The Effects of Colonialism on Indigenous Matriarchal Communities in Canada
By Samantha Davis

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the effects of colonialism on Indigenous women as well as other members of Indigenous matriarchal communities across Canada. Matriarchy and the importance of mothers and children will be discussed first. Followed by colonization including a brief explanation of the Indian Act and the Residential School policy. Finishing with some of the physical, mental and emotional impacts that forced colonization has had on Indigenous women and their families.

Society needs to be made aware of how colonialism has affected Indigenous women's roles in their communities as well as how egalitarianism was highly prevalent in many tribes across the nation (Allen 1986 cited in Ramirez 2007: 14). In matriarchal communities women are seen to be stronger, to have a high tolerance to pain, to have more endurance than men, and most importantly they are mothers - creators of life, holy and sacred (Means 2011). Indigenous women, as the matriarchs - "the givers of life and keepers of traditions and practices of the nation", commanded the highest levels of respect from all community members (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2014: 39). Matriarchal communities follow and organize their relatives and relations through the mother's lineage, all mothers, including mother in-laws (Means 2011).

Children are taught responsibility at a young age, emphasizing trust and knowing that they have responsibilities and that they are trusted to fulfill them (Means 2011). Indigenous parenting - traditional parenting, before colonization, gave children self-confidence and feelings of being loved, owing to the fact that at such young ages it was instilled in them to know they are cherished as the most important individuals on earth (Means 2011). This was lost during colonization, as will be discussed below.

Colonization can be very briefly explained as processes and strategies used to separate Indigenous peoples from their traditional territories for the Crown to acquire land (Eberts 2013). Mary Eberts (2013) argues that colonization is not a thing of the past, many of the same processes, strategies and tools used hundreds of years ago are still being used today, one example would be the Indian Act. Russell Means (2011) describes colonizers as invaders with pyramidal structures showcasing the male on top. He perceives their education, government, and families as replicas of this pyramidal structure, male on the high top looking down on all the small people below him, creating a sense of fear (Means 2011). Means (2011) acknowledges that being alone on top of this structure with fear of displacement causes a need for seeking control of surroundings, which could include control of family, religion, and spirituality. The colonizer's pyramid of civilization is dependent on production in areas including economics, education, and religion (Means 2011). Colonization implemented "the appropriation of the land, resources and jurisdiction of the Indigenous peoples, not only for the sake of resettlement and exploitation but for the territorial foundation of the dominant society itself" (Tully 2009 cited in Eberts 2013: 127). For Indigenous people, the lack of geographical separation between the colonized and the colonizer resulted in many of the colonized (Indigenous people) not having a land-based platform to reassert sovereignty (Eberts 2013).

The Indian Act is designed to establish obligations of the Canadian Government toward 'Indians' and to regulate the management of 'Indian' resources (IACHR 2014); this includes "discriminatory provisions on land surrender, wills, band elections, Indian status, band membership, and enfranchisement." (Government of Canada 1996 cited in IACHR 2014: 40). In 1920 the Deputy Minister of Indian affairs stated " I want to get rid of the Indian problem…our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question and no Indian department…" (Scott 1920 cited in Eberts 2013: 152). One way to ensure there would no longer legally be any recognized 'Indians' was for the Indian act to be set in a way in which it deprived Indigenous women of their 'Indian' status when they married non-Indians (Government of Canada 1996 cited in IACHR 2014: 40). This also meant that children born from an Indigenous woman married to a non-indigenous man were also not recognized as 'Indians' under the Indian Act (Government of Canada 1996 cited in IACHR 2014: 40). Between the years 1876 and 1985 close to 25,000 Indigenous women had their Indian status removed and were forced out of their communities (Bonita Lawrence 2003 cited in IACHR 2014: 42), including all of their descendants, as thru the Indian act they no longer had any rights to their reservation land (IACHR 2014).

In support of the aggressive government policy of assimilation between the years 1879 and 1996 the mandatory residential school policy was enforced by the Government of Canada, removing all Indigenous children from their families and placing them in 'boarding schools' where they were instructed to do crafts and learn trades (IACHR 2014). The notion was that if the children were removed from their homes, taken away from their Indigenous traditions and cultures and forced to speak English or French that soon their Indigenous ways would be forgotten. These residential schools, along with their menial education, often exposed Indigenous children to traumatic experiences where the "school management and employees frequently mistreated and abused their students emotionally, physically and sexually" (Government of Canada cited in IACHR 2014: 43). Not only were the children mistreated, confined for extended periods, beaten and severely punished but their most basic of needs failed to be met, and example being food that was rotten or food with little to no nourishment was often given to the children (Government of Canada cited in IACHR 2014: 43).

The experiences survivors faced during the mandatory residential school policy caused severe breakdown of families and communities ultimately affecting their sense of identity resulting in a separation from their culture and native language, destroying relationships with family and community members (Government of Canada cited in IACHR 2014). Isolation and dissociation from family and community paired with psychological effects from surviving the mistreatment, neglect and abuse of residential schools has been seen to be a leading cause of the struggles for surviving students' abilities to raise their own children (IACHR 2014). This is due largely to the fact that as children themselves they did not have positive parenting role models, making it difficult to apply positive parenting skills with raising their own children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren (IACHR 2014).

