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CROW AND HIDATSA WOMEN: THE INFLUENCE  
OF ECONOMICS ON RELIGIOUS STATUS

By

Lucy E. Capehart

B.A., Rollins College, 1975

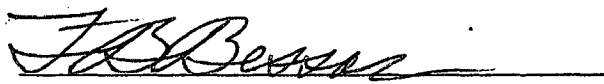
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Anthropology

Crow and Hidatsa Women: The Influence of Economics on Religious Status

Director: Frank B. Bessac

*F.B.*

The objectives of this research were to describe the roles Crow and Hidatsa women played in economics and religion and to note any correlations between religious status and economic status.

Because the Crow and Hidatsa are historically and linguistically related and because they belonged to the same cultural and environmental area, the controlled comparison method was used. In a controlled comparison study one attempts to note variation among a series of data with the rest of the material being held constant. While the Crow and Hidatsa held many factors in common, they differed in terms of economic roles. Hidatsa women were horticulturalists, while Crow women were primarily gatherers. It was suggested that these differences in economic roles could be correlated with differences in religious roles as well.

The conclusions drawn from this study were: (1) Hidatsa women had higher economic and religious status than Crow women; (2) both female control of production and distribution of valued goods and female solidarity groups supportive of female economic activities are associated with high economic status for women; (3) religious themes that honor female activities are associated with high religious status for women; and (4) there is a tendency for women who have high economic status to enjoy high religious status as well.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an attempt to describe the religious and economic roles of nineteenth century Crow and Hidatsa<sup>1</sup> women and to note any correlations that might occur between religious status and economic status for women in these two groups.

The controlled comparison method will be used in this study. This method involves the isolation of common denominators among groups of people and the analyzation of particular variables that exist between the groups.

Northern Great Plains cultures such as the Crow and Hidatsa hold many factors in common: (1) warfare and buffalo hunting as major male activities; (2) extensive use of the horse in trade and transportation; (3) vision quests, medicine bundles and male self-torture to gain supernatural power; (4) political leadership awarded to men having war honors; (5) political, religious and social emphasis placed upon men's societies; (6) the Sun Dance as a major religious ceremony; and (7) adaptation to an environment characterized by extremes in temperature and wind. While holding many factors constant,

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<sup>1</sup>The Hidatsa are also called the "Gros Ventres" on the Fort Berthold Reservation today. In past literature, they have been referred to as the Minitares or the Minitarees.

the Crow and Hidatsa vary in terms of female economic roles. The Crow were nomadic hunter-horsemen, and Crow women were primarily gatherers. The Hidatsa were village horticulturists, and Hidatsa women were primarily gardeners.

I propose that Hidatsa women had higher economic and religious status than Crow women and that there is a correlation between high economic status and high religious status.

The following factors will be used as indicators of high female economic status:

1. Percentage and value of female contribution to subsistence.
2. Female control over the production and distribution of valued goods, e.g., tanned skins.
3. Female solidarity groups supportive of female economic activities.

Religious status will be analyzed according to the following points:

1. Types of roles women play in ceremonies, e.g., leader, and restrictions placed upon those roles,<sup>2</sup> e.g., marital status.
2. Basic religious themes that do or do not favor female participation in religion, e.g., emphasis on warfare in Crow religion.

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<sup>2</sup>The term "role" is used here to indicate the dynamic aspect of status: when an individual puts the rights and duties which constitute a given status into effect, he is performing a role (Linton 1936:114).

A look at the historical background of the Crow and Hidatsa during the equestrian era shows that Crow female economic status declined through time, while Hidatsa economic status stayed the same. The equestrian era was marked by the introduction of the horse and gun on the Plains.

The Crow and Hidatsa originally belonged to the same tribe. Around the time that the horse reached the Plains, the Crow split from the village Hidatsa and became nomadic hunter horsemen (Frison 1967:225). The exact date of this split is uncertain. Denig and Hayden place it at 1776, while Curtis suggests 1676 (Frison 1967:225). The Crow's adoption of the nomadic subsistence tradition had a tremendous impact on both male and female economic roles. With the introduction of guns and horses, hunting became man's most important economic activity. Men could kill buffalo on horseback more swiftly than in the days of communal hunts when drive lines were used. Hunting became more individualistic: the animals a man shot were his, and success at hunting was a source of prestige for the male (Liberty 1979:141). Men supplied vast amounts of meat to be butchered and skins to be processed into leather goods for trade.

After the Crow took up the nomadic subsistence tradition, women's economic roles changed from gardener to gatherer and skin tanner. With an increase in the supply of skins to be tanned and an increase in the demand for skins for trade, women's work became more burdensome (Liberty 1979:141). Tepees

also became larger, requiring more work. Horses made moving camp easier, but an increase in the accumulation of personal articles did not (Liberty 1979:141). As hunting became the primary economic activity, the women's role of plant gatherer was less valued than before.

The Hidatsa never left the village way of life. Hidatsa women survived the equestrian era with their economic roles left intact. Women continued to provide a large portion of the food supply through gardening. Female trade negotiations may have decreased slightly as men began to engage in "massive barter" for horses, guns and related goods (Wood 1974:10).

## CHAPTER II

### THEORY AND METHOD

#### Sources

Ethnographic sources written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and some ethnohistorical sources were used in this study. Both types have their biases. As Weist (1973) mentioned, nineteenth-century Plains data can be gathered from the journals of early Plains explorers who experienced Plains cultures undestroyed, but did not understand them, and especially failed to talk to women; or later, from Plains ethnographers, who may have had a better understanding but were unable to witness the cultures intact.

After analyzing the ethnohistorical data, it becomes apparent that most of the literature written by males minimizes women and their activities or ignores them completely. Trappers, missionaries and explorers carried their own conceptions about women with them when observing Indian society. To the trapper and explorer, women were often seen as objects for sexual exploitation or as gifts offered by an Indian host to strengthen trading alliances.

The ethnographers, usually male and white, also attributed little significance to women and their world. According to Weist (1976:2), "because women's roles were not of central

importance to the ethnographers, many aspects of relevance were omitted."

Among the few works written on Indian women by ethnographers are: Lowie (1922a) and Linderman (1972) on the Crow; Michelson (1932, 1933) on the Cheyenne and Arapaho; Mead (1932) on the Omaha; Lewis (1941) on the Blackfeet; and Marriot (1945) on the Kiowa. Two works on women warriors are James Schultz's Running Eagle (1919) and Kehoe's The Warrior Girl (1976). Plains women in general are treated briefly in books covering all North American tribes; Terrell and Terrell (1976) and Neithammer (1977) are two such works. Weist (1980) and Liberty (1979) have written much needed overviews on Plains Indian women. Schneider (1980) has written a paper on Indian women's work, presenting for the first time an unbiased approach to women's roles in arts and crafts.

#### Theoretical Material

In my search for an understanding of the effect economic status has on religious status, I surveyed the recent literature concerning female status and economics.

Female control over production and distribution of goods is one condition that increases female status and power. Sanday (1973:1682-1700) examined the relationship between female productivity and female power. She found that "female productive activities may be a necessary but not sufficient precondition for the development of female power" (1973:1697). In some groups, women may be practically slave laborers,

prohibited from controlling what they produce. In other societies, female labor is focused on items of low prestige and low market value, while male labor goes towards goods with high prestige or market value. If women produce valued goods in a society where control and production are linked, they tend to develop power. On the other hand, in many groups magic or religion endows men with control over valued goods. In such cases, female control is not likely to evolve unless an outside influence creates a new demand or leads to a re-valuation of female products (Sanday 1973:1697).

Control of resources is a factor that allows women to have considerable economic power. According to Simone de Beauvoir (in Sanday 1973:1968), women often have control of resources when magico-religious power is bestowed upon them and they are backed by a belief system presenting motherhood as sacred or magical. This often occurs in farming groups where there is an association between maternity and the fertility of the soil.

Brown (1975:235-251) presented an ethnohistorical analysis of female domestic and political power among the so-called matriarchal Iroquois. Contrary to the theories of others, she found that control of the economic organization of the tribe--not the Iroquois kinship structure nor considerable contribution to subsistence--was the key factor responsible for the power and freedom enjoyed by Iroquois women.

Women were in charge of every aspect of agricultural production. They controlled the land and owned all tools and seeds. More importantly, they had the right to distribute food, including food procured by men. Stored food, also under female control, provided the main source of wealth. Women had the right to refuse to provide food for council meetings, war parties, religious festivals and daily household use if they so desired (Brown 1975:249).

