

Anthropologists believe that, about 18,000 years ago, the ancestors of Native Americans crossed the Bering Land Bridge which linked North America to Asia during the Ice Ages. Their communities were based on egalitarian, lateral, rather than hierarchical relations. Every member had an equal share in the collected resources; women were respected for providing sustenance as gatherers and men as hunters. The only measure of distinction was old age because elders had a deeper knowledge about the welfare of the group, in addition to a broader experience about life and survival. For Native Americans, the land is not only a means of sustenance, but also the witness of their history and the definer of their identity, as it embraces the bones of their ancestors. For them, bodily illness reflects spiritual unbalance and loss of harmony with the universe. Those who suffer from what shamans call “soul loss” seek “soul restoration” and communal reconnection by means of ceremonies that bind the sick to the wellspring of tribal energy. This holistic approach to healing combines the treatment of the body, the mind, and the soul. Many Native American communities are gynocratic and matrilineal; in other words, they bestow authority to women, and some of them trace ancestry through the maternal line. This is a major aspect of the storytelling tradition, in which women tell the stories and hold a focal position in the organization of their communities. A powerful female archetype constitutes “the backbone” of oral traditions, like Spider Woman for the Navajo, Sky Woman for the Iroquois and Corn Daughter for the Hopi. With colonization, however, the roles of women were reduced to childbearing, rearing, and domestic chores, because the invaders “could not tolerate peoples who allowed women to occupy prominent positions and decision-making capacity at every level of society” (Gunn Allen 3). With the redistribution of gender roles, the colonizers shook the foundation of communal structure.