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Culture Clash

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Gina Lowdon explores the implications of cultural perspectives on mothering

I was recently given the opportunity to review a book for the AIMS Journal which I found profoundly thought provoking. The book *Until Our Hearts Are On the Ground* (reviewed on p22 of this issue) puts forward the perspective of many different women who are grouped together for the purposes of the book as 'Aboriginal Mothers'. The women are from many different tribes and peoples, mostly in Canada, but also from Australia, USA and Ghana.

The peoples represented are diverse including those considered 'Status Indians' by Canadian authorities with tribal names such as Iroquois (Haudenosaunee), Mohawk, Ojibway, Algonquin, Mik'maw, Cree; as well as 'non-Status Indians' such as Metis and Inuits; the Aborigine people of Australia; and the displaced people of Ghana.

Although their individual cultures are very different what they have in common is that they have been conquered, colonised or transplanted against their will by western Europeans.

The book uses strong language and speaks of occupied nations, the violence of colonisation, the cage of colonialism and the subjugation of indigenous peoples. Such language is entirely justified and the more I read the more clearly I saw a fundamental clash of cultures.

The egalitarian nature of the different gender roles

Whilst the individual cultures of the various indigenous tribes were very different, most were egalitarian, that is, although men's and women's roles and responsibilities were different neither was considered more important than the other.

Many were also matrilineal. Family descent was traced through the female line, and a child's status and place in the world came from his mother. It was common for the husband to move in with the wife near to her extended family rather than the other way around. This was not because women were considered superior, but for practical reasons that acknowledged the value of children and of women as mothers, as it meant that if the marriage ended for whatever reason the mother and her children remained secure with food, shelter and support being provided by her extended family.

In many indigenous cultures women held considerable political power that was equal to, not superior than, that of the men, but which acknowledged the different perspectives and equally valued contributions of both men and women. The Haudenosaunee, otherwise known as the Iroquois, were a

shining example of what mothering can mean in a society without patriarchy.

European colonisation of the Americas was widespread by the 1800s. European culture at that time was strongly patriarchal with power, land ownership and all political decisions being almost exclusively under the control of men.

Until Our Hearts Are On the Ground gives a valuable insight into the far reaching, long term consequences for egalitarian/matrilineal cultures of invasion by a patriarchal society.

I have no wish to trivialise or imply that the extensive racial and cultural discrimination and abuse that the indigenous peoples suffered and continue to be subjected to, is in any way excusable, but those issues are not the focus of this article.

In reading the voices of the many Aboriginal Mothers in the book I began to realise that some aspects of the trials and tribulations they have endured and which continue to this day are not without relevance to present day mothers in the UK regardless as to culture, race, colour or social standing.

Many of the problems mothers face in this country today are also the result of individuals battling against patriarchal tenets that are fundamental to our culture but which can be highly damaging to individuals and, I believe, to wider society as a whole.

Different cultures, different focus

The matrilineal egalitarian cultures that inhabited the lands of Canada and Australia prior to colonisation were focused on the well-being of children. Villages needed happy, healthy children to maintain cultural values and to ensure future sur vival. Women were therefore valued for their reproductive and nurturing abilities.

Contrast this with the patriarchal European invaders who came from cultures where life had become cheap. The well-being of the poor and the survival of their children had long since ceased to be a central concern for society as a whole and took a far lower priority than the wealth and prosperity of the big landowners (who were male).

Despite the power and respect accorded to women in the indigenous cultures of the new lands the European colonisers ignored the voices and concerns of the Aboriginal Grandmothers, just as they were accustomed to ignoring the voices of wise old women in their home countries.

The colonial imposition of male-centric ideologies and institutions caused significant damage. The result has been the social and economic marginalisation of Aboriginal women today. Government policies have torn apart Aboriginal families and communities and have pushed many Aboriginal women into dangerous situations that include extreme poverty, homelessness and prostitution.

As I read of the dire consequences for Aboriginal Mothers of colonisation by western Europeans I began to see how our own patriarchal culture is forcing many mothers in the UK today to struggle against

similar, though more insidious, prejudices and policies.

Pregnancy - the different approaches

For indigenous peoples pre-colonisation, pregnancy was an important concern for the whole community. The responsibility for her care did not rest solely with the pregnant woman; everyone around her, including her husband, took care to ensure that not only her physical needs were well met, but also that her psychological, emotional and spiritual states were protected. For example women were particularly protected from any form of violence. In Haudenosaunee and Algonquian culture men did not hunt while their partner was pregnant. Foods that changed the 'natural state of mind' were also avoided by both the pregnant woman and her partner.

