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# Complementary Power
## Men and Women of the Lenni Lenape

MARGARET M. CAFFREY

In the 1790s a man named John Burnet witnessed a game organized by the Lenni Lenape chief Buckongahelas in which about a hundred people participated. Men and women played each other on opposite teams. Women could carry the ball in their hands, and men could use only their feet. If a woman had the ball she could be tackled in attempts to dislodge it. Play began with an old chief throwing the ball up between the two teams in the middle of the field. Each team tried to get the ball through the other team's goalposts at opposite ends of the field. Burnet wrote that the young women "were the most active of their party, and most frequently caught the ball when it was amusing to see the struggle between them and the young men, which generally terminated in the prostration of the squaw upon the grass, before the ball could be forced from her hand." The game lasted about an hour, and the women won "by the herculean strength" of a woman who threw the ball for the deciding goal. In an article including various historical and oral accounts, scholar Jim Rementer found this game, called Pahsaheman, still being played in 1993.[1]

The continuation of this game, in spite of the vast changes the Lenni Lenape have faced over time, suggests that it reflects an important element of pre-European-contact Lenape society. This game, in which the women's team faces the men's and each has an equal opportunity to win by using complementary methods to move the ball (women's arms, men's legs), suggests in the Lenape past intriguing alternatives to European ideas of gender and their application.[2] To explore these differences, it is necessary to look at the role gender played among the Lenni Lenape as Native Americans met Europeans. Since the accounts from this period are European, one must read and compare them critically to gain insight into Lenape life.

### A GENDERED SOCIETY

The Lenni Lenape, called the Delaware people by the English, lived predominantly in New Jersey, Delaware, southeastern Pennsylvania near the Delaware



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River, and southeastern New York state at the time of first European contact. They were pushed into western Pennsylvania, then to Ohio by white settlement, and then to various other western areas. Today there are four major Delaware groups, living predominantly in Oklahoma and Ontario, Canada, and numbering approximately sixteen thousand people.[3]

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Lenni Lenape were a highly gendered society with defined markers of male and female identity. Physical appearance, clothing, work roles, and even behavior marked one as male or female. Women grew their hair long, often until it reached below their hips, whereas men plucked the hair from their heads until only a small amount remained, "forming a round crest, of about two inches in diameter." Men wore a plume of feathers in their hair, which stuck straight up or hung downward, while women did not. Men daily decorated their faces elaborately, creating designs such as streaks or the outlines of animals. When dressing up, women painted more discreetly, using round spots of red on each cheek, reddening their eyelids and the tops of their foreheads, and some women reddened the rims of their ears and their temples.[4]

Clothing easily distinguished the genders – men wore "breechclouts," or loincloths, women knee-length skirts, which, although short by European standards, allowed them to move through the forest without hindrance. After European contact, when dressing up men would wear a small blanket called a match-coat over a shirt, a loincloth, leggings, and moccasins; women would wear a "petticoat," a piece of cloth about two yards long that was fastened around the hips and hung a little below the knees, along with a shirt, leggings, and moccasins. To go dancing, men fixed deer claws to garters or knee bands and women used bells or thimbles, each making their own distinctively gendered sounds. In dancing itself, men leaped, shouted, and stamped, while women acted "with decency and becoming modesty," moving "one foot after the other slightly forwards then backwards, yet so as to advance gradually."[5]

Men and women also had gendered work expectations, although, as in the case of face painting, they differed from European expectations. Women were the principal farmers, growing predominantly corn, beans, and squash, while men hunted and fished. There was some overlap in daily life – when women made maple sugar, men would "occasionally assist their wives in gathering the sap and watch the kettles in their absence." But while women made maple sugar, men's principal occupation at that time was hunting bear. It was also expected that women would provide wood for fires and keep them going year-round. The proper person to work in the fields was also clearly the woman, to the extent that men were embarrassed to be seen doing this work. Indeed, Lenape men mocked European men for doing women's work. An early missionary, David Brainerd, wrote, "Hence they will frequently sit and laugh at the whites, as being good for nothing else but to plow and fatigue themselves with



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hard labour." He further wrote, with cultural bias, "They have been bred up in idleness, and know little about cultivating land. . . . I am obliged to *instruct* them in, as well as *press* them to, the performance of their work." For old men, the gender expectations loosened. They worked "a little, chopping wood or doing other things about the house, but the younger do nothing unless driven by dire necessity to build a hut or house or the like."[6]

Besides hunting and providing housing, men were expected to make canoes and wooden bowls, help women clear the land for planting, and, post-Contact, build fences around it. But men's identity was tied up in hunting, for which there were various seasons. The most prominent were the deer-hunting season from approximately September to the beginning of January; the beaver, raccoon, fox, and bear season, from January to spring planting in May; and the summer deer hunt, from the end of June or beginning of July.[7]

While men did their work, women, besides planting and harvesting, cutting wood, and producing maple sugar, were expected to pound corn to meal in mortars or troughs, cook and make bread, smoke and dry meat, tan skins and make clothing and moccasins, store food, gather nuts, tubers, and berries in various seasons, and make mats, ropes, hats, and baskets of wild hemp. Once the Europeans came with different domesticated animals, they also became gendered. Missionary David Zeisberger wrote, "Cattle belong to women, horses to men, though a man may give his wife a pony for her own."[8]

Men and women even carried burdens differently. Women made and decorated the carrying bands, but men's were worn fixed across the chest and were used to carry a deer weighing 100 to 130 pounds, while the women's were worn with the strap around the forehead, the load hanging down the back. When death occurred, men made coffins, but old women dug the graves. Gender differentiation also extended from material life to ways of acting. Zeisberger wrote, "Men deem it a shame to weep," but women wept loudly and bitterly at deaths. There also seems to have been cultural permission for women to quarrel with each other and with men, but men were culturally prohibited from this. Zeisberger wrote that "berating one another" was "rarely the case among men . . . more frequent among women." John Heckewelder wrote of the men, "They are not quarrelsome, and are always on guard, so as not to offend each other." Women also had cultural permission to be more vocal interpersonally, or at least were seen so. Heckewelder wrote, "The women, who everywhere speak more than the men, never want words to express themselves, but rather seem to have too many." He added that the Lenni Lenape had the expression, "Much talking disgraces a man and is fit only for women."[9]