Any woman with the proper qualifications could become a Matron. One of the duties of a Matron was to help select the religious practitioners, "the keepers of the faith," comprised of both men and women. Matrons could also nominate council elders and influence council decisions. Women were in charge of all activities in the longhouse, a living unit comprised of several matrilineally related families (Brown 1975).

Some anthropologists have speculated that certain economic systems enhance female status. Lippert (in Murdock 1949:205) suggests that when subsistence is primarily a female activity, matrilineal residence will occur and women will enjoy high status. The female condition is especially improved when a society changes from a hunting and gathering economy to an agricultural economy.

Other factors which increase the status of women are:  
(1) the absence of movable property (i.e., herds or slaves) with which men might challenge the preeminence of landed property and introduce "the destructive factor of polygyny";



(2) relative peacefulness, since war enhances the importance of men and brings them slave wives or the means to purchase women; and (3) a low level of political integration that does not go beyond the local community, since wider government control is usually in the hands of men and brings them increased power, property and prestige, along with the decline of female influence (Murdock 1949:205-206).

According to Lomax (in Sanday 1973:1686) when women play an important and recognized part in providing the main food source, they will have a complementary and more or less equal interactive relationship with men in the public activities of a society.

Anthropologists have found only a few economic systems in which women are the primary contributors: gathering, horticulture and trade (Lippert 1886, Schmidt 1955, Murdock 1957, Aberle 1961). Women contribute the most to subsistence activities in shifting agricultural or horticultural societies (Sanday 1973:1690).

What factors influence female contribution to subsistence? Brown (1970:1074-1078) suggests that female contribution to subsistence is determined by compatibility with child rearing, not physiological or psychological factors. If the economic role of women is to be increased, their child care responsibilities must be lessened or their work must be carried on simultaneously with child care.

Women cannot actively participate in an economic system based primarily on hunting because the risks involved in hunting and the long periods of absence are incompatible with child care. Women can participate heavily in an economy based on horticulture because of compatibility with child rearing. In the words of DeSchlippe (in Brown 1970:1076):

In all those field types which are grouped around the homestead and to which the common name of garden has been applied, as a rule women work alone or with their children. This may be explained by the proximity to the homestead and accordingly by the nature of this work. It consists of a great variety of different small tasks, many of which can be packed into one single day. A woman, trained in household work, is capable of doing a great deal of minor independent tasks without losing the order of her day's work.

In light of the above theories I propose that: (1) control over the production and distribution of valued goods, solidarity groups supportive of female economic activities, and a high degree of participation in the primary subsistence activity bring high economic status; and (2) economic status is a major factor in determining religious status.

In societies where women play active important ceremonial roles, where few restrictions are placed upon female participation in ceremonies, and where basic religious themes favor female participation in religion, women will enjoy a high religious status.

#### Method

Because the Crow and Hidatsa are historically and linguistically related, and because they belonged to the same

cultural and environmental area, I employ the controlled comparison method.

Eggan (1954) used this term to describe studies which examined the development of social institutions in a given geographic area. Among others who have used the controlled comparison method are Redfield (1950), Bessac (1965), and Fei Hsia-t'ung (1945).

In a controlled comparison study, one attempts to note variation among a series of data when the rest of the material is held constant. This method is similar to classic laboratory experimentation: certain factors are held constant, thus the remaining ones are causative.

Among northern Great Plains cultures such as the Crow and Hidatsa, many factors are held constant: (1) warfare and buffalo hunting as major male activities; (2) extensive use of the horse in trade and transportation; (3) vision quests, medicine bundles and male self-torture to gain supernatural power; (4) political leadership awarded to men having war honors; (5) political, religious and social emphasis placed upon men's societies; (6) the Sun Dance as a major religious ceremony; and (7) adaptation to an environment characterized by extremes in temperature and wind. Two other common denominators that exist between the Crow and Hidatsa are language (basically the same language with differences in dialect) and ancestral stock.

One of the striking differences between the Crow and Hidatsa was female economic roles. The Crow women were primarily gatherers while the village Hidatsa women were horticulturalists. I propose that women who are horticulturalists have a higher economic status than women who are gatherers, and that there is a co-variation between high economic status and high religious status.

To affirm a functional relationship between high economic status and high religious status, I will examine all variables not held in common by the two groups that might be influential: female sexual autonomy, rights over marriage, divorce and adultery, residence patterns and rules of descent.

## CHAPTER III

### ECONOMIC ROLES: CROW

The rigors of this life made the women as strong as the men; and women who could carry a quarter of a buffalo apparently without exertion, ride all day and all night with a raiding party, or travel afoot, two hundred miles across an unmarked wilderness of mountains, plains and southern streams in four days and nights, were not the women to bring forth puny offspring (Curtis 1909:3).

Crow women prepared meat, made clothing, gathered plant foods, carried wood and water, packed all the household items on the travois during a move, cut tepee poles, made and decorated leather bags and clothing, dressed and tanned skins, made saddles and horse gear and reared children.

Horses and tepees were the most valued property among the Crow (Ehrlich 1937:391, Lowie 1922:268). Women accumulated horses through inheritance, gifts, or trade. A woman held rights of trade, loan, or gift-giving concerning her horses (Ewers 1955:29). Hamilton mentioned women trading ponies for scarlet cloth, buttons, knives, etc. (1900:63). Women owned the tepee and all its furnishings. If a man was punished by the tribal police, however, "his" tepee was slashed and destroyed along with his horse (Liberty 1979:141).

Tanning hides for clothing, tepee covers and leather articles was a major occupation of Crow women. It took three days of hard labor to dress a hide. Twenty buffalo robes

could be made in a season. Women often worked cooperatively. There was always a co-wife, an older widowed relative, or the wife of a man not so lucky in hunting, around to help. A woman who was skillful and efficient at preparing hides was a valuable marriage partner and could bring her husband wealth and honor (Neithammer 1977:112). In the words of Lowie (1935:75), "A good tanner was well thought of and sometimes offered her services to a neighbor who needed a new tipi cover and might pay her a horse."

Women could increase prestige and income by becoming a medicine woman, tepee cutter, or a highly skilled crafts-woman (Grinnell 1962:216). Through personal visions or teachers, men or women became doctors and learned of the various medicinal plants and how to administer them (Ewers 1955:245). One medicine woman made people well by pushing their stomachs and giving them root concoctions. She eventually became quite wealthy through her success at curing<sup>3</sup> (Ehrlich 1937:339). Because of the time it takes to raise children and maintain a household, medicine women were probably post-menopausal and free from the burden of children.

If a woman wanted a lodge cover made, she hired one or more tepee cutter designers. These highly skilled women directed up to twenty women in the cutting of skins. The assistants received four items of payment while secondary helpers were given a feast in exchange for their work.

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<sup>3</sup>From Crow mythology

According to Mooney, the tepee cutter is supposed to be of good disposition "because if any other kind of a woman builds the tepee, things will never go right inside" (1911:102).

Exceptional Crow women who apparently assumed male roles have been mentioned in the literature. John Ewers (1961) and Frank B. Linderman (1972) have described women who were famous warriors, hunters and war leaders. Crow Woman Chief was the most famous of the Crow women warriors (Ewers 1965, Kurz 1937).

Crow Woman Chief equalled men as a hunter and horseback rider. She wore female dress but was taller and stronger than most women. On one occasion the Crow were attacked by the Blackfeet and fled to the local fort for protection. The Blackfeet tried to drive the Crow out, but no one came forward except Crow Woman Chief. She rode straight for the enemy, was shot at, and proceeded to kill and wound several Blackfeet warriors (Ewers 1965:197). The woman warrior escaped unharmed and her people praised her brave deeds and named her a war hero (Ewers 1965:197). From then on she led men in battle, stole many horses, and counted many coups.

Because of her brave war deeds, old men awarded Crow Woman Chief a position of honor and respect seldom attained by warriors and never before by women of the Crow Nation (Ewers 1965:198). She was included in tribal council meetings and took precedence in public counting of coups.

The Other Magpie and Finds-Them-and-Kills-Them were also women warriors. They fought with General Cook against the Sioux and Cheyenne in the Battle of Rosebud (Ewers 1961:10, Linderman 1972:228).

The Other Magpie went to battle in order to revenge the recent death of her brother who was killed by the Sioux. A belt knife and a long thin willow coup stick were her only weapons. In spite of the odds against her, she counted coup on a live Sioux warrior and took his scalp. Pretty Shield, Linderman's informant, described The Other Magpie as "a wild one who had no man of her own . . . both bad and brave . . ." (Linderman 1972:228).

