

"WARRIOR WOMEN" - SEX ROLE ALTERNATIVES
FOR PLAINS INDIAN WOMEN¹

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In much of the ethnohistorical and ethnographic literature on Plains Indians, females are characterized as docile human beings and drudges. Such characterizations serve as a counterpoint to the commonly described male attributes of aggressiveness and bravery. But when one moves beyond the idealized generalizations and examines actual descriptions of individuals and their activities, it becomes apparent that there was considerable variation in the roles of women and men.

One role, which apparently was widespread in North America, is the "warrior woman." Besides references (Lewis 1941; MacAllester 1941; Seward 1946; Denig 1961; Landes 1968) to the appearance of this role among Plains Indians, it has been reported in such widely separated societies as the Kutenai (Schaeffer 1965), the Navajo (Topper, field notes), Tlingit (Knapp and Child 1896), and Ottawa (Duggan's Journal 1793).² The existence of the warrior woman role not only challenges pervasive ideas about the passivity of native women, but it also offers an excellent case example for examining female role variations in American Indian communities.

The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze the Plains Indian warrior women, not as a form of deviant and idiosyncratic behavior, but as a healthy and self-actualized role. More specifically, it is

argued that the warrior role for women was institutionalized in Plains Indian communities, and that it was one of several culturally accepted positions which accorded women power and prestige in areas typically identified as "masculine."

BACKGROUND

The subject of sex role reversal has been a popular subject in the literature on Plains Indians. Most discussions of this subject, however, center around the role of the male berdache (Jacobs 1968). While female role reversals have been described in several sources (Lewis 1941; MacAllester 1941; Seward 1946; Denig 1961; Schaeffer 1965), there has been a disproportionate emphasis on the berdache.

The usual explanation for the institutionalization of the berdache, and the one originally enumerated by Ruth Benedict (1934), is that certain men were unable to meet the demands of masculinity and aggressiveness in the warrior role. From this, it is also assumed that the berdache--donning the attire of women, imitating their voices, acquiring their mannerisms, and following their domestic occupations--provided a necessary outlet for men who did not fit into the typical male role (Hassrick 1964). And finally, it is commonly asserted that rejectors of the masculine warrior role were individuals with unproductive vision quests.

While it is true that berdache took on behaviors and activities associated with women in Plains Indian societies, their role did not exactly correspond with that of women. Among the Lakota, for example, Winkte ("wishes to be woman"--i.e., womanlike) continued to engage in masculine activities. They often accompanied war parties, and they could support themselves through hunting. In addition, they carried on certain activities that were viewed as normative in their role, including: the naming of children in a ritual way, dispensing herbal medicines, and prognosticating the outcome of war parties. In these and other activities, berdache received a measure of respect and prestige in their community. And even though their social position was not enviable, it was better than

that of a man who was a repeated failure as a warrior.

Sue-Allen Jacobs (1968) has suggested that the warrior woman may have been the female counterpart to the pervasive and widely reported berdache. In so far as many warrior women combined achievements in masculine occupations with traditional female roles, there was a parallel. There was also a similarity in the sanctioning of sex role reversals through supernatural means. Among the Lakota, women changed gender identities through recurrent dreams, while men sanctioned their sex role reversals through vision quests. Yet, in both cases supernatural visitations were interpreted by religious practitioners and accepted by kin and community. Thus, through institutionalized dreams or visions both sexes could assume other roles without seriously damaging their social acceptance and self-esteem. The parallels, however, stop at the level of description. When it comes to customary explanations of sex role reversals, the one commonly applied to the berdache does not appear applicable to the case of warrior women. It seems unlikely that women could not meet the demands required of females in most Plains Indian societies. But then, the whole idea that sex role reversals, for either women or men, constituted deviant forms of escapism from "normal" behavior is open to question.

Instead of looking at sex role reversals as a form of "deviance" derived from "incompetence" in the roles associated with a person's gender, it might be more productive to examine them as normative statuses which permitted individuals to strive for self-actualization, excellence, and social recognition in areas outside their customary sex role assignments. In this light, changing sex role identity becomes an achieved act which individuals pursue as a means for the healthy expression of alternative behaviors.

FEMALE ROLE VARIABILITY

In the nineteenth century, major changes were taking place in the social positions of Plains Indian women. As Oscar Lewis (1942) so carefully demonstrates with the Blackfoot, the involvement of Plains Indians in the Euro-American hide market brought about

major changes in the position of women. Among these changes was the growing economic dependency of women. Increasingly female labor was engaged in the processing of hides, a commodity whose acquisition and trade were largely in the hands of men. The economic dependency of women had important consequences on their social positions within their families and in their communities at large. Generally, their status declined, and they became more vulnerable to the interests and machinations of men.

