

# Teach Them the Moral Way of Living: The Meeting of Huron Sexuality and European Religion

By Mary C. Mees

*The Huron did not place great importance on the difference between married and not married. They encouraged various stages of experimentation and growing commitment.*

<1>

*Males had the liberty of giving themselves to evil from their earliest years, while females prostituted themselves as early as they could, and fathers and mothers were panderers for their own daughters.*

Sexuality was more than reproduction to the Huron Indians of the Great Lakes region. It pervaded many aspects of their culture including healing, spiritual power, and warfare. The freedom and importance they place upon sexual expression, marriage, and divorce put them at odds with the Christian ideology of the French missionaries who appeared on the Southern Shore of the Georgian Bay in 1623. <3> The Recollect and Jesuit missionaries struggled to moralize the Huron, enforcing Christian marriages and taboos against premarital sex and divorce. Their efforts to stifle the sexuality of the Huron brought about the subjugation of Huron women, and contributed to the splitting of the Huron into Christian and traditional factions. This factionalism would eventually lead to the demise of the Huron nation.

The Huron's first contact with Europeans was through trade. The Huron began trading directly with the French in 1609 but they were most likely indirectly linked with them earlier than that through their neighbors, the Algonkian. <4> Initially, the contact between the French and Huron was limited to trade with the French at Quebec. There were few French who actually settled among the Huron. <5> This changed in 1614 when Champlain was made Lieutenant in Canada of the Viceroy in France. One of his first actions was to give attention to the religious conversion of the Indians. Thus, the Recollects entered Huronia. Two years later, they were joined by the Jesuits. <6>

The Recollects assumed that it would be a simpler task to convert sedentary peoples than nonsedentary ones. This is why they chose the Huron. The Recollects, however, did not believe that even sedentary Indians could be converted satisfactorily unless they first adopted standards of behavior more in keeping with Christian practice. <7> The Recollects were particularly appalled by the sexual and marriage practices of the Huron, and sought to reform them.

The Huron were very open about their sexuality. They engaged in sexual expression soon after puberty and premarital sexual relations were considered to be perfectly normal. <8> Promiscuity was characteristic of, if not encouraged among the youth. Each village had its 'procurers' whose sole occupation was to bring young men and women together for intercourse. <9> Such relations would usually take place in the woods. This secured a

certain amount of privacy that was not possible in the crowded longhouses where the Huron resided. For this reason, it is probable that both unmarried as well as married Indians had sexual intercourse outside of the village. This practice also introduced a considerable amount of seasonal variation into the annual birth cycle. <10>

Rather than taboos against multiple sexual partners, the Huron frowned on the public expression of jealousy or restriction of sexual freedom. <11> Young men and women were required to recognize that their partners could, at anytime, choose the lover they most preferred. <12> Enforcing this lack of jealousy were the informal companion relationships, which were common within Huron culture. These relationships involved couples who did not marry but simply lived together for as long as they wished. Their relationship did not hinder their freely seeing and engaging in sexual relations with other men and women. <13> The women in these relationships were referred to as Asqua (companion). In addition to the benefits of the freedom that came with these relationships, many chose them to avoid the numerous prerequisites that accompanied marriage. Any young man could have an Asqua but it was not until he had proven himself bold in hunting, war, and fishing that he was considered fit to have a wife and children. <14>

When an unmarried girl became pregnant, it was tradition that the various lovers would come to her, each saying the child was his. From them, she chose the one she liked best. <15> Therefore, Huron children always knew for certain which woman was their mother, but there was often a question as to which man was their father. <16> This uncertainty of fatherhood encouraged the passing down of kinship through the mother, accounting for the prevalence of matrilineal kinship in Huronia. <17>

While pre-marital sex was encouraged, importance was also placed on marriage. When a boy came of age to marry, his parents and relatives suggested a suitable girl. The young man then had to get the permission of the girl's parents. Without this, she was not his wife. The young man would paint his face and adorn himself with the finest ornaments attempting to make himself more handsome. He would bring the girl a present, which might be a wampum necklace, bracelet, chain or earring, or a beaver robe. <18> If the girl liked the boy, she accepted the present and he would come and spend a number of nights in succession with her. During this time the two had sexual intercourse but did not speak to one another. This was considered the first marriage ceremony. <19> If the girl did not like the boy, she could simply reject him anytime before or immediately after the first marriage ceremony. If all parties consented, however, the second marriage followed. The families together prepared a feast of dog, bear, moose, or fish and invited friends and relatives. Once they all gathered, the father of the girl announced the couple's marriage and the feast began. <20>