Also during the Battle of the Rosebud, Finds-Them-and-Kills-Them saved a warrior's life. Bull-snake was shot down from his horse and wounded badly. Finds-Them-and-Kills-Them jumped down from her horse and stood over him, shooting the Lacota as fast as she could load her gun (Linderman 1972:229). In Pretty Shield's words, Finds-Them-and-Kills-Them was neither man nor woman. She looked like a man but dressed as a woman. She had the heart of a woman and did woman's work. "She was not as strong as a man, and yet she was wiser than a woman . . ." (Linderman 1972:228).

Warfare was normally the male's concern, and the woman warrior was an exception. However, the occurrence of women warriors in many nomadic Plains tribes leads one to join Liberty (1979:143) in questioning the circumstances behind it.



A Crow woman spent most of her energies in the domestic sphere; her public roles were peripheral. As Weist (1978) points out, women were not directly involved in political decisions. It is uncertain whether women were involved in the selection of a chief. They could increase property and gain wealth, but the glory went to men coming home from war or horseraiding. Most of the wealth from trading buffalo hides with whites probably went to males. There were no public opportunities for females to gain honor through achievement from strictly female activities, except in the public counting of robes quilled or tepee covers made. Bravery in battle brought the highest public honor one could receive in Crow society. Those women who wanted to achieve honor and prestige in the public arena had to do so in male terms. Women received glory by association with men. But there was a price to pay for rejecting the normal life of an Indian woman. Most women warriors were unmarried and did not have children. Crow Woman Chief never married because "men feared her more than loved her as a conjugal companion" (Ewers 1965:197). The woman who chose the non-traditional female roles of warrior or horse stealer could no longer be categorized as strictly female. By becoming a woman warrior, she had relinquished the right to bear children, one of a Plains Indian woman's central roles. Fertility was one of the major components of the concept of femaleness in Plains culture.

Coming to the aid of one's tribe may have been a motivation for the woman warrior. There was a strong sense of ethnic pride among the Plains groups. Personal and family interests often had to be put aside in defense of the tribe. In the struggle for life on the Plains, group effort was essential for survival against attacking tribes, smallpox epidemics and the United States military. Some women were not satisfied with fulfillment of tribal duty by bearing lots of children to replace men lost in war. They wanted to gain glory themselves. The women warriors are these women.

Percentage and Value of Female  
Contribution to Subsistence

According to Neithammer (1977:107), it has been estimated that in some Native American hunting and gathering societies (nomadic hunters of the Great Plains such as the Crow are labeled hunting and gathering by some) women contributed as much as eighty percent of the labor necessary for the family supply of food. This included gathering, raising plant foods, and the labor involved in butchering, drying and cooking game brought in by men (Neithammer 1977:107). A buffalo cow could provide up to fifty-five pounds of pemmican and forty-five pounds of dried meat. An extremely skilled woman could butcher three buffalo carcasses a day.

Regardless of the importance or the labor of daily food production, female contributions to subsistence were overshadowed by the glamour of hunting. There was little excitement

or prestige to be gained from gathering plant foods or cooking meat (Neithammer 1977:107). Hunting was dangerous and exciting, requiring organization, planning and much skill.

Hunting was a central focus in the lives of all members of the Northern Plains nomadic groups. The buffalo, the most important game animal, provided food as well as most of the materials used to produce objects for survival. Buffalo horns were made into cups and spoons; rawhide was used for clothing, shelter and containers for boiling food. References to hunting were a major theme in mythology. Mythological heroes secured favor from potential helpers by leaving elk, deer, antelope or buffalo carcasses outside their doors (Lowie 1956:72). Rituals were performed in order to insure a successful hunt. Only men who had proven themselves in the hunt were worthy of taking a wife.

In a cross-cultural examination of hunting and gathering societies, Friedl (1975:13) found that even though meat does not always provide most of the food source, meat from big game animals is thought to be the best, most satisfying food. In the words of Lowie, "Even nowadays an old-fashioned woman will disdain excellent maize and clamour for mediocre beef as the nearest approximation to buffalo" (1935:72). According to Lowie (1956:72), roots and berries were always a major part of a meal but only as a seasoning or dessert; the corn traded from the Hidatsa was valued for its variety rather than as a substitute for meat.

Indian women knew that the finest food of all was meat but that the body must have other nutrients to function properly (Terrell and Terrell 1976:60). So they gathered plants which provided sugars and starches. The botanical knowledge required by women in hunting and gathering societies has been played down in the literature, but was essential for survival. Strawberries, juneberries, gooseberries, artichokes, buffalo berries, cherries, plums and raspberries are just a few of the plant foods women had to be familiar with in order to provide daily fare for her family.

Female Control over the Production  
and Distribution of Valued Goods

One of a Crow woman's primary economic functions was tanning hides for trade. This function became increasingly important with the infiltration of whites into the west. Women were valued for their productivity. The more wives a man had the more guns and whiskey he could trade for from the whites.

There appears to be an inconsistency in the literature concerning who controlled the trading of buffalo hides. Ewers wrote that skins were divided between husband and wife and each traded for what he or she liked best (1961:157). In reference to the Blackfeet, Schultz wrote that when robes were traded, the women received their share of the proceeds and bought blankets, bright prints and other articles of dress (1907:64).

On the other hand, it has been suggested that women entirely lost control of trade during the equestrian era. With the onset of horses and guns, trade decisions began to fall under male authority. "Horse raiding became an all important obsession, along with other aspects of intertribal warfare" (Liberty 1979:141). External demand for tanned leather goods, especially buffalo robes, increased, along with the desire for trade goods such as guns and ammunition offered in exchange for them (Liberty 1979:141). According to Jablow (1951:21),

As far as the women were concerned, what the horse gave, the fur trade took away, for the latter only added to her burden of labor. The complex of historical factors changed her role as produced from that of a participant in the old hunting pattern to that of a worker in the fur trade. Without the proper dressing of the skins by the women their articles were valueless for the market.

Guns, ammunition and whiskey (items desired by males) were exchanged for leather goods produced by women. Women were vital to the production of buffalo robes but had little or no control of distribution to outside groups.

#### Female Solidarity Groups Supportive of Female Economic Activities

Unlike other Plains Indian groups that had quillwork guilds or pottery societies, there appears to have been no female solidarity groups devoted to female economic interests among the Crow. Women received recognition for excellence in quillwork or beadwork, and a woman gained wealth and prestige for being a specialist in tepee cutting. However, there were

no formal societies with rituals and selective membership where a woman could obtain collective honor, power and support for her accomplishments.

## CHAPTER IV

### ECONOMIC ROLES: HIDATSA

Along with raising children, tanning skins and making household items, gardening was a Hidatsa woman's main occupation. According to Will and Hyde (1917:11), "the woman did all or most of the work, digging the ground, planting with care and usually hoeing all of the patches twice before the tribe set out on its summer hunt."

The main crops were corn, squashes, pumpkins, sun flowers, tobacco, maize and beans (Maximilian 1906:274). A tremendous surplus of corn was grown, harvested and stored in huge cache pits until traded with whites and other Indian groups (Will and Hyde 1917:137).

Young girls helped their mothers work on three- to five-acre plots. One of their tasks was to sit on top of platforms built in the fields, ready to fend off blackbirds.

Much of the work associated with farming was done cooperatively and provided a time for socializing. Two girls whose mothers farmed adjoining gardens often sat on the watchers' platform together, singing songs and offering food to anyone who came out to the fields for a visit (Wilson 1917: 31). One or two women of the same household usually worked together in the gardens while the others stayed near the lodge and prepared meals, tanned hides and did other household tasks.

During the corn harvest, the women cooked a big feast and invited men aged nineteen to thirty to help in the harvest (Wilson 1917:43).

Shelling corn was tedious work. Two to three women usually worked together (Wilson 1917:38). In the words of Buffalo Bird Woman "If while I was shelling corn, a girl or woman came into the lodge to visit, she would sit down and lend a hand while we chatted; thus the shelling was soon done" (Wilson 1917:41).

Several authors mentioned the fact that Hidatsa women were extremely conscientious about their gardens and took great pride in their work (Wilson 1917, Holder 1970, Will and Hyde 1917). In the words of Wilson's informant, Buffalo Bird Woman (Wilson 1917:44):

We cared for our corn in those days as we would care for a child; for we Indian people loved our gardens, just as a mother loves her children; and we thought that our growing corn liked to hear us sing, just as children like to hear their mother sing to them.

