

THE ROMANTIC ROLE OF OLDER WOMEN

IN A CULTURE OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST COAST

Melville Jacobs

During my earliest field researches among the Indians of Washington and Oregon I arrived at the opinion that, in this part of the Northwest Coast, a young male anthropologist usually established better rapport with older native women than with other informants. If this view was correct, the phenomenon had to be explained. Was it a matter of the manner of shattering of the local Indian heritages, which had permitted women to retain healthier psyches than men? Was it because I related better to older women than to men? Had contact and acculturative conditions of earlier decades developed more hostility toward Caucasians in men than in women? Had such conditions also intensified a culturally channeled need in women to relate to younger men? Wherever I went the natives quipped delightedly, naughtily and persistently about my working with older women in their homes. I was inevitably led to suppose that there was a special socio-cultural factor in the amusement and gossip. I believed that it had more to do with the retention of pre-Caucasian interpersonal ties and with the continuation of needs than with relationships and feelings created by modern conditions.

I recognized no clues until, in 1933, my wife joined me in ethnographic and linguistic researches with representative survivors of the Tillamook Coast Salish group along the coast of northwestern Oregon. There one of the informants, a woman of noteworthy sophistication in her comprehension of personal relationships, indicated that in pre-Caucasian times many Tillamook widows or divorced women of post-menopause age sought and enjoyed culturally acceptable affairs with unmarried younger men. Married women either remained, in a sense, the property of their husbands or of their husbands' families, or did not desire affairs with youths because community approval of such ventures was lacking.

The youth with whom a post-menopausal widow or divorcee had affectional and sexual relations gave her some sort of gift which was not regarded as a payment. She received, for example, a blanket during the earlier decades of Caucasian entry. A tryst had to be apart from the village houses where many persons were around. It occurred in the woods, perhaps near a berry patch. We recorded a Tillamook song that men sang, the words of which were, "I wish I would fall (or swoop) down in the berry patch." That is, were I only a bird and could fly to a tryst with an unmarried older woman. An experience of this kind was a standard means of introducing a Tillamook youth to the art of unhasty sexual foreplay, at the same time that it served the purpose of providing an affectional relationship for an older woman who lacked a husband. But one should not suggest primacy for the relationship needs of the woman, in the light of indications that the affectional involvement of the youth was often intense and sincere. A characteristic feature that was noted for the liaison itself supports the deduction that the affair was

unreservedly romantic: we were told that sexuality here as in some other Northwest Indian groups was featured by lengthy foreplay, in contrast to the speedy consummation customary among Caucasians whom these Indians knew. It would be interesting to determine the effects of relationships with older women on the feelings and behavior displayed by younger men in marriage. We know only that among Tillamooks, and perhaps among a number of immediately adjacent Indian peoples as well, a husband might spend several weeks or even longer in patient foreplay with his untutored young bride who was also, of course, almost a total stranger compared to his romantic teacher. We lack information as to whether his marriage terminated his relationship with the older woman.

We were told about one older woman who had had a sixteen year old youth among other residents in her house. He would complain that his blankets did not keep him warm. She would retort, "Oh, my nephew can sleep with me." Tillamooks presumed that she had had sexual relations with him because in later years he would sing a little song to his wife: "If I had not had an auntie, I would not know how to have sexual intercourse. Oh, poor, poor auntie!" When he sang this song his wife would retort, "You ought to be ashamed. You are like that Wren in the myth, having sexual relations with his own grandmother!" The shamefulness was not that he had had an affair with an older woman but that like Wren he had committed incest. Unfortunately, we failed to determine his actual kinship relation to his sweetheart.

Our Tillamook informant asserted that affairs of unmarried older women with unmarried young men were discussed, not by the participants but by observers, in the presence of people of all ages. That was one way in which youth learned that for their initial ventures in romance they might seek out certain older women with impunity and also without the necessity for onerous financial transactions involving many relatives. The fact that the women might have children or grandchildren appears to have been a matter of indifference to youths who sought such relationships. We do not have clearcut evidence regarding the emotional investment in and the concomitants and consequences of the relationship. But our impression is that in many, if not in most, instances there was mutual respect and affection. It is easy to understand these feelings in the context of a social system where feminine status tended to rise with age and where respect for a post-menopausal worthy mounted with her years. In addition, persons living in the same or adjacent villages may have felt much affection for one another.