Although the Lenni Lenape constructed their gender system in many ways differently from Europeans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both groups expected visible differentiation between men and women in appear-



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ance, clothing, suitable work, material culture used or made by each, and certain ways of acting. But was this gender distinction used to reinforce the dominance of men and the subordination of women among the Lenni Lenape? Examination of the relationship of men and women in the multiple aspects of Lenape culture, such as marriage, economics, social status, and religion, reveals that men and women played complementary roles in their daily lives and in their cultural matrix, roles that gave them a relatively egalitarian relationship in which the key dynamic was not domination and subordination between the sexes, but complementary partnership.

## COMPLEMENTARY POWER

In marriage, men and women gave reciprocally to each other what they produced. Zeisberger wrote, "What a man secures in the chase belongs to his wife; as soon as he brings skins and flesh home he no longer regards them as his own, but as property of his wives." He adds, "On the other hand what the woman has gained in planting and harvesting is for the husband and she must provide for him everything that he needs in the chase."[10]

This was not a metaphorical reciprocity. Of the meat, Zeisberger wrote, a woman could "then do what she pleases with it. He says nothing, if she even gives the greatest part of it to her friends, which is a very common custom." Heckewelder added that the husband, "if he has suffering friends, may give them as much of it [corn] as he pleases, without consulting his wife, or being afraid of her being displeased." He added that the maple sugar made by the wife was also "considered as belonging to her husband."[11]

That the contributions of both men and women to subsistence were considered equally important is suggested by a conversation Heckewelder had with one man who complained of going to a treaty conference to talk about land and thereby losing nine weeks of the hunting season. The man stated, "Had I not such a good wife . . . who planted so much corn, and so many beans, pumpkins, squashes, and potatoes last summer, my family would now live most wretchedly."[12]

Men and women in marriage did not hold goods in common; a man had his property and a woman had hers, over which each had the final say. At death, the property of a person was given away to friends and relatives, and the remaining spouse kept only what belonged to him or herself personally, that is, those items made by him or herself or given to him or her as gifts. Both women and men could contract debts as well, something generally not allowed European married women.[13]

In the social realm, evidence indicates the high status of women. Women's lives were worth more than men's. As William Penn wrote, "For in case they kill



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a Woman, they pay double, and the Reason they render, is, That she breedeth Children, which Men cannot do." No dominance was given to boys in puberty ceremonies. Both boys and girls went through distinct rites of passage at puberty, the boys at the killing of their first deer, the girls at the time of their first menstrual period. A girl had to go to a separate hut, built apart for her, where her mother or an older woman "cares for her and guards her so that none may see her." Generally, the girl stayed in the hut twelve days, the sacred number for the Delaware, during which she was given little to eat, purged through vomiting, and had to wear a blanket over her head. At the end she was brought back home, washed and dressed in new garments, and required to wear a cap with a long shield so she could not see well or be seen for two months, after which she was eligible to marry.[14]

A boy became a man through the rituals associated with killing his first deer. Until a man built a reputation as a skillful hunter, he had little chance to marry. William Penn wrote, boys "go a Fishing till ripe for the Woods, which is about Fiftenn; then they Hunt, and after having given some Proofs of their Manhood, by a good return of Skins, they may Marry, else it is a shame to think of a wife." This event was "the occasion of a great solemnity," a feast during which the boy fasted and listened to advice and prayers.[15]

There are variant accounts of marriage customs among the Lenni Lenape, but they all reveal the favorable status of the woman. According to Zeisberger and George Loskiel, the Lenni Lenape practiced bride wealth, in which the prospective husband gave gifts to the woman or woman's family, in contrast to the European dowry system, in which the woman's family gave gifts to the man or his family. The practice of bride wealth is generally a custom among groups who have a tradition of valuing women. Heckewelder gives an account of marriage customs that emphasizes the reciprocity expected in marriage. He wrote that the bridegroom's mother negotiated for him, beginning the process by taking meat to the prospective bride's home and mentioning that her son had killed it. In return, the mother of the bride, if the family and the daughter approved, took a dish of beans, corn, or other vegetables to the man's house, saying, "This is the produce of my daughter's field; and she also prepared it." If the mothers told each other the young people declared the offerings "very good," the bargain was struck. From this time a series of presents continued to be exchanged between the families, and the friendship between the families increased daily; "they do their domestic and field work jointly." When the young people decided to live together the parents supplied tools, kettles, bowls, and other goods. A woman could not be forced to marry; the choice was hers, but she usually acceded to the wishes of her parents and relatives.[16]

There is some evidence that suggests the partial or previous use of a longhouse and multiple-family dwellings, so it is difficult to say whether the



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Lenape were patrilocal or matrilocal. Zeisberger wrote of the 1700s that when the decision was favorable, "the girl is led to the dwelling of the groom, without further ceremony." Commonly, the couple would live with friends "until they can erect a dwelling of their own." Zeisberger added that each family preferred to have its own house, and hence, they were small, unlike the longhouses of the Iroquois.[17]