A woman could achieve honor through her gardening. A woman who had a good garden and a well-kept lodge was given the privilege of wearing a belt about six inches wide, made of deerskin and decorated with feathers (Curtis 1970, vol. 4: 142).

Hidatsa women, like women in other Plains groups, were adept in making a variety of crafts and artwork. Pottery made from blue clay, "highly distinctive" twilled plaited carrying baskets, large and small utensils made from box elder wood,



parfleches and dresses made of mountain sheep and deer skins, embroidered and fringed skirts and robes are among the items made by Hidatsa women. Mat weaving and pottery were done by both men and women (Wilson in Schneider 1980:8). Pottery and basketry were both specialized crafts (Bowers 1965:165).

Like other Plainswomen, Hidatsa women derived wealth, prestige and pleasure from their creative endeavors. The institution of paying for an apprenticeship in one of the specialized crafts was highly developed. In fact, "payment for teaching a skill was so ingrained that a girl even made token payments to her mother" (Hammond and Jablow 1976:85).

A hardworking and talented woman could increase her husband's wealth through payment for her work. Wilson (in Schneider 1980:16) mentioned that a man might pay a woman a robe and a large bowl of food to have a tent made. Owl Woman was given a pony in exchange for a steer robe decorated with quills (Schneider 1977:17). Because a man's position depended upon his ability to give away considerable quantities of goods, the woman's contribution was essential to his status and prestige (Schneider 1980:17).

Women received recognition for work in the same manner that men received recognition for war honors (Schneider 1977:17). According to Wilson (1912:52):

An honor mark goes to one who shows great industry-- one who is a great worker and finishes hundreds of hides for robes and tents. Mahidiweash had such a mark given her by her "aunt" Sage. This honor mark was a woman's belt, a ma-ipsu-haashe, and it could only be acquired by gift, as a reward to a great worker.

There appears to have been no equivalent of the Crow woman warrior among the Hidatsa. The following factors might have contributed to the lack of their occurrence:

(1) Gardening was too time-consuming to provide women the opportunity to get involved in warfare. Women had to stay home and tend the fields while the men went off to hunt or fight in battle. (2) Because of the significance of crops in Hidatsa economy and the ceremonial complex that surrounded gardening, women were not tempted to take on male roles to gain public recognition. (3) Village tribal members were depleted earlier than the nomadic tribal populations when the tremendous smallpox epidemics followed white intrusion on the Plains. Villagers, such as the Hidatsa, were not as enthusiastic about going on the warpath as their nomadic neighbors. The village tribes were reluctant to spare their dwindling population of males for warfare, much less their women.

Percentage and Value of Female  
Contribution to Subsistence

Most authors agree that females contributed as much, if not more, to subsistence than males in the Hidatsa economic system. Holder (1970:58) wrote the following passage concerning the value and extent of female subsistence activities.

They [the women] were interested in the maintenance of a permanent dwelling, the care of children, the production of staple vegetable foods, and the preservation of all types of provender. They processed skins and furs and manufactured clothing, basketry, and pottery. They owned, controlled, and worked the

lands. From them came the really basic foodstuffs and surpluses and, in consequence, all of the essentially permanent fixtures of life. Their actual position in the society must have been strong, since their work was the basic guarantee against the dissolution of the villages.

Bruner (1961:193) wrote that horticulture and hunting were equally important in Hidatsa economy, and that the Hidatsa economy was flexible. When game was scarce, corn, beans, and squash provided sustenance. Women owned the land, did all the horticultural labor and provided the basic food supply (Holder 1974:6, Clarke 1969:20). The value of female horticultural work was revealed by the association between corn and supernatural power. "When the horticulturalists went to war they carried the figurative weight of the stable village around their necks as they, in all reality, often wore as a talisman a sacred ear of corn, to bring them success on a raid" (Holder 1970:134).

Another indication of the significance given to female subsistence activities was the occurrence of males contributing to horticulture, a female-controlled activity.

Wolf Chief told Wilson (1917:115) that some men liked to help the women in the fields, others did not:

My father, Small Ankle, liked to garden and often helped his wives. He told me that, that was the best way to do. 'Whatever you do,' he said, 'help your wife in all things!' He taught me to clean the garden, to help gather corn, to hoe and to rake.

My father also said, 'that man lived best and had plenty to eat who helped his wife.' One who did not help his wife was likely to have scanty stores of food (Wilson 1917:115).

Hunted game was also important in the Hidatsa subsistence pattern. But hunting was only a seasonal occupation and heavily influenced by a horticultural way of life.

Since the gardens were so important to the Hidatsa, the summer hunt was not scheduled to leave until the corn was knee high. When the date for the hunt was announced, the women looked to their gardens, completing the hilling of the plants and pulling the last weeks; they repaired their riding equipment and checked their weapons. But the sharp dichotomy of work was not as apparent as during normal times. Men did many duties otherwise reserved for the women. They would assist in the gardens, spread out the tipis for inspection and last-minute repairs, and attend to last-minute matters so that the household would be ready to move out of the village when the signal was given (Bowers 1965:52).

According to Meyer (1977:65), the hunting expeditions were seldom further than forty miles from the village. Bowers wrote that the Hidatsa traveled as far as one hundred to two hundred miles from the village to cure meat and hides, leaving behind an older woman of each household, the small children and enough older men to protect the village from burning (1965:50).

#### Female Control over the Production and Distribution of Valued Goods

Trade was an important economic activity among the Hidatsa. The Arikara, Mandan and Hidatsa villagers were middlemen between nomadic hunters on both sides of the Missouri and between whites and nomadic hunters (Wood 1974:10). They traded garden produce as well as goods manufactured by both nomads and villagers.

The extent to which Hidatsa women benefited from and controlled trade is unclear in the literature. According to Friedl (1975:63), female participation in trade occurs in societies where "commercial exchange, especially, but not exclusively in food, raw and cooked, is a significant part of the economy." Women are often involved in the trade of agricultural products when they are the farmers or gardeners (Boserup 1970:91).

It is generally understood that Hidatsa women controlled the trade of foodstuffs and clothing, while men engaged in "more massive barter" of horses, guns and related items (Wood 1974:10). Wood postulated that before the advent of European goods on Indian trade networks, trade conducted by women might have been the more important mode of exchange (1974:10).

Corn and vegetable products produced by Hidatsa women were important trade items to the nomadic groups. Nomadic hunters subsisted primarily on meat, and corn was a welcome change of diet. More crucially, corn could save a tribe from winter starvation (Bruner 1961:199).

Wilson (1917:58) mentioned that the Sioux traded with the Hidatsa, not because they were in need of food, but because they liked to eat Hidatsa corn and always had meat and skins to trade. One tanned buffalo robe was exchanged for a string of braided corn.

Explorers such as Lewis and Clark also yearned for vegetables during the long winter months. They found Mandan

and Hidatsa women quite willing to trade. Lewis and Clark (in Will and Hyde 1917:193) wrote:

Dec. 21) A woman brought her child with an abscess in the lower part of the back, and offered as much corn as she could carry for some medicine . . .

Dec. 22) A number of squaws and men dressed like squaws brought corn to trade for small articles with the men.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the trading of corn and other vegetable products was a significant part of the Hidatsa economy, and such trade was under female control. This leads one to believe that control of the distribution of corn and other crops was a contributing factor for high female economic status among Hidatsa women.

#### Female Solidarity Groups Supportive of Female Economic Activities

The Hidatsa had exclusive female craft societies, devoted to the preservation of a craft technique and to the regulation of the numbers practicing the craft. Secrecy was maintained by the society in order to protect the knowledge of the craft (Schneider 1980:14). This secrecy might involve rituals which were necessary to do the work correctly and safely (Schneider 1980:14).

Among the Hidatsa, pottery and basketry were sacred crafts practiced by those in a select group. Pottery was made exclusively by those who owned bundles associated with the Hidatsa

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<sup>4</sup>There was no reason given for the men dressing as women while trading foodstuffs--perhaps this occurrence suggests the importance of women in trade with whites and perhaps it suggests a strong sexual division of labor in trade; only women were involved with the trading of food.

cultural hero, The-Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies (Bowers 1965:120). Particular design elements were owned by individuals and usually were passed down to a relative. If a mother owned particular design elements, it was expected that her daughter would buy the complete rites and continue the designs unique to that female lineage (Bowers 1965:120). Households who did not possess the rights to make pottery bought pottery in exchange for decorated robes, clothing, and other property. In this manner, older women had a source of income to last until old age (Bowers 1965:120).