Are there data that would indicate why older women entered relationships with youths? Unhappily the notes of our field researches fail to provide pertinent suggestions. Apart from specific cultural factors, and there must have been such, psychiatric literature suggests that where psychobiologic impulses of a sexual kind are displayed in older women of Euroamerican culture, they constitute a reactivation of adolescent sexuality. It is therefore of interest that there are indications, from the mythology as well as from the ethnography in the Tillamook group, that there was some similarity in adolescent and menopausal or later manifestations of sexual activity. For example, the Wild Woman myths of the Tillamooks delineate a supernaturally

powerful older woman who is interested in effecting a series of amours. Accordingly she always dresses with the basket hat, abalone-decorated garment, and facial paint that are the customary appurtenances of pubescent girls. Tillamook and other Northwest myths clearly express an older woman's desire to act like and to be an adolescent girl. The vivacity of sexual drive in older women in Tillamook communities is as openly and frequently projected upon the screen of their mythology as it is in the oral literatures of other Pacific Northwest Indians. The strength of the literary expression of such behavior there tends to corroborate a deduction that post-menopausal sexual activity may have been as great in coastal Oregon as it was elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest.

However, we might discount the data we have and the inference that we have drawn, by supposing that our main Tillamook informant happened to be exceptional and not representative of her community; that she was an especially interested collector and narrator of stories that included an undue number of post-menopause sexual motifs. But as each myth was told, note was made of the person from whom she had learned it; almost all her stories had come from her father, who in his turn may have been aberrant. Then, too, we may have been at fault in encouraging dictations of a sexual kind. On the other hand, since we conducted researches among a number of other Indian peoples of the region, and many friends and colleagues have done field work in various parts of the Northwest, we have reason to suppose that no considerable amount of data of this kind has been sought elsewhere in the area. The conviction therefore remains that we have not distorted our estimation of this facet of Tillamook culture.

Cultural acceptance of romantic relationships between persons who were far apart in age is only a segment of the regional indorsement of marriages of persons who were not of the same age level. We heard of several women who had had husbands much younger than themselves. One was a Clatskanie woman from an Athabaskan band immediately contiguous to the most northerly villages of the Tillamook. She had gone through a series of such marriages, and was also a "love doctor." It was said that only older Tillamook women became shamans of this type, that is, acquired supernatural aid to give other women power to hold their husbands so that these men would be neither abusive nor interested in acquisition of a second wife. Undoubtedly the fact that the Clatskanie woman had a relationship with a spirit-power which conferred sexual attractiveness connected her in some manner with younger men and sanctioned her interest in them. She was enabled to act out her need in permissible and stylized ways.

Psychiatric theory regarding the aggressive or hostile component in sexuality deserves careful checking in mythologies of the Northwest, as well as in ethnographic recordings. We heard, incidentally, that when a Tillamook man sneezed he often said, "Some old woman who is fuzzy in the groin is calling me by a bad name." He referred in this antagonistic fashion not to a young, but to an older, woman. In Northwest myths where sexuality is ascribed to older feminine actors, they are presented as murderers or other dangerous and hateful figures. The rancor was against persons to whom maternal-like roles

were culturally assigned, perhaps also against plural wives who were jealous, but not against older women solely because of their age. At the same time a preferred marriage was perhaps everywhere with mates of similar age.

Our evidence seems to rule out a custom of menopausal or post-menopausal sexual activity for most Northwest Indians and to limit the area for expected and sanctioned expression of that kind to the Tillamooks and possibly to their immediate neighbors, for whom it is undoubtedly much too late to secure the data. On the other hand, all over the Northwest there may have been strong desires and occasional outlets that were not severely stigmatized. Oral literatures appear to provide most of the indications in the absence of the ethnographic notations that have become difficult to obtain in recent decades. It is therefore necessary to connect the distributions of certain feminine myth actors with the scanty ethnographic evidence concerning the status, social participation, relationships toward younger persons, and channels of libidinal behavior of older women among Northwest Indian people.

