

# A Nation of Women

*Gender and Colonial Encounters Among the Delaware Indians*



Gunlög Fur

# *A Nation of Women*

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Among the Delaware Indians*

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## *Preface*

I did not set out to write a book about gender. In fact, I was not particularly interested in the topic at all. What did interest me was trying to understand as much as I possibly could about how Lenape Indians lived their lives around the time that they first encountered people from across the great sea and how that encounter altered their society and the world they knew. Therefore, I began mining archives and published primary sources for anything relating to the Lenapes (or Delawares, as they were subsequently known) written by English, Swedish, Dutch, German, or even French colonists. This is where I met a woman named Notike, a woman who more than anyone else came to change the direction of my research. She appears—so far as I know—in only three documents, and the circumstances of her emergence was a land dispute, ostensibly between Swedish and Dutch colonists concerning land along the west bank of the Delaware River. But her very appearance in these documents unveiled an equally important internal confrontation among Lenapes regarding control over and alienation of land. Clearing the brush surrounding Notike's intervention in Swedish and Dutch colonial politics forced me to come to grips with issues of gender, and as I did so I discovered that Delaware history, as well as contact history, cannot be told intelligibly without reflecting on gender and its function in human societies.

Thus, I stumbled on my subject by chance, or so I thought, caught by the nagging notion that I was observing a picture where one object stood out of place. The problem I had with the picture I was beholding was that it contained only men. Reading Swedish, Dutch, and English sources from the seventeenth century more or less convinced me that a friend of mine was correct when she commented that her people had thought that “the Swedes were a race of only men, as they had to do all the labor of planting themselves.” That the colonists were predominantly male was true of some colonial ventures, although Sweden did indeed encourage (or force) families to emigrate. However, looking at the same sources, the Native populations emerged as equally unbalanced. This of course was not true then or now, and the only reasonable explanations for the absence of women that I could

find were based on feminist theories regarding the double marginalization of colonized women. As I entered the search for Notike's story I uncovered more and more women. I became convinced that it was both possible and necessary to write them into history in order for me to be able to envision adequately Delaware experiences in the past. I found that this history was about relationships—relationships between and among women and men, Indians and whites, mortals and divine spirits.

This book is my attempt at understanding these relationships. It is an offering to a people who once met with people from my country, fought with them, fed and clothed them, and created links to them, an offering that I hope will demonstrate the necessity of taking Delaware experiences seriously in the endeavor to uncover and interpret the complex web of interactions that led to the growth of the Middle Atlantic colonial world, as well as to the more or less forced removal of a coastal people to places such as Oklahoma and Ontario.

## *Introduction: “We Are But a Women Nation”*

“We are but a women nation,” explained a young Delaware man in 1758 to a visiting delegation from the Pennsylvania colonial government, and presented three strings of white wampum signifying the peaceful intent of Minisink Delawares living north of the Delaware Water Gap. Ten years later a Moravian missionary expedition up the Beaver River in western Pennsylvania came upon a “Women’s Town,” inhabited primarily by Delaware women who had chosen not to marry. These two snapshots, of peaceful feminized men and independent Amazonian women, occur prominently among the depictions of Delaware Indians in their encounters with European colonists during the eighteenth century. Yet, to contemporaries the name Delaware might just as easily have conjured up the image of a murderous Indian brave in the form of Shingas the Terrible, whose name spread fear in frontier settlements during the Seven Years War.

These contrasting representations of Delaware Indians from the colonial world of the mid-eighteenth century contain seemingly bewildering gender dimensions. Encounters in Northeastern North America between Europeans and Native Americans present an astonishing and challenging world of gender metaphors and practices, and the Delawares offer a multitude of examples. Few metaphors are more familiar yet mystifying than the one that describes the entire Delaware nation as women. Popularized in the writings of James Fenimore Cooper, the image of Delaware men made into women by their Iroquois overlords sparks both curiosity and discomfort. Many attempts have been made, throughout the centuries, to explain this seeming affront to a whole population of male Delawares. A worse insult than being called “woman” might have been hard to imagine for a white man, both in the eighteenth century and later. Perhaps that is why defenses for the bravery and virtue of the Delaware Nation became cloaked in evocative and emotional language. E. M. Ruttenber wrote: “Through the thick and gloom . . . through all the degradation and reproach which was heaped

