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Introduction

It is an honor to introduce to you *The Spirit of Indian Women.* This volume brings to us a combination of images and voices from American Indian women. The historic and written voices of, and about, American Indian women are remarkably profound. By reading this book, we are privileged to hear the thoughts and words of Indian women along with the intense beauty of their images. This gift of voice and image affords us an opportunity to travel across time and cultures, to listen to, and to observe these beautiful mothers, grandmothers, and matriarchs, all of them Indian women. This gift counters the invisible, silent status ascribed to American Indian women by history and literature. American Indian women played significant roles in American Indian families, clans, communities, and nations. Their thoughts and words, in teachings, stories, songs, and ceremonies, and their countenance in beauty, strength, spirit, and dignity, made possible the very survival of American Indian people.

The Spirit of Indian Women is a research feat of major proportion, for the writings and therefore the voices of American Indian women are obscured by the weight of an enormously oppressive series of centuries in this country. And the search for images of quality and dignity, befitting American Indian women, was a task nearly as daunting as locating and identifying the writings, for photographers were intent on recording the "primitive," the romantic, the "vanishing Indian race." Our chance to hear and observe Indian women is dramatically enhanced by this collection of voices and images. We can glimpse the faces of American Indian women and their poignant words for a greater understanding of American Indian life. This is a book I plan to give to my sisters, my daughter, and my granddaughter, and I know it will go everywhere with me. *Aho*! Thanks to Michael and Judy Fitzgerald and World Wisdom Books; you have created an extraordinary gift of writings and images for the reader, *The Spirit of Indian Women.*

American Indian women are virtually ignored by the historians. Nineteenth century historians exclusively focused on men's leadership, men in military conflicts, and men as the heads of households, families, and communities. Theories of history's "famous man" or of the "man whose time has come" drive humanity's historical narratives. Beatrice Medicine, Lakota anthropologist and historian, comments about Indian women and history:

> I believe that women's activities and women's orientation to the Lakota lifestyles have been slighted. History is fashioned by events and relationships in the lives of both men and women, within a cultural milieu.[1]

Further, those traders and military men who maintained journals of their time with the Indians, lent a listening ear and observing eye to the Indian men. About visitors to the Hidatsa, Peters notes,

> When visitors approached an Indian village, they were met by a delegation of men in colorful and exotic costumes. Indian men assumed elaborate hairstyles, decorated robes, and military regalia. The men took charge of all ceremonies dealing with white visitors, especially those involving trade between other tribes and whites.[2]

The problem of hearing and seeing American Indian women was monumental. As history about the life and times of American Indians comes down to our generation, their omission damages historical works and leaves us with less than half the story.

American history has a propensity for following the events of conflict. Mention of American Indians nearly always connects with wars between the agents of the United States or the colonies, and American Indian nations. Historians' obsession with the themes of "American progress" and the "transformation" of North America eclipsed American Indian life from the scene, as they symbolized the antithesis to progress.[3] In "Problems in Indian History," Fred Hoxie comments:

> as for Native American history, it is remarkable that in the span of a century, Indians have gone from the forest primeval to a footnote, and Indian history has devolved from high adventure to demographic speculation.[4]

Progress, transformation, and struggles render American Indian women, in essence, invisible.

Let us talk about the challenge of hearing the voices of American Indian women. From our place in the twenty-first century, voices and faces from the past seem far away, in time and distance. What conditions put such distance between us and our precious American Indian grandmothers and great grandmothers? Historians, missionaries, teachers, and ethnographers who were there, were held captive by cultural biases that predisposed them to narratives, studies, observations, and images that were "conditioned by their own cultures and times. It never occurred to them to look beneath the surface of what they saw. And, what they saw was misleading."[5] Robert A. Trennert's research on the education of Indian girls and women, described the mid-nineteenth-century view held by Americans about Native Americans:

> Although recent scholarship has suggested that the division of labor be-

> tween the sexes within Indian societies was rather equitable, mid-nineteenth-century Americans accepted a vision of Native American women as slaves toiling endlessly for their selfish, slovenly husbands and fathers in an atmosphere of immorality, degradation, and lust.[6]

The degraded status of American Indian women was evidenced in curricular instructions from federal Indian Commissioner Morgan in 1900, when he said that "higher education in the sense ordinarily used has no place in the curriculum of Indian schools." Indian service school officials described Indians as incapable of learning, a "child race." Thus, domestic work was emphasized for the training of American Indian girls and women.