An example of the paucity of ethnographic items may be given for the Quinault Coast Salish of central coastal Washington, about one hundred miles north of Tillamook villages. Dr. Ronald Olson's Quinault ethnography, written on the basis of field materials jotted down over thirty years ago, provides little beyond the explicit statement that it was thought that it would "poison" a young man to have sexual relations with an older woman. The early death of a Queets berdache, who belonged to a group just north of the Quinault, was said to have been due to the fact that he had had sexual relationships solely with older women. A cursory perusal of ethnographic writings suggests the absence of Tillamook-like behavior of older women in other Washington groups, in Oregon coastal groups south of the Tillamook, and among the Chinookan peoples of the lower Columbia River valley. Since ethnographers have not often made painstaking inquiries into the feelings and permissible relationships of older women, omissions in technical publications are really indecisive, however. Only the internal evidence of oral literatures may offer definitive answers.

If menopausal and post-menopausal sexuality as a matter of custom and cultural stylization were more or less localized in northwestern Oregon, what could have developed historically in that district to bring about so wholly accepted a behavioral outlet? Was there a relative severity of constraints against almost all highly rewarding community participations for women to the north along the coast, and a contrasted freedom in opportunities to become shamans or to engage in other valued social participations directly to the south? If so, did a confusing variety in permissible relationships among peoples with whom Tillamooks occasionally intermarried and visited involve Tillamooks in conflicting feelings which the women resolved by turning to "love doctor" shamanism, affairs with youths, or other alternatives depending upon personal inclinations? Were the cultural conflicts which resulted in a Tillamook proliferation of stories, told and enjoyed by both sexes, about the emotional needs of older women? Another possibility is that polygamy, largely confined to hereditarily wealthy persons and an old feature on the entire Northwest Coast, had severely curtailed the ability of many

young Tillamook men to purchase young brides. Such a limitation might have constituted a pressure for cultural approval of affairs with unmarried older women. On the other hand, evidence in myths suggests an old sanctioning of the custom.

All in all, the clues regarding social relationships are so numerous and even repetitious in the oral literatures of the Northwest States that one is tempted to surrender hope of making trustworthy deductions about such matters from most of the published ethnographic sketches, and to channel scholarly endeavors in the direction of analysis of the expressive content of stories. An example of the resources that are latent in oral literatures may be given by a myth which has a wide distribution among Oregon and Washington Indians. The plot tells of Wren or some other precultural actor and his often unnamed grandmother. He goes out for food, kills an elk, and asks his grandmother to help pack home the butchered portions. She refuses to carry any part but the rump or genitals and is subsequently found dallying sexually with them. In a Clackamas Chinook version, from a group over eighty miles east of the Tillamooks, she later masquerades as a young girl and has intercourse with her grandson, who in shame and anger at his incest attempts to kill her. The Coos Indians, who lived on the Oregon coast over a hundred miles to the south, also told a myth about a grandmother who impersonated a young girl in order to have an affair with her grandson. The Coos also had a myth about a grandmother who agrees to carry home only the genitals of an elk and who amuses herself sexually with them. Miss Sally Snyder found the story in the Skagit valley of northwestern Washington in 1954 among a group over two hundred and fifty miles north of the Chinooks. Although the plot has not been reported for the Nez Perce of central Idaho, well over two hundred miles to the east of Clackamas Chinook and about three hundred miles east of Tillamook, these Idaho Indians heard a story about a woman shaman who captured a youth, married him, and killed five girls with whom he had had affairs. Then the people killed her. Other instances of commingled sex and anger, all directed toward grandmothers but expressed in differing plots, could be cited from the vast collections of oral literature already obtained from the Northwest. For example, the Nass Tsimshian far to the north tell about the tricky grandson who cut his grandmother's vulva, roasted it, awakened her and gave it to her to eat. Then he ran outside and sang, "Grandmother ate her own vulva! Grandmother ate her own vulva!" Shouting at him, "Don't enter my house again, slave!" she forced him to walk about outside and remain hungry.

The wide dispersion of stories of such kinds reinforces a deduction from ethnographic data that a number of cultural factors made for the imaginative development of plots expressing love and hostility between young men and older women. Both along the coast and in the less wealthy interior east of the Cascade Mountains a possibly important factor is a relationship wherein persons such as aunts, uncles, grandparents and unrelated village elders played a vital part in the care, feeding, restraint, disciplining, education, training, and pride accorded children and adolescents. Psychiatrists might urge that one aggressive resolution or outlet which received cultural crystallization for males and was sometimes expressed sexually was directed against any females

who had functioned as early objects of love and hate. Along the Northwest Coast they may have been either present in the household or in other houses of the village.