Knowledge of how to form and fire pottery and the rituals involved in making pottery were kept secret. "Pottery making was a secret rite and one should not visit or stand around talking with those making vessels" (Bowers 1965:165). Women made pottery in a darkened earth lodge with all openings covered from the prying eyes of others (Bowers 1965:373). Sacred songs were sung during the mixing of ingredients, shaping of the vessel and application of decorative features (Bowers 1965:373). If a piece of pottery broke in firing, it was assumed that the spirits had been offended by the potter (Curtis 1970:140).

Basket making was practiced only by those possessing Holy Women rites (Bowers 1965:120). Techniques and sacred rites associated with basketry were also kept secret. The Hidatsa women knew the value of holding a monopoly in a craft (Schneider 1980:15). In the words of Buffalo Bird Woman, "Basket makers

would not let others see how they worked, because if another wanted to learn how to make a basket she would pay a good price for being taught . . ." (Wilson 1977:104).

The Hidatsa also had important women's age-graded societies<sup>5</sup> in which membership was purchased collectively by women of the same age group. These societies provided help for women in times of need and gave support to female activities (Weist 1976:10). If a woman was sick and unable to work, she prepared a feast for her fellow society members who came and planted her entire garden for her (Lowie 1913:324).

The two highest societies were the Goose and the White Buffalo Cow organizations. They were involved in securing food through magico-religious means (Lowie 1913:324). The Goose society was concerned exclusively with the rites for insuring a good crop and protection from drought and insects (Bowers 1965:200).

Members of the Goose society frequently received supernatural experiences, associated with Corn rites, in which the individual was instructed in a vision to make feasts to the society or to various sacred bundles concerned with the corn. Some women also bought the right to have "corn spirits" come up in their throats on certain public occasions. These women were retained by the buyers as honored life members of the Goose society (Bowers 1965:202).

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<sup>5</sup>A level of social status, or of segregation, which is distinguished by age. Age grade usually involves males only but may involve females also. Ceremonies generally mark the transition from one group to another. The age grades may consist of the natural physiological periods of life, such as puberty and menopause. The age-grade dimension may cut through the vertical dimensions of clan or lineage to develop horizontal ties, thus strengthening the social fabric. Members of an age-grade sometimes wear distinctive garments and have special responsibilities (Winick 1972:238-239).



The White Buffalo Society was the highest of the organized age-grade women's societies, comprised of the oldest group of women in the tribe.

Women not yet through menopause were not permitted to join the society as it was believed that menstrual blood would drive the buffaloes away. This was in direct contrast to the belief that menstrual flows were "good" for the gardens (Bowers 1965:205).

The women in this society were called upon to give buffalo-calling rites to lure winter buffalo herds near the village. The special officers in the organization were women who owned buffalo bundles of their own or were married to men with such rights (Bowers 1965:205).

## CHAPTER V

### RELIGIOUS ROLES: CROW

#### Important Female Religious Roles

However private or personal an individual's religious experience may be, religion itself is highly institutionalized in most cultures. It is very much a part of the public domain, a vital source of power and a sanction for authority. As such, it is only to be expected that women's roles and participation in religious institutions is limited. Even where women are active in the major religious institutions of society, their roles are subsidiary to those of men (Hammond and Jablow 1976:120).

As Hammond and Jablow imply in the above statement, religious organization reflects the power structure of the rest of public life. The producers and directors of religious ceremonies among the Plains groups usually held political positions. Despite the fact that women did not hold political positions and despite the emphasis placed on such male pursuits as warfare and wife-stealing, Crow women had important roles in religious ceremonies.

Tobacco was the most distinctive of Crow medicines and the Tobacco Planting Ceremony, a major Crow ceremony (Lowie 1956:274). The Crow believed it was necessary to plant tobacco to secure the well-being of the people. Women filled several key positions in this ceremony. A woman led the planting procession on its way to the garden site. Many regarded this as the highest office in the society (Lowie 1920:164). Women or

men mixed the sacred tobacco with buffalo dung and various roots before planting. Some women even had visions telling them how to organize chapters of the ceremony (Lowie 1920:164).

In the Cooked Meat Singing ceremony, married couples acted as a ritual unit. A man or woman could have had the vision that prompted the ceremony (Lowie 1956:258). A woman acted as hostess and prepared meat for the feast (Lowie 1920:195). The participants sat in a circle, women behind their husbands. As a sacred rattle and incense were passed around, each husband-wife team sang a song. A considerable amount of property was distributed during the ritual. Each guest gave the host and hostess a gift and gave a paternal relative of either sex a gift (Lowie 1956:260).

The Bear Song Dance was a ceremony where both men and women exhibited shamanistic powers. Held in the fall, when the berries were ripe and the bears danced in the mountains, this ceremony consisted of a dance around a pole wrapped with a tanned bear skin. An old woman led the dance. During the proceedings, individuals with *bātsirápe* were irresistibly drawn towards the pole (Lowie 1956:267). *Bātsirápe* was "a mysterious animal or part of an animal or inanimate object that dwells within a person's body, emerges on some definite stimulus, and in most cases must be made to go back unless its host, who at once goes into a trance, is to come to grief" (Lowie 1956:264). Most regarded *bātsirápe* as a special type of vision (Lowie 1956:264). In one instance, a woman had a horse inside her and the

tail began protruding from her mouth as she danced. Muskrat, one of Lowie's informants, had two bātsirápe: one was a weasel and the other a gray horse that entered her stomach when she had been fasting. After experiencing the power of the gray horse bātsirápe, Muskrat was able to cure horses that had a urinary disease (Lowie 1956:266).

The Crow Sun Dance was a ceremony that everyone participated in, but was held for distinctly individual purposes (Spier 1921:807). A man desiring a vision to revenge a slain tribesman pledged the ceremony. The Crow Sun Dance was essentially a bundle transfer ritual; the pledger (or Whistler) selected a director for the ceremony from among a number of Sun Dance Doll Owners and obtained the vision through the doll. The Crow Sun Dance included several of the typical Plains Sun Dance features: a period of separation and ceremonial purification to pledger; a group of scouts sent out on a mission to look for a center pole, felled a tree in imitation of killing a warrior; young men attempting to gain war visions through self-torture; and the erection of a sacred Sun Dance pole (Spier 1921:807).

Women held several prominent roles in the ceremony. The Doll Owner's wife was involved in rituals throughout the entire ceremony. She sang songs with her husband, painted the Whistler's body white and put the sacred moccasins on the Whistler. No one was allowed near the Whistler, the Doll Owner, nor the Doll Owner's wife for the duration of the

ceremony (Lowie 1918:22). The wife of a man who had killed and scalped an enemy was given the honor of sewing the Whistler's sacred moccasins (Lowie 1956:305). Five or six women known as good workers, cut branches and foliage for the Tongue Lodge.

### Restrictions on Female Religious Roles

#### Marriage and Chastity

In the Crow Sun Dance and other Crow ceremonies, only women who were married and women who were loyal to their husbands were eligible to perform those roles allotted to women. The task of chopping the tree for the central Sun Dance pole was assigned to an absolutely virtuous woman, often accompanied by a captive woman and a berdache<sup>6</sup> (Lowie 1956:312). The woman who served as tree notcher must have been married in the most honorable manner (by purchase) and must have been loyal to her husband (Lowie 1918:30). Qualified women often declined the position because a tree notcher relinquished the right to remarry after her husband's death. One informant refused an offer to be tree notcher by saying, "I will wait until I am an older woman" (Lowie 1918:31). If an unchaste woman accepted the position, bad luck would fall upon her people (Lowie 1918:31). The tree notcher was led through camp while young men taunted her and challenged her

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<sup>6</sup>Males among Plains groups that wore women's clothing and did women's work. Such individuals were often viewed as having certain mystical powers.

oath if they knew her to be unchaste. If it was discovered that the woman selected to be tree notcher was unchaste, she was disgraced for the rest of her life. When a woman accepted the office her husband rejoiced over the honor bestowed upon her (Lowie 1918:31).

Another woman, known to be virtuous but not necessarily a purchased wife, was asked to be the "one who goes for firewood" (Lowie 1956:315). She was given a buffalo tongue in payment, and led a group of men and women on the expedition to gather firewood to be used in the ceremony. Her horse was led by a virtuous young man. If this woman's reputation was in question, a man might shout "She has a hole in her mocasin!", meaning she has not been loyal to her husband (Lowie 1956:315).