The Lenni Lenape were matrilineal. "Children," Zeisberger wrote, "do not inherit tribal rights from the father but from the mother." Therefore, both men and women owed allegiance to their lineage over their husbands or wives. Thus, divorce, while it could be personally disruptive, leading to great grief or, at the extreme, suicide, was not socially disruptive because the main social unit of society was not the nuclear family but the lineage. Therefore, divorce was common and could be initiated by both men and women. Neither the man nor the woman had dominance over the other in this decision. As Heckewelder wrote, "It is understood on both sides that the parties are not to live together any longer than they shall be pleased with each other. The husband may put away his wife whenever he pleases, and the woman may in like manner abandon her husband." Children went with the mother in cases of divorce, since they belonged to her lineage. The importance of the lineage was captured in a remark written down by Zeisberger: "The Indians, therefore, regard their wives as strangers. It is a common saying among them, 'My wife is not my friend,' that is, she is not related to me and I am not concerned about her, she is only my wife." In 1823 Charles C. Trowbridge recorded a similar remark among the Lenape concerning men: "Children are always considered as belonging to the tribe of the mother, who is the only relative; and the expression, 'He is my father but not my relative' tho' singular, is said to be very common."[18]

In spite of these sayings, there is abundant evidence that men and women in marriage cared for each other or wanted the other to care for them. Both men and women bought love charms, or *besons*, to try to ensure the love and faithfulness of a spouse. A man showed his love for his wife by displaying his eagerness to hunt for her, by seeing that she was always well dressed, better than himself, by giving her presents, and by going to extraordinary lengths to get her the foods that she wanted when pregnant. A wife showed her love by having food ready at any time her husband asked for it, by supplying him with provisions needed for the hunt and with clothing and moccasins, by carrying out all the duties expected of a wife, by presenting her husband with gifts, by trying not to quarrel with him, and by saving stories about the children while he was gone to repeat to him when he returned.[19]

But husbands did not make decisions for wives. The Lenni Lenape, like other Native American peoples, believed in the freedom of the individual to act, and both men and women shared this freedom. Thus, when one spouse was con-



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verted to Christianity, the other did not necessarily follow. There were cases of men and women deciding to live at a Moravian missionary village while their spouses would not. Men also did not make decisions for women concerning the fields or the household. Zeisberger stated, "The husband leaves everything to his wife and never interferes in things committed to her." Heckewelder also wrote, "The men and their wives do not in general trouble themselves with each other's business." Women apparently did not expect to be protected by men at all times on journeys. At times, women traveled by themselves or with other women for what Europeans considered far distances. Explorer Isaack de Rasieres wrote in around 1626 of three women of the "Sinnekens" (Lenape) who came to trade fish and tobacco and "had been six days on the march." Again, every woman whose child died in a foreign land tried to go once a year, usually with another woman, to make a drink offering on the child's grave. Brainerd wrote that women "readily set out and travelled ten or fifteen miles" to tell friends that he would preach the next day. Loskiel told the story of a woman, upset at the Moravian missionaries' capture by other Indians, who stole a horse and set out to Pittsburgh to get help for them.[20]

Women joined together to make decisions concerning the crops, such as whether to hire a rainmaker when the skies were dry. Both men and women often worked communally with members of their own sex, though they also sometimes worked alone or relied on family help. The men formed hunting parties and also fished together, and the women worked together at caring for and harvesting the crops.[21] As Heckewelder wrote, farming, getting wood, and pounding corn were "frequently done by female parties . . . the labour is thus quickly and easily performed; when it is over, and sometimes at intervals, they sit down to enjoy themselves by feasting on some good victuals, prepared for them by the person or family for whom they work, and which the man has taken care to provide before hand from the woods. . . . Even the chat which passes during their joint labors is highly diverting to them."[22]

According to observers, Lenape women had fewer children than European women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Heckewelder noted that "the Indian women are not in general so prolific as the white race," and in general "seldom have more than four or five children," although Christian Indians had as many children as whites, from six to nine. The difference appears to be that Lenape women breastfed longer than European women, on an average for two years and sometimes longer, to as many as four years in the case of a last child; the average for European women was nine months. While breastfeeding, women apparently did not have sexual relations with their husbands. Zeisberger wrote that during the breastfeeding period "husbands have concubines, though not in the house." Thus Lenape society kept the birthrate down to a level that a subsistence society could support, and, incidentally, gave their



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women freedom from the European women's constant cycle of pregnancy.[23]

Both old men and old women were accorded the respect of age and at death received similar treatment. Heckewelder wrote, "Women . . . are not treated after their death with less respect than the men, and the greatest honors are paid to the remains of the wives of renowned warriors or veteran chiefs, particularly if they were descended themselves from a high family."[24] Both widows and widowers were expected not to marry again for a year. Women had cultural permission to mourn more openly than men. Women could become professional mourners at funerals, paid in goods or food for their loud wailing and lamenting. Zeisberger wrote that in the days before a burial, female relations and friends would mourn together over the body after sunset and before daybreak. After the burial, the mother, grandmother, or other female relations were expected to go every evening and morning to the grave and weep over it. This practice gradually tapered off until the mourning period was over. Widows could give rein to the wildest mourning: sitting in the ashes near a fire, weeping bitterly, running to the grave with loud lamentations, not eating, drinking, sleeping. These actions calmed down after a while, but for the year of mourning a woman usually wore no ornaments and seldom washed. When the year was up, she washed herself clean, combed and anointed her hair, and resumed ordinary life. Men, without this same cultural permission to mourn openly, were not supposed to weep or outwardly show deep feelings about their wives. However, the lineage of the woman had a claim on the husband during the year of mourning. William Penn wrote that men had to make an offering to the kin of a wife who dies, "For till Widdowers have done so, they must not marry again."[25]

Women played no political role among the Lenni Lenape that Europeans could perceive. According to William Penn, women did not become chiefs: "Their Government is by Kings, which they call Sachema, and those by Succession, but always of the Mothers side; for instance, the Children of him that is now King, will not succeed, but his Brother by the Mother, or the children of his Sister, whose Sons (and after them the Children of her Daughters) will reign; for no Woman Inherits."[26] Zeisberger, writing later, added, "Women are never admitted to the council; in matters of public interest they may stand about the house and listen, and they account it an honor when they are admitted, to hand victuals and keep up the fire."[27]