Although Plains Indian women had become more dependent and vulnerable, there were many different avenues through which they could act in independent and decisive ways. These included: socially sanctioned role alternatives, participation in certain female sodalities, as well as many different options of a situational nature.

The most detailed and complete discussions of female role alternatives appear in the literature on the Piegan of Alberta and Montana. Among the Piegan, there was a small group of women, called "manly-hearted women," whose ambition, boldness and eroticism contrasted with the prevailing ideal of female submission and reserve (Lewis 1941). Although the Piegan, along with other Plains groups, put a premium on male dominance, they accorded certain women exceptional privileges and prestige in areas typically associated with men. The manly-hearted women excelled in every important aspect of tribal life--property ownership, ceremonialism, and domestic affairs.

As children, manly-hearted women were often favored with more food, toys, care and attention than other siblings. Such favoritism, which incidentally, was widely distributed among northern Plains groups, must have had a profound impact on a child's sense of self-assurance and independence. Indeed, favorite female children among the Piegan often led in childhood games, played boys' sports, and took for themselves the names of great warriors. Moreover, some indulged in sex play early in life.

As adults, the self-esteem and drive of favored females led to superiority in men's as well as women's work. These women attained wealth by taking on the economic roles typically played by men, and as a consequence, they attained a level of self-

sufficiency which permitted them independence in other realms as well. They selected dance partners and cursed when the occasion demanded it. Some dominated their husbands and exposed them to ridicule (Lewis 1941:181). Yet, in spite of this, their position in the household was secure. According to Lewis (1941:181), this security was related to their passionate and unconventional sexuality. They allowed their husbands sex play that other women refused, and they expressed their dominance in assuming the male position in intercourse. Such privilege is especially remarkable in view of the prevailing ideology of male dominance which included wife beating and disfigurement for infidelity. The predominant picture of the manly-hearted women certainly presents an anomaly in the customary view of Plains Indian women as submissive and oppressed.

When the manly-hearted female role is examined in the light of other socially sanctioned status positions for women, it becomes apparent that it is not a "deviation" but one of several alternative female roles. These optional positions can be studied by examining four different native role categories among the Canadian Blackfoot. These are: (1) Ninawaki (manly woman)³; (2) Matsaps (crazy woman); (3) Sun Dance woman; and (4) Ninaki (chief woman or favorite wife). (For an interesting diagrammatic representation of these categories, see Seward 1946:120.)

The Ninawaki (manly woman) corresponds to the "manly-hearted" woman of the Piegan. This category identifies a woman in whom aggression was developed to the point where she behaved like a man. (For another interesting discussion of masculine striving among Kaska women, see Honigmann 1954.) Some of these women, though not all of them, engaged in warrior pursuits.

The Ninaki (chief woman) refers to an able and respected female who is capable of doing a job as a chief. This term, however, has a second meaning, which is the favorite wife of a man. John Ewers (1958:100) refers to this favorite wife as a "sits-beside-me-wife." According to Ewers, this woman had the responsibility of carrying the ceremonial equipment of the man (1958:93). She also shared responsibilities with a man in caring for sacred bundles and in conducting certain ceremonies. She also may have

been a sexually favored wife. Usually, this woman was exempt from household work, and only a wealthy man could have afforded such a person in his household. It must also be noted that these women appear to have been trained for this role as children, and like the manly-hearted women, they received the kinds of special privileges accorded to a favorite child.

Matsaps designates a "crazy woman" but with special reference to sexual promiscuity. Among the Lakota, a correlate female figure is "Witkowin." Sexual promiscuity exhibited by a witkowin was sanctioned through certain types of dreams. Dreaming of the Anog-Ite, "The Double Face Woman," or dreaming incessantly of the Wakinya (Thunder Beings) released a Lakota woman from her commitments to the cultural ideals of virginity or marital fidelity (Wissler 1912:93). Oral history material suggests that there were incidences where women who had witkowin-like dreams were given away by their husband. This occurred not in the manner of "throwing away the wife," which typified divorce. Instead, the husband, recognizing the affection of his wife for another, dressed her in her finery, painted her face and the part of her hair, and led her on a fine horse to the man she esteemed.