The marriage ceremony obviously took place with great simplicity and likewise there was a great deal of freedom placed on marriage. Because of the freedom that prevailed until marriage, sexual relations between a husband and wife did not play a vital role in holding a marriage together. <21> Marriages were dissolved almost as easily as they were

created. Within the *Jesuit Relations*, there is an account that interprets the freedom in marriage:

A Savage having absented himself from home, for I know not what reason, his wife, being wooed in his absence, married another. A few months after these second nuptials, the first husband returned and wished to have her back again; the other one not consenting to give her up; the father of the woman decides the contention without appeal. He takes a stick, carries it a short distance away, and sticks it in the ground. He says, 'He who shall first bring back that stick shall have my daughter' and he tells them to run. The woman was assigned to him who had the better legs, and suit was so entirely settled, that it was never more spoken of except as a joke. This demonstrates their inconstancy in marriage. <22>

The Huron were monogamous but saw no wrong in divorce. Prior to the birth of a child, infidelity and divorce were matters of little concern. <23> It was not uncommon for a Huron to have had twelve to fifteen spouses. <24> The matrilineal focus of kin relations and its effects on the organization of work teams and distribution of products of labor facilitated the ease associated with divorce in Huron society. Women were not dependent on their husbands for hunted foods because they had access to them on the basis of their clan membership. Men, however, relied on their wives for the day to day foodstuffs because they usually went to live in their wives' mothers' longhouses. Therefore, men were less likely to seek divorce. Even so, they did usually have the option of returning to their mothers' and sisters' longhouses for these products. <25>

Contrary to the Jesuits carefree description of them, however, marriage and remarriage were often complicated processes. After the birth of a child couples rarely separated. If they quarreled or became estranged, friends and relatives would intervene to save the marriage. <26> Remarriage was also fairly difficult for widows and widowers. The relatives of a deceased man or woman did not look favorably on the remarriage of their kin's surviving spouse until three years after their kin's death. A man who remarried before, without permission of his former spouse's kin, was held in contempt, while a woman who thus married could expect to see her new husband 'plundered.' <27>

Sexuality played various other roles in Huron society outside of premarital and marital relations. Sex was often used in curing rituals. In one particular ritual, *andacwander*, any ill person could call for a number of young people to come and have sexual relations in his or her cabin. *Andacwander* was described in great detail by Gabriel Sagard, a Recollect who lived among the Huron between 1623 and 1624:

There are assemblies of all the girls in a town at a sick woman's couch. When the girls are assembled they are all asked, one after another, which of the young men of the town they would like to sleep with them the next night. Each names one, and these are immediately notified by the masters of the ceremony. All come in the evening to sleep with those who have chosen them, in the presence of the sick woman, from one end of the lodge to the other, and they pass the whole night thus, while the two chiefs at the two

ends of the house sing and rattle their tortoise shells from evening till the following morning when the ceremony is concluded. <28>

The young also might be asked to simply dance naked in front of the sick. Sagard described another practice that took place during these dances, but it can be inferred that this was not a frequent occurrence:

One day a dance was given with all the young men, women, and girls stark naked in the presence of a sick woman. One of those young men was required to make water in her mouth and she to swallow it. She herself wished it all be done in that manner, in order to carry out with any omission a dream she had had. <29>

Along with observing the power of sexuality in regards to healing, the Huron viewed periods of abstinence as equally important. The Jesuit Relations makes an account of this:

As regards morals, the Hurons are lascivious, although in two leading points less so than Christians, who will blush some day in their presence. You will see no kissing nor immodest caressing; and in marriage a man will remain two or three years apart from his wife, while she is nursing. <30>

The Huron viewed sexual abstinence as important for the accomplishment of many activities of sacred nature. <31> Abstinence was usually believed to bring dreams, which were essential to all Huron rituals. Prior to a ball game, the players from each village fasted, abstained from sexual intercourse, and sought dreams that would bring them victory. <32>

Huron shamans also observed periods of sexual abstinence. These were men and women who claimed to control supernatural powers. They obtained their special potency through visions or dreams in which a powerful spirit had revealed itself to them. Such visions required prolonged fasting and the avoidance of sexual intercourse—similar to the period before the ball game. However, no shamans ever practiced sexual continence for life, or even long periods of time. The Huron had no equivalent to the European concept of religious celibacy. <33>