In spite of this highly prejudiced and misinformed view, there were Indian women who wrote about their lives, and photographers who captured their images with respect and dignity. From traditional American Indian culture, American Indian women knew the power of thought and the power of words. In *Literature of the American Indian*, A. Lavonne Brown Ruoff comments:

> As employed in religious rituals, thought and word can bring rain, heal physical and mental sickness, maintain good relations, bring victory against an enemy, win a loved one, or ward off evil spirits. Because of the great power of thought and word, Indian people feel both should be used with care.[7]

American Indian people have demonstrated their strong oral tradition through the tradition of creative writing. American Indians mastered the written word to preserve oral traditions, and to document tribal histories. In the nineteenth century, many American Indian authors wrote histories in the hope that their work would "remind whites of their tribes' long existence as peoples and convince them to respect the Indians rights to the land."[8] Speaking also included the power of silence, which N. Scott Momaday called "the dimension in which ordinary and extraordinary events take their proper places."[9]

The power of words was carried into the formal Indian oratory. Speeches were made to "inspire warriors or to celebrate a victory over an enemy. Most Indian orators were men. Plains Indians only occasionally allowed a female warrior or strong medicine woman to speak in public. Some women did become influential speakers."[10] The oratory was often placed in the context of major public rituals and ceremonies. Placed in that rich context, American Indian literature, thoughts, and words, were vested in ritual dramas, songs, narratives, and life histories.[11] The liter-

ary works have a particularly vital quality, in reenactments that require the broad participation of speakers, storytellers, dancers, singers, and audience. To render American Indian literature (dramas, songs, ceremonials, stories) as mere words isolates the words from the dynamic qualities of the literature in performance, like the whirring sound of birds' wings, the action of the dance steps, the evocative landscapes and homelands (against the rimrocks tinted rose in the setting sun), the camp sounds in the background, and meaningful declarations of dancers' regalia in color and symbolism.[12]

American Indian literature, both from the oral and written traditions, shows several dominant themes. First, is the belief that human beings "must be in harmony with the physical and spiritual universe. And, that such harmony may be achieved through the power of thought and the power of word."[13] A deep reverence for the land, sacredness of direction, the importance of the circle, and a strong sense of community are key themes in American Indian oral and written literature.[14] These themes are brilliantly represented here, in these writings.

Media images and stereotypic portrayals of American Indian women distort reality. Indian women rarely take any lead role in movies, or have lines that afford an Indian woman a voice. When you do see them up close, the conditions are deplorable, beyond pitiful. These images and portrayals are far from the actual roles and status of American Indian women. The forced removal of Indian nations to reservations, coupled with the loss of tribal economies dealt an enormous blow to all American Indian people. The struggle for homelands, sustaining virtual existence, prisoner of war experiences, conditions of reservation confinement, famine and disease, attacked American Indian families, with a decimating affect. Over several centuries, the diseases of smallpox, flu, and measles killed close to 90% of the American Indian people, who had numbered near five million in 1500. (The Crow population collapsed from 8,000 in 1600 to only 1,200 people in 1900.) The tumultuous changes and incumbent tragedies altered American Indian life, twisting and complicating role continuity.

American Indian women were remarkably resilient, in spite of these unimaginable frontal assaults on Indian people. Beatrice Medicine, Lakota anthropologist and historian, reflects that,

> Lakota women's roles as household provisioners have retained a certain stability. Women continue to maintain the house—to cook, clean, and care for children. Because of the socio-economic situation in most native communities, women are assuming a greater share as economic providers.[15]

Whether the times were changing or lands were lost, there were still children to raise. Child rearing was a primary and dominant role for American Indian women, assuming the entire control over the children until they were able to provide for themselves.[16] Among the Creek of the southeast, the girl's education continued under her mother and other clan women, including practical and moral instruction.[17]

As "primary socializers of children," American Indian women were the essential keepers of culture, language, worldview, rituals, and practices; in essence the purveyors of beliefs and behaviors.[18] Grandmothers were master teachers of history and culture as they told the tribe's myths and legends to their grandchildren, especially during the wintertime. Virginia Beavert, a Yakima Indian woman, collected her tribe's legends in *The Way It Was*,

> There were times when there was more than one storyteller involved, which made it a more interesting evening. Many questions were answered in the minds of the children; for instance why did the characters in the legend do things five times? It was explained that this was part of our lives, the parts of our bodies, the part of the religion, and many other things we take for granted in our everyday living.[19]

Ruoff also describes the role of the audience, namely to give gifts to the storytellers, and provide a feast as the storytelling concluded.[20] The rich tradition of signing among American Indian people further enhanced the telling with emphasis, action, even mimicry. Responses from the listeners were expected and elicited. Further, the grandmothers' stories were accompanied in the Crow tradition with a story-stick, a thirty inches long stick bedecked with miniature figures and objects that could be brought into the vivid Old Man Coyote or Red Woman stories. The nation's knowledge was held and taught by the women, the keepers of the people, the keepers of the culture.