upon them as a ‘nation of women,’ there runs a thread of light revealing their former greatness . . . promising that their dead shall live again. Not in the eternal darkness which shuts in the Eries is that light lost, but from its prison house breaks in brilliancy, redeeming the past, and wringing from their ancient subjugators, shivering under adverse fortune, the greeting—“Brothers.” In Ruttenber’s interpretation the Delawares signaled their redemption through the use of the greeting “Brothers.” By clarifying that they were relating to both friends and foes as men they cleared themselves of the “thick and gloom” of “degradation” inherent in the appellation “women.” To Ruttenber the gendered language of the encounter recounted above could not spell anything but reproachful subjugation. He was not alone in his sentiment. For over two hundred years scholars have faced the conundrum of why it came to pass that the Delawares for more than a century were known in diplomatic contexts as “women.”<sup>1</sup>

Who were these people who were collectively referred to as women? And, equally intriguing, what were the roles and responsibilities of women among these people? This book will address these questions, the historical conditions that made such a gendered designation possible, and its significance. I examine concepts and practices concerning the meaning of female and male in Lenape—or Delaware—society in its meeting with European colonization in various forms, from the first Dutch and Swedish trading colonies to the establishment of Quaker Pennsylvania and pietistic Moravian missions. My purpose is to investigate changes and continuity in women’s and men’s roles, identifications, and authority in Lenape culture. I focus on gender, how it is brought into play in metaphors and what these have to say about perceptions of gender; its concrete material realities; its links to power in daily life and politics; and how gender and kinship played out in the realm of the metaphysical, in religion and ritual. Thus, this book is a history both of the significance of gender in Lenape/Delaware encounters with Europeans, and of women in these encounters.

Human beings create ideas about gender as one of the tools to make sense of their world, and gender is one of the most persistent means by which human beings are sorted and categorized. The ways these divisions are made reveal much about what roles and choices are available to individuals in a given society. I want to demonstrate how gender infiltrated the material structure of society as an organizing principle for subsistence activities, division of labor and exchange, and dispersion of power. Gender is a material condition, in terms of both physical bodies and what people do. But gender is also a process of thought and belief, and as such it finds sanc-

tion in the spiritual realm. Neither a social history approach nor a history of ideas and discourses alone suffices to explain the role of gender in cultural encounters. I link material processes to spiritual and ideological expressions to discover the role gender played in Delaware encounters with Europeans and in the understanding of what it meant to become Delaware. The themes that have structured this study are (1) concrete relations of production and distribution, (2) religious and spiritual responsibilities and beliefs, and (3) metaphors and discourse. Taken alone, any one of these themes cannot reveal sufficiently how gender worked in colonial encounters. For example, a focus on material organization would miss the fundamental significance of gender in the spiritual realm, just as a focus on metaphorical language in diplomatic exchanges would fail to situate these metaphors in concrete historical and material contexts.

Gender, I argue, is particularly apt for reflecting a space so shaped by cultural encounters as eastern North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many have tried to envision this bewildering landscape full of crisscrossing lines signifying encounters, confrontations, and adaptations. No rules seemed unchallenged, no meanings left unaltered, no practices unthreatened. Domination and authority became as much a matter of posture as of material advantages or force. This does not deny that there were inequalities and asymmetries that powerfully altered human conditions for Indian peoples, but the uncertainties of encounters set its mark on all and influenced cultural adjustments of both Indians and whites. Representations and practices of gender concern the most fundamental relationships in human societies and shape understandings of kinship, hierarchies, and nationhood, as well as relationships to property and power. It is not surprising that cultural understandings regarding gender clashed and aligned as peoples fought for place and identity in this unpredictable new world.<sup>2</sup>