There is no direct evidence of a dual government system among the Lenni Lenape, such as those that existed among the Iroquois, Hurons, and Cherokee. All of these peoples had men and women leaders or men's and women's councils, the women usually dealing with problems that concerned women or building a consensus among women concerning issues important to both men and women, with a link to the men's council or the chiefs.[28]



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The government of the Lenni Lenape is described, by Europeans who had the knowledge to make comparisons with the Iroquois system, as male, with the usual civil chief and war chief, who alternated authority in times of peace and war, advised by a council made up of old men and experienced warriors. Chiefs could not command, compel, or punish. They ruled by "calm reasoning and friendly exhortations." The Lenni Lenape were described as made up of three groups, the Turtle, the Turkey, and the Wolf, and Zeisberger described chiefs, although members of the group involved, as chosen by the chiefs of the other two groups.[29]

Brainerd noted that women distinguished between events "of a public nature, belonging only to the men, and not what every individual person should concern himself with." But there is indirect evidence that the women, along with the young men and the older men in council, were treated as a constituency with power in the decision-making process. In the ceremony creating a new chief after the death of the old, the wife of the new chief, "attended by several women," was called to be obedient to him. "This is confirmed by means of a belt [of wampum] and the woman, *in the name of all the women*, promises obedience." The young men made this promise as well. In 1758, at a treaty conference in Ohio, Frederick Post reported in his journal that Lenni Lenape leaders again and again warned him not to listen to the warriors, women, and young people while the chiefs struggled to create a consensus.[30] It seems that the women were treated as a constituency who had to discuss and deliberate and come to consensus together with the young men and the mature or older men, although it would be the chiefs who would present their united consensus to another Native American people or the Europeans.

From the descriptions of various Europeans, it seems that this intragroup consensus system, in which women played an important role, complemented the men's councils. As Zeisberger wrote: "They [Indians] like to discuss affairs of state and communicate their opinions. In fact they are more ready to discuss such matters in course of visits than in the Council House, for there they prefer to let the older people speak. Occasionally visits are made with the purpose of discovering the opinions of others; in a chief's home, all manner of reports, true and false, furnish material for discussion."[31]

Loskiel found at least one Lenape woman remembered after her death as a "wife and intelligent counsellor." Zeisberger, however, had a negative view of the women's participation. "Stories are carried by women from house to house," he wrote, "so often manufactured" that men would not believe them until "confirmed by some more reliable authority." Or again, "The women are much given to lying and gossiping. They carry evil report from house to house. As long as they are observed they appear modest and without guile."[32] On examination, what Zeisberger meant was that some women resisted European



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culture and religion by speaking against the missionaries. Loskiel wrote,

> The greatest enemies of the missionaries were the old women, who went about, publicly complaining, that the Indian corn was blasted or devoured by worms; that the deer and other game began to retire from the woods; . . . merely because Brother Zeisberger preached a strange doctrine, and the Indians began to alter their manner of living and to believe on God. One in particular, who was unusually enraged against him and his doctrine, protested with vehemence, that whoever went to his meetings and believed his words, would be tempted and tormented by Satan, and that therefore all men should carefully avoid the company of the white teacher.[33]

The Lenni Lenape were a society in which social control was maintained by public displeasure or shame before others. Zeisberger wrote, "Indians dislike having their civil conduct or acts uncovered and held up to them. . . . It has happened that one openly accused of an evil deed, murder or the like, has, in desperation, ended his life." Of the women, he wrote, "Fear of disgrace keeps them from open wrong-doing for they do not wish to have a bad name." Women were the primary praisers and shamers of society. Heckewelder noted that, when a man received visitors, his wife, after feeding them, "will retire to a neighbor's house, to inform the family of the visit with which her husband is honoured." Or again, "The more a man does for his wife the more he is esteemed, particularly by the women, who will say, 'This man surely loves his wife.'" When a husband and wife quarreled he went off to the woods for a week or two, "well knowing he cannot inflict a greater punishment on his wife," who would be uncertain of his whereabouts. She "is soon reported as a bad and quarrelsome woman . . . she is at once put to shame by her neighbors." Women, Zeisberger wrote, would more frequently berate one another: "They direct words and speeches at one another which would not be considered terrible by other people but are very seriously taken by the Indians."[34]

Historians and anthropologists have studied female gossip networks as a means by which a community's members, both men and women, are praised, shamed, or coerced. Gossip is one of the ways women can influence political decisions as well as relations between people.[35] The picture painted here is of a society that women helped keep stable by their roles as shamers and praisers and in which the men's councils became the final step in a process of consensus in which the women actively participated.

Like Iroquois, Huron, or Cherokee women, Lenape women had the political power to rescue or condemn prisoners. Men, women, and children participated in the ritual of the gauntlet, which prisoners had to run, but Zeisberger wrote, "Female prisoners are frequently rescued by the women who take them



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between their ranks and carry them to the town." Loskiel added that if a prisoner entered a family and lost the goodwill of the widow, "she soon puts him to death" as a servant to her husband.[36]

It is clear that men and women of the Lenni Lenape shared complementary economic and political participation, accompanied by social activities and relations that indicated high status for women and the egalitarian nature of marriage. What was truly different from European society and what, more than anything else, gave women their complementary power with men was the underlying worldview of the Lenni Lenape, which led them to see the world as a nexus of spiritual power, where, as Trowbridge wrote, "all animals, even animated nature, trees, plants, etc., are considered as beings having supernatural powers." Nor was their spiritual world hierarchical, as the European spiritual world was. Heckewelder wrote that "all animated nature, in whatever degree, is in their eyes a great whole, from which they have not yet ventured to separate themselves." He went on, "They are, in fact, according to their opinions, only the first among equals," between whom "intimate ties of connexion and relationship may exist, or at least did exist in the beginning of time." The universe was a great sacred circle on which men and women, plants and animals coexisted in partnership, and their language reflected this. Heckewelder continued, "Hence, in their languages, these inflections of their nouns which we call *genders*, are not, as with us, descriptive of the *masculine* and *feminine* species, but of the *animate* and *inanimate* kinds. Indeed, they go so far as to include trees, and plants within the first of these descriptions." Both men and women were within the category of animate beings. The earth was given jointly to all and each was entitled to a share. From this, Heckewelder wrote, "Hospitality flows . . . with them it is not a virtue but a strict duty."[37]

