is true that the cultural position of many Native women in the Great Lakes region did become degraded, which undoubtedly led to widespread exploitation, for the time period in question, any exchange of Iroquoian women remained anchored in their own cultural beliefs and was not immediately present as many traders assumed.

³¹-Seaver, *The Life of Mary Jemison*, 67.

³²-Ibid.,12.

Pierre Radisson became well aware of the power of the women in his adoptive community, and eloquently expressed their majesty when he wrote:

It is always the way to be beloved of women; to bring them gifts and the wherewithal to be joyful. It was always a pleasure to see, that when embarking [on shore] all the women went in [to the water] stark naked with their hair hanging down, they remained in that posture half a day, to encourage us to come and lodge with them again, they are not ashamed to show us all, to entice us and inanimate the men to come and enjoy them.³³

³³. Radisson, *Radissons Voyages*, ch.17.

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