A final use of abstinence among the Huron was in the treatment of prisoners. The torturing of a prisoner of war chosen for death took place in the longhouse of the village's principal war chief. The torture might last several days but it was mandatory that the prisoner die outside at sunrise—the sun was the special witness of the fate of warriors. This was a sacred event, in which, the headmen ordered that no one in the village engage in sex the night before the prisoner's death but behave in an orderly and restrained fashion. <34>

Abstaining from sex is not the only connection between sex and prisoner torture. The *Jesuit Relations* twice allude to the use of sex in prisoner torture:

The Father Superior went to his side, to console him, and to confirm him in the willingness he had all the time shown to die a Christian. He recalled to his mind a shameful act he had been made to commit during his tortures—in which, all things rightly considered, there was but little probability of sin, at least not grave sin—nevertheless, he had him ask God pardon for it. <35>

Others nobly refused to imitate foul and immodest actions to which their captors tried to incite them. <36>

Among other tribes of the Great Lakes Region, there is more concrete evidence of sexual torture of prisoners, particularly castration. For example, in 1744, the European colonists tried to get the Iroquois and the Catawbas to make peace. The Iroquois responded that the latter had refused: "The Catawbas refused to come, and sent us word that we were but women, that they were men and double men, for they had two penises; that they would make women of us, and would always be at war with us." <37> It can be deferred that the Huron would have participated in the same type of activity because the cultural pattern of the Huron was essentially shared by all Iroquoian-speaking peoples who lived in the general vicinity of the lower Great Lakes. <38>

There is a final sexual phenomenon that was most likely part of Huron society. This is the existence of the berdache. A berdache was a biological male who dressed, gestured, and spoke as an 'effeminate.' <39> The berdache served macho males by assuming the female division of labor, often including the sexual servicing of males. Evidence suggests that berdaches were aspects of most aboriginal nations and the tribes of the Great Lakes probably possessed them. <40>

Apparently, berdaches were either chosen at birth or chose the lifestyle in adulthood. Parents often gendered their males as females soon after birth because of social and cultural imperatives. These imperatives usually included the birth of all male children to a family in a society which placed a high value on women. In these situations, the decision was obviously not based on personality or behavior and in that sense Indian children were not 'free' to choose their sexuality. <41> However, there is also evidence that some adult males became berdaches of their own accord or because of their tribes' decision later in life. When an adult man became a berdache, it meant that they left their warrior status behind and assumed the position of women. The decision might have been influenced by the fact that they were no longer effective warriors. <42> Marquette in his account of the Illinois tribes of the 1660s comments on this particular use of berdaches, "transvestites made war but they can use only clubs and not bows and arrows, which are the weapons of proper men." <43>

The Recollects entered Huronia with their Seventeenth-century hierarchical Christian morality. They preached chastity and the importance of Christian marriages, and immediately butted heads with the Huron. The Indians did not understand the priests' disinterest in women. They could not imagine a man without a woman; ignorant of the monastic tradition, they could imagine still less a life without sex. <44> They were also confused by the Recollects' insistence on living apart from the Huron and refusal to

participate in Huron activities. Because fasting and sexual abstinence were necessary to become a shaman, the Huron must have interpreted priestly celibacy as evidence that the Recollects possessed supernatural powers of extreme potency. Such powers could be used for good or evil, but the secretiveness and unsociable behavior of the Recollects must have made the Huron fear that they were engaging in some form of witchcraft that was designed to harm them. <45>

Furthermore, the Huron hoped to adopt or conclude matrimonial alliances with these visitors, either of which meant that the French entered into kinship with a particular Huron family. Efforts to persuade priests to marry Huron women caused the former considerable embarrassment and resulted in the Recollects drawing erroneous conclusion that the Huron men were anxious to debauch and prostitute their women. Sagard, in particular, elaborated on this opinion: One of our greatest and most troublesome embarrassments was their continual pursuit of us, begging to marry us or make a family alliance....In these importunities, the women and girls were more insistent and plagued us more than the men themselves who came to petition in behalf of the women. <46>

The Huron, obviously, did not view this in the same way as the Recollects. Like many tribal peoples, the Huron viewed all social relations as an extension of kinship; hence they were behaving quite normally in attempting to establish such relations with the French. <47>