The focus on Lenape/Delaware interactions with Europeans provides a specific example of relations with far-ranging impact, as it illuminates both general concerns relating to theories of gender and specific issues of Indian history in the colonial period. Research concerning women's positions among indigenous peoples challenges theories about the universal subordination of women. Similarly, intercultural research on sexuality and gender demonstrates fascinating variations in perceptions of sexual and gender identities. Previous studies have amply clarified how historians need to treat with care the one-sided sources at our disposal, in particular when it comes to the patriarchal perspectives and limitations expressed in them. This often accounts for the invisibility of women in the sources (as well as

the invisibility of a majority of men!). A body of research now exists that reveals the participation of women in such varied occupations as food production, manufacturing of clothing and tools, mining, healing, ceremonial obligations, and so on. This is just as would be expected of any human society where individuals worked together and sometimes in opposition to one another to ensure continued survival; nonetheless, it has taken the emergence of feminist scholarship to bring this kind of knowledge to the fore. These accounts comprise a significant foundation for another theoretical issue: what do the roles and responsibilities of different genders mean for an understanding of the whole of Native American communities and their social and individual experiences, and how did these understandings and practices change in encounters with white people? The study of gender as I use it here concerns what people thought about biology and social roles as well as what they actually did and how they employed gendered metaphors to explain their social interactions. Individuals of varying genders, biological sexes, ages, and experiences participated in all these areas, and in order to understand the significance of gender it is vital to pay as much attention to what is excluded and unseen, as to what is evident and clearly present.<sup>3</sup>

This is also a history of power and authority in Lenape society as men and women worked, fought, danced, and prayed to maintain their world as they knew it, or to change their practices and beliefs to fit new circumstances. Relationships of power influenced their reactions to, and interactions with other Native peoples in the region and with various European colonizing groups. However, there are other aspects of power relations that influence this study, such as power over the words recorded in the sources upon which the historian relies. Scribes, chroniclers, diary and letter writers, missionaries, and other writers have held enormous power over the content and extent of the information left for posterity. They chose what to include and what to leave out, and they were influenced by their own biases, limitations (in linguistic knowledge, for example), and expectations in their observations of the people and situations they encountered. Likewise, the audience for whom they wrote had an impact on the way they fashioned their accounts. The historian's task is always to enter into a dialogue with the sources and ask questions of where, why, and to whom, to go beyond mere words on paper (or in the microphone) and to understand and uncover the structures of power and desire that shaped them.

Historians in the performance of their craft also exercise power over the past. This is particularly apparent when one delves into issues of gender. Men—white European males in particular—have written almost all the

sources I use in this study, and men have produced most of the histories from which I have learned and been inspired or reacted against. In this respect, Native American histories are no different from other fields of historic inquiry. Gender as an analytical device and a field of inquiry has also influenced this research to the extent that we now know considerably more than we used to about women’s roles and responsibilities in various Native American contexts. Yet much recent scholarship on the colonial period still paints images of landscapes primarily inhabited by men. This book seeks to counter that image, not by offering a new master narrative to superimpose on old ones, but by using gender analysis as the starting point, the beam of light with which to illuminate sources and previous scholarship in order to present competing images that may complicate the stories—and force new questions to be asked and answered.<sup>4</sup>

I am aware that to call a people “women,” as I do in the title of this book, can be misunderstood as derogatory. To refer to males as “women” has been a common way throughout human history to shame them into performance or action. For centuries, ideas about male contamination by female qualities have haunted perceptions of proper masculine behavior in American society. At the heart of feminist analysis of culture is the fact that keeping the male category pure of any female contamination involves placing all things feminine in a subordinate relationship to the masculine. My contention in this book is that among the various groups that made up the Delaware Nation, the understanding of categories of women and men differed from these hierarchical notions of gender, and that to act the role of a woman involved responsibilities and prerogatives that lent honor to an individual in equal measure to that of the role of a man. This gender analysis of Delaware history thus leads to challenging notions of what it meant to be male and female in a society. History teaches us that human societies are varied and that human possibilities of cultural organization and categorization are multiple.<sup>5</sup>

At the time of historic contact between Europe and America, a number of related bands of people who sometimes referred to themselves as *Lenape* (meaning “human beings”) lived on land they identified as *Lenapehoking* (land, or house, of the people), an area encompassing present-day New Jersey and northern Delaware, southeastern Pennsylvania between the Susquehanna and Delaware Rivers, and southeastern New York west of the Hudson River. The first white settlers transcribed their name as *Renappi* or simply called them River Indians. The Lenapes who lived along the Delaware River south of the Raritan River spoke Unami and Unalachtigo—dialects of an