Contrast this with the approach taken to pregnancy in our own culture. The emphasis is entirely focused on the woman's physical state with little consideration being given to her psychological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Although friends and family might make polite enquiries and do their best to be helpful, there is really little interest at community level.

Whilst, as individuals, we may feel a sense of wonder at the growing new life within us, and share a feeling of affinity with other women across the eons of time, any sense of power, self-importance and self-worth is either short-lived or remains a personal celebration.

In our culture pregnancy is treated as an illness, therefore for most of us here in the UK our mothering experience begins at a community level with the NHS, a large, bureaucratic organisation primarily focused on people with health problems. This can be a difficult concept for any woman who considers pregnancy to be a normal course of natural events, and a sign of good health.

Despite the fact that the majority of women who become pregnant are healthy, the first action most will be expected to take will be to consult an (often male) doctor whose expertise lies in all aspects of disease and medicine.

Rather than an atmosphere of celebration and gentle nurturing designed to promote health and well-being, pregnant women embark on a series of appointments, usually with total strangers, during which they are checked, measured and tested to see how their bodies are managing to cope with the complex task of growing a baby and to find out what has gone wrong, or what might be about to go wrong - mechanically speaking. The pregnant woman is viewed as a biological machine and the emphasis is on detection of ill-health rather than promotion of good health with an underlying mistrust of her inherent abilities.

Unlike the traditional practices of indigenous cultures there is no celebration of pregnancy at community level and no attempt to make pregnant women feel valued as individuals involved in bringing for th life. There is also very little consideration given to any needs women might have for reassurance, guidance or support at a personal level, or that such things should be provided in a loving way by known and trusted individuals with the intention of increasing the woman's calm and self-esteem.

There is not even any acknowledgement that the pregnant woman herself might be able to assess her own level of health, or indeed even whether she is pregnant or not, or that she may be perfectly able to predict when the birth might take place given a few simple pieces of information.

Aboriginal mothers are certainly not the only ones who are suffering from this total lack of regard for the psychological and spiritual health of mothers, nor are they the only ones finding the paternalistic approach to pregnancy disempowering and debilitating

The mothering role - status and value

The emphasis on the purely physical continues after the baby is born, severely hampering the ability and opportunity for many mothers to mother as effectively as they could. The biological yardsticks used during pregnancy to measure and judge the performance of a woman's body are replaced by materialistic yardsticks to measure her mothering abilities. The lack of psychological, emotional or spiritual considerations continues.

'Anishinaabe mothering and motherhood includes the concepts and ideas of life-giving, fostering, adoption, raising-up, aunties, and grannies,' writes Renee Elizabeth Mzinegiizhigo-kwe Bedard. Mothering in our society is viewed very differently and is measured with a relatively narrow materialistic yardstick based on economics not psychology.

In many traditional indigenous cultures mothers were not necessarily the primary care givers, and certainly not the sole caregivers for their children, and they continued to work and to contribute to their communities. The notion that 'it takes a village to raise a child' was in daily practice with childcare being provided by grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, friends and indeed any man who happened to be around.

'The Euroamerican model of isolated, nuclear families, characterised by paternalism and competition that are expected to be self-sufficient has not worked well for Aboriginal, native people.' This statement also begs the question as to how well the 'model of isolated, nuclear families' is working for our society.

Today in the UK it is almost impossible to find some middle ground. Either babies and young children are placed in childcare, with strangers to care for them, while their mothers return to work without them in order to take up 'gainful employment'; or mothers leave paid employment to stay at home to care for their own children, unsupported and segregated from the rest of society to fulfil a role they know to be important, but which wider western society does not value. Combining paid employment with caring for

children is not the norm in our culture and opportunities to do so are scarce.

In our patriarchal culture the worth of an individual is determined by their earning potential and the contribution they can make to their community - a contribution that is measured in economic terms. Being a mother carries little value in modern day western society and neither does caring for children unless the 'caring' is a 'career choice' and is carried out as 'paid employment' thus giving it an economic value. Since childcare that is freely provided by grannies, aunts, sisters or close friends or the mother herself, carries no economic price tag, it also carries no clearly defined value and therefore carries no status at community level.

'Parenting' has become synonymous with 'mothering' but is widely accepted to include fathers and fathering. Unfortunately the encompassing of male input seems not to augment the status of child rearing, but rather to diminish the standing in society of those men who consider their role as a father important and who therefore commit the travesty of occasionally putting family considerations above career commitments on the priority list.