The Recollect effort was not aided by the accepting of Huron offers and in some cases the adoption of the Huron way of life by French traders. Some Frenchmen took Asquas giving rise to Sagard's charge that the French had established "brothels" in various parts of Huronia. Etienne Brule, a French trader, is an example of the Recollect's worst nightmare. He dressed like the Huron, hunted with the men, joined them in their ritual steam baths, and subscribed to the native sexual practices. <48>

The Recollects accused all but a few traders of subverting, by their actions, the moral teachings that the missionaries were trying to impart among the Huron. The traders were specifically accused of informing the Huron that French women were not chaste, as the priests claimed— this being central to their Christian movement. This clash between Christian ideals and normal European behavior amused the Huron but embarrassed the Recollects because it undermined their credibility. It also revealed that they lacked sufficient influence either among the Huron or with the traders to put a stop to such behavior. <49>

The Recollects were highly unsuccessful and implored the help of the Jesuits in 1625. The Recollects and Jesuits worked together until 1629 when the English took Quebec and the priests were forced to leave. The Jesuits resumed the mission in 1633 and it continued for fifteen years. <50> The Jesuits, following the ideas current at the time, believed that the St. Lawrence River was the beginning of a great waterway system that would allow them passage, ultimately to China. For the Jesuits, then, the Huron located along the beginnings of this waterway were only the first people to be encountered in a their long term project of the conversion of all the pagans of North America and the Far East. The

strategic location of the Huron, made their conversion of immense importance in the Jesuits' general plan for the Christianization of the world's population. <51>

Similar to the Recollects, in the Jesuits' view, the creation of a Catholic society out of a 'pagan' people unfamiliar with hierarchical authority required the reformulation of family life and morality. <52> This included the confining of sexual expression within what the Jesuits considered its appropriate boundaries. The appropriate boundaries were within marriage for the sole purpose of reproduction. It also included the outlawing of divorce and remarriage. These requests proved to be the largest stumbling blocks for the Jesuits in their conversion efforts. As two Jesuits pointed out:

The young people do not think that they can persevere in the state of matrimony with a bad wife or a bad husband; they wish to be free and to be able to divorce the consort if they do not love each other. Such are the chief outward impediments we have encountered in the performance of our duties. <53>

Some young men offered themselves to us of their own accord, with many evidences of good will. However, we shall not hasten their baptism, because this would render it almost impossible for them to find wives, since there are, as yet, no good Christian girls here. Until we have a village that is entirely devoted to God, the marriages of our new Christians will occasion us difficulty. <54>

An Indian man is quoted in the *Relations* as saying:

If we take a wife, at the first whim that seizes her, she will at once leave us; and then we are reduced to a wretched life seeing that it is the women in our country who sow, plant, and cultivate the land, and prepare food for their husbands. <55>

The women seemed to have rejected the efforts of Christianity longer than men. Perhaps this is because Christianity offered a particularly bleak future for women. As already stated, central to the Jesuit movement were Christian marriages. Christian marriages required the obedience and subjugation of women. The Jesuits viewed women's sexuality as something dangerous. If left uncontrolled, their capacity to seek pleasure was capable of undermining the higher morality of men. Not only were women expected to refuse the advances of men, but to never make any themselves. While men who sought intercourse outside marriage behaved contrary to the rules of Christian morality, women who sought intercourse outside marriage behaved contrary to human nature. This view stifled all of the sexual freedom that Huron women possessed. <56>

Jesuit success with the Huron was slow, but because the integrity and social cohesion of Huron society was challenged under pressures of war by the Iroquois, European disease, and the fur trade, the Jesuits as representatives of a new and apparently cohesive social order, were eventually able to gain a strategic position within Huron society. <57> Christian factions arose in various villages and gave rise to new tensions that cut across the segmentary structures of lineages, clan segments, and tribes. <58>

The relationship between Christians and traditionalists was affected by Jesuit taboos against extra-marital sexual intercourse. The Jesuits strove to inculcate in their converts what in their opinion was an appropriate sense of shame about sex and although their teachings ran counter to Huron culture, they appear to have succeeded somewhat in this endeavor. <59> Traditionalists attempted to exploit the sexual vulnerability of the young Christian converts by inciting girls to seduce Christian men, but the prudery of converts undermined these efforts. One account in the *Jesuit Relations*, in particular, describes this suppressing of sexual desires:

Our Huron snows have been whitened, this winter, by the chastity of a young Christian, who-feeling in his body a fire, of which he had more horror than of that Hell, and temptations so powerful that it seemed to him that all the Demons of impurity possessed him. Transported with a holy despair, he ran into a neighboring wood, stripped himself quite naked, threw himself into the snows, and rolled in them a long time— bathing them with his tears and uttering his prayers to Heaven with so much fervor, having lost nearly all feeling, those infernal flames became entirely quenched, and left his soul as vigorous, after this victory, as he found his body dejected. <60>

The refusal of young Christians to respond in what the Huron regarded as a normal way to sexual advances astonished other Huron. It was regarded as yet another example of antisocial behavior with sinister connotations of sorcery. Traditionalists told the Christians that they were making a mistake to deny themselves the pleasures of youth through this fear of an imaginary hell. <61>

The ultimate split brought on by the Jesuits broke down any defense the Huron had against the growing hostility of the Iroquois. Fifteen years after the Jesuits arrived in Huronia, the Iroquois would massacre the Huron leaving the remaining few to move to Quebec. <62> The reformulation of Huron sexuality by the missionaries cannot be given full responsibility for the demise of the Huron nation, but it played a large role. Sexuality was central to many aspects of Huron culture. In that sense, it was no different than politics, economy, or religion. When the Europeans invaded its parameters, the culture began to dissolve.

### Notes

1 Bruce Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (Kingston: McGill-Queens's University Press, 1987), p. 49.

2 Francis Xavier Talbot, *Saint Among the Hurons* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), p. 58.

3 James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures In Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 46-47.

4 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 243.

- 5 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 365.
- 6 Trigger, *The Children*, pp. 23-30.
- 7 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 378.
- 8 Trigger, *The Children*, pp.48-49.
- 9 Karen Anderson, *Chain Her By One Foot: The Subjugation of Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 78.
- 10 Bruce Trigger, *Huron: Farmers of the North* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Wilson, 1969), p. 66.
- 11 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 368.
- 12 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 49.
- 13 Elisabeth Tooker, *An Ethnography of the Huron Indians: 1615-1649* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), p. 127.
- 14 Anderson, *Chain Her*, p. 115.
- 15 Tooker, p. 127.
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- 17 Trigger, *The Children*, pp. 45-46.
- 18 Tooker, p. 126.
- 19 Trigger, *Huron: Farmers*, p. 67.
- 20 Tooker, p. 126.
- 21 Trigger, *Huron: Farmers*, p. 67.
- 22 *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* V. XIV, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: the Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), p. 261.
- 23 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 49.
- 24 Tooker, p. 125.
- 25 Anderson, *Chain Her*, pp. 113-114.

- 26 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 49.
- 27 Anderson, *Chain Her*, p. 77.
- 28 Gabriel Sagard, *The Long Journey to the Country of the Hurons*, ed. George M. Wrong (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1939), p. 120.
- 29 Sagard, p. 118.
- 30 *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* V. VIII, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1897), p. 127.
- 31 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 79.
- 32 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 84.
- 33 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 79.
- 34 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 73.
- 35 *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* V. XIII, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), p. 77.
- 36 *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* V. XVII, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), p. 65.
- 37 Richard C. Trexler, *Sex and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 76.
- 38 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 90.
- 39 Trexler, p. 64.
- 40 Trexler, p. 64.
- 41 Trexler, p. 85.
- 42 Trexler, p. 96.
- 43 Trexler, p. 66.
- 44 Axtell, p. 79.
- 45 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 388.
- 46 Talbot, p. 58.

47 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 365.

48 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 367.

49 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 368.

50 Sagard, p. 37.

51 Anderson, *Chain Her*, pp. 13-14.

52 Karen Anderson, "As Gentle As Little Lambs: Images of Huron and Montagnais-Naskapi Women in the Writings of the 17th Century Jesuits," *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* V. 25 (November 1988): 565-566.

53 *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* V. XVI, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), p. 41.

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55 *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* V. XIV, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), p. 235.

56 Anderson, *Chain Her*, pp. 90-91.

57 Anderson, *As Gentle*, p. 574.

58 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 721.

59 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 718.

60 *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* V. XXX, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), p. 39.

61 Trigger, *The Children*, p. 718.

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