

Although generally unrecognized, a flowering of the beaded costume of the Lakota, also known as the Teton or Western Sioux, occurred during the early reservation period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. How might we account for such an artistic burst of energy given the extreme stress and severe societal disruption which these people were encountering during this time period? For a fuller understanding of the ingredients of this efflorescence it is necessary to examine the role of costume in the prior period.

The Lakota costume occupied a central position in pre-reservation Sioux society. It functioned as a form of graphic rather than verbal communication in reinforcing the roles and positions of its societal members. For the Lakota male, costume was an important avenue for conveying success and fame as a warrior, as well as gaining honor and prestige through the wearing of fine apparel. Symbols of achievements, painted in the representational style by the warrior, and the geometric decoration quilled and beaded by his wife and female relatives on his shirts, leggings, and moccasins, communicated his skills and prowess to the rest of his society. Fine clothing was a highly prized gift which reinforced his position as a generous man by serving as an important exchange item in the institution of the giveaway.

It was the Lakota woman who produced the majority of the clothing required by her husband, brothers, and children. Skill in beadwork and quill work provided an avenue of reflected prestige both for herself and her family. So highly prized were the feminine virtues of industry and artistic skill that they were institutionalized as societies and guilds.

Large allotments of time were necessary in order to accomplish the manufacture of these costumes. In order to accommodate art, an extraordinary division of labor occurred between a daughter of child-bearing age and her mother (or mother-in-law). As reported by Mirsky, until the mother was very old, past seventy, she continued to help her daughter by caring for the small

children and doing much of the heavy labor. Mirsky states:

During this period the daughter takes over the pleasanter, sedentary tasks of porcupine work, while the mother tans the hides, or the daughter does the fancywork on pair after pair of moccasins while her mother sews the soles on and finishes them. If a daughter of 35 tans the skins while her mother does porcupine quillwork, people will say, "She tans hides at her age!" "She is still doing embroidery!"<sup>1</sup>

Lakota clothing functions as a personal identifier as evidenced by the following statement: "Borrowing of anything is permissible and common, but not personal apparel or ornaments. . . They make fun of someone who wears even her mother's shawl. . . 'That family lends each other shawls, you cannot tell one individual from another' . . ." <sup>2</sup> Lakota costume also acted as a collective identifier, in much the same way as the description by Bogatyrev in his discussion of folk costumes, of the ethnic pride of the group in wearing what he terms "our costume."<sup>3</sup> In short, as the Lakota entered the reservation era, they were wearing clothing which served as both a personal identifier and a group identifier.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, a rapid succession of historical events fostered a breakdown of Sioux society. In 1868, the large Sioux Reservation was established in western South Dakota. The Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876 brought the defeat of Custer and with it the white retaliatory campaign which spelled the final military defeat for the Sioux. At that point the majority of the Sioux moved onto the reservation. In 1881 the U.S. government prohibited the holding of the Sun Dance henceforth; and the last great buffalo hunt was held in 1882, the final buffalo killed by a Lakota in 1883.

The cumulative effect of these events was staggering. Whereas "in 1880 the political, social, and religious structure of the Teton Sioux remained largely intact," the decade following ushered in an era of profound stress.<sup>4</sup> Many Lakota institutions could not withstand such drastic change. Warfare, one of the primary activities of the men, was no longer possible. As a result war societies ceased to function, and the principal means of attaining prestige, rank, and wealth vanished. The tribal economy collapsed with the disappearance of the buffalo. Without the buffalo, traditional diet and the materials for many objects of material culture perished, as did another means for the Sioux hunter-warrior to gain recognition. The religious framework was vastly weakened with the ban on the Sun Dance. As MacGregor notes:

This prohibition of the Sun Dance took away not only much of the security which religion gave to the people but also the public regarding and sanctioning of social life and social institutions. The ending of this reinforcement of the Dakota custom and the instruction of the young people by observation and participation contributed greatly to the weakening of social controls and the crumbling of Dakota culture.<sup>5</sup>

In the wake of these combined losses, additional pressures were brought to bear by the U.S. government which replaced buffalo with rations and farming implements, substituted Christianity and missionaries for the Sun Dance, and replaced Lakota chiefs with government agents.

The combination of these events was particularly devastating for the Lakota male. Luther Standing Bear, a Lakota chief, records: "It was as if a runner suddenly felt the ground beneath his feet disappear, leaving him off balance and plunging over a precipice."<sup>6</sup> The male role has been completely undermined leaving him stripped of his function as protector and provider and with no means for achieving cultural approval through warrior status and hunting prowess.

It is therefore not surprising that the Ghost Dance, which provided hope for return of the old life was a powerful attraction in 1889. "Wounded Knee drove home the impossibility of escape from white subjugation."<sup>7</sup> Lakota men, experiencing tremendous despair, often resorted to non-productivity, apathy, and alcohol. Ella Deloria states:

It was they [Lakota men] who suffered the most from the enforced change, whether they realized it or not. It was their life primarily that was wrecked; it was their exclusive occupation that was abruptly ended. The women could go right on bearing children and rearing them. They could cook, feed their families, set up and strike camp unaided, pack and unpack when on a trip. Even embroidery, exclusively a woman's art, was not cut off suddenly. . . The man was the tragic figure. . . And so he sat by the hour indifferent and inactive, watching — perhaps envying — his wife, as she went right on working at the same essential role of woman.<sup>8</sup>

Thus it was left to Lakota women to maintain the cultural traditions, as has been confirmed in a 1960 study on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations by an economist and a social-clinical psychologist. Hagan and Shaw who found:

Their [women's] transition to life as captives in the reservations allowed them to carry into the new way of life their

Figure 1. Lakota beaded saddle blanket. Late 19th century. Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico.



old roles of mother and wife as private affairs, left untouched for a long period after the men lost their special function of dealing with problems outside the family and the group. As they [the women] came to acquire more autonomy as the persons responsible for the maintenance and support of family life, they became even freer to continue to raise their children as they were taught children should be raised. The traditional values held by the older people reinforced the role of the mother as a cultural refuge where Sioux practices could be kept alive beyond the reach of external suppression. That refuge became increasingly more crucial as children had to be surrendered to white schools at a younger age.<sup>9</sup>

The Lakota woman continued to follow the pathway of industry and arts. As in pre-reservation days, the costumes which she manufactured acted as a contribution to her family and her society. She had to confront, however, two new conditions: 1) the vacancy left by her masculine counter-part for achieving and maintaining group identity, and 2) the everpresent threat of white assimilation.

Lakota women responded to this changed situation by creating some of the most elaborate beaded costumes in Lakota history, which are characterized by increased complexity of pattern, complete beading of items, incorporation of new forms, and inclusion of the pictorial image in the repertoire. Increased complexity of pattern after 1875 has been noted by Lyford.<sup>10</sup> It was



Figure 2. Lakota girl's fully beaded dress. Late 19th century. Winona Trading Post, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

during this time that the Lakota developed beadwork patterns distinctively their own, which are characterized by delicate, nervous line, and complex compositions constructed of geometric elements, particularly triangles, forked lines, and terraces.<sup>11</sup> (Figure 1).

In addition to complexity of design, a tendency to bead items completely was initiated during the reservation period.

Pohrt, one of the few to note this change, states:

The artistic appeal of a particular item seems, in part, to have been determined by the number of square inches of beadwork used. A tendency to bead objects completely may be seen on examples of every item the Sioux produced at this time. . . . The ultimate examples of this aestheticism are completely beaded dresses. The sheer weight of the glass beads would have made wearing of these dresses an unpleasant experience.<sup>12</sup>

Many of these beaded dresses were made for young Lakota girls (Figure 2). Certainly wearing-comfort and practicality were not the thoughts uppermost in the minds of the makers. It must be remembered, however, that it was the children who were the particular target of assimilation through education. In the late nineteenth century, the U.S. government, in an all-out effort to expeditiously assimilate the Indian into white society, mandated the wearing of white clothing by Indian school children. As Standing Bear recalls: "At Carlisle



Figure 4. Lakota pictorial beaded vest. Late 19th century. Winona Trading Post, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

the transforming, the 'civilizing' process began. It began with clothes. Never . . . could we be civilized while wearing moccasins and blankets."<sup>13</sup> By creating particularly fine traditional clothing for her children, a mother found one vehicle to combat the threat of assimilation (Figure 3).

The item which became the foremost symbol of ethnic identity was the beaded moccasin, whose longevity outlasted all other items. Here again the Lakota woman, during the reservation period, took the opportunity not only to fully bead the upper moccasin but the sole as well, eschewing practicality in favor of elaboration.

Lacking buckskin, a basic material in the pre-reservation period, the Lakota craftswoman incorporated new materials and new forms into her repertoire, without sacrificing the integrity of her art. She had long before recognized the opportunities available with white man's goods, for instance, glass beads which were found particularly appealing. For her husband and her sons she developed a unique amalgamation of the white man's cloth vest, available as an annuity good, which was either beaded fully so that none of the cloth remained visible or recreated in cowhide and beads.<sup>14</sup> (Figure 4).

The fully-beaded vest served as a successful union of a new form with a traditional style of decoration which allowed for placing one foot into the white man's

world while continuing the Sioux traditions. The vest may also have functioned as a filter in the manner that Deveraux has suggested in his discussion of the nature and functions of art; that is, that art may make outside influences safe to confront by translating them into a culturally acceptable form.<sup>15</sup> The form found special favor with those who traveled with the Wild West shows and around the turn of the century with the newly-emergent Sioux cowboy.

The introduction of pictorial imagery into beadwork is found particularly on vests and pipebags, both items owned by men. Representational forms traditionally were the exclusive prerogative of the Lakota male, strictly enforced by the sexual division of labor.<sup>16</sup> One of the new conditions facing the Lakota female, however, was the vacancy left by the lack of masculine fulfillment of role in art as well as other endeavors. A possible explanation for the assumption of the pictorial style by the Sioux woman may have been in an endeavor to maintain the tradition of recording heroic events as well as traditional Sioux life through her own medium of beadwork. Wissler described a boy's pictorially beaded vest as the object of military decoration and "claimed to reflect the deeds of the family," a task formerly performed by painted clothing decorated by male artists.<sup>17</sup>

A further indication of the significant role which costume continued to play in the reservation era was the adoption and use of the Ghost Dance dress in 1889. The costume of the Ghost Dance assumed the function of a form of rebellion against the usage of white products, and as a powerful source of protection from the enemy, in this case, military bullets.

Although the Ghost Dance costume quickly proved inadequate to the task, the beaded costume continued to be produced into the 1920's. Severe societal disruption, rather than signaling the eclipse of an art form, was responded to by Lakota women with an intensification of the beaded costume. The traditional Lakota use of costume as a form of protection and cultural identification was a vehicle employed in the endeavor to contend with the external threat of assimilation and the internal threat of societal breakdown.