The Lenape believed in a gender-neutral idea of God. Heckewelder wrote that the Indians looked to an all-powerful Mannitto, which he translated as "Being, or Spirit," thus "the Great Spirit." Within the Lenape religious belief structure there were both male and female creators and male and female powerful spirit beings. There were at least three different creation stories, all directly or indirectly celebrating female creation. One set of stories had the Lenni Lenape coming out of the earth, as out of a womb. Heckewelder wrote, "The Indians consider the earth as their universal mother." A widely spread second Lenape version seems to be similar to the Iroquois story of Sky Woman:

> a woman fell down from heaven, who, for a long time, hovered about in the air, but could not find a resting place anywhere; that the fishes in the sea had compassion on her, and a large tortoise raised her back out of the water and offered it to her for her abode. Since that time, the scum of the sea and a quantity of shells and weeds gathered around the fish, gradually



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> became solid earth, and at least grew into that large country which is now called America.[38]

The third version had the world created on the back of a giant turtle brought up from the depths by the Creator and included the idea of complementary creation – men and women created together – not, as in Christianity, woman from man. As the water fell from the turtle's back, a tree took root. The tree sent out a sprout that grew into a man and another sprout that became a woman. The Lenni Lenape believed they were descended from this first human couple. The turtle became a sacred symbol of Mother Earth and the twelve plates on its shell became the sacred number for the Lenape.[39]

The Great Spirit gave power to various manitowuk, or spirits: for example, the four quarters of the earth went to four manitowuk, three Grandfathers and a Grandmother. The Grandmother had power over the south, from which balmy winds blew and where it was warm, aspects associated with the coming of spring and new growth. Another important manitowuk was the Corn Goddess, known as Mother Corn. One of the Turtle legends says, "It was God's will that the Corn Spirit abide in the far heavenly region in the image of an aged woman, with dominion over all vegetables." The Corn Mother was symbolized in sacrifice by corn itself. Zeisberger wrote, "Corn is said to be the wife of the Indian and to it they sacrifice bear's flesh. To the deer and bear they offer corn." The complementarity of this sacrifice, related to female and male sacred powers, is obvious.[40]

Women seem to have had charge of religious ritual for the well-being and health of the family. Families had sacred figures, carved out of wood, which were passed on from generation to generation, that they called mother or grandmother. Women cared for them, making new clothes and new moccasins for them. Once a year they would hold a ceremony and dance. There are two different reports of how the dance was held: one emphasizing complementarity and the other, the women's power. In the first, which occurred in the spring, the figure, dressed in new clothes and moccasins was be put up on a pole and prayed to, participants asking it to ensure good health to the owner's family. The dancers made two circles, with men on the inside and the women on the outside. Men carried the figure through six sets and women carried it through six more sets, making the Lenape sacred number. Then a feast of hominy and venison was served to everyone. In the second, which occurred in the fall, again the figure received new clothes and moccasins, but this time the owner danced around, carrying the figure and leading other women who wished to participate, with a feast following.[41]

Either old men or old women could mediate for spiritual power and blessings. When a boy killed his first deer, if it was a doe, it was given to an old



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woman, if a buck, to an old man. During the feasting the recipient prayed for and gave counsel to the boy. In day-to-day life, old men were thought to have spiritual power concerning the work of hunting, women to have spiritual power concerning love and relationships. They made magic charms, called *besons*, out of various things, for example, roots, herbs, and seeds, which they sold to support themselves and which were carried by younger men and women to promote success in hunting and in love. They also sold *besons* to bring many presents to the buyer.[42]

The most important religious festival for the Lenni Lenape was the Big House Ceremony, which lasted the sacred twelve days. The Big House represented the universe; the floor was the earth, the four walls, the four quarters of the world; the roof, the sky where the Creator lived. There was a center post with two carved faces, one facing east and one facing west; two posts at each of the two doorways and six posts along the walls also each had a carved face, making twelve carved faces in all, all painted half red and half black. The intent was to thank the Creator and Spirits for their past blessings to the whole people and to pray that they would provide for the year to come.[43]

The Lenni Lenape, when asked later by anthropologists, were aware of the complementarity built into the sacred performance. George Anderson, or Rustling Leaves, a Lenni Lenape, according to anthropologist Frank G. Speck, "pointed out that the balancing of functions between the male and the female elements of human society was implied in the Delaware ritual performance." He cited the equal number of male and female attendants, a ceremonial honor. One fire was in the charge of women and one was in the charge of men attendants. One door and the image on half of the center post "'belonging' to the men, the other, the opposite, to the women." He went on to note the complementary sweeping of the dance floor with turkey wings by the attendants to purify it. One of the fans was associated with the men and one with the women, but they continually switched the fans from one sweeping to the next. From the ninth to the twelfth nights of the Big House Ceremony, drumsticks, a male face on one and a female with breasts on the other, were used. At the end, the attendants received the same amount in payment. Both men and women danced throughout the twelve nights. Both men and women also recited their visions, but not equally. The twelfth night was set apart for the women's visions, and there were special ceremonies that evening. Cedar leaves were added to the two fires at the beginning so that people could breathe in the smoke and purify themselves. Two women took around a bark dish of red paint and one of grease, starting on the north side, and put a spot of red paint on each person's left cheek and a little grease on the head. Men attendants painted and greased the twelve faces on their posts and the drumsticks, prayer sticks, drum, and turtle rattles. Each woman who told her visions received "a share of the veni-



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son, if there is any – the biggest and fattest buck the hunters kill – and the attendants cook it for them at the fire outside."[44] This suggests that not as many women had visions as men, but that, when they occurred, their visions were taken as seriously as the men's.