It is clear that by imposing patriarchy and male dominance on matriarchal communities the power that once belonged to Indigenous matriarchs as the community decision makers and leaders was threatened (IACHR 2014), and ultimately dissolved, no longer existing. The demotion of the once highly respected and even idolized mothers and women, or as Anderson (2006) describes them, "Indian Queen"(s) to the "girlish-sexual figure"(s) as the "Indian Princess"(s) made land, resource exploitation and claims easier for the colonizers (Anderson 2006). The persistent marginalization seen in the Indian Act and in the accepted worldview of Indigenous women in general, the IACHR (2014) notes is the deep rooted cause of the vulnerable and unhealthy situations Indigenous women face on a daily basis. 35% of Indigenous women aged 25 or over did not graduate from high school, where only 20% of non-indigenous women aged 25 or over did not graduate (IACHR 2014: 45). "Indigenous women are ten times more likely to have their children taken away by state agencies than non-indigenous women" (IACHR 2013 cited in IACHR 2014: 47). In 2005 the average income of an Indigenous women was $15,654 compared to non-indigenous women who had an average income of $20,640 (IACHR 2014).

The actual material conditions of Indigenous women's lives include "hunger, infant mortality, forced sterilization, treaty violations, the plague of alcohol & drugs, ridiculous jail terms, denial of civil rights, radiation poisoning, land theft, endless contrived legal battles which drain [Indigenous women's] wills, corrupt 'tribal' governments, harassment & death at the hands of BIA & FBI" (Chystos 1988 in Hobbs & Rice 2013: 300). The imbalance between men and women within Indigenous communities was a result of policies imposed on them without their consent (Amnesrty International 2004 cited in IACHR 2014: 39). Indigenous people suffered the trauma of dispossession of their traditional territories, disassociation with their traditional roles and responsibilities along with the loss of their culture and traditions (Amnestry International 2004 cited in IACHR 2014: 39).

With the ingrained western dichotomous worldview of all things being good or bad; pure or corrupt; light or dark, Indigenous women must be of the dark and corrupt variety with the adopted societal view of Indigenous women as "Squaws" (Anderson 2006). 'Squaw', a grotesque term that was, and still is used to portray Indigenous women resulting in feelings of degradation and experiencing more vulnerability to physical verbal and sexual violence. (IACHR 2012 in IACHR 2014: 39). Indigenous women have internalized these destructive and hateful views towards themselves, resulting in self-destructive behaviours which could include but are not limited to addictions, violent relationships or doubting the validity of their existence and the existence of their people (Anderson 2006).

The racist stereotypes that come from the colonial "Indian Princess" endanger all Indigenous girls and women across our nation. Anderson (2006) shares an experience of a woman who was attacked by an older white male who asked her at about ten years old "Want to go for a ride, little squaw?". This woman, Emma LaRocque, like many other Indigenous women, after living through an experience such as this, and others with those experiences that have ended more tragically, are left with the question "why?" (Anderson 2006). Why do men feel it is acceptable to attack Indigenous females of all ages? - this inhumanity against our co-humans

must come from "conditioning, some horrendous sociological, racist and sexist conditioning" (LaRocque cited in Anderson 2006 edited by Hobbs and Rice 2013: 275).

It can be seen that the aggressive assimilation policies during colonization have clearly impacted the lives of Indigenous women across Canada. Head matriarchs were forced to watch as their people, their villages, tribes and/or communities were physically displaced from their traditional territories and suffered social and cultural displacement with the mandatory residential school policy in place to assimilate young Indigenous children. Their identities were stripped away from them, leaving them bare and filled with doubt of their existence. Their right to raise their own children was stolen from them, hindering their opportunity to learn to traditionally parent with healthy, positive or safe parent models. Traditional knowledge and values were lost along with their matriarchal identities, causing imbalance, demotion, degradation, and ultimately vulnerability. Indigenous women essentially have been put at high risk by the hands of the government of Canada. Society needs to be made aware of the impacts that colonization had/has on Indigenous peoples in 'Canada'.

References:

Anderson, Kim. 2006. "The Construction of a Negative Identity" pp. 267—277 in General and Women's Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain. 2013, edited by Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice, Toronto, Ont., CAN: Women's Press.

Chrystos. 1988. "Preface" pp. 300 in General and Women's Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain. 2013, edited by Margaret Hobbs and Carla Rice, Toronto, Ont., CAN: Women's Press.

Eberts, Mary. 2013. "Still Colonizing After All These Years". University of New Brunswick Law Journal 64: 123-159.

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. 2014. Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in British Columbia, Canada. Organization of American States.

Means, Russell. 2011. "Patriarchy: The Ultimate Conspiracy; Matriarchy: The Ultimate Solution: History-or 'His-story'. Griffith Law Review, 20(3), 515-525.

Ramirez, Renya. 2007. "Race, Tribal Nation, and Gender: A Native Feminist Approach to Belonging". Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism, 7(2), 22-40
4