If this point of view is valid, it must be woven into the theory of the historical development of locally distributed as well as widely dispersed forms of ethnographic behavior and myth projections which have been mentioned. I am confident that a hitherto little appreciated feature of Northwest Coast cultures is clearly evidenced: there is a qualitatively distinctive response of commingled hostility and affection toward older women. Anthropologists commenced intensive field research much too late in the Northwest to account for, much less to depict, the specific libidinal outlets available to older unmarried women in a district which includes Tillamook, as contrasted with the absence or lower frequency of such behavior among older women in other districts of the Northwest.

Although the title of this paper refers to what I have termed the romantic role of older women, much of the discussion has so far dealt with culturally stylized expressions of that role. But it is useful and necessary to make a distinction between romantic relationships that were expressed sexually and a variety of relationships which were not so manifested, but were romantic in the sense of deep affection and mutual interdependency; relationships of the latter type were much more important in the society than those of the former. Again, oral literatures of the Northwest offer far more evidence about such relationships than can be gleaned from the sketchy ethnographic observations of anthropologists whose informants were hardly able to verbalize regarding such matters and who were, in fact, seldom asked about them by the investigators.

As in many parts of the world, strong affectional ties, feelings of belonging, and identification of self with others characterized Northwest sibling, extended family, lineage, household and intravillage bonds. These relationships were accompanied by emotions that were of Oedipal origin in the broadest sense.

Northwest romanticism as expressed in oral literature is connected with feelings that arose in non-nuclear family relationships. It is abundantly clear from myths that members of the nuclear family, whether monogamous or polygynous, were not the exclusive sources and objects of romantic attitudes. In the oral literature emotions of a romantic kind are less frequently directed toward unpurchased future mates and members of the nuclear family than toward other persons. One had intensely romantic feelings of bondedness toward siblings, grandparents and grandchildren, as well as toward various persons outside the nuclear family. Potential mates were brought together in marriage largely by the decisions and payments of elders, and emotional responses of distinctive kinds undoubtedly arose in such relationships. Husband-wife relationships may have become romantic in quality as the years went by. But if Northwest affectional responses are to be comprehended in their types and totalities of expressions, it is necessary to understand that generous feelings which extended to siblings, grandparents, extended

kin, and co-villagers went out with comparable quality and intensity to spirit-powers which each individual desired and eventually acquired. Spirit-powers were actually only a special kind of kin who desired relationships with persons as much as persons craved relationships with supernaturals. The link with a spirit-power was as individual, symbiotic and profoundly romantic as any tie with a person. Evidence from the oral literature indicates that it is necessary to proceed upon the further premise that similar responses were accorded the principal foods and major tools such as flint knives and awls. It is as if they, too, were spirit-powers, kindred, or co-villagers. Foods and tools themselves wanted relationships with people just as spirit-powers and kin yearned for their relatives. All must help and lean upon one another.

Whatever the affection and dependency responses may have been qualitatively, and irrespective of their variability of manifestation, they apply to an impressively large class of relationships; it includes siblings, various kin outside of the nuclear family, co-villagers, spirit-powers, the principal foods, and the most important tools. The latter three were qualitatively rather than physically anthropomorphic. They had had the overt appearance of persons only in the precultural epochs which were depicted in myths. Since that bygone era the spirit-powers had appeared in the guise of human beings only infrequently and largely during dreams, vision quests, and winter spirit dances. Evidence is meagre concerning the supernatural garb in which food and tools manifested themselves.

It would be absurd to say that older women of the Northwest were special kinds of foods, tools, and spirit-powers. Nevertheless, it seems that the permissible libidinal relationships of older women to youths partook of the kinds of feelings which I have pointed to without further specificity of delineation. If psychoanalysts are right, deeper components in the bonds of such women and youths flowed especially from the high status of post-climacteric women, their expanding participation in village life, and their continued responsibility for children. The latter duty was assigned as often to older persons of the household and village as to parents and siblings of the nuclear family. Additional factors in such bonds may be sought, for example, in the feelings of widows whose husbands had treated them unflatteringly, and in the sentiments of widows whose acceptance by the community had become such that their creative worth was deeply respected.

Although I have been unable to offer much detailed evidence about the romantic role of older women in the Northwest, future research on the Indians of that region should not neglect the interesting problem of determining the manifestations and causes of affectional behavior in such women. The broader problem of describing all relationships to persons, supernaturals and things is a central one for the comprehension of the dynamics of community life before European invasion of the region.