The Lenape, like other eastern Native Americans, believed in the power of dreams. As Brainerd wrote, "They give much heed to *dreams*, because they suppose that these invisible powers give them directions at such times about certain affairs, and sometimes inform them what *animal* they would choose to be worshipped in." Examples of women's dreams and visions appear in the historical literature. Brainerd wrote of a women who declared "she was dead several days, that her soul went southward, and feasted and danced with the happy spirits, and that she found all things exactly agreeable to the Indian notions of a future state." Captain Pipe's wife around 1775-76 spoke of having been in a vision to the "mansions of the spirits, where the strawberries and bilberries were as large as apples, and in great plenty."[45]

Like men's dreams, women's dreams or visions could turn them into witches or prophets. Old women in particular could be accused of being witches, and there are accounts of men and women being put to death on the basis of this accusation. But women's visions were also respected. Moravian missionary Abraham Luckenbach wrote in 1805 of more than one vision by women that were received by the chiefs positively, including one in which a woman predicted a dead chief would return to teach the traditional way of life, a vision that met "with the utmost approval of the chiefs, for which reason they had all the Indians come together these last days, in order to make it known to them, and admonish them by all means to do everything that the woman said."[46] Women's visions were taken as seriously as men's, and women's spiritual power was acknowledged.

Every aspect of Lenape life – hunting well, farming well, gathering herbs – involved the invoking of spiritual power, the calling on the spirits of the deer, the corn, the herbs, and the performing of the correct propitiatory rites to appease these spirits. To be a doctor among the Lenape also involved the calling upon of spiritual forces. Heckewelder wrote of "physicians of both sexes, who take considerable pains to acquire a correct knowledge of the properties and medical virtues of plants, roots, and barks, for the benefit of their fellow-men." The female physicians in particular had cures for "complaints peculiar to their sex," as well as skill in curing wounds, bruises, and other ailments. Most Native Americans, Loskiel wrote, believed that a medicine would not work unless given by "a professed physician, which many persons of both sexes pretend to be," indicating the spiritual power involved.[47]

The mixed complementarity and spirituality in Lenape life is visibly symbolized by the game described at the beginning of this essay, a game men and



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women played together that was, in addition to being entertaining, a part of the spiritual cycle. Anthropologist Frank Speck in 1938 wrote of this game as part of an important ancient religious rite. Played from the beginning of spring through June, it was both a celebration of the spring and a protection against bad weather that would destroy the crops.[48]

From all of the evidence, the complementarity and relative equality of Lenape men and women is apparent. The case of the Lenape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries shows that a society that acknowledges a distinct gender difference between men and women is not necessarily a society in which one gender dominates and the other is subordinate. Lenape men and women shared decision-making power in their culture.

Scholarship on different Native American peoples of this time period has focused on politics and economics as the key factors that allowed Native American women to have more power and status in their societies than European women had in theirs.[49] What this essay reveals is the complex interweaving of economics and politics with other equally important factors: the principle of autonomy for men and women that gave women more independence than European cultures allowed; the effect of living in a society in which the lineage was the most important social unit, which allowed more egalitarian marriage between men and women; and, most especially, an idea of spiritual power to which both men and women had equal access coupled with a belief system that included female co-creators and the creation of men and women as co-equals. All of these elements of the cultural matrix worked together to create a society in which the woman's role was highly respected.

## NOTES

1. John Burnet, from *Notes on the Early Settlement of the North-Western Territory* (1847), quoted in John Sugden, *The Shawnee in Tecumsah's Time*, Heft 66 (Nortorf, Germany: Volkerkundliche Arbeitsgemeinshaft, 1990), 83. The game was played in a Shawnee town. Jim Rementer, "Pahsaheman – The Lenape Football Game," *Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of New Jersey* 48 (1993): 52-55; also available online at *www.delawaretribeofindians.nsn.us.*

2. *Gender* is defined as the social construction of men's and women's roles and relationships.

3. See Lee Sultzman, *Delaware History*, revised 28 June 1997. Available online at *www.dickshovel.com/dela.html* [5 March 1999].

4. David Zeisberger, *David Zeisberger's History of the Northern American Indians*, edited by Archer B. Hulbert and William N. Schwarze (1779-80; reprint, F. J. Heer Printing Company, 1910), 12, 87. See also George Loskiel, *History of the Mission of the United Brethren among the Indians in North America: In Three Parts*, translated by Christian La



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Trobe (London: Brethren's Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel, 1794), 48, 49, 52. Loskiel uses about one-third of Zeisberger verbatim. See John Heckewelder, *History, Manners and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States*, The First American Frontier Series (1876; reprint, New York: Arno Press & *New York Times*, 1971), 203, 204 (originally written in 1819).

5. Zeisberger, 15; Loskiel, 48; Heckewelder, 203, 205. Quote from Zeisberger, 118.

6. Heckewelder, 156; Zeisberger, 81. David Brainerd, *Memoirs of the Rev. David Brainerd; Missionary to the Indians on the Borders of New-York, New-Jersey, and Pennsylvania* (1822; reprint, St. Clair Shores MI: Scholarly Press, 1970), 345, 360, his emphasis. See also Francis Daniel Pastorius, "Circumstantial Geographical Description of Pennsylvania, by Francis Daniel Pastorius, 1700," in *Narratives of Early Pennsylvania, West New Jersey, and Delaware 1630-1707*, edited by Albert Cook Myers (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), 353-448, esp. 385. Last quote by Zeisberger, 18.