Yet another chaste woman was asked to be garment maker. She made a special deerskin which was smoked with incense in a preparatory Sun Dance ritual (Lowie 1956:304).

In the Tobacco Planting ceremony, the female who brought the first piece of ceremonial wood must have had no illicit affairs with men. Again, if a woman lied about her virtue, accepted this position and was found out, she would be disgraced for life (Ewers 1965:4). According to Ewers, the ceremony had almost been given up because of the difficulty in finding honorable women to fill the role (1965:4).

The Chaste Women's Dance was a ceremony held specifically for women but sometimes men were involved. It was an assemblage

of married and single women who had never had an illicit love affair (Lowie 1924:361).

#### Menstruation

Separation of women at menses was not common among Plains groups. But according to Weist (1976:11), "in all societies, menstruating women were not allowed to participate in religious rituals, to associate with medicine men, or to enter the same lodge in which a sick person lay or an important medicine bundle was kept." These restrictions could be attributed to ideas about pollution held by peoples on the Plains. The concept of pollution rests on the assumption that individuals or substances in certain states, e.g., menstruating women, are unclean, mystically powerful and potentially dangerous to other supernatural powers that they come into contact with (Friedl 1975:10).

Weist, on the other hand, hypothesized that prohibiting menstruating women from participating in certain religious functions was not associated with ideas of pollution, but rather ideas about what was "natural" and "unnatural" (1976:12). Menstruating women were in an unnatural state and thus had inherent powers possibly dangerous to persons, objects or events which also had power or were in an "unnatural" state (Weist 1976:12).

Lowie mentioned that menstruating women avoided the Sun Dance Whistler or pledger and that menstruating women were not allowed to go near medicine bundles (1956:314). Ehrlich

(1937:386) found that a mourning widow was not allowed to touch a Sun worshipper because she was bleeding.<sup>7</sup> One Sun Dance bundle could not be unwrapped by a menstruating woman, but throughout the ceremony the bundle owner was assisted by his wife, "feminine disabilities to the contrary notwithstanding" (Lowie 1956:14).

The taboo against women coming near sacred objects was carried over to modern times. Lowie mentioned that in the summer of 1931 the owner of a medicine bundle kept it on his back porch. "There, he felt, it was less likely to be defiled by female visitors, who nowadays no longer announce their condition so as to permit removal of medicines" (Lowie 1956:45).

Ceremonial Motifs that Influenced  
Female Religious Status

Individualism

The notion of personal power, personally revealed, was an important theme in Crow religion. The individual attempted to establish a relationship with a divine power that would help him or her throughout life (Frison 1967:250). The relationship was established through visions induced by self-torture or fasting. The personal supernatural power, once received, was deposited in an object, the medicine bundle (Frison 1967:250). Visions and medicine bundles could be purchased. A great accumulation of visions or medicine bundles

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<sup>7</sup>From Crow mythology



led to high-prestige positions such as shaman (Benedict 1922:17). An individual often sought visions in times of hardship: sickness, loss of property or the death of a close relative (Lowie 1963:171). Crow women were not handicapped concerning individual religious practices (Lowie 1922b:402). They could inherit medicine bundles, go on vision quests and act as shaman (Lowie 1922b:402).

There are many cases of Crow women using their personal medicine to bring good fortune to ward off evil spirits (Underman 1972, Ehrlich 1937). Pretty Shield mentioned a fasting experience where she attempted to have a vision after the death of a child. "I ate only enough to keep me alive, hoping for a medicine-dream, a vision, that would help me to live and to help others" (Linderman 1972:165). Another woman sang her medicine song to help a woman recover from a rattlesnake bite (Linderman 1972:164). Goodclothes was a medicine woman who received her power from the mythological figure Red-Woman, a very bad "person" with bones of stone (Linderman 1972:54). Goodclothes "lived alone, had no children and was wise" (Linderman 1972:221).

#### Warfare

The interconnection of warfare and religion was apparent in almost every Crow ceremony. Mock battles and recitations of war deeds were common in ceremonial proceedings. Rituals were often performed in order that men might receive supernatural power to aid them in war. The Crow Sun Dance was

CROW AND HIDATSA WOMEN: THE INFLUENCE  
OF ECONOMICS ON RELIGIOUS STATUS

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performed especially to revenge the death of a warrior killed in battle. According to Liberty, the Crow Sun Dance was so war oriented that it was discontinued after the disappearance of intertribal warfare in 1874 (1970:77).

During the consecration of sacred rocks in the Cooked Meat Singing ceremony, the host often "indulged in a favorite Crow gesture." Taking a forked stick, he would point it toward an enemy camp, saying, "I poke it into their eyes" (Lowie 1956:313). This same phrase was often recited by the tree notcher as she struck the initial blow to cut the center pole in the Sun Dance Ceremony (Lowie 1956:313). The Cooked Meat Singing ceremony also included songs about war parties taking booty or making a killing, or about the brave deeds of those present (Lowie 1956:260).

While women played active roles in religious ceremonies, the focus of Crow ceremonialism was warfare, a masculine activity. The emphasis placed upon war deeds, mock battles and war medicine immediately excluded women from certain religious experiences. A woman could not dance in the Sun Dance with a skewer stuck in her back, attempting to gain a war vision. Nor was it appropriate for a woman to pledge a Sun Dance to revenge the death of a fellow warrior. A woman's participation in religion was contingent upon her relationships with males. For example, the wife of a man who had killed and scalped an enemy was given the honor of sewing the Whistler's sacred moccasins in the Sun Dance (Lowie 1956:305). Public

ceremonies were not given in honor of female pursuits such as gathering. In the words of Hammond and Jablow:

Indeed in some societies the dominant religion revolves around masculinity itself, and women become the target rather than the beneficiaries of the ritual. The ceremonies are designed to impress them with the power and authority of men and to give supernatural sanction for the subordination of women (1976:120-121).

## CHAPTER VI

### RELIGIOUS ROLES: HIDATSA

#### Important Female Religious Roles

Women had functioning roles in all important Hidatsa religious ceremonies (Holder 1970:58). The Hidatsa even had a group of women who were included in every ceremony. They were called Holy Women and formed a religious society composed of older females who bought membership rights individually after dreaming of the Holy Woman (Bowers 1965:323-324). The organization met whenever a tribal ritual was held and whenever a successful war party returned (Bowers 1965:326). Young men going off to battle sought supernatural aid from this benevolent group and were given a sacred object to wear (Bowers 1965:327). If successful in war, the warrior sponsored a feast for the Holy Women (Bowers 1965:327).

The majority of Hidatsa ceremonies were bundle transfer ceremonies. The Hidatsa recognized two types of sacred bundles: "tribal bundles acquired by vision and subsequent purchase, and personal bundles acquired by vision" (Bowers 1965:287-288). Bundles were transferred during a feast/gift-giving event sponsored by the prospective buyer. Each bundle had an origin myth that explained the bundle's source of supernatural power.

According to Bowers, women seldom attempted to build up personal bundles but owned their own tribal bundles and helped their brothers in the purchase of bundles (Bowers 1965:290). Women also were involved in the physical care of their husband's bundles (Holder 1970:58).

The Creek bundle, and associated doctoring and earth-lodge building rites, were passed down from mother to daughter. A mother taught her daughter how to put on the bundle transfer ceremony. When the daughter grew older, she sponsored a bundle transfer ceremony with aid of her siblings; this included "putting up" or contributing many buffalo robes and a big feast (Bowers 1965:383).

The Wolf Woman bundle was another bundle owned by women. Because this bundle contained a buffalo skull, it was considered of major importance (Bowers 1965:431). A woman bought the bundle directly from her mother with the help of her brothers and sisters and the young people of her household and clan. They helped her gather the necessary articles for a transfer ritual and feast. Women who owned this bundle were thought to have the power to predict the presence of enemies near the village (Bowers 1965:433).

During the transfer ceremony of the Sunset Wolf bundle (a male bundle), a Wolf Woman bundle owner was selected to impersonate Wolf Woman, the mythological figure associated with the origin myth of the Sunset bundle (Bowers 1965:419). Since several women owned Wolf Woman bundles, it was customary

for the buyer to choose a woman from his clan or moiety to act as Wolf Woman impersonator. In this way a woman could bring honor to her clan. During the ceremony, the Wolf Woman impersonator carried an untanned hide and sang an "invitation song" to call the bundle owners to begin the ceremony (Bowers 1965:419).

