

## Chapter 8

## READING 3

## SECTION 3

## Civilizations in the Americas

*Women Leaders in North American Indian Societies*

*It has been a widely accepted view that North American Indian women occupied the lower levels of society, being completely subordinate to men. In most traditional Indian societies it was certainly true that few women held office or sat on the tribal council. Even so, women were able to exercise considerable authority in day-to-day tribal life. The ways in which women exercised power in several North American Indian societies are discussed in the excerpt below. As you read the selection, compare how women attained power in the four societies mentioned.*

While there has never been a true matriarchy [rule by women] in ancient or modern times, the Iroquois did come as close to it as any other society. The Iroquois were a woodland culture and inhabited the area that is now New York.

Women in that society had the upper hand economically because they owned the fields, crops, and houses. Descent was traced through the women and all titles, rights, and property passed through the female line. . . .

Although Iroquois women did not actually hold the position of chief (called a sachem in that tribe), it was they who not only chose the leaders but also decided if the men they selected were doing a creditable job. Each clan was divided into lineages, and at the head of each lineage was an older woman—the matron—who derived her position from her age and her qualities of leadership and diplomacy. . . .

When one of the sachems died, it was up to the matron of his lineage, in consultation with her female relatives, to select his successor. If the new sachem's conduct was not satisfactory, the matron would warn him three times. . . . After that the

matron would ask the council to depose him. Because of her position, it was necessary for the matron to always conduct herself with great decorum [proper behavior], so that when she had to admonish [criticize] an erring chief her warnings were respected. . . .

Women also played a very important role among the Natchez, who lived along the lower Mississippi River and had an unusual system of government. . . .

The principal leader, or Great Sun, was always a male; because nobility was transferred only through the female line, this ruler was succeeded not by one of his sons but by the son of the woman most closely related to him. . . . While the women Suns generally did not meddle in governmental affairs, they did command great respect from the rest of the populace. . . .

The Suns, both men and women, were not allowed to intermarry. . . . Husbands of White Women functioned more as servants than partners—they were not allowed to eat with their wives, they were required to stand at attention when in their wives' presence, they even had to salute in the same manner as the rest of the servants. Their only privileges were freedom from labor and a chance to exercise authority over the other servants. . . .

In some tribes on the western side of the continent we also find women in leadership roles. . . .

In northern California, the Nisenan sometimes had a woman at their head . . . and, if on the death of a chief, there was no male relative competent to fill the position, the deceased's widow, daughter, or niece might be chosen to succeed him. A woman in this office had no actual power, although she was always consulted by the leading men. . . . Besides advising the council, her duties included planning community activities and food gathering, arbitrating

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[judging] disputes, acting as official hostess, and arranging "big times" or celebrations.

In the southwestern groups, where women often have high status and command considerable respect, we find several tribes in which there were specific positions of leadership filled by women. . . .

The leader of a Hopi town was usually assisted in his duties by a woman relative, who was called "Keeper of the Fire." She was chosen for this honor on the basis of her wisdom, intelligence, and interest in religious ceremony. The male head priest or chief kept his office in this woman's home and consulted her on many decisions. . . .

Every clan in a Hopi village was also headed by a

matriarch, or clan mother, who enjoyed certain privileges as a result of her seniority. The clan mother was always consulted by her male relatives on any matter which fell within her realm of competence or sphere of influence, for example, family quarrels or other such disputes. The matriarch of the leading clan did not necessarily hold the position of Keeper of the Fire—sometimes a younger woman was felt to be more suited to the job.

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1. How did Iroquois women have the upper hand economically?

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2. Among the Hopi, why was the matriarch of the clan not always chosen as the Keeper of the Fire?

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3. What similarities can you see among the four societies mentioned in the excerpt in terms of women's power?

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