The Sun Dance woman represented in Piegan society, and among the Lakota society as well, the extreme of womanly virtue. Before marriage, she was a virgin. She was never unfaithful to her husband nor did she remarry after his death. These women were rewarded by assuming an honorary position in the Sun Dance. Among the Lakota, there was also the prestigious "Bite-the-Knife" ceremony in which post-menopausal women were honored for their virtuousness.

The female role categories of the Canadian Blackfoot, which also have correlates among other Plains groups, indicate that there was a range of special statuses for women. Although two positions, that of the favorite wife and Sun Dance woman, epitomize the idealized features of femininity, they were no less important and accepted than those which linked women to manly pursuits. These varied role categories also suggest that the idealized behavior of women was not as rigidly defined and followed as has been supposed.

Besides the evidence of female role variability provided by the categorical statuses just mentioned, there is also the well-known diversity of behavior associated with a woman's birth order. Among the Dakota, for instance, birth order positions had a powerful impact upon how children were raised and what behaviors were expected of them. Such differential treatment must have had a major influence on later adult behavior. There was also variation in treatment and expected roles of wives from the first to the last married, and there were differences in how women behaved in their various kinship statuses (i.e., older sister, younger sister, daughter, mother). Unfortunately, the varied social positions of women in Plains Indian societies have not been well-documented, and as a consequence, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make conclusive statements about the dynamics of psychological and behavioral variations among women that correspond with recognized role diversity.

WOMEN AND WARFARE

The fact that there were a range of socially accepted roles for women in Plains Indian societies permits us to understand the role of warrior women as one aspect of this variation.

The most detailed account of a warrior woman comes from the writings of the well-known trader on the Upper Missouri, Edwin Denig (1961:195-200). This woman was a Gros Ventres who was captured by the Crow when she was twelve years old. Already exhibiting manly interests, her adopted father encouraged these inclinations and trained her in a wide variety of male occupational skills. Although she dressed as a woman throughout her life, she pursued the role of a male in her adult years. She was a proficient hunter and chased big game on horseback and on foot (Denig 1961:196). She was a skilled warrior, leading many successful war parties. In time, she sat on the council and ranked as the third leading warrior in a band of 160 lodges (1961:198). After achieving success in manly pursuits, she took four wives whose hide-processing work brought considerable wealth to her lodge (1961:198-199). Although this woman's

manly-oriented life may have been exceptional, it was socially recognized and esteemed among the people with whom she lived.

Other reports of female warriors are not as complete, and most do not distinguish between women who pursued warfare as a life occupation and those who joined war parties on a situational basis. Among the Blackfeet, there appear to have been women who pursued warfare as an extension of their manly inclinations (Lewis 1941; MacAllester 1941). There were also women, usually childless, who accompanied their spouses on raiding expeditions and who may (or may not) have been actively involved in fighting (Ewers 1967:329). And finally, there were women who took on the role of warrior only for a short time and for a specific reason (e.g. to avenge the death of a relative, [Lewis 1941]).

Cheyenne women, according to George Grinnell (1956:157), also engaged in warfare. Although many appear to have accompanied war parties as "helpers," some fought in battle, raided for horses, and counted coup on the enemy. The participation of women in warfare, however, appears to have been less common in the late nineteenth century than it was in earlier times.

There were also women warriors among the Dakota. Ruth Landes (1968:39) indicates that while women were tacitly barred from joining war parties, many did participate in war for glory as well as revenge, and some even led war expeditions (1968:49). Women who had achieved war honors played an important role in the winoxtica (the female equivalent of the male akicita or soldiers). These women were called upon to police other women in the campsite and to punish female offenders (1968:69). It is noteworthy that while the female warrior role was apparently common among eastern Dakota (i.e., Mdewakanton, Sisseton, Wahpeton), it has not been reported for western Dakota (Teton).

These are a few examples of women's reported participation in Plains warfare and raiding. The motivation for women to engage in war can only be conjectured. First of all, there was the prestige and glory which accrued to counting coups, obtaining guns, killing and scalping, and cutting tethered horses from within a tipi circle. Women who were capable in

these activities could achieve prestige and wealth independently, ~~as the case of the Crow female warrior~~ indicates. Secondly, there was the need for women to be assertive and able to fight for reasons of self-defense. In a period of history, when Plains Indian populations were engaged in bitter and unceasing rivalries with neighboring peoples, it was imperative that women were prepared to fight and assert themselves, not only at times when they were alone but also when men were present in the camps. And finally, women were also motivated by revenge and engaged in warfare to avenge a relative's death. Importantly, reasons for female engagement in warfare--defense, glory, and revenge--were not different from those that inspired men to fight.