Like many of the Northern Great Plains tribes, the Hidatsa practiced the Sun Dance ceremony. The Hidatsa Sun Dance contained many of the features common to the Sun Dances of other Plains tribes: the selection and cutting of a tree representing the enemy, the erection of a preparatory and a main lodge, and male fasting for several days, culminating in a dance where self-induced torture was used to secure supernatural aid (Lowie 1914:624).

The Hidatsa Sun Dance was actually another sacred bundle transfer ritual. The rights for sponsoring the dance and the relevant knowledge concerning the proceedings and origin of the ritual were held exclusively by a fraternity of men (Lowie 1921:415). The ceremony was sponsored or pledged by a man who had received a vision telling him to purchase the Sun Dance rights from a member of the fraternity and vow a ceremony (Spier 1921:482). The purpose of the Sun Dance was to acquire supernatural aid for success in war and other benefits for the people (Curtis 1970:52).

Women played several supportive roles in the Hidatsa Sun Dance. Several women procured buffalo hides to be used in

the ceremony. The man who had pledged the Sun Dance gave them a feast in exchange for their contribution (Curtis 1970: 152). Eight older, post-menopausal women were selected to prepare the ceremonial grounds and were given special places to sit and observe the ceremony (Bowers 1965:315). Members of the Holy Women society fasted during the ceremony and sang during the preparation of the ceremonial lodge (Bowers 1965: 315).

As in other Hidatsa ceremonies, husband and wife acted as a ritual unit. The pledger's wife made the public announcement that her husband was giving a Sun Dance and she led the way to the ceremonial cutting of the central pole (Curtis 1970:152). As part of the ceremonial proceedings, a small post was erected and dressed to look like an enemy; the pledger's wife made a full set of clothes for this effigy, including a fine robe decorated with porcupine quills (Bowers 1965:316).

Because of their involvement in the Sun Dance rites, the wives of bundle owners were thought of as having received power from the Sun Dance bundle. Men were afraid to marry widows of bundle owners for fear the bundle's power might turn against them and bring misfortune (Bowers 1965:321). During their husbands' funeral rites, bundle owners' wives often made a vow never to remarry (Bowers 1965:321).



## Restrictions on Female Religious Roles

### Marriage and Chastity

Women who took the most honorable positions in religious ceremonies were those who represented the highest ideals of Hidatsa womanhood. One of those ideals was marital fidelity. There were many roles only open to women who were honorably married (that is, by purchase) and who had been faithful to their husbands.

Lowie wrote that in a bundle transfer, the bundle might be transferred through the buyer's wife only if she had never been married before and was of "irreproachable chastity" (1921:417). The buyer's wife took care of the medicine bundle and received benefits from it, including visions (Lowie 1921:417).

The Imitating Buffalo bundle transfer ceremony was a buffalo-calling ceremony and the bundle was passed from father to son (Bowers 1965:443). During the transfer, the wife of the prospective buyer had to vow to live with her husband always. She also vowed not to remarry should her husband die. In return for her promise, she was awarded good health and long life (Bowers 1965:443). However, if she eloped with another man or had other lovers, the promise made by the bull spirits was revoked (Bowers 1965:443).

Since the Hidatsa Sun Dance pledger's wife assisted in certain rites and supervised the preparation of ceremonial articles, it was essential that she be a woman of high moral

character (i.e., a woman not likely to abandon her husband during the preparation or performance of the ceremony) (Bowers 1965:312).

#### Menstruation

As with Crow, Hidatsa women were barred from participation in certain rituals and prohibited from being in the presence of sick people and certain medicine bundles while menstruating. For example, menstruating women were not permitted to attend the opening day of the Sun Dance (Bowers 1965:317).

Menstrual blood was also "dangerous" to buffalo hunting; pre-menopausal women were excluded from the White Buffalo Cow society, whose primary function was to perform rituals that would attract buffalo herds near the village (Bowers 1965:205).

The supernatural power associated with menstrual blood could also produce positive effects. Menstruating women were normally not allowed to enter an eagle-catching ceremonial lodge. However, if certain rites were performed and a menstruating woman entered the lodge, it was thought that the eagle-catching would be successful (Wilson 1928:168). The supernatural power of menstrual blood was also considered beneficial to gardening.

Ceremonial Motifs that Influenced  
Female Religious Status

Women as Transferers of Supernatural Power

The concept of ceremonial fathers impersonating bison bulls and having intercourse with women to transfer spiritual power was basic to the Hidatsa belief system (Kehoe 1977:8). Ceremonial sexual intercourse occurred during the age-grade society purchasing rites, during buffalo calling ceremonies and outside the ritual setting, e.g., in an individual's lodge. Sexual intercourse between a man's wife and a ceremonial father from whom he wished to gain power symbolized intercourse with the "life-giving bison, and was supposedly followed by the regeneration and attraction of the bison herds" (Kehoe 1970:100).

Hidatsa men's age-grade societies required two conditions for entrance: age and purchase. Each age-grade society corresponded with a particular age group. Membership or the "requisite emblems" and instructions had to be bought; the purchase was usually collective rather than individual (Lowie 1916:919). As part of the purchase price, a buyer requested that his ceremonial father have sexual intercourse with his wife (Lowie 1916:919). In this way, spiritual power was passed on from "father" to "son" through a woman as intermediary, with sexual intimacy as the "channel of transfer" (Kehoe 1970:99).

In Hidatsa buffalo calling ceremonies, ceremonial sexual intercourse was also practiced. In the Painted Stick ceremony, intercourse occurred between buyers' wives and older men

possessing the "rights to own and pray to the buffalo bulls" (Bowers 1965:455). "Through the medium of the sex act, older men's supernatural powers to call the buffaloes were transmitted to the younger generation" (Bowers 1965:455).

Maximilian (1906:334) offered the following account of the Painted Stick ceremony:

At this festival they leave their wives to the older men, and individual Indians do the same on certain occasions, when they desire to ask good wishes for the attainment of some object they have in view. A man, in such a case, goes, with his pipe, and accompanied by his wife, who wears no clothes except her buffalo robe, to another hut. The wife carries a dish of boiled maize, which she sets down before a third person, and the man does the same with his pipe. The woman then passes the palm of her hand down the whole arm of the person favored in this manner, takes him by the hand, and he must follow her to a retired spot, generally to the forest surrounding the huts in the winter time; after which she returns and repeats the same process, often with eight or ten men.

This custom was not restricted to age-grade purchasing ceremonies or buffalo calling ceremonies. Maximilian (in Lowie 1913:229) mentioned that if a man desired a blessing from an older man, he offered his wife. One of Lowie's informants, Hairy Coat, recalled that men invited their "fathers" to a feast and offered their wives (Lowie 1913:229). If a young man was about to embark on a dangerous mission, he often offered his wife to an older man known to have supernatural powers associated with warfare (Bowers 1965:462-463).

It is difficult to determine the effect this practice had on women's religious status. Lowie mentioned that buyers into age-grade societies were expected to offer their wives to older

men, but the sellers rarely exercised their privilege, for fear of bringing bad luck (Lowie 1913:229). This leads one to believe that women were not taken advantage of in this practice.

A woman was often reluctant to participate in ceremonial intercourse, but her participation had its benefits: spiritual protection for her and success in warfare and hunting for her husband (Bowers 1965:456).

### Corn Worshipping

Praying to corn spirits and performing corn rites to insure a good harvest were features of many Hidatsa ceremonies. According to Curtis (1970:133) corn was directly or indirectly a part of all ceremonial rites. Corn rites ranged from "simple household cleansing rites after a day in the field" to major bundle transfer rites and dances (Bowers 1965:340). The Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies bundle was a major bundle. The Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies was a mythological figure responsible for the growth of all vegetation. Bundle owners organized planting rites to insure bountiful crops and healthy households (Bowers 1965:341).

Corn dances in honor of corn spirits were held in the spring, summer and fall. The spring corn dance, a dance to honor The Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies, was performed by old women. Each woman carried an ear of corn on the end of a stick (Will and Spinden 1906:144). After the dance, corn was consecrated and distributed to each family present.

Each household mixed this sacred corn with their seed corn during the spring planting (Will and Spinden 1906:144).

The summer corn dance, or Green Corn Dance, took place when the ears of corn were ready for eating. The dance and corn feast lasted a week or ten days. Corn was offered to the corn spirits and the dancers danced with corn stalks in their hands to symbolize water birds, messengers of the Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies (Catlin 1973:188-190).

Another corn dance was held in the fall for the purpose of attracting buffalo to the village. Again, women carried corn stalks as they danced. Because women led corn dances and conducted corn rites, and because cultivating corn was a female activity, corn worshipping as an Hidatsa ceremonial motif enhanced the religious status of Hidatsa women.