American Indian creation stories contrast with the Judeo-Christian beliefs about where woman came from. Hoxie notes that,

> Crows did not believe that the creator made women after men or that women were derived from men. Instead all the versions of the tribal creation story that have been collected indicate that two genders were made at the same time and from the same materials.[21]

In further analysis of the Crow Indian mythology, Hoxie describes the spiritual status of females as "sharing equal, and autonomous status" that was comparable with

their male counterparts' status.[22] For the Hidatsa of the upper Missouri River—the earth lodge people—the tribes' mythology and religious life reflected a "dependence on women, and their regenerative powers," being the origin of life.[23] Peters documents that,

> Women were in charge of the ritual blessing of each new earth lodge; they carried out annual rites before beginning to plant their gardens and in thanksgiving after the harvest; their White Buffalo Cow societies were often asked to perform a ceremony if the buffalo were too far away to hunt in safety, and they had an important role in "walking with the buffalo" in the men's buffalo calling ceremonies.[24]

The White Buffalo Cow societies' "walking with the buffalo" ceremony is an example of non-patriarchal religion, and derives from American Indian societies with a strong female presence within religious ceremonies. Among the Mandan, sacred bundles were owned and maintained by families, along matrilineal clan line, to the male heirs. The heir holding the bundle was obligated to prove his worthiness through giving feasts; a ceremony that could only be accomplished with support from the women in his family, and from his wives, who prepared food (that they had grown in huge gardens) and made appropriate gifts.[25]

The Lakota women play an integral part in the Lakota Sun Dance ceremony. Arthur Amiotte, in his article "The Lakota Sun Dance," narrates the instructions given to the four young women in the tree cutting ceremony:

> They are told of their significance and their relationship to the earth. They are told: "You are the pure, you are the good, you are the fecund, you are the new life of the people. Through you, the women, even the bravest of warriors must come into this earth.[26]

Sacred ceremonies of American Indian nations have essential roles played by women. In today's Lakota Sun Dance, a woman is selected to "become White Buffalo Calf Woman, she who will dance with the pipe and endure and sacrifice much the same way as the men do. One lady will attend to the ladies in the sweat lodge."[27] The Sun Dance ceremony follows a pattern of American Indian womens' significance in the sacred life of the Lakota people. Beatrice Medicine says, "it is a beautiful honor to be selected as a participant in any part of the Sun Dance. The Sacred Pipe Woman, the four virgins who cut the sacred tree, the people who do the work—all consider it an honor."[28] Women have honor and privilege in the spiritual life of the Lakota people.

In the Crow Indian tradition, as the eldest sister, I am called "little mother." My name is "Loves to Pray." This position is one of family responsibility, from my earliest assignments right up to the roles I carry out today. As a child and young woman, I held the responsibility for looking after my siblings and cousins. Elders tutored me in our tribal knowledge areas: in ceremony, dance, songs, traditions, and history. I aspired to be like my mother, my grandmothers, and my father's elder sister. Following their paths, it has been my honor to carry the sacred water into ceremonies, plan and prepare feasts and giveaways, conduct the sweat lodge ceremony, name children, sing love songs and lullabies, dance in the Dance of the Seasons, tell histories, and be the camp grandma. That I uphold these roles is evidence that my grandmothers fulfilled their roles as true Crow Indian women. In that respect, I am them. With First Maker's blessing, the circle will continue, with my daughter, "Leads the Parade Three Times," and my granddaughter, "Brave Heart."

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22 February 2005

notes

1. Medicine, "*Indian Women and Traditional Religion*," p. 161.
2. Peters, *Women of the Earth Lodges*, p. 161.
3. Hoxie, "*The Problems of Indian History*," p. 35.
4. Ibid., p. 35.
5. Peters, *Women of the Earth Lodges*, pp. 161-162.
6. Trennart, "*Educating Indian Girls and Women*," p. 380-381.
7. Ruoff, *Literatures of the American Indian*, p. 18.
8. Ibid., p. 74.
9. Ibid., p. 22.
10. Ibid., p. 61.
11. Ibid., p. 20.
12. Ibid., p. 23.
13. Ibid., p. 18.
14. Ibid., pp. 18-21.
15. Medicine, "*Indian Women and Traditional Religion*," p. 171.
16. Spencer and Jennings, *Native Americans*, p. 426.
17. Ibid., p. 425.
18. Medicine, "*Indian Women and Traditional Religion*," p. 170.
19. Quoted in Ruoff, *Literatures of the American Indian*, p. 40.
20. Ruoff, *Literatures of the American Indian*, p. 40.
21. Hoxie, *Parading Through History*, p. 191.

22. Ibid., p. 191.
23. Peters, *Women of the Earth Lodges*, p. 34.
24. Ibid., p. 40
25. Ibid., p. 36.
26. Amiotte, "*The Lakota Sun Dance*," p. 82.
27. Ibid., p. 76.
28. Medicine, "*Indian Women and Traditional Religion*," p. 168.

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