7. Zeisberger, 13-14.

8. Gabriel Thomas, "An Historical and Geographical Account of Pensilvania and of West New-Jersey, by Gabriel Thomas, 1698," in Myers, 341; Loskiel, 59; Zeisberger, 16; see also Heckewelder, 155-57.

9. Zeisberger, 21, quotes on 89, 85; see also 81, 82. Heckewelder, 160, quotes on 103, 128, 189.

10. Zeisberger, 16; see also Loskiel, 60, and Heckewelder, 158. This reciprocity was also noted by Regula Trenkwalder Schonenberger in *Lenape Women, Matriliny and the Colonial Encounter, Resistance and Erosion of Power (c. 1600-1876): An Excursus in Feminist Anthropology* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 1991), 16-17.

11. Zeisberger, 82; Heckewelder, 158.

12. Heckewelder, 314-15.

13. Zeisberger, 87; Loskiel, 63; Heckewelder, 153. European women became femes covert at marriage, were "covered over" by their husbands, and in general lost their rights to own property, keep wages, make contracts, and have credit in their own names. See, for example, Paula A. Treckel, *To Comfort the Heart: Women in Seventeenth-Century America* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), chapter 4.

14. William Penn, in Myers, 236; see also Zeisberger, 91; Loskiel, 16. On girls' puberty ceremonies, see Zeisberger, 77; Loskiel, 56-57; William Penn, in Myers, 231. On boys' ceremonies, see Heckewelder, 245-48.

15. William Penn, "Letter from William Penn to the Committee of the Free Society of Traders, 1683," in Myers, 231; Zeisberger, 75-76.

16. Zeisberger, 78, 79; Loskiel, 57; Heckewelder, 161.

17. Zeisberger, 78, 17; Loskiel, 57; Heckewelder implies separate living, 161. Peter Lindestrom, in *Geographica Americae with an Account of the Delaware Indians, Based on Surveys and Notes Made in 1654-1656*, translated by Amandus Johnson (Philadelphia: Swedish Colonial Society, 1925), 211, describes each Lenape sachem as building a longhouse for the winter use of all the people, which would imply matrilocality. Will-



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iam Penn's description of housing resembling an English barn in the 1680s could be interpreted as a longhouse as well. But Pastorius, in 1700, wrote of the small, one-room house even of royalty, in Myers, 426. The Moravian missionaries' accounts show that by the 1700s the Lenape lived patrilocally in family units. Matrilineality does not necessarily dictate longhouse-style living. The type of house described is reminiscent of those of the Powhatan, a matrilineal people who also lived in family units, not longhouses. In 1766, missionary Charles Beatty, in *The Journal of a Two Months Tour; with a View of Promoting Religion among the Frontier Inhabitants of Pennsylvania and of Introducing Christianity among the Indians to the Westward of the Alegh-geny Mountains* (1767; reprint, St. Clair Shores MI: Scholarly Press, 1972), 44, 54, described the chief's house as a "council house," "a long building" with characteristics reminiscent of the later Big House. Possibly the chief's house was a remnant of a matrilocal past.

18. Zeisberger, 98; see also William Penn, in Myers, 235. On suicides, see, for example, William Penn, in Myers, 232; for the case of a woman poisoning herself over her husband, see Heckewelder, 258-60; for cases of self-poisoning by men over wives, see also Zeisberger, 83; Loskiel, 57. On mutual divorce, see Heckewelder, 154; also Brainerd, 325; Zeisberger, 82, 83. On child custody, see Zeisberger, 98, 99; Loskiel, 61; Heckewelder, 259. On wives as strangers, see Zeisberger, 99; on husbands, see Charles C. Trowbridge, "Account of some of the Traditions, Manners and Customs of the Lenee Lenaupaa or Delaware Indians," appendix 3 in *The Delaware Indians: A History*, by C. A. Weslager (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1972), 473-500, esp. 481.

19. Zeisberger, 83; Loskiel, 57; Heckewelder, 155, 159-60.

20. Zeisberger, 81; Heckewelder, 159; Isaack de Rasieres, "Letter of Isaack de Rasieres to Samuel Blommaert, 1628," in *Narratives of New Netherland*, edited by J. Franklin Jameson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 102-15, esp. 143. On women traveling, see Zeisberger, 140; Loskiel, 45; Heckewelder, 199; Brainerd, 205; Loskiel, part 3, 159.

21. Zeisberger, 91, 129; Loskiel, 78-79, 95; Heckewelder, 164. Schonenberger, appendix 1, 291-93, identifies three women's names on two Esopus land deeds from 1677, which suggest that women might have had some power over land decisions as well as crop decisions.

22. Heckewelder, 156.

23. Heckewelder, 221-22. See also Zeisberger, 80, 81, and Loskiel, 61. European colonial women gave birth, on the average, every two years after marriage, unless some circumstance like a husband away for a long period intervened. The women became pregnant, on the average, almost immediately after ending breastfeeding. See, for example, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 135.

24. Heckewelder, 269, 270-75.

25. William Penn in Myers, 232; Zeisberger, 88, see also 124, 150. See also Heckewelder, 156.

26. William Penn, in Myers, 235.



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27. Zeisberger, 96; also Loskiel, 134, 135.

28. On the Iroquois, see Joan Jensen, "Native American Women and Agriculture: A Seneca Case Study," in *Women and Power in American History: A Reader*, edited by Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), 1:8-23; for the Hurons, see Pierre de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North America*, 2 vols. (1761; reprint, Chicago: Caxton Club, 1923), 2:19-20, 23-27; for the Cherokee, see Theda Purdue, "Nancy Ward (1738?-1822)," in *Portraits of American Women: From Settlement to the Present*, edited by G. Barker-Benfield and Catherine Clinton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 83-100.

29. Zeisberger, 112-13; Loskiel, 130, 132. Zeisberger also says the "principal captain" could elect and depose chiefs (98). Neither of these methods seems to allow a matron of the lineage to elect or depose chiefs, as Huron and Iroquois matrons could. The idea of a Delaware chief matron as a chiefmaker came into the anthropological literature in Frank Speck's *The Celestial Bear Comes Down to Earth* (Reading PA: Reading Public Museum and Art Gallery Scientific Publication 7, 1945), 3-6. He gained this information from Delawares on the Six Nations Reservation in Ontario. This is not mentioned in any early source or corroborated in any other source, and it seems possible that the Delawares living there had adopted the Iroquois model. Anthony F. C. Wallace uses this information in "Women, Land and Society: Three Aspects of Aboriginal Delaware Life" (*Pennsylvania Archeologist* 17 [1947]: 14), citing Speck. Both of these sources are often cited over this controversial point.

30. Brainerd, 177; Zeisberger, 112-13; also Loskiel, 131, my emphasis. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 251.

31. Zeisberger, 116.

32. Loskiel, 24; Zeisberger, 116, 124.

33. Loskiel, part 3, 31.

34. Zeisberger, 120; Heckewelder, 149, 159, 160; Zeisberger, 85.

35. On women's gossip as a form of social control and influential in the creation of informal political networks, see, for example, Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 99-100, 145, 306-13.

36. Jensen, 11; Purdue, 90-92; Zeisberger, 105; Loskiel, 149, 151.

37. Trowbridge, 493; on the hierarchical concept of the Great Chain of Being, see Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York: New American Library, 1977), 194-98. The Bible also called for men to rule nature and women. Heckwelder, 254, 101.

38. Heckewelder, 100; see note 1 on this page for the translation. See also Zeisberger, 128. For next quote, see Heckewelder, 249, 250. A version of the Iroquois story of Sky Woman can be found in Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill NC: University of



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North Carolina Press, 1992), 9-10. Heckewelder, 250, 249. For this Delaware version of Sky Woman, see Thomas Campanius Holm, *History of New Sweden* (c. 1670-1702), quoted in Schonenberger, 184. See also Loskiel, 24.

39. Weslager, 66-67. See also Zeisberger, 131-32, for variations.

40. M. R. Harrington, *Religion and Ceremonies of the Lenape*, Indian Notes and Monographs Series, edited by F. W. Hodge (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1921), 43-44. Harrington's information came from Delawares of Oklahoma (three men and one woman) and Canada (six men). Zeisberger, 139.

41. Harrington 162-79. Harrington calls this the Doll Being, but the use of this word diminishes the ritual in Western eyes. He also refers to it as a minor ceremony. This is true if one thinks of a major ceremony as involving greater numbers of people and time, but it gives a false message in terms of potential spiritual impact for the family and others involved. The spiritual power of women in the family was not minor, as this ceremony shows. Harrington commented that most early writers overlooked these ceremonies "since they were matters of personal and not of public concern, and their rites were held in private" (46). On 170-71, he quotes an account of such an "idol" written in 1839, in which a Munsee Indian (Wolf group of the Lenni Lenape) had had the figure in his family for over a hundred years, he himself being of the fourth generation to worship it.

42. Zeisberger, 75-76, 83, 84; Loskiel 15, 73; Heckewelder, 236.

43. Jay Miller, in "Old Religion among the Delawares: The Gamwing (Big House rite)," *Ethnohistory* 44 (winter 1997): 113-34, sees the Big House ceremony as an ancient expression of Delaware religion and not created post-Contact by 1805, as Anthony Wallace had thought. See Weslager, 71, on the symbolism; Harrington, 83, on the posts. On the purpose of the gathering, see remarks by Chief Charles Elkhair, who presided over Big House Ceremonies, quoted in Harrington, 88-89.

44. George Anderson, paraphrased in Frank G. Speck, *Oklahoma Delaware Ceremonies, Feasts, and Dances*, Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 7 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1937), 24-25; see also Speck's analysis, 26. Quote from Harrington, 106; see also 105.

45. Brainerd, 347. See also Zeisberger, 132; Loskiel, 40; Heckewelder, 245-48, although he concentrates on men. See also Harrington, 60-65; Delaware Richard C. Adams quoted in Harrington, 80. Last two quotes from Brainerd, 348; Loskiel, part 3, 105.

46. On witches, see Zeisberger, 128; Heckewelder, 294-99; Trowbridge, 497; Gladys Tantaquidgeon, *Folk Medicine of the Delaware and Related Algonkian Indians*, Anthropological Series, no. 3 (Harrisburg PA: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1972; orig. first section [Delawares], 1942; second section [Mohicans], 1928), 45. Quote from Abraham Luckenbach, in *The Moravian Indian Mission on White River: Diaries and Letters 1799-1806*, edited by L. H. Gipson (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1938), 339-40; also 334. See also Jay Miller, "The 1806 Purge among the Indiana Delaware: Sorcery, Gender, Boundaries, and Legitimacy," *Ethnohistory* 41 (spring 1994): 245-66.



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47. Heckewelder, 228, 229. Loskiel, 109, 110. Tantaquidgeon (8, 12, 13) talks of the spiritual rites of herbalists, and adds that "It is said, however, that women, through spiritual guidance, are more adept as a rule in the art of preparing and administering herb medicines than men" (8).

48. Speck, 73-87.

49. Karen Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (New York: Routledge, 1991), esp. chapter 6. See, for example, Judith K. Brown, "Economic Organization and the Position of Women among the Iroquois," *Ethnohistory* 17 (1970): 151-67; Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, "Autonomy and the Economic Roles of Indian Women of the Fox-Wisconsin River Region, 1763-1832," in *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, edited by Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Routledge, 1995), 72-89; Elizabeth Tooker, "Women in Iroquois Society," in *Extending the Rafters: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies*, edited by Michael J. Foster, Jack Campisi, and Marianne Mithun (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 109-23.



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