#### Warfare

Symbolic and real references to warfare were also apparent in Hidatsa ceremonials. Songs about war were sung in several of the bundle transfer ceremonies. Women were given supernatural power to predict the presence of the enemy in the Wolf Woman bundle transfer ritual. References to warfare were heavily incorporated into the Hidatsa Sun Dance as well. The pledger's purpose in sponsoring the dance was to gain the spiritual power for successful warfare. Warriors recited war deeds during segments of the ceremony; young men who had struck first coup on the enemy and were noted for bravery were given special privileges (Bowers 1965:316). As

with the Crow, the emphasis on warfare in ceremonies excluded women from many of the most honorable positions.

## CHAPTER VII

### OTHER POSSIBLE DETERMINANTS OF FEMALE RELIGIOUS STATUS

In Chapter II I mentioned three other factors that may have had an effect on female religious status: female rights in marriage, divorce and adultery; rules reckoning descent and residence patterns. In this chapter these variables will be analyzed to determine (1) whether or not they were held in common by the two groups and (2) the degree of influence they had on female religious status.

#### Female Rights in Marriage, Divorce and Adultery

In both Crow and Hidatsa societies, marriage by purchase was the most honorable form. A woman married in such a manner brought wealth to her family and was given certain ceremonial privileges. A second marriage was not frowned upon but did not benefit a woman's status. Among the Hidatsa, women who had been married before were disadvantaged; they could not be married by purchase and were not allowed to receive sacred objects from their husbands in the transfer of medicine bundles (Lowie 1924:46). A woman's brother often chose a marriage partner for her (among both the Crow and Hidatsa) but it was acceptable for a woman to marry a lover of her choice.



Divorce was a common occurrence among both groups, but was easier for Hidatsa women to obtain. Among the Hidatsa, divorce was little more than an announced separation. Divorce was not as easy for the Crow woman. A Crow woman's departure from her husband was called "disliking a man." Relatives tried to dissuade a woman from divorce, for they would have to return all the gifts that had been paid for her (Lowie 1924:75).

Crow women were punished severely for adultery. If a man caught his wife having an affair with another man, he often beat her or sent her away (Frison 1967:249). Hidatsa women often ran off with other men but were seldom punished for infidelity (Meyer 1977:74).

Wife-stealing was an established tradition among the Crow. During certain times of the year, members of the two rival men's societies, the Lumpwoods and the Foxes, abducted each other's wives. Theoretically, a man had the right to steal a woman only if he had previously been her lover. If a man falsely claimed a wife on these grounds, she called him a liar and refused to go with him (often to no avail) (Lowie 1956:186). If she lied about having former relations with him, his comrades took her by force.

A husband hated to see his wife stolen but would assume an air of bravado if he was present during the kidnapping. Any sign of jealousy on his part or any attempts to reunite with his wife brought extreme ridicule (he was tied up, and

dog or other excrement was smeared all over him) (Lowie 1956:188).

After the kidnapping, women were shown off and treated as new brides by their abductor's parents (Lowie 1956:188). Stolen women were usually dismissed by their abductors after a brief period of glory and were free to marry any other man, aside from their former husbands (Lowie 1956:188).

It appears that Hidatsa women experienced more freedom with divorce and extra-marital affairs than Crow women. The most significant difference between the two groups concerning personal rights was the fact that the Crow had licensed wife-stealing, clearly a tradition that violated female rights. Not only was a woman removed from her husband and home, but she was later rejected by the very man who abducted her. The obvious disregard for female rights that was expressed in wife-stealing may have been carried over into other spheres of life, such as religion.

#### Reckoning of Descent

Both the Crow and Hidatsa recognized descent through the female line, while respect and gift-giving were directed towards one's father's relatives (Lowie 1924:40). Property rights to sacred bundles were transmitted exclusively in the paternal line (Lowie 1924:40).

Because of the Crow's adoption of a nomadic way of life, the matrilineal influence may not have been as strong as among the Hidatsa. The nomadic-hunting pattern emphasized

male pursuits; a man's relationships with his "brothers" became increasingly important as the Crow adapted to the male-oriented nomadic way of life. The matrilineal influence remained strong among the Hidatsa. An older woman was the head of every household. In spite of these differences, rules of descent among the Crow and Hidatsa were similar enough to not be significant in determining female religious status.

#### Residence after Marriage

According to Frison (1967:249), newly married Crow couples temporarily lived with the husband's parents. Lowie suggests that the Crow had no strict rule concerning residence<sup>8</sup> after marriage: "a young couple was not obliged to settle either with the bride's or groom's parents, but at the beginning of wedlock patrilocal residence was usual" (Lowie 1956:57-58).

The Hidatsa did not have a hard and fast rule concerning residence, but apparently a new couple lived with the wife's parents after marriage, "the husband acting as their servant and providing them with food" (Lowie 1924:46). The practice of matrilocal residence (if only temporary) and the subordinate position of the male in this situation was characteristic of the Hidatsa and not the Crow, and may have influenced the religious status of Hidatsa women.

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<sup>8</sup>Residence: the rule establishing where a married couple will locate its household, either matrilocal or patrilocal, or a combination of the two (Winick 1972:456). Matrilocal residence is often associated with high status for women.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made in this thesis to describe the roles Hidatsa and Crow women played in religion and economics and to determine the relationship between economic status and religious status. The data presented strongly suggests that Hidatsa women enjoyed higher religious and economic status than Crow women and that there is a correlation between high economic status and high religious status.

Female control over the production and distribution of valued goods was the key factor in determining high economic status for Hidatsa women. Corn production was vital to the Hidatsa economy. Corn and other vegetable products provided a large amount of food eaten daily; corn and vegetable products were some of the most important items traded with whites and other Indian groups. Since women were in charge of the production and distribution of vegetable products, their economic status was high.

Solidarity groups devoted to female economic interests also helped to raise the economic status for Hidatsa women. Female economic independence and power is increased when women are able to combine their goals with those of other women and when they have other women to honor and support their work.

Percentage and value of female contribution to subsistence was not a major determinant in high female economic status. Although Hidatsa women contributed a great deal to subsistence, the value of their contribution was somewhat diminished by the value given to hunting.

Crow women had a lower economic status than Hidatsa women. They produced valued items (e.g., tanned skins) but had no control over their distribution. Men used the skins tanned by their wives for their own purposes: to buy guns, ammunition and whiskey. Thus, women may be highly involved in the production of valued goods, such as tanned skins, but they must control the distribution of valued goods in order to enjoy high economic status.

Hunting appears to have been given the most value in the Crow economy; Crow women's contribution through gathering was definitely overshadowed by the male activity of hunting. This factor can also be linked with low economic status for Crow women.

In both Crow and Hidatsa religious ceremonies, women had important roles; they led dances, purchased important medicine bundles and provided most ritual paraphernalia. Women in both groups were also subject to the same restrictions concerning their participation in ritual, e.g., marriage and the menstrual taboo.

Although Crow women held important positions in ceremonies and though their religious roles were limited by the same restrictions as Hidatsa female religious roles, the emphasis

placed on warfare in Crow religion excluded Crow women from achieving high religious status. The influence of warfare in Crow religion was so pervasive that women could never hope to attain the highest honors in Crow religion. The very basis of Crow ceremonialism, to increase one's store of spiritual power to insure success in battle, excluded women.

References to warfare were also common in Hidatsa ceremonies. However, female religious status was enhanced by the religious themes of corn worshipping and possibly sexual transfer of power. Both motifs honored female powers of fertility; corn worshipping honored a female activity, gardening. Basic religious themes that honored women were the factor that distinguished Crow female religious participation from Hidatsa female religious participation and led to high religious status for Hidatsa women.

Thus, among the Hidatsa and Crow of the nineteenth century, there was a correlation between high religious status and high economic status. Female control of the production and distribution of valued goods and female solidarity groups supportive of female economic activities appear to be the factors associated with high female economic status. Important religious roles and religious themes that honor women appear to be essential for high female religious status.

In addition, the Crow and Hidatsa were originally one tribe. After the Crow's separation from the Hidatsa and subsequent adoption of a nomadic subsistence tradition, female

religious and economic status were lowered. The Hidatsa remained village horticulturalists, and female religious and economic status continued to be high.

The change in economic roles appears to have been the impetus behind the decline of female religious status among the Crow. This study strongly supports the hypothesis that economic status determines religious status.

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