

Mikmaq Women

Their Special Dialogue

BY DR. MARIE ANNE BATTISTE

There is a fragility in making broad generalizations about Mikmaq women's roles in society. Over the generations, they have done everything. In grasping their total experience, both in our language, legends and in small talk, it must be noted that there is no concern with gender. Gender being a foreign concept, brought to our land by the wood walls of Europe, is a strained thought to the Mikmaq worldview. Mikmaq concepts do not divide man from woman; the concepts only honour their ordinary efforts as mothers, grandmothers, godmothers, teachers, healers and the like. European thought calls them 'roles.' Mikmaq thought labels them extraordinary honours.

The predetermined natural fact of being created by the Holy Spirit as either a woman or man is of minor importance in the Mikmaq worldview. More important to the Mikmaq is the fate of being born into a tribal community which contributes to a shared mental experience: the sense of having a view of the world and of the good in which others participate. Over the last three generations, the Mikmaq worldview has been denied by political policies and law. These gross injustices fragmented our traditional worldview and its intense moral communion.

In the traditional Mikmaq worldview, Mikmaq "woman" and "man" are the fulfillment of each other. Most of women's undivided obligations are held in common with their male partners. But Mikmaq thought teaches of special obligations which "women" have to the Holy Spirit. Mikmaq "women" are the keepers of the unknown. They have the ability to see the ordinary with amazement and to create the future. Each Mikmaq woman is the primal path that forces man beyond knowing to the unknowable

future. In women, man finds what is beyond the daily struggle.

Mikmaq women are the keepers of change. They are the confirmation of the small and great rhythms of each generation to whom all return for comfort and release. They are the visible manifestation of continuity in change. Both continuity and change occur within a community in dialogue; thus the daily dialogues which occur in every facet of Mikmaq life essentially hold all visions of the future and the beauty of the past. Mikmaq women provide a special dialogue which is at the centre of the worldview. Knowing that all of nature is continually changing, the special dialogue of Mikmaq women conditions change so it may be received within the worldview.

Mikmaq women begin the dialogue with the future. They are the first teachers who transmit knowledge of the past and present to the future. They create an extensive, coherent, concrete tribal bond with the future through an easy silence and caring. The tribal bond arises from the rhythm of the daily event. Togetherness comes quietly in the shared trust inherent in family life. Later, they continue the teaching of the tribal bond: the beauty and force of the Mikmaq language; a code of cultural respect; the joy in fulfillment of family obligations.

While Mikmaq women are fulfilling their special obligations, they have also fulfilled the common obligations with the men. Each struggle over time mandates adaptations to survive to give the future a better chance. When European racism attempted to enslave Mikmaq males, the Mikmaq family became the last resort of pride and respect. When European authorities sought to force "individualism" on tribal society through formal education, the



Mikmaq families moderated the continuity. When Mikmaqs accepted European values and vices as superior to tribal values, the Mikmaq families had to face the terrors of alcoholism and substance abuse, the fact of broken families, and the confusions of values. In each of these struggles, the women resiliently weathered the times and mastered them.

There is a family story that illustrates some of these points. When my mother was a young woman, she played a game with her girlfriends which prophesied her life in an extraordinary way. It was said that a dream could predict one's partner and the life you would have, so she and her friends gave it a try. After a friend's wedding, she and her girlfriends ate salt fish and then before bedtime put the wedding cake they had gotten at the wedding under their pillows. It was said that in the dream when thirst took hold, the man who gave you a drink would become your husband. More importantly, would be the kind of container from which she would drink as it would indicate the kind of life she would lead. If the container was a fine bone china or fine glass, she would lead a life of prosperity. If received in a broken cup, she could expect a life of turmoil and hardships.

In my mother's dream, a young man (her brother's best friend, a man much younger than she) gave her a drink from a birchbark cup. After the dream my mother laughed with her girlfriends at the prospect of marriage to her brother's friend. Many years later this man would eventually take her hand in marriage and together they would lead a long traditional Mikmaq life together. The birchbark cup was significant, as my mother's life was one not of leisure and prosperity, not fraught with turmoil and hardships, but one typical of the traditional women on the reserve today. It has been a traditional life of hard work with Mikmaq dignity, a trying life with many rewards of children, grandchildren,



and a life among Mikmaqs.

Mikmaq women represent a resiliency, so ill-defined by modern thought, but so well known in the hearts of Mikmaqs. Throughout tribal and modern changes, from reserve life to modern life, and back to reserve life, Mikmaq grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and aunts typify a spirit of commitment, dedication, and physical and mental hardiness that allow the people as a whole to withstand economic hardships and social changes. Perhaps it is for this reason that Mikmaq people have weathered the contact with Europeans for so long. Over 350 years of contact have passed to which Mikmaqs have had to adapt and accommodate, yielding to the changing world in their own way to suit their own needs within their own worldview.

Many people in the history of the world have lost their culture under such oppression. Some families have fallen under the bondage of alcohol and drug abuse, but within the extended family network are

hands that help, share, and guide so that all children can survive within the family. As their reward, the nation is assured continuity in their language and worldview, and thus stability within unsettled times. The fact that the Mikmaq did not succumb totally, as some disappeared tribes had done is a tribute to the strength of the Mikmaq family and a tribute to Mikmaq women and men who foresaw the necessity of Mikmaq thought.