Even when women did not participate in warfare directly, they played a very important role in supporting the military activity of men. Robert Lowie (1935:106) mentions the importance of women's auxiliaries in the military societies of the Crow, and George Grinnell (1956:10-12, 20-22) discusses the importance of women in the scalp ceremonies and social dances which followed the warriors' return. Besides their participation in formal institutions, women supported military ventures in other ways. Among the Dakota, for instance, women expected their husbands to avenge a brother's death. They also pressured husbands to acquire horses to increase the wealth of their lodges, and they encouraged husbands to obtain co-wives (including women captured in war) to assist in the processing of hides and other domestic duties.

Whether Plains Indian women participated in military activity directly or supported it in an indirect way, it is clear that they saw their own well-being and that of their kin and community in terms of a social system which revolved around warfare. In this system, prestige and wealth centered around success in the warrior role. The typical status configurations of women mirrored this orientation. As a female grew up, her status was typically reflected in the warrior position of her father, then brother, husband, and sons. But it could also be reflected in her own warrior status which, if successful, was achieved and pursued along masculine lines.*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The idea that some Plains Indian women followed masculine roles and behaviors, either on a permanent or situational basis, does not deny the idealized and normative patterns of female passivity and dependence in Plains Indian societies. But even though the general ethnographic picture paints Plains Indian women in a dependent role, it is clear that they had other options which included assertiveness and independence. In social settings where maleness and femaleness were separate and contrasting spheres, as they certainly were in Plains Indian societies, the roles of manly-hearted women and berdache were sources of mediation. They offered men and women opportunities for displaying cross-sex talents in socially approved ways, and in doing so, they were probably essential to the psychological well-being of peoples who lived in societies with highly dichotomized gender expectations.

What is clear from the information presented here is that Plains women and men were able to assume a range of roles that were either consistent with or contrary to their customary gender ascriptions. Unfortunately, such notions as "warrior society," "male dominant," and other male supremacist expressions have set the tone for the analysis of male and female behavior in Plains Indian societies. Consequently, the rich complexity of female gender roles and the variety of relations between women and men has been largely obscured.

In this regard, the shared beliefs and strategies for obtaining status is well-documented for Plains Indian men. Comparatively little information, however, is available on how women pursued alternative roles, how they achieved self-actualization in a male-oriented social system, and how they managed conflicts between personal strivings and societal norms. But it is precisely because many ethnographers of Plains Indian communities assumed, a priori, the existence of a modal and rigid personality profile for females that such questions were not asked. While a new generation of scholars has begun to pursue questions such as these, their answers may never be complete or conclusive. Regrettably, the kinds of data that might illuminate and clarify the nature of female role reversals in Plains Indian societies have not been recorded. At

least for the pre-reservation period, it is now too late to uncover such material with any degree of depth. In the end, all that remains on this fascinating subject are cursory references which, while suggestive, are not sufficient to fully reconstruct the nature and dynamics of role variability among Plains Indian women.

NOTES

1. A different version of this paper was originally presented at the International Congress of Americanists (Rome, Italy, 1973). It was a preliminary statement to call attention to the problem of women's status in the male dominant societies of the Northern Plains. It emphasized the need to re-examine ethnographic data to provide new insights into this issue and to chart courses for future research involving Native American women. I wish to thank Patricia Albers and William James for their considerable assistance in drafting this paper.

2. Dr. Martin Topper records an historical case of a Navajo woman avenging her son's death and leading a Navajo war party on a successful raid against the Hopi. Topper's informants were Percy John and Donald DeJolie (field notes 1971). The reference for the Tlingit is as follows "... it was usual for an old woman of rank to sit in the stern of the canoe and steer, for even in some battles, women were leaders in battles" (Knapp and Child 1896:64). Dr. Christian Feest, Museum fur Volkerkunde, Wien, sent this reference in 1972:

November 15. An Ottawa sent by Egushewa de Bout Call'd on me in his way to inform me he was sent to acquaint the Ottawas that one of the prisoners a Frenchman taken by the little Otter's part had shot the Indian who owned him, whilst asleep and Tomahawked the Indian wife, Tis a considerable loss to this nation as both the man and woman were leaders of Parties in war, and I greatly fear that all the other prisoners will be sacrificed to avenge this murder. (Extracts from Thomas Duggan's Journal, Detroit, 1793:108).

3. L. M. Hanks, Jr. (personal communication) confirms that the Blackfoot term for manly woman, ninawaki, differs from Lewis' term for manly-heart Ninauposkitzippe. These terms need further clarification in use and transcription.

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