Cultural values and child protection

Belinda Wheeler writes that '-the bond between an Australian aboriginal mother and her children was strong, with the mother under taking multiple responsibilities, including nurturer, protector and educator. Since the colonisation of Australia, however, legislation by white culture stripped Aboriginal mothers of this traditional role.'

Inexcusably, as the book *Until Our Hearts Are On the Ground* documents, many Aboriginal mothers in Australia and in Canada were stripped of a lot more than their traditional role. Indigenous mothers were considered 'unfit' in a number of respects and it was widespread practice in both countries to remove children permanently from their mothers and their cultures.

The belief that the state was justified in judging mothers rather than supporting them has continued into the present day and in some respects is not a problem faced solely by the Aboriginal Mothers of colonised countries as calls to the AIMS helpline can testify.

'The Aboriginal mother who adheres too closely to her traditions has historically found it difficult if not impossible to meet the standard of the "good mother" as set out by the dominant patriarchal culture.'

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (1997) commented that 'Strange how the bureaucracy adopts a materialistic yardstick when measuring deprivation' (HREOC 86)

A 'good' mother is one who has what is considered to be a high standard of living: a large house, a well-paid job, a flash car, and whose children are clean, dressed in designer clothes and cared for at a 'good quality' nursery. A 'good' mother does not deviate very far from what is understood to be the cultural norm.

Mothers here in the UK who deviate from generally accepted mothering practices are also increasingly

finding themselves in conflict with the state and with Social Services. For example, those who plan home births, who breastfeed long term, who home educate, and/or who dare to challenge the quality of the 'care' they received during labour, are straying too far from the cultural norm and consequently are increasingly finding themselves under state observation, policing and intervention.

Unfortunately, and often tragically, those doing the judging and measuring are often those who value and understand the least about that upon which they are pronouncing judgement - the role of a mother. The low status of 'mothering' in paternalistic societies, the materialistic yardstick and the total disregard for psychological, emotional and spiritual health leaves mothers fighting for their children's rights and well-being from a perspective that is so fundamentally different that its integrity is unrecognisable to state authorities.

Loss of cultural balance

Clearly our patriarchal western-European culture has been successful in many respects since western ideologies now dominate worldwide, but *Until Our Hearts Are On the Ground* highlights the extent to which male-centric doctrines have eclipsed the maternal perspective. Not since pre-Roman times (or even before that) have women in this country held cultural positions with status that was equal to but different from those of men. In more recent times the inequality between men and women has been redressed in many ways as women now have the right to vote, to own land and property, and have their paid employment aspirations protected by equal opportunities legislation. However, such measures are designed to ensure that women are treated as equal to, in the sense of being the same as or as 'good' as men, and in order to gain status women must embrace male values. There is no acknowledgement, let alone acceptance or celebration, of the potential benefits the uniquely female perspective might bring to society.

Prior to the formation of the NHS in 1948, childbirth and the care of young children remained in the community, predominantly under the control of women and thus largely escaped patriarchal control. Birth commonly took place in the home, with midwives in attendance who were employed, not by the medical services, but by the local authority. Over the decades as the NHS slowly evolved into the large patriarchal institution it is today there has been an insidious erosion of maternal ethos and feminine values in the areas of both childbirth and the care of young children.

Childbirth, the last bastion of feminine culture has now fallen under the control of patriarchal principles. We are now trying to 'do' birth the male way. And what is more, we are actually wondering why it is proving so problematical.

Unfortunately the low status of maternal values and the total lack of respect for women's ways and women's knowledge make it difficult, if not impossible, for womankind to reclaim this area of our culture. Even initiatives such as the Albany Midwifery Practice, the Montrose Birth Centre, and Independent Midwifery, where women's ways have been reinstated, find it difficult to survive despite lower economic costs and better outcome statistics, even when measured with the standard paternalistic yardstick.

Impact on wider society

As a society we have replaced extended family-based, decentralised social policies with centralised government services and bureaucracies. In many instances the rights of the state now override the rights of the individual, the interests of the institution take precedence over personal needs, economic considerations are more important than psychological health - but at what cost?

Personally, I believe men, as well as women, are being adversely affected as the eclipse of women's ways of being and doing throws a shadow over our entire society.

The voices of the Aboriginal Mothers in *Until Our Hearts Are On the Ground* speak of the difficulties they face as a result of the loss of key elements of their respective egalitarian cultures. Their words demonstrate the lack of balance in our own culture that has been caused by the missing female perspective.

We would do well to heed this warning. It is time we took a long, hard look at the long term implications of continuing to allow paternalistic doctrines to govern every aspect of our lives before the eclipse is so advanced it becomes too dark to see clearly.

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