Today's generation of Mikmaq women socialized to this resiliency and dynamism are prepared for the new expectations in higher education and professional careers. Marked growth of Mikmaqs in higher education shows that Mikmaq adaptations and resiliency take on a new form. The professional sectors of teaching, social work, and administration carry an easy transition of thought for women, illustrating Mikmaq's commitment to the nation's children and families.

In 1984 of the 30 Native graduates at the University of New Brunswick teacher training program, 27 graduates were Mikmaq, and 21 of these were women. It was a fortuitous occasion, marking a change globally among Mikmaqs in their vision of the future through education. Some of us have entered local band-operated schools and administration, but all of us have had an impact on the changing times by uniting higher education and tribal thought into a new worldview. An old process but a new vision. It is a reality that can be shared among all Mikmaqs — men and women, youth and elders. Our history of meeting high expectations and adapting within our traditional milieu is the enabler that survives. Mikmaq thought has empowered a generation of sons and daughters.

It was not the successes of the formal educational institutions of Canada and their European foundations that created the people who stood up for tribal values and still stand up for them.



(top) Marie Battiste with daughter: Anne Wintersong
(bottom) 1989 graduates of McGill University Teacher Education Program at Wagmatcook

It was the Mikmaq family who believed in their ancestors and their culture. While Mikmaq women could take the credit for the Nation's cultural integrity, such credit is buttressed by tribal values which foster family coherence over individual effort.

There would be no "Indian movement" in Canada or in the United Nations, if the aboriginal families did not teach the ancient lessons of life and love. In the Mikmaq struggle for human dignity and self determination, there was no one dominant leader. Instead there were many men and women standing up for their received tribal values as was needed. Ideal overpowered personality. This is very different from the European and Canadian tradition of the leader. This is an extraordinary difference. It is another tribute to Mikmaq knowledge and the value of family life. Indirectly, it's a monument for the continued role of the Mikmaq "women" as the keepers of the changing future.

In the restoration of this shared worldview in the hearts of all the Mikmaq people for the future generation, gender will not be as important as it is in Canadian society. In the restless individualist society of Canada, the equalization of gender is a necessary task in creating a better society. In the restoration of Mikmaq thought, an unreflective notion of gender could be merely another means of dividing our tribal society. The task of removing prejudices and obstacles which prevent the coherent sharing of our common beliefs or ideas with modern ideas is the task of every Mikmaq family. This crucial task cannot be accomplished by individualized Mikmaq nor by reliance on European assumptions or knowledge.

Ending the trivial artificial divisions created by European ideas and languages among Mikmaq people is a difficult task. Yet, the problems which European ideas have created between woman and man in the modern age demonstrate the validity of Mikmaq thought and language. Ending our unreflective use of gender classification and sexism acquired from Europeans is as important as ridding ourselves of European stereotypes of Mikmaq society, and of its men and women. It is only through empowering Mikmaq knowledge through its genderless language that the transformation of Mikmaq society can occur. It is only through understanding Mikmaq wisdom that family unity can continue to be an empowering experience.

MONICA MCKAY

Journey

Each time I close my eyes, I journey
within,
... to the strains of the drum.
The harmony, the melody,
my soul dances.
To a song that neither begins or ends.

The heaviness upon my form tries
desperately to move,
instead I stand among silhouettes,
...dark against darkness.
this song has come and gone.

My soul struggles to move but does
not know how.
... As the drum persists, I struggle to
dance without
heaviness.

EDNA H. KING

The Revealing

I

Night.
Starless night.
Grandmother steps aside
as the skies speak.

A pleasant smell fills the air.
It is sweetgrass —
a smudge from the other world.

Smoke falls from a tiny circle
in the night.
as the circle widens to show
blue sky, and in the sky a
speck.

The blue sky widens, the speck
grows and begins to take shape

II

So high were you, but closer
you came,
gliding at first, in silence.

Then I saw your eyes — so round
and brave. You blinked and screeched
flapped your wings, talons spread
ready to fly inside my head.

Hawk.

LINDA MCWATCH

They Look Here

They look here
they look there
their search is long
frustrating and hopeless

Where shall they look
to seek out
keep searching what they are looking for

Where shall they start
to find that peace
peace which is made of
body, mind and soul

Spirit who knows the way
smothered by lust
smothered by greed
smothered by corruption
envious of things not worth much

Spirit of soul searches long
Spirit travels many roads
spirit still searches

Where shall it look
where shall it start
seek and still seek

Start at the heart

CAROLE ROSE

The Candle

At dusk, as night would search the
tiny home time,
A candle would be lit,
Hour by hour it would burn,
Flickering and Weaving a spell of lights.
The shadows would be cast on the walls
for hours I did watch.
And the stem would burn till end,
barely a brush of wind.
How mellow the lonely hours fell,
till no more of the flickering wax.
Slowly my eyelids would fall as I
drifted to a readying sleep. The
flame goes out and I asleep